

Volunteers are crucial to keep church running

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

According to Peggy Folts, no one is safe from her.

That's because Folts chairs the Parish Life Committee at St. Helen's Parish in Gates. And her committee wants volunteers — lots of them.

"There's people you know who will help you out," Folts said. "(But) we don't necessarily wait for people to volunteer."

Folts' committee does everything from placing announcements for volunteers in the bulletin to calling parishioners who are encouraged to pitch in on the parish's behalf.

According to active lay Catholics such as Folts, and the pastors and religious with whom they work, volunteers are a parish's lifeblood.

Liturgy, catechesis, building and grounds maintenance, parish schools, finance and all the other other activities that give a parish its character would simply not exist without the voluntary help of a parish's faithful.

Just ask Father James F. Doyle, pastor of St. Rose Parish in Lima, who noted that he has volunteers directing his lectors, financial operations, liturgies and social ministry.

"I expect everybody to do something for the parish, and each does his little bit for the parish," the pastor said. "I could not get along without these volunteers in particular areas of the church."

Because of this importance, questions about volunteerism show up on new parishioner registration forms throughout the Rochester diocese. And volunteer coordinators often approach new parishioners, hoping to encourage them to contribute whatever talents they have to their new Catholic home.

"I think the key is to match people with their talents," noted Sister Roberta Tierney, SSND, parish life coordinator at St. Cecilia's Church, 2763 Culver Road. "I think church, in the broad sense, means everybody has something to do."

St. Cecilia's offers 75 possible volunteer categories to its parishioners, Sister Tierney said. Parishioners can do everything from programming computers, to driving a senior citizen to



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor
Rita Boss, a member of Sparkle Team No. 6 at St. Helen's Church in Gates, cleans candleholders on the altar Sept. 2. Boss is among 40 volunteers who clean the church on a rotating-team basis.

the supermarket, to making posters announcing upcoming events or sending shut-ins greeting cards.

St. Cecilia's also encourages parishioners to create new volunteer activities if they see needs not being met, she said.

But it's easier for a parish to rally around a temporary need than it is for pastors to garner year-round volunteers, observers said.

"Unless you have a crisis situation, you're not going to get too many people volunteering," Father Doyle said.

Folts echoed Father Doyle's assessment of volunteer commitment. She pointed out, for example, that many people are more than willing to volunteer for such one-time-only activities as selling tickets after Mass for a parish event. However, any activity — such as phoning shut-ins — that calls upon people to regularly volunteer on weekdays can be quite difficult to staff, she said.

Still, those who serve as coordinating volunteers on parish staffs aren't complaining. Indeed, they all expres-

sed sympathy for the fact that many family breadwinners need to work all day and find it simpler to work at yearly events such as the annual church bazaar than to stuff envelopes in the church office on regularly scheduled weekdays.

Folts also stressed that a parish should always be truthful about what it is asking its parishioners to do. It does no good to dress up dirty work in lace, she asserted.

"I think the most important thing is that jobs be explained simply," she said. "Don't try to make it sound more glamorous, or you'll just put people off that will do it."

Once a parish has recruited volunteers, keeping them happy occupies a volunteer coordinator's thoughts, Father Doyle said.

"I really feel for the priest to be with them is terribly important," he said.

At 69, he can't exert himself physically the way he used to, Father Doyle said. However, when parishioners are working at some laborious physical task around the church, he'll make them refreshments and chat with them to help lighten the load, he added.

"It's a visible sign of the parish's appreciation," he said.

Father Doyle developed this attitude while working with bingo volunteers at several Rochester parishes. He would always throw a small party after each night's bingo to help workers relax.

"They were tired as can be after being on their feet six hours, but they were happy," he said.

Folts also noted that volunteers should work primarily in pairs and groups. Passing off even a small task on just one person can create apathy, she concluded, because jobs often seem to get "bigger and bigger."

Most importantly, coordinators said, two words can keep a volunteer coming back each year — "Thank you."

Whether it's a card at Christmas acknowledging their efforts, or a visit at home from a parish staff member, volunteers enjoy the appreciation, observers said.

"It constantly helps let people know that all these small parts make the whole work together," Sister Tierney concluded.

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