

FEATURE

Black heritage takes priority at Rochester parish**Parish Profile**

Immaculate Conception, Rochester

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Judy Toyer views Immaculate Conception Parish as a place "where I feel welcome — as if I belong to the mystical body of Christ."

A visit to Sunday Mass at Immaculate Conception affirms the description offered by Toyer, a 14-year parishioner.

The sign of peace lasts a full five minutes as parishioners shake hands, hug and chat. Following the Eucharist, visitors to the parish are asked to stand so they can be acknowledged with applause by the congregation.

Father Michael Upson, Immaculate Conception's administrator, offers birthday greetings to parishioners from the pulpit. And, at the 11 a.m. Sunday Mass, the gospel choir adds to the spirit by belting out powerful hymns.

Father Upson highlighted another distinguishing element of this parish Feb. 2 when, in his opening remarks at Masses, he asked his congregation to appreciate the "history and culture" of African-Americans as Black History Month began.

Approximately two-thirds of the 275 registered families at Immaculate Conception are black, making Immaculate Conception the largest African-American parish in the Diocese of Rochester. In addition, Father Upson — who has served Immaculate Conception since 1992 — is the only African-American priest currently serving in the diocese.

Immaculate Conception's current makeup has only emerged over the last 30 years. The parish was founded back in 1849 to accommodate a growing number of Irish families on Rochester's southwest side. A new church — the same one used today — was built in 1864.

In the 1950s, Immaculate Conception was well-known for its Friday-night dances that drew hundreds of teenagers. However, by the late 1960s, the parish saw its parishioners moving in droves to the suburbs, causing a decline in parish population and the closing of Immaculate Conception School in 1974.

"The urban flight — there was a lot of tension and stress. It was a very painful period. We lost a lot of people from the neighborhood," said Gaynelle Wethers, a parishioner since 1970. She is Immaculate Conception's pastoral associate and also director of multicultural affairs at Nazareth College.

Many buildings near the church were razed as a part of urban renewal projects, and have been replaced by town homes in what is now known as the Corn Hill neighborhood. Wethers said that only a small percentage of current parishioners actually reside within a short drive of Immaculate Conception.

During these rapidly changing times,



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Immaculate Conception parishioner Harry Pierre-Philippe keeps a watchful eye on her daughters Leslie (center) and Nathalie (right) as they prepare a meatloaf dinner for the monthly meal the parish serves at St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center.

Immaculate Conception made strong social statements. In 1969 the parish openly declared its opposition to the Vietnam War, and offered its church as a refuge for anyone who refused to enter the draft.

And, to acknowledge Immaculate Conception's growing black population, the parish adopted a policy requiring that at least five of the nine parish council members be African-American.

"Immaculate kind of represented that ideal of what was being fought for," said Ramona Moore, parish council president, an Immaculate Conception parishioner for 25 years.

Mary Jackson, in her 30th year as a parishioner, said she has enjoyed "friendships with many of God's children, both black and white" over the years.

Although the parish continues to strive toward integration in 1997, such black members stressed that it's also important for them to continue honoring their own unique heritage.

"People here, especially African-Americans, want to come into a church that will speak to their culture, speak to their history, speak to their experience, speak to their totality," Father Upson said.

Toyer said that parishioners are glad to be served by an African-American priest for the first time.

"Black people can be a part of the leadership — and should be," Toyer stated.

Currently, parishioners strive to meet the needs of the Corn Hill neighborhood and beyond. The parish's outreach efforts target such groups as the Boys and Girls Club, St. Joseph's House of Hospitality and Alcoholics Anonymous. Immaculate Conception also stages benefits for overseas missions.



David Miles, Donald Toyer and Harry Pierre-Philippe (left to right) serve the 72 pounds of meatloaf and 60 pounds of potatoes donated by parishioners.

"As we grow, we try to find a way we can make the most impact on the community," said Alfred Bitek, parish council vice-chairperson.

For two days each summer, Immaculate Conception joins the rest of the community in celebrating the Corn Hill Arts Festival. The parish takes part in this popular annual event by selling Immaculate Conception T-shirts, holding special Masses and providing breakfast for vendors. The festival is such a large part of parish life that this year's dates (July 12-13) are al-

SNAPSHOT

Immaculate Conception Church
445 Frederick Douglass St.
Rochester, N.Y. 14608
716/325-3893
Registered families: 275

Ministerial staff:

Administrator:
Father Michael Upson
Pastoral associate:
Gaynelle Wethers
Parish secretary:
Maggie Torres
Business manager:
Brownlie Graham
Parish council president:
Ramona Moore
Religious-education coordinators:
Myrtle Fontenette, Harry Pierre-Philippe
Music director:
Janet Poles

ready being publicized in the church bulletin.

"It never fails — every year at Corn Hill, people come by and say, 'I used to go here in the 1920s or whatever,'" Moore said. "It's like old-home week. (Immaculate Conception) has touched a lot of people one way or another."

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EDITORS' NOTE: Immaculate Conception will host its Mardi Gras celebration on Saturday, Feb. 8, at 8 p.m. Tickets can be purchased at the door.

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