



It was in 1939 that the first moves were made to establish another mission to care for the widely scattered Catholics of the Pelican Lake area. Father J. A. Bisson encouraged this effort from the start. Then in May of 1940 a census revealed that a church was needed and interviews with residents resulted in the opening of a summer mass, held by Father Bisson.

The first four masses were held in the Cormorant Village School; then, in a school two miles east of Fair Hills resort; and finally, in the so-called Smith-School, on the northeast end of Big Pelican Lake. Then in July of 1940 it was voted on to build a new church and on August 4, 1940, ground was broken. A drive resulted in the collection of \$900 and on August 12 work began. Six men, including Father Bisson, architect and builder, Joe Bertram, head carpenter, Bill Bloom, Arthur Bloom, Anton Aker and Mel Bartelson, put up the church in seven weeks, and was 74 by 38 feet. In the first week of October the first Mass was said in the basement chapel. An altar was donated by Bishop John H. Peschges of Crookston with furnishings as well as vestments and candlesticks. The winter of 1940 was a test. It had to prove it possible for the priest to reach the church and the church had to prove itself fit to shelter us without a heating system, except a box stove in the chapel.

Each year added something to the church. Impoverished pews and a temporary altar were in use for the first year. In 1941 new pews were built, new vestments received from the church Extension Society in Chicago, and the church received a coat of stain. In 1942 the basement was made fit for dinners and bazaars

The Shrine of Lourdes was built in June, 1943. It is said to be modeled after a Shrine that the Montella family saw while vacationing in Hawaii. It was given in memory of John and Louise Montella donated by Mr. & Mrs. James Montella and family of Chicago.

Then in 1944 a special building fund established this year to burn the mortgage. Bishop Peschges dedicated the church Sunday, July 30, at 10:30.

In 1945 families and the Ladies Aid Society donated the stained glass windows, with the average cost of \$50.00 to \$100.00 in price and in 1947 rubber kneelers were purchased.

Twice the church was damaged by windstorms: November 1941, and June 1943. An additional Mass was added each Sunday in 1941-44. Priests from as far as Winnipeg, Canada, came to help on Sundays. The Oblate Fathers were succeeded by the Paracletes, who have furnished a house at Nevis, MN.

The church fills up each Sunday, accommodating 600 people in the two masses. About 30 families live in the parish year-round. For them mass was held every Sunday and holidays.

In 1942-59, religious summer school was held, directed by the Benedictine Sisters and the St. Joseph Sisters of Crookston. In June of 1953, a meeting was held at St. Mary's to decide on the purchase of an organ for the summer masses.

The addition to St. Mary of the Lakes was first discussed in April of '58. This addition was used as the main altar and the side overflow seating. It is 28' x 70' and was completed by July of '59. Father Bisson was quoted as saying, "I enjoy the new addition and attendance has been over 1000 people on Sunday."

When the church was built, a complete basement was omitted. Father Edward Haney was serving fulltime as associate pastor, and it was during this time that renovation of the church was begun. The basement was enlarged, and a pastor's office, kitchen facilities, small religious education rooms and restrooms were installed.

A parish council was organized at St. Mary's on July 15, 1977. In organizing the 1st council Joe Lepine was elected chairman of the council; Paul Rick, vice chairman; Delores Kuhlemeyer, secretary; and the future chairperson of the finance committee as treasurer. Fr. Haney was in attendance and suggesting operating committees as follows: social, liturgical, finance and education. The discussion centered on much needed improvements for the church. At this time the next priority expressed by Fr. Haney was getting CCD classes started.

In October 1977, the board met again and discussed remodeling of the church and basement needs. Three floor plans were discussed, and work started on the plumbing, heating and excavating in January '78. Work continued into the spring and summer of '78; this addition was first used for the funeral of one of our oldest members, John M. Kowalski, in July. All women of the parish were asked to attend. Then our Fishermen's Breakfast was started in 1980 and has been a bigger and better success every year. The proceeds have been used for various improvements within the church and its surroundings. Then Ken Crahan suggested in 1980 that a Men's Club at St. Mary's be formally organized.

On August 3, 1981, St. Mary of the Lakes became an independent parish with Father Haney as pastor. In 1983, the basement area was extended to the north end of the structure and two meeting rooms and a storage area were built in that space. During the same year, complete renovation of the church exterior took place. It began with plumbing of the east and west walls before increased winterization and re-siding 85 percent of the outer walls was completed, restoring the church to its natural and original look. The renovation of the parking lot began in 1984 with a portion of the area being blacktopped, with new lighting installed around the lot.

A scrap book of memories was made and placed in the church basement.

A large part of our written history not written down, from 1990, until the fall of 2004, where discussion was held on replacing the current structure with a new one. Much discussion along with disagreements were dealt with, and in 2005, the parish and finance council agreed to move forward. It was in September, 2005 that the new construction began and was finished in 2006, under the guidance of a number of volunteers and Fr. Joe DeCrans, at an estimated cost of \$1.3 million dollars. We moved into the church in April, 2006, and it was dedicated May 7, 2006 by the Most Reverend Bishop Balke. Bishop supported this at the time of construction to the finish, and we are still very grateful for his support.

Fr. Bob LaPlante became our pastor July 1, 2007 and continues to be at this time in March of 2020. A parish burning of the Church mortgage was held in December of 2008, then the first addition to the new structure was agreed upon and finished, which included four new classrooms on the north end of the current structure in 2009, and another renovation was added for additional storage space to the north of the new classrooms, in July of 2015, with a new columbarium for the cemetery added as well, with 48 niches, and now another is planned in the spring of 2020. Our parish has continued to grow in enrollment and from 1997 when there were 90 registered year round members, we 310 registered families. The Belles and Men's clubs are very active in keeping things done that need to be done, and we are a very happy family.

Active Priests of St. Mary of the Lakes

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| 1940-1970 Fr. J.A. Bisson | 1970-1971 | Fr. John Pickla |
| 1971-1977 Fr. John P. Merth | 1977-1981 | Fr. Barnabas Laubach, OSB |
| 1981-1993 Fr. Edward S. Haney | 1993-1994 | Fr Donald Dumer |
| 1994-1996 Fr. Wilfred Sheehy | 1996-1997 | Fr. Bernard Friedl, OSB |
| 1997-1998 Fr. Eugene Wesely | 2001-2007 | Fr. Eugene Wesely (In Residence) |
| 2002-2003 Fr. Luis Silva | 2001-2007 | Fr. Joe DeCrans |
| 2007- to current | | Fr. Bob LaPlante |