

Three Western Maryland churches recommended to close

The proposed closure of three Western Maryland churches, all part of Our Lady of the Mountains Parish in Cumberland, was announced at Masses over the weekend of March 23-24.

The churches - St. Ambrose in Cresaptown, St. Patrick in Mount Savage and the Shrine of Ss. Peter and Paul in Cumberland - are three of the parish's five worship locations.

"None of us *want* to close any of our church buildings - after all, they contain the spiritual and social history of our lives as Catholics," the weekend bulletin insert read. "After eight years of our consolidation into one parish, we are now at the point where we *must* close some churches."

The letter states that the parish spends 34 cents of every dollar on utilities, maintenance and insurance on buildings used infrequently or only once a week.

Ed Jones, director of mission support for the parish, told the Catholic Review that if the parish can completely divest of the three proposed properties, church buildings and all, the parish will be able to get much closer to the archdiocesan average of 15 to 16 percent spent on facilities.

St. Mary and St. Patrick, both in Cumberland, will continue to serve the parish, which was combined and founded in 2011, and became a single-parish pastorate in 2017.

A Pastoral Planning Team comprised of parishioners representing the diversity of

the parish has been meeting since October 2016 to focus the vision for Our Lady of the Mountains, the letter said. A second group of likewise diverse parishioners, the Infrastructure Optimization Team, analyzed the parish's facilities and finances, including looking at size and condition of each worship space and its parking; necessary immediate and future repairs; the space's flexibility; attendance; and offertory trends.

"The result of their work was a clear and urgent need to modify our existing number of churches, reduce expenses and otherwise reallocate our resources in order to achieve our current and future goals of Missionary Discipleship," the insert said.

After a series of meetings to inform parishioners and receive feedback, the parish may send a recommendation to close the parishes to Archbishop William E. Lori and the Archdiocese of Baltimore. After a consultation process, a decree allowing the churches to be deconsecrated and sold could come as early as June, the letter states. The sale of the buildings would follow.

The parish's Mass schedule will be changed to adapt to the two remaining churches. A final Mass will be celebrated by a bishop at each of the closing churches.

The revised Mass schedule will be a great benefit, allowing the priests to stop "running around like chickens without heads" on Saturdays and Sundays, Jones said. With having to move around on the weekend to five different campuses, they aren't able to stay after Mass for long periods of time to have real conversations with parishioners.

As for the closed facilities, the letter said the "most significant and sacred aspects of these churches," will be integrated into St. Mary and St. Patrick; among other items, this might include altars, statues and stained glass.

"The memories we have now honor our past generations and us," the letter said.

“The choices we discern now will affect us and the generations who will come after us.”

The letter invited parishioners to join “in the sacrifice of brick and mortar, to enhance your personal relationship with Jesus as we reach out to friends and family members who have wandered from our fold and introduce Jesus to the souls within our parish boundaries who do not experience his love, mercy, grace and joy.”

Jones said the parish staff has been spread thin over five campuses. Another benefit of the closures will be to centralize religious education so that by having “all the teachers, students and parents at the same place, planned around a Mass time, we expect a much better opportunity for students and their families to engage in the life of the parish.”

While acknowledging the pain that some people will have in the closing of churches, Jones said there is a lot of hope. “The hope from the missionary discipleship aspect is really what’s driving this whole thing. We’re called to assess our own personal relationship with Jesus Christ and notch it up. And then ask ourselves: Are we fired up enough about that relationship that we can share it with others?”

He said the next challenge after that is determining what infrastructure, staff and funding the parish needs to enable parishioners to share their faith.

The parish wants to keep engaged those who are attending and involved in the parish and reach out to other baptized Catholics who are not engaged. Then they hope to evangelize people who have never been in the pews. “We want to attempt to reach out to every one of the 44,000 souls within our geographic boundaries,” Jones said.

The parish will host a series of discernment sessions March 30-April 28 at each of the churches, which will include a presentation of the work done by the teams.

Discernment Sessions:

Saturday, March 30 at St. Ambrose after the 5 p.m. Mass

Sunday, March 31 at St. Patrick in Mount Savage after the 8 a.m. Mass

Wednesday, April 3 at the Shrine of Ss. Peter and Paul after the 6 p.m. Mass

Sunday, April 7 at St. Patrick in Cumberland after the 11 a.m. Mass

Sunday, April 28 at St. Mary after the 10 a.m. Mass

Christopher Gunty and Emily Rosenthal contributed to this story.

CORRECTION: This story originally misstated the status of the request by the parish to the archbishop and the archdiocese, and the ninth paragraph was updated 3/29/19 to better reflect that status. The Catholic Review regrets the error.