Residents fight for chapel

Forked Island church was closed after Rita

Travis R. Badeaux

FORKED ISLAND — "I feel the Catholic Church is abandoning Immaculate Conception Chapel and the people of Forked Island," said Charles Broussard.

Charles Broussard is not alone. He and about 50 other Roman Catholics from the Forked Island area, who formerly held membership or attended services at Immaculate Conception Chapel, gathered at the former sanctuary Thursday to make a public plea to Bishop Michael Jarrell to reopen the church.

But they didn't stop there. The group also filed for a restraining order to prevent demolition of the church.

"I was baptized here. My daughter was baptized here. My marriage was blessed here," said Tara Mouton, 34, who lives one block from the chapel. "There's always been one door unlocked so someone could light a candle or pray for a family member or..."
Chapel

Immaculate Conception Chapel sustained damage last September when Hurricane Rita roared ashore. Pews, baseboards and the floor were destroyed by the four inches of water that inundated the church, part of a tidal surge pushed ashore by the storm.

The church never reopened. On Thursday, its wooden doors were locked tight and nailed shut.

"We're in the United States of America. When did it become legal to lock up churches and nail the doors shut? Hasn't anyone heard of freedom of religion?" said Andrew Sherman, 62, who lives a block from the church.

Broussard recently circulated a petition to determine if people in the area wanted to re-establish the chapel, he said, and pledge to sustain it once it reopened. He garnered more than 280 signatures, he said, and turned the document over to Jarrell's office. Broussard called the office several times thereafter to schedule an appointment with the Lafayette Roman Catholic Diocese bishop to discuss the possibility of the chapel reopening, but said he has received no response.

"I'm being asked daily by members of the community to do something," he said. "He (Jarrell) wouldn't even talk to me."

A Roman Catholic church in Dayton, Ohio, according to Broussard, has agreed to donate the manpower and materials necessary to restore the church. However, Jarrell decided in August the structure would not reopen.

Monsignor Richard Greene, diocesan spokesperson, said Thursday that Jarrell confirmed his decision to close the chapel. It was a "question of need, necessity and the cost of ongoing upkeep."

The decision to close the chapel was not an easy one to make, Rogalla said, but it was necessary when considering rising insurance costs and limited funds available to sustain the Forked Island chapel.

Immaculate Conception Chapel and Sacred Heart Chapel in Pecan Island are missions of St. Anne Church in Cow Island. Rogalla suffers from a heart condition, and the Bishop, he said, referred to the condition that if the chapel was torn down, the land would return to the family.

"People lost almost everything they had in that storm," Sherman said. "Now, we're losing the church in our own back yard."

Jarrell said he also took into account the ill health of Rogalla, who serves as pastor of the chapels in Forked and Pecan Islands and St. Anne in Cow Island. Rogalla suffers from exposure to black mold and other contaminants present in the three sanctuaries as he continues to lead restoration efforts in each area and ministers to parishioners in the surrounding communities.

"Being responsible for three locations is a burden which should be undertaken only when necessary," Jarrell wrote. "I join the four inches of water that inundated the church, part of a tidal surge pushed ashore by the storm. Next year, we're going to have to pay Insurance never goes down, it only goes up."

In a letter dated Aug. 30, Jarrell gave Bill Rogalla permission to discontinue services at the Forked Island chapel. The decision, he wrote, came after 11 months of 'prayerful consideration and many discussions.'

The bishop listed several reasons for his decision.

First, he wrote, Forked Island is in "close proximity," about five miles, from St. Anne Church in Cow Island. "If you destroy the church, you destroy the community," said Wilman Gaspard, 62, a longtime church member who was married in the chapel in 1964.

His grandfather, Azolin Primeaux, donated the land for the chapel to be built, he said, on the condition that if the chapel was torn down, the land would return to the family.

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— The Rev. Bill Rogalla, pastor of Immaculate Conception Chapel in Forked Island with all of you in acknowledging the sadness, especially in the people who were attending Immaculate Conception Chapel and who have supported it through the years."

Church members had no say in the fate of the chapel they have supported for more than 30 years, Broussard said.

"Bill Rogalla never discussed closing Forked Island chapel with us," he said. "It was only his decision. It's not his church. It's our church."

"We have to step back and see where Christ is in all of this. Our apostolic has made a decision. Not every decision is easy. We need to pray to our Lord and the Blessed Mother for understanding and peace," Rogalla said. 