

CONTINUED...

Youth ministry

Continued from page 1

Barbara Pedeville, diocesan director of recruitment and staff services, said there currently are not enough interested, qualified candidates from which to draw.

"I think that the average parishioner still doesn't see this as a viable career choice. We've got to do a better job in recruiting, bringing to the forefront the call for lay ministry in the future," she said. "Our futuristic need for lay leadership is at an acute level right now."

Pedeville added that youth ministry is far from the only area in which such problems exist. She also said a larger pool of candidates is needed for other paid parish staff positions — pastoral associates, liturgists, musicians and faith formation coordinators.

Sue Drexel, youth minister at St. Joseph's-St. William in Livonia and Conesus, said those individuals who do get involved in youth ministry end up sacrificing time above and beyond the call of duty.

"Part of the deal is, we want so much for these kids and we're always trying to make it better," Drexel said. "I think every youth minister extends themselves."

But Mary Carol Wall, youth minister at St. Mary's Church in Bath, said her love for children and the Catholic faith make the challenges all worthwhile.

"What I receive is so far beyond what I give," Wall said. "My faith is enlarged and expanded, watching the kids give, and share, and speak of their faith ... I have received much from these teens."

An emerging need

The need for lay Catholic youth ministers began emerging in the 1970s, according to Theisen. Up until that point, he said, elements of youth ministry had existed through CYO programs, Catholic high schools and young parish priests. But Catholic-school enrollment and priest availability have declined, while at the same time adolescents' needs have changed as divorce and two-income families have become more commonplace.

Theisen also noted that the Catholic Church's relationship to adolescents has become better defined. "We needed to create a specific focus for young people that spoke to them not on a children's or adult level, but on their level," he remarked.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark looks back on Pope John Paul II's visit to Denver for World Youth Day 1993 as a catalyst for growing awareness of youth ministry's importance. That event — along with subsequent World Youth Days every two years (Toronto will be the host site in 2002) — have put the spotlight on youth ministry.

"Those were very important milestones," Bishop Clark said.

Theisen pointed out that youth ministry was stressed during the diocesan Synod in the early 1990s and the pastoral planning process that began in 1997.

"Parishes that didn't have youth ministry said, 'I want that.' Those that did have it said, 'I want to keep that,'" Theisen remarked.

According to statistics provided by Theisen, approximately 50 paid full- and part-time youth ministers are working in the diocese — well up from 15 in 1993. Thirty youth ministers also are catechetical leaders, up from 10 in 1993; and 25 are volunteer youth ministers, up from 10.

Typical activities conducted by youth ministers include faith-sharing meetings; service projects in the parish; community service at nursing homes and inner-city soup kitchens; recreational offerings such as softball leagues, movie nights and trips to amusement parks; and youth-group fundraisers such as car washes and flower sales.

Many youth groups also collaborate with neighboring parishes and participate in diocesanwide programs. Solid attendance is prevalent at such diocesan events as conventions, retreats and leadership training. And last November, 500 diocesan teens

and 115 adults — including Bishop Clark — attended the National Catholic Youth Conference in St. Louis. Rochester sent the largest contingent of any diocese outside Missouri.

Bishop Clark is beginning the final year of a three-year term as liaison between the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He commented that the Rochester Diocese's strong national reputation in youth ministry played a part in his being asked to represent both national organizations.

"It's a compliment to what the people in this diocese are doing," Bishop Clark said. "I think we're recognized as people who

ters should be highly talented, highly qualified people.

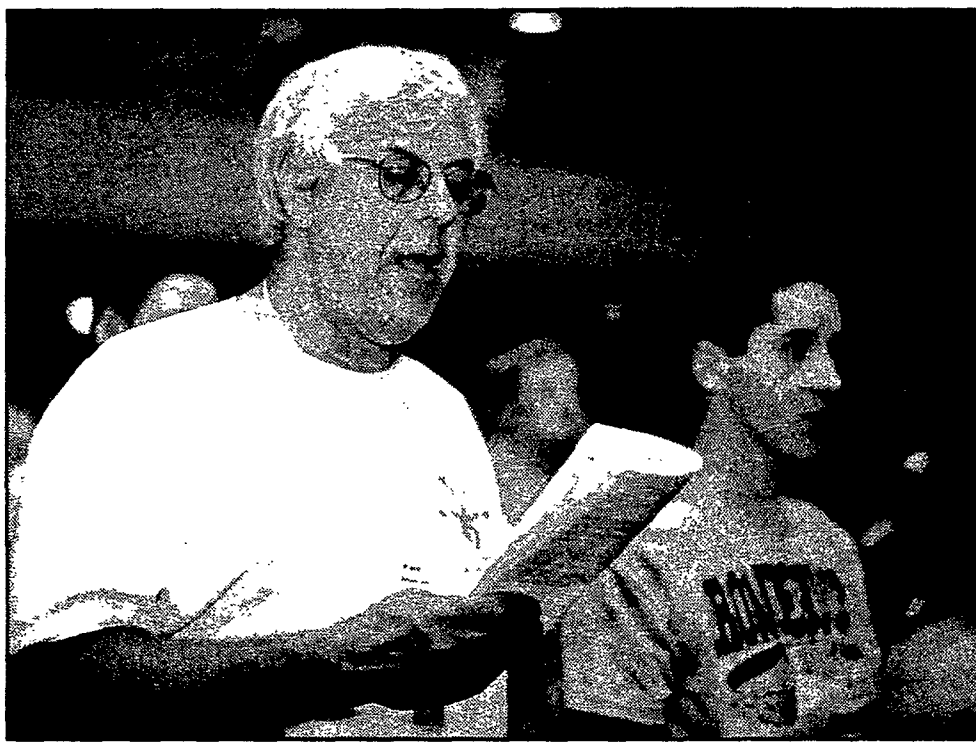
"It's a profession," said Orman, who was Holy Ghost's youth minister for two and one-half years.

But Orman also said that adults who pursue youth ministry should be prepared not to get rich. "The key word is 'ministry.' When we go into it, we realize we're not going to make \$50,000," she commented.

Yet Pedeville countered that there is a somewhat false perception that church ministry positions all carry low wages.

"I think we are as competitive with salary and benefits as with other non-profits, both here and across the country," she stated.

On the other hand, Pedeville acknowl-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Paul Anastasi (left), youth minister at Irondequoit's Christ the King Parish since 1990, prays with parishioner Ian Fettinger at the Diocesan Youth Convention.

take their commitment to youth seriously in our church."

Most parishes in Monroe County currently have a paid or volunteer youth minister. Theisen said that recently the number of youth-ministry positions has grown significantly in the Genesee Valley and Finger Lakes regions, and that he hopes for similar growth in the Southern Tier.

One of the key qualifications for youth ministers is that "they have to be knowledgeable and grounded in their faith," said Theisen, who added that he has interviewed many applicants who weren't hired because they "didn't have a clue" about some basics of the Catholic faith.

Along with a love for young people, Theisen said, youth ministers also must be able to work smoothly with parents and volunteers in the parish. "That part is overlooked," he said. "If you can't do this, you're not going to survive long."

Many current youth ministers came into their positions by starting as parish adult volunteers, he said. Several others are recent college graduates, and in some cases are still attending college.

Those involved with youth ministry are strongly encouraged, but not required, to take a certification course through St. Bernard's Institute. The diocese also periodically offers BUOY (Building Up Our Youth), a five-hour training session for adult youth-ministry volunteers.

However, Theisen said only a small number of colleges offer youth ministry as a major or even as an elective course. Thus youth ministers coming out of college tend to hold degrees in social work, counseling, education or religious studies. In all likelihood, they were also active in their campus ministry programs.

"The struggle is getting people who are qualified and who look at this as a career for the long term," Pedeville said. "The ideal is to have a youth minister who is going to remain at a parish at least six or seven years."

Laurie Orman, who vacated her full-time position at Holy Ghost Church in Gates in June to become the parish's coordinator of Christian formation, said that youth minis-

tered that parishes do not always offer salaries within the diocese's recommended salary guidelines, especially if a youth minister has no prior experience. She explained that it's not that parishes don't want to pay more, but that budgetary constraints may come into play.

One way parishes find they can afford youth ministers is to combine forces with nearby parishes. Positions in which the minister covers more than one parish are on the rise, Theisen said, due to the pastoral planning process' focus on regionalized ministry.

Linda Mehlenbacher, for example, began in youth ministry as a volunteer at St. Pius V Parish in Cohocton, and later added Sacred Heart in Perkinsville. Last year she began a part-time, paid position at those two churches, as well as St. Joseph's in Wayland.

"It's gone very well," said Mehlenbacher, whose program includes 78 youths in grades seven to 12. "One reason why is that all three (parish) communities go to one school (Wayland-Cohocton)."

Ministry, marathon hours

Could the rigors of the job be keeping potential youth ministers away? Youth ministers respond with a chuckle when asked if they work only the amount of hours for which they're contracted.

"Of course not," said Mehlenbacher, whose position calls for her to serve three churches in different communities — all in 15 hours per week.

In his 1994 book *Survival in Youth Ministry*, Robert J. McCarty, executive director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, cited a poll of more than 100 youth ministers on why they left their positions. The top three reasons: burnout, 76 percent; lack of results, 49 percent; and low pay, 29 percent.

Theresa Fantone appears to fall under reason No. 1. Fantone, the youth minister at St. Mary of the Assumption in Scottsville, from 1992-95, said her 25-hours-per-week position did not allow sufficient time to maintain a quality program that involved 70 youths.

"Yeah, right," she said. "Twenty-five hours? You're working 50 hours."

Much as she loved her work, Fantone said there came a point where her job was putting a severe strain on her home life.

"My kids were young, and (youth ministry) was nights and holidays and weekends. I felt I was with everyone else's kids more than my own," said Fantone, whose children were ages 6, 7 and 12 at the time. "The compromises I was making — I was really beginning to test what was important. I was eating and sleeping it."

After leaving her position in 1995, Fantone stayed involved with diocesan youth events, but no longer ministers at St. Mary's. The current youth minister is Dennis Reno.

Drexel, part-time youth minister at St. Joseph/St. William in Livonia and Conesus since 1996, said she recently began to pare back her schedule. She is contracted for 20 to 25 hours per week — but a few months ago, she said, "I figured out I was working an average of 40 hours per week. That was that point where I said 'Whoa, I'm working full-time!'"

Drexel said her plight reflects that of many youth ministers who work well past their time requirement; she knows of several who typically "donate" 10 or so hours per week. Speaking during the Diocesan Youth Convention in early August, Drexel observed that the time she was spending at the all-weekend event alone would exceed a week's scheduled hours.

"It's just not possible to make it up the following week. I often thought I'd make up time during the summer, but there's Bible camp, programming, staff meetings," she said. "And you still have parents show up at 9 a.m. to talk about their youth. Because I live in the community, I'm more accessible."

Based on her experience, Fantone advised current youth ministers not to "try to complete every project." She suggested forming a team of adults so that the youth minister doesn't feel all the responsibility rests on her/his shoulders.

Wall, from St. Mary's in Bath, noted that adult volunteers not only take the load off, they also enable more programming to be offered and serve as potential future youth ministers as well.

"There is a greatly increased chance of continuity of ministry," Wall remarked. "Other people know, if not all the ropes, at least a variety of them."

Many rewards

Despite the challenges of youth ministry, Drexel said there are powerful reasons for staying in the field.

"The reason I do this is, this is where I belong ... the kids are wonderful. It's so exciting, seeing kids learning to pray out loud," Drexel said.

Mehlenbacher said her job allows her to work with adolescents who might struggle in other social settings. She also enjoys attending her youth-group members' sporting events, cheering them on.

"You love what you do. I want to be a part of these kids' lives," Mehlenbacher said. "It's that presence that is so important."

Some parish youth ministers find their work so gratifying that they perform it strictly on a volunteer basis. At St. Felix/St. Francis in Clifton Springs and Phelps, Jodie Wilbur and Kay VanDeusen coordinate a group of high-schoolers who attend meetings every other week, perform community-service projects, and get together for recreational events. In addition, Wilbur and VanDeusen brought 12 teens to the Diocesan Youth Convention.

Wilbur said she logs about 15 hours per week — and the fact she is unpaid doesn't faze her.

"Not at all. That's not what I'm here for," Wilbur said. "Just to see (the youths') faith grow, their self-esteem pick up — that's reward in itself."

EDITORS' NOTE: Staff writer Mike Latorna was the part-time youth minister at St. James Parish in Irondequoit from 1996 to 1999.