



Youth Minister Barb Legere (top left) talks with some of the members of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton youth group during a recent movie night at the Hamlin church. The members pictured above are (from left): Traci Spanitz, Kevin Sigler, Jessica Flanagan and Stacey Peckham.

Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Isolation creates challenge for rural groups

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

For leaders of parish youth groups in Monroe County, planning the next meeting's activity may be as simple as scheduling a trip to a theater complex or organizing a party with neighboring youth groups.

But in many parishes throughout the other 11 counties in the Diocese of Rochester, organizing a youth group requires an extra measure of creativity and, frequently, strong fundraising skills.

Youth-group organizers in several of the diocese's rural areas note that financial woes and distance from city attractions pose obstacles. Yet they find ways of coping with isolation and a lack of resources.

Barb Legere, part-time youth minister at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Hamlin, pointed out that financial problems are her biggest worry, but said the shortage of funds doesn't leave the teens in her youth group lacking for spiritual and social guidance.

"We do the same stuff as the other youth groups do," agreed group member Ann-Marie Luciano, a freshman at Brockport High School.

Since many of the families in the parish are young and much of the parish funds went to building the new church last year, "we don't have a lot of money burning holes in our pockets," Legere lamented.

"It's hard for families to give extra money when they just don't have it," she added.

The parish does provide a small amount of money for use by the youth group, and the teens raise whatever other money they need for activities through such events as

car washes and poster sales.

Youth-group members bring their own refreshments for parties or movie nights, and often are asked to chip in a nominal fee. But when it comes to coughing up the \$15 per-person fee to attend the diocese's annual Bishop's Day with Youth, some of the teens start to choke, hinted Legere.

In addition to the cost, some youth-group members from distant parishes lack interest in the annual Rochester-based youth day because they feel alienated from the diocesan seat.

Take Linda Cruise, for example. Cruise — a first-year youth ministry intern at St. Patrick's Parish in Owego — said that although she doesn't consider her work to be rural ministry, she does feel isolated from Rochester.

"We feel cut off from programs in Monroe County," said Cruise, who added that it is hard to get drivers to bring teens to a diocesan event in Rochester.

"Bishop's Day is difficult for us to do because the three-hour trip becomes a major undertaking," she remarked. "Parishes in Rochester take it (the convenience) for granted."

Cruise said Owego teens lean more toward involvement with the Syracuse diocese because they are so close to the city of Binghamton in that diocese. Yet she said they feel the Diocese of Syracuse ignores them because they belong to the Diocese of Rochester. "They feel cut off from both dioceses," she noted.

Although the youth group at St. James the Apostle in Trumansburg manages to charter a bus each year to attend Bishop's Day, youth minister Jane Doolittle said her group members also feel very isolated.

"I have to do the best I can do where I'm at and I haven't let it (the isolation) get to me," commented Doolittle, who has been a volunteer youth minister for seven years.

Christine Finocchario, who has been the part-time youth minister at St. Joseph's Church in Livonia for six years, said participating in diocesan events and regional retreats is a good way for members of her youth group to meet their peers.

"A lot of parishes in such places as Avon, Geneseo and Scottsville don't have their own youth ministers, so we host retreats for other parishes and that's how we interact with the community," she said.

Although St. Joseph's is more than 30 miles away from Rochester, Finocchario said she feels she can always contact the diocesan staff.

"I never have any problem with them. They have always been willing to help," she said.

On the other hand, being cut off from Rochester isn't necessarily a bad thing, according to Liz Sedinat, a parishioner at St. Patrick's Church in Livonia.

Youth group "is our own little family away from our close-knit families, so we don't feel isolated from Rochester," said Sedinat, a senior at Livonia Central High School.

Likewise, teens at St. Elizabeth's said they are content with their close-knit group of about 15 kids.

Bill Lenhart, a junior at Brockport High who lived in Rochester until the third grade, said he doesn't miss being in a city group.

"I'd rather be here than in the city," said Lenhart. "These are all people I know from school."

Sarah Georger, a freshman at Brockport, chimed in that the group has everything it needs in order to have fun. "It (the group) is pretty much everyone from around here, so we don't need the city," noted Georger.

But fellow group members Matt Scheffer, a junior at Hilton High School, and Renee Machanos, a freshman at Brockport, said it might be fun to get together with the Rochester groups to meet new friends.

Getting together with neighboring parishes is one way youth groups in outlying areas deal with isolation.

Legere's group — which is located in the northwestern-most corner of the diocese — often participates in activities with Nativity parish in Brockport. Doolittle said her group tries to plan activities with the Ithaca parishes, and Cruise opens up many of her activities to teens from Apalachin and Newark Valley.

"The teenagers have nothing to do and nowhere to go if they can't get into the city or Greece," explained Legere, who wishes she could field a softball team. She said establishing a sports program would be her first objective if her group ever had the money.

Despite what many see as disadvantages, leaders say their parish staffs recognize the special importance of youth ministry in outlying areas.

"They are aware of the need of the teens

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