

Saving local churches has Catholics divided

Committee formed to save St. Patrick's, Assumption, St. Basil's churches

Dave Mabell

LETHBRIDGE HERALD

dmabell@lethbridgeherald.com

With no opportunity to vote on a \$21.5-million proposal, a number of the city's Catholics are unwilling to support plans for a "mega-church" at the edge of town.

More than 300 have joined Save Our Churches, a protest group that held a "prayerful demonstration" on the weekend. It's working to prevent three of the city's four Catholic churches — Assumption, St. Basil's and historic St. Patrick's — from being closed and sold.

Calgary Bishop Fred Henry, whose territory includes Lethbridge, has ordered downtown St. Patrick's to be mothballed at the end of July. He's also announced plans to dispose of the pioneering congregation's southside and northside counterparts.

"Our mission now is to save all three churches," says Barb MacLean, elected the group's chairperson during a weekend forum at the Fritz Sick Centre. "The bishop's proposal should be put on hold."

Deacons and lay people continue to assist their parish priests in the ministry at each church, she added. They're serving about 3,100 families east of the Oldman, she says, with about 1,500 attending regularly.

"There are many priests from around the world who would love to come to Canada," MacLean says — if a shortage is cited as a reason to close neighbourhood churches.

All three churches have viable, thriving congregations, she says. Their facilities are debt-free, and parishioners are able to support a wide range of causes. Now the bishop is asking them to pay for a 1,200-seat building, on land that still hasn't been purchased.

"The debt issue is huge," she says, with

the danger of default if members can't triple their weekly offering.

Worse, says communications spokesperson Grant Alger, the Catholic community is divided after four years of debate over an issue that never came to a vote. In Montana, he says, Catholic parishioners are asked to vote in support of renovations or new facilities.

"Here, there's been no vote," he says. "There's no buy-in."

Other prominent voices were raised at the rally, outlining many members' anxieties.

Former Catholic school trustee Don Demers, who attends Assumption, described local members' volunteered labour in building St. Patrick's and then Assumption parish churches. After a lifetime of baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals, they want to tell the bishop how strongly they feel about keeping their churches open.

"I find he will not even listen to us," Demers says.

Retired city development officer Felix Michna, a member at St. Basil's, says discussion and communication from Calgary "has simply been inadequate.

"It only magnifies the split that has occurred in our parish."

Prisca Baptista, speaking for St. Patrick's parishioners, cited the importance of continuing worship at the heart of the city — alongside Southminster United and St. Augustine's Anglican.

"We have suffered enough," she added. "The present disunity, anger, pain and distrust that have been created in the past five years must cease."

Others elected to the Save Our Churches board were Brian Wright, Francis Noronha, Bob Costanzo and Rose Kastyelic. The meeting was chaired by former school board chair Chris Spearman, a member of the westside St. Martha's parish — not included in the current proposal.

Alger says more than 300 members have also signed a petition to keep St. Patrick's open. There's also a second petition — with details at

www.saveourchurches@vp.web — seeking support from Lethbridge residents of all faiths.