

An Evolving Vision for Saint Luke Church – Part I: Our Physical Campus
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Introduction

As we begin the celebration of our 50th anniversary year, the parishioners and staff of Saint Luke Church parish have an unparalleled opportunity to grow together and enhance ourselves in at least three fundamental respects: spiritually; as a social community; and by enhancing our parish's physical campus. This perspective was reinforced by our recent parish survey which has been very enlightening.

It is also my belief and the belief of most parishioners with whom I have discussed this subject, that enhancing our physical campus will not only address some practical needs of our parish, but will also contribute directly to both our spiritual growth and our desire to grow as a social community.

The pages which follow are intended to provide further insight into our plans to enhance our physical campus. Based on ongoing discussions with parishioners, I will soon address our additional collective efforts to enhance our spiritual and social growth as well.

As always, I both encourage and deeply appreciate your thoughts, questions, suggestions and prayers.

Historical Context

Bishop Lawrence J. Shehan was the first Bishop of Bridgeport, serving from 1953 to 1961. During the late 1950s, many parishes were established by Bishop Shehan with a three-phase plan for building the parish campus. The first phase involved the construction of a temporary place for worship (which would later revert to serving as a gymnasium, auditorium or cafeteria for the school that would follow); phase two was to establish a Catholic elementary school; the third phase was to build a "real" church elsewhere on the campus property and to reincorporate the temporary worship space into the school complex. Parishes established under this "game plan" included Saint Luke in Westport; Saint Matthew and Saint Jerome in Norwalk; Saint Leo in Stamford; Saint Andrew in Bridgeport; Saint Mark in Stratford; and Christ the King in Trumbull, to name a few. A common characteristic of many of the phase one temporary worship spaces in these parishes is that stained glass windows exist only on one side of the nave; in some cases, the windows have been no more than colored glass panels without any images. In most cases, the opposite wall has little or no glass; some have air conditioning louvers. Another very noticeable characteristic is that these buildings have little or no vestibule in the traditional sense. Taken together, these characteristics of design testify that these buildings were never intended to be permanent worship spaces. Although many have undertaken liturgical updating projects, none of these parishes ever initiated, much less accomplished, the third phase, the building of a separate, free-standing church with the more familiar "gothic" or "Romanesque" styling of pre-Vatican II church architecture.

In short, the building in which Saint Luke Parishioners have worshipped for almost 50 years was **never intended to be a permanent church**. The closing of Saint Luke School after only about 10 years must have made it quite apparent that the original three-phase plan would not proceed to the point of building a permanent church elsewhere on the property. Further, we can surmise that the renovations completed under the leadership of Monsignor Thomas J. Driscoll in the 1970's acknowledged the need to enhance the sacred character of the worship space (in other words, to make it look more religious or "churchy") as well as to bring it into harmony with the liturgical reforms mandated by the Second Vatican Council.

I was appointed pastor of Saint Luke in 1997 and began in 1998 to develop plans to address capital and maintenance issues that had been neglected. Many parishioners urged me to do something to upgrade the appearance ("curb appeal") of the main entrance as well. Notable among them was Fred Comfort, who was at that time one of the two Lay Members of the Saint Luke Roman Catholic Church Corporation (the legal entity recognized by the State of Connecticut). Many parishioners expressed the opinion that the raw concrete planters in front of the church are a particular eyesore, comparing them to "burial vaults" and "septic tanks." And so, "Challenge 2000" was initiated as a multi-phase campaign to address the perceived needs: Phase I included upgrades to classrooms, lavatories (including a new handicapped-accessible facility), carpeting, roofing and HVAC. Phase II was to include an expansion of the rectory offices; Phase III was to address the front entrance of the church building. "Challenge 2000" raised \$923,000 toward a goal of \$1.2 million, allowing us to complete successfully the Phase I renovations and repairs. It was understood that Phases II and III could wait until a later date. The growing consensus is that the time has come to address phases II and III.

Financial Considerations

In terms of cash flow, the parish investment account had a balance of approximately \$700,000 when I arrived in 1997, allowing us to begin Phase I work immediately and then replenish the account as the pledges were redeemed. Phase I work cost approximately \$880,000; the remainder of the \$923,000 stayed in the investment account. Since that time, and with the repayment to our parish of \$200,000 that had been deposited in the Diocesan Parish Savings program, we have been able to grow the account to its present level of approximately \$1.8 million. Preliminary estimates for all three major components described below total \$2.1 million. It is the opinion of the Parish Finance Committee that the goal for the current campaign should seek to pay for all the work that is to be done, while leaving the investment account as intact as possible for the purposes of growing an endowment to help support the parish in the future.

Current Needs and Rationale

Our current capital campaign seeks to address three major needs, as follows:

The first need is for a proper gathering space (“vestibule”) for Saint Luke Church. No one would ever think of building a home without a front foyer or hallway in which to welcome visitors. Our parish history has led us to a point where we now have, in essence, a home without a foyer-front hallway. This arrangement causes a number of tensions and inconveniences for our parishioners:

1. Especially during inclement weather, there is very little appropriate space for people to carry out the common tasks associated with entering a building (removing wet raincoats, folding umbrellas, wiping feet, etc.). (Observation: isn't it odd that most Catholic churches do not provide any place for coats, hats, etc.! What kind of message of hospitality does that send??)
2. Also during inclement weather, those who wish to meet and converse with friends and neighbors before Mass have little or no place to do so, especially in the winter.
3. Those who wish to converse with friends and neighbors after Mass very often do so by remaining in the main body of the church, often disturbing those who wish to stay and spend time in quiet prayer and meditation after Mass. If asked to be aware and considerate of those who wish to pray, those who are “visiting” with one another may feel offended and unwelcome.
4. Many social and fundraising events require representatives to be on hand to sell tickets, conduct sign-ups or receive donations. In nice weather, it is easy for them to set up their stations on the front “patio” area. Inclement weather, however, forces them to the sides of the front porch or into the hallway outside the Robertson Room or, worse still, into the Community Room. These latter arrangements remove them from the view and main flow of parishioner traffic, negatively impacting their efforts. (Experience has taught us that people tend to make a direct line for their cars after Mass; they do not respond well to those activities which require them to go to a location that is even a little bit out of their way.)

The construction of the proposed gathering space would address these practical needs and tensions and create a more beautiful and welcoming appearance for the entry into our church. Since the gathering space is to be “in the round,” the axis of the main doors can be aligned with the principal axis of the parking lot, thus providing a more inviting appearance to people as they walk from their cars to the main doors and thereby providing a visual reminder that, “all are welcome.” Moreover, by establishing this beautiful gathering space, parishioners will naturally tend to congregate before and after Mass, contributing directly to our collective goal of continually strengthening our parish’s social community.

Far more important than its practical functionality, however, the gathering space has deep symbolic and theological meaning for God’s people as we assemble for worship. To see this space as merely a “vestibule,” a space of passive and minimal importance, does not do it justice. Probably the most important symbolic concept at work in the gathering space is that of *liminality* – *i.e.*, the gathering space as “threshold.” The threshold – and therefore, the gathering space – is both border and meeting place of two worlds where one almost

mystically becomes the other: the outer and the inner; the dangerous and the safe; the “profane” and the sacred; that which is foreign and that which is home; the past and the future. There is deep spiritual power in the very act of approaching and crossing a true threshold. Theologically, the gathering space and its doors is where we cross the threshold from the everyday world into the sacred space that is the dwelling place of God and the home for the *ekklesia* – the gathering of God’s people that is the Body of Christ, the Church. In that gathering space, we transition from the everyday activities of life to the supreme activity of worshipping God in the two-fold liturgy of Word and Eucharist.

Furthermore, the placement of the baptismal font at the center of the space will have it serve as the principal Holy Water font and be a constant reminder of the importance of our baptism as the entryway into the life of the sacraments and the community of God’s faithful people. Also, in its use during the funeral ritual, the font will be a hope-filled reminder that baptism is the promise and entryway into resurrection and eternal life.

Recognizing the depth and power of all these meanings demands a space that is both worthy and expressive of those meanings.

The second major need centers on safety. The location of the lower parking lot’s main entrance is extremely close to the intersection of North Turkey Hill and Long Lots Roads. Thus, as one travels east on Long Lots and turns south onto Turkey Hill, the very gradual shape of the curve allows cars to enter our parking lot at full speed. This is especially hazardous at times when children are on hand and likely to run toward their rides in the parking area, darting out in between other cars that are (illegally!) parked in the fire lane.

The repositioning of the main entrance to the midpoint of the campus property line on Turkey Hill Road and some redesign of the layout of spaces and travel lanes will vastly improve the safety of the parking lot for all pedestrians, especially our children. The creation of additional parking spaces will provide added convenience (especially in inclement weather) so that there will be less need to use the upper parking lot. Furthermore, we will have ample room for additional “handicapped” parking spaces. Finally, the redesign of the lot will also beautify the campus property by including new lighting and (town-required) landscaping.

The third major component of our need involves the rectory office. Even though a modest addition to rectory office space was created when an existing sun porch was enclosed some years ago, the amount of rectory office space that is currently available is inadequate for the size and lively nature of our parish. We are in dire need of work space for the secretaries and volunteers, storage space for files and supplies, and offices for the priests of the parish. By simply building on top of the flat roof that already exists, we will be able to add some much-needed work and storage space, minimize the change to the outward appearance of the rectory, and avoid the need for a lot coverage discussion with the town’s Planning & Zoning Commission. (We will also take advantage of this opportunity to remove the current in-ground oil tank and replace it with new indoor tanks in the rectory basement.)

Positioning: The 50th Anniversary Slogan

As we enter into the festivities of our golden anniversary year, our 50th Anniversary slogan provides the best way that I know to summarize our needs and to present the rationale for our upcoming construction projects and the capital campaign which will make them possible.

We **HONOR THE PAST** as we remember the founders of our parish who gathered around Father Cornelius J. Looney as their first pastor. Until their hard work and sacrifices could bring about their own church, they gathered for Mass at Long Lots School, moving tables and chairs to create their worship space each week. Under the guidance also of Monsignor Thomas J. Driscoll and Monsignor Pierre A. Botton, Saint Luke Church has served your great-grandparents, grandparents and parents as they were married and started their families here; as they welcomed, met and formed bonds of lifelong friendship with other families; as they brought you to faith and community in baptism and made sure that you learned your faith and were nourished with the sacraments.

We **CELEBRATE THE PRESENT** as we welcome the wide diversity of families who grow our parish as they move to Westport from all corners of the United States and beyond. Here we pray, learn and live our faith together as a parish family. Our staff stands ready to serve you faithfully “in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health,” in joy and in grief, through all the seasons and milestones that mark the journey of faith for you and your families. We celebrate the incredible array of gifts, talents and abilities that you share so generously to make our parish both lively and life-giving for one another and, beyond our borders, for those who are in need.

We **ANTICIPATE THE FUTURE** as we strengthen families with the Gospel of Christ and the traditions of our Catholic Church so that they may face the challenges of living our faith in a complex world. We will continue to help you form your children in faith so that they, as they begin their new families in turn, can pass on this precious gift to your future grandchildren. Our new atrium-vestibule-baptistery (and even outdoors in our redesigned entry and parking areas) will convey even more clearly in the future what we have stood for all along through these fifty years: ***We stand ready to offer welcome to all who seek a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Roman Catholic Tradition and a caring community of people who will share that faith-journey with them.***

Conclusion

Enhancing our physical campus surely will address a number of practical needs. More importantly, this work will also contribute directly to strengthening both our spiritual and social community. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to reflect on our need to develop our physical campus and the extent to which you will be able to participate in our capital campaign to make these improvements possible.

Many know that asking for money does not come naturally to me, but having reflected long and hard on the benefits to be derived by our parish community, I am now eager to sit down

with each and every parishioner who has an interest in strengthening our parish. I truly believe that enhancing our physical campus is an essential element in the spiritual and social development of our parish.

As part of our efforts to strengthen our parish, I think it is also imperative that we re-establish a Parish Council. To this end, I have established a task force of parishioners, staff and clergy to work with me to develop a Parish Council structure appropriate to Saint Luke Parish and look forward to sharing our progress with you in the weeks and months ahead.

As we begin our golden anniversary year, during which we will honor the past, celebrate the present, and anticipate the future, I often imagine the future state of our parish and what we can accomplish together. I encourage you to reflect similarly on your future vision for Saint Luke Parish, share your thoughts and hopes with me, and work together with me and your fellow parishioners to achieve that vision.

Cordially,

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Pastor