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## Faith Today

### They're the same... only different

By Cindy Liebhart  
NC News Service

St. Peter's Parish in Washington rises in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol amid colorful, renovated row houses, small neighborhood shops and an array of ethnic restaurants. At 165 years, the parish is one of the oldest in the city.

Cutting across social, educational and economic lines, St. Peter's parishioners include attorneys and maintenance workers, legislative aides and domestics, staff members of the nearby Library of Congress and retired government employees.

Some parishioners live in the same homes where they were born, but many are recent arrivals to Washington. Some live in public housing and depend on public assistance for survival. Others live in fashionable Capitol Hill residences or homes in the suburbs.

About half of St. Peter's 500 registered households would be considered traditional, nuclear families. The other half consists of people who have never been married, those who are divorced or widowed, and single parents.

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St. Thomas More University Parish serves the Catholic community at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

Located across the street from campus, the parish is made up primarily of 400 families of the university's faculty and staff, and more than 4,000 students during the academic year.

Most of the faculty members have spent the better part of their lives in an educational setting. Few are Bowling Green natives.

The students, whose lives are ordered by the same academic calendar, possess the characteristic concerns of doing well in their courses, adjusting to life away from home, choosing a career.

Two very different parishes. Two very different challenges.

For St. Peter's, the challenge might lie in finding the common threads that unite such a diverse group of people; for St. Thomas More, it is perhaps to recognize the diversity within a seemingly homogeneous community.



Father Michael O'Sullivan, St. Peter's pastor for 15 years, thinks that "paying too much attention to the differences can be divisive." He believes people, no matter what their backgrounds, share the same basic human aspirations — happy home lives, job security, better future.

Father O'Sullivan stresses the similarities between people — and the common faith which forms them into a community.

This does not mean ignoring people's unique needs. But it is important to create ways for parishioners to work or play side by side.

At St. Peter's, this takes the form of social events at which all members of the family are welcome, coffee hours after weekend Masses, participation in the Renew program and an active social concerns committee which organizes many projects.

Father O'Sullivan said when people take the time to get to know one another better, an ease and a familiarity develop that can transcend differences.

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Father Herbert Weber, pastor of

St. Thomas More, said that when he came to the parish he expected to find a certain "sameness" among faculty members and students. But he quickly realized that despite surface similarities, no two students or faculty members are exactly alike.

If members of the Christian community are to minister effectively to one another, there must be the recognition that each person has his or her own story — that each individual is a "unique blend" of family background, life experiences, spiritual development, needs and hopes, he said.

For Father Weber, the concluding lines of an old television program are instructive: "There are 8 million stories in the Naked City. This has been one of them."

But once people recognize diversity exists, what then? Can

diversity and unity coexist?

Father Weber believes they can. There can be "an underlying unity without people necessarily being the same."

Unity can be found within the Mass, the Gospel, and the shared responsibility to serve others. And unity is enriched by the constant telling of and listening to individual stories within a community.

"Sometimes we fear that accepting another point of view means agreeing with that point of view," Father Weber said.

Instead, he continued, it admits that "reality is in Technicolor...It allows me to see that truth is bigger than one person is able to understand."

(Ms. Liebhart is the media reporter for NC News.)

How does a parish achieve unity amid diversity? Or should a parish even try? Cindy Liebhart interviews the pastors of two strikingly different parishes. The two discuss the challenges of "sameness" and individuality.