

‘God is in Charge’

St. Margaret of Scotland Parish, 1999-2024



The bulletin announcements leading up to the 100th anniversary of St. Margaret of Scotland in St. Louis were full of typical news for a new millennium: the welcoming of baptized babies, reminders for volunteers on coffee and donut duty, the announcement of a new parish home on the world wide web.

One blurb updated parishioners on the “Catholic Homesteading” campaign championed by the pastor, Fr. Kenneth Brown. The archdiocese would front a \$5,000 forgivable loan for each family who moved from the county to the city and stayed at least five years to be part of parish life. The effort was to “reseed” the city, so to speak. A few times a year, Fr. Brown traveled to suburban parishes to visit and preach the benefits of city living.

That wasn’t always easy.

During Brown’s time at St. Margaret of Scotland, which started in 1994, a serial rapist prowled the Shaw neighborhood. A spate of arson fires damaged or destroyed homes and apartment buildings in Shaw and the McRee Town neighborhood to the north.

A body was found in an alley behind a derelict house that stood where the middle school building stands today. (“Don’t worry, Father,” a member of the board of police commissioners, also a parishioner, assured in a phone call. “We’ll take down the police tape before school lets out.”)

And while Fr. Brown drove to take communion to a parishioner at home in McRee Town, a police officer pulled him over and asked what he was doing there.

“The next time you do that,” the officer told Fr. Brown, “call me. I’ll go with you.”

Fr. Brown knew that to build up the parish, he needed the help of its parishioners: many smart, scrappy, activist and political types who saw something bigger in the neighborhood and one another.

“Being the pastor of St. Margaret of Scotland is not for the faint of heart,” says Fr. Brown. “They were going to tell you exactly what they wanted, no matter what. And they did. But see? I was as scrappy as they were.”

In 1999, the year St. Margaret of Scotland began celebrations for its 100th anniversary, Fr. Brown and the parishioners had reason to look hopefully toward the future. It had 500 registered households, an increase of 125 in six years.

As the parish celebrates its 125th anniversary into 2025, it has 868 registered households and 2,748 parishioners. It has a parish school of 450 students. The momentum and hope continues, no doubt through the continued tenacity—and scrappiness—of its parishioners and leaders.



In fall 2000, workers lowered a 4,000-pound limestone capstone on a new sign for St. Margaret of Scotland as part of its centennial celebration.

Building on momentum

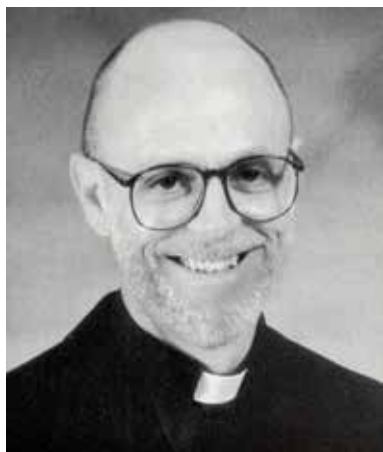
At the start of the new century, the parish had raised nearly \$1 million for capital improvements, including a new gym floor, science labs, and new windows and doors. Parishioners and parish leaders wanted the changes to make a statement to the neighborhood.

“The old windows were glass blocks installed years ago as a hedge against vandalism,” Fr. Brown told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 2001 for a story about a school open house. “Shifting from the look of a fortress, the



new energy-efficient windows add light and life to our school.”

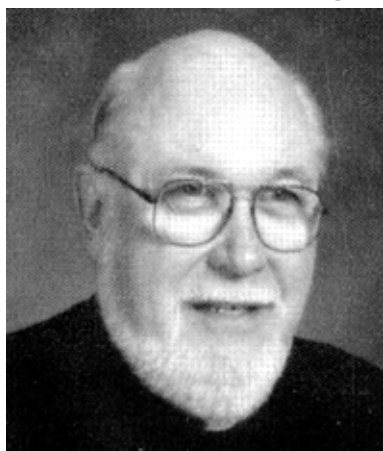
The parish bought and demolished three derelict buildings to make room for expansion and make the school buildings more visible to the neighborhood. It installed a new playground and enlisted local artist



*Fr. Ken Brown
Pastor, 1994–2004*

In one 2004 letter to the archdiocese, he wrote that it had been most successful at St. Margaret of Scotland.

He noted that from the original group of “homesteaders”



*Fr. Ron Choccol
Pastor, 2004–2005*

possible consolidation with other parishes and schools in south city, and considered St. Margaret to be one of the stronger parishes.

In 2003, St. Pius school closed. In 2005, Holy Family parish and school closed, as did Immaculate Conception/St. Henry parish. The St. Margaret parish boundaries expanded.

In August 2004, Fr. Brown left St. Margaret for a new parish assignment. Fr. Ron Choccol came to take his place.

Bob Cassilly to build dragon-shaped border walls.

Throughout the neighborhood, families and contractors renovated homes, some of which had sat vacant for years.

Fr. Brown continued pushing the Catholic Homesteading program, also designed to draw families to Holy Family and St. Pius V parishes.

the parish gained the school board president, five new choir members, two lectors, three new ministers of communion, the president of St. Vincent de Paul Society, the chairman of the stewardship committee, two parish council members, and the chairperson of the finance committee.

Parishioners were concerned about

During one of his first notes to parishioners in the bulletin, Fr. Choccol addressed rumors that he was sent to close the school. “Let’s not waste energy uselessly on rumors!” he wrote. “We need to pool our hearts and minds and spirits to make good things happen here. We need all our energies to do God’s work.”

He scheduled a series of listening sessions to get to know people and the concerns of the parish. His tenure at the parish lasted less than a year, and Fr. Thomas Wyrsh was named pastor in July 2005.

Building on a baby boom

Fr. Wyrsh loved children. Perhaps it was no coincidence that he arrived at St. Margaret of Scotland at a time when the young families who moved into the neighborhood started having them.

His first Sunday at St. Margaret, he recalls, he baptized two children after the Mass. He figured that was typical. Then, more families approached.

He usually visited with families in their homes first, getting the young parents and babies comfortable with him. If families wanted to celebrate the sacrament during Mass, Fr. Wyrsh carried the baby around the congregation as a welcome and introduction to their parish family. He often started the rite at the parish doors as a symbol of an entrance into the community.

“At some parishes, I know, people show up and say, ‘There’s a Baptism during Mass? I’m leaving,’” Fr. Wyrsh says. “Margaret’s people? They wanted to be there.”

He started counting babies, and did some simple math. He figured that the number of infant Baptisms per capita was higher than at a number of parishes in the archdiocese, including some booming ones in the suburbs. In a 2007 story in the *St. Louis Review*, which featured the Baptisms of the Reitenbach triplets Otto, Rudolph, and Zanaida, Fr. Wyrsh figured the parish had a Baptism rate of one per 43 parishioners, compared to one for every 70 or 120 parishioners in outlying parishes.

He grew irritated with the suggestion by some archdiocesan leaders that this was the “grandparent effect”—that the babies were grandchildren of longtime parishioners, and children of parents who had left for the suburbs. He knew the babies lived here.

“Block after block, house after house, is being bought by young families,” he told *The Review*.

In all, he baptized about 200 babies and young children in his six years at the parish, Fr. Wyrsh says.

He delighted in watching the children and families grow. He regularly visited the parish school, performing impressions of Scooby Doo and Super Grover in the cafeteria. He visited classrooms to perform with his lion



*Fr. Tom Wyrsh
Pastor, 2005-2011*

puppet, Manny, and his ventriloquist figure, Jerry.

Jerry and Fr. Wyrsh also made appearances at parish fundraisers. During one routine for a St. Vincent de Paul fundraiser, Fr. Wyrsh took Jerry out of his case and urged him to start talking.

"Jerry, we're waiting," he'd say to a barely-moving Jerry.

"Come on, Jerry. I don't want these people to think I make a living looking stupid."

"No," said Jerry, finally responding. "You do that for nothing."

His sense of fun extended to the rectory, where he arranged the experience of "The Rectory on Haunted Hill" as a parish auction item. Parishioners cautiously walked from room to room to solve a murder mystery Fr. Wyrsh had skillfully executed with scratchy record player sound effects and creepy props.

Every Halloween, Fr. Wyrsh transformed the rectory lawn, sidewalk and entryway into another version of The Rectory on Haunted Hill, where parish and neighborhood children dared arrive for a treat.

The fun extended throughout the year. When the Girl Scouts gathered at Tower Grove Park for a nighttime outing, he snuck up on the group wearing a gorilla suit, and wound up dancing with one of the Girl Scout leaders.

He assembled a white captain's uniform to wear to the 2005 Highlander fundraiser dinner dance, which had a cruise ship theme that year. The first thing he said to the crowd, microphone in hand: "I know about St. Margaret of Scotland parish. And I wasn't going to be captain until I asked first."

In 2006 the parish added central air conditioning to the rectory, which had been cooled with 22 window units. In 2007, parishioners also added new boilers and

air conditioning to the church, a huge but necessary \$300,000 project. They began restoring the stained glass windows in the church. Time and resources were spent catching up on deferred maintenance.

The parish also raised about \$150,000 to refurbish, update and move a 55-year-old Wicks pipe organ from Immaculate Conception/St. Henry's parish to St. Margaret. The parish hosted a series of inaugural concerts in 2007, and the "organ transplant," as the effort was called, enhanced the parish's already-robust music ministry.

In 2006, Fr. Wyrsh hired longtime parishioner and educator Julie Hesed as school principal. "We worked very well together," says Fr. Wyrsh. "I knew that her passion for justice would fit the neighborhood and the school community."

Fr. Wyrsh also began serious conversations about whether to expand the school, and in 2008 asked Archbishop Raymond Burke for permission to pursue a feasibility study. With the closure of Holy Family school, attendance had risen from about 250 to 270 students. During his time at the parish, enrollment grew into the 300s. The school found classroom space where it could, and Fr. Wyrsh and the parish hired an architect to explore expansion possibilities. He liked the idea of building an atrium with classrooms between what is now



Fr. Wyrsh blesses Leo Hahn at his Baptism in October 2007 as Deacon Joe Iovanna and parents Valerie and Andy Hahn look on.

called St. Joseph Hall and Faith Hall.

In 2010, the school earned the much-coveted, national honor of being named a Blue Ribbon school of excellence.

In February of that year, the restored Vincentian Children's Chapel was dedicated to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the parish's St. Vincent de Paul Society.

When Fr. Wyrsh speaks now about his time at St. Margaret of Scotland, he says the parishioners were "tremendously gifted" and they had their challenges together.

He also appreciated that the congregation seemed to embrace his creativity during homilies. "It's a joy to preach where I know people hunger for that, and where they'll let me be kind of off the wall, where they'll let me challenge them," he says. "I love preaching to congregations that are good consumers of the Word."

Building to serve

Fr. Matthew O'Toole started as parochial administrator in June 2011, and was formally named pastor the next year. He knew it was a growing parish, and was prepared for the challenges that would bring. He had been involved in planning the new campus at Christian Brothers College High School, and archdiocesan leaders said they might need his help building at St. Margaret.

"I was enthusiastic about just going into the city, because I grew up in south St. Louis, at St. Joan of Arc, and I served as an associate at St. Raphael's," he says. "So the city was attractive to me." Sometimes, he says, the city can be a hard sell to priests.

The long list of repair projects had slowed because of the recession, but during Fr. O'Toole's earlier years at the parish, they tackled an impressive list: the stained glass window restoration was completed, the church interior was repainted, the church roof was replaced, interior lighting was enhanced, and a lift was installed in the northeast wall of the church to give more people access to the church and the basement parish hall.

"Seeing the cross section of the walls of our church is fascinating," Fr. O'Toole wrote in a 2011 bulletin update on the lift project. "There are no cinder or concrete formed blocks - just solid stones stacked on top of one another, held in place by thick piles of mortar. Stepping back and taking in the whole of our 105-year-old church, it's incredible to think how the masons hoisted all these white stones into position to great heights and with geometric precision."

A major new home development to the north of the parish, Botanical Heights, broke ground in March

2011. Many abandoned and derelict buildings in the area, previously known as McRee Town, had been razed for the project, and dozens of its residents had been displaced.

Many of the babies Fr. Wyrsh had baptized were at the school by now. In Fr. O'Toole's first 2 ½ years at St. Margaret, he baptized 125 more. "The holy water either has fertility medicine in it or it's a fountain of youth," he'd remark.

In 2012, Fr. O'Toole asked Archbishop Robert Carlson for permission to conduct a feasibility study for expanding the school.

The present enrollment was 373, and the parish was told to expect 450 children by 2016, he wrote in his letter to the archbishop.

The school had jumped about 20 students a year in the past decade, Fr. O'Toole told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 2014.

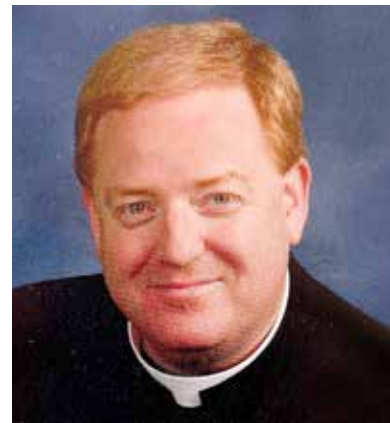
As Principal Julie Hesed led the reporter through a tour of the school, she pointed to a first-grade classroom. "That used to be the teacher's lounge," she said. The computer lab turned into a fifth-grade classroom, and five teaching periods took place in the school cafeteria.

Fr. O'Toole and parish and school leaders considered three options: cap enrollment, rent satellite space in neighborhood buildings, add portable trailer classrooms, or build. They performed surveys and hosted town halls and listened to the pros and cons.

"And we dove in and said, let's build," says Fr. O'Toole.

They acted quickly. On March 2, 2014, the parish kicked off a \$2.3 million "Faith in our Future" capital campaign to construct a school building and replace the school's existing boilers. On March 1, 2015, they hosted a groundbreaking for the new middle school building, but in true St. Margaret of Scotland fashion, at the last minute they had to innovate.

An overnight snowstorm forced the groundbreaking to be held indoors. As the congregation chuckled and applauded, Archbishop Carlson and Fr. O'Toole "broke ground" at the church altar with a bowl full of dirt



*Fr. Matthew O'Toole
Pastor, 2011-2021*

and a pair of silver-plated shovels.

The new middle school building, named Purcell Hall, opened to sixth, seventh and eighth graders in time for the 2015–2016 school year. It was the first freestanding Catholic parish school building to be constructed in St. Louis city in at least 50 years.

Besides making its own headlines, national and international news touched St. Margaret. On Aug. 9, 2014, Michael Brown, 18, was shot and killed by a Ferguson police officer, sparking protests throughout the city and county. Increasing tensions came to Shaw that October, after a St. Louis police officer shot and killed VonDerrit Myers Jr., 18, after an encounter in the 4100 block of Shaw Boulevard.

Protesters and news reporters converged in Shaw, and the mostly-peaceful protests sometimes ended in gunfire, tear gas or broken windows at homes and businesses in Shaw and along South Grand. During one protest throughout the streets of Shaw, protesters burned American flags on Flora Place.

Fr. O'Toole recalls texting during the protests with his good friend Fr. John Vien, who at the time was the pastor at nearby St. Pius V. *Where are they going now? they'd text. Did you hear or see anything?*

"Protect every person you have created," Fr. O'Toole prayed before those gathered at an interfaith vigil at Compton Heights Christian Church in October. "Blanket our streets with your mercy."

At the height of the protests at the end of November, in anticipation of the grand jury announcement in the Michael Brown case, Mayor Francis Slay visited the parish school during afternoon dismissal to offer his support. The parish, in collaboration with Metropolitan Churches United and St. Cronan Church, opened the parish hall and made it available as a "safe space" in case of protests, but it wasn't needed. During the protests, Archdiocesan officials encouraged principal Julie Hesed

to call off school. She refused, believing that students and their parents needed to know that the school was their safe place.

Parishioners and school children continued to pray for peace.

In 2018, Fr. O'Toole was honored with the Aquinas Institute of Theology's Great Preacher Award. In an interview with the *St. Louis Review* about the award, Fr. O'Toole said he often draws on current events to write his homilies.

"It's important to me to resonate with people's experience," he said. "If it doesn't resonate with people's lived experiences then the Word isn't alive. A preacher has

to be alert to what's going on in people's lives; how does the Word and our faith speak to this? You have to be relevant."

In the 2017–2018 school year, the school celebrated its centennial, and part of the celebration included the burial of a time capsule. Fr. O'Toole, who had taught history at CBC, bought the capsule online.

The capsule, which sits beneath the floor of St. Joseph Hall, is expected to be opened in 2118.

It includes essays from students, photos from school events including the August 2017 solar eclipse,

and an iPhone 5—with a charging cord—containing pictures from the school.

"It's more than just stuff," Fr. O'Toole said in his homily the day of the ceremony, gesturing to the objects to be placed inside, according a June 2018 *Review* article. "It's a sign, it's an outward sign of something beautiful that God does."

Meanwhile, Hesed announced she would retire as school principal at the end of the 2018–2019 school year. At the end of that year, the school had 499 students. In April, it was announced that Clare Abkemeier would start as principal in the 2019–2020 school year.

In February 2019, the parish kicked off the



Fr. O'Toole and Archbishop Robert Carlson "break ground" for the new middle school building on March 1, 2015. An overnight snowfall forced the celebration inside the church.

“Preserving Our Future” campaign to raise money for new flooring and refurbished pews in the church, and to establish a reserve for future capital projects.

Its main goal was to raise money to install air conditioning in St. Joseph Hall, Faith Hall, and the gymnasium, which could grow unbearably hot. Music director Peter Hesed and choir member Peter Merideth sang their own version of Cole Porter’s “Too Darn Hot” at the kickoff to make the point. The parish and school quickly raised nearly \$900,000 to install the air conditioning in time for the 2019-2020 school year.

The relief would be short-lived. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the church and school to close their doors.

“Hello, St. Margaret of Scotland. It’s Father O’Toole,” Fr. O’Toole says in a March 21 video posted on Facebook. “I’m here. You’re there. We’re doing our social distancing thing in these cautionary days of trying to stay healthy.”

During the message, he updated parishioners on the school, about students doing distance learning, and praised administrators and teachers for their efforts. “I think they’re ready for the next couple weeks that we’re gonna have to be still using this mode of education,” he said. “So great work is happening there.”

He also praised the parish’s young professionals group for pairing with the St. Vincent de Paul society to deliver groceries and goods to those in need.

He asked parishioners to hold off on any in-person activities, and to pray for couples who had a wedding planned in the coming weeks at St. Margaret.

“It makes me sad not to be gathered with you in our worship in church,” he said. “I just can’t imagine what it’s going to be like, especially this weekend, without you there in church.”

He said Mass would be recorded for parishioners

to view, complying with the city of St. Louis mandate to limit gathering in groups of more than ten. Fr. O’Toole and a select few musicians, choir members and ministers would celebrate Mass for the recording.

The practice of recording Mass would continue for months.

That Easter, Fr. O’Toole opened the church doors, kept the Easter candle lit, and invited people to come in to pray if they wanted.

Virtual school ended for all students in early May, continuing the struggle for working parents. Graduating 8th graders entered the church one by one with their

parents to pick up their certificates, and parents organized a “reverse parade” along Flora Place to celebrate them. Families stood in the grassy median of the boulevard while supporters drove by to wave and cheer.

Masses were allowed to restart in person in late May, but hymnals were removed from pews, holy water removed from fonts, and families asked to stay six feet apart.

There would be no offertory procession, no sign of peace, and no passing of the

collection basket. Seating was also limited.

Meanwhile, that summer, workers installed new flooring in the church and removed pews for refurbishment without much interruption, because fewer parishioners could enter.

“People were really cheated out of a number of things that year,” Fr. O’Toole says. “We were just like, is this real?”

St. Louis University Hospital had relied on Jesuit priests to perform last rites and the anointing of the sick, but most of the priests were older, and they were not allowed to leave Jesuit Hall on campus, O’Toole recalls. So he was called on to go to the hospital.



The school celebrated its centennial during the 2017-2018 school year. The celebration included the burial of a time capsule, a Mass for alumni, a gala, and this drone portrait of students in the refurbished play space.

“That was scary,” says O’Toole. He’d put on a hazardous materials suit, a mask and face shield, and had permission to anoint patients from afar. “I remember a doctor saying ‘You can’t go in there, Father. You can go in, but you shouldn’t go in.’”

Fr. O’Toole spent time alone at the rectory, and had to shelve plans for a party for the 25th anniversary of his ordination. Parishioners organized a small parade and drove by the rectory, where he waved from the porch. He still keeps the cards he received that day in a basket near his desk.

At the start of the 2020-21 school year, the school operated on a hybrid schedule, meaning students attended in person two days a week and virtually three days. Some students attended virtual school all week.

That September, first communicants, now in third grade, made the sacrament in small groups at Sunday Masses.

The parish came together on Oct. 4, 2020, by celebrating an outdoor Mass on the school parking lot.

By January, students were back on campus four days a week, and started out the 2021-2022 school year wearing masks to class.

Building on strength

In June 2021, Fr. O’Toole was asked to take on a new parish assignment, and Fr. John Rogers Vien was named the new pastor of St. Margaret of Scotland.

Fr. Vien was familiar with the parish since he had spent about ten years as pastor of St. Pius V until 2015. He had helped out at St. Margaret with the sacrament of reconciliation, hung out at the rectory with Fr. O’Toole, and even accompanied the choir with Fr. O’Toole on a 2014 pilgrimage to Scotland. He loves the city, the architecture, its history, the restaurants and

attractions, and was excited to serve here.

“So I certainly knew St. Margaret of Scotland. To be honest, coming from St. Pius, St. Margaret was always kind of the highfalutin parish,” he says, laughing. “You

know how parishes have little rivalries? I think the perception was that St. Pius was kind of the scrappy, ‘We’ll get it done’ parish. And St. Margaret’s was already the ‘Oh, we already have it done’ parish.”

Because of the pandemic, it was a strange time to start life at a new parish, Fr. Vien says. The usual groups weren’t meeting in person. The usual systems weren’t in place. The usual crowds weren’t showing up to Mass. Because many wore masks, he wasn’t even sure what some people looked like.

Within the first month of Fr. Vien’s arrival, the parish’s maintenance supervisor and Clare Abkemeier, the school principal, resigned. Within the first year, Fr. Vien’s brother-in-law, mother, and younger brother died.

“There was a lot of stuff going on,” says Fr. Vien. “Between COVID, and people leaving, and my family dying, it was just really, very difficult.”

During a retreat in the summer of 2022, he prayed for a new beginning. He made it a personal, spiritual, mental, and psychological quest: start anew.

He got to know more people, activities restarted, and parish life went back to normal.

He appreciates the parish’s music ministry, which received the Aquinas Institute’s Great Preacher Award in November 2024. He also appreciates its focus on social justice, and all the things that parishioners who have settled at St. Margaret seem to appreciate about the city and parish life. One of his favorite nights of the month is when he hosts a young professionals group social



During the COVID-19 pandemic an outdoor Mass was celebrated on the school playground on October 4, 2020.

hour at the rectory, mixing up a special cocktail for the occasion.

In January 2022, the Archdiocese of St. Louis announced a planning process called All Things New to reorganize the parishes and offices. During the summer and fall of 2022, all the parishes of the Archdiocese, including St. Margaret, participated in meetings, town halls to discern which parishes should merge, consolidate, or close.

On Oct. 22, 2022, Fr. Vien had planned a day with Fr. O'Toole to have lunch and visit some Catholic churches near Washington, Mo., that they thought might be closing as a result of All Things New.

But that morning, a student opened fire at Central Visual and

Performing Arts High School, only a couple miles from the parish, killing a student and a teacher. Fr. Vien knew St. Margaret graduates attended school on campus. He canceled his plans with Fr. O'Toole. He worked with music director Orin Johnson and other parishioners to host a prayer service that evening at the church.

The service has been held on Oct. 22 since. The social justice ministry Gun Sense: For the Common Good, evolved as a result of that day. According to its mission statement, the group strives to "form a coalition of faith-based organizations joining together with the mission to reduce gun violence and the subsequent destruction of human life in the City of St. Louis."

With the retirement of director of music and liturgy Peter Hesed in 2022, Fr. Vien hired Orin Johnson, also well known in the world of liturgical music ministry. Because he knows the importance of communicating beyond a website or weekly bulletin, Fr. Vien hired Michael Sonntag in 2022 to fill a new communications manager position.

In 2021, he asked longtime teacher Chris Burke, who had served as assistant principal, to serve as interim principal and then principal of the school.

The school enrollment remains steady under the

leadership of Principal Patrick Holley, who Fr. Vien hired at the start of the 2023-2024 school year.

"I think that's an important thing," says Fr. Vien of making strong hires. "You know, I'm not gonna be around here forever. But I can continue to find good people when I'm here."

On May 27, 2023, the day before Pentecost Sunday, Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski announced the decisions made as a result of All Things New: 178 parishes would be consolidated into 134.

St. Margaret of Scotland remained as one parish that would remain open, its boundaries



Fr. Vien leads the Palm Sunday procession from the school to church, March 24, 2024.

unchanged.

In July 2024, Fr. Patrick Baikauskas was named part time senior associate pastor of the parish, the first associate pastor in at least 40 years.

Building for the future

As the people of St. Margaret of Scotland continue to grow into their next 125 years, the parish's pastors offer advice.

Fr. O'Toole asks parishioners to appreciate the history of the parish and what it took to grow from an immigrant parish in the early 1900s. He points out it's a unique parish physically—he can think of no others in the archdiocese without a parking lot—and notes the physical separation of the school and church.

"I've always thought," he says, "it's a little Catholic parade when the kids went to school Mass and back."

The social justice ministry and the music ministry are also distinctive strengths of the parish, something the people should continue to appreciate and foster, he says.

"It's a really can-do parish," Fr. O'Toole says. "Peter Hesed made this observation that we have to know

our limitations there, too. His metaphor was, sometimes parishes try to be a full-service hospital in a small town. You can't have an oncology unit and pediatrics. You can't have everything and afford it. That's for the big cities. And St. Margaret was small. So what we do focus on we're going to do well. That doesn't mean you can't start things up."

Fr. Wyrsh reminds parishioners that a parish can fall apart quickly without continued reinvestment. "A neighborhood can fall apart even quicker. You know, one or two crimes, one or two civic disinvestments...things can begin to change quickly. So prize what you're having now, reinvest in the parish and the community: your time, your children, your work. Get to know your neighbors."

If people want to leave the church or neighborhood or send their children to another school, that's fine, he says, but that should prompt parishioners to take a hard look at themselves. "What consolidates us? What are we not trumpeting? What are we not developing that is our gift? And I think that's true for the parish and for the neighborhood," Fr. Wyrsh says.

Fr. Brown urges parishioners to find their roots in the church: "I think my number one bit of advice would be: be Catholic in the best sense of the word, be a real, practicing Catholic, because that's what motivates us to do the things we do."

He advises people to go to Mass, receive the sacraments, look out for, as Jesus said, the least of these.

"There's a great social justice ministry there, that was just getting started when I was there," he says. "We have a terrific St. Vincent de Paul Society. So that's being Catholic: looking to those neighbors who really need our help, while at the same time being proud of our Catholic faith and practicing it."

Fr. Vien advises the parishioners of St. Margaret of Scotland to not rest on their

laurels.

"Things can change on a dime," he says. "We have to be very strong in advocating for ourselves, and building community and preserving our buildings and our population. We really have to be proactive."

In the 1990s, Fr. Vien was the associate pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows, also in south St. Louis, at a time when the parish had 2,000 families and 900 students at the school. Now, the school has closed, and the parish has merged with others. "So that's in one generation," Fr. Vien points out. "That's a cautionary tale, for us or for anybody, that things can change."



Fr. Matthew O'Toole, Fr. John Rogers Vien, Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski, Fr. Kenneth Brown, and Fr. Thomas Wyrsh at Fr. Vien's installation Mass in October 2021.

But in light of change and challenges, Fr. Vien challenges parishioners to be hopeful and trust in God.

"As a Christian, we have to be people of hope, to believe that God has things in store for us that we cannot yet imagine. And our history shows us that even though there's tough times that come along, there's growth and grace that happens because of those times."

He advises people to believe and trust in the Paschal Mystery: the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the moment when God's plan for salvation was accomplished.

"Good things come out of the bad events," says Fr. Vien. "And even though we might be in a great place now, we have our challenges. There's a lot of challenges in the neighborhood, for sure. But I think the history of this parish shows us that by working together and trusting in God, we can really grow community and give God a lot of glory."

"So my advice? Be hopeful, and trust that God is in charge of all this."

By Valerie Schremp Hahn



Dear Parish Family of St. Margaret of Scotland,

In 1899, Pope Leo XIII was the head of the Catholic Church; William McKinley was the President of the United States; St. Louis was the fourth largest city in the nation; and cars, light bulbs, and aspirin were hot new inventions! 1899 also was the year that Fr. James J. O'Brien and a few Catholic families in the Shaw neighborhood gathered together to found a new parish in the Archdiocese of St. Louis under the patronage of St. Margaret of Scotland. By the grace of God, through good times and bad, war and peace, prosperity and pandemic, our Church, our nation, and this parish have endured and grown in ways that those founding families could never have imagined!

As we observe our Quasiquicentennial year at St. Margaret of Scotland, we are grateful to God for our rich and storied history.



Fr. John and Axel

We are especially grateful to all those who came before us, those who struggled and sacrificed for this parish so that we might benefit. At the same time, we look forward with faith and hope to all that God has planned for us, and we recommit ourselves to faithful stewardship of this parish so that future generations will benefit.

This parish directory celebrates 125 years! It highlights our recent story, recognizing that God oversees all our comings and goings. It also highlights the good people who make up this community in 2024-25. I hope that this directory will help you appreciate our history and help you to make connections and deepen relationships with others so that we can continue to build up and strengthen our parish, our neighborhood, and our Church.

Thanks for the many ways that you help build up the Body of Christ through our worship, ministries, organizations, outreach, and service. Thanks to all who have their picture in this directory. And thanks to Valerie Hahn, Andy Hahn, Matty Kleinberg, and Michael Sonntag for their good work in organizing this parish directory and keepsake for our 125th year.

Let us pray for each other, as we look forward to the bright future of St. Margaret of Scotland Parish!

Fr. John

Fr. John Rogers Vien
Pastor

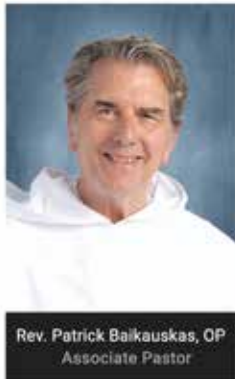


To read a history of our parish written by Maureen Wangard and Don Burrus for the church centennial in 1999, visit the website bit.ly/smoscentennial or scan the QR code.

St. Margaret of Scotland Staff



Rev. John Rogers Vien
Pastor



Rev. Patrick Baikauskas, OP
Associate Pastor



Orin Johnson
Director Of Music & Liturgy



Deborah Elliott
Parish Administrator



Carmela Garza
Parish Administrative Assistant
and PGC Coordinator



Ruth Pera
Coordinator of Faith Formation



Michael Sonntag
Coordinator of Communications



Patrick Holley
School Principal



Mary Grace Villmer
Assistant Principal



Christine Stephens
School Administrative Support

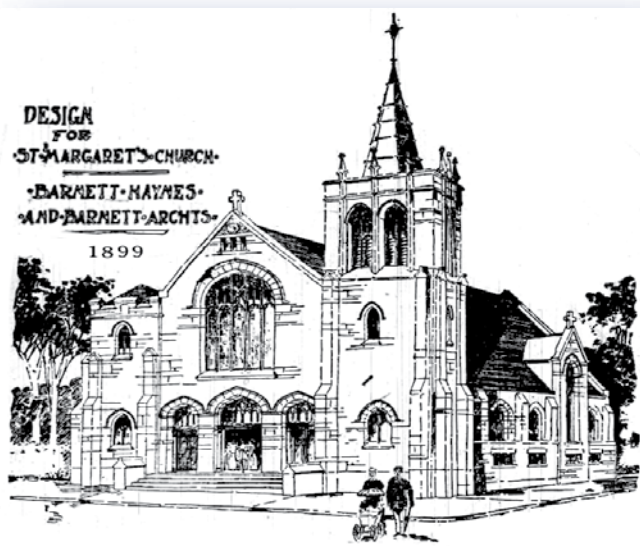


Gwen Heithaus
Coordinator of Religious Education

St. Margaret of Scotland
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StMargaretSTL.org



Parish Timeline

1899: Parish established by Fr. James J. O'Brien, first Mass celebrated on Christmas Day at rented storefront at southeast corner of Russell and 39th Street

1906: Families celebrate first Mass in basement of unfinished church building on Christmas Day

1907: Church building completed and dedicated

1918: Parish school opens at Lawrence and Castleman

1925: Complete renovation of church interior begins

1944: Purchase of former B'nai El synagogue at Flad and Spring for use as high school

1965: Construction begins on new school building which will include six class rooms, gymnasium and cafeteria

1998: St. Louis Archdiocese backs "Catholic Homesteading" program to lure families to move into St. Margaret and other city parishes

2015: New middle school building opens

2017-2018: School celebrates 100th anniversary

2020: Worldwide pandemic forces church and school to halt in-person Mass and classes

2023: Archdiocesan All Things New parish consolidation plan announced: St. Margaret's status and boundaries remain unchanged

2024-2025: Parish celebrates 125th anniversary

