

DIOCESAN NEWS

'Excellent Catholic Parishes' lists five in diocese

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant editor

Pastors of Rochester diocesan parishes listed in *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices*, aren't exactly sure how they came to be listed but are pleasantly surprised.

St. Francis Parish of Phelps is one of the 308 parishes singled out of nearly 20,000 in the country. The new book, by Paul Wilkes, cites St. Francis for encouraging lay involvement and being hospitable. It also cites its efforts to move the Gospel into the workplace.

"That's what it's all about, isn't it?" Father Edward Dillon, pastor, said simply.

Others listed were St. Mary's in Rochester, St. Michael's in Penn Yan, St. Joseph's in Penfield and St. Francis Solanus in Interlaken.

Of those, St. Joseph's was cited for "Strong faith-formation programs; jail ministry; workfare assistance" and St. Mary's for "Ministries to business/corporate community; strong music programs; various social ministries well and reach out into their communities," he said. "We put no litmus test on them."

"We would never say we have all the excellent churches in America, but every one we have is an excellent church," Wilkes told the *Catholic Courier*.

"What we were looking for were churches that quite simply honor and serve God, serve congregants well and reach out into their communities," he said. "We put no litmus test on them."

Wilkes spoke from Wilmington, N.C., where he teaches writing at the University of North Carolina. His books include *The Good Enough Catholic: A Guide for the Perplexed*. He wrote, directed and co-produced "Merton" for PBS.

Wilkes and two other researchers began researching Catholic parishes about 2½ years ago with a Lilly Endowment grant.

Wilkes had given a pre-Lenten mission at a church in New Jersey. "I loved being there," he wrote. The parish was "so alive" and friendly, its programs varied and useful. People in their 20s packed the services.

"Only when I returned to my home parish and a certain sadness came over me did I realize the dramatic difference between that parish and my own," he wrote. And so began the project of finding excellent churches and making them known to others that might adapt successful aspects.

Wilkes contacted experts in parish renewal, Catholic newspaper editors and various specialists. He also viewed a burgeoning number of Web sites.

The *Courier* was sent a form but declined to single out any parishes. Bill Pickett, diocesan director of pastoral planning, and Karen Rinefierd, planning group liaison, were not surveyed and did not know anyone who was.

"We are under a confessional seal," Wilkes said, but added that he personally knew some of the clergy and parishes in the overall list.

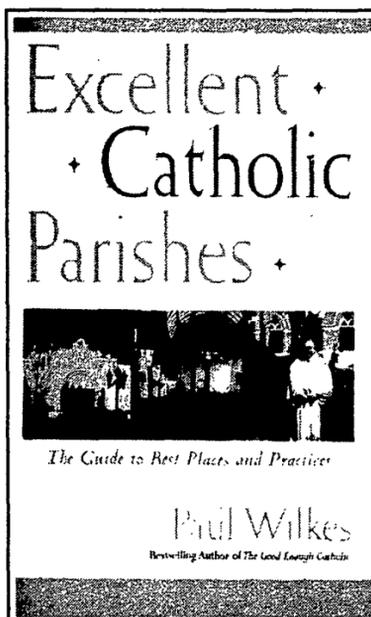
Rinefierd raved about the book, however, released in March.

"The book is fantastic," she said. "It really is one that probably anybody in lay leadership or an actual professional position should read."

"It has tons of ideas," she said, adding that she had encouraged parishes to read about evangelization methods in it.

One of the book's highlighted parishes, Holy Family in Inverness, Ill., was featured during a workshop at the Planning Group Leadership Day March 31 in Waterloo.

The 1,800-seat church has 120 ministries, a 28-person staff and about 10,000 parishioners — and only one priest in residence, Father Patrick Brennan. It was founded after the Chicago Archdiocese saw the appeal of the nearby Willowcreek Community Church, a nondenominational church with mostly ex-Catholics.



"No one complains about the shortage of priests at Holy Family," Wilkes stated in *Excellent Parishes*. "In fact, Father Brennan has repeatedly said he would sooner have a committed, competent, faith-filled lay person than simply another Roman collar around the neck of a fellow priest who did not share the vision of Holy Family."

The first pastor became "exhausted by 100-hour work weeks" and left.

When Father Brennan came, he insisted on a family ministry that involves all members of the family; small communities for faith-sharing; and adult education. He has radio and cable TV shows. Ministries run the gamut of support groups for separated and divorced, grieving, domestic violence victims, and people who need healing after an adulterous affair; praying the rosary; a men-only group; Knights of Columbus. A

counseling clinic is open 12 hours a day.

"What the vast majority of Catholic parishes in our country lack is not priests or resources, but vision, energy and hope," Wilkes wrote.

In researching *Excellent Parishes*, Wilkes wrote, common traits emerged: The churches acted as missionary outposts; maintained an edge; had a "habit of being," from a warm welcome on the phone to relevant homilies and exciting religious education; were forgiving; were innovative; and willing to take risks and make mistakes.

"Here one may find built-in community, acceptance, safety, growth and spirituality," Wilkes wrote.

The parishes apply rules "intelligently." "While they know and appreciate that they are part of a larger, worldwide church with codes and dogmas and laws, they also realize that their unique situation within their community requires them to apply church rules intelligently," the book stated. "They are not rebels; they practice a certain informed pragmatism."

The book quotes a woman grateful to a priest who allowed rice wafers for her daughter who has a wheat intolerance, despite such a provision for Eucharist being uncanonical.

"I hate to say it, but what would Jesus do?" Wilkes said. "Say 'I can't be present in rice. I can only be present in wheat?'"

Ideology and church battles have little place in excellent parishes, he wrote.

"Excellent parishes are operated with the realization that most people will never have dealings with the Vatican or with a chancery office; people will form their opinion of what the Catholic Church stands for within the local parish."

Wilkes has invited all the congregations in the book to a Pastoral Summit May 30-June 1 in New Orleans to share ideas and experiences. For more information, he encouraged viewing the Web site, www.pastoralsummit.org.

Planning groups

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While the first round of PPNM relied on both qualitative and limited quantitative data, the bishop said "there was no attempt to 'norm' this information." The diocese now needs a "standard approach to evaluating the vitality of our parishes and faith communities. Should we continue to assign priest pastors or pastoral administrators to parishes that have not been able to generate at least median levels of vitality? If all parishes cannot be retained, are the least developed to be discontinued? Or, are the least developed to become our priority?"

"At some point," Bishop Clark continued, "we will have to ask the question: If we cannot support all parishes, which ones will no longer be supported?" He said one promising framework through which to assess parish vitality and viability is to use "indicators derived from the various aspects of the four-fold mission of the church (word, worship, community and service) as well as the parish's ability to sustain itself financially and physically."

The full text of the bishop's address appears on Pages 8 and 9 of this issue.

Following his talk, participants broke into small groups to generate suggestions on the design of the next round of pastoral planning, and to discuss what the bishop and Pastoral Center could do to assist them in their planning efforts.

A concern repeated in the small-group reports was the need for greater and continuous communications — including greater use of communications technologies — not only between the Pastoral Center and planning groups but also between the bishop and parishioners throughout the diocese. Suggestions that Bishop Clark's talk be widely disseminated, both in print and on videotape, met with applause.

"We also would encourage that your words be spoken in every parish and at



Michael Fay of St. Catherine of Siena in Addison (center), and Carlos Chaldes of St. Patrick's in Victor, laugh along with Bishop Matthew H. Clark, at a joke made during a workshop.

every planning group," said Donna Fannon, representing planners from Tompkins County and the Rochester area. "People don't really believe the statistics, and we need to look for ways to have those words said over and over again in a variety of venues."

Participants also seemed to welcome the prospect of receiving objective vitality and viability criteria from the diocese.

"We believe in this second round of planning we need some more top-down, directive leadership from the diocese, not to dictate but to provide some firm direction and standards so that the necessary changes can be made, obviously with a full opportunity for dialogue," said Peter Spinelli of the Pittsford-Mendon Planning Group, whose small group also included planners from Irondequoit and Northern Steuben/Livingston.

Barbara Levatic of Ithaca concurred. "We'd like to know that standard for vitality that (Bishop Clark) mentioned and make everybody in our groups aware of it so that

we have a goal of what to work for and what you're looking for."

Numerous small-group representatives emphasized the importance of the diocesan liaisons — Karen Rinefierd and Casey Lopata — in the work of planning groups.

"Because people are so happy with the work that the diocesan liaisons have

been doing with the planning groups, we'd like you all to consider whether we need more resources in the diocese to work with those planning groups — more Karens, more Caseys — and also where those additional resources should be based, perhaps regionally based rather than in Rochester," remarked Joanne Florino of Immaculate Conception, Ithaca.

Another need expressed by participants was for training of planning group members. "We need more practice in discussion," said Michele Bertot, pastoral associate of Holy Name, representing a small group of East Greece/Charlotte planners. "We need to look at how we talk about differences in our cultures which may be in evidence in our planning groups, the possibility of reconfiguring, how to bring others along who may not be used to discussing ideas that are new to them."

Sensitivity to the feelings of parishioners and finding ways to help them work through grief was another concern that planners cited. "We feel that it's very im-

portant to have compassion for each individual in our parishes, whether it be the young people, the old people and our priests, especially with the declining number of priests," observed April Pettingill, representing St. Mary's in Waterloo, where she is youth ministry adviser, and St. Patrick in Seneca Falls. "We would appreciate the sense of compassion for the emotions — the fear, the anger, the frustration and the confusion — and to know that it's OK to change as long as it's Christ-centered and to have the parishioners understand the spirituality of that change."

Tabita "Tabby" Torres, a 16-year-old representative from the 19th Ward Roman Catholic Community, said the next round of planning should be designed in such a way that parishioners "can actually feel it in their hearts and have this warmth, so that they want to work" for the good of the diocese. "It's not a job ... it's about our future and a sense of pride and ownership of all of us because it's our diocese," she said.

Torres was one of a just handful of leadership-day participants under the age of 30, and planners saw increasing youth involvement — both in parish life and in planning groups — as crucial.

"Help us to intentionally involve our youth in the planning process and also help us to provide scholarships for further educational and lay-leadership training opportunities," said Mary Lou O'Connor, representing planners from the Central Steuben Parishes as well as Northwest Ontario.

Responding to the small-group reports, Bishop Clark said he saw several themes emerge: education, communication, youth, vocations and stewardship of resources.

"We need to think about the gifts we have and use them to the very best of our ability," he said.

In conclusion, Bishop Clark told the planners, "I am filled with hope for many reasons. My deepest reason for hope is that we now have in our diocese an unprecedented cadre of leaders like yourselves."