

# Group to promote 'images of success' for children of color

By Teresa A. Parsons

Because images are very powerful, people of color stand a little bit taller in the principal's office at St. Monica's School.

Consciously or unconsciously, Principal Gaynelle Wethers believes her visitors are affected by illustrations throughout the room that depict Christ, the Blessed Mother and the saints as people of color.

Whether or not her pictures are historically accurate is not important, according to Wethers. "Their purpose is not to say God or Jesus are black, but to show children how to see themselves as like Jesus," she said.

On the stairway outside her office hang portraits of black Catholic bishops from around the country. "People told me when I put those up 'They'll never last. Well they've never been touched. And people still say to me, 'I never knew we had any black bishops in this country,'" she said.

Wethers herself is an image to many — the only black woman in the diocese to serve as principal of a predominantly black school.

"My years of experience have convinced me that we have to understand what images do to children. If you're a child of color and your images of success are all white, then how can you succeed?" she asked.

Changing the images of success for black and other minority Catholic school children is just one of the goals of a diocesan task force on multicultural programming.

The task force is one of many provisions of the Catholic Elementary School Plan released by the diocesan Urban School Study Steering Committee last February.

Formally, the group will be charged with studying Catholic educational programming in a multi-cultural setting; the importance of a more racially balanced enrollment to enhance cultural exposure of all students; resources for multi-cultural programming; instructional programs to attract a great variety of students; and in-service needs of faculty teaching in a multicultural setting.

Although members will not finally be appointed to the task force until November 1, 1986, representatives will be included from St. Monica's and Corpus Christi schools, as well as St. Augustine's School, which closed this year.

In the meantime, a core group of interested diocesan teachers and administrators has already begun defining what is meant by multicultural programming.

"It's more than just buying books," Wethers said. "I see it as a process, not just a program, by which we are affirming everyone's culture."

"But that has to happen within the task force first," she added.

To begin, six teachers and principals from Rochester attended the Catholic Inner City School Conference in Chicago, July 7-14. En-

titled "The Forgotten Church Speaks Out," the conference featured speakers and seminars that focused on ways of affirming children from varied racial, religious and family backgrounds.

For Wethers, the conference was a confirmation of much that she already knew. But it reminded her that she and her teachers are not alone in struggling to develop positive self-images and discipline among black children.

"It gave us the chance to see what others were going through," explained Angela Castanova, one of two teachers from St. Monica's who attended the conference. "But it's got to start with developing positive images for ourselves."

At stake is the future for children of color. "Our perceptions, our subtleties tell children whether we believe they can succeed. It's more than color, but a lot of it is color," Wethers said. "We send so many subtle messages, and there are so many negative connotations to the word 'black.' We need to address those images and put them on the table."

Minority students are not the only ones who will benefit.

Schools without minorities are "missing out on a whole other experience," according to Wethers. "How can we be a community without all types of different people?" she asked.

"Our schools might be missing the Christian message by ignoring other cultures. Christianity is not just for white Europeans. Christianity is for all cultures," said Sister Mary Ann Mayer, a social studies teacher from Nazareth Academy who also attended the Chicago conference. "From other cultures we can pick up strong Christian values. In the black culture, for example, there's the idea of calling one another brother and sister... We can learn from that."

Along the same line, Catholic educators need to come to terms with the fact that non-Catholics are attending parochial schools.

"Prayer in Catholic schools is not an imposition of one set of beliefs over another," Sister Mary Ann said. "They complement one another."

The importance of positive male role models — from priests to more male teachers — for black boys was stressed at the conference, Castanova said.

"Our schools are predominantly female. That's where pastors are very important to our schools," Wethers said. "They need to interact with our young people."

"That's why we began to see that we need each other, male and female, church and school. Our basis for working together needs to change. We need the parish for more than financial reasons and we need the men of the parish. It doesn't matter what color they are," Wethers said.

Teachers also need to be sensitive to the ex-



illustration by Sister Angela Williams/Ashanti Studios  
To begin viewing themselves as Christ-like, children of color need to see Christ as like them. Multi-cultural religious illustrations are seen as one way to build positive self-images.

periences of children who don't live within a traditional family. "If the family is projected as mother, father and children, how does that affirm children who have one parent or no parents?" Wethers asked. "We have to let them know it's OK to be different."

The same is true of adults. "We need to encourage fathers or whatever male figures are present within the home to come and participate (in school activities) without being judgmental," she said. "If they've made a commitment to be present in a child's life, we need them here."

Classroom materials and curricula need to reflect views beyond that of the dominant white, European culture. "It is of great value to have books on a reading list that feature people of different cultures," Sister Mary Ann said.

"If, for example, our schools are teaching history from a predominantly white perspective, there's something wrong there," Wethers explained. "We can't just espouse justice and peace if we don't begin to live that — we're supposed to be a diverse church."

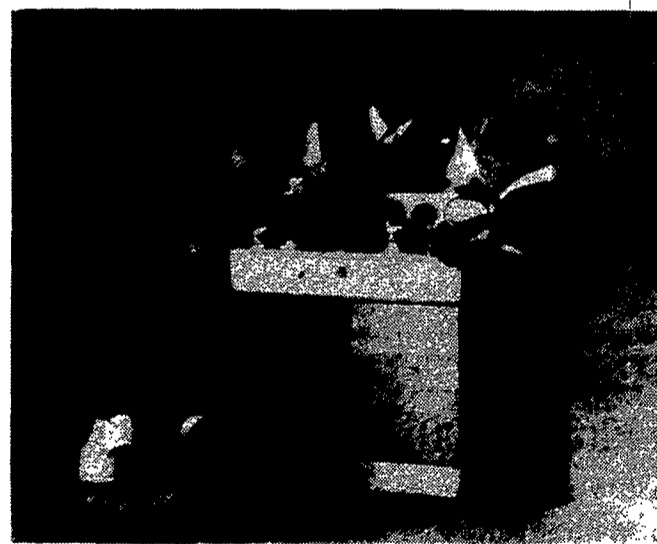
In Wethers' experience, materials that reflect cultural diversity are hard to find. She has spent years accumulating pictures, records, tapes and books that "affirm uniqueness and celebrate diversity."

"My vision is to eventually see a cultural center here at St. Monica's for everyone — (academic) teachers as well as religious education teachers," she said. "Everyone can be involved."

In addition to raising their own levels of consciousness, task force members will need to find ways to impress other diocesan educators with the importance of a multicultural approach. One avenue may be through workshops, such as the one planned for urban school staffs next March.

"Those are fine and good, but we have to each educate ourselves," Wethers said. "Everybody has a story to tell, and we can gain a lot from sharing and telling our stories to one another."

"White people are victims of images too," Wethers said. "We're all victims. But instead of sitting around feeling bad about it, we have to admit the problem and move on."



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