

Journey to end for another 16 Catholic Churches

Kmiec predicts a more vibrant parish life

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Parishioners of 15 Catholic churches in Buffalo as well as one in Cheektowaga on Saturday began mourning the loss of their longtime houses of worship, as pastors announced at Masses the latest downsizings by Bishop Edward U. Kmiec.

The announcements set in motion what is expected to be a dramatic overhaul of the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo's presence in the city.

Diocesan officials declined to comment Saturday, but Bishop Edward U. Kmiec is scheduled to address the latest parish mergers and church closings this afternoon.

The bishop also was expected to discuss mergers at several churches in other parts of the eight-county diocese.

Kmiec sent a letter this week to the parishes of the diocese's Central Buffalo vicariate as well as to several churches in Black Rock and Riverside and on the East Side of Buffalo.

Receiving word that their churches would close were Visitation and St. Agnes parishes in Lovejoy; St. Gerard Parish at Bailey and East Delavan avenues; St. James Parish at Bailey and Hastings avenues; St. Ann on Broadway; St. Mary of Sorrows on Guilford Street; Queen of Peace at Genesee and Forman streets; Holy Name of Jesus on Bailey Avenue; and Most Holy Redeemer on Genesee Street and Avery Place in Cheektowaga, near the city line.

In his letter, Kmiec wrote that the changes will promote vibrant parish life and create stronger, merged parishes that will keep ministries alive in the city.

"The process has not been easy, but I am confident that the results will be a source of new life and hope for our diocesan Church," Kmiec wrote.

In Riverside and Black Rock, St. Florian and St. John the Baptist/St. Francis Xavier will close, merging into Assumption and All Saints parishes. And on the East Side, St. Adalbert Church will close in a parish merger with St. John Kanty. Other church closings include Precious Blood, SS. Rita & Patrick, Holy Apostles SS. Peter & Paul and St. Valentine.

By the time the diocese's "Journey in Faith & Grace" is complete, the city could lose two dozen to three dozen of its current 58 parishes to mergers.

While 50 priests are staffing city parishes now, only 18 priests are slated to be available by 2015, based upon diocesan projections of priest numbers.

In addition to this weekend's announcements, major changes are anticipated for South Buffalo, the West Side and North Buffalo.

The long-anticipated downsizing will leave vacant several large and impressive churches, most notably St. Adalbert, St. Ann and St. Gerard.

"In the day, the Masses were so crowded. If you didn't arrive 20 minutes early, you couldn't find a seat," said Dorothy Edd, a longtime member of St. Gerard. "And now, a hundred people in a 900-person church. It's really sad."

The mergers could happen within three to six months, flooding the real estate market with church properties.

That prospect riled Buffalo lawmakers. Last week, they adopted a resolution opposing any efforts by the diocese to "dump" properties on unsuitable buyers without the wherewithal to protect and maintain the buildings.

The resolution include a controversial clause claiming the city church closings appeared "to have a whiff of 'ethnic cleansing,'" — a phrase that provoked outrage from the diocese and the Catholic League, a national Catholic civil rights group.

The mergings and closings are part of "Journey in Faith & Grace," the largest downsizing effort in the history of the diocese.

The closings announced this weekend are the most in Buffalo since the diocese shut down 10 city churches in 1993. Some of those churches found new life for other religious groups or were reused for other purposes; others were torn down.

Some were sold and remain vacant, including the decaying Transfiguration Church on Sycamore Avenue and St. Matthew Church on Wyoming Avenue.