

Saint Bernard's Parish, Alta Vista

Until 1897 the early Catholic settlers of Alta Vista attended either the Elma or the North Washington parish church. Since rural roads sometimes became impassible, the parishioners asked Archbishop John Hennessy for permission to build a church in Alta Vista. Under the supervision of Father Francis J. Gunn, pastor of Elma, work began immediately. The cornerstone was laid in the spring of 1897, with the building being completed by autumn of that year. In recognition of Bernard Meirick's leadership, the church and parish were named for Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153).

In 1903 Miss Mayme Butler of Dyersville was invited to teach the thirteen children enrolled in the first parish school. Classes were held in the new rectory. Three years later the Dubuque Franciscan Sisters joined the faculty. Because neither school nor convent had been built by the time of their arrival, the three Sisters taught 75 pupils in the rectory, where the sisters lived. When the school-convent was completed in 1908, it was named Saint William's Catholic School to recognize the generosity of William Gardner, a generous member of the parish.

The next pastor, Father Joseph J. Zeyen, came in 1916 and expanded the school into the secondary grades. The first class of three graduated in 1921. The school was accredited by the Iowa Committee on Secondary Schools in 1947. When enrollment dropped to 33 in 1966, the high school closed and the parish arranged for the secondary students' religious education.

St. Bernard's became a part of a six parish cluster called the Good Shepherd Cluster in 2002. It consisted of the parishes in Alta Vista, Elma, Lourdes, North Washington, Ionia and Nashua. St. Bernard's joined with parishes in Riceville, Elma, Lourdes and New Haven, becoming the Holy Rosary Cluster in 2005. An ecumenical Thanksgiving service and St. Patrick's Pork Chop supper are two popular and well attended annual events.

St. Bernard's continues to be an active parish community, with members involved in the Rosary Society, Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women, Knights of Columbus Marion Council #4144, St. John's Court of the Catholic Order of Foresters No. 878 and Tri-County Citizens for Life.