

## St. Mary experiment works

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By DAN TELVOCK

The Rev. Donald Rooney was worried all week as Easter Sunday approached.

The popular Easter Mass yesterday for the 14,000 members of St. Mary Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception was an experiment.

After years of standing-room only Easter Masses, Rooney decided to change the venue to a location without stained-glass windows, an array of flowers or paintings of Jesus.

He was worried the membership might not show up.

But when the doors opened at the Fredericksburg Expo and Conference Center, Rooney could hardly believe the sight: Several thousand people entered the circle-shaped room.

"This is a phenomenon," said Moonyeah Jones, as she glanced around the cavernous space filled with more than 3,500 chairs.

Rooney then realized the venue change was a success. A calm fell over him as he approached the pulpit, where he talked about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

His wireless microphone was still on mute as he said a barely audible "Hello."

He tried again, bringing laughter from the approximately 3,000 people who attended the middle of three Masses yesterday.

"Can you believe this?" Rooney said into the microphone. "This is one of the most amazing sights."

After the approximately 90-minute Mass, his face glowed with a smile a mile wide as he said goodbye to his friends.

"This has been the most joyful Easter Sunday I think I've ever experienced in my life," the gregarious pastor said.

The church on William Street seats just 620 people. In previous years, the church has held extra Masses in the building's activity center on William Street and at Holy Cross Academy in Stafford County. But the rooms were never big enough.

Rooney said he was relieved that the three Masses were so well attended yesterday. He said it is likely the church will try to get a standing reservation at the Expo center to continue Easter Masses there.

"You want everything to be perfect," he said. "It was a very difficult decision to tell people we were not going to have Mass in our own church."

Many churchgoers expressed their own joy that everyone could finally sit comfortably for the Easter Mass.

"I loved it," Andree Saint Elin said.

Jean Saint Elin was also pleased. "I think it went well. It was very organized. Normally, there isn't any room at all."

Jeanne Bergeron, a member since 2000, said the Easter Mass was always packed with people "flowing out the doors."

"It's really wonderful, everyone had a parking space," she said. "Everyone had a seat."

Bonnie Gelwicks said Mass could be in an open field and she would be happy.

"I think Father Rooney should be commended for coming up with a solution for everyone," she said.

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More than 3,000 people attended the St. Mary Catholic Church Easter service at 10:15 a.m. yesterday at the Fredericksburg Expo Center.



Pat Carroll, 15, walks into the lobby after one of three Easter services St. Mary Catholic Church held at the Fredericksburg Expo Center.

Rev. Donald Rooney of St. Mary Catholic Church speaks with guests after an Easter service yesterday at the Fredericksburg Expo Center.