

St. Francis Solanus
Parish Meeting
February 7, 2016

Planning Committee members from all three parishes present: Kathy Sinkiewicz, Steph Houck, Jen Sharp, Barb Willers, Karen Rinefierd, Bob Duthie

Opening Prayer by Father Bernard

Members of the planning team were introduced.

Jennifer Sharp reviewed the merger process. She stated that there are two legal parts to the process: church (canon) law and civil law. She explained the canonical process in detail including a timeline that was developed by the planning team. If it is determined to move forward with the merger, the civil process will take place.

We share information in bulletins, link to Saint James website to see minutes from the planning committee meetings.

Similar meetings have occurred at Saint James and Holy Cross.

Purpose of this meeting is to answer questions and seek feedback of the parishioners regarding the merger.

Q: How will we know what the recommendation is for the letter to the Bishop?

A: The letter will be public and displayed on the websites.

Q: Where is the idea of the merger coming from? We are financially stable, building is in good shape, and we have a strong faith formation program.

A: We don't have the resources any longer to have 50 person parishes. Even together, you will still be one of the smallest parishes in the Diocese. The Diocese would like us to work together. In many ways, the small parishes are the friendliest because you know everyone.

Q: Where does the number of 50 come in to making the decision?

A: That is the Mass attendance numbers for Saint Francis for the last few years. Even though the Diocese has had increased ordinations the last several years, there are more retirements than ordinations and priests are older. There are just not enough priests to staff parishes exactly the way they have been in the past.

Q: According to Canon Law, a lack of priests is not a reason to close a church. There is no advantage to merging, that clustering will not also solve. Why is merging better than clustering?

A: We are talking about merging the three parishes, not closing a church. There are 2 processes, a merging which we are looking at. A second process is closing a church. You are used to being a small community, but to survive and offer the best pastoral ministry it often makes sense to merge smaller churches.

Comment: He is planning for a pre-supposed condition, that we are dire in circumstances which we are not.

Q: I understand that 2 churches will be open, and one will be open for weddings and funerals. The third church still has to be maintained, so who will pay for that?

A: The merged parish will be responsible for taking care of all of the buildings.

Q: How will you actually close a church?

A: If it later seems financially necessary to close one of the churches, a process similar to that for merging parishes would take place. That would probably happen several years after a merger. Church closures can also happen without a previous merger. Even if a church closes, the parish is responsible for all expenses until the church sells. One of the key messages is to retain as many of your parishioners as possible. You need people to do ministry and do it well. New families need to be invited to the churches from the entire community between the lakes.

Comment: I am concerned because we keep talking about moving to Holy Cross, because it's a big church. It's a big church. There is also a house connected to the church, the rectory. That house also has to be maintained. It's concerning that we are still going to have to pay those bills. It doesn't ring true that all three parishes should take care of such a big church.

Comment: The geographic problem, I was speaking to a lady in Romulus. She said she would travel to go to Seneca Falls instead of coming to one of our churches.

Response: The people in the middle of the parish are more likely to attend mass in the new parish. Those who live on the outskirts of the parish may choose to attend mass in other parishes if mass is not offered in their current church.

Q: Does the diocese have resources to facilitate this change for our parishes, to become a new community of faith?

A: That's a lot of the work that I'm doing. There are two other parish clusters that are going through this process too right now.

Comment: This is a very negative thing for the Catholic community.

Response: There have been occasions where a parish did turn their financial situation around. It would be preferable to keep all 3 churches open.

Comment: To clarify, the diocese didn't pay for any of the financial support or for the priests.

Q: How much is the legal process going to cost?

A: It is minimal.

Q: If we can address the shortage of priests by making some changes, allowing priests to marry, etc. we may not have an issue.

A: I sympathize with that wish but we need to operate within the reality we face.

Q: In looking at our finances, our savings are lower because of the renovations we have made.

A: We know that's why and the construction was well done.

Q: You mentioned that Ovid was able to come up with the money for the roof repair done in the recent past.

A: Your savings are razor thin.

Response: If we need to do something with our church, we will work together and raise the money.

Q: The reduction in funds has a lot to do with the idea of what's happening. There has to be more clarification in that area. The more unhappy parishioners are with how things are going the less they are contributing each Sunday. They don't know what the money will actually go for.

A: That's unfortunate. It's a self fulfilling prophecy.

Comment: Look at the demographics of our parish. It's an older group. We have to think about where we are heading.

Response: Changes are happening across the United States. Fewer people are belonging to churches and mass attendance is down. We are struggling in the north because so many have moved south for jobs or retirement. Down south, they are building churches even with the priest shortage because of the people relocating to their areas and the increasing Latino population.

Response: I see this process as a way for Catholics to get to know each other and strengthen the community. The Christmas that I remember was when we combined with Holy Cross and Saint Francis. I hope that we can look beyond the financial situation and look at creating a stronger community.

Q: I think that we will see by the attendance at the Dinner Dance if people from the three parishes want to work together.

A: Well, there may be schedule conflicts. So, we shouldn't determine the success of the three parishes coming together based on that one event.

Comment: I am exhausted from the last year and a half. I just wish I could go to church. It's affecting the kids, they are worried. We all have good points and feelings. I just hope when it's all said and done that we have a strong community.

Comment: We have to stick together, or there will be more closings. We have to work as a community. We need faith groups from each parish to work together.

Comment: You mentioned earlier that the numbers are down all over New York State. Look at how many people have left New York State because of taxes, lack of jobs. If we weren't so fortunate to have the friars, none of us would have priests.

Response: Many years ago I worked with some of you when pastoral planning first began in our Diocese. With projections of the number of priests serving in the Diocese, we knew then that if the Capuchins left the Diocese, there would be only one diocesan priest available to serve these three parishes. You've done a great job keeping them here and wanting to serve. We are doing our best to keep them here. However, the local situation has also changed. The three parishes together can no longer afford the expense of two full-time priests. Father Brendan works part-time in the three parishes and also in migrant ministry. Some of the Catholics in our area do not come to our churches because they are Latino and work on the farms every day of the week. Father Brendan offered Bible study and Mass at a farm last night for 20 people.

Q: The pride of our church are the kids we have right now in our basement. How can we make sure that we can take care of them and keep them together? They are so happy to see each other every week.

A: We don't know what the Catholic Church in the future will look like. In your children's lives, they will have to deal with change and learn to be strong in their faith. I'm sorry to hear that your children are worried about what the future of the church will be. I hope that you are not describing the Bishop as a bad person. He is hoping to make these changes to help strengthen the churches.

Comment: I would like to say that it's tragic that the value of the small community is not part of the discussion at all. There are people who are drawn here because of our community. There is no value being placed on it.

A: There is value being placed on it. However, the Catholic Church is organized differently from Protestant churches. We need a priest to offer Mass. We don't have ministers with full-time jobs who can lead a congregation part-time. I know a minister who serves part-time at a church with only 15 members.

Comment: I've been a Catholic my whole life, I've never been at a church that gives off the vibes that this one does. It's a tragedy to lose that.

Comment: When we moved here, we looked for a church. I was really happy when we were able to come here. There is something here, part of my soul. I am so afraid that's going to stop.

Comment: If you look back in history, this group started by meeting in the town clerk's office. People worked hard and built a church. Therese Elliott can give you details about how her family helped. Father Kelly was here and ran two churches, and did outreach, etc. If we have

survived all the things in our past, how are we even talking about closing it. People have lived here all their lives.

Comment: It would be nice for the Bishop to come. I know he's a busy man but it would be great to have him come meet us and talk to us.

Comment: I've only be here 9 years, that makes me a newcomer. It shouldn't be criticized for being small. I came here and I was welcomed. My second year I came with an adopted child. This church and its people, embraced her. They let her take part in the Catholic experience. They asked how she was doing. They became my family to help me being alone. My family is not here. I may not be able to get here every Sunday because of my work responsibilities, I come as much as I'm able. The culmination of this happened on Easter when my daughter became a member of this church. Every single member of this church embraced her, gave her cards, and welcomed her. This is not a small church, ma'am, this church is bigger than the Cathedral in Rome. The people in this church are as important to me as the people in my family. How can you judge that the church is small, to say it needs to be closed or merged? This is a family.

A. Please remember that Karen is just the messenger. She does not want to see any of our churches close.

Comment: To me this sounds like it's a done deal that we are just going through the motions. I used to be on the council many years ago. I was baptized and married at Holy Cross, and attend Saint Francis. We are the most centrally located in between the lakes. Why can't Saint James attend Immaculate Conception? I can see that it starts with Saint Francis, then Holy Cross, then Saint James being merged with Ithaca.

Q: If this is a done deal and it happens, will the new parish council have the right to decide what buildings stay open?

A: When the new parish council and finance council are formed, they will make recommendations to Father on all aspects of parish life. When necessary there will be conversations about what you can financially afford.

The hope is that the new parish council will have its first meeting in March.

Comment: The Bishop should be ashamed for putting Father Bernard through this. There's a sadness about him. This is such a difficult situation to put him in.

If anyone has any other feedback that you didn't share at this meeting, please send Bob or Ruth your feedback in writing.

Q: Can we do a straw poll?

A: That is not appropriate. The purpose of this meeting is to respond to questions and get your

input regarding pastoral advantages and disadvantages of the proposed merger. This is not a democratic process with voting.

Closing Prayer by Jen Sharp

Feedback added after the meeting: It's sad that a parish that was started and run by the Capuchins, who we have shared over the years, would have to be closed. It's unfair. We shouldn't even be in the equation.

Comment from St. Francis Solanus planning team member after the meeting: After attending meetings at all 3 churches, St. Francis parishioners are upset and disappointed that the Bishop is making decisions without visiting the churches himself and listening to the people of the Parishes.

Respected submitted by Jeanie Wiggins, Parish Council Secretary, Saint Francis Solanus Church.