

On other side of church closings, new reasons for hope

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Margaret Conetsco, 85, sits next to a wooden life-size statue of St. William inside the newly formed Ss. Robert & William Catholic Church in Euclid, Ohio. Conetsco donated the statue after her former church, St. Robert, merged with St. William. (RNS/Marvin Fong/The Plain Dealer)

CLEVELAND -- Holly Nixon used to need only 10 minutes before the 9 a.m. Mass to pick up her elderly, disabled mother and find a parking spot close to the sanctuary door.

That was before St. William Catholic Church in Euclid merged with nearby St. Robert Bellarmine, which then closed, shifting hundreds of people into St. William's pews.

"Now I have to pick her up at 8:30," said Nixon, noting that the parking lot, expanded since the January merger, fills up pretty quickly on Sunday mornings.

Nixon's mother, Loretta Valencic, has been attending Mass for more than 50 years at St. William. The church is now Ss. Robert & William Catholic Church, the result of an extensive downsizing by the Cleveland Catholic Diocese.

Seventeen new parishes, involving 39 churches, have been created as a result of mergers since last year.

Ss. Robert & William stands as an example of how the consolidation -- however painful for the parishioners losing their churches -- can lead to growth and good will.

Margaret Conetsco, 85, a member of St. Robert for 40 years, said she "wasn't too happy" when her church closed, yet she came to her new parish bearing a more-than-generous housewarming gift -- a hand-carved wooden statue of St. William that cost her \$12,500.

The statue complements a large statue of St. Robert that was moved to the new worship site from the closed church. The old St. William's had no interior statue of its namesake, but now the life-size saints flank the main altar in the new parish.

"I'm not really wealthy, but it's a joy to me," Conetsco said. "At this time of my life, I felt in my heart it was the right thing to do."

The new parish brought together about 450 families from St. Robert and 1,000 families from St. William. It also drew members from various other closed parishes in the area, boosting registered parishioners to about 3,000.

Between 1,800 and 2,000 parishioners have been attending weekend Masses, which is well above the diocesan average of 30 percent for Mass attendance, said Ss. Robert & William's pastor, the Rev. John Betters.

"There's a real sense here of moving forward," said Betters, 35. "The people have taken ownership. They love their church, despite its sometimes weaknesses."

The eight-county diocese, led by Bishop Richard Lennon, recently completed the process of closing 50 churches through mergers or outright shutdowns -- called suppressions -- since last year.

Closing churches was necessary, the bishop has said, because of shortages of cash, worshippers and priests.

The closings, mostly in inner-city neighborhoods and inner-ring suburbs, sparked outcries from hundreds of people fighting Lennon through public protests and appeals to the Vatican that are still pending.

But, while the trail of tears is still fresh and many remain angry, a number of the faithful are putting that aside as they work to rebuild shattered communities.

"I've really been pleasantly surprised at how well it's going," said the Rev. James Stenger, 56, pastor of Mary Queen of the Apostles, a newly formed parish created by the closing of Assumption of Mary and its merger with St. Peter the Apostle.

"There was sadness, obviously, but there didn't seem to be anger," he said.

Nearly all 850 families from Assumption joined the new parish at the old St. Peter site, swelling enrollment to 2,600 families.

"It was very gratifying, but I'm knocking on wood," Stenger said.

The new parish has added a full-time assistant priest and another Saturday Mass. It has combined the staffs from the two parishes.

"The merger team worked very, very well," said Stenger. "It was really smooth from beginning to end. And that doesn't make news."

Ann Marie Petrik, a parishioner at Assumption for 50 years, said the closing in May was a shock to the congregation, but people are beginning to see the consolidation as making sense.

"Most people are saying, 'We can be more vibrant if we pull together. Let's give this a chance,'" she said. "It's going to take time, but we're beginning to see some togetherness. I'm not 100 percent there, but I'm feeling comfortable and I'm getting involved."

The diocese is hoping that the early successes of these parishes will continue with all the mergers.

"These new parishes serve as excellent examples of parishes coming together to build new and stronger communities where worship, evangelization and embracing the church's social teachings take on added significance in the lives of all parishes," the bishop said in a statement.

[Michael O'Malley writes for *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland]

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- [Parish community refuses to be suppressed](#) [1], by Robert McClory
- [On other side of church closings, new reasons for hope](#) [2], by Michael O'Malley, Religion News Service

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