

2026 PARISH RECAP AND DIOCESAN CAPITAL CAMPAIGN INFORMATION

To begin, I would like to express how deeply moving and humbling it has been to be a part of this parish community the past year. One of the greatest days of my life was being installed as your pastor and I promise to continue trying to live up to that office in the way you all deserve here. Christ is moving in our parish, and it has been beautiful to see His work and how open and willing we have been together in responding to it.

Parish Report

2025-26 Parish Numbers

Average Mass attendance, total per weekend (taken over two weekends in October 2025):

- 614 English (3 Masses, +7% from 2024-25)
- 512 Spanish (1 Mass, +2% from 2024-25)

Religious Education (English):

- 110 total students, including homeschooled students.
- 8 catechists, 6 classroom aides.

Religious Education (Spanish):

- 116 students.
- 40 catechists and classroom aides.

Sacraments:

- 60 Baptisms/Professions of Faith
- 83 First Communion
- 69 Confirmations
 - 62 children, 7 adults
- 14 Marriages
- 13 Funerals
- 6 adults in OCIA

Parish Budget

For the 2025-26 fiscal year, we came in very much under budget and with the surplus, some was put back into ministries, including our school, but much of it was put in our parish saving accounts. That is a good sign that we are projecting costs accurately and being good stewards with the monetary gifts entrusted to us. We are looking to grow our parish's life and what is offered here and so your generous stewardship remains a central point of emphasis for the upcoming year.

For this year's budget, here are some notable changes made:

- The addition of Father Twenty means there are now two priest salaries and benefits to cover.

- Major projects that we budgeted for in this upcoming year: removing the school cafeteria asbestos tiling (completed), epoxy floor in the school cafeteria (completed), resealing the parking lot (completed), repaving the cemetery road.
- We continue to take a conservative approach in budgeting income on things like votive candles.

As with last year, if our budgeting goals are met, excess contributions will be split between investing in our savings accounts and putting money back into our ministries.

We are in a healthy situation as far as our parish savings accounts go. I want to take a more conservative approach over the next couple years to grow the corpus of our Catholic Foundation accounts.

The school began the year with an enrollment of 79 students. The school subsidy is budgeted at \$355,000 this year. Any amount the school goes over budget would be additional parish support to that already budgeted \$355,000. Our principal, business manager, and I meet monthly to review the school budget and discuss any discrepancies that exceed 5% for that month. Our goal is to make financially responsible decisions in order to decrease the subsidy while also recognizing that the school is a ministry of our parish to be invested in as we begin to turn it around under our new principal Mrs. Beth Hollaway's leadership, which already has brought a great spirit to the school this year. We are discussing some additional fundraising events that will also be opportunities for building community in our school family and between the school and the parish.

I meet quarterly with the Finance Council to review monthly reports. I will take all the help I can get to steward your generosity well. Working with the Finance Council regularly ensures that I receive that advice, and more transparency and accountability is offered for the decisions I make. We were also audited this summer, and I am pleased to report that, while there were recommendations for better practices, there were no major issues found.

Parish Life Recap

I shared last year at the State of the Parish address that my vision for us is to have Saint Mary Parish be a vibrant, welcoming, evangelizing Catholic community in which one can live discipleship; a light of faith, hope, and charity for the Sycamore area, stemming from the joy of our encounter with Jesus Christ.

To that end, I want to just reflect with you on what has happened here and what we've done together over the past year. The to-do list of deferred maintenance on our facilities was largely completed and thanks to the generosity of parishioners, much of this work was paid for in-full or in-part by donations. That is so incredible; often, parishes do campaigns or save for years to do some of these projects. Thanks to your generosity, we were able to all of these projects at a very low cost to the parish:

- At the school, we did tuckpointing and roof work to repair leaky spots that caused interior damage. A broken drainage pipe that let to extensive water damage to plaster in one of the

stairwells was repaired. Broken asbestos tiling was abated throughout the school cafeteria and kitchen areas and an epoxy floor was installed.

- The church bell tower's rotting flooring was repaired and the interior of the tower was tuckpointed. It was a special moment to have the bell ring for the first time in over 12 years at the consecration during Christmas Eve Mass. Many of you have commented that it is so nice to hear the bell again before weekend Masses and I definitely share that sentiment.
- A new roof was put on the church. During that project, it was discovered that one of the reasons that shingles had fallen off far too frequently is because there was no plywood put down between the roof beams and the shingles. When the church was built, they used wood shingles with pegs that fit in-between the beams as it was built. Whenever we moved to the standard shingles used today, those gaps were never covered over and nails for the shingles were not adhering in anything in many places. This time, plywood was put down so that will not be an issue moving forward.
- The parking lot was resealed for the first time in around 5 years. It should be done every 2 years to maintain the integrity of the pavement, and we will do that moving forward.
- The parish center had a wet summer, as the water softener kept leaking and having issues. It was discovered that, due to its age, a crack had developed in the neck which caused the O-ring to keep coming off. We replaced the water softener and that is no longer an issue.
- At the cemetery, a flagpole was installed. The road in the cemetery will be re-paved this Fall.

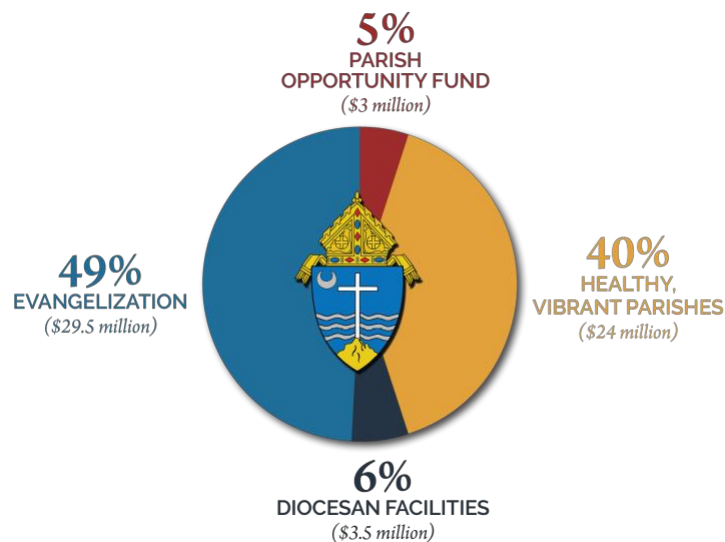
Beyond the brick-and-mortar work that has been done, our parish life has started to grow. As noted above, Mass attendance numbers were up as of last October and I think we all notice that the increase has not stopped as time has gone on since then. We started a Fall Faith Formation series, going through prayer and *lectio divina* last year and this year, Father Twenty will be teaching a class on Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*. We have the Upper Room quarterly and Holy Happy Hour in the summer months. I'm proud to say that throughout the whole year, we have events to continue forming the faith of our parish. We also formed a Social Committee that has hosted a game night and a watch party for the Bears-Packers game on October 11. The Rummage Sale that we recently had here brought in over \$10,000, which will be put toward the parish's support of the school. Finally, we recently began recording weekend homilies and making those available as a podcast online through Spotify and Apple Podcast. Not to mention, the wonderful things our community had been doing before last year continued, such as parish support and community outreach from the Knights of Columbus and providing meals for Hope Haven.

In summary, life at Saint Mary Parish is growing and that is really exciting. We had more weddings and baptisms than funerals, another sign of growth. Our school has a full (award-winning) preschool and good energy throughout the building under the new leadership of Mrs. Beth Hollaway. To continue stepping into what the Lord wants for us here and respond to how He is moving, it takes all of us – pastor and the community – and an ever-deepening sense of stewardship in all its senses: time, talent, and treasure. I am moved by the people who have stepped up to volunteer and offer their services to better our life here. Thank you!

“You Will Be My Witnesses”: The Diocese of Rockford Capital Campaign

The Diocese of Rockford has started a 4-year long capital campaign, with a focus on evangelization, implemented in waves across the diocese. We are part of Wave 3, and Kickoff Weekend is October 17-18. The last diocesan campaign was over 20 years ago, “United in Faith”, and it is typical in other dioceses to have extraordinary campaigns like these every 10 years or so. Parishes and schools are still benefitting from the generosity shown in the last campaign and the endowments set up then. In fact, our parish and school just received around \$19,000 from that campaign and how the people’s generosity 20 years ago has been stewarded by the diocese.

The overall goal of the current campaign is \$60 million. So far, through two waves, over \$29 million has been raised through 5,713 decisions. Our wave is the largest and so the numbers so far reflect a great response to this campaign through the first two waves. Now, what will the \$60 million go toward? I invite you to watch a video on the campaign [here](#). More information is available on that website but I will present here the nuts and bolts of this campaign.



Evangelization (49%, \$29.5 M)

Between the Office of Religious Education, Youth Ministry, and Adult Faith Formation, the Catholic Education Office, and the Life and Family Evangelization Office, around half of the campaign will be invested in the future of the Church in the Diocese of Rockford through evangelization:

- Office of Religious Education, Youth Ministry and Adult Faith Formation (\$13.2 M)
 - Lay evangelization: train catechetical leaders in 25 parishes (\$265,000/yr)
 - Parish cohorts: 14 shared youth/faith formation programs (\$170,000/yr)
 - Mentor program: coordinator and mentors guide parish planning (\$162,000/yr)
- Catholic Schools (\$12.1 M)
 - Tuition assistance to keep schools affordable (\$304,500/yr)
 - Student and family evangelization curriculum (\$80,000/yr)
 - Educator development and recruitment partnerships (\$80,000/yr)

- Centers of excellence throughout the diocese: STREAM, dual language, arts (\$80,000/yr)
- Life and Family Evangelization Office (\$2.7 M)
 - Two bilingual coordinator positions (\$120,000/yr)
 - Hispanic marriage preparation and Natural Family Planning instruction
 - Family and Respect Life ministries in English- and Spanish-speaking parishes

This money will be used to hire for these positions and endow funds to continue providing for parishes and schools throughout the diocese for years to come, after the model of the “United in Faith” campaign, which has proven successful.

Finally, under evangelization, there will be work done on our diocesan retreat center just outside of Rockford, Bishop Lane Retreat Center, to make it a more comfortable and beautiful space for visitors to encounter the Lord:

- Bishop Lane Retreat Center (\$1.5 M)
 - Refurbish 50 guest bedrooms (\$600,000)
 - Renovate 50 private bathrooms (\$300,000)
 - Update conference room, chapel, and sacristy (\$400,000)
 - Replace five rooftop HVAC units at the Youth Center (\$200,000)

Diocesan Facilities (6%, \$3.5 M)

The Diocesan Administrative Center in Rockford needs upgrades to provide a safe and functional working environment for those serving the diocese. For example, during this summer, the air conditioning units were not working and my office in the building was regularly around 80°. Since the administrative center is not attached to a specific parish, ordinarily all the parishes would be assessed a certain amount to complete any needed capital improvements. In this case, the needs of that building are built into the campaign, removing an additional burden from the parishes.

Healthy, Vibrant Parishes (40%, \$24 M)

At the heart of this campaign is the parishes of the diocese. Evangelization happens at the parishes, and this campaign recognizes that fact by allocating 40% of the funds raised to parishes. That means that 40% of every dollar raised stays with our parish. The last time the diocese did a capital campaign, only around 20% of the money raised stayed at the parishes. In the early phases of planning the current campaign, it was proposed to have 30% stay at the parishes. After hearing the priests and people, Bishop Malloy decided to increase that amount to 40%, almost unheard of in campaigns like this. Again, that is our bishop’s recognition that evangelization and discipleship take place and grow in and through the parish.

There are different payouts possible for us here based on the amount raised. From Dollar 1 raised, 40% stays at Saint Mary and 60% goes to the diocese to support the above-stated initiatives, until we hit our goal. Upon hitting the goal, those numbers flip and 60% of every dollar raised beyond our parish goal stays here at Saint Mary. If we raise 200% (or double) our parish goal, 100% of

every dollar raised after reaching 200% stays here. That might seem like a lot of money to get to that point but it has happened in several parishes during the first two waves! Let's dream big!

The final 5% of the \$60 million goal (\$3 M) is allocated for smaller parishes facing financial difficulties, so that every community in the diocese can thrive and serve the faithful. Thanks to the generosity of our parish members, we do not qualify for that portion of the campaign funds.

As a final note on how the diocesan campaign is organized, our parish goal is an aspirational goal, which is to say, there is no penalty for parishes that do not meet the goal. That is different from the annual diocesan appeal, which makes up the diocese's operating budget and thus continues while this extraordinary campaign is going on; if we do not make our assessment for that operational appeal, the parish has to make it up. The diocese has paid for the "You Will Be My Witnesses" campaign, meaning all the materials and support provided for the campaign do not cost the parish anything. In modeling this campaign after the "United in Faith" campaign 20 years ago, the diocese is setting up this campaign to continue paying out for generations to come, making our generosity now a real factor for evangelization in the diocese in the future.

Our Parish Share Plans

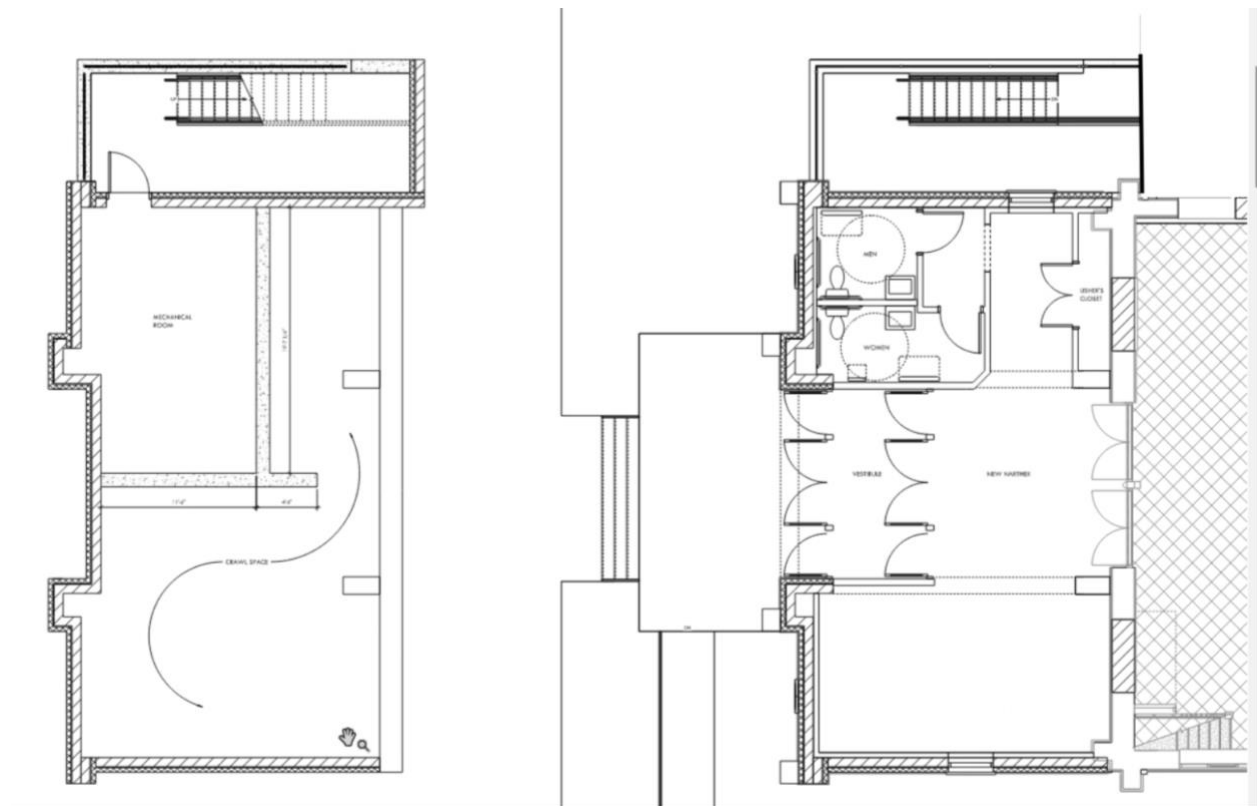
That brings me to share what our parish goal is and what we are planning to do with the funds that will stay at the parish. The goal for our parish is to raise \$759,008 and if we make our goal, the 40% that is our share amounts to \$303,603. Again, if we surpass our goal, different payouts become possible.

Before elaborating on the plans for how that parish share will be used here, though, allow me to express my sentiment that this is an incredibly providential moment for our parish. On June 14, 1903, Bishop Muldoon came to Sycamore to dedicate our church building. That means that in 2028, we will be celebrating the 125-year anniversary of our church's dedication. With the energy, growth, and excitement happening here, it does not appear to me to be coincidental that this anniversary will occur on the heels of what this diocesan campaign is making possible for us. As noted above, we were able to do a lot of deferred maintenance projects this year, freeing us to dream big now. I believe the Lord of history is moving here and now, in our life together and through this campaign, to open the possibility of doing something beautiful for God and for our future.

Our plans for our parish share of the campaign are set and approved in two phases. Phase I is interior renovations to our already-beautiful church building. That will include painting the ceiling of the sanctuary in a shade of blue with gold stars, recognizing that the mysteries celebrated in that space open earth up to Heaven. It also recognizes our patron, Mary the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, who is traditionally recognized in blue, crowned with stars (see Rev 12:1). In addition to the painting in the sanctuary, we will install new pews/kneelers and new carpeting. Finally, we are also going to install a new lighting system to make the space brighter. By making these upgrades to the aesthetic of our already-beautiful church, the experience of visiting St. Mary will be more beautiful for all and, for the person who is coming in for the first time, the building itself be an invitation back to spend more time with our Lord and our community. In total, these interior renovations will cost just short of \$400,000 (~\$392,000).

Now, as I said earlier, let's not be afraid to dream big! I really believe that the occurrence of this campaign leading into our church's 125th anniversary in 2028 is an invitation from the Lord to us to do something for which future generations will be grateful. Therefore, as Phase II, we will be setting up a fund to build an addition onto the existing narthex, extending out about 30 feet toward Waterman Street. This addition will provide a larger gathering space, as well as Men's and Women's restrooms, both of which will have baby changing tables. Expanding the narthex will create a welcoming space in which parishioners can gather, connect, and greet one another in the presence of the Holy Spirit, without causing a block for those moving in and out of the doors. This additional space will also provide a convenient and hospitable environment for engagement and community life attached to the church, such as lemonade after Upper Room or coffee and donuts on a Sunday, rather than crossing the parking lot (or not...) into the parish hall. The installation of bathrooms within the church addresses an important need by ensuring comfort and accessibility for all who gather to celebrate Mass and participate in parish life. Together, these improvements will foster a more welcoming, inclusive space that supports evangelization by encouraging people to remain, connect, and grow within the parish community. At this time, there is not a precise estimate or budget for the narthex addition, as it is in such a preliminary phase of planning, but it is roughly estimated to cost around \$1.4 million.

Here are some preliminary renderings of the addition that I am excited to share with you:



On the right side of this image is the plan for the addition. The crossed out section is our existing narthex and front doors. The addition will extend out toward Waterman Street around 30 feet. You can see the larger gathering space on one side and the restrooms on the other side (to the left, as

you would enter), as well as a space for ushers to put things, removing the need for that larger cabinet currently in our narthex. At the top of the drawing, you'll see a stairwell. This would lead to a basement area underneath the addition, seen on the left side of the drawing. This is where machinery for the necessary systems will be put in order to save space above and make maintenance access easy.



Here is the view of the addition from the front. The exterior will have brick that matches our existing church. On either side of the front doors, this rendering has alcoves and statues but we will switch those spaces to mosaics, which are easier to maintain. By putting the machinery for the systems underneath the addition, we will be able to maintain visibility of our existing window in the choir loft.



VIEW FROM NORTHWEST

This final view shows the parking lot on the right side. There will be a handicap ramp leading from the parking lot to the front doors. Overall, I think this design both serves the needs of our parish while also maintaining a certain unity with the existing church; with the brickwork all matching, the goal is that the addition would look like it has always been there.

I am aware that there is a history of campaigns at our parish that go unfulfilled. I know that has been hurtful on many different levels, both for individuals who had trustingly given and the community as a whole, and I am so sorry. I want to be clear that the interior improvements and narthex addition are not a wish list – this is happening. According to diocesan policy, work cannot begin until the parish has on-hand a minimum of 75% of the estimated project cost. Thanks to the incredible generosity of some parishioners, we already have on-hand the money to begin Phase I (interior renovations). I am working with the architecture firm Larson and Darby to organize the different parts of Phase I so that work can begin later this Fall/Winter and be finished as soon as possible. This also means that the majority of our 40% parish share of the diocesan campaign can be put into the narthex fund for Phase II. If we meet our goal for the campaign, that means we would already be ~1/5 of the way to the estimated cost of the addition. Last year, I began planning ahead and started putting some parish money away in savings for this addition. Once the diocesan campaign concludes, if generosity can continue to match the aspirations of this project, I have no reason to doubt that we will have 75% of the estimated cost on-hand a couple years from now.

How beautiful would it be to celebrate our church's 125th anniversary by breaking ground for a new narthex!

I ask that you pray for the success of this campaign, promote it by speaking positively about it in conversation (we have enough bad news in the world today and this is something good that is happening: good for the Diocese of Rockford and good for us at Saint Mary), and consider how you can participate and be a part of what is happening here.

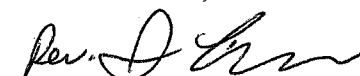
Conclusion

Again, the different elements of the diocesan campaign and its focus on evangelization, our parish life growing, and the upcoming 125th anniversary of the dedication of our church all coming together make this moment stand out in our parish's history. I believe it is an invitation from the Lord for each of us to see our lives under the lens of belonging to each other and to the Church in the Diocese of Rockford and to invest in that belonging with sacrificial giving for our future brothers and sisters. Each of us is important, each of us belongs, and so, more than any bottom-line amount, I will be proud if our parish has a high participation rate in the diocesan campaign, as an expression that we understand our own importance and relevance to this companionship. As campaign envelopes begin showing up in your mailboxes, please prayerfully consider how you can participate and respond to the diocesan campaign, also with a view to needing to finish fundraising for Phase II of what the campaign is making possible for us.

I pray for you every day, I fast for you and your family regularly, and I am grateful, humbled, and honored to be your pastor. But I am just one part of our community. It takes all of us together to move and respond to what the Lord is inviting us into at this moment. May Christ be present, may His work here come to fruition, and may we see His face as we come together!

May God bless you and your family with His peace.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Rev. J. Linkenheld", written in a cursive style.

Rev. James Linkenheld
Pastor