

Teens tackle tough topics at Perkinsville parish

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

PERKINSVILLE — In this Steuben County parish, death and teenage pregnancy are not treated as exclusively grown-up matters.

"They're all going to public school, and there's no way they're going to hear it there," remarked Father Charles T. Manning, pastor of Sacred Heart Church.

"Isn't the church where we're supposed to get education on these issues?"

Kevin Washer, 14, likes the fact that Sacred Heart is issuing strong directives on subjects such as chastity.

"We learn in public school, but in a different way," said Kevin. "They won't really give a message, like 'Don't have sex.'"

Father Manning pointed out that it's especially important for the Catholic Church to promote open discussion with youths about the moral ramifications of teenage sex because "it's happening more at that age."

"I would say now is when the Catholic

parishes should get into that. You get a clinical approach in the schools," commented Father Manning, who also serves as pastor of St. Pius V Church in Co-hocton.

Ryan Reigelsperger, 12, found the program on death "helpful, because one of my best friends died in a car accident."

Upcoming events scheduled for the youth group will include a study of prison ministry, and a "day in the life" session led by Father Manning so that Sacred Heart youths can learn more about becoming a priest, deacon or

woman religious.

"I think it's good for kids to understand, so they can get ready for being an adult," Ryan stated.

Youth participation in these programs has been excellent despite the fact that Sacred Heart, which has approximately 115 registered families, is not among the larger diocesan parishes.

"We have very good parental support," noted Bricks.

"Without the parents, we couldn't have this," agreed Dan Wensel, another youth leader.

Perkinsville Youth

commented Pat Washer, a leader with the Sacred Heart youth group.

More than 20 youth-group members, ranging in age from 12 to 17, recently faced these challenging topics head-on. Last fall they attended a presentation given by two teenage mothers, and in January they met with hospice workers and visited a funeral home.

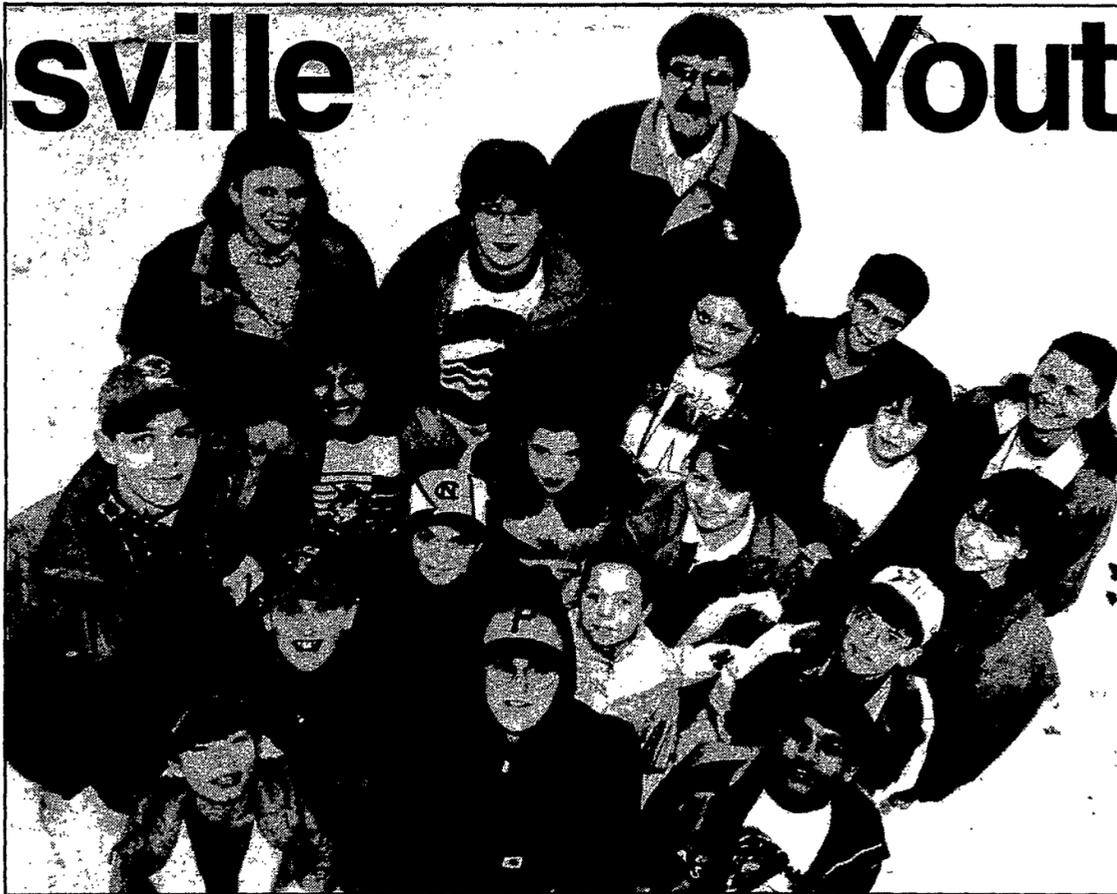
For Elisa Blum, 14, information shared by the young mothers provided a vivid illustration of the challenges teenage parents face.

"It was really awakening," she said. "It was kind of a shock. I knew these things were going on, but it became, like, more real."

Jenn Sahrle, 16, said the experience would help her follow the chastity message emphasized by her youth ministers.

"I think it's really important to know that it's not a very good idea for a kid my age (to become pregnant)," she commented.

At the same time, youth leader Sharon Bricks pointed out that the youths are discouraged from being judgmental of the teenage mothers who have not remained chaste. The Sacred Heart group is accomplishing this ideal by sponsoring the mothers and their babies for a one-year period.



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Sacred Heart Church's youth group is active and flourishing under the guidance of adult leaders Pat Washer (top left), Dan Wensel (top middle) and Sharon Bricks (far right).

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