

Story by
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Talking up youth ministry in Livingston County

While attending the diocesan Junior High Youth Rally in Seneca Falls on June 10, Annie McCue began to realize just how much ground her youth minister, Mike Sauter, actually covers.

"There were people from all over, and he seemed to know a lot of them," said Annie, 13.

Perhaps this observation is tied in with the fact that Sauter is youth ministry coordinator not only for Annie's parish, St. Mary's in Geneseo, but four additional Catholic churches in western Livingston County as well. They are St. Patrick's, Mount Morris; Holy Angels, Nunda; St. Thomas Aquinas, Leicester; and St. Lucy, Retsof.

Sauter, who lives in Hemlock, said his closest drive to any of the five churches is 25 minutes, to Geneseo. On the other end of the scale, it takes nearly an hour for him to get to Nunda. Along with his full-time youth ministry position, Sauter's schedule must also factor in his wife and four small children, including a baby born in mid-June. Sauter even milk cows one morning per week for extra money.

Annie remarked that, when she learned of Sauter's range of responsibilities, "I was, like, amazed."

Being tight on time and long on distances to travel, Sauter has taken many innovative approaches for successful youth ministry since he began his newly created full-time position in September 1998. Chief among his initiatives is to devise group outings that unite all five western Livingston churches. Past events have included an Advent retreat; summer service project; ropes course; and "Movie Madness" night.

"I've tried to have one big event per month," Sauter said. He said that the Advent retreat, which also included the youth group at St. Agnes in Avon, attracted 40 young Catholics; and the summer service project drew 25.

Last summer, Annie said, she teamed up with youths from other western Livingston churches to perform the four-day service project. She traveled to Mount Morris to help scrape and paint the parish-center building at St. Patrick's Church. Sauter noted that youths worked in the mornings and spent the afternoons enjoying such leisure activities as canoeing, boating, hiking and horse-

back riding.

"I loved it because I love meeting new people. It was a great opportunity to help people, and meet people at the same time," Annie said.

Jayne Carlock, also, said she has expanded her social network since she took part in some of western Livingston's joint activities coordinated by Sauter.

"He introduced me to a whole lot of people. It gave me the chance to make new friends with people all over the county," said Jayme, 15, from St. Patrick's in Mount Morris.

Jayne commented that she favors the idea of expanding youth ministry beyond her own parish.

"You get to experience more things; (otherwise) it gets kind of boring after a while. You want to meet new people," she remarked.

Being in a rural parish, Chris Lentner pointed out, makes youth ministry challenging because the number of parishioners can be limited and the community is spread out. Chris said he is among only a small number of teens regularly involved in youth ministry at his churches, St. Thomas Aquinas in Leicester and St. Lucy in Retsof.

Yet Chris, 18, remarked that Sauter is making the best use of resources.

"I think he's very good at organizing events and getting kids involved in church-related activities," said Chris, 18. "He seems to relate to children better than most youth coordinators I have encountered."

Sauter said he relies heavily on e-mail to connect with his western Livingston teens, explaining that he can't be physically present at their church or school events. He chats with teens individually by e-mail, and also sends out youth-ministry correspondence via his growing list of teens' e-mail addresses.

In addition, Sauter said, he hopes to expand youth ministry offerings in his area by developing parent volunteer groups at each western

Livingston church.

Sauter's creativity tapped into an even wider audience through "The God Guys," a teen-oriented radio show that was co-hosted by Sauter and Corey Keyes, pastor of West Bloomfield



Congregational Church. The show involved a combination of banter among Sauter, Keyes, teen studio guests, and listeners who called in.

"God Guys" topics centered on religious issues, and Christian rock music was a staple of the program. Sauter and Keyes also mixed in humorous dialogue, such as the episode where they chatted about palindromes (words spelled the same

both forwards and backwards) throughout the one-hour show.

"The God Guys" made its debut with a few segments in the summer of 1999 and, with grant money from the Diocese of Rochester, ran for five weeks this spring on WYSL-AM in Avon. It went off the air in mid-June due to financial constraints and limited availability of the co-hosts, but Sauter said he hopes to bring it back in the near future.

Jayne, who served as a studio guest this spring, said she enjoyed the format of "The God Guys." She believes that with good promotion and a long-term commitment, "A lot of people would listen."

Overall, Sauter is pleased with the development of youth ministry over the massive geographic area that he serves.

"You learn from the successes and failures. It just takes some time," Sauter remarked. "Rural youth ministry is challenging enough, and then you're combining five parishes."

"But we're off to a good start."

**COMING NEXT WEEK:
Liturgical ministry**



Starting the June 11 airing of "The God Guys" with a quick prayer, from left to right: Amanda Pickering, Mike Sauter, Corey Keyes and Wesley Pickering. Sauter, youth ministry coordinator of five churches in western Livingston County, and Keyes, pastor of West Bloomfield Congregational Church, were co-hosts of the weekly radio show, which aired on Sunday nights over WYSL-AM in Avon. The show recently was suspended, but Sauter hopes to obtain funding to revive it.

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