

inside. But inside was another little box, made from a ceramic or a stone of some sort.

Not one to be easily deterred, I asked what was in THAT box. She opened it and it appeared empty. All this, you understand, was happening on live radio. I was beginning to think it was "confuse the host day."

The guest pointed to a few tiny specks littering the bottom of the box. I was ready to call a flea alert right there in the studio, but she calmed me down enough to tell me they were mustard seeds. Mustard seeds from the Holy Land.

The seeds, she explained, were a hands-on exhibit to teach biblical truths to small children. It, of course, recalls the Scripture in which Jesus talks about having faith "even as small as a mustard seed" and being able to accomplish great things.

What's the parable about things not always being as they seem?

I remembered the dinner-table conversations which centered around questions our kids brought back from religious education classes. One question had to do with the mustard seed

Scripture. One of our kids—I don't recall which one—grabbed a jar from the kitchen spice rack and promptly poured mustard seeds all over the table... and the floor. "But these seeds aren't small," the kid said. "Was Jesus, wrong, Dad? These are pretty big seeds."

That was something I learned a long time ago in a Scripture course, but which some people may not know: American-type mustard and Jesus-type mustard are quite different. And I'm not talking about taste, wimpy yellow mustard, spicy brown or Grey Poupon. The variety from the Holy Land are just specks, and make ours look like BBs. Hence the parable, and the fact that Jesus wasn't wrong. When you mix kids and God, things are often not always like they seem.

That last tale got me thinking about how we always encouraged our children to talk conversationally with God and to offer grace before meals that was spontaneous and not always rote prayer.

Don't get me wrong; the traditional prayers of the church are of course good and have a place. But so, too, does a conversational connection with

# Four Catholic centers' goal: boost West Side presence Planning process continuing for 10 parishes

the West Side," wrote Bishop Manz in a Sept. 8 letter to parishioners.

"We will focus on creating four vibrant, strong and engaged Catholic communities, utilizing existing physical structures and resources in the most effective and efficient manner possible."

The letter designates St. Malachy Parish, 2251 W. Washington Blvd., as the center for the Near West Side, incorporating people from Precious Blood Parish, 2411 W. Congress Parkway. Our Lady of Sorrows Basilica, 3121 W. Jackson Blvd., will remain the center for the Garfield Park neighborhood. St. Martin de Porres Parish, 5112 W. Washington Blvd.—the product of an earlier three-parish merge—will be the center for the Austin neighborhood, integrating St. Angela, 5758 W. Potomac Ave., and Our Lady Help of Christians, 832 N. LeClaire Ave.

St. Agatha, 3147 W. Douglas Blvd., will be the center for the North Lawn-dale neighborhood, taking in Blessed Sacrament, 2153 S. Millard Ave.; Precious Blood Parish, 2411 W. Congress Parkway. Our Lady of Sorrows Basilica, 3121 W. Jackson Blvd., will remain the center for the Garfield Park neighborhood. St. Martin de Porres Parish, 5112 W. Washington Blvd.—the product of an earlier three-parish merge—will be the center for the Austin neighborhood, integrating St. Angela, 5758 W. Potomac Ave., and Our Lady Help of Christians, 832 N. LeClaire Ave.

St. Agatha, 3147 W. Douglas Blvd., will be the center for the North Lawn-dale neighborhood, taking in Blessed Sacrament, 2153 S. Millard Ave.; Precious

sentation Parish, 734 S. Springfield Ave.; and Our Lady of Lourdes, 1444 S. Keeler Ave.

"The key is to get people to understand what's happening," said Father Tom Walsh, pastor of Presentation. "The letter is still open-ended. We need to create plans."

"It was something that needed to happen," said St. Agatha's McCormack. "People realized we needed to cut back to grow."

He knows members of parishes not chosen as worship centers will see the decision differently, although most understand the need for changes. For the new communities to take hold, even the site centers will have to change quite a bit, McCormack said.

"We will be a very different church in a year, if we welcome people well," he said. "I hear their pain. There's going to be a lot of anger."

"We want to keep Catholic presence in those communities. Ministries will stay, maybe some youth outreach, food



Bishop John R. Manz

Chicago Catholic/Luis Reyes

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tries, the continuation of education on me of these sites. ... We don't know what will look like. That will come after July 05. It's going to happen quickly."

While none of the parishes have been officially closed, Freeman said she and her own children are talking about what they'll do when Our Lady of Lourdes is gone. "It's really devastating," said Freeman, recalling the baptisms, first Communions and affirmations of her children and grandchildren that took place in the church. "In the settings we had over the past two years, there was some discussion that maybe we could keep some of the sites open, maybe at Mass on Sunday, like satellites. I'm hoping we could be one of them. But it didn't happen."

While Freeman is considering moving to Agatha, her children, who are members of Our Lady of Lourdes even though they've left the neighborhood, will not, she said. They intend to join parishes closer to their homes, and Freeman said she also is considering joining them.

At least that way, we all would be together, she said.

Redemptorist Father Ramon Dompke, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes, said many parishioners are in similar situations. Success of the plan depends on how such issues are handled, he said.

I think it depends on the preparation that goes into this. It depends on the creativity of welcoming parishes and the creativity of the part of the people who will be blended into more than one site, he said.

It's likely, Dompke said.

It's a lead time to figure out how the coming of the Lord will happen might help soften

the blow for some, he said.

"In past times, decisions were made and things got terminated very quickly," he said. "It left a lot of people extremely angry. There could still be angry people, of course. But they can't say they were not informed."

There is a contrast between Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Agatha, located a little more than a mile apart. St. Agatha has a large church in a prominent location at a major intersection. Last October, it averaged about 500 worshippers every weekend. McCormack said.

The archdiocese traditionally counts worshippers during October, after summer vacationers have returned and before the major holidays.

Our Lady of Lourdes had the smallest October count in the archdiocese last year, with an average of 87 worshippers.

Overall, the 10 parishes included in the plan had a total of 2,500 worshippers last October, which should be enough to sustain four full-service parishes, said Jean Welter, the archdiocese's director of research and planning. Welter helped facilitate the West Side planning process, and hopes to use similar processes for planning in other areas of the archdiocese.

"Our goal has always been a vital, vibrant Catholic community on the West Side, and I think this will allow us to accomplish that," she said. "Parishes will be coming together as larger worship communities that will be able to offer more of the programs and services that we associate with a vibrant faith community."

McCormack said that by offering more, Catholic parishes could offer a more attractive option for neighborhood residents looking for a faith home.

"It's an exciting thing," he said. "This



Auxiliary Bishop John Manz celebrated Mass Sept. 17 for the children of Our Lady of the Westside School, 3151 W. Douglas Blvd., and presented academic scholarships to several students. The two-campus school is a joint ministry of two West Side parishes, St. Agatha and Presentation. The scholarships were gifts of The Shaw Company and St. Joseph Elementary School, Libertyville.

Catholic New World/David V. Kamba

should have happened 40 or 50 years ago. If it had happened then, I think there would be more black Catholics on the West Side. We really have been speaking from weakness. Now we can speak from strength. People will see the Catholic Church as a viable option."

That's what Walsh is hoping for. "It's not just a question of money," he said, noting that his parish is not in debt and does not receive archdiocesan grants. But its pastoral staff consists of him and a part-time minister of care. "It's a question of what's most effective."

Now Walsh wants to make sure everyone knows about the planning process and that there is still a long way to go as the clusters find ways to keep ministries open.

For example, the food pantry at Presentation is self-sufficient; an ex-offender pro-

gram has federal and state funding and Our Lady of the Westside School, a multi-parish institution, will remain open. The parish already houses a Department of Children and Family Services transitional home for youngsters leaving group homes, and there is a state-funded after-school program.

"That's the point we're at now," Walsh said. "Putting the plans together for what will remain in the future. . . . If this place was shut down and the buildings boarded up, this community would be in chaos. This church has been a source of stability in the neighborhood."

For the archdiocese, Welter said, the goal is to keep those good things going, only on a stronger footing.

"We hope to be bigger and better and stronger in terms of the ongoing good work that we do," Welter said.