

May 20, 2007 - Parishioners seek closure on controversy

By Hoa Nguyen, Staff Writer, Stamford Advocate

Declan Maguire boldly rose from his pew at St. Michael Church one January evening to question Bishop William Lori on his decision to remove the Rev. Michael Moynihan as pastor of the Greenwich church. Maguire's public confrontation earned thunderous applause during that emotional Mass where parishioners first learned of Moynihan's fate and the accusations of financial mismanagement.

Four months later, Maguire, 56, of Stamford, still believes Lori made an unfair or at the least a premature decision because Moynihan has not been accused of mispending parish funds, just maintaining unauthorized bank accounts. Maguire said little has changed at the church since those revelations were made public. His family remains active members of the church. His sons still perform their duties as altar boys and his wife was recently appointed to the parish's pastoral council.

"It's not as if the place is half full," Maguire said. "If you came a year ago and you came today, you would be hard-pressed to notice a change in terms of numbers of people."

Still, questions about Moynihan's financial judgment and spending habits linger in the minds of parishioners who await the results of an audit into the parish's finances. The audit, diocese officials said, would answer some of those questions that remain nearly a year after an independent auditing firm was asked to look into the church's finances.

"Things march on," Maguire said. "I would not at all perceive there is some great cloud hanging out there. There is some curiosity. I'm curious to see what comes out of this ... some charge of stealing -- it would probably make the bishop's case ... if nothing comes of it -- gee, just run a guy out of town for no good reason."

The Diocese of Bridgeport has released little additional information regarding an outside auditor's ongoing investigation into Moynihan's spending, which according to preliminary financial audit results released in January, included at least \$500,000 in unaccounted for payments made from one off-the-books bank account and an undisclosed amount in a second unauthorized account. The two accounts total about \$1 million, according to figures the church's new pastor made public to parishioners in March, diocese officials said.

The diocese is not accusing Moynihan of stealing the money, but officials have said that he lied about keeping the off-the-books accounts and that Moynihan has been unable to provide all the necessary documentation to prove the spending went to pay for parish and Greenwich Catholic School needs, though officials stress the investigation continues.

"Due to the lack of supporting documentation on both off-the-books accounts, the review has been a slow and painstaking process," diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer said in an e-mail. "Our mandate has been that the review be complete, thorough and fair to all parties."

Though Moynihan remains a priest and keeps in contact with some parishioners who are close friends, he has for the most part disappeared from St. Michael Church. Moynihan in his farewell letter to the parish and the bishop both said in January that after a brief leave of absence, he would be reassigned to other duties in the diocese, but that has not happened. The diocese now says Moynihan's future is contingent on the conclusion of the audit.

"Any decision on Father Moynihan's future status has been deferred until the final report is received, which we hope is soon," McAleer said.

Some parishioners said they were resigned to what happened to Moynihan and the parish, and are now trying to move on.

"Unfortunately what happened happened and however it did and however it was addressed, none of us know that and I don't know if it's something we ever will know," said Melinda Sherman, the director of development for The Historical Society of the Town of Greenwich, who was asked to serve on the parish finance council. "It was a change and we have to move on. I'm sure some people will be very disappointed and would like to know every detail. I don't feel that way. I just feel the parish is more important than even one pastor."

The church's new pastor, the Rev. Monsignor J. Peter Cullen, has been working to gain the trust of the parishioners.

"Monsignor Cullen is doing a good job under difficult circumstances because everybody had great affection for Father Michael," said Michael Dunne, a real estate agent who has attended St. Michael Church since 1973 and was recently asked to serve on two newly formed church councils.

One is called the pastoral council, which has 15 members, and the other is the finance council, which has 13 members. Both were formed to advise Cullen on parish activities. Their names and contact information were published in the church's bulletin last weekend as part of recommendations recently issued by the diocese. The names are made public so if parishioners have concerns about financial activity at the church, they know who to call.

"We've never really had much exposure to that over the years," Dunne said. "There was a parish council and a finance council but you never knew who was who. It's always nice to know who your contemporaries are on these boards."