

CONTINUED...

Niche

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Later Mason began teaching fifth-grade religious education, and ended up progressing with his class to seventh/eighth-grade.

"It just evolves. ... I don't want to use the term 'Get sucked in,' but you find it's actually fun. When I became involved in Scouting, baseball, church, it gave us quality time together," Mason, the father of three sons, said.

His initial involvement at church as a eucharistic minister "wasn't as in-depth as now," he said. Yet, he added, "By doing, it opens your eyes to some other avenues in the church family. ... I can be in most anything."

Jean Wolf, a parishioner at Holy Trinity Church in Webster, has the same feeling.

"I've been working with everything from CCD to youth ministry to working with elderly and with the dying, right on through," she said. "I get a feeling in my heart that people here need me right now."

She takes Communion to two couples, and serves on the Consistent Life Ethic and Community Action committees. She spends entire weekends witnessing with the Fully Alive ministry at the women's prison at Albion. Also, she and her husband Dave present Marriage Encounter talks in various towns and host dinners and outings for Corpus Christi's Rogers House ministry for ex-inmates. Meanwhile, she bakes goodies for these and other events.

"I'm a people person. I like to be with people. For me, you just know. There's a sense that is where you are supposed to be," she said.

For the time being, she's given up working with religious education students, nursing home residents and with Isaiah House residents who are dying. It was hard to let go. But a woman religious at a prayer group meeting helped her decide.

"She said, 'Back off of one. Step aside, see how it feels,'" Wolf recalls.

Still, Wolf said, "I think, 'Oh, Lord, who is going to take it?'"

Beverly Clark of St. Catherine of Siena Church in Mendon has a similar sense of obligation. One task she felt she had to accept, for example, was producing the newsletter for Agregres, lay associates of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

"I can't even write a letter to a friend, let alone newsletters. It was a nightmare," she said. "I didn't know how to type. ... I did it because they needed it badly."

She gladly let go when someone else took over.

"You block out things that are bad, like a root canal," she said. When prodded, however, she could recall other non-niches, such as Scouting and a nursery co-op.

They meant the mothering chores never ended - she and her husband raised nine children, including four adopted children with special needs.

But Clark believes all those duties and others were building up to her establishing the hospice house Benincasa with her late husband Gary. An outreach of three-Mendon churches, the house should open in August.

"My dots are now connecting," she said. "All the things I've been doing since my first volunteer job at Genesee Settlement House to what I'm doing now have been building to what I'll probably do the rest of my life."

"When you are doing something you like and is needed, what more can you ask for?" she added.

But then she offered advice that sounds contrary to practice.

"Just because it needs to be done doesn't mean everyone has to volunteer for it," she said. "It may not be right for you."

Jim Delaney, manager of the Catholic Family Center's Refugee Program, agrees.

"Research both sides," he said. "Don't assume what you are going to do is going to be the best thing you can possibly do."

Researching an issue can help potential volunteers decide how committed they will be, he said.

"If you don't have the wherewithal and patience that volunteering requires, you are going to burn out ... and not help anybody," he said. "I really think you have to

make a nice match where your head is." One nice match was a "very bright" refugee program volunteer, for example, whom Delaney asked to research refugee issues. The volunteer also tutored refugees.

Both the volunteer and Delaney were surprised upon finding that the government's own studies were strong support for refugees in this country. With the final report, Delaney produced a brochure, which the U.S. Catholic Conference Migration and Refugee Services has since borrowed for its own use.

While community and church organizations both vie for volunteer help, this hasn't caused a shortage of volunteers at Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration, according to Barbara Swiecki, pastoral associate.

"We're really good listeners," Swiecki said. "We try to pay attention when people say they want to help. We find out what they are interested in, and come up with people who are good at one thing or another."

And when the staff hears of parishioners doing community work, it commends them. She said, "we try to write notes to them, and to let Father know they are involved in that, so he can mention it in passing."

For instance, they learned through the newspaper that parishioners were helping single-parent families at Wilson Commencement Park.

"That's who we are as Christians," Swiecki said. "They're out doing what Jesus said, and that's the whole point. They're stretching the church to its full extent."

Ellen Caffrey of Sacred Heart Church in Auburn, as well, enjoys her community work and her church work, and hopes she never has to decide between the two.

Caffrey heads the Thanks Giving Appeal and teams that count the church's collections. She also works for the Mercy Rehab gift shop.

"I feel with both (the church and Mercy) I'm doing things for the Lord," she said. Her mother and father set an example,

she said. Caffrey said that prior to plays at St. Mary's School she thought nothing of asking her mother, "We need costumes, could you make 14?"

As an adult, she watched the hole dug for Sacred Heart School and helped wash windows before it opened in 1957. Later she helped in the library and was a substitute teacher. In fact, she'd do anything.

"That's part of our teachings, to help other people," Caffrey said. "Whatever your talent - big, small, intellectual or nonintellectual, you should share."

Even at the Abbey of the Genesee in Piffard, once a monk finds his niche a member of a religious order he still has several more to try out.

Brother Anthony Weber - while still serving as work president and scheduling the 40 monks' daily assignments - gradually took on the plumbing, vocation director post, and bookstore as well, and helps make Monks Bread. After "burning out" as guest master after 10 years, however, he was allowed to leave that job.

"Augustine said, and I'm paraphrasing, 'Happiness is not doing what we like but liking what we do,'" he said. Brother Weber claims he came to like plumbing.

But he admits he found a niche about five years ago when he was asked to be novice master. Through this work he accompanies novices along the monastic journey, from the moment their parents drop them off at the abbey.

"It felt right from a couple of different perspectives," he recalled. "It sort of was fulfillment of my monastic life, to share with other people. And it brought out a latent paternal character. I could really be a father to somebody, in the spiritual sense."

Still, he said, "I don't have any problem with cleaning out one of the sewers one day and teaching about monastic life the next day. It's all part of the seamless garment kind of thing."

And though the novice master assignment came as a surprise, he said, he could identify with Beverly Clark and other longtime volunteers.

"Looking back," he said, "there has been a progression."

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