

PARISH PROFILE

Community ponders future as it begins its renewal

Parish Profile

St. Ambrose,
Rochester



By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — St. Ambrose Parish's grounds straddle the border between the city and Irondequoit. In a similar fashion, the parish community itself straddles a present that divides a rich past and a challenging future.

Under the leadership of its former pastor, Father James J. Marvin, who retired last year, the parishioners grew close together, according to Nancy Giordano, pastoral associate.

"Father Marvin's legacy is that we as a church (are) a family," she said, adding the priest taught the parish that "we would be for one another."

A prime example of how St. Ambrose parishioners pulled together as a parish family during Father Marvin's pastorate was through its many social events, particularly its annual festival in June. But parishioners did not restrict their outreach merely to each other through such events, she emphasized.

In 1988, for example, the parish used some of its annual festival proceeds to help establish Catholic Family Center's Francis Center, which serves homeless men. The parish did so in response to a proposal by St. Ambrose parishioner and Festival Chairman Dean Wojtczak, who had worked with the homeless.

The legacy of the first major gift lives on through the parish's social ministry committee, according to Phil Oberst, chairman. He noted that the parish annually gives \$11,000 in grants to various not-for-profit agencies and organizations — money now taken from the parish's overall budget rather than from festival proceeds.

As the new century beckons, St. Ambrose is set to define itself once again, this time under the pastoral leadership of Father Melvin H. Walczak, who took over from Father Marvin last summer.

After his first 100 days at the parish, Father Walczak released a pastoral plan for St. Ambrose.

"Spiritual and liturgical renewal seem to dominate my vision and thinking as I re-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
June Szatko (top left) and Megan Bowen lead the children's Liturgy of the Word during the 9:45 a.m. Mass Jan. 21 at St. Ambrose Church in Rochester.

view the first 100 days and attempt to identify my personal goals and those of the faith community of St. Ambrose, which I have been called to lead," he wrote.

To implement the pastoral plan, the parish's pastoral board — formed in spring 1995, according to Phil Cichanowicz, the board's meeting presider — has overseen the creation of three subcommittees devoted to liturgical renewal, staffing patterns and space evaluation.

The liturgical renewal committee, for example, will consider such projects as making the church accessible to people with disabilities, staff members said.

The parish will also enter the process



Danny O'Reilly participates during the children's Liturgy of the Word.

called "Renew" over the next three years, according to Father Walczak. Based on a program that began in the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., Renew calls the entire parish to participate in five six-week sessions during Advent and Lent. Sessions deal with such issues as discipleship and evangelization.

Discipleship and evangelization seem to be strong points at St. Ambrose, whose Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program brought 13 people into the church last year, and will bring an equal number this Easter, according to Sister Roberta Rodenhouse, RSM, pastoral associate.

Sister Rodenhouse noted that many parishioners volunteer to assist in the RCIA process, and invite candidates into their residences to learn more

SNAPSHOTS

St. Ambrose Parish
25 Empire Blvd., Rochester
(716) 288-5000
Founded: 1921
No. of Parishioners: 6,000
Ministerial staff:
Parish administrator: **Father Melvin H. Walczak**
Parochial Vicar:
Father Daniel Heintz
Pastoral Associates:
Nancy Giordano, Sister Roberta Rodenhouse, RSM
School Principal:
Sister Marilyn Reeves, SFCC
Religious Education Director:
Mary Kay Oberst
Music Ministry:
Ric Ramirez, Anne Virgil
Office Staff: **Colleen Griffith, Laurie Maier**

about the faith.

"People have opened their homes to us," she said. "People are very good about that."

Parishioners also volunteer in large numbers to work as catechists, liturgical ministers and sacristans, she said.

Education is also an important part of life at St. Ambrose, which is home to a diocesan school housing a pre-kindergarten-through-sixth-grade program, according to Sister Marilyn Reeves, SFCC, principal. Roughly one-half of its 480 students come from the parish, she said, adding that the remainder come from other parishes and non-Catholic families.

Religious education is also important to the parish's public school children, according to Oberst's wife, Mary Kay, who directs parish religious education. Two-hundred-fifty elementary-age students participate in the parish's religious education programs, she said.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to implement the 1993 Diocesan Synod's priority of lifelong faith formation, St. Ambrose will cooperate with its neighboring parishes of St. James, Annunciation and St. Philip Neri to present a Lenten series in March on the Synod's four goals. Each parish will tackle one goal each night over a four-day period. St. Ambrose will focus on Synod Goal Three, "The Role of Women in the Church."

"I just think it's neat that all of the churches are working together," Mary Kay Oberst commented.

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