

Features

Crusade offers parishes unique opportunity to evangelize

By Teresa A. Parsons

Marianne Liddle figured that 300 Billy Graham bumperstickers would be more than enough.

But when last weekend's final Mass was over at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece, Liddle discovered that fellow parishioners had picked up every one.

Patrick Shanley was likewise caught unaware by the degree of interest in the crusade among his fellow parishioners at Holy Apostles Church in Rochester. "I believe a lot of Catholics have been 'closet followers' of (Billy Graham) for a long time," he said. "Now, with the parish and the diocese expressing their support, (those people) are coming out of the woodwork."

What's happening at St. Charles and Holy Apostles is good news for those who believe that the Billy Graham Crusade, which sets down in Rochester's Silver Stadium September 11-17, offers a prime opportunity for evangelization among Catholics as well as members of mainstream Protestant denominations who comprise the Rev. Graham's more traditional audience.

"I do see unity among Christians. I do see them coming together in neighborhoods and talking about the Lord," said Liddle. "We're going to bring people into the churches and get them grounded. We'll plant the seed, and the Lord will make it grow."

For the past two weeks, Liddle and a group of 40 other Catholic volunteers have been telephoning pastors and contact people in each of the diocese's 161 parishes. The phone-athon was organized to determine whether parishes had received information regarding the crusade, whether they had designated a mechanism for follow-up, and whether they needed more information.

Although the survey is not complete, results so far indicate that parishes from Canandaigua to Greece are planning to take advantage of the opportunity for evangelization. Some, like Holy Apostles, have appointed parish liaisons. Others, including St. Charles, are actively promoting the crusade through bulletin announcements and presentations during Masses, forming prayer groups.

"(The phone-athon) was quite an exciting thing to do because the volunteers are so enthused about the Graham crusade," added Margery Nurnberg, director of the diocesan Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. "It's very gratifying to know how many parishes have teams set up."

Parish and diocesan follow up is needed because the aim of a Billy Graham Crusade is to elicit a personal commitment to Christ from participants, and then to connect those who aren't currently members of a church community with one. Crusade organizers believe that as many as 10 percent of the estimated 15-20,000 people who attend each night's services will "come forward" to "declare for Christ." Between 15 and 25 percent of those who come forward will be Catholics by virtue of practice or inclination.

Because the crusade does not promote a par-

ticular Christian denomination, volunteers known as counselors ask those who come forward whether they are currently worshipping at a church, whether a particular church invited them, or whether they are affiliated with a particular faith.

Those who come forward will then be contacted — either by phone or in person — within 48 hours by the counselor to whom they spoke at the crusade.

Marianne Liddle, who describes herself as a born-again Catholic, will be among those working as a crusade counselor. She likens the task of follow-up to caring for an infant. "(They) will come forward and say, 'I want the Lord in my life, but you can't stop there,' she explained. "Just like a baby, these people, baby Christians, need nourishment. We're going to be there to take them home to a church, to teach them and nurture them through the nurture groups organized by the crusade."

Crusade officials will provide the names of those who identify themselves as practicing or baptized Catholics as well as those who are affiliated with or were invited by a Catholic parish to the diocesan Pastoral Center. Diocesan officials, in turn, will refer the names to appropriate parishes.

Diocesan officials are suggesting a variety of specific ways for parish teams or individuals to follow up with crusade participants. Possibilities range from home visits to a special welcoming liturgy, appointing parish "sponsors" for newcomers or providing introductions to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) or religious education programs.

Meanwhile, in preparation for the crusade, Catholic parishioners are joining neighborhood/workplace prayer groups, which will begin gathering daily August 22 to pray for the success of the crusade.

"Parishes are doing more, by and large, than I expected," said Father Bob Werth, pastor of St. Bridget's Church and a member of a committee serving as a liaison between the Diocese of Rochester and the local crusade. "It's picking up steam."

The phone-athon and participation of more than 48 parishes to date are indications of a Catholic response local crusade director Rick Marshall considers "far beyond the ordinary."

"I would say the whole tone of participation was set by Bishop (Matthew H.) Clark when he attended our announcement luncheon last April and gave his support and approval," Marshall said. "That has really made our work and relationship here as congenial as it has been."

Not all Catholics' reactions have been positive. Some parishes have declined to take part. Even those parishes — like Transfiguration in Pittsford — that are actively promoting the crusade include parishioners who don't believe Billy Graham has anything worthwhile to say to Catholics. Others are simply not interested, according to Thomas Kirchoff, the parish crusade coordinator.

Kirchoff, like Marshall, credits Bishop Clark's response for much of the positive reac-

tion he has encountered. "I really want to thank Bishop Clark for coming out in open support of the crusade. He has made it so much easier for us on the local level," he said.

Despite the damage inflicted on popular evangelism by the scandals involving Jim and Tammy Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart, Billy Graham's message may also be reaching Catholics because it comes at "a prime time" for the evangelization in the Catholic Church, according to Father Thomas P. Mull, a member of the diocesan Liaison Crusade Committee. "There's been support (for evangelization)

coming from the Vatican, coming from Washington, and coming from the local church," he said. "Billy Graham is an evangelist, but he is non-denominational, not connected with a commercial fundraising group, and he doesn't do any of those mail-in types of things on TV."

"(Graham's) local representatives are also wonderful people. They are very, very intense about their work for the Lord," Father Mull added. "They have become very good examples for us."

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Schedule of events announced

A host of events are planned to help local churches gear up for the Rochester Billy Graham Crusade.

Beginning on Monday, Aug. 22, and continuing through the end of the crusade on Sunday, Sept. 18, the Rev. Graham will lead neighborhood/workplace prayer meetings each day at 6:15 p.m. via broadcast on Rochester radio station WGR, 1460 AM.

On Friday, Aug. 26, Dr. E.V. Hill and the Greater Rochester Community Gospel Choir will be featured at a prayer and commitment service in Silver Stadium from 7:30-9 p.m. Dr. Hill, a nationally acclaimed speaker, is pastor of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, Calif., and a member of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Board.

August 26 has also been designated as a day of prayer and fasting in preparation for the crusade.

A Catholic evening of prayer for the work of the Billy Graham Crusade is scheduled for Tuesday, Sept. 6, from 7:30-9 p.m. at Sacred Heart Cathedral. The prayer service will be followed by an information session on crusade follow-up.

Crusade services on both the opening and concluding nights — Sunday, Sept. 11, and Sunday, Sept. 18, — will begin at 7 p.m. and conclude at 10 p.m. in Silver Stadium.

7:30 p.m., and are scheduled to last approximately one-and-one-half hours. Monday, Thursday and Saturday night services will be targeted particularly toward youth.

In addition to the Rev. Graham and members of his evangelizing team, the guest speakers will be featured according to the following schedule:

Sunday, Sept. 11, Wintley Phipps; Monday, Sept. 12, music group Glad; Tuesday, Sept. 13, Sung Sook Lee; Emory K. Dively, deaf testimony; Wednesday, Sept. 14, Joni Eareckson Tada; Thurs., Sept. 15, Larnelle Harris, Greg Buchanan, testimony; Friday, Sept. 16, Steve and Annie Chapman; Saturday, Sept. 17, Myrtle Hall, Josh McDowell, testimony; Sunday, Sept. 18, Steve Green.

Admission for all services is free, and seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. Special seating is available for the handicapped, and interpretation will be provided for the deaf and hearing impaired.

Shuttle-bus service from area parking lots will be available before and after each crusade session.

Groups of 10 or more people interested in attending the crusade or a pre-crusade service should call 546-1400 for more information.

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