

Fresh faces in liturgy

For many years, Jamie Abaid said, she saw only adults in such roles as lectors and eucharistic ministers at her parish, St. Mary of the Lake in Ontario.

"There were never any teen liturgical ministers. I never saw anybody my age up there," recalled Jamie, 18.

Jamie was understandably surprised when, four years ago, she was asked to become a regularly scheduled lector for weekend Masses. Before that, her only lecturing experience had been at her confirmation and a teen retreat.

"At first I refused to do it. First of all, I was scared that I'd be looked down upon. I didn't think anybody would take me seriously," Jamie admitted.

But the adults turned out to be very supportive, Jamie said, and she continues to lector to this day. In fact, liturgical involvement by the parish's teens has now grown to include eucharistic ministers, greeters and ushers as well.

St. Mary of the Lake could be considered a model parish by diocesan officials who, beginning about four years back, sought to greatly expand the volume of young people in liturgical roles.

Michael Theisen, diocesan coordinator of youth ministry, recalled that he and Joan Workmaster, director of liturgy, set out to research church law and see if a minimum age existed for liturgical ministry. The only stipulation, based on their findings, is that lay involvement "is rooted in the sacrament of baptism," Theisen said.

"No age requirement was ever found," Theisen added. "A very common misnomer is that people have to be 18, or have to be confirmed."

The diocese offered workshops in 1996 to inform youths and parish leaders on opportunities as lectors, eucharistic ministers, ushers, altar servers, greeters/hospitality ministers, musicians and liturgical dancers. The workshops included training. One year later, Bishop Matthew H. Clark presented "Gifted to Serve," a set of guidelines that called all diocesan parishes to the full integration of young people into liturgical ministry.

Theisen said the guidelines have been "a huge momentum builder." He noted that "some parishes were way ahead of the guidelines even before they came out," whereas the majority "used them as a springboard to renewal of their liturgy by getting 'fresh faces' into the existing lay ministry roles."



St. Mary of the Lake lector Jamie Abaid processes at the end of 11 a.m. Mass on July 9. Jamie, 18, has lectored at St. Mary's for the last four years.



Jamie presents the first reading at Ontario's St. Mary of the Lake Church on July 9.

a now-defunct liturgical dancing troupe at her parish. Deacon Jerry Skerrett, pastoral associate at St. Mary of the Lake in Ontario, said that the 1997 "Gifted to Serve" guidelines coincided with his parish's increase in teen liturgical involvement.

"At about the time the concern was raised, it showed us we should be looking downward in age," said Deacon Skerrett, who trains lectors at St. Mary of the Lake. "We can spot the ones who have the talent, the ability and level of maturity. Once their talent is identified, we say, 'We think you'd be a good lector.' Not everyone accepts, but for the most part they do."

Deacon Skerrett credited Jamie and another teen, Amanda Nagle — "Both do an excellent job," he said — with having the courage to become lectors so that other teens would feel comfortable in volunteering for such roles.

Jamie acknowledged that her presence on the altar can be valuable role-modeling for younger parishioners.

"I think it sets a real good example for middle-school ages, who haven't been confirmed and haven't been to a retreat yet," she said. "At middle-school age they can get bored, but if they see other young people up there, it sparks their interest."

Patrick Wall, 18 — who has lectored at St. Mary's Church in Bath since he was in junior-high school — said that teen liturgical ministers are an impressive sight for older people as well.

"It shows a lot of the adults that the youth does care, and is active," Patrick said.

"They see that younger people are involved, and they like that," agreed LeAnne Burke, 18, from Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Greece.

LeAnne got involved in eucharistic ministry about a year ago, after parish staff told her that they were seeking young people for liturgical roles.

"I was a little nervous at first, but I like it now," she said. "You're giving part of Jesus to the people, and you're sharing in part of the Mass with them."

LeAnne encourages other young Catholics to view liturgical ministry as a vehicle for helping their parish while also expanding their faith.

"You're going to get better involved. And you'll understand the different parts of the Mass better; you'll take it more to heart," she said.

Meanwhile, Jamie said that lectoring "helps me to understand the Bible, and inspires me to read it. I never used to."

Patrick said that he, also, has a heightened awareness of Scripture when he lectures.

"In the pews you might hear it, but you might not get it," he observed.

However, Theisen said there's still room for improvement, remarking that some parishes have been slow to embrace the guidelines and others have ignored them.

"I'd certainly like to see every church have their youth fully integrated into the regular schedule of their weekend liturgies, and not just save them for special youth Masses or youth-oriented celebrations such as confirmation," he commented.

Adrienne Peltz, of St. Mary's Parish in Auburn, feels that youths deserve to be treated on an equal level when it comes to liturgical ministry.

"I think each person should have an opportunity to be a part of the Mass and contribute to it," said Adrienne, 15, who has played the flute for about a year at weekend Masses. She is also a longtime altar server, and was part of

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