

Catechists

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Thus she packs enough food to feed her religious education teachers each time she travels with them to a faith formation opportunity and serves it to them picnic-style.

The teachers talk about the lunches long after the trips, Kukiela said. But they also talk about what they learned, and, as she stresses with them from the moment they become involved in religious education, that to be effective teachers they need to continue to learn.

"They completely understood that to be a catechist, ongoing training would have to be a part of their ministry," she said.

"Pope John Paul II has indicated again and again that catechesis must be a priority for the church," observed Maribeth Mancini, director of the Diocese of Rochester's Department of Evangelization and Catechesis. "We know that well-formed catechists ensure excellence in catechesis."

In the Diocese of Rochester, there are ample ongoing formation opportunities for catechists — defined by the diocese as individuals "engaged in leading or teaching formal religious education" and thus including an estimated 5,500 to 6,000 people involved in such areas as religious education for children, RCIA, sacramental preparation, youth ministry, adult faith formation and Catholic schools. Those opportunities include parish- and regional-sponsored programs and Thanks Giving Appeal-supported diocesan initiatives such as Alive in Christ.

The bishops speak

Such an extensive commitment to catechetical formation is precisely what the bishops of New York state are calling for

in their new document, "The Catechist in the Third Millennium: Call, Mission and Formation."

Approved in June and being disseminated this fall, the document will be the focus of "Heralds of Faith," a statewide convocation of catechists scheduled for Nov. 6 in Douglastown and Nov. 7 in Syracuse. More than 100 representatives from the Diocese of Rochester are registered to attend the Syracuse program.

The 14-page document examines the ministry of catechists, and what catechists need in terms of education and formation to carry out that ministry.

Its four main recommendations are that by the year 2000:

- New catechetical ministers will receive initial orientation and training before or during their first year of ministry;

- Catechists will participate in ongoing training and formation;

- Catechists will be certified or will be working toward certification (or have attained certification) according to the guidelines and processes of their own dioceses;

- Parishes, schools, and diocesan offices and agencies will provide adequate staffing and resources to accomplish this goal of formation and certification.

"This work will be a challenge," the bishops wrote in their introductory letter. "As we prepare for the Jubilee year, let us make every effort to see that the promise of this document becomes a reality."

Mancini, who served on a committee that helped to prepare the document, noted that it is a follow-up to the bishops' 1981 document, "Journeying Toward a Future Full of Promise: Catechesis in New York State, Reflections and Challenges."

"In the last decade we have come a long way toward implementing that vision," Mancini said of the 1981 document. "It made sense for a document on catechist formation to be developed."



Chris Maier, 7, and Stephanie Roland, 7, try to answer a question from second-grade volunteer teacher Beth Beato Oct. 26, in Our Lady of Lourdes Church's religious education class.

"I think the biggest practical concern is that it represents a challenge for parishes," Mancini added. "All catechists will be certified or involved in a process of certification by the year 2000. That's a tremendous challenge."

Mary Britton, catechetical consultant for the diocesan Department of Evangelization and Catechesis, has high praise for the document.

"It makes the whole catechetical mission so much more visible," Britton noted.

Meanwhile, Barbara Ayer, religious education coordinator for St. Mary's Church, Bath, has read the document and found it affirmed what she is doing.

"It's nice to have the bishops speak to this," Ayer observed. "It gives credibility to what we have been saying for a long time."

Synod spur

Besides seeing credibility for their efforts, diocesan catechists who have read the new document see something familiar in it.

"Much of what is in the document we are already implementing in the diocese," Ayer observed.

"The whole time that I read it I was saying we've been doing this, we've been doing that," Kukiela remarked.

Mancini pointed out the 1993 Synod helped to set the stage for improved catechist formation in the diocese. She noted that the Synod's top goal was lifelong faith formation.

"Because of the Synod we began to address a lot of the things that are in this," Mancini said.

One of the direct results of the Synod was that the diocese's catechist formation process was revised extensively, Britton noted. That revision produced Alive in Christ.

Unveiled in April 1997, Alive in Christ — like the state document — provides a basic definition of catechist. It goes on to detail the training required to be a catechist in the diocese, and to outline the courses, which are referred to as modules.

In preparing Alive in Christ, Britton said that she consulted extensively with catechetical leaders in the diocese. Among the feedback she received was that the formation process had to be flexible to accommodate all kinds of circumstances, had to be localized and had to involve a commitment of finances and personnel.

The training is provided in part through two-hour modules offered on a variety of topics, and designed to meet the levels of need: Foundational, for individuals seeking to be commissioned catechists; Master, for catechists seeking master certification; and Advanced for ongoing formation after master certification.

As part of the flexibility incorporated into the Alive in Christ, individuals can gain this training in a variety of ways, including written material and videos people can take home and complete on their own; individual study with their catechetical leaders; parish and regional workshops; and day-long gatherings sponsored

by the diocese during which a variety of courses are offered.

In keeping with the idea of flexibility, Britton added, people attending day-long events can pick and choose what and how many courses to take so they are not locked into being present all day.

Mary Kay Oberst, director of faith formation at Rochester's St. Ambrose Church, who helped to write some of the Alive in Christ curriculum, led a foundational level session on "The Creed" at Christ the King Church Sept. 14 that was sponsored by the parishes in her region.

"I think one of the best parts about (Alive in Christ) is they learn they are not working in a vacuum; they're out meeting people like themselves," Oberst said.

Kukiela, meanwhile, is now readying for a Jan. 23 Finger Lakes regional gathering at Sacred Heart Parish in Auburn. She helped to arrange such an event in Auburn last January, which 63 catechists attended.

Such joint efforts by parishes and regions are essential to Alive in Christ, Mancini noted.

"It's obvious no single parish can implement catechist formation by themselves," she said. "The key to this is cooperation."

Besides encouraging cooperation, Alive in Christ has drawn attention from other dioceses, which requested copies, Britton acknowledged.

"Our process has gone to every other diocese in the state — at their request," she observed.

Feeding a hunger

Britton said when she was preparing to create Alive in Christ, she found that diocesan catechists were looking for ongoing training opportunities.

"I found a real energy, and a real hunger," Britton said. "They are committed to what they are doing, and they look for opportunities to learn more about their faith, how to catechize well, how to share their faith."

On a practical level, Kukiela said, "If you don't have the answers for the kids, it's not something (the kids) are going to buy into."

Oberst noted that it's important to continue formation not only for gaining knowledge, but for the example it sets for the students.

"It is important that they see that we are still learning, that we are still growing in faith," she said.

"As a person grows in their faith, they share that with the kids in the classroom," Ayer said. "In 14 years I have never felt that I knew everything there is to know about this."

Despite the array of opportunities, it is still difficult to make sure everyone is able to take advantage of them, catechetical leaders acknowledged.

"The challenge of all catechist formation from a practical, pragmatic point of view is people are volunteers," Ayer explained. "They do feel a calling to the ministry ... but the challenge is you are (working) with busy people who have careers, who have families."

"It depends on how willing a catechetical leader is to encourage them to go," Oberst suggested. "I think that places where there's a lot of support from the pastor, from their parish, from their catechetical leaders, you're going to see a more positive response from their catechists."

Meanwhile, Britton said that because of the flexibility provided through home study, printed materials and videos, and the low cost of diocesan and parish course offerings, formation opportunities are available for even financially strapped or geographically isolated parishes.

Mancini said that ultimately what the bishops' document and the diocese's program make clear is that ongoing formation is essential to good catechesis.

"It's a vital ministry in the church," she declared. "You have to be well-trained, well-prepared to be effective."

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