

Church of the Future

New Ideas

**WMHT – RISE
Community Connection
Interview with:
Lou Grasso & Robert Racette
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Transcript

Host: Bob Yager

(wmht RISE radio introduction – Community Connection, connecting you to services in our community – Theme song, Where Eagles Fly))

Bob Yager: Hello everyone. Today we are going to be talking about the closing of the Catholic churches in our area. We're talking with Bob Racette and Lou Grasso. They have some ideas that may save the closing of some churches and everybody knows that the churches are the focal point in a lot of communities with services to people in our communities. On the way over, I saw a billboard on Rt. 7; and the billboard said this, Matthew 16:18, "On this Rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Right below that sentence was "but Bishop Hubbard can close yours. Stop the closing of God's churches." So it kind of looks like they're blaming the Bishop for a lack of priests, and I don't think that's the case. Lou and Bob, what do you think?

Lou Grasso: No, I don't think it's the Bishop's fault. I think that we as Catholics haven't got enough of our children to become priests; and so with the closing of these churches that are closing in the area now, we are hoping that we have an idea that maybe we can stop the closing of the churches, at least for a while, and try to keep the communities together. I went to a meeting with the Bishop, back in August, and there were people from all over the 170 parishes in the Albany Diocese, including the Bishop and all the priests that represented these parishes. The message there was that by the year 2020 there will be 36 active priests; 170 parishes and 36 active priests with probably around 40 retired priests. So, they are now starting this program, Called to be Churched; and the to be Churched program is going to try to figure out how to spread the priests that we have to these 170 parishes. Some of the options are closing parishes; and so upon leaving this

particular meeting, I was kind of sad. Leaving this meeting kind of saying, gee, this is kind of a sad thing. We are going to be closing parishes. Here you have a parish, or any parish, no matter where it is, where you have a community of people who live there who were born in that community, who have been baptized in that community, made their Confirmation, maybe got married or buried their parents there; and they work with other people in that community. Each parish is kind of a community; and so I think Gee if we can keep these communities together, even though we have a shortage of priests, then we can build a better Catholic faith in the diocese. So, with that in mind, I kept thinking about it. Maybe there's an idea. Last December I went to New York to see the Radio City Rockettes, and it was raining, and for lack of something to do we went to St. Patrick's to get out of the rain and see the service that was going on. I got in and sat in the back corner; and there was a big pillar in front of me, and I couldn't see past the pillar. I looked up, and there's a television set on the pillar. Then I looked around, and there's a television set on every pillar. So they're broadcasting the service to those in the church who can't see it. I got thinking, Gee, maybe we could do the same thing. Maybe we could come up with a way of broadcasting the service from neighboring churches. For example, the idea that I first had was to go up into the North Country where the parishes are spread out: Bolton Landing and Luzerne and all those areas. How in the heck can the priest go from one of those parishes to another? But if we were to link them together so that that was like a little community of say 5 or 6 parishes, maybe the main parish would be in Lake George. The priest would say Mass in Lake George, or what would be better yet is to keep the community together, the people in each of their churches would start the service with some singing, doing some of the readings keeping the parish ministry together; and then as you go along through the service, you could get to the consecration where no one could consecrate the host except the priest. So if we were to pre-consecrate the hosts before the service, and then broadcast the consecration of the hosts

to those parishes, they then could distribute Communion to everyone, and you could keep that particular community together; and you wouldn't have to close that particular church. So the idea would be to see if we could do something of that nature. In talking to a few of my friends, we got a gentleman who works in this field, who thinks that it would be very simple to do. What they call it is video conferencing. Right Bob?

Bob Racette: That is correct. It's interesting, I am a customer of Lou Grasso, who is a barber, and normally we get together and we have grand conversations about politics in the barber shop, and he happened to open this subject one afternoon when I was in for a haircut; and I was quite surprised that a gentleman a generation older than I am would be so interested in doing something that is a fairly contemporary concept. I know that older Catholics are very concerned about keeping the process of worship much as it has been in the past. I'm a coordinator at a local college for instructional technologies, and I have an understanding of multi media in video conferencing and in television production; and that's originally why Lou Grasso tapped me on the shoulder. In post secondary education we've always had a concern about bricks and mortar. I mean education has been fairly standard in classrooms for many years. That trend is moving away a little bit from center with different avenues for distance learning, and this may have a very good application for video conference as an alternative to closing churches. I have a lot of questions. I am very interested in what possibilities could be provided for video conferencing. It's a high tech solution, and I think unfortunately, things have culminated to the point where we're hearing more of a blame game and less solutions; and I think that this may be an alternative that is very well worthwhile being looked at.

Lou Grasso: You know, in talking to Bob in our conversations while he's getting his hair cut, of course.....

Bob Racette: I'm kind of a captive audience.

Lou Grasso: He can't get away from me. Some of the ideas he had in addition to doing the Masses are educational. You could actually start in the one parish, and you could bring in a speaker and you could probably beam that speaker through the system to all of those parishes that are interested. You probably could set up the parish like you were telling me about that one parish, that church in Clifton Park where they have the video.

Bob Racette: Actually, it's a Rensselaer County church. I have a friend who belongs to a local church. It's a fairly contemporary church. Actually, it's a brand new church, it's a beautiful church; and it's very media- capable. The interesting thing about it is everything is tastefully done. It's done with a great deal of respect, you know, for their religion, and for getting the word out. In that church they use rear screen projection in the front of the church; actually, a large screen on either side, which is basically built into the wall. It doesn't have to be that way, but that's the way the application is used in this church; and I was, being a Catholic, thinking of the hymnals and all of the other things that we read through during the Mass., you know, knowing that all of that can be projected for easy reading at central points in the church. So missalettes are not really needed anymore. Hymnals really are not needed to a large extent because everything can be loaded onto a server and fed throughout the church. Now, that is for media support, video support within the church during services; but once you have this equipment installed, you could certainly telecast these masses to local churches or churches at a distance, depending on how they're hooked up together. I thought that it was really interesting that this type of technology could also bring in guest speakers or people of authority who could talk to students in the Catechism classes, religious Ed classes. Literally, you could have an

authority from the Vatican speaking to a group of eighth graders in three or four parishes at the same time. There are a number of different things that this type of technology could provide for a grouping of churches above and beyond just masses.

Lou Grasso: You know, the idea of having the bishop giving his message out, when he had his Bishop's Fund, directly instead of having it read. The idea of maybe having the bishop do the Easter Mass or the Christmas vigil Mass would be exciting. To be able to do that kind of thing. You know, I was at a meeting the other night, and several of the gals sitting with me at this meeting were saying, "I think it's going to be very sad if they close my church." and that possibly is very real; and I said to them, "What do you think about trying something like this video idea?" They said they would rather have that than to close their church. So no matter how big or small your church is, this is something you could do. As you link them together the priest would be spiritual advisor to three or four churches, depending on how they set this grouping up. You can also take that priest, and you could move him to different churches so that maybe every third or fourth Sunday the priest would be in one of the satellite churches. So you could move them around. It seems to me a priest who has to jump in his car and run to three different masses on a Sunday morning is not a really safe or a good idea to have the priest do that. . You could certainly keep the priest so he is the main person for this group, and when people need to see a priest they would be able to dial the number where he is located, make an appointment, and then they could go and see the priest. So they'll still have access to the priest. The priests today are not going to be able to do all these things. You figure 36 priests trying to service 170 parishes. When they get through cutting the obvious parishes down, the ones that are poorly attended now; and then they get into the mid-sized parishes, in ten years we will probably close more than half of the parishes that we have out there today. I think that's kind of sad, when you think that all these people who

are linked to these parishes are going to lose their soul. They're going to lose their ability to be with people they know in the community that they grew up with.

Bob Racette: They're losing their community in the process. I'm originally from the North Country. I grew up around the Canadian border; and the church that I grew up in, as a kid, already has lost its priest. It's barely staying open. The local priest now covers a number of different parishes. That is a real grind on priests as well as the parishes. I would wonder further, you know, from the politics of the church, it will be even harder for the church to recruit young men into the priesthood as they know how much harder this process is going to become. It would be nice if we could find a way, a creative way that would support the church and probably help recruiting. One of the things that also fascinates me is that our next generation, below both Lou Grasso and I, our kids, our grandchildren, are going to be the real beneficiaries of what can be done to save the churches. We are getting older, and we are kind of set in our ways. That may be good, and it also may be bad. I'm concerned about people our age refusing to look at technology as a solution; because that's not what we grew up with. However, our children and grandchildren are very used to that. Let's face it; you had said something about the average age of local Catholics as being around 50?

Lou Grasso: 55--The average age of a Catholic is 55years old. The average age of the priests is 62 years old, and 7 out of 10 Catholics do not go to church. A lot of the young people today are too busy to go to church; and so, you know, we're hoping that we can excite the kids with something that would be something they like. Maybe we can get the parents to come and get involved in some of this technology that would make the Mass more interesting for them to come without losing the main focus of the Mass.

Bob Yager: With this technology, too, you could actually send it into a nursing home where people are bedridden, so that they would actually be able to see the Mass as it's being performed. Couldn't you?

Bob Racette: Absolutely Bob. It's interesting because video conferencing technology will actually allow for synchronous and asynchronous transmission of the program. In other words, live or it can be streamed at another time. Literally, you could go to your computer, type in a web address, and see the stream from St. Paul's Church in Schenectady or St. Helen's or St. Luke's or wherever; also for invalids who are bedridden, for inmates in local jails, for people who are in hospitals. You know, the diocese has their own Mass on Sunday morning that Bishop Hubbard does. You know, that's a little disjoining from a parishioner of St. Paul's. If you want to, in some way, try to attend your church within your community, you may not necessarily be interested in what's going on in Albany. This affords you the ability to do that; and for those people who cannot necessarily get out every Sunday to go to church, it allows them to still stay within their practice in some way.

Bob Yager: You know, more importantly, too, are the, like Lou Grasso said earlier, are the ministries. I just want to remind everybody, you are listening to RISE radio's Community Connection show. Today's show is on the closing of Catholic churches in our area. On the way over I saw a billboard, and I would like to read the contents of the billboard, which really got us thinking about the closing of the churches in this area. This billboard said, "Matthew 16:18 - On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it; but Bishop Hubbard can close yours. Stop the closing of God's churches." I really don't know who put this billboard up, but I'm sure that it's not Bishop Hubbard's fault that there's a lack of priests. It's just the way things are today,

and Lou Grasso and Bob Racette have come up with a solution to this problem with the shortage of priests, and that's video teleconferencing.

Bob Racette: Well it certainly is a solution that can be looked at and allowed for more discussion. One of the things when we were talking about the average age of Catholics being around 50 or 55 in this area, I was concerned about what really is the church's target audience, or what should it be; and I'm thinking that it is our children and grandchildren...

Bob Yager: Anybody you can get to listen.

Bob Racette: Well yeah, but I mean children now, three year olds are watching PBS programs in the morning, well, hopefully in the afternoon too. I mean, they're using television to learn, and it's a source of entertainment. Certainly it could be a source for religious learning and a better understanding of their faith too. So it would be helpful if people perhaps stopped blaming authorities. I mean, the reality is we have a problem and it's here to stay; and we can work together, and we can try to find a solution, and perhaps this isn't a solution that is going to work for every parish, though for some parishes, for some church groupings, it may very well.

Lou Grasso: I think you're going to have the decision, do you want to close your church or do you want to try something new that would probably work, and that would keep your church open and keep your community together. I was talking to a lady that works in the local Kingsway Arms Nursing Home. I said, "How would you like us to send the Mass over there with this teleconferencing?" She says, "Can you start tomorrow?" I said, "Well, we're not really up and running to do that yet"; but then we would send the Mass in there from St. Paul's. A lot of people who live there go to St. Paul's Church, so

they would be in their own home parish; or people from St. Luke's would get to see the same kind of thing; but if you can get your own group of people to see their own parishioners and their own priest, it would make them feel a lot better than to have to just get a communion service.

Bob Racette: Right. It's their community, and they're still engaged in their community; and I would be curious on how the people are going to react to having their church closed and having to go to a neighboring. Now, again,

Bob Yager: But that's not really the concern here. The concern here is not so much the closing of the church. It's the closing of the ministries in the church. You have a lot of ministries that serve the community. At St. Paul's, I know there are a lot of ministries that actually assist people in the community. That's what you're losing when you close a church. We can drive 30 miles to go to church, but you're not going to get the ministries that you have when you close the doors in one church; and all those ministries move to another church. You're going to lose services to the community, and that's a concern.

Bob Racette: You're absolutely right, Bob. I look at the services themselves as the focal point, and quite often it's easy to lose the concept that there are other important community related things that go on within a parish. You know, as Lou Grasso was talking about the lack of fellowship and the lack of attendance within the church; you know, these things are all things that, if we can, focus on them, and see if we can make positive advances forward instead of losing these opportunities.

Bob Yager: Then the other concern is like the organizations within the church. You know, we have services that provide a real value to the community; but what about the

social organizations within the church, like the men's club in some Catholic churches.

There are some people that go to the men's club, and that's their only social outlet. Now, if you move the observance of the Mass 40 miles away, is that person going to socialize 40 miles away from their home? Probably not. So you're losing a lot more for the community.

Lou Grasso: You know, in the North Country some of the parishes are really spread out. I think it is really important to keep those communities together. In the city, you know, we have the Polish church of St. Adalbert's, and I was talking to a lady who goes there the other day. She says, "You know, if they close my church, I'm not going to sign up anywhere else. You know, I'm going to be lost." Do you realize you could probably link all the Polish churches together somehow; and you could probably have a Polish Mass brought in to St. Adalbert's? Not only that, there are so many things that you can do, like in some parishes some priests are terrific speakers. You could bring in those terrific speakers and bring in the homily for those. One of the things we heard at this meeting the other day was that the priests that are retired, they don't want to do weddings, they don't want to do funerals and they don't like doing sermons. So if you have one of the retired priests in there, he may not want to do the sermon. We could bring the sermon in from another church, and a priest who is really good at it could give his expertise to a whole lot of other people. This is unlimited. I think we're just scratching the surface of things we can do. This disc is going to be sent out to all the parishes in the diocese, and when you start your meetings in January, I'm hoping that you will play this disc for everybody that sits in your room, and ask the question to yourselves. Do we want to close our church or do we want to try something new?

Bob Yager: That brings to mind a good point, Lou. You say sending out the disc or the

information for this technology; how can they get a hold of you?

Lou Grasso: My phone number is 374.1623. I am in Schenectady. I attend St. Paul's Church. I'm not being authorized by the priest there, Father Peter, or anybody. This is something that we came up with and we have been talking about for a while. But that's my number, 374.1623.

Bob Yager: And this is Lou Grasso,

Lou Grasso: And I'm willing to come to your meeting, if you want me to come, and talk more about it. I'm sure Bob would be available if you want more technical information.

Bob Racette: I wouldn't mind chatting. I'll come to the meetings if you invite me, Lou Grasso.

Lou Grasso: I'll invite everybody. I mean, this started out as a small idea, and it's amazing how many people have gotten into this. At a couple of the meetings that I attended, afterwards, people would come up to me and say, "I like that idea. I wonder if we could really make that work." And I think we can. I think it's something that if we get everybody thinking about it and how it will work.... I had a priest say to me the other night. He said, "I'm not for all of this. I like your thinking, but I'm not for all of this; but we really could use this for educating our kids. We could use this to educate our adults." So there's a lot, maybe not all of it, maybe some of it. I think that the idea is there, and we should think about it.

Bob Racette: There is a lot of church politics involved in this. I mean, older

parishioners are very concerned about the ways of the church changing. There are certain parishioners that are very angry about the idea that their church could be closed. One of the humorous , it's not humorous, but slightly comical at least to me, was one of the parishioners when we're in the barber shop saying, "well I go to St. Paul's, and it's a wealthy parish, and I'm not going to worry about my parish closing." I said, "Yeah, well I'm from a wealthier parish, and yours will close before mine does." So why should we care? Because it affects the communities around us; and ultimately it will affect our community also.

Bob Yager: It shouldn't have anything to do with wealth. Everybody would have their house of worship and their ministries which their comfortable with; and it shouldn't be disturbed as much as possible. With this technology it doesn't have to be.

Bob Racette: There are small things like that which will get in the way of the conversations that could help move this or another concept forward. There are a lot of politically charged items that, Lou Grasso,. you were telling me about, that came up during some of the meetings; and it's hard to come up with an idea like this and to move forward; because when you go to these meetings a lot of people want to talk about the old times and how things were. The reality is that the old ways are going away, and how we are going to educate our children and how we are going to attend worship services are going to change. We're going to lose them or we are going to find a way to improve what we have.

Bob Yager: Lou Grasso, we only have about a minute left. What are your last thoughts on the closing of churches in this diocese?

Lou Grasso: I belong to a fairly large church. It probably wouldn't have been slated for closing; but I feel very badly that there are going to be a lot of people in smaller parishes who are going to lose that feeling that they had all their life of belonging to that particular church; and that bothers me. I really would like to see us not have to look at another billboard that says "Stop closing our churches". This weekend there were closings in Watervliet. It's very sad, and I think that this is something we should look at, so we don't have to put people in that position. The bishop, when we left that meeting, said, "This is a new beginning. We have to think in a positive way and a new beginning." That's what I'm thinking here. This is a new beginning, and maybe we have to do things a little differently and not the way we are used to them.

Bob Yager: I know that this is area of concern with a lot of people in our area. Bob Racette....., Lou Grasso, thank you very much for coming on Community Connection and talking about the closing of Catholic churches in our area.

Lou Grasso: Thanks for having us.