

Thanks Giving Appeal '86

Ministry to city youth among urban-subsidy-funded projects

By Teresa A. Parsons

Growing up today is about as difficult as it has ever been. Young people are faced with drugs, alcohol, sexuality, broken families and despair at an ever-younger age. More and more of them become parents while they are still little more than children.

In the face of so many distractions and so much peer pressure, few parishes successfully capture the attention of young people. Particularly in urban parishes, where needs are great and resources limited, it is tempting to give up on the difficult task of involving young people. Why not simply wait until they grow up, some people wonder.

Youth ministers are people who believe that waiting would be a great loss to both young people and adults. "Young kids have so much to offer and to say. So often we just don't listen," said Ramona Moore, a youth minister at Immaculate Conception, Rochester.

Thanks to the diocesan Urban Subsidy Program, at least two city parishes don't have to choose between funding youth ministry and some other community need. Through subsidies, Immaculate Conception and St Michael's can offer at least part-time salaries and thus are able to attract quality candidates to serve their young people.

Moore and Paula Watson coordinate a combined religious education and youth ministry program at Immaculate Conception Parish, just south of the city.

The two programs were joined in 1984, when Moore was hired. Watson taught post-Confirmation classes for three years before joining the team in 1985.

Immaculate Conception is a community that values its traditions, and youth ministry is one of the best-established, dating back to shortly after the parish school closed in 1975.

"At that time, we knew we wanted to keep on having something for our young people," Moore said. "We also wanted to fulfill our religious-education obligation and to provide a forum for young people to come together with a sense of unity."

That aim is both mandated and complicated by the fact that few of the families that attend Immaculate Conception live in the immediate neighborhood.

In addition to weekly religious-education classes organized by Moore, youth activities range from an annual Halloween Party to Christmas caroling, bowling parties, fund raisers and visits to Bethany House and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. Most activities involve children from age 8 to 18.

While combining age groups at times presents difficulties, it also offers peculiar advantages. For instance, the presence of youngsters allows older children to take on leadership roles.

"When you tell them you're bringing them

together to get to know one another, they say 'Forget it,'" Moore said.

"They have to have a reason to come. They have to have the feeling of being needed," Watson explained. "We bring them together and help them get to know each other while offering them something other than what they have to do, like coming to Mass."

To deal more specifically with the needs of teenagers and their parents, the parish offers the Catholic Family Center's Family Life Demonstration Project, a series of all-day sessions on issues from drugs to sexuality to family values.

"A lot of parents take it for granted that their children know what their values are," Moore said. "But these are forums designed to make sure they talk them out."

Parental support is the backbone of any successful youth ministry program, according to Moore and Watson.

"When they're young, children are very involved," Watson said. "But as they get to be teenagers, a lot of times they don't want to be as involved any more."

"You really need parents to get them through that initial phase," Moore added. "Once they're there, we can hook them."

But for some parents, the effort of convincing a reluctant or downright rebellious child to go to church-sponsored activities is just not worth the trouble.

"If parents see that it's important and will benefit their children, then they will encourage them, and more will want to become involved," Watson said. "When parents see other things as more important, their children do too."

Parental attitudes are also a critical factor in the success of youth ministry at St. Michael's Parish, according to Youth Minister Luis Matos.

More than their support, however, he seeks their trust. "You have to let the parents know who you are and what you're trying to do," he said. "There's a lot of fear with so much teenage pregnancy and drugs and everything else that's going on."

Matos emphasizes the need for communication among family members. "There is a big, big communication barrier between parents and kids," he said. "Parents feel they should be able to deal with everything, but they're living in a society where everything is changing. It takes them some time to realize that and just deal with that."

But above all, his time is devoted to listening to kids. "Most of the kids around here are from families that have split up. It's hard for them to find a role model in their homes," he explained. "I try to keep them off the streets and off drugs. I try to get them to treat themselves with respect. Through the Church and



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

On Monday morning at a hotel in Washington, D.C., the National Conference of Catholic Bishops opens its semi-annual meeting. The meeting ends on Thursday morning.

As has been the case for the past few years, I'll be going on Sunday afternoon to attend a meeting of the Conference Committee for Priestly Formation. And I'll be staying through the following Sunday to continue to work with the committee drafting the pastoral letter on the Concerns of Women in the church.

You know from comments I've made earlier in this column that I am not particularly fond of living in hotels. But I don't ever begrudge the time given to the work of our conference. I believe it is important now, but I also have a strong sense that it will only grow in significance as the years go by. Life is too complicated and fast-paced, communications are too rapid for us to presume that 180 dioceses in the United States can be the Churches they're meant to be without consistent and close interaction.

The principal piece of work in next week's session will be final amendment and, I presume, final passage of our pastoral letter, Economic Justice for All. That has been in the public eyes for a few years now and has generated a fair share of discussion — even controversy. For this reason, I do not expect the final version to receive as much publicity as the first version did.

Whether that is correct or not, we will have placed before our nation and before our community of faith a major challenge for the years ahead. We will be asking that we take a fresh look at the way in which we make economic decisions: at the principles that guide the decision making processes; at the impact these decisions have on the poor both at home and abroad; at the manner in which all of these reflect and deepen the richest values of our faith tradition.

This letter — together with the Challenge of Peace and the one being prepared on the Concerns of Women — represents

not only the willingness of the conference to wrestle with the tough issues of the day, but also the realization that, if we are to be credible teachers, we must tap the wisdom of the entire community. Such participation enriches the documents. It also offers people a sense of investment and ownership in them. Most importantly perhaps, it offers a model of what the Church should more and more become.

Important as I think these three documents have been and will be for the Church in the United States, my own hope is that we will find another way to engage broad cross sections of our Church in reflection and in sharing about themes which I believe require deeper understanding. How we should do it, I don't know, but I hope we can explore some of these issues in the future:

1) What it means that the Holy Spirit dwells in and teaches each person. How do we tap into the wisdom of all members of the community for a greater communal understanding of our faith? How do we integrate all Spirit-given gifts for the good of the community?

2) Our need for a greater sense of what the local Church or diocese is. Correspondingly, we need to know the meaning of the Church Universal. What is the relationship between the two? What do we mean by the communion of the local churches?

3) The importance of freedom and conscience. The time may be here to reflect anew on what Vatican II said and didn't say about this question. What questions does it raise for those who struggle with this or that issue of faith? And how does the community assist her members in such struggles?

Right at this moment on a Sunday evening, I am not interested in creating more work for myself or anyone else. It's just that I think we'll be farther along than we are now if and when we can reflect slowly and carefully on the issues like the ones mentioned above.

Peace to all.

through youth ministry, I try to let them know they're somebody and it's worth trying the best they can."

At 23, Matos is just beginning his second year at St. Michael's, but he has served as a youth minister without a title for nearly eight years, both in Rochester and in Puerto Rico.

He holds no formal degree, but gained his qualifications through experience in the "Clinton Avenue school." Caught in the middle of a family torn apart by drugs and alcoholism, Matos joined the Air Force to escape. When he returned to Rochester, he knew that he

wanted to work with young people. "I lived most of my life on these streets. I know what they're up against," he said.

Matos believes that young people want to be involved in the Church, but are often turned off by the way the Church reacts to them.

"To get kids attracted to Church, you can't tell them only to come to Mass or study the Bible," he said. "You have to let them know that Church is not just liturgy — there are lots of other activities."

St. Michael's youth group, for those between

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