

`Roamin' Catholics' wander in search of new church

by [Michael O'Malley](#)

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CLEVELAND (RNS) They call themselves "Roamin' Catholics," traveling from church to church, looking for a new place to worship since Cleveland's oldest black Catholic church was shut down more than a year ago.

Initially, there were nearly 50 of them from St. Adalbert Catholic Church, which closed in June 2010, as part of a diocesewide downsizing. But some found other worship communities -- both Catholic and Protestant -- while others just quit church.

Phillis Fuller Clipps, 54, said she knows of 14 former Adalbert members or families who joined Protestant churches, 29 who no longer attend any church and 69 who joined other parishes.

But 16, including Clipps and her husband, are still displaced and say they will continue to roam as a group until they get a ruling from the Vatican on an appeal they filed, challenging Bishop Richard Lennon's closing of St. Adalbert's.

More than a dozen Cleveland-area parishes closed by Lennon over the last two years have appeals pending in Rome.

"We're praying for a miracle on 83rd Street," said Clipps, who hopes to return someday to the shuttered St. Adalbert's, which was located at that address.

Meanwhile, the Roamin' Catholics have not missed a Sunday Mass since their church closed.

"We are the church and we still have our faith," said Joyce Sanders, 73, whose family had been part of St. Adalbert's roots for five

generations. "Our faith is carrying us on."

The Roamin' Catholics have a pool of about two dozen parishes they regularly visit on both sides of town, partaking in Sunday rituals and gauging how warmly they are received.

Cleveland Catholic Diocese spokesman Robert Tayek said the diocese was concerned that the roamers are not registered with particular parishes because in the event of a death, there could be complications over where the funeral would be held.

"We hope they can find their way," he said.

The Catholic roamers said that if they win their appeal, they'll stop their wandering and go back to their spiritual home. If not, they'll stay together and decide in which parish to settle.

"The majority of the parishes have been very welcoming," said Sanders. "A few of them have not."

But no matter how warm the welcome, it hasn't been enough to soften some Adalbert members who, in bitterness over losing their church, have turned their backs on religion.

George Gamble, 28, was baptized at St. Adalbert's when he was a baby. It was his home away from home, he said, a place where he learned his academic lessons and his Christian values.

"The ordinary black kid in our community doesn't get a chance to experience a place like St. Adalbert's," he said. "I am very proud of my St. Adalbert community -- so proud that I can't go to any other community.

"My Sunday mornings are just another day," he said. "I'm just not religiously focused these days. The tears are still in my eyes."

Rudy Thompson, 64, who runs a Sunoco station in the Buckeye neighborhood on the city's East Side, raised his family at St. Adalbert's.

He too has given up on the church.

"Bishop Lennon pulled the rug out from under us," said Thompson, who did a lot of volunteer maintenance at the church. "We had a big, happy family at St. Adalbert's, but it's all been taken away from us. When something like that is broken up, what do you do?"

St. Adalbert's traced its roots to the long-defunct Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, established in 1922 as Cleveland's first and only black Catholic church.

By the 1960s, Blessed Sacrament, a small church, was in need of major repairs, so the diocese closed it and the congregation migrated a few blocks away to St. Adalbert's -- a dying Bohemian parish in a predominantly black neighborhood.

The new tenants -- about 1,000 of them -- moved into the twin-towered church, painted the faces of Jesus, Mary and Joseph black and built a school.

When the diocese shuttered the 100-year-old building last year, the congregation was down to about 225.

Lennon has closed 50 churches in the eight-county diocese over the last two years, citing changing demographics and shortages of priests. Most of the closings were in inner-city neighborhoods, including two other black Cleveland churches.

"For many black families, the church is their whole life," said the Rev. Dan Begin, who had pastored at two black churches in the city. "Now there's nothing convenient for them to get to. A lot of them are just not going to Mass. It's unfortunate."

Tayek said the gap in black Catholic churches created by the closings was one of the diocese's biggest concerns during reconfiguration discussions.

"We wrestled really hard on trying to close that hole," he said. "And that's one we're still wrestling with."

Like the Adalbert roamers, Begin and his "scattered seeds" travel once a month to different churches, where they hold African-style Masses

and dinners.

"I try to keep up with them as much as possible," said Begin. "I've made a commitment to be their pastor."