Dwindling Carteret Catholic parishes plan to merge

By Jeff Diamant/The Star-Ledger
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CARTERET -- The three Catholic parishes sit within nine blocks in Carteret, testament to a bygone era when different immigrant groups supported ethnic parishes within walking distance of each another. But memberships at the churches — historically Polish, Slovak and Hungarian — began dwindling decades ago and today, after a yearlong series of meetings among parishioners desperate to keep their parishes open in some form, Metuchen Bishop Paul Bootkoski is expected to formally approve plans to merge the three into one.

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Sacred Heart Church, on Fitch Street, is one of three Catholic churches merge in Carteret, as part of massive Metuchen Diocese consolidation.

Under the arrangement, each church building would remain open for worship but be managed by the same pastor, the Rev. Edmund Shallow, who has run two of
the churches since 2006. The three churches would be considered one parish entity, with one name — to be announced tonight — and would consider selling or leasing unused rectory and convent space. Such mergers, a function of Catholic demographic shifts and a continuing shortage of priests, are often fraught with anxiety. Parishioners with emotional ties to parishes have protested bishops’ decisions to close church buildings in cities from Cleveland to Camden. One merger in Rahway, between the churches of St. Mark and St. Mary, has been so turbulent that parishioners have lobbed insults back and forth on nj.com’s Rahway blog. But in Carteret, a blue-collar borough in Middlesex County with a population of about 23,000, parishioners have praised the process behind the merger of Holy Family, Sacred Heart and St. Elizabeth churches — founded between 1907 and 1914 as Polish, Slovak and Hungarian parishes, respectively — as open and participatory.

Each parish, as well as nearby St. Joseph’s Church, also in Carteret, had five people on a committee that met once a month and held follow-up meetings for other parishioners. “Allowing all the parishioners to get together and have all their opinions, I think was wonderful,” said Arlene Szymborski, a member of St. Joseph’s Church for 55 years. “It makes everyone feel as though they have a little part in it.”

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St. Elizabeth of Hungary on Washington Avenue.
The need for a merger came as no surprise. St. Joseph’s and St. Elizabeth began sharing a pastor in 2004. Two years later, Sacred Heart and Holy Family began sharing priests. Membership has declined further since these mergers, said Jeffry Korgen, director of the Metuchen Diocese’s Department of Diocesan Planning. Each church has experienced significant drops in registered families over the last 10 years, leaving Holy Family with 384 members, Sacred Heart with 284, and St. Elizabeth with 124. St. Joseph’s has 1,737 registered families, more than twice the number as the other three combined. It will remain independent of the new merged parish. It will remain Carteret’s “territorial parish,” which local Catholics are expected to attend unless they request another parish. Never formally an ethnic parish, it has many Hispanics now, and is where most Catholic newcomers to Carteret worship. Committee members briefly considered merging the three ethnic parishes into St. Joseph’s but decided that operating them as a separate unit would help them retain their shared Eastern European identities, Korgen said. “I don’t think it’s been easy for anybody,” Debbie Ascolese, a member of Holy Family for 32 years, said of the process. “We’re going to lose our name. We just celebrated 100 years last year, and suddenly you’re not going to be Holy Family parish any more.”

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Holy Family Church on Pershing Avenue.
Still, she said, “it went much nicer than I thought it was going to … Everybody had mutual respect for each other. Everybody was concerned about the possibility of losing identities, losing histories, losing culture. Everybody knew how important that is.” Bootkoski has not yet formally approved the committee’s recommendation, but his approval is expected. Over the past six years, Roman Catholic dioceses throughout the state have announced plans to merge or close more than 100 parishes and dozens of schools because of financial pressures resulting from low enrollments and memberships; changes in demographics; and shortages of priests. Charles Zech, an economics professor at Villanova University who specializes in church finance, said that early last decade, bishops around the country made decisions about church closings without obtaining substantive input from parishioners. Parishioners were often angry when decisions were announced. Now, however, dioceses are increasingly allowing congregants to participate in decision-making processes. “I think they’re learning,” Zech said of the bishops. “The Catholic Church is not the most consultative body in the world. We have a long way to go. But they’re getting better at it. It still doesn’t make people happy, but they’re getting better at it.