

SUNY Geneseo

Parishes on campus: Challenging tomorrow's leaders today

By Teresa A. Parsons

Conclusion of three-part series.

As in most universities, the life of SUNY Geneseo revolves around students. And during the time students spend at Geneseo, most of their lives revolve around the university.

But SUNY Geneseo can claim at least one important exception — its Newman Center. There, students, faculty and staff and Geneseo townspeople meet as fellow parishioners. And beyond the confines of classroom and campus, they are reminded of their common identity as Christians.

Non-denominational by law, a state university might seem an unlikely environment for a vital Catholic parish. But few neighborhood-based parishes could claim Geneseo's range of activities, level of commitment, and lay involvement and enthusiasm.

Parishioners plan outings and events for children from the Highlands, a nearby housing project. At Christmas, they distribute more than 80 baskets of food and gifts there. Others visit nearby Craig Developmental Center to celebrate Mass each week.

The parish has sponsored a Vietnamese refugee family through Catholic Family Center's resettlement program. Lien Bui and her 14-year-old son, Hung, arrived unexpectedly just before Christmas last year — just as the students were all packing to go home. Nevertheless, by the end of January Lien Bui had a job, Hung was in school, and they had moved into their own apartment in Geneseo.

Each spring, instead of basking in Florida or preparing for exams, some parishioners participate in the Appalachian Service Project. For a week, they are assigned to a mission in either Tioga County or Finchville, Pa. There they spend the days doing whatever needs to be done, from repairing roofs to painting to helping in the garden. Evenings they spend socializing with one another and their new neighbors.

For some, the experience becomes more than an annual trip. They return throughout the year to visit, to help when possible and to continue their Appalachian education.

Students term these opportunities a nice break from studying and the campus environment. But they are also a necessary facet of a well-rounded education. "It gives another, added dimension to your education and growth while you're here," said senior Renee Labaki.

"I think it makes us more aware of the different needs in the world and less self-centered," Missi Burns explained.



Students from SUNY Geneseo's Newman Center augment their education through conversation with an Appalachian woman. Each year, Newman parishioners spend a week working at two missions of the Appalachian Service Project.

From now until September, only about 60 people will attend weekend Masses. But during the school year, an average weekend congregation consists of 450 to 500 students and about 75 townspeople, faculty and staff members.

Part of the community's magic is in the mixture. Non-students come to Newman because they like its lack of formality and structure. They bring a much-needed stability to the parish.

Students, on the other hand, appreciate the presence of families and others from outside the campus as a welcome change. In turn, they provide freshness, innovation, energy and excitement.

One thing all parishioners have in common is that they come to the Newman Center by choice. "It works because everybody wants it to work," said Burns, a graduate student.

But the chaplains — Father Charles Manning and Wes Kennison — are two of the reasons it works so well, added Labaki, who is majoring in psychology.

"Their whole ministry teaches us about living out gospel values," she said, simply.

Apart from celebrating the sacraments, Father Manning and Kennison share most responsibilities. "It's not a cut-and-dried division," Father Manning said. "In terms of temperament and personality, I can tend to be more directive and Wes is more diplomatic. . . . We also have a unique ability to communicate without words."

The mixture of students and non-students demands a balancing act from chaplains as well as parishioners. Although the majority is students, the parish is no less responsible for meeting the needs of non-students.

"We need them (non-students) for everything you need people for in a regular parish," Father Manning said. "You can't just cater to students and forget the other people. . . . We recognize that they're present and don't alienate them."

In addition to programs students would typically need, such as pre-Cana and the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), the parish sponsors religious education for children.

But not just for children — the program involves 15 to 20 whole families as well as students.

Coordinated by Kennison, students and parents take turns planning and teaching lessons. On some Sundays, parents and children meet separately; on others, all but the youngest children meet together for all or part of the time.

The parish's ministry stretches far beyond liturgy, but liturgy remains "the focal point of everything we're all about," Father Manning notes.

According to Burns, the makeup of the community affords parishioners the chance to be "tasteful — innovative but not schmaltzy" with liturgies.

But an interfaith chapel challenges the chaplains to create a Catholic environment in featureless surroundings. "It's important to develop some credibility in that building," Father Manning said.

"You can't say a half-hearted Mass or people won't know where they are," said Lynn Ken-

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