Two separate seating areas face the altar at Our Lady of Wisdom Catholic Church on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette campus. The church has launched a fundraiser to help build a larger place of worship.

Catholic church, student center looks to expand

By Kailey Broussard
Special to The Advocate

Our Lady of Wisdom Catholic Church and Student Center is looking to move out of its 73-year-old weathered and time-worn building and into a proposed three-story, 46,563-square-foot building across the street from where it now stands.

The church and student center are perched on the corner of St. Mary Boulevard where they serve as a resource for more than 1,000 Catholic students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

The students and Ragin' Cajun Catholics, one of the oldest campus organizations, should have a facility that will last another century, said the Rev. Bryce Sibley, pastor and chaplain of Our Lady of Wisdom Church and Catholic Student Center, talks about the design and need for a new church recently.

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Bryce Sibley, a church pastor at Wisdom.

He would also like to attract more of the 10,000 students on campus who are Catholics to the church and student center.

He said the aging building now housing the church and student center has water leaks, mold issues and cramped space for meetings and church offices.

"It's not so much about the building as much as investing in the future of the church and investing in the students," he said.

In pursuit of funding for a new building, the church spawned Wisdom for Every Generation, the campaign to rebuild its facilities and possibly move to the E.K. Long parking lot. The proposed new center's estimated cost falls between $15 million and $20 million, and the goal is set at $22 million because of interest and upkeep.

"We are right now in the phase of making face-to-face asks — asking people to make five-year pledges that can be paid off as people desire or when they're able to," Sibley said.

The Diocese of Lafayette is helping Wisdom expand with a $5 million donation and fundraising; however, the church has been tasked with raising the rest. Sibley said the church will eventually reach out to students and recent alumni for pledges and one-time gifts.

"We want as many people to know about the good things that are happening here in the ministry — the impact it's having — and allow them to make an investment," Sibley said.

Sibley said students who are members of the church said they were drawn to the university by the successful Ragin Cajun Catholic program and the church itself.

Our Lady of Wisdom Catholic Church and the Catholic Student Center are on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette campus.

"I'd say (our ministry) is top five, top 10 in the nation. It's grown to be very large and we've had a fair amount of national recognition," he said.

Sibley also noted that when UL Lafayette was featured in the 2014 Princeton Review's "Best 378 Universities" college guide, it was noticed for spirituality and religious diversity.

Despite its reputation, leak-age problems intermittently run throughout the facilities. Under the building are holes and empty spaces due to pipelines in poor condition that are leaving Cypress Lake Swamp — an issue that was amended for the university's Student Union before it reopened in 2015.

"They found out that a pipe had been stopped up for probably about 30 years," Sibley said.

"That's one of the reasons the Student Union took so long to build and was more expensive. There was washout under the whole entire building. They had to pay a half a million dollars to build it up and then put it on top of that. We had the same thing under here," Sibley said it is possible in one hallway for black mold to enter the lungs of anyone who stands in it for too long. The office spaces are cramped with some staff sharing desks and the break room sometimes transformed into an impromptu work space.

According to statistics provided by Wisdom, 350 students attend weekly Mass, and over 300 students participate in Bible studies. The proposal designates areas designed just for Bible studies and a series of spaces for academic study sessions.

Mary McMahon, a junior at UL Lafayette who frequents the center, said the new designs would ameliorate space issues.

"The Bible study I'm in is held in a small office, which is fine when it's only a few of us. But for the majority of the time, half of the girls sit on the floor because there isn't enough room for chairs for everyone," she said.

The initial designs for the new facility also feature a pronounced church entrance, atrium and dining area. The first two floors will house the church sanctuary, which will be able to house 600 students compared to its current seating of 450.

In addition to increased seating and recreational amenities, the new center designs include a crying room for children, which the church now lacks. With more than 600 families in the parish, Wisdom uses its café area as a space for unruly children and their parents. With the café in another building, separating families with unruly children from the sanctuary is an alienating experience, Sibley said.

"This becomes sort of like the playroom, actually, because there's no sense of the sacred, and it gets loud in there," he said of the café.

Moving to the other side of St. Mary Boulevard would allow growth, Sibley said the university and the church are still discussing whether moving is a possibility.

If the move fails, Sibley said, the center's growth may be stunted due to the tree line that prevents the church from expanding.

"We have the same architects that the university does," he said. "There was talk of potentially putting a storefront there, but there's no specific plan for it."

Sibley said the church will retain some of its key designs such as Latin lining the walls and the cross by the altar; however, he said some of the designs in the old church still hold a special connection with members.

"It's not an ugly church at all. It's just there are a lot of people who have sort of sentimental connections to the church. You gotta understand that students don't, and we're building it for the students," he said.

McMahon agreed.

"With Jesus, friends and coffee all in the same room, I can't think of a better place on campus, and I am so excited to see the growth of the student center," she said.