

St. Mary's, West Bend, Moves to Future

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It was an emotional loss for the families of St. Mary's Immaculate Conception in West Bend when their 160-year-old parish school closed its doors in 2016.

But like a phoenix from the ashes, the parish has taken its first steps into the future with a church renovation project that embraces the community's roots while affirming its Gospel mission.

"It had been many years since we had done any work inside the church — it needed some updating," said Fr. Nathan Reesman, pastor of St. Mary's Immaculate Conception. "We really wanted to make this building the centerpiece of our campus now."

The current church building on the corner of Barton Avenue and River Drive was constructed in 1900 and remodeled in 1968, when many of its original elements were disposed of. A further addition of a parish center and gymnasium was completed in the late 1980s.

Current finance committee chair Don Theisen agreed that some cosmetic updates were in order, but worried that the fundraising campaign would be an uphill battle.

“We kicked off the campaign with a \$375,000 goal. I wasn’t sure we could raise that kind of money,” he admitted. “We had just done a campaign two years ago for some exterior work (on the church steeple) — we asked for \$160,000 and got \$200,000. I said, ‘I don’t think that will repeat. I think we’re going to have a struggle.’”

But the support from parishioners was swift and resounding as soon as the campaign launched in the fall of 2017, just after the parish’s 160th anniversary celebrations. By January, enough money had already been raised that the parish could move forward on the project, working with Conrad Schmitt Studios to develop a traditional design scheme for the church’s interior that incorporated Marian colors of blue, white and gold. The team at Conrad Schmitt relied on historical photos found in the parish archives and incorporated parts of the church’s surviving circa-1900 tabernacle in the new design.

A special challenge faced the project in the sanctuary, which actually houses an elevator shaft that leads to the parish center and gym. The shaft was previously hidden by a half-wall of dark wood panels, but was replaced with a white high altar. “Now, looking at it, you’d never know there was an elevator shaft there,” said Fr. Reesman.

Unexpected complications, including the need to replaster the sanctuary and to replace the old particle-board pews with solid wood ones, pushed the ultimate budget to a little more than \$500,000. Fr. Reesman volunteered his time to coordinate contractors and much of the work was done by parishioners, making the result a true testament to the dedication of the parish and its staff.

“We all did our part. There’s a very strong do-it-yourself ownership of the church and very strong local pride,” said Fr. Reesman.

Theisen said that the parish is still seeing new pledges come in in support of the project. About 95 percent of the pledged money will be in hand by December, he said, making for a very small carryover into the new year.

“It just amazes me,” he said, crediting the renovation’s success to the ability of Fr. Reesman and the parish staff to communicate the project’s goals and progress to the community. “That communication is so key because it builds a trust. When you have that trust, the people step forward because they feel you’re spending their money wisely. And we kept it in front of the people — we had church there as much as we could so they could see the progress. It kept them in tune with what was going on.”

Bishop James Schuerman visited the parish for an altar dedication on Sunday, Aug. 26. It was a moment not only to appreciate the physical beauty of the renovation work, but to take stock of the parish's place in the wider Church.

After the shuttering of the school, St. Mary's has turned its focus to a new outreach program that will support the surrounding Barton neighborhood, offering volunteers to families in need and making the old playground into a city park.

"One thing we said was that we were going to do this not just for our sake, but for the sake of the neighborhood," said Fr. Reesman. "This is very much a neighborhood parish here in West Bend. We want to invite people to come to our house and pray, and really make this a tool for evangelization. I'm very proud of the parish. This is the next phase, and our doors are open."

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