News



The interior of St. Gerard Church in Buffalo, N.Y., is seen Feb. 10, 2010. The nearly century-old church, was closed by the Buffalo Diocese in 2008. (CNS/Patrick McPartland, Western New York Catholic)

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The Diocese of Buffalo, New York, plans to reduce the total number of its 160 parishes by 51% following a Sept. 10 announcement of final decisions on closures and mergers.

Father Bryan Zielenieski, vicar for renewal and development, said in the news conference 118 churches would remain open in the Western New York diocese. He said 79 of those would be parishes and 39 would be secondary worship sites (or churches whose functions are restricted).

Dates for the closures and mergers are to be determined in meetings over the next nine months. The process is expected to be concluded by Pentecost in June 2025.

Buffalo Bishop Michael W. Fisher said the diocese like others nationwide and around the world has had to deal with "the same very harsh realities" of lower church attendance, a decrease in priestly vocations, secularization and "the horrendous toll" of the clergy sexual abuse scandal.

The diocese is in Chapter 11 bankruptcy and church officials have said the way out of this status is not only to divest of some church properties, but also to focus on evangelization and faith formation to ignite interest, especially in fallen-away Catholics, in coming back to church.

Zielenieski said the final decisions were a result of either decisions of the diocese or from counter-proposals made by so-called "families of parishes," which are 36 groupings of churches across the eight counties of the diocese.

"I have to share with you that many parish communities and families that came for the counterproposal process were very much in favor of what's going on and that we need to be responsible stewards," he said. "Yes these are difficult announcements but in the midst of all this the spirit is working. And there's a spirit of hope, a spirit of new life, a spirit of ... let's get back to inviting people to a relationship with Jesus ...

introduce them to the tenets of our faith ... and then if we have resources to focus on mission and not have to worry about the maintenance of buildings, it gives them more potential to do more program outreach."

The diocese said 26 changes were accepted out of the 52 counter-proposals submitted.

Zielenieski said 13 churches have been placed on a "watchlist." They have a year to meet certain goals to ensure they are "viable and strong."

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Buffalo resident Christopher Byrd told OSV News some people were mad and he himself felt saddened.

"It's kind of heartbreaking to people like me. I have such an attachment to these churches I grew up with ... one of them is closing," he said. "It's the one where I was baptized. My mother was baptized there. I've been to constant funerals there with family members and marriages in the family."

But Byrd, 57, and one of the founders of Buffalo Mass Mob, also said he was surprised that the diocese's list of final closures and mergers was shorter than it had anticipated in May when it first announced the plan. He called himself a realist and said he understood the need for the diocese to fix its financial burdens, saying that having some all-but-empty, cathedral-sized, European-style churches was "just not sustainable."

Buffalo Mass Mob uses social media to gather crowds to attend Mass at the declining churches to fill the pews, create a surge in collections and generate interest among the churchgoers to attend Mass there again. Byrd said the mob would be looking into watchlist churches.

"We'll give them a boost, but ultimately these churches are going to have to start showing signs that they're attracting more people," he said.

Fisher said, "Three of my churches in Baltimore have closed, that I grew up in. So I understand the loss when we lose a parish ... but also it gives us an opportunity to now refocus who we are as Catholics. And, what an exciting time it is to be a Catholic."