



Saint Stephen

CATHOLIC CHURCH

July 14, 2023

Dear Friends in Christ,

It is with great sadness that I announce today the closing of Saint Stephen School. The school will conclude operations at the end of our summer camp on August 10, 2023. When I first wrote to you a few weeks ago, there was the recognition of a sobering reality: the school ministry was in a perilous position based on enrollment and staffing for the current school year.

Over the last 15 years, the school has undergone a decline in enrollment, with especially sharp declines in the last five years. Additionally, there are approximately 25% fewer people attending Mass in the Grand Rapids area in the last seven years alone. These numbers are key factors in this decision. We brought in new school leadership, launched a new, vibrant educational vision, and rebranded our marketing in an effort to keep the parish school open. We are so grateful to past and current parishioners whose generosity allowed us to undertake this new model while remaining in a solid cash position through this time. However, allocating this amount of financial resources to the school, year over year, is not sustainable.

We had been hopeful that another enrollment period would allow us to add the necessary number of students to align with our return to viability plan. Unfortunately, at the end of June, a handful of families chose other educational options and four of our ten staff members discerned that they will not be returning to Saint Stephen School this fall. These changes forced us to confront this hard reality sooner than expected.

I want to thank you for bringing forth creative solutions and strategies to keep the school open. We have discerned your ideas. Unfortunately, the combined challenges of enrollment, staffing and finances will preclude our ability to maintain a parish school moving forward. This decision has been made with much prayer and in consultation with Ms. Black, the parish leadership, the parish and school community, and Bishop Walkowiak and his team at the Diocese of Grand Rapids. **More information on this transition, including the ways we are assisting students and staff, can be found in the accompanying key information document found on our website.**

Fr. Farquharson, the first pastor of Saint Stephen, with the founding parish families and the teaching work of the Dominican Sisters, began the school in 1925. For nearly one hundred years Saint Stephen School has been a steady presence in the East Grand Rapids and Ottawa Hills neighborhoods. Over the years, the school has executed its charge as an apostolate of the parish, educating and forming children in the faith and assisting parents in the education of their children. For this we are grateful! We are indebted to the consecrated religious and lay people who have ministered at Saint Stephen, to all the families and students past and present, and to the benefactors and volunteers who have made this ministry possible.

I join you in mourning the loss of this good and noble work of our parish community. We all long to experience a flourishing school in our midst, partnering with parents in the whole-person formation of their children and doing so “born from the heart of the Church.” May our sadness and grief at the closure of Saint Stephen School spur us on to strive for the holiness to which our God calls us. “There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens” (Ec 3:1).

During these coming weeks, we will be planning a private opportunity for currently enrolled families to come together. We are personally assisting them through this transition. There will also be an opportunity for the broader community to grieve the school’s closing. I welcome your thoughts as to how we may celebrate the great legacy of our parish school.

As we mourn the passing of Saint Stephen School, we also pause to remember the good that God has been doing in our midst through the school. The parish’s work of evangelization does not end. I invite each of you to discern the charisms that the Holy Spirit has given you and in what ways you can assist the parish in continuing its efforts to gospelize.

Our faith teaches us that God wishes to lead us through the Cross to the Resurrection. In this moment, we turn again to Jesus Christ, our hope. “Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith,” (Heb 12:2), we trust that our Father’s faithfulness to us is never exhausted. The closure of the school marks a significant moment in the life of the parish, and we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit, who is always longing to bring us closer to Jesus. I believe that the Father continues to commit to Saint Stephen Parish the missionary work of the Church. Together, let’s consider how the Father may be unfolding a new plan for our community.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr. Scott Nolan". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

Fr. Scott Nolan
Pastor