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Faith formation

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great. It really is."

On 'FIRE'

In the Diocese of Rochester, a number of parishes provide some form of family-based faith formation, according to Karen Rinefierd, the diocese's planning group liaison and former coordinator of young adult, adult and family faith formation.

In some cases, family programs supplement the traditional weekly child-only classroom sessions that the majority of parishes provide. In some others, they are offered as an alternative option parents can choose.

"Even with the more traditional programs we're having a recognition that if the parents are not involved it's not going to work," Rinefierd said. "There's a lot more awareness that if you are going to work with kids, you're going to have to work with their parents as well."

For about eight years now the diocese has been encouraging parishes to provide family faith formation programs as a religious education option, Rinefierd noted. She even offers them a four-page description of family faith formation.

"Family faith formation is an alternative, intergenerational religious education program in which catechesis is planned with the needs of the entire family—as individuals and as a unit—in mind," it begins.

"Family education is suitable for all kinds of families who want to build on their own unique strengths and grow together as a family," it continues. "It provides opportunities for different-aged family members to share together in a situation where everyone is both teacher and learner."

Among the advantages of such a program, the description notes, is that it provides an alternative for families who find it difficult getting their children to weekly sessions, it helps parents with their own faith development and encourages adult faith formation, and it helps to make clearer the connection between faith formation that happens in the home and that going on in the religious education program and the parish in general.

Rinefierd pointed out that family faith formation developed in part because of the changing nature of society.

At one time, Rinefierd explained, "school and social life centered on the parish. People had the Baltimore Catechism. They had basically the same training." Thus there was a pervasive Catholic environment that reinforced faith lessons.

But parish and Catholic school are rarely now the center of a family's social life, and other than religious education classes, the family is often the only consistent source of faith formation. In recent years the emphasis has been that parents are the primary educators of children.

Indeed, Vatican II's "Declaration on Christian Education," proclaims: "Parents must be acknowledged as the first and fore-

most educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it."

Religious educator and author Kathleen Chesto was among the pioneers of family faith formation. Based on her own experiences in Southbury, Conn., in the late 1970s, she developed a program that involved family members of all ages. Her model of catechesis is known as Family-Centered Intergenerational Religious Education (FIRE).

Rinefierd noted that many family faith formation models in the Rochester Diocese are based in part on FIRE.

A typical FIRE-type session might include Scriptures, hands-on projects involving parents and children, small group discussions involving all age groups, a prayer or worship experience and materials to take home for ongoing study and discussions.

But parishes add their own touches. Hinkley noted, for example, that she has arranged for parishioners to dress as saints and to visit family sessions in character. At another session that focused on Psalms, she had participants make and play musical instruments out of toilet paper rolls.

Family faith formation provides common experiences and common language for the families, and thus can help foster ongoing discussions, Rinefierd noted.

"I honestly believe one of the virtues of it is kids see their parents involved and hear about their parents' faith more than they might ever have," Rinefierd noted.

Family faith formation allows the parents to rediscover or learn more about their faith, advocates claim.

"I think a lot of them find it's things they knew but forgot," Brooks observed.

"A lot of times they surprise themselves about what they don't know," Hinkley said.

Variations

Rinefierd pointed out that parishes have developed a number of ways to provide family faith formation.

One such variation is that used at Rochester's St. Ambrose Church.

There, most of the approximately 150 children in the religious education program attend a two-week summer session during which the basic curriculum is covered. During the rest of the year, the parish offers family faith formation gatherings.

Mary Kay Oberst, St. Ambrose's director of faith formation, acknowledged that the parish adopted the new model four years ago, "mostly out of frustration."

Previously, she explained, the parish offered a traditional religious education pro-



gram on Monday nights. But because of schedule conflicts and illness, children — and sometimes even teachers — often missed classes.

The parish also offered an annual summer Bible camp that had proven successful, Oberst continued.

Parish staff decided to build on that success and offer the two-week summer religious education sessions.

The family component — the sessions during the year — was included, Oberst explained, because "we wanted the continuity, otherwise you're just talking about those weeks in the summer."

Moreover, she added, "I strongly believe that parents, that everybody needs ongoing formation. Our underlying hope is that parents will say, 'I didn't know that.'"

The program does contain options. If children are unable to attend the summer session, their parents can home school them after receiving instruction from the parish. And families have a choice of Sunday or Monday family sessions.

In addition, families can take advantage of programs offered at nearby St. James and St. John the Evangelist parishes — including traditional weekly classes.

St. Catherine's in Mendon, meanwhile, offers both a traditional classroom program — with approximately 200 students — and a monthly family program involving about 30 families. The family program itself includes options: parish sessions, or smaller home-group sessions.

"I don't think one size fits all anymore," Brooks said. "Even in the traditional program, we try to work some intergenerational sessions in around the seasons of the church year."

The program also includes service projects, such as preparing food baskets or working at a soup kitchen.

Building community

Similarly, St. Joseph's offers both a family faith formation program, which involves 110 families, and a traditional classroom program.

The family faith formation program involves small clusters of three to four families each. The clusters meet once or twice a month in homes, with the parents leading the sessions. Arnold provides training for the parents.

In addition, the small family groups gather several times a year for large group sessions and social activities, "so they come out of their little cluster gatherings so they are part of a larger community."

The St. Joseph's program also includes social ministry projects such as assisting at the Ronald McDonald House in Rochester.

The clusters have become part of many parishioner's lives, Arnold noted.

"I've heard families say, 'Gee, we've built up a little community now,'" Arnold observed. "Kids have picked other parents from the program to be their sponsors for confirmation."

At the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, even more options are available.

Families can choose among a traditional classroom program; a family program that meets about five times a year and holds a yearly family retreat; a program that includes breaking up into smaller age-related groups during each session; and a monthly family formation program.

All told, Hinkley estimated that between 75 and 100 families have chosen the family faith formation options.

One of the advantages of the family programs is that they foster adult education. Previously, she acknowledged, "Every time we tried an adult ed program, it flopped."

Not only do the parents learn from the packets she provides, they learn from their own children, Hinkley observed.

"We all learn together, because the kids come out with things we never thought of," she remarked.

More effort

Despite their enthusiasm for the family faith programs, advocates acknowledge that such program require more effort than traditional program — both from the religious education staff and from the parents — and a strong sense of commitment.

"This is a lot of work — and I wouldn't do it without my committee," Hinkley said. "The reason we do it is so that religion is something that's happening in the home."

Rinefierd has cited several weaknesses with the approach — above and beyond the amount of extra work it entails. She noted that few of the models have been successful at including adolescents, and that parents do not always complete the at-home activities with children. She also pointed out that family programs have to be carefully planned to make sure that they cover all content areas in the diocesan religious education curriculum.

Moreover, due to the comfort level of many people — and parishes — with the traditional classroom form of religious education, advocates acknowledge that family faith formation will not become the norm any time soon.

Still, Rinefierd noted, "I think there's been a fundamental shift in believing that you can't just deal with kids in hour-long blocks of time and expect to pass on the faith."

"All parents want the best for their children," Brooks said. "I've seen a real desire in recent years — families want to teach their children values."

"I've been involved in religious education for 25 years," Brooks said. "I've always struggled with how to involve the families. I think (family faith formation is) the best way. I truly believe in it."

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