

Seven churches to merge into two

East Side closings stir some protest

Migration to suburbs saps some churches

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Seven churches on Buffalo's East Side will merge into two as part of the latest restructuring within the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, pastors of the parishes announced during weekend Masses.

As feared by its parishioners, St. Adalbert Church will close and merge with St. John Kanty, putting an end to the second oldest Polish parish in Buffalo.

That plan was the recommendation of the Strategic Planning Commission to Bishop Edward U. Kmiec who is expected, to make a final decision soon.

The Response to Love Center, the parish's outreach arm to the poor in the neighborhood, will remain as a stand-alone human services agency.

Parishioners said they would fight the closure of the church, a large basilicalike structure on Stanislaus Street.

"The only thing we can do is put facts together and contact people like you in the media and get some facts out and cause a little bit of a stir," said Stanley A. Kowalski Jr., president of the parish council.

Pastors also announced that Precious Blood SS. Rita & Patrick, Holy Apostles SS. Peter & Paul, St. Valentine and St. Stephen will merge into one located at the St. Stephen site on Elk Street.

Staying put will be St. Stanislaus Church on Townsend Street and Our Lady of Perpetual Help on O'Connell Avenue. The situations at St. Stanislaus and St. John Kanty would be reviewed after two years.

The announcements were part of a wide-ranging diocesan effort to better align a dwindling number of priests with the shifting Catholic population.

Historically, tens of thousands of immigrant Catholics settled on the East Side, leading to the building of many neighborhood churches.

But Catholic migration to the suburbs has left the churches largely empty and, in many cases, struggling financially. For their weekend Masses, Precious Blood and St. Valentine each had an average weekend attendance: of 60 people; Holy Apostles SS. Peter & Paul, about 75 people.

St. Adalbert, which can seat nearly 1,000, draws, about 200 people to three weekend Masses.

But parishioners said they were getting some new families and were still able to pay all of the church's expenses, with income, from a profitable cemetery in Lancaster.

In addition, the church maintains a special Vatican affiliation with St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Pope Pius X decreed in 1907 that anyone visiting St. Adalbert was entitled to the same indulgence and spiritual favors granted by the Holy Father to the Vatican Basilica.

"We, as a council, are asking the question: How can you purport this process in a Journey in Faith and Grace and then eliminate St. Adalbert's church, which is a source of grace?" Kowalski wrote in a letter to Kmiec.

Parishioners reacted angrily to the announcement at Masses Saturday and Sunday, according to longtime St. Adalbert member Ted Kniazuk.

Many then accused the pastor, the Rev. Thaddeus N. Bocianowski, of encouraging the merger.

"Nothing's easy when we're fighting the diocese, and our pastor isn't with us," said Kniazuk. "I don't know how to put it in words how furious people were."

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