

# Shortage of priests forces church to close



Ken Behrend/Press-Gazette

The Rev. Dean Dombroski talks to parishioners during a recent Mass at SS. Cyril and Methodius Catholic Church in Eaton.

## SS. Cyril and Methodius in Eaton will be torn down

BY ANDREW BROMAN  
PRESS-GAZETTE

EATON — Albina Goral can't understand why her church, SS. Cyril and Methodius, must close — and why it must happen so quickly.

"I remember when my mother used to fry chickens for the picnics there," the 83-year-old parishioner said. "They could stay open ... they should have never closed it."

The parish council at SS. Cyril and Methodius voted in May to merge with another Catholic church — Our Lady Queen of Peace in Luxemburg. The new parish is called St. Thomas.

SS. Cyril and Methodius will host Mass for St. Thomas parish through the end of July, when the parish will relocate to Luxemburg. The Rev. Dean Dombroski, pastor of the parish, said the church will be demolished, although no date has been set.

The situation is hardly

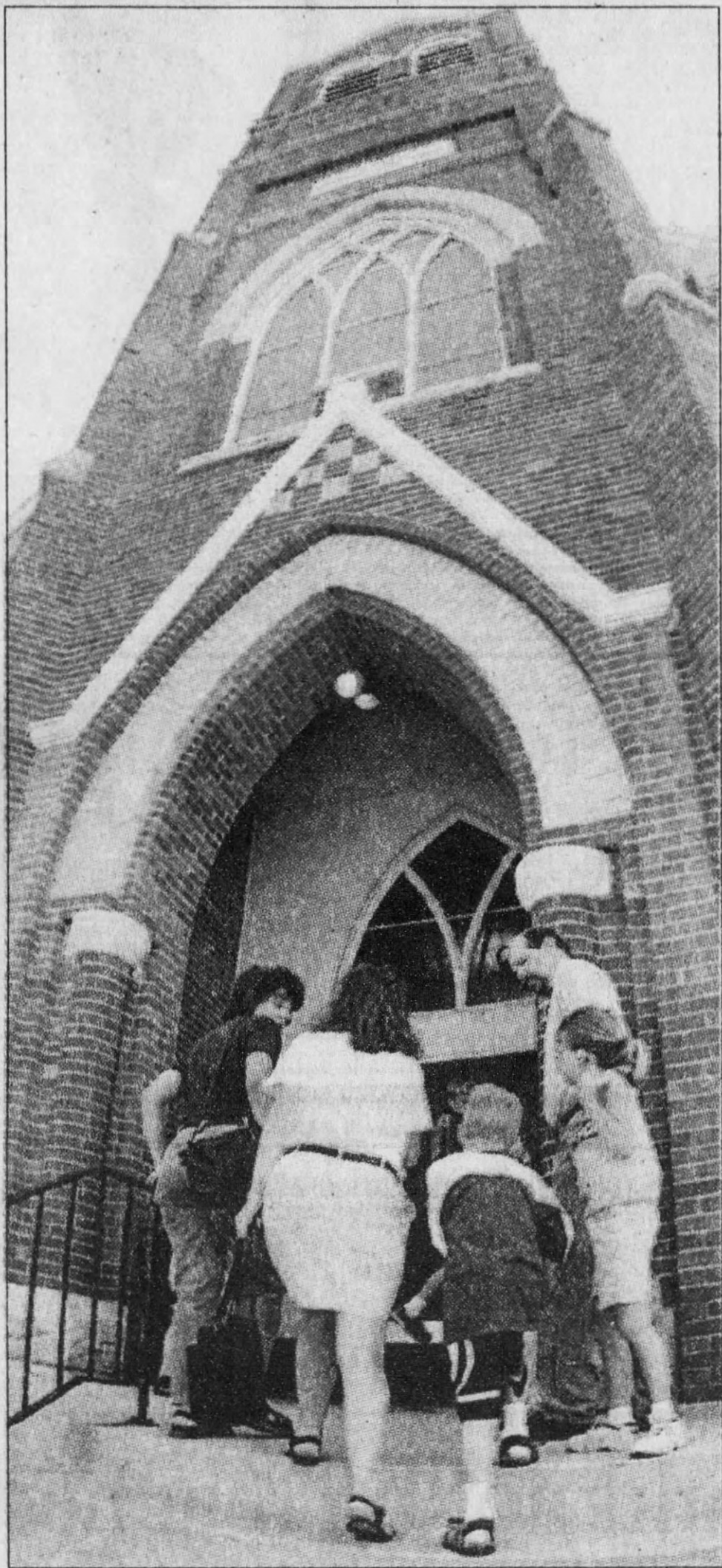
unique to SS. Cyril and Methodius, and the Diocese of Green Bay expects more tough decisions ahead. It has a simple answer for why the church must close: Priests in the area are retiring more rapidly than they are being replaced.

Only 28 priests have been ordained this decade in the diocese. It is a sharp decline from the 1960s, when 20 to 30 priests were ordained each year. This year, one priest has been ordained in the diocese. Nine are expected to retire, and one is expected to leave the priesthood, according to the diocese.

Priests typically are eligible to retire at age 70. Diocese statistics show the expected number of priests younger than 70 to decline from 153 in 1998 to 99 by 2005 — a 35 percent decrease.

But projections and statistics mean little to Goral and others, who saw five generations grow up with the 118-year-old parish.

"It was a very hard thing to take," said Darlene Goral,



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Parishioners head to Mass recently at SS. Cyril and Methodius Catholic Church in Eaton. They'll soon attend Mass elsewhere.

39, Albina Goral's daughter-in-law. "It felt like a home to me. I guess I don't understand with our tight community how it could be closing."

With 20 people from the family who were members of the parish, the church became more than a place of worship for the Gorals.

"Now with it closing, we're going to three different parishes," said Darlene's husband, Steve, who takes his family to Holy Trinity Church in Pine Grove.

Darlene said her family felt too betrayed to be a part of St. Thomas parish, where Dombroski now resides.

A priest at the church for

### Special Mass

Bishop Robert Banks of the Green Bay diocese will celebrate a special Mass at SS. Cyril & Methodius Parish at 10 a.m. Sunday, Sept. 19.

The Rev. Dean Dombroski will celebrate his last Mass at St. Thomas Parish at 10:30 a.m. Sunday, Aug. 1, at the church in Luxemburg.

16 years, Dombroski said the closing split the community to a degree.

"I've been surprised in some ways by a lack of support from some of the people

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close to me," he said.

He said he had hoped some parishioners would have better understood why the church had to close and how it affected the church.

Darlene's sister-in-law, Debbie Goral, 47, wondered whether the diocese coerced the parish into merging with Our Lady Queen of Peace.

"I think the decision was made long before we had any say in it," she said.

"The diocese had nothing to do with this. We had this planned out long ago. Before we went to them, we had three or four meetings," Dombroski said.

## A lose-lose situation

Members of the parish council at SS. Cyril and Methodius described the options they faced as a "lose-lose situation."

"I did not want to see it close," said Ann Potts of the parish council. "But it was bound to happen at some point."

The parish has 365 families as members. Because the town of Eaton's population is about 1,200 people, many of its residents attend the church. The combined parish has about 770 families.

Mark Mogilka, director of pastoral services for the diocese, advised Dombroski and parishioners during the decision-making process. Mogilka possesses the data that show how in five years many churches may need to share a priest, or worse yet, close.

For parishes such as SS. Cyril

## Fewer priests

This chart is a year-by-year estimate of the number of priests under the age of 70 who will be available for service in Green Bay diocese parishes.

Year	Priests reaching age 70	Newly ordained	Potential resignations	Priests under age 70
1998	4	2	1	153
1999	9	1	1	145
2000	7	0	2	136
2001	5	1	1	131
2002	7	0	2	122
2003	9	1	1	113
2004	6	0	2	103
2005	4	1	1	99

Source: Green Bay Catholic Diocese's *Local Area Planning Guidelines 1999*

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and Methodius, the diocese lets them decide whether to close, merge or link.

In a merger, two parishes form one, sometimes choosing to shut down one or both of the churches to build a more modern church.

In a link, two parishes share one priest but remain separate entities. This is what SS. Cyril and Methodius did before deciding to merge with Our Lady Queen of Peace.

About half of the 199 parishes in the diocese share priests, and by 2005, the diocese expects that number to increase to 170.

Over the next six years, Mogilka estimates, as many as 15 churches will merge and then close, as SS. Cyril and Methodius did.

## Numbers didn't lie

Mogilka first traveled to Eaton in March to explain the reality of things.

"Eaton was aware of the numbers ... They had five parishes in a five-mile radius and a couple of

priests. The church also needed repairs, and the question was, 'Does it make sense to invest \$250,000 into a 100-year-old church when there was a new one in (Luxemburg)?' " he said.

Since 1993, 22 parishes in the diocese have merged, and all but two of them — St. Joseph's and St. Boniface in De Pere — were located in rural areas.

Mogilka said he believes the priest shortage will soon affect churches in and around Green Bay. For the most part, urban churches have outlasted the shortage, but already, the diocese is studying plans for more mergers and mega-churches.

The diocese is in the second phase of a six-phase study that will determine how churches in the area will have to arrange themselves to survive.

"People don't always feel the pinch until they lose a priest," the Rev. Kenneth De Groot of St. Willebrord Parish said. "My fear is we will see a bunch of mega-

churches, where it is totally impersonal."

## Feeling the pinch

While De Groot said he expects his church to stay open, he feels the pressure of the shortage. In 1980, St. Willebrord had four priests and four daily Masses, along with 10 weekend Masses. Today, it has one pastor and some retired priests officiating for three weekday Masses and eight weekend Masses.

In Eaton, parishioners could foresee an era of fewer churches.

"They're kind of going out of business, like some of these corporations that downsized," said Gail Deterville. "The church knows the problem, but just won't do anything about it. Until they do something, more mega-churches will pop up."

Whether the downsizing trend will reverse itself is anyone's guess.

"It's hard to pinpoint what has caused a decline in the priesthood," said professor Mary Gautier of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. "Being a priest used to be a pretty honorable profession. If you were coming from a blue-collar family, priesthood was a pretty attractive alternative, but you don't see that as much anymore."

Debbie Goral, while she wishes SS. Cyril and Methodius would stay open, said she has no plans to encourage her son to enter the priesthood.

"Not with all the problems they have been having," she said.