



Background to the Decision re. St. Mary's Parish

The Church in the City of Prince George has been in a steady decline in terms of the number of Catholics attending Mass and in terms of financial health for several decades. Over the last 40 years, the numbers attending Sunday Mass in the City of Prince George have **declined by about 50%**. Collections, when adjusted for inflation, have dropped by even more. When we take inflation into account, collections have dropped by **more than 30% in the past 15 years alone**. Despite these dramatic changes, the city has continued to be served by four parishes.

It has now become clear that the situation is increasingly unsustainable. Parishes have been cutting costs and drawing heavily from their savings for many years and programs and services have been reduced due to a lack of financial resources and personnel, whether staff or volunteer.

The Catholic population of the city can be well-served by three parishes. This means better stewardship of resources now, while ensuring the capacity to accommodate increased population in the future.

The Bishop has the responsibility of ensuring that the parishes in the city continue to provide reasonable access to parishioners for Mass and the Sacraments, as well as other pastoral services for parishioners. Two parishes in the downtown area within a five minutes' drive of each other represent a duplication that is not sustainable over the long term. That is why the current St. Mary's parish will be divided into Sacred Heart cathedral parish and Christ Our Saviour parish.

New boundaries will be established between the Cathedral and Christ Our Saviour parish and the assets of St. Mary's – financial and otherwise – will follow the parishioners who live within the new parish territories.

Why is there a need to reduce the number of parishes?

When the parishes of Prince George were constructed, the city was going through immense population growth due to the construction of the pulp mills. At the time there was a higher percentage of Catholics practising their faith than there are now. Those parishes were also expecting to see even greater population growth over time, which has not materialized.

Since their construction, our parishes have been on a steady downward trend in Mass-going Catholics and donations. Baptisms have dropped considerably. Had it not been for increased immigration over the past two decades, in which Canada has welcomed many immigrants from Catholic countries, these problems would have been made more evident quite some time ago. At certain times, one parish or another might experience growth, but it has usually been at the expense of another parish, as parishioners migrate from one parish to another.

In Prince George, we have four parishes providing ten Sunday Masses for fewer than 1,500 people each week. In communities of our size in other dioceses, that would normally constitute one parish or, in certain cases, two.

If there's been a long-standing need to change the structure, why is this happening now? Is the financial situation at Christ Our Saviour the cause of the problem?

Christ Our Saviour's current financial problems are a symptom of our shared problem. They are not the cause. The shrinking parish populations are.

No parish has been immune to these trends. Because the decline has been steady, the impact each year was not necessarily clear. Each year, parishes would cut a little deeper on expenses and try to encourage parishioners to contribute a bit more to balance the books.

We also see that the demographic trends are going to be the cause of further issues in future years. Our seniors, who form a significant number of our attendees and who donate a substantial part of each parish's budget, are not being sufficiently replaced by those in the subsequent generations.

This is not the sign of genuinely healthy parishes.

It is time to look forward toward missionary growth rather than resigning ourselves to continued financial struggle.

While the alarm bells have been sounding for some time, they weren't heard clearly. Efforts in recent years to look at the issue more comprehensively have made it evident that we need to act quickly in order to allow our parishes the opportunity to stem the bleeding and refocus on the urgent need for missionary activity.

Is this all about money?

As important as financial health is for our parishes, we also have to recognize the problem that declining Mass attendance and volunteer involvement has been for our parishes. Parish finance and pastoral councils often have members who continue to serve for many years past their terms because replacement members cannot be found. Those volunteering in liturgical roles have suffered from a lack of volunteers. Knights of Columbus and CWL councils struggle to find members and to fill executive roles. Youth ministry is not universally active throughout our parishes and, when it exists, it often targets a narrow range of ages. Social justice apostolates and programs to aid those needing assistance similarly struggle.

We are called to live with a missionary attitude. But when we are divided and reinforcements seem far off, it is too easy to lose that missionary zeal.

These parishioners are spread too thinly over four parishes. By taking steps to consolidate parishes, we hope that those who are involved in these apostolates may be better supported and encouraged. There are many active parishioners at St. Mary's who can help spread this missionary attitude to the other parishes and encourage others to journey with them.

Why is St. Mary's being closed instead of another parish?

While St. Mary's is fiscally viable, it serves the centre of the city along with Sacred Heart Cathedral. As Christ Our Saviour and Immaculate Conception parishes serve extreme north and south regions of the city and beyond, closing one of those parishes would create a

significant increase in travel for more remote parishioners. St. Mary's does not have the same concern, located only five minutes away from the Cathedral.

The Cathedral and Christ Our Saviour can absorb the additional parishioners from St. Mary's.

The new boundaries also encourage parishioners to attend Christ Our Saviour parish. This will provide for a more dynamic community in the parish. Ultimately, the desire is to see three more vibrant parishes in the city that are focused on the work of worship, evangelization and charity.

What will happen to St. Mary's School?

St. Mary's School has been very successful and there are no plans to close the school.

As the Rector of the Cathedral already has Sacred Heart School to support, the Bishop will appoint a priest as delegate to St. Mary's School who will sit on the School Council in the same role that the Pastor currently has and serve as chaplain.

The school will have use of the entire building and may consider development of the space to accommodate growth in the student population.

Are the needs of St. Mary's School causing this closure?

No. While St. Mary's School would like to provide additional services to a larger number of students, the problem of shrinking parishes has been a reality for decades.

What will happen to St. Mary's buildings and savings?

When a parish is amalgamated with another, canon law requires that the assets of the parish follow the parishioners. They do not go to the diocese.

Because the territory of St. Mary's Parish is being divided between Sacred Heart and Christ Our Saviour, the assets will be divided based on the number of parishioners residing within each parish's boundaries. As most of the parish assets are held in the buildings, there will be a careful process to assess the value of each property to best determine how assets will be fairly divided.

What will happen to St. Mary's sacramental records?

Sacramental records will be transferred to the Cathedral parish in order to ensure safekeeping in accord with canon law.

If other communities of our size only have one or two parishes, why will we continue with three? Will that create future problems?

The challenge of the City of Prince George is that it largely follows Highway 97. There is quite some distance from the northernmost parts of the city to the southernmost. Some parishioners travel from outside the city to reach the nearest parish. While the consolidation of a greater number of parishes was considered, it was determined that this would create significant obstacles to those parishioners accessing the sacraments.

If the downward trend continues and we are unable to continue to support the three parishes, then additional amalgamations would need to be considered. We have learned from

this experience that we need to more closely monitor trends in our parishes. Had changes been made decades ago, our parishes would likely be stronger now.

Are the lawsuits part of the problem?

While the issue of the outstanding lawsuits is a significant and growing concern, it is not a material part of this decision. Parish assets remain with the successor parishes and we pray that they will continue to be used toward the mission of evangelization for many years to come.

The goal of this decision is to strengthen the community and make it more resilient in order to withstand forthcoming challenges.

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