

## **A church in mourning**

By Mark Coddington

[mark.coddington@theindependent.com](mailto:mark.coddington@theindependent.com)

Nov. 19, 2006

RAVENNA — The Rev. Marty Egging's job title may be "pastor," but since he began his newest job five months ago, he has essentially been a full-time grief counselor.

Egging began as the priest at Ravenna and Loup City on July 1 — the same day the Catholic Diocese of Grand Island "clustered" nine of its Central Nebraska parishes, ending weekly Mass in six towns and eliminating a priesthood in another.

That meant Egging was responsible for six parishes, four of which — Ashton, Hazard, Pleasanton and Rockville — had just lost the weekly meeting that gave their church its spiritual vigor. And another, Loup City, had just lost a full-time priest. Two other churches, Farwell and Elba, also lost weekly Mass in their clustering with St. Paul.

Emotionally and spiritually, Egging's parishes were a triage unit.

"Nobody would wish this on anybody," Egging said. "But at the same time, you do the work that's given to you."

Now Egging splits his weeks between Ravenna and Loup City (He has rectories in both towns). He celebrates about 11 Masses each week in Ravenna and Loup City and oversees nearly 900 families — about half of which are active — over an area of some 400 square miles.

The Grand Island Diocese has been clustering for about 40 years, but its most recent round has hit several small towns hard, leaving many committed families reeling. Pastors such as Egging are wondering how to maintain spiritual vitality in communities that have just lost their spiritual and social lifeblood — a chance to gather each week to talk, pray and celebrate Mass.

The changes were announced during the last week in April, just two months before they would take effect. Bishop William Dendinger traveled to each of the nine parishes to be clustered, and his explanations were met mostly with shocked silence.

That shock is still very real, Egging said. He spends much of his week meeting with grieving parishioners, some of whom have moved through the grief process to acceptance, while others are still hurt and angry.

But more than ever, his time is spent dealing with the administrative burden of overseeing more than 10 local councils, rather than visiting the sick and elderly and counseling parishioners. He has had to delegate many of those duties to nuns in Loup City and Ravenna.

"That kills me," Egging said, "because that's what I was ordained for."

## **A community dispersed**

Betty Poss was one of those parishioners in the pews, shaken and shocked when the announcement of the halt of weekly Mass was made at the end of a Sunday service last April in Elba.

“I couldn’t handle it for a month,” said Poss, who is on Elba’s parish advisory council. “I had tears in my eyes just thinking about it.”

Elba was among the most logical candidates for clustering, with only 46 registered families. It hadn’t had its own priest for decades, and when talk of clustering came up, Elba’s parishioners knew they were likely to be among the first. But for many, that did little to soften the blow.

The Catholic Church is a rock in Elba, both physically and socially. With its stark steeple, it is easily the tiny town’s most distinctive structure. And in a town of 243, Sunday Mass was a destination for almost 100 people every week.

“It was kind of like a coffee shop. Everybody would go down the street and get their visit in for the week,” said Shelly Wolinski, the church’s director of religious education. “Now you don’t ever get that kind of fellowship.”

Now those parishioners are scattered, Poss said. Some are attending Mass in St. Paul, others in Loup City. Some have quit going to church altogether. Many feel like they’re in limbo — not really parishioners of either Elba or St. Paul.

In Farwell, which also lost its weekly Mass, about a third of the parish’s families are not going to church anywhere, estimated Kathy Gorecki, the church’s secretary and bookkeeper. Giving to Elba and Farwell has dropped by about half.

Parishioners in Elba clamored for other options. They asked about scaling back to Mass once a month or having Mass broadcast in church from St. Paul. Parishioners in Farwell even tried to bring in a priest from Poland, but their move was rejected by the bishop and fell through.

Now, five months later, the reality has sunk in. Mass in Elba and Farwell will be limited to special occasions — Thanksgiving, town festivals, holy days — a few times a year.

Many, including Poss, feel abandoned by the diocese, dropped without warning or much discussion. Poss is still going to church, but she said she’s not as dedicated.

“I won’t change religions, but it’s really rocked me to the core,” she said. “Unless we can talk with somebody and work with somebody, I don’t see any reason for hope.”

### **Training lay leaders**

Bishop William Dendinger understands why many parishioners feel abandoned, but he said the clustering must be understood as part of a process that the diocese has been dealing with for more than 45 years.

Clustering, he said, is the best option the diocese has for dealing with a shortage that has been growing in severity over the decades — not so much of priests as of population.

“Even if I suddenly ran across seven more priests, I couldn’t put them out there, because they couldn’t be supported,” Dendinger said.

He said that what the diocese is facing is similar to many public schools’ dilemma — just as they can’t retain a school district, many small towns simply can’t support priests, financially or in

workload.

The Rev. Ray Kosmicki, pastor of the St. Paul, Farwell and Elba parishes, said clustering is simply an extension of what parishioners are already doing — traveling to shop, work or go to school.

“We’re talking about clustering of churches, (but) it’s really clustering communities,” he said. Dendinger draws a sharp distinction between clustering and closing — all of the clustered churches are still open, and most host religious education programs each week. He notes that clustered parishes can still be active, vibrant communities of faith with a distinct local identity.

The key, he said, lies in parishioners recognizing their baptismal calling to lay ministry and filling in many of the roles priests typically play.

For that purpose, the diocese tapped the Rev. Jim O’Kane, a retired priest, last year to head its new Office of Lay Ministry. Many small parishes have become accustomed to letting the priest do almost everything, from organizing potlucks to keeping the books, Dendinger said.

“The concept of ‘No priest, no church’ has been very deeply ingrained in some smaller parishes,” he said.

O’Kane has been charged with helping train lay leaders to lead liturgy and prayer, administer Communion and educate youths.

Egging and Kosmicki hope eventually to consecrate Mass for each of their parishes every Sunday and then send the elements out to each town for a midweek Word and Communion service led by a trained lay minister.

Both priests, along with Dendinger and O’Kane, said that project is the hope to be drawn from the grief of clustering — that laypeople will begin to see the importance of personal action in keeping their faith robust and their parishes alive.

“We can be alive and well and viable even without a weekend liturgy, but that will only happen if there’s proactive involvement in ministry by the laypeople,” Kosmicki said. “And that’s where we’re headed. That’s the future.”