

November 8, 2023

Most Reverend Louis Tylka, DD  
Bishop of Peoria, Illinois  
419 NE Adams Street  
Peoria, Illinois 61603

Your Excellency, Bishop Tylka,

The parishioners of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Bloomington, IL have compiled a list of concerns, thoughts, and information about our historic church. Our town hall parish meeting on October 22nd had 208 parishioners attend the question/answer session with many stating their dismay in the tentative announcement of Holy Trinity Church closing.

The statements below are divided into several categories: Physical, Financial, School, Vocations, and Evangelization.

### **Physical Space**

1. Holy Trinity Catholic Church is on the National Historic Register and is one of few churches listed as a “masterpiece of Art-Deco architecture for worship spaces.” (stlouispatina.com) Of the 19 buildings in Bloomington -Normal, only 1 is a church – Holy Trinity.
2. Although the number of Holy Trinity parishioners is down, we still have a large number of members. Our concern is how the two smaller churches are going to physically accommodate our Holy Trinity parishioners in their pews and parking lots.
3. Keeping one large church open would be more cost-effective than keeping two smaller churches within a couple of miles of each other open. St. Mary and Historic St Patrick do not have the capacity to grow in members or accommodate the increased parking.
4. Parishioners that belong to both Historic St Patrick and Holy Trinity are older adults more susceptible to viruses like flu and COVID. If necessary or desired, Holy Trinity allows their parishioners to distance themselves due to the size of the church, giving them the opportunity to attend Mass in person rather than stay home and watch Mass.
5. A beautiful tradition in our community is to hold Central Catholic High School's graduation in one of the local Catholic Churches. In 2023, some families were unable to sit inside the Sanctuary at Epiphany because there wasn't enough space. Families were placed in the vestibule. Historic St Patrick and St. Mary would not be able to host Central Catholic High School graduation services, but Holy Trinity could because it is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest Catholic Church in town.
6. While trends in Holy Trinity attendance over the long term are significant, the shorter-term trends are no worse than other churches in the planning area. There was an unusually large drop at Holy Trinity in 2017, which may have been impacted by the reduced number of masses. Looking at the shorter-term trend, the Holy Trinity 2019-2022 change in attendance (-28%) is better than the Bloomington-Normal parishes of St. Mary's (-30%), Epiphany (-33%) and St. Patrick's of Merna (-33%).

### **Physical Space - Mass Times**

1. Holy Trinity has experienced at or near full capacity during Christmas and Easter Masses. How will closing the largest church building in Bloomington/Normal affect the parishioners, their families, and new members that would like to attend, but are not able to do so due to building capacity.
2. When Holy Trinity and Historic St Patrick combined, parishioners considered themselves one parish. Our pastor, offices, church bulletin and website are all under one umbrella. Parishioners have attended Mass at both parishes affecting the attendance data.
3. Holy Trinity has a 10:00 am Mass only on Sunday. Removing the 7:00 am Mass from the schedule was concerning to our aging parishioners. Many decided to attend Historic St Patrick's 8:00am & 4pm Mass which would skew the attendance data.

### **Physical Space - Handicap Access**

1. Our aging population at Holy Trinity, Historic St. Patrick's, and St. Mary's requires our facilities to be handicap accessible for all of our members. Holy Trinity has an elevator with easy accessibility from the handicap parking lot. The handicap parking spaces range from 39 ft. to 90 ft. to the elevator doors. The elevator entrance has a push-button handicap accessible door. Holy Trinity Church has 5 designated handicap parking spots; however, on weekends, the entire lot adjacent to the elevator is designated as handicap with 15 parking spots.
2. The elevator allows our parishioners to access all areas of the building. On the first floor is the Sanctuary, and if a parishioner would like to be a member of the choir, the elevator will provide them access to the choir loft. The elevator also goes to the basement – the newly renovated Holy Trinity Lower Level.
3. Historic St Patrick has seven handicap accessible parking spaces between the church building and the parish hall that range from 153 ft. to over 250 ft. to the 40 ft. steep, switchback ramp. The slope of the ramp exceeds the limits for handicap accessible guidelines. This ramp leads to the front church door that is not handicap accessible. There is no elevator at Historic St Patrick making access to the choir loft impossible.
4. St Mary has four handicap parking spots. None are close to the building.
5. With the improved sound system, Holy Trinity has a system that allows hearing impaired individuals to connect their Bluetooth enabled hearing aids to the system and hear Mass. We also have 3 headsets for those without Bluetooth devices.

### **Physical Space – Location**

1. Holy Trinity is centrally located in downtown Bloomington between the northbound and southbound lanes of IL Business 51. According to the Illinois Department of Transportation, the annual average daily traffic on IL Business 51 around Holy Trinity is 22,000 vehicles. Holy Trinity is also located on Historic Route 66, and IL Route 9/150 are located on the south side of the block. IL Route 9/150 has an average daily traffic of 6000 vehicles a day. With the combined average daily traffic of 28,000 vehicles, Holy Trinity has a prime location to evangelize. Closing Holy Trinity will cast a negative light on our faith and our Church.
2. The bell tower of Holy Trinity is a “beacon of light” for all Bloomington/Normal residents and visitors and has been for more than a century.

3. Closing Holy Trinity will have a negative impact on Bloomington and especially the downtown area. Bloomington has recently (8/22/23) approved moving forward with planning a \$25 to \$30 million downtown street redesign. Having a dilapidated/abandoned church with a gravel parking lot at the north entrance of downtown will show the community a failure of our Catholic faith.
4. Illinois Wesleyan University is located only a few blocks away from Holy Trinity and within walking distance for the college students, and they are a great addition to our parish at daily and weekend Masses. Music students at Illinois Wesleyan also participate in our choir.
5. With population increasing on the west side of Bloomington due to the increase of employment at the Rivian Automotive Factory, it seems logical to offer a large church for worship in a central location to increase disciples. It was recently announced on July 6, 2023, there is going to be an apartment and townhouse expansion built off Route 9 near Rivian. The announcement stated there will be over 750 dwellings built over the next few years. This new population growth would be about 3 or 4 miles from Holy Trinity Catholic Church. According to an article published July 6, 2023, by WGLT, the number one issue in the Bloomington/Normal area is the lack of people to fill open employment positions, and they cannot fill these positions without having housing for future employees. Closing the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest church in Bloomington/Normal during an increase of population on the west side may not be the best solution.
6. Closing Holy Trinity would exacerbate an even greater geographic divide between 'East' and 'West' Bloomington and the cultures and attitudes that are held within each.
7. Holy Trinity is large enough to accommodate all three parishes on the west side. Holy Trinity can adjust the Mass schedule and include a Spanish Mass.
8. Holy Trinity is located near public bus routes, and this allows the underserved on the west side access to Holy Trinity.
9. Emergency vehicles can easily access Holy Trinity. Historic St Patrick and St. Mary's are in higher crime areas than Holy Trinity according to law enforcement. This could deter parishioners from being a part of the new parish community.
10. Attracting New/Young Families and Keeping Current Families
  - Holy Trinity has the space to add a cry room to the rear or side areas of the sanctuary without negatively impacting capacity; or even the Lower Level which would allow for the viewing of Mass on both screens. Historic St Patrick's has no available space.
  - Building size can attract families but they may shy away due to the potential feeling they are disturbing others.
  - A "Cry Room" at Holy Trinity adds an option to new/young families.
11. The newly renovated lower level has an area for the bride and her wedding party to get dressed and prep for the wedding service. Historic St Patrick does not have an area at the church. The wedding party can use the hall across the parking lot but that isn't conducive during inclement weather.
12. Holy Trinity has space available in the Holy Trinity Lower Level for a children's liturgy. Historic St Patrick does not have the available accommodations to grow disciples with a children's liturgy.

### Physical Space – Parking

1. Holy Trinity has significantly more off-street parking and handicapped spaces than either Historic St Patrick or St Mary combined. Can St. Mary's and Historic St Patrick handle the increased parking needs, if Holy Trinity's current members join their congregations?

### Physical Space – Renovation

1. Holy Trinity has continued to upkeep our church:
  - The roof is relatively new.
  - Stain Glass Windows have been restored with protective storm windows.
  - Exterior walls have been tuck-pointed and rebricked where needed.
  - Basement remodeled.
  - Audio sound system updated.
  - Organ and acoustics upgraded for the best musical experience during Mass for our congregation.

### Financial/Stewardship

1. Demolition of Holy Trinity would cost at least \$1M
2. Holy Trinity parishioners are generous financial donors, and the church is financially stable with the current parishioners. If Holy Trinity members migrate to a church close to where they reside, can St. Mary and Historic St Patrick remain financially sound long term?
3. If Holy Trinity parishioners choose to worship at Epiphany and/or St. Patrick of Merna, those churches may need building expansions and that would be an inefficient use of resources.
4. Operating costs were mentioned as a reason to close Holy Trinity, but these costs are manageable. Holy Trinity is financially strong with the largest 2022 surplus (\$1.1 million) of all the parishes in the Bloomington-Normal area. The next highest was \$477,000. This is after an education subsidy of \$566,000 to Corpus Christi School and Central Catholic High School. As of 6/30/2022, Holy Trinity had \$2.2 million of cash and investments. Historic St Patrick had a 2022 surplus of \$27,400 and \$864,500 in cash and investments as of 6/30/2022. St. Mary parish had a \$139,700 deficit in 2022, which is a \$300,600 deficit after school and cemetery deficits. St Mary education subsidy was 113% of ordinary income. The St Mary parish, school and **primarily** CEMETERY had cash and investments of nearly \$2.6 million as of 6/30/2022. This may help deal with deficits for a while, but it seems that there is trouble ahead.

### School

1. St. Mary's has raised funds to expand their elementary school, but they are in fact land locked. St. Mary's Church and School do not have exposure to the Bloomington/Normal community based on their location. Holy Trinity is in the heart of downtown Bloomington.
2. Holy Trinity is assessed for financial support of Corpus Christi School. Will St. Patrick of Merna bear the sole financial support of Corpus Christi School if Holy Trinity closes?
3. The schools need to be a larger part of this Growing Disciples planning project. St. Mary's is under financial strain trying to keep the school operating. Is this even sustainable long-term under this proposed plan? Even at the St Mary town hall meeting

St Mary parishioners voiced their concerns that the current business model is unsustainable. By shifting Holy Trinity/Historic St Patrick support away from Corpus Christi school, will that school also be weakened? Has any consideration been given to consolidating these two schools? They are only 2.5 miles apart. It seems that this would be more efficient and provide as good, or better, Catholic school education, and would financially help all of the involved churches.

4. Closing Holy Trinity is disregarding the long tradition the church has had with Corpus Christi School, formerly Holy Trinity School, which was founded by Holy Trinity parish. Multiple generations of Holy Trinity families have attended this school. The choice between the proposed Holy Trinity-Historic St Patrick-St Mary parish community or Corpus Christi School may be a painful one, but these families will likely choose the school, which means losing the younger parishioners. Other families without this previous connection may also prefer Corpus Christi instead of St. Mary because of the larger size, variety of activities, location, etc.
5. If the school is a major reason St. Mary is the primary site, could we ask for a pause on this decision until we know what decision will be made on the long-term viability of the school? It appears the school is struggling financially and may eventually be closed/merged into another school. Is the cost per student for each of the Bloomington-Normal grade schools submitted to the diocese? According to the numbers in the Growing Disciples Round 1 workbook, the cost per student at the other two schools in town is between \$6-7k per student, while at St Mary School the cost is over \$11k per student. How is this being a good steward of funds?
6. Combining St. Mary, Holy Trinity and Historic St Patrick creates a conflict for parishioners on which school should be supported.

## **Vocations**

Holy Trinity has been the home parish for many who have chosen God's calling as priests, sisters, and deacons. We believe this is reflective of our faith community and should be considered. This truly is 'Growing Disciples'. More recent vocations include:

- Fr. Chase Hilgenbrinck
- Fr. Eric Bolek
- Fr. Daniel Dionesotes
- Br. Zachery Feldker
- Br. Tom Junis
- Blake Miller (seminarian)
- Sr. Mercy Marie Gallagher
- Deacon Joe Knapp
- Deacon Bob Hermes
- Deacon Jim Gore
- Deacon Brendan Carolan
- Deacon Al Lundy
- Deacon Mike Marvin
- Mark Landsly (deacon in formation)

## Evangelization

1. Based on the Growing Disciples survey, if 43% of fallen away Catholics would consider returning the practice to church if asked (from 'Catholic Missionary Disciples' Five steps to building a strong Catholic Community), what kind of message are we sending if we close or demolish the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest historic Catholic Church in Bloomington/Normal?
2. What is the percentage of parishioners expected to leave the faith with the closing of their church? Why is it acceptable to lose that percentage by proposing the closing of Holy Trinity - who has the largest parishioner base of the suggested grouping - when the purpose of Growing Disciples is to expand? Doesn't this result contradict the whole purpose of Growing Disciples?
3. If the guidelines for Growing Disciples are:
  - Evangelization potential (for which Holy Trinity has the highest potential and is currently enthusiastically engaged in)
  - Geography & Demographics (Holy Trinity has location, location, location as well as updated facilities that are centrally located on major thoroughfares)
  - Natural affinity between parishes & past collaborations (Holy Trinity and Historic St Patrick have been linked and are considered sister parishes)
  - Relationships (our choir could be united once again in their original choir loft of choice).
  - Long term sustainability (Holy Trinity has hands down more sustainability over the other 2 parishes).
4. Many believe St. Mary's was 'chosen' over Holy Trinity because of the Hispanic community. Holy Trinity and Historic St Patrick could easily and would enthusiastically serve the Hispanic community. We must understand that the Catholic Hispanic community does not exist because of St Mary, but rather it exists because of their strong and vibrant faith. Holy Trinity and St. Patrick would allow not only for the future growth of the Hispanic community, but the entire Catholic community of west Bloomington and those living near downtown. We need to trust we WILL grow disciples and hope we are not closing the only church on the west side of town that can accommodate a larger and more active Catholic community, with a campus that can accommodate classes, evangelization efforts, and retreats.
5. The highly utilized Holy Trinity parish center has office space and meeting rooms right across the street from the church. It has ample space to accommodate large groups for Bible Studies, Ministry Meetings, Evangelization programs, as well as hosting Cursillo weekends. There are no stairs to enter the Holy Trinity Parish Center, making it easily accessible for handicapped individuals.
6. Holy Trinity and Historic St Patrick have worked together to increase participation in RCIA (current enrollment is 10), bible studies and other faith development opportunities to grow our disciples. Based on Holy Trinity's campus, we are more capable of serving more people than either Historic St Patrick or St. Mary. Holy Trinity Church, parking, and administrative building can accommodate growth.
7. Holy Trinity provides a campus of fellowship, worship, education, and service to our community. Our Church, St. Vincent DePaul, and our ministries work together to serve not only parishioners, but also downtown and the west-side community. Holy Trinity is accessible to those who have limited resources. We are a visible reminder to the community by showing the love of Jesus through the services Holy Trinity provides. It

serves as a beacon of hope for the inter-city and removing it sends a statement of a failing faith and hope.

8. The newly renovated basement is spacious and allows Holy Trinity to have a gathering space for many activities that allows us to evangelize and grow disciples.

### **Evangelization Events at Holy**

1. Since July of 2021 the sister parishes of Holy Trinity and Historic St Patrick have offered the following Faith opportunities:

- Equip Group
- Divine Mercy – offered in 2022 and again in 2023.
- Alpha
- Arguments Against Abortion – in three offerings
- The Bible and the Church Fathers – offered twice.
- ChristLife course 1 of 3 ‘Following Christ’
- Eucharistic Miracles of the World Exhibit – attended by Bishop Louis Tylka
- What type of Bread Shall I Be? – by Fr Dom the Bread Monk
- 3 Night Mission by Fr Joseph Mary
- Genesis I
- Genesis II
- Genesis III
- Gospel of John
- The Eucharist: Our Source & Summit by Scott Hahn & John Bergsma
- Holy Moments book study
- Life of Moses
- Gospel of Matthew
- Ministry Fair
- Numbers & Deuteronomy
- Philippians
- Redemptive Suffering
- Holy Relics of St Manuel Garcia Gonzales and Carlos Acutis
- Romans
- Shroud of Turin Exhibit – open multiple weekends
- Sorrowful Mysteries
- The Presence
- Relativism
- Mr Mike O’Neill the Miracle Hunter: Eucharistic Miracles
- Mr Mike O’Neill the Miracle Hunter: How the Catholic Church Investigates the Supernatural
- 33 Days to Morning Glory
- CCD Parent faith opportunity offered in conjunction with CCD.

That’s **35 different opportunities** to grow in faith that have been offered in a mere 28 months. This doesn’t include RCIA, CCD, Baptism Preparation Classes, or Wedding Preparation. Our vision statement states: **“We are a catholic community, striving to be intentional disciples in love with Jesus, inviting everyone to experience the joy of the gospel.”** Every one of

our evangelization opportunities offers an encounter with Jesus to reenergize individuals into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

2. In addition to the faith opportunities, we have also offered programs geared to the older members of our parish:
  - A Matter of Balance
  - Home Safety & Fire Prevention
  - The Green Folder: A Later in Life Plan
3. Social Events have been offered at Holy Trinity as well:
  - Monthly Welcome Weekend Breakfast & Name Tag Sunday
  - Big Game Party (Super Bowl)
  - Volunteer Appreciation Dinners yearly
  - Trivia Night
  - Annual Parish Picnic
  - Don't Eat Alone on... Easter, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Thanksgiving and Christmas
4. Parish Ministries and Outreach Ministries that use our facilities:
  - Christian Family Movement
  - Elizabeth Ministry
  - Hospitality Committee
  - Funeral Lunch Committee
  - Evangelization Team
  - Vocation Ministry
  - Centering Prayer
  - Tribunal Notary Meetings
  - Giving Tree
  - Youth Group
  - Alcoholics Anonymous
  - Knights of Columbus
  - Young at Heart
  - Illinois State Newman Center Groups
  - St Vincent de Paul
  - Deacon Vicariate
  - Cursillo (4 retreat weekends a year in addition to weekly meetings)
  - Spanish Cursillo (2 retreat weekends)
  - Diocesan Cursillo Ultreya
  - Work Camp Youth Group
  - Benedictine Oblates
  - Secular Franciscans
  - Illinois Symphony Concert
  - Illinois Wesleyan Christmas Program
  - Illinois Wesleyan Recording Session
  - Illinois Wesleyan Spring Program
  - BloNo Catholics Young Adults Group
  - Millikin University Concert (located in Decatur, IL)



## **How does Holy Trinity promote faith opportunities?**

1. RCIA is offered differently than any other parish in the Bloomington-Normal Community. We regularly publish the class topics in our bulletin and on our website, inviting anyone interested in learning more about that topic to attend. All are welcome to learn more about their faith. Additionally, we have speakers from 4 of the 5 local Catholic parishes presenting at RCIA.
2. When hosting exhibits and larger events such as the Hahn & Bergsma Event, we regularly reach out to parishes within our diocese and the surrounding dioceses to promote within their diocese.
3. Catholic Spirit Radio regularly promotes different events for us.
4. Articles have been submitted to the Catholic Post for publication and promotion of events.
5. We've had digital billboards advertising events here at Holy Trinity.
6. Holy Trinity & Historic St Patrick purchased a rotation of seven different billboard designs to be used in a rotation around Bloomington-Normal promoting the Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Pictures and an article can be found in the Catholic Post.
7. With an in-house website administrator, Holy Trinity can easily promote not only their own faith opportunities, but those within the Bloomington-Normal Catholic Community.

## **Nursing Home and Assisted Living Outreach**

1. Below is a list compiled by St Patrick of Merna listing the outreach done by parishes in the Bloomington-Normal area:

### **Epiphany Catholic Church**

- By request only, no communion services offered.

### **St Mary Bloomington**

- Communion distribution on Sunday to Luther Oaks after the streaming of **HOLY TRINITY'S 10am Mass**

### **St Patrick of Merna**

- Weekly communion service offered at Carriage Crossing, Bickford House, Hollybrook & Mercy Creek
- Visits to specific parishioners at Heritage on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday

### **Holy Trinity & Historic St Patrick**

- Communion distribution every Sunday at Westminster & Martin Health Care after the streaming of Holy Trinity 10am Mass
- Communion distribution 2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday at Heritage after the streaming of Holy Trinity 10am Mass
- Mass and Confession is offered 9 months a year at Westminster & Martin Health
- Mass and Confession is offered 3 months a year at Heritage.
- Additional services by request.

2. The pastor of Holy Trinity is the only pastor in the Bloomington-Normal area who regularly offers Mass and confession opportunities to those in Assisted Living facilities.

3. In addition to the outreach listed above, Fr Stirniman personally visits EVERY homebound parishioner during Lent and Advent.
4. During COVID, reaching parishioners became difficult. It required thinking outside the box.
  - The pastor of sister parishes, Holy Trinity & Historic St Patrick, began live streaming Mass from the churches and the chapel in the Holy Trinity Parish Center.
  - Eucharistic Adoration was offered with Jesus present in the monstrance and viewable from the parking lot. Many local Catholics attended this regularly.
  - As the COVID situation eased, we began to offer 'parking lot' Masses. The faithful could spread out on lawn chairs (weather permitting) or remain in their vehicles and listen as the Mass was broadcast within a small radius of the church.
  - Parking lot confession was offered.

Change takes time and progress takes effort. Holy Trinity is clearly making an effort to change the current paradigm that the church has been mired in since Vatican II, sixty plus years ago. Time is needed to gain experience for what is working and expand on those opportunities, to gradually change the mindset and get buy-in of parishioners. Events like hosting Dr's Hahn & Bergsma don't happen without months, sometimes years, of planning to build unity, confidence, faith, to gain a new perspective that can be nurtured to become more invitational in our evangelization endeavors. With plans that are two and three years out, time is needed to incorporate the changing dynamics of our Catholic community to that which is much more inclusive and less contrary to whatever the Growing Disciples plan from the Diocese is. Matt Faley states that "Pope Francis speaks that evangelization/discipleship consists mostly of taking the constraints of time off of how we perceive our life to be." (Inspiring Discipleship video at the 19:15 mark) The same can be said for a parish. We must remove the constraints of time to continue moving forward. Having been proactive with evangelization at Holy Trinity, we continue to think outside the box and incorporate a growing understanding to be more inclusive to the needs within our community as we look to the future. To be blunt, we're just getting started. We at Holy Trinity would like to see this through as we expand our presentations to include the greater Bloomington-Normal community as we wait with great anticipation to get and implement the Diocese's plan for Growing Disciples Evangelization.

As Matt Faley said in his Discipleship video "Jesus chose the unchosen to change the world." The current proposal to close Holy Trinity makes us the 'unchosen'. We ask that you reconsider the current model and choose Holy Trinity to lead the evangelization efforts in the Bloomington-Normal catholic community.

Sincerely,  
The parishioners of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Bloomington, IL