

At St. John Parish: Select few get to meet bishop

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Select parishioners at St. John Parish will finally get a meeting with Bishop William E. Lori on Friday in Bridgeport, The Darien Times has confirmed.

This is the first in what the diocese says will be a series of meetings with the bishop. The meeting follows the Rev. Michael Madden's departure from St. John and from the priesthood last month. Last Friday, at a parish meeting conducted by the Rev. Frank McGrath, church pastor, Father Madden's departure was discussed as well as the questions some parishioners had for the bishop.

Father McGrath said that he felt he was a marriage counselor working on the relationship between the bishop and parishioners of St. John's. Some continued to express anger at the bishop's absence from the parish since a meeting in May. At that meeting, during which the bishop discussed the financial misconduct of the former pastor, the Rev. Michael Jude Fay, as well as the hiring of the private investigator by Father Madden without the diocese's knowledge, the parishioners engaged in angry exchanges with the diocese head.

Since that May meeting, the bishop has not returned to St. John or met with parishioners. However, in his cover letter that accompanied the findings of an independent audit of St. John finances that estimated a loss of at least \$1.4 million, Bishop Lori wrote that he would be arranging small meetings with parishioners. The bishop wrote he would coordinate with Father McGrath and the parish council to hold those meetings in parishioners' homes. In an interview with The Darien Times last month, the bishop, said that he expected those meetings to be like "fireside chats."

Friday's meeting is the first of those chats. However, according to some sources within St. John Parish, not all are welcome at the hearth.

Many parishioners say they did not even know of a meeting with the bishop, who is scheduled to be a celebrant at St. Thomas More's 5 o'clock Mass on Saturday, a celebration of its 40th anniversary, had been scheduled. Still others said they have been specifically told they were not welcome.

"I was told by Father McGrath that there was a list provided by Bishop Lori and that if you were on that list, you were not welcome at the meeting," a parishioner who spoke to The Darien Times on the condition of anonymity.

Another parishioner said that e-mails to Father McGrath asking about the meeting had not been answered.

"I'm just very upset," the parishioner said.

Sources also say that some parishioners who were not originally included in the meeting were removed from the so-called "blacklist" after they expressed anger at being left out.

Over the last week, parishioners were encouraged by the parish council to submit questions they had for the bishop either at a second basket collection at Mass, or in a box at the back of the church. These questions were to be organized by the council and presented to the bishop at some point.

When contacted by The Darien Times, diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer confirmed the meeting was taking place in Bridgeport, and said the participants were "chosen by Father McGrath and his staff."

"This is the first in a series of gatherings between Bishop Lori, Father McGrath, and members of St. John Parish, which was proposed when the independent report of Deloitte Financial Advisory Services was issued in July. We expect a good and frank discussion of questions raised by the report, and see these gatherings as an important next step in the healing process of the parish," he wrote in an e-mail.

In response to whether there had been a "blacklist" of unwelcome attendees, McAleer said he had "not seen a list of this kind." When asked if such a list existed, McAleer declined further comment.

Father McGrath told The Darien Times that the meeting on Friday was an opportunity for parishioners and the bishop to express understanding of facts and how they feel. He said about 15 parishioners would be attending, and that it was the first of four scheduled meetings. McGrath said he selected the participants.

“I started with parish leaders and people on our transitional advisory board, and I picked a range of folks with some real issues,” he said.

As far as the “blacklist” of unwelcome parishioners, Father McGrath said that was a “malicious rumor,” but said there was a list of those not invited to the first meeting.

“I met and talked with the bishop and his staff, and we decided that some folks should not be invited to the first meeting, some who were out front and more confrontational would be better off not to have there — I made the choice of whom I thought was best to start the reconciliation process,” he said.

Father McGrath said the list of those who weren’t invited to the first meeting was decided by himself and the diocese.

“We talked about it together, it was mutual,” he said.

Father McGrath said the entire parish was not told about the meeting because he had been very busy, working “7:30 to 9:30,” and that he may not have managed the communication the best way.

“But also, if I had, I would have gotten a lot of ‘Why can’t I go?’ — a lot of folks can’t,” he said.

He also said that parishioners knew the meetings were coming up because he talked about it at the Friday evening discussion, so it shouldn’t be a surprise.

“People know meetings will be happening,” he said.

Father McGrath said it is possible that those who were specifically not invited to the first meeting could be welcome at the future meetings. There are three more scheduled over the next two months.

“I want to get everyone reconciled,” he said.

Asked if he would be announcing future meetings publicly, Father McGrath said “probably not.”

“I probably won’t announce them publicly, because some folks might just show up,” he said.

Father McGrath said some of the questions contributed by parishioners could be discussed at the meeting.

The meeting is taking place on Friday evening in Bridgeport. It is not confirmed if the meeting will take place at the diocese office.