

Volunteers embrace vision for new parish in southwest Edmonton

Even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a long-term plan is underway for a new Catholic church in southwest Edmonton, with the land already bought and a fundraising appeal expected to start as soon as this fall.

“We have to have some vision to look down the road, and that’s what we’re being invited here to participate in, to have that vision and to look farther down the road than what we see today,” said Paul Givens, who is helping to lead the effort.

“Most people will tell you there’s never a good time to start fundraising or it’s always a good time to start fundraising. You have to start. You have to have a plan for what life is going to be like 10 or 20 years down the road. It’s pretty exciting to be asked to participate in that.”

Givens is co-chair of the 16-member southwest parish fundraising committee. St. Thomas More, the biggest parish in southwest Edmonton, is leading the project.

The site is a 10-acre parcel of land in the Glenridding Heights neighbourhood, off Rabbit Hill Road and south of Anthony Henday Drive, purchased by the Archdiocese for \$9.5 million in January.

A Covenant Care and Covenant Living facility is planned next door and the Edmonton Catholic School Division has a Grade 10-12 high school site across the street.

St. Thomas More Parish has been tasked by Archbishop Richard Smith to raise funds to start paying off that mortgage and eventually for construction for the church itself, its parking lot and related facilities.

The timeline for the project is roughly 15 years, and organizers say the pace is dependent on support from the Catholic community. Once the new church is built, it will be a sister parish to St. Thomas More and share some facilities.

“Right now we see the very, very great need for another church, but we don’t know what will happen in the future,” said Rev. Mitch Fidyka, pastor of St. Thomas More. “But we have to be ready.”

Already, his parish serves more than 5,000 families, and it’s one of the largest by population in the Edmonton Archdiocese. Many of its five weekend masses are filled beyond capacity, and the number of families in Windermere, Ambleside, Heritage Valley and the communities near the Edmonton International Airport is expected to continue increase along with housing development.

Twelve Catholic schools are affiliated with St. Thomas More, and this year alone 280 children were preparing for their First Communion before it was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The area is developing even as we speak and that means we’ll need a church there sooner rather than later I believe,” Givens said. “For this new parish we have to look ahead. What will it look like there 20 years from now? What will the need be?”

Father Fidyka said having a large parcel of land is a good start. He noted that the St. Thomas More church site is too small, leading to issues around parking and access.

The St. Thomas More southwest parish fundraising committee launched a website just after Easter detailing plans for the new church project. The committee’s mandate and fundraising is separate from the finance committee charged with the maintenance of St. Thomas More.

The fundraising appeal is expected to begin in the fall or when COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. In the meantime, the committee is planning for community outreach and lining up contractors, potential donors and supporters.

Organizers say they have faith that the Catholic community will support the new church project.

“It’s always a problem. There’s never a good time to raise money for any causes,” Father Fidyka said.

“You know, big things in the church, big cathedrals were not built by millionaires who give \$5 million, \$10 million right away but people of faith who are willing to give part of their earnings no matter how big they are or not.”

Organizers note that churches are planned and built on faith, with no exact knowledge of how big the parish community will be or what other developments will occur around it in the future.

“We are people of faith. We are people of the Church,” Father Fidyka said. “If we start something and we believe that it’s needed, this is not just our initiative. We believe that God is on our side. If it had to happen, it will happen. Without faith, we would not start anything.”

The southwest parish fundraising committee was established in February, with Fidyka picking its members from the ranks of St. Thomas More parishioners.

“They have an image of the new generation. They’re people of the future, people with good ideas,” he said. “I don’t know how much money they have. I don’t care that much. They are faithful people and they are willing work towards the new church, the new parish. They are gung ho. I don’t know how to slow them down.”

For Givens, the southwest parish project is a chance to be part of a long-term vision for the Archdiocese. He noted that prior to the construction of the St. Thomas More church, the area around it was farmland.

“This isn’t a sprint. It isn’t even a marathon. It’s generational. My parents, my grandparents, they all had the chance to participate in a mission like this in Edmonton. It’s a real honour and privilege to actively participate ... It’s fantastic.”