



July 31, 2023

Most Reverend Bishop Robert Gruss  
Bishop of Saginaw  
Diocese of Saginaw  
5600 Weiss Street  
Saginaw, MI 48603-2762

Deacon Rick Warner  
Director Parish Life  
St. Mary Catholic Church/Nativity of the Lord Parish  
220 West Downie Street  
Alma, MI 48801

Dear Bishop Gruss, Deacon Warner, and Parishioners:

The Michigan Historic Preservation Network (MHPN) has learned that leaders of the Saginaw Diocese and Nativity of the Lord Parish who are overseeing the future of the former St. Mary Catholic Church in Alma are once again proposing demolition of this iconic building. The MHPN is writing to ask that another look be taken to preserve it, an idea supported by many both in Alma and around the state.

The MHPN is the statewide preservation organization that advocates for Michigan's historic places that contribute to the state's economic vitality, its sense of place, and our connection to the past. While we advocate for historic properties of all ages, we frequently are tasked with protecting the Modernist masterpieces of the recent past. These masterpieces are often threatened because the period of design is so familiar and can be dismissed as unimportant. "That can't possibly be historic. I remember when it was built!"

We would like people to recognize the important design tradition of which St. Mary is a part. Michigan is a global player in Modernism. The state established its prominence because of the cutting-edge design work of the auto industry, the educational contributions of design programs such as Cranbrook, the architects being trained at such institutions as the University of Michigan, and the internationally-recognized designs of practicing architects such as Albert Kahn. Because of these powerful influences, evidence of very sophisticated Modernism is found all around our state, in big cities and small.

St. Mary is one of these highly sophisticated buildings. It was beautifully conceived by William Wesley Peters of Taliesin Associated Architects of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, with the first mass celebrated in 1969. The church was striking for the visual complexity created by its interlocking curved walls and sweeping cone-shaped spires. There is no one who visits Alma

who does not see its spires among the treetops. Those who venture closer are stunned that such an amazing gem is just minutes off US-127. They also are stunned to learn that such a distinguished building – that other communities would be thankful to have! – is now threatened.

The MHPN is keenly aware that saving an historic property takes a community committed to its stewardship. We ask the Diocese and Parish to look at what it really would take. Has a preservation architect taken a look at its needs, and collaborated with a contractor who regularly works with historic buildings? Those who know how to work with historic buildings know the real cost of saving them. Returning St. Mary to use as a parish church, or reimagining a new use, is not out of the question. This is especially true if the money that would be budgeted to demolish portions of the property, remove construction waste to a licensed landfill, and remediate the site become the first dollars applied toward restoration.

If stewardship is not possible for the Diocese and Parish, they have a cultural responsibility to turn its ownership over to another individual or group who will honor its history. There are examples of projects right in the city from which lessons are learned. For example, Alma College President Jeff Abernathy, Alma Mayor Greg Mapes, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, and visionary private donors have shown a superb level of creativity in turning downtown's Wright Leppien Opera House Block into commercial retail space on the ground floor and student apartments on the two upper levels. St. Mary is no further away from the campus as the Opera House, and is part of a downtown that is thriving. Just because an adaptive reuse for St. Mary does not easily come to mind does not mean a talented team cannot release its potential and its economic benefits.

The Michigan Historic Preservation Network asks the Diocese and Parish to take another look at St. Mary. When an irreplaceable historic building is damaged or lost, our own connection to architectural excellence and an understanding of the past is weakened. We are charged with protecting this history. In the case of St. Mary, may preservation be practiced with the passion of faith.

Sincerely,



Janet Kreger  
Founding Member and Current President  
Michigan Historic Preservation Network  
313 E. Cesar E. Chavez Ave., Lansing, MI 48906  
PHONE: 517-371-8080  
EMAIL: info@mhpn.org

CC:

Jim Grace/Financial Council Chair, St. Mary Church  
Zack Durocher/Parish Council Chair, St. Mary Church  
*Gratiot County Herald*, Michael MacDonald, Editor, and Rosemary Horvath, Contributor  
*The Morning Sun*, Rick Mills, Local News Editor  
President Jeff Abernathy, Alma College  
Mayor Greg Mapes and Commission Members, City of Alma, ATTN: Aeric Ripley, City Manager  
Joe Frost, Community Development Manager, Region 5, Michigan Economic Development Corporation  
Representative Jerry Neyer, Michigan House of Representatives  
Senator Roger Hauck, Michigan Senate