

PARISH PROFILE

Eucharist energizes Geneva church to do good

Parish Profile
St. Stephen's,
Geneva



By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

GENEVA — If it's Monday, it's meeting night at St. Stephen's Church.

"I drive into the parking lot, which is full with cars, and say to myself, 'What's this supposed to be for?'" the pastor, Msgr. Gerard Krieg, said.

Father Brian Jeffers, parochial vicar, explained that parishioners avidly assume a project and run with it. Because of the number of projects and meetings, he said, "The best we can do is stop in for 15 minutes and see what is going on, but they are the ones running it."

St. Stephen's, high on the hills of Geneva, is a well-maintained classic Gothic limestone church dedicated in 1912, topped with an impressive cross that can be seen from the streets below. Across the street from the church is a two-story convent recently converted into a cozy religious education center.

Behind the church is St. Francis/St. Stephen School, which combined the two churches' elementary schools 14 years ago and has 321 students. Landscaping of the entire complex is immaculate, thanks to two groundskeepers hired from a developmentally disabled program.

The church sits near the geographical center of the Diocese of Rochester. Indeed, it often serves as a central meeting point for Catholics in the diocese. Msgr. Krieg comments, however, that in his "more desperate moments," it seems an hour from everywhere.

St. Stephen's is a church that cherishes a rich architectural heritage and distinctive interior — carvings and other artwork, an old oaken nave of pews set straight back from the altar, and a year-old perpetual adoration chapel in the old work sacristy. Even more valued, however, is its parishioners' outreach activities and projects.

Those outreaches include the Center of Concern (provides clothing), Community Lunch Program, Geneva Coalition Food Pantry, Food Co-op, Geneva Agri-Business Child Development center (Head Start/day care), Bridges bereavement program, and Dove (which provides volunteers to run errands and offer rides). The list goes on.

The 1,700-family congregation also dedicates 6 percent of its Sunday income to three projects, stretching from Geneva to Africa: the Sharing Program, for rents, prescriptions, utility bills and emergency needs of anyone referred to the parish; the Diocese of Tororo, Uganda, the home of a sister church and three former seminary students who served at St. Stephen's; and Catholic Charities' Maternity and Single Parent Program.

On top of that, the parish contributes to a freewill collection for hunger every first Sunday of the month. The collection, taken at the doors, has received overwhelmingly generous support, according



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

During a March 17 Mass at St. Stephen's Church, Msgr. Gerard Krieg, pastor, blesses candidates and catechumens involved in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.



Theresa Durso serves as a eucharistic minister during the March 17 service.

to Marie Milligan, who heads the Social Ministry Committee in addition to serving as the parish secretary.

While many of the projects are inter-faith (including hospital and nursing home chaplaincies that keep the staff running), St. Stephen's increasingly cooperates with St. Francis deSales Parish of Geneva — from which it was created in 1904. Their staffs talk together and fill in for each other; their parish councils meet and pray together; and two small Christian communities formed during Lent bring together members from both churches. Msgr. Krieg noted that the day may be coming when one priest will serve both parishes.

Deacon Michael Mahoney, pastoral associate, has come to appreciate St. Stephen's busy-ness.

"I think the real beauty and gift of the community is its outreach and caring of others, particularly the poor of Geneva," he said. "It is well-known throughout the community for its involvement, with the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Finger Lakes Social Ministry, Ontario County Social Services. We have a constant flow (of people) referred to our church."

SNAPSHOTS

St. Stephen's Church
48 Pulteney St., Geneva
315/789-1124
Established: 1904
No. of families: 1,700
Ministerial staff:
Pastor: Msgr. Gerard C. Krieg
Parochial Vicar:
Father Brian E. Jeffers
Pastoral Associate:
Deacon Michael Mahoney
Director of Religious Education/Youth Director:
Walter Savaria
Associate Youth Director:
John Oughterson
Parish Secretary/Social Ministry Committee Chairwoman:
Marie Milligan
School Principal: Elaine Morrow

He noted a "deep and well-developed spirituality," as did Father Jeffers, who joined St. Stephen's last summer.

"There are a lot of role models here," Father Jeffers also noted. "One of the things that struck me when I came was the diversity of young families, elderly, and kids."

The various services St. Stephen's and area provide people of Geneva may be coordinated in the future, through the community's Michael McHale Memorial Fund, which totals more than \$9,000. It memorializes Father McHale, the Rochester Institute of Technology chaplain, who served in the parish from 1992 to 1995 and inspired much of its work with the poor. He died early Christmas Day in an accident as he was driving home to pick up his mother in Steuben County for a holiday trip, after he'd stopped in Geneva to celebrate midnight Mass.

While the late priest's efforts and those of parishioners have provided emergency

food, clothing, and money, they also have encouraged self-sufficiency.

"We have bought a lot of steel-toed Milligan said. Responding to needs has become a way of life for many parishioners, she added.

The people of St. Stephen's have learned that "once you volunteer, you can never not be a volunteer. You don't say 'I'm going home now, I'm not going to do this,'" she said. "It's not an addiction. It's a real thirst for helping someone."

The parish's volunteers make no distinction as to whom they help — including religious affiliation — she said.

"It never comes up," she commented. "Many times people say, 'I'm not even a member of your church' or 'I'm not a member of any church,'" Milligan said. "Many times they say, 'How can I repay you?' And we say, 'You can help somebody if you are ever put in that position.'"

Milligan is not alone in wearing several hats at the parish.

"Everybody has to wear three or four hats; it's fun to do that," said Mary Kay Bolan, vice-president of the parish council and coordinator of small Christian communities for St. Stephen's (and former Synod delegate and Synod Commission member). That's because parishioners want so much from church, she explained.

Amid all the community activism, however, the parish's focus is the Eucharist, Msgr. Krieg pointed out.

"If you center on the Eucharist, no matter how big the community, it can be small," the pastor said. "The deeper the spirituality, the more extensive and well motivated the social ministry becomes. No longer you do it out of pity, condescension. You do it out of love for one another."

He credits previous generations of priests for instilling this sense of spirituality. And he notes that parishioners perpetuate it with such zeal, there are many he'd be "very happy to have as spiritual directors."

But Giovina Caroscio, a parishioner since 1982 and executive director of the Finger Lakes Social Ministry, cites the monsignor's example, saying, "The way he prays the Eucharist is very much 'beginning-to-end' prayer."

She added, "And I think the community responds to that."

"It supports my ability of reaching out. I'm not just going to church for me, a me and God kind of thing," Caroscio continued. "It is that. But the Eucharist sacrament is to be broken, to be shared so the act that goes on in celebration of Christ is nourishing my body with the body of Christ."

She added that the pastor also inspires his people that "you don't look at putting money in the bank before meeting the needs of people. He preaches that and explains it to people."

Msgr. Krieg knows the message is getting across.

"I will think of something that has got to be done, look around, and find that somebody already has done and completed it," he said with a smile.

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