

Adult education elicits Bath residents' interest

By Richard A. Kiley
Staff writer

BATH — For parishioners at St. Mary's Parish in Bath, 1987 was a year that will never be forgotten.

During one week in May, the Southern Tier parish lost its pastor, Father Albert V. Ryan, to a serious lung and heart condition, and lost its school to rising costs and declining enrollment.

Yet within 10 months the parish council recovered from these losses and implemented a comprehensive religious-education program to help meet the needs of an education-hungry parish.

One of the areas council members decided to focus on was adult education, said Barbara Ayer, religious-education coordinator of the Bath parish.

"As our program has developed, people have been so supportive ... not just financially either," said Ayer, who has been a parishioner at St. Mary's for eight years. "People have been supporting our programs by attending them in large numbers."

She said about 100 parishioners attended five adult-education offerings last year, meaning that the program reached about one out of four adults at the Bath parish.

That ratio is a tremendous increase compared to the number of families touched by the parish school when it was still open, said Father Robert W. Hammond, pastor.

"The school was reaching one family in 10, and my experience has been that people tend not to give money where they don't see the results," Father Hammond said in reference to the 27-year-old school's chronic financial problems. "The school closed not only because of a lack of students but because there was a lack of interest."

Nevertheless, when Father Hammond arrived at St. Mary's two years ago, he perceived an enormous interest in "education" in a broader sense of the word. Two weeks after his arrival, the priest held an open meeting with parishioners and found out that education was the top priority.

"The first five goals were education," the priest continued. "It was quite obvious what the parish wanted."

Ayer credited Father Hammond and

Bishop Matthew H. Clark with being the catalysts in revitalizing the parish's desire for educational programs. For his part, Father Hammond brought to his new parish a wealth of experience gained from 10 years in the diocesan office of education, where he was actively involved in youth ministry.

Extra motivation came from Bishop Clark's September, 1987 challenge to all pastors and catechetical leaders to develop "a well-integrated catechetical program" within their parishes.

Responding to that challenge, the Bath parish council commissioned its Christian Formation Committee and parish staff to develop a catechetical program for St. Mary's parishioners. Because the average age of parishioners is 32, a specific need to build a strong adult-education program was stressed.

More recently, St. Mary's became an on-line member of the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America (CTNA), a satellite-delivery system founded in 1981 by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Possessing one of the two CTNA downlinks in the diocese — the other satellite is located at the Pastoral Center on Buffalo Road — should make St. Mary's the Southern Tier hub of continuing education.

Nearly 30 percent of the television network's programming in 1987 focused on adult religious education, a figure that makes Ayer enthusiastic about the future of the adult-education program at St. Mary's.


"CTNA offers us one more way we can learn about our faith," Ayer said. "We have the responsibility to provide people of the parish with educational opportunities. This has been a long time coming."

Among the adult-education courses St. Mary's will offer this year will be a series on church history, a course on Mariology and parent workshops on human sexuality. And although it's too early to tell how popular this year's offerings will be, Ayer said she's confident that each program will be well-attended.

"We initiate the opportunities, but it has been the parish that has responded so well," she said.



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier
William Grimmer, a teacher at St. Mary's in Bath, shares a lively interchange with adults involved in a religious-education mini-course being offered this summer. The course, entitled "Is This Really the Catholic Faith?" deals with the changes in the Catholic Church since Vatican II.



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