



Herald photo by Tijana Martin

The Save Our Churches Association isn't giving up the fight to save its three east Lethbridge Catholic Churches including St. Patrick's.

Church battle headed to the top court in Rome

FIGHT TO SAVE THREE CHURCHES HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR ALMOST SIX YEARS

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The Save Our Churches Association won't go down without a fight. During Sunday's annual general meeting, members voted to take their fight to save St. Patrick's Church to the top court in Rome.
"The spirit is strong and

while we can, we will do what we can. The churches deserve to be saved," said Francis Noronha, Procurator and SOCA's secretary.

It's been almost six years that the church has been shuttered. Former Bishop Frederick Henry, who resigned due to ill health in January, had proposed the sale of the three Catholic churches in east Lethbridge — St. Patrick's, St. Basil's and Assumption — which were merged in 2006 to create All Saints Parish. The plan is to build a new \$21-million church facility in southeast Lethbridge near 43 Street.

St. Patrick's Church was shuttered by the bishop on

Aug. 1, 2011. The Save Our Churches Association has been fighting ever since to have it reopened, even appealing to the Vatican.

In February 2016, the Congregation for the Clergy of the Vatican agreed to investigate if the closure of the church is contrary to the norm of Canon Law. The deadline for the investigation had been repeatedly extended.

On Oct. 1, 2016, Henry sent a decree to relegate the church to "profane but not sordid use," before the investigation could be completed.

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CHURCH

The Decree of Relegation states a number of reasons for the closure including lack of space for programs, lack of parking, insufficient clergy and financial expenses to maintain three older churches compared to one new church.

The decree became effective Jan. 1, which means the church could be sold to a new owner.

SOCA wrote to the Congregation for the Clergy, challenging the grounds on which the bishop's decree is based. The word they received was not in their favour.

In the letter dated March 14, the congregation upheld the decree as lawful. It explains the congregation accepts that the pastor has determined what is best for the people, which includes selling the three churches to build a new church, and that the building of the new church has widespread support.

Noronha said they were disappointed in the decision, as they felt there was not enough consideration given for their arguments.

During Sunday's AGM, there were many questions and comments from some of the more than 150 members in attendance.

One long-time member of St. Basil's spoke of being confirmed, married and having her children baptized there. Others also spoke of the cultural, historical and emotional ties the three churches have to the community.

The price to hire a new lawyer to work on their behalf in Rome is estimated at \$30,000. SOCA decided the price of not following their mission to the end was higher.

When it came time to vote, a

resounding majority put up their hands. Only five voted against the motion.

"I will pay anything to keep the three churches open because they represent three communities, and we can fix this," said Don Demers.

They have lodged an appeal of the letter's decision. Once they hear back, they will have 60 days to launch an appeal with the Apostolic Signatura, if necessary.

Apart from the Pope himself, the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura is the highest judicial authority in the Catholic Church.

They have also requested a meeting with their new Bishop, Rev. William McGrattan, who was appointed after Henry's resignation.

SOCA will begin circulating a petition soon, hoping to show that there are many non-Catholics who also want to save the churches.

During the AGM, Mayor Chris Spearman also gave a talk titled "Faith and Politics." While the focus of his speech was not about the St. Patrick's Church closure, he was met with a few questions afterward. One member asked when the City is planning on developing the area where the Bishop has purchased land for the new church.

Spearman spoke about the Southeast Area Structure Plan that was approved by council last year. Based on growth in other areas, he said the City does not intend to develop the southeast until 2029-2032.

There is an option for landowners to foot the bill for water, wastewater and roadway infrastructure — to the city's standards — should they wish to advance development. Spearman estimated the total cost to develop the area at \$40 million.

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