

Young adults

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Sokolowski, for instance, decided to work on forming a multi-parish group after attending the Synod.

"I think the priority on forming small Christian communities was phenomenal," she remarked.

In addition, Maura Sweeney acknowledged that she was hired as a part-time young adult ministry coordinator at St. Dominic's Church in Shortsville, Ontario County, after her pastor, Father William J. Cosgrove, attended the Synod and decided that young adults needed to become more of a priority.

Although Chemung County and Shortsville have formed some of the newer young adult ministries, Webster said that most of the 10 to 15 diocesan groups are no more than 10 years old.

"It's a ministry that's constantly in flux. One of the things I haven't seen proven yet is if young adult ministry can survive in the long-term with volunteer leadership," said Webster, who added that only a small percentage of young adult ministry leaders receive any sort of stipend.

Most diocesan young adult ministries

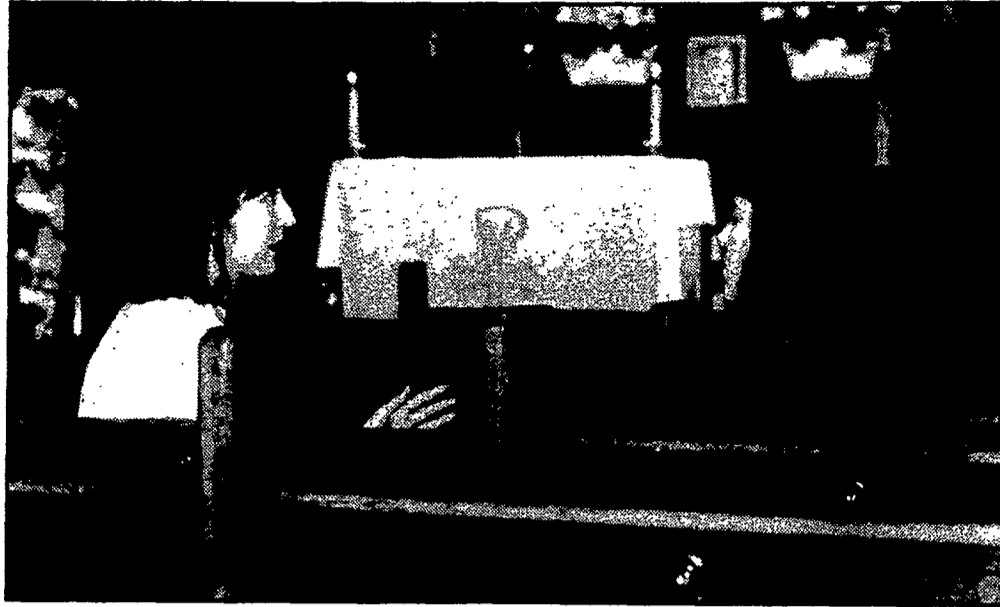


Photo illustration by S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

are located in Monroe County and operate within a single-parish structure.

One exception is a three-parish coalition, similar to Chemung County's, which was begun last year in suburban Monroe County. This group, known as Young Adult Christians, encompasses St. Louis Church in Pittsford, Church of the Assumption in Fairport and Guardian Angels Church in Henrietta.

Another suburban ministry, operating

out of St. John of Rochester Church in Fairport, is known as the "20-30 Club."

Additional young adult ministries can be found in the City of Rochester at parishes such as Blessed Sacrament, St. Boniface and St. Mary's.

Blessed Sacrament's Mike Drexler, who coordinates the diocese's largest single-parish young adult ministry, said that his parish is a prime territory because of the neighborhood's demographics.

"There are approximately 500 people in the parish community that we're trying to target," said Drexler. He noted that his parish's ministry is open to non-parishioners as well as non-Catholics.

Social functions available through young adult ministries — such as dinners, picnics and recreational outings — fill an important void in this day and age, said Webster.

"At parishes there aren't as many social opportunities that there were in the 1940s and 1950s — your men's clubs and your rosary clubs," Webster said.

These groups also emphasize their Catholic faith by holding special prayer services and performing volunteer work in their parish and community. Blessed Sacrament's mission statement, for instance, sums these priorities up as "the three Ss — social, spiritual and service."

Although the Blessed Sacrament area and near Monroe Avenue is heavily populated by single young adults, Drexler emphasized that the ministry is not limited to people who fall into that category.

"Unfortunately, there is still a stereotype that this is a singles group only. We go out of our way to put out a disclaimer that it's for single, married or divorced people," said Drexler, who was a member of the St. Boniface young adult ministry before coming to Blessed Sacrament.

By the same token, Drexler and Webster acknowledged that they met their spouses through their work as young adult ministers.

"I've known a number of people here at Blessed Sacrament who have gotten married through church functions," ac-

knowledged Drexler. "That's where people can meet and be honest with each other; they're not getting that 'shtick' you'd get at the bar scene. For your average Catholic single, it's a safe place to be."

Whatever the reason for joining a young adult ministry, Webster stressed that options for most diocesan young adults will remain limited unless more programs are put firmly in place.

"The greatest period of people leaving the church is between the ages of 16 and 25, and the greatest period they come back is in their late 20s and early 30s. If we aren't there to welcome them back in some significant way, we might lose them totally," remarked Webster, who coordinated the Blessed Sacrament young adult ministry from 1983 to 1990.

Webster and Drexler were also involved with the now-defunct diocesan Commission on Young Adult Ministry, which sought to create events diocesan-wide rather than just in a parish setting.

Webster's current role with the diocese is to encourage parishes to begin young adult ministries through a networking process, in which established ministries pass along their ideas.

This step is crucial, she said, because "in the long-term there has not been a model to help integrate the age 21-35 adults within the parish community."

Support from parish hierarchy is also a key factor in the success of young adult ministry, said two members of the Blessed Sacrament planning committee.

"One thing that made me stay was (pastor) Father (Bruce) Ammering's warmth," said Sharon Bednarczyk, 30, who has been with the Blessed Sacrament ministry for three years.

"If young adults feel there is a place for them, they will continue their faith," agreed Darcy DeBonis, 23.

Both Bednarczyk, a Honeoye Falls native, and DeBonis, a Troy, N.Y. native, are relative newcomers to the Blessed Sacrament parish. Yet DeBonis said she felt quickly accepted upon attending her first young adult ministry function last July.

"I immediately made a bond. Since then, I've gotten some really good friends — it's almost like a network. I feel like my life is fuller," DeBonis remarked.

Webster noted that young adult ministries also stand a much better chance of succeeding if this welcoming attitude is initiated by the entire parish.

"If you're willing to go out and tap people on the shoulder, you'd find that (young adults are) there and willing," said Webster.

That viewpoint is backed up by the quick growth of a new young adult ministry at another Rochester city parish, St. Anne Church. Frank Fusare, a pastoral year seminarian who is overseeing formation of the ministry, reported that 14 people attended an inaugural meeting last month. Two weeks later, that number had already risen to nearly 30.

A recent surge of diocesan teenage youth groups should spur future growth for young adult ministry, Drexler said.

"Youth ministry has taken off in the last four or five years, and we'll probably see an extension of that," he remarked.

"What we see is a lot of people who have gone through youth ministry and have 'graduated,'" Webster explained.

By having widespread support for both programs, said Webster, another stereotype can be more easily erased — that "young adult ministry is another name for youth ministry."

"One of our biggest struggles is, what does young adult ministry mean?," Sokolowski commented. "We don't consider ourselves to be that young; most are right around 30 years old."

EDITORS' NOTE: Young adult ministry groups wishing to have their events publicized should send information to: Calendar, Catholic Courier, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y., 14624. Notices must be received at least two weeks prior to the issue in which events need to be published.

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