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Church closings in New Orleans reflect a national trend

by Bruce Nolan by Religion News Service

NEW ORLEANS -- Archbishop Alfred Hughes' decision in April to close 33 of what were once about 142 parishes in the Archdiocese of New Orleans was not only a concession to the damage wrought by Hurricane Katrina. It also introduced New Orleans Catholics and neighborhood activists to a wrenching phenomenon communities in other parts of the country began seeing two decades ago.

Middle-class Catholics' migration to the suburbs from inner cities and the shortage of priests long ago began forcing bishops elsewhere to close, merge or cluster beloved churches and parishes, sometimes to furious public outcry that has strained relations between lay Catholics and the church's institutional hierarchy.

In some places, critics insist there is more than demographics and personnel in the mix: They allege that bishops sometimes close financially vibrant parishes to sell off property to cover sex-abuse settlements or general operating losses.

That's a charge Hughes and other bishops deny. In New Orleans, the needs of ministry, not economics, drove the decisions to close and consolidate parishes, Bishop Roger Morin said.

But elsewhere in the country, closures on a larger scale were well under way. And even with this month's announcement, New Orleans' experience with closed parishes, although painful, is statistically unremarkable by national standards.

For example:

-- Bishop Joseph Galante of Camden, N.J., announced plans to collapse 124 parishes into 66 within two years.

-- The Diocese of Syracuse, N.Y., which in 10 years has reduced the number of parishes from 173 to 153, is undergoing another round of consolidation in which 83 parishes will become 40 during the next three to five years, said the Rev. Jim Lang, a planner there.

-- The Archdiocese of Boston in late 2003 announced plans to close 83 of 357 parishes. It stopped short of that goal and now has 63 fewer, spokesman Terry Donilon said. The experience stoked a storm of protest that still lingers.

-- The Diocese of Green Bay, Wis., has shrunk from 212 parishes to 160. Two out of three parishes share a pastor, said Mark Mogilka, Green Bay's director of pastoral services.

In 2005, Sister Katarina Schuth, a church sociologist, found 44 percent of about 22,000 parishes and missions in the United States were involved in some kind of clustering arrangement, rather than the traditional one-priest, one-parish model.

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The phenomenon now is so advanced that dioceses have acquired a good deal of experience developing new ways to manage parish life.

Many of those lessons were on display recently in Orlando, Fla., where national experts such as Mogilka, Lang and others shared research on best parish leadership practices.

It is at the level of the parish community, they said, that faith is nourished by sacraments, ritual and community. Sometimes, an old church or parish setting becomes entwined with faith itself.

"A person once told me, 'When I went through a divorce, that was heart pain I never thought I would recover from. But then, closing my church -- that was soul pain, and that was much deeper,'" Mogilka said.

In a church that is both hierarchical and decentralized, in which, within limits, each bishop is free to manage as he sees fit, experts say the approach to restructuring parish life has varied widely.

"There are some who argue that it's better to do a surgical strike and get it over with. And there are others, like me, who say, 'No, change is painful, and if we can take our time and walk with people through their pain, in the long run, we'll be stronger,'" Mogilka said.

Lang said some dioceses have learned to live in a more or less constant state of self-examination, repeatedly asking what their parishes will look like in the foreseeable future.

"If there's a sense that there's this ongoing, constant tweaking on how to do this best, it becomes second nature to a diocese," he said.

"But most have to have some kind of abrupt startup before they level off into a long-range, systemic process."

Mogilka's Green Bay diocese has a national reputation as an innovator. Every five years or so, its parishes re-enter an open, long-range planning process in which parishioners play a large role, he said.

Green Bay's diocesan Web page contains a link describing to everybody what will happen to each parish during the current planning period.

"People, for the most part, don't mind change. What they do mind is being changed," he said.

"Insofar that you can sit down with a community of faith, lay out the factual realities in terms of priest availability, in terms of economics, in terms of conditions of buildings -- and you give them alternatives and encourage them to come up with more of their own -- it can work.

"But you have to give them time to grieve a loss. In many of the processes here, it took two years before a community made a decision to join three other churches and build a new church."

But it also appears that lay involvement is no guarantor of popular acceptance when parishes are to be closed or merged.

In Boston, parishioners and pastors found themselves in regional planning meetings in which they were told to decide which churches should close. One critic likened it unfavorably to a Catholic version of the reality TV show "Survivor," with somebody getting voted off the island.

The Boston process produced an enormous backlash, one so great that Cardinal Sean O'Malley, by then well along in cleaning up that archdiocese's massive sex-abuse scandal, called closing parishes "the hardest thing I have ever had to do in 40 years of religious life."

The Boston experience also gave birth to a national backlash.

Peter Borre, a Catholic layman and energy consultant who helped form a local resistance group, the Council of Parishes, has linked up with dissatisfied Catholic lay people in five other dioceses to form a national self-help resistance group, called the Coalition of Parishes.

Borre and other critics believe changing demographics and the priesthood crisis provide bishops cover for selling off vital parishes to raise money to cover sex-abuse settlements and cover budget holes.

"We see bishops in dioceses hit hard by sex-abuse claims using parishes as their ATMs," Borre said.

O'Malley insisted that sex-abuse settlements were financed separately, with insurance money and the sale of nonparish archdiocesan property, including part of the archdiocese's own massive headquarters.

Borre said the resistance in Boston forced that archdiocese to disclose financial details in vast quantities.

"We found that for the last seven years, the archdiocese ran an operating deficit, which they finance by selling properties. We can't make them stop, but at least we have them in the glare of public opinion," Borre said.

(Bruce Nolan writes for the New Orleans Times-Picayune.)

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