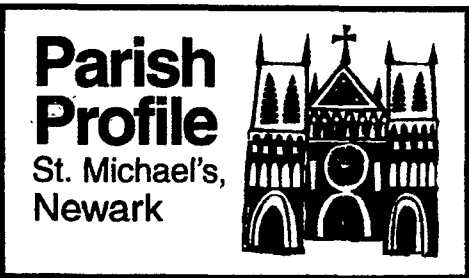


# Wayne County parish stresses clear family focus



**By Lee Strong**  
Senior staff writer

NEWARK — Visitors to St. Michael's Church will quickly discover two things about the parish: it's family oriented, and it's active.

The family orientation is readily evident — and necessary.

The 132-year-old parish's religious education and youth programs have combined enrollments of more than 580 participants. And St. Michael's School — the only Catholic school in Wayne County — has seen its enrollment grow to approximately 340 students.

As a result of discussions leading up to the diocesan Synod in October, 1993, the parish at 401 S. Main St. hired a youth minister, Deborah Housel, to help meet the growing need.

"It's because Newark is a family community," Housel suggested. "People might go away to college, but they come back to raise their children."

Meanwhile, the parish plans such events as the annual marriage night — held this year on Feb. 17 — for married couples. And many of the religious-education activities include a monthly family activity, noted Rose Leisenring, the parish's coordinator of religious education.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

(Above) St. Michael's Church in Newark hosted a married couples night in the parish hall Feb. 17. The evening included a liturgy of the Eucharist celebrated by Father William M. Barrett, a renewal of wedding vows, dinner and dancing. (Right) Joe and Renee Bailey cut the 'wedding cake' at the dinner's conclusion.



## SNAPSHOTS

**St. Michael's Church**  
401 S. Main St., Newark  
Incorporated March 25, 1863  
New church dedicated March 15, 1903

Independent parish with first school pastor in 1903  
School built in 1954

**Ministerial staff:**

- Pastor:  
**Father Edward E. Steinkirchner**
- Parochial Vicar:  
**Father John Gagnier**
- Pastor Emeritus:  
**Father Joseph McDonnell**
- Deacon:  
**Thomas Cass**
- Pastoral Associate:  
**Sister Mary Agnes Trabold, SSJ**
- School Principal:  
**Kathleen Peters**
- Religious Education Coordinator:  
**Rose Leisenring**
- Youth Minister:  
**Deborah Housel**
- Liturgy and Outreach Ministry:  
**Charlotte Pitrella**
- Parish Council Chairman:  
**James Reid**
- Business Manager:  
**Raymond Hannan**

"I think it's important in working with the children that you work with the whole family," Leisenring said.

In keeping with this spirit of promoting a family atmosphere, when the youth last summer held a work camp to paint an area house, parish senior citizens — including many of the youths' grandparents — brought food and ate lunch with the teenagers. Meanwhile, last Christmas, instead of singing carols at local nursing homes, youths went out to the homes of group members' grandparents to sing.

Youth-group members are also encouraged to be active in the parish, observed Charlotte Pitrella, who served as St. Michael's School's principal from 1980-93, and is currently the parish's liturgy/outreach ministry coordinator.

"We try to encourage and find places where youth can fit in — commentators, lecturers, musicians," Pitrella said. "We're very conscious of getting the youth and young people involved."

Youths who participate at the Newark parish find an array of events available to fill their time. And, just as the Synod helped lead to Housel's hiring, it also provided a convenient way to measure the extent of these activities.

Father Edward E. Steinkirchner, who will retire this year after serving as the parish's pastor since 1980, noted that,

during parish synod discussions, people kept suggesting things they thought were missing in Newark.

As a result, the parish published an information sheet listing a complete list of activities and services, along with contact people throughout the parish and the county. Parish functions alone fill more than 50 lines on one side of the page.

In addition to familiar organizations, such as finance and liturgy committees or parish council, St. Michael's offers involvement in groups such as: the Sacred Heart Society; Spanish Council; Christmas Baskets; Senior Citizens' Luncheon; Food Closet; Home Visitation; Jail Ministry; Ministry of Praise; and the Wayne County Jail Ministry.

"We have a lot of activity in the parish," acknowledged Betty Smith, a lifelong parishioner and a member of the Rosary Altar Society. She also helps with bingo in the school, serves as secretary of the Legion of Mary, and has been a sponsor six times for candidates in the parish's RCIA program.

"I know when we have gone and met with the bishop in the cathedral, St. Michael's has had as big a group as some of the city parishes," Smith remarked.

Despite its small-town atmosphere, St. Michael's is indeed as large as many Rochester-based parishes. Although not

all are active in the church, Father Steinkirchner estimates that as many as 2,000 Catholic families live within parish boundaries.

Moreover, the community is diverse, the pastor continued, noting, "You have everything from the very poor to the very rich, people who are apart to people who are part of the scene."

St. Michael's also has a strong commitment to serving others, Father Steinkirchner said. That priority, he speculated, may have grown out of Newark serving as the longtime home to the Newark Developmental Center, which housed developmentally disabled people.

Illustrations of this commitment include the Legion of Mary visiting area hospitals and nursing homes; parishioners involving themselves in prison ministry, and with the House of John, a home for the dying in nearby Clifton Springs; and the parish creating a food closet which is now a community effort.

Father Joseph McDonnell, the parish's pastor from 1957-75 who still lives in the rectory, noted that parishioners have not changed much over the years.

"They were the same (then) as they are today: grand, friendly, people of faith," Father McDonnell said.

Leisenring experienced that friendliness when she arrived at the parish three years ago to take over the religious-education program.

"I was never made to feel like an outsider," Leisenring said. "I was accepted as one of the community."

Father McDonnell came to the parish just a few years after parishioners built the school — an effort they began in 1949 and completed in 1954. He soon realized that the school needed to expand and he oversaw the addition of classrooms and an auditorium.

The auditorium, in particular, was necessary, Father McDonnell observed, because the parish's children had lost their place to play basketball and the board of education had assigned the parish team a small gym in which to play.

"I said to myself, come hell or high water, the kids would have a place to play basketball," Father McDonnell said. Characteristically, parishioners pulled together to build the auditorium.

Today, the facility serves not only as a comfortable home for basketball players, but also as a school lunch room as well as the venue for a wide variety of parish activities.

In looking back at her years at the parish, Smith recalled how she felt when the church was renovated for its 125th anniversary in 1988. She went into St. Michael's and cried, not in sadness, but in joy at its beauty and for all the fond memories that rushed back to her.

"(I) was baptized here, married here and received the other sacraments of my life here, then baptized my three children here and participated in most of the celebrations of the church — some happy, some sad," Smith said. "I would not change it in any way."

**EDITORS' NOTE:** A retirement party for Father Steinkirchner has been scheduled for Sunday, June 4, at the Burgundy Basin Inn, 1361 Marsh Road, Pittsford. For details, call the rectory at 315/331-6753.

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