

# Christmas PROFILE

## Webster church emphasizes social action, service

**Parish Profile**  
St. Paul's,  
Webster



### 'Laid-back' style parish hallmark

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

WEBSTER — Like most parishes, St. Paul's once held an annual Christmas pageant designed to include as many of the parish's children as possible.

But three years ago, the 1,400-family parish decided to end that tradition in favor of starting a new activity centered on the Jan. 6 feast of the Epiphany, which celebrates the infant Jesus' adoration by the Magi.

Scott Rutan, the parish's religious education director, noted that the Christmas pageant was just one more responsibility in the busy days everyone experiences leading up to Dec. 25. Yet, Epiphany comes after Christmas Day's hustle and bustle has ceased and allows the children to focus on the meaning of the Magi's adoration, he noted.

This Dec. 28, the parish's children will be invited to a morning session featuring Epiphany customs, stories and songs, he explained.

Then, the children will be instructed how to act out the Epiphany gospel reading at the parish's Masses Jan. 7-8. About a dozen children play roles at each respective Mass over the weekend, he said.

Anne Novik, whose daughter played Mary in a past Epiphany Sunday, noted that the celebration not only comes at a less-hecky time than the old Christmas pageant, but serves another valuable purpose as well.

"It is also a way to make Christmas extend into a season when Christmas is supposed to extend," she said, pointing out that many people think of the "Christmas season" as December, which is actually Advent.

"It reminds the people that Christmas starts at Christmas, it doesn't end at Christmas," she said of the Epiphany celebration.

The fact that St. Paul's was willing to go off the beaten track and try something new by switching to an Epiphany festival is characteristic of the parish, according to staff members.

"I think sometimes when people come from a traditional parish, they're shocked initially," remarked Father Raymond H. Booth, St. Paul's pastor.

What may shock newcomers or visitors is St. Paul's laid-back atmosphere, evident in everything from the folding chairs that serve in place of pews in the worship space to the fact that there are no kneelers, he said.

The parish doesn't even bother to pass a basket for collection, but rather leaves boxes at the entrances to the worship space, trusting that parishioners



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

During a Nov. 29 blessing ceremony at St. Paul's Church in Webster, (from left) Meghan Rosinski, Rachael Brust, Stephanie Ferrari, and Brendan Thornton raise their hands over goods donated to Rochester's House of Mercy. The endeavor was part of the youths' religious education program. Children also heard from Greg Mercer, a former homeless man who now volunteers at the inner-city outreach center.



Ben Ochrym makes his way to the altar during a ceremony blessing various goods headed for the House of Mercy in Rochester. The parish's children also donated goods to Bethany House of Hospitality and Dimitri House this year.

will put in enough to pay the parish's bills, staff members explained.

"We encourage people to check out the other (Webster-area) parishes, too," Father Booth said.

The parish has greeters to welcome new parishioners, but it won't come on too strong to anyone because the pastor believes every Catholic should worship where they are most comfortable.

If you're comfortable working on behalf of your fellow man and woman,

then St. Paul's might be for you. Social ministry and outreach has been a parish focus since its was founded by Father John T. Walsh in 1967, according to the parish's history.

"Shunning the 'lasting city' image of a church, we instead chose the image of 'a simple shelter for a people of God on a journey,' as we saw it, and constructed an affordable church that speaks to requirements as varied as its occupants," the history read.

Indeed, a parish committee tithes St. Paul's weekly income — donating it to 30 organizations — and publishes a "Good Sam Community Connection" booklet listing opportunities for volunteer service in the community and for the donation of household items to those in need.

In addition to organizing a monthly food collection, the Good Sam community organizes volunteers to go to such outreach centers as parish soup kitchens.

Social service also plays an important role in the parish children's religious education, according to Sister Deanna Gears, SSJ, religious education coordinator.

The parish's 75 volunteer catechists have been emphasizing social concern over the last few years for the 550 elementary school children who attend catechetical classes on either Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday afternoons and evenings, she said.

For example, on Mondays, students bring in food and clothing for Bethany House of Hospitality — a home for women and children — located at St. Bridget's Parish in Rochester, she said.

St. Paul's has also brought in such speakers as a formerly homeless man who now works at the House of Mercy — another outreach center located in Rochester — to talk to students, she continued.

"You could hear a pin drop with the junior-high kids," she said of the man's presentation.

Members of the parish youth group, geared toward high-school teenagers, also volunteer at area outreach centers, added Kris Mich, the parish's youth minister.

But social service is not the parish's sole focus. Scott Rutan added that the parish also plans to educate its adults during Lent next year on the 1993 Diocesan Synod's priorities.

The parish will also host knowledgeable speakers each week during Lent who will tie in a Gospel reading to each of the priorities — morality and lifelong religious education; the consistent life ethic; dignity of women in the church; and the promotion and growth of small Christian communities, he said.

In addition, St. Paul's offers a slew of activities for Catholics who are toddlers to those who are retired. A parish activity card lists 45 possible groups to join, from a book and video discussion group to a team of parishioners that regularly vacuums the parish center's second floor.

"It's a warm, welcoming parish," concluded Anne Rohnke, parish secretary and bookkeeper.

EDITORS' NOTE — For information about St. Paul's, call the parish at 716/671-2100.

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