

WORLD YOUTH DAY

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Bensalem, Pa., teenagers Megan McCandless (left) and Kerianne Kulliga rest July 22 after a day of traveling from Philadelphia to Avon's St. Agnes School on their way to Toronto for World Youth Day this week.

A tale of two cities — and a small town

People from the suburbs of Philadelphia are accustomed to a big-city atmosphere, so being in Toronto shouldn't be a major adjustment.

But Avon, N.Y.? That's a different story.

En route to Canada's largest city, a tour bus carrying 46 Philadelphia-area World Youth Day pilgrims stopped at St. Agnes Parish July 22 for some small-town hospitality. The youth group of St. Agnes offered dinner, an evening prayer service, overnight accommodations and a Tuesday-morning breakfast before their guests hit the road again.

Rita Ricciardi, a volunteer coordinator for the Philadelphia group, said she sensed Avon's size while planning the visit with Mike Drexler, St. Agnes' director of faith formation and youth ministry.

"He said 'We just got our first traffic light about a year and a half ago,'" said Ricciardi, who noted that Avon is a six- to seven-hour drive from Philadelphia.

Regarding the dinner prepared by St. Agnes' teens, Drexler joked that his volunteers have "different levels of kitchen skills." When asked if she would be the only person cooking, 15-year-old Wendy Leakey replied, "Thank God, no." Beth Schliff, 14, added that she, too, is inexperienced in preparing food for large groups, so the menu was being geared toward "something that we'll be able to cook."

The visitors slept overnight on the floor of St. Agnes School — "not the Hotel Ritz," Drexler said. However, this could serve as a good warm-up for later in the week: on Saturday night the Philadelphia folks — as well as hundreds of thousands of other young people — will sleep under the stars in Toronto as a part of World Youth Day's overnight vigil.

After leaving Avon, the group planned to tour Niagara Falls before arriving in Toronto July 23. The international gathering will conclude July 27-28, when Pope John Paul II presides over the Saturday vigil and celebrates World Youth Day's closing Mass the next morning.

"I think it'll be a good experience, exciting to meet people from all over the world coming together," said Jackie Devine, 16, one of the Philadelphia teens. "I took Spanish classes and probably am going to sit with some (Spanish-speaking



Some of the teenagers get ready for bed in the basement of St. Agnes School.

people)."

Jackie is among 30 teens and 16 adults traveling together from several parishes in the Philadelphia suburb of Bensalem, Pa. Ricciardi said that her parish, St. Charles Borromeo, would like to maximize the excitement of World Youth Day.

"We don't have a youth program, but we hope to start one after this," Ricciardi said.

Drexler said that the St. Agnes-Philadelphia connection stemmed from a request by the Rochester Diocese for parishes to host World Youth Day pilgrims traveling long distances. The Philadelphia group was also scheduled to stop overnight at St. Agnes on its return trip July 28. Drexler said the parish plans to serve a farewell breakfast Monday morning, July 29 — but depending on the potentially heavy traffic out of Toronto, "it could be supper or it could be lunch," he said.

Meanwhile, only a handful of people from the Livingston County area had planned to be with Rochester's 900-person diocesan delegation in Canada this weekend. Instead, St. Agnes and nearby parishes are acknowledging the event by holding a vigil of their own in the

same time slots.

That will take place at St. Joseph's Parish in Livonia and will simulate, in humorous fashion, many aspects of World Youth Day. For instance, organizers plan to set up a "border crossing," checking participants' identification and inspecting the contents of cars. Other fun activities will be "Popemobile Races" and a "Who Wants to Be a Pope" game show. Also planned are a picnic dinner and, later in the evening, a candlelight service, an opportunity for reconciliation and a television viewing of the vigil in Toronto. On Sunday morning the group will walk one mile from St. Joseph's parish center to the 8 a.m. Mass at St. Joseph's Church, then walk back for breakfast and the papal Mass on TV.

Drexler explained that World Youth Day is primarily geared toward young adults and older teens, so the vigil in Livonia gives young people of all high-school ages a chance to participate.

"We realized World Youth Day was not as teen-friendly as people might think," Drexler said.

Drexler also quipped that certain advantages arise from staying at home: "Our bathroom lines will be a lot shorter."