

Features

Thanks Giving Appeal '88

Visitation program helps parishes plan future ministries

By Rob Cullivan

Father Charles McCarthy, pastor of Rochester's Christ the King Parish, may soon have to start working out. The senior citizens of his parish want an aerobics class and, if a needs survey the parish took last spring is any indication, they want it now.

Father McCarthy will also need to exercise his imagination, looking for a place where his parish's teenagers can hang out, because the same survey found that teenagers "are looking for a place to be." The parish's young adults, meanwhile, indicated that they wanted to form parish recreation leagues.

In facing the need for new parish programs, Father McCarthy has one comfort. Thanks to the Diocesan Parish Visitation Program, Christ the King will formulate these programs in response to sound data on parishioners' needs, not educated guesses.

During the last eight years, 100 parishes have implemented the Parish Visitation Program under the direction of the diocesan Division of Support Ministries. A PVP combines the demographic aspects of a population census with a survey of parishioner needs and abilities. A PVP can help a parish determine whether or not the parish needs to expand its existing ministries and whether it should create new ones to meet newly discovered needs.

Father Peter Bayer, director the Division of Support Ministries, said the PVP has three purposes: "To strengthen, encourage and motivate those who are already part of the faith;" to invite those who are "unchurched" into the Church; and to invite back Catholics who have been alienated from the Church.

In order to fulfill these purposes, parishes need updated information on the populations they serve. Parishes usually commission a PVP because their previous census information is outdated, or because they plan to switch their existing paper files over to a computerized system.

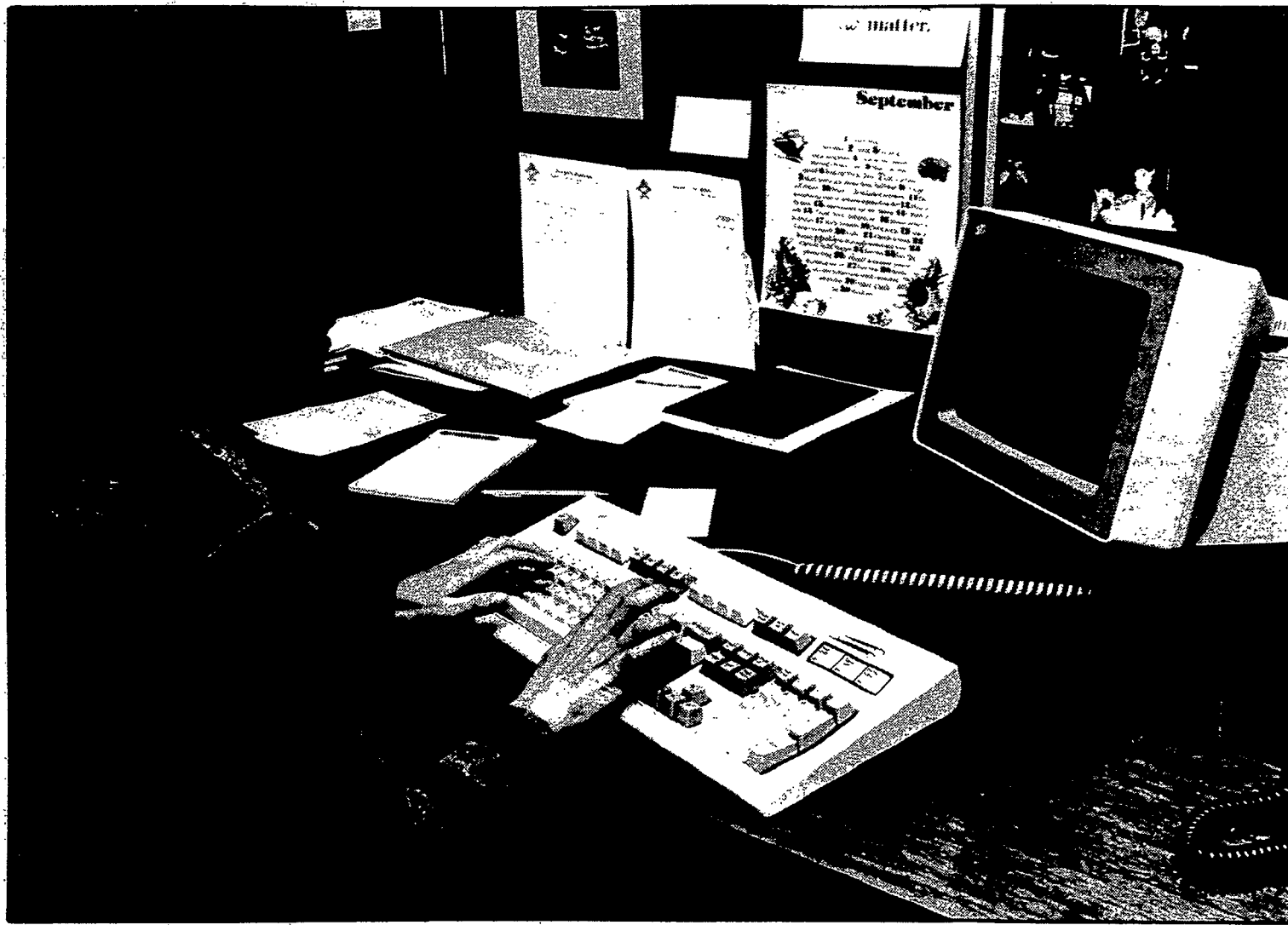
Once a parish decides to initiate a PVP, it contacts the diocese for assistance. In steps Father Bayer and his support team from the diocesan Office of Information Systems and Research.

Father Bayer presents the parish staff and volunteers with a parish profile to help them determine how to conduct the PVP. Based on data from the diocesan Office of Pastoral Planning and Research, the profile breaks down the parish's population into categories of age, gender, race, marital status and membership in a household. The profile also includes the number of families registered in the parish along with parish organizations and such reported sacramental events as baptisms and marriages.

Equipped with this data, a parish can determine what assistance it might need to conduct its PVP. For example, a parish profile may indicate a large Spanish-speaking population in the parish community, which might call for some door-to-door solicitors who speak Spanish and the printing of survey cards in both Spanish and English.

After assessing the nature of its community, the parish then forms a committee to coordinate the visitation program. This committee creates subcommittees to oversee various tasks that precede the actual census and survey.

One committee divides the parish into



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

Donna Cauvel inputs parish data on the diocesan computer.

regions to be surveyed. To do this, a parish must determine its boundaries. Usually, the diocese can supply this information, but not all parishes have official boundaries. St. Boniface's in Rochester fell into this category.

"We were told that our parish was considered a national German parish," explained Rick Keenan, coordinating committee chairman. When the parish was founded in the 1800s, it was established to serve the German immigrants throughout the diocese. Because parish membership has changed radically since that time, the committee had to draw up "natural" boundaries reflecting its registered members' concentration in southeast Rochester.

Even so, about 30 percent of St. Boniface's parishioners come from outside the designated boundaries. Some of them actually lived closer to neighboring St. Anne's and Blessed Sacrament. Generally, about one third of a parish's members live outside its boundaries, according to Father Bayer.

Once parish boundaries have been determined, the area must be divided into equal survey regions, sometimes called routes. Each route contains the addresses of all its households. One route, for example, may contain 200 people, all of whom live in a total of 50 households; while another route may contain 200 people, 150 of whom live in one apartment complex.

Each household on a route is surveyed by a volunteer called a "disciple." The pastor

chooses parishioners to be "apostles" who in turn recruit and train disciples with the aid of the diocese. Most PVPs consist of two surveys — the door-to-door visitation within the parish boundaries and an after-Mass survey for parishioners who live outside the boundaries. After the first phase is completed, disciples usually spend one to two weeks going back to households that didn't answer.

Another committee designs a visitation card for the door-to-door survey. Parishes' visitation cards tend to contain similar statistical questions regarding household composition, but the cards vary from parish to parish when it comes to the needs-survey portion. This survey generally consists of two sets of questions under the headings: "How can your parish serve you?" and "How can you serve your parish?"

Parish computer coordinator Donna Cauvel, who trains parish staff members in the use of computers, noted that it is important for a parish to carefully design its visitation card.

"We work very closely with the card-design committee," Cauvel said. "Every organization in the parish has input in the information taken." Most parishes find that parishioners' needs have changed considerably in the years since the last parish census, Cauvel remarked, a pattern that provides ample reason not to embark on new programs based on old census data.

Cauvel said that some parishes decide to in-

itiate PVPs because of difficulties encountered in attempting to transfer old census data from

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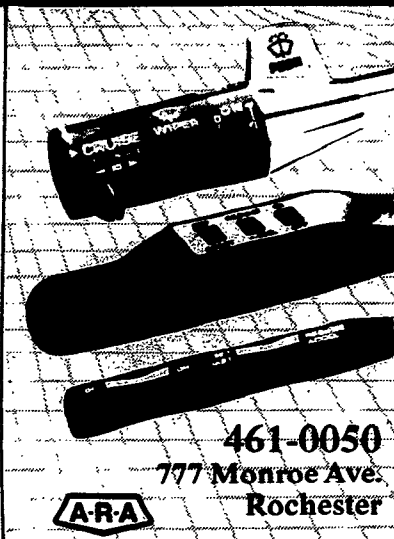
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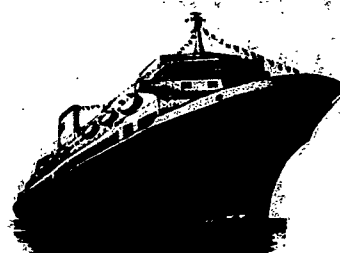


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