

Pioneering pastor forecasted future of religious education

By Teresa A. Parsons

The director of Assumption Church's School of Religion has only one item on her wish list for the coming year.

That item is not more audio-visual equipment, a larger corps of volunteers or higher enrollment. Sister Janice Morgan, SSJ, hopes only to maintain the program's current strength.

Sister Morgan doesn't suffer from a lack of ambition. Her satisfaction with the program she directs is instead a testament to the realization of a pioneer's vision. More than 30 years ago, when the prevailing trend was still to build parochial schools, Assumption's late pastor, Father Leonard A. Kelly, chose a different direction. He founded a School of Religion through which he intended to serve all the Catholic children of Fairport, not only those students whose parents were willing to support a parochial school.

Father Kelly chose not to build a parochial school back in 1956 largely because of the same problems that face Catholic schools in the 1980s: a shortage of teaching sisters, the high cost and heavy turnover of lay teachers and the financial burden of a parish school. In those days, however, such problems were exacerbated by overcrowding rather than declining enrollment.

The pastor also believed that by taking advantage of the released-time option offered by the state's public schools, he was resolving the issue of federal aid to parochial schools. Released-time allows public school students to leave school for one class period per week in order to attend religious education class. Parents could thus benefit from the tax dollars with which they supported public schools, while still providing their children with quality religious education.



Covenant House, a New York City-based program for runaway youths, will receive the proceeds from a "Rock-a-thon" sponsored last weekend by youths at the Church of the Assumption in Fairport. Youth ministry is one facet of Assumption's School of Religion.

The quality of Fairport's public schools was also a factor in Father Kelly's decision not to build a parochial school. Unlike urban schools, which have suffered from negative images whether deservedly or not, Father's public schools have an excellent reputation that would have been difficult to match.

The School of Religion was Father Kelly's dream, but members of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart made it work. A Baltimore-based congregation of sisters dedicated to training catechists and establishing religious-education programs, they welcomed

the School of Religion's first 200 students in 1956.

The school was hardly open before it was being heralded as the wave of the future. Few went so far as to say the new model would replace Catholic schools altogether, but many believed it would provide a viable option for growing numbers of parishes, particularly in burgeoning suburban areas.

Contrary to proponents' expectations, the School of Religion model failed to catch on widely among parishes. Few public school districts were as cooperative as Fairport in regard

to released-time. Recently, even the Fairport district has had to restrict released-time arrangements because of such new curricular demands as those imposed by the Regents' Action Plan.

At the same time, the emphasis on religious education for children, which was prevalent during the 1960s, has given way to a parish-wide, lifelong approach to catechism.

Recognizing that trend, Assumption's School of Religion, which now bears Father Kelly's name, has expanded its programs to reach parishioners of all ages. When it opens later this month, the school will offer adult education and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) in addition to catechism programs for children, youth ministry, and sacramental preparation.

Although it was once envisioned as an alternative to a Catholic school, Assumption's religious education program operates much like a traditional school. All students receive biannual progress reports and those in high school may even earn credits toward their graduation.

Since enrollment averages 1,000 or more students each year, there are usually six or seven classes within each grade level. Class sizes generally range from 18 to 25 students.

School is in session at the school building on Baum Place almost every day of the week, and most evenings as well. Children in grades one through six attend an hour-long class one afternoon a week. Those students whose schools are nearby walk to class, and the parish bus transports others to and from school.

Junior high students have the option of choosing released-time or evening classes. Assumption is one of the few diocesan parishes

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