

Parish party offers parents an alternative for Christmas

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

EAST BLOOMFIELD — Lindsay Johnson heeded her father's directions.

She spoke only in a whisper while playing Dec. 16 with the figures in a wooden Nativity set in the parish hall at St. Bridget/St. Joseph Church, 15 Church St.

But when Ed Johnson said it was all right to speak a little louder, the two-and-a-half-year old pointed to the infant in the manger. "Baby," she proclaimed.

And when asked who the baby was, Lindsay, with a little help from her father, clearly stated, "Jesus."

Making sure that Jesus could be there at all was part of the reason two parishioners at St. Bridget/St. Joseph have organized a story-and-carol Christmas party at the parish for the past two years.

Noreen O'Shea and Chris Creswell produced the first party in 1992 after the Bloomfield Library Board decided to remove all religious overtones from its annual holiday story party. The board's decision came in response to one board member's concerns about offending non-Christians.

Creswell, whose music group, The Precious Few, had provided music for the library party for years, was enraged at the library board's decision.

"They wanted a completely white-bread version of Christmas," Creswell said. "They just felt it wasn't politically correct to have Jesus and the religious aspects."

Creswell began to search for another place to hold a religiously oriented Christmas party. Then, she said, Father John L. Philipps, pastor of St. Bridget/St. Joseph, suggested the parish hall.

Consequently, Creswell and O'Shea — whom Creswell had met at the library's 1991 party — put on the 1992 celebration at the church, drawing 30 to 40 participants.

"It was so successful last year, we decided to do it this year," O'Shea observed.

For the 1993 party, the two retained many of the elements they had incorporated into the 1992 celebration.

When the children arrived, they found waiting for them Christmas tree decorations cut out of Christmas cards and bearing their names. They hung these decorations on the tree.

The children were also given bells they could ring at appropriate points in such songs and stories as "Jingle Bells" and *The Polar Express*.

After music by The Precious Few, O'Shea began the program by explaining the circumstances behind the party, describing it as a religious alternative to the secular story time the library was, ironically, offering that same night.

"We believe part of the specialness of Christmas is that it is Christ's birthday," O'Shea told the parents and children.

O'Shea then started the story telling, with appropriate carols interspersed among and even during the sto-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

St. Nicholas (Paul Rayburn) hands out goodies to children during a story-and-carol Christmas party in the parish hall at St. Bridget's/St. Joseph's Church in Bloomfield Dec. 16.



Laura Vespi (left) and Rachel O'Shea react to a Christmas story read by Rachel's mother, Noreen. Children also sang songs and made crafts.

ries. Many of the children sat on the floor, listening intently and studying the pictures in the books held up by the story tellers.

In addition to Christmas tales, one of the stories was about the history of the menorah — the nine-branched Jewish candle holder associated with the festival of Hanukkah. Hy Freedman, violinist with The Precious Few, told the tale.

"I'm glad to do it," remarked Freedman, who is Jewish. "It's a happy part of my childhood."

The high point of the celebration was a visit by St. Nicholas, played by Paul Rayburn.

Dressed in bishop's robes — not Santa's fur-lined red suit — Rayburn told the children the story of St. Nicholas, the fourth-century Bishop of Myra in Turkey and patron

saint of children. He then distributed candy to the children, who flocked around him.

After leaving the main room of the hall, Rayburn explained that he'd been doing Santa Claus for a decade, going to people's homes at their request. Then he also began doing St. Nicholas.

Children can get confused when he shows up as St. Nicholas, Rayburn acknowledged, noting, "That's why I try to tell them I'm the same person. I'm St. Nicholas, but some people call me Santa Claus."

As Rayburn was leaving the hall, one boy approached him and presented a picture the boy had just drawn. Rayburn's smile was evident even through his thick white beard.

After St. Nicholas' departure, the program's story portion concluded with the reading of the Christmas story, and the singing of "Joy to the World."

One addition to the party this year was a crafts table at which children could make sponge art or pine-cone bird feeders, or decorate Christmas tree bulbs.

O'Shea said they added the table so that restless children could leave the story area and have something to do.

Britt and Cody Kostraba, along with their cousin Emily Pratt and Katie Boddy, were among the children who took advantage of the crafts table.

Katie, who was sprinkling sparkles on a bulb, explained that she was going to take it home.

"I'm going to put this on the window by the Christmas tree, or put it on the Christmas tree," Katie explained.

Sandy Kostraba said she brought her children and niece to the party after reading about it in the parish bulletin.

Part of the reason for coming to the parish event — as opposed to the library story time — Kostraba explained, was so that the children could "hear stories about Christmas. I think it's important for them to learn Christian values."

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