



Retreats evolving to fulfill the needs of teens

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

Although the number of youth retreats sponsored by the Rochester diocese has significantly decreased over the past few years, the director of the diocesan Department of Youth Ministry cited ongoing efforts to match the format of new retreats with the needs of today's youths and parishes.

"We have to respond to youth today, not youth of 10 years ago," explained Pat Fox, diocesan director of youth ministry. "Spiritual development has to meet the needs of kids in the 90s."

In an effort to meet those needs, Fox said the traditional retreats — Hosea, Jeremiah, Genesis, Teen Seminar and Emmaus — have been slightly revamped over the past few years.

In 1969, Father Robert W. Hammond, who now serves as pastor of St. Mary's Church in Bath, began organizing diocesan youth retreats at Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua. Father Hammond recalled that the response from youths was so overwhelming that the retreats were

often booked to capacity.

"We had such great numbers that they (the retreats) were filled months in advance," said Father Hammond.

The Bath pastor noted that in the early 1970s the diocese offered 40 to 50 retreats per year to serve 3,000-4,000 youths. In contrast, Fox said, the diocese will offer only nine retreats for youths this fall.

In addition, the annual Family Camp program ran for eight weeks during the early 1970s. This summer, the camp will be offered for only three weeks.

"There were only four or five weeks that we weren't running retreats back then," explained Father Hammond.

The former retreat director noted that even though parishes were beginning to offer retreats, the diocesan-sponsored retreats still attracted large numbers and "got better and better."

When Father Hammond stepped down as retreat director in 1979, Father David W. Mura, current pastor of St. Michael's in Penn Yan and its mission church of St. Andrew's in Dundee, took over the program.

Although the number of retreats declined slightly during Father Mura's tenure — he estimated that he conducted around 25 youth programs per year — the priest noted that the programs were the same ones offered during Father Hammond's tenure as retreat director.

Five retreats targeting different age levels served as the mainstay of the diocesan retreat program. The same type of retreats are offered today, only under different names, Father Mura said.

Hosea, now called the Eighth-grade Retreat, for example, focuses on faith and the family experience.

Jeremiah, which is now known as the Freshman Retreat, features themes of trust, affirmation, peer pressure and self-esteem. Genesis, now called the Sophomore Retreat, challenges youths to grow as young adults and as members of the Christian community. The programs emphasize the effects of sin, prejudice and values.

Teen seminar, which today is known as the Junior-Senior Retreat, is designed to celebrate life, love, friendship and faith. The program teaches teens how to live their daily life in a Christian manner.

Emmaus, which is offered during Holy Week, is a continuation of Teen Seminar. Its format is also one of celebration, community building and resurrection.

Fox said he didn't know what specific changes will be implemented this fall, or if the retreat names will be changed again. He noted, however, that one aim of the reorganization is to make the programs more

compatible with the efforts of parishes.

Several factors have caused the decline in youth retreats, according to Fox. Some youths find it impossible to take time off from school to attend the retreats. Others have work, school or sports commitments that prevent them from attending.

According to Father Charles T. Manning, associate director of Youth Ministry for Teen Retreats and Christian Family Renewal since 1987, the growing number of youth ministers conducting their own retreats has lessened the need for diocesan-sponsored programs.

"We are talking two generations of change," said Father Manning. "Some of the need for retreats has been diffused. It's not as much on the diocese to run them anymore because some of that need is being taken by the parishes."

Yet not all parishes offer youth groups or retreats. These churches depend on the diocese to sponsor retreats for its parishioners, said Father Manning.

According to Irene Goodwin, director of religious education at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, attending a confirmation retreat is mandatory for candidates at the Brockport parish. Goodwin noted that interest usually wanes after that one retreat, however.

For instance, 26 candidates were confirmed this past year, but only five continued to attend retreats after receiving the sacrament.

"If we had youth ministry here, there would be more of a push (for retreats)," said Goodwin. "Maybe if someone at the diocesan level contacted them and asked them to sign up, a lot more would probably say 'yes,'" commented Goodwin, who has served as the church's religious education director for two years.

Fox noted that the diocese is making an effort to be more in tune with the needs of the parishes. With Father Manning's recent appointment as pastor of St. Pius V Church in Cohocton and Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Perkinsville, the Department of Youth Ministry is currently seeking someone to continue the diocesan retreat program.

"We're trying to maintain constant renewal and not stagnation," said Fox. "We ought to be running a responsive diocesan retreat program in conjunction with the parishes."

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