

Young adult ministry: a welcoming presence to the alienated

By Teresa A. Parsons

Young adult ministry in the Diocese of Rochester is average compared to similar programs in other dioceses.

But considering that the Commission on Young Adult Ministry was established less than five years ago and has since depended on the dedication of one part-time coordinator and, on a good day, 25 volunteers, it has come a long, long way.

As coordinator of the diocesan commission since its inception, Karen Rinefierd has presided over the growth of young adult ministry from a sheaf of survey forms to what is, in some areas, a thriving outreach to the largest and hitherto most neglected age group in the Church. As she prepared to leave that position this month to become a full-time mother, Rinefierd explained how the commission and ministry have evolved to date.

"We spent the whole first year pretty much soul searching," she said. "Since then we've seen a lot of growth in skills and programs and numbers reached ... I probably meet a total of 100-200 young adults per month in person and on the phone."

When they began, commission members had all they could do just to inform people what was meant by young adults. Time after time they were told "Thanks, but we already have youth ministry." Although young adults are usually defined by age as 19- to 35-year-olds, Rinefierd prefers to take a less limiting approach. She describes it as a time of transition, generally after graduation from college, during which people are experimenting with their choices of career and lifestyle.

In their Task Force Report on Young Adult Ministry, published in September, 1981, Rinefierd and other members of a diocesan committee that predated the commission stated that 60 million Americans were between the ages of 18 and 35. Study after study has shown that these young adults or "baby boomers" are consistently marrying and bearing children later in life. Those who are single fall into many categories — from divorced, separated or widowed to never married.

Although they make up the largest segment of the nation's population, young adults have historically been neglected by parish communities. Whereas most parishes sponsor youth activities and any number of family programs, very few have developed ministry to young adults.

It may be that parishes don't respond to young adults because they don't participate. They in turn don't participate because they feel alienated from institutions in general and unwelcomed by the Church in particular.

"Young adults have grown up not expecting much from the Church," Rinefierd said. Although their parents turned to the



Karen Rinefierd was coordinator of the diocesan Commission on Young Adult Ministry until she accepted a better offer from her seven-month-old son, Paul.

neighborhood parish in times of crisis, young adults in the same situation don't turn as readily to the Church for support. Perhaps it's because they grew up with an authoritarian Church that concentrated on defining right and wrong rather than supporting and teaching them to make their own moral decisions.

Rinefierd was drawn to young adult ministry through her involvement with the Neumann Community at the University of Rochester. As her friends graduated, she watched them fall into a gap somewhere between the Newman Center experience and parish life.

"I was struck by the waste of their talents ... and by the fact that some of these people were going through terrible difficulties in their lives, but were not looking to the Church for anything," she said.

Although the commission began with a regional model in mind, members found that in a diocese as diverse as Rochester, no single approach was sufficient. At least two parish-based young adult ministry programs are thriving in the Rochester area — one at Blessed Sacrament and another at St. Boniface. In Elmira, young adults from several parishes formed a regional young adult ministry team last year and have since sponsored a variety of events.

The commission, meanwhile, has organized social gatherings and leadership workshops in locations all around over the diocese, trying to introduce people to the concept and share their expertise in getting started.

Nowadays, instead of commission members calling people to explain what young

adults are, young adults call commission members. "Lately I get calls from two or three people a week asking 'what's in the Church here for young adults?'" Rinefierd said. "But that's just the tip of the iceberg."

Reaching the rest of that iceberg has proved to be both frustrating and difficult. Just locating young adults is a laborious undertaking because they seldom register as parishioners. Another obstacle is finding those who want to lead and who are willing to put their skills to work in a church community rather than a secular setting.

Even after an interested group has assembled, it takes time for members to become comfortable with one another, to determine their individual gifts and to develop the skills and experience needed to reach out to others.

Working with the rest of the parish can be a disillusioning experience, especially to people who come direct from the comparatively homogeneous atmosphere of campus ministry communities.

"You come to the Church expecting it to be better than other institutions ... expecting to make a big impact," Rinefierd explained. But established parishioners may react to that kind of enthusiasm defensively. Young adults, on the other hand, may view parish traditions disdainfully.

Mobility is often the death of small parish-based groups. When several key members move elsewhere — which happens more often than not — those who remain become discouraged and burn out. Regional groups in some areas have proved susceptible to defensiveness between parishes over invasion of "turf."

"No place, to date, has developed as well as it could be done," Rinefierd said.

That's despite what she described as strong encouragement from Bishop Matthew H. Clark and cooperation with many diocesan departments such as Vocations, Adult Education and Campus Ministry. Parish staff members, especially pastors, have also been extremely supportive of the commission's efforts.

"There seems to be a good understanding at the parishes for the need to reach out to this group," Rinefierd said.

But the word she used to describe the direct commitment of the diocese to the Commission on Young Adults was "tentative."

"A budget of \$12,000 and one part-time position is just not reflective of the importance of this segment — the largest single group in the Church," she explained. "It (the commission) just came along at the wrong time budgetwise ... we're all sharing a limited amount of resources."

One way the commission will try to cut costs is to stop planning activities outside Monroe County unless some local interest is expressed first. Since most of the commission members are from the Monroe County area, quite often they traveled considerable distances for meetings without finding any local response.

The coordinator's part-time position has been funded for another year, but so far a successor for Rinefierd has not been named. Even though she's leaving her diocesan post, her expertise and dedication won't be lost to the young adult community.

"I'll be staying on the commission ... and continuing my other job as religious education coordinator at the University of Rochester's Neumann community," she said.



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