

FEATURE

Air of inclusiveness blows through Steuben parish

Parish Profile

St. Mary's,
BathBy Mike Latona
Staff writer

BATH — It's not every church where you find little girls passing the collection basket, and married couples and senior citizens assisting as altar servers.

But parishioners who regularly attend St. Mary's Church are accustomed to what others may perceive as a reordering of traditional liturgical roles.

Twelve groups at the parish, known as "assemblies," are trained for several liturgical duties that are rotated on a regular basis. Under this format, a parishioner can be an altar server one week-end, an usher on another, a lector on another, etc.

According to Erin McConnell, 14, these duties are available to parishioners of all ages.

"We do basically everything the adults do," Erin said.

Each assembly is led by a member of the parish liturgical committee. The groups are known by such lively nicknames as "Heavenly Hash" and "Al's Angels."

"This gives everybody the opportunity to experience the ministries," said Debbie Brinkhus, who participates on an assembly with her husband, Bill.

Liturgies take a high priority at St. Mary's in many other ways, said Barbara Ayer, religious-education coordinator.

"We have been moving toward making liturgy the focus of our parish life. Our Sunday Mass — that's where we begin everything. Quality liturgy is important, so that people are fed for the week and sent out," Ayer remarked.

"Every committee that meets reflects on the readings for Sunday," added Kathy Donnelly, youth minister.

Father Robert Hammond, pastor of St. Mary's, acknowledged that the parish's emphasis on inclusiveness has inspired his parishioners to become involved in non-liturgical roles as well. He remarked that the 600-family parish features more than 300 people in a variety of ministries.

"They walk in and out of that rectory so often, you don't know where your keys are half the time," Father Hammond said with a chuckle.

For instance, nearly 40 parishioners are involved in visitation ministry. The St. Mary's bereavement committee has been active for several years as well, said Marcella Benedict, a parishioner since the early 1960s.

One of the most telling examples of St. Mary's outreach occurs each weekend



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Altar servers Marge Eichensehr (left) and Marcella Benedict (right) hold candles while preparing for the processional led by Richard Hopkins to begin an Aug. 2 Mass at St. Mary's Church, Bath.

when Father Hammond takes up a special collection for the poor. Long lines of people come forward to drop cash donations into a large basket that Father Hammond holds at the altar base. Funds are then forwarded to local charities, with a large percentage earmarked for the Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier branch, which opened in Bath earlier this year.

Benedict also noted that St. Mary's has willingly implemented such modern programs as small Christian communities and Renew. "We're a very progressive parish," she said.

St. Mary's strongly focuses on community youth as well, as evidenced by a day-care center — located in the former St. Mary's school building — which serves 250 children. Within the parish, St. Mary's religious-education program is attended by 163 families.

In addition, the youth ministry program is growing quickly. Donnelly noted that 10 teens attended the Diocesan Youth Convention in Geneseo Aug. 1-3, whereas only one youth was present at the 1995 convention. Another 19 teens plan to attend the National Catholic Youth Conference in Kansas City this

November, she said.

Donnelly's daughter Margaret, 13, noted that the youth group gets involved in local church projects as well. "We always have a group of teen counselors at Vacation Bible School," she said.

Father Hammond said he promotes St. Mary's to be a parish that "our children can grow into."

"We need to pass our legacy on to them," Benedict added.

The St. Mary's legacy extends back to 1850, when it originated as a mission church. St. Mary's was incorporated as a parish in 1860, and the current church building opened in 1892.

As far as its pastor is concerned, St. Mary's is situated in one of the most scenic parts of the diocese.

"Do yourself a favor and take a look at some of the hills. They are some of the most beautiful in the world," wrote Father Hammond, a native of nearby Hornell, in a bulletin announcement he made upon his arrival as pastor in 1987.

According to Father Hammond, the support of St. Mary's parishioners is as beautiful as the scenery.

"This parish has always been most giving in every way," Father Hammond said.

Bill Brinkhus noted that the spirit of giving comes very naturally at St. Mary's.

"What I enjoy is the warmth and the receptiveness I receive here," he said.

Benedict remarked that she appreciates St. Mary's the most when she is far removed from the parish.

SNAPSHOT

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Parish staff:

Pastor:

Father Robert W. Hammond

Religious education coordinator:

Barbara Ayer

Business manager: Patricia Brazie

Youth minister: Kathleen Donnelly

Musical coordinator:

William Grimmer

Parish life administrator:

Sue McKinney

Liturgy commission director:

Barbara Perry

Office manager:

Margaret Minichello

Day care director: Mariann Walsh

Pastoral council chair:

Freida Wheeler

"When I go to Florida for the winter, I miss St. Mary's terribly," Benedict commented.

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