

Multiparish ministry is on the rise

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Know your shortcuts.

Though not a formal part of Kelly Howard's job description, it wouldn't hurt to add those three words. Howard noted that on a recent Sunday morning she drove from St. Joseph's Church in Campbell, to St. Catherine of Siena in Addison, to St. Stanislaus in Bradford.

These trips are commonplace for Howard. She serves not only those three churches, but also St. Mary's in Bath and St. Gabriel's in Hammondsport in her role as full-time coordinator of youth ministry for the Central Steuben Planning Group.

"Back roads, I've gotten to know them," she remarked.

Howard, who began her position in September 2002, is reflective of a growing emphasis on multiparish youth ministry in the Diocese of Rochester. People who have begun similar positions in recent years include Dan Martin, who serves in Tioga County; Mike Sauter, Western Livingston; Linda Mehlenbacher, Northern Steuben/Southern Livingston; and Amy Mikolajczyk, Western Steuben. And in Monroe County, the late Dennis Reno, who died Feb. 6, was the first full-time youth minister for the three-parish Winton-Culver Planning Group.

Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry, said previous attempts at this model had failed because parishes had little experience in sharing resources, and carried unrealistic expectations as a result. However, through the pastoral planning process that began in the late 1990s, Theisen said that these positions have become "very effective."

Howard's position, which involves ministry to both high-school and junior-high youths, is paid by the Central Steuben parishes as well as a grant from the diocese. Theisen noted that in this region, organized youth-ministry programs had already existed in Bath and Hammondsport. But by creating Howard's position, the planning group was also able to extend youth ministry to St. Catherine's in Addison, St. Stanislaus in Bradford and St. Joseph's in Campbell — small parishes that could not have supported a paid youth minister on their own.

Howard stressed that formalized youth ministry is vital in the small communities she serves. "The kids are so spread out. It is important for them to have something to do that's



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Kelly Howard, youth-ministry coordinator of five parishes in the Central Steuben Planning Group, packs care packages March 30 for college-bound students who belong to St. Joseph's Church in Campbell.

faith-based," she said.

Thus far Howard has met with pastors and parish councils, and coordinated parish-based adult volunteers. Along with promoting parish activities, Howard has organized one youth event per month for all five Central Steuben parishes, such as a game day that was scheduled for April 5 at St. Catherine's in Addison. In addition, 20 youths met for an overnight lock-in March 1-2 at St. Mary's in Bath. That night the high schoolers saw "Lord of the Rings" and the junior-high youths viewed "Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone," then engaged in a discussion on how the movie themes relate to

Catholic beliefs. The lock-in concluded with 9 a.m. Sunday Mass at St. Mary's.

Lee Craig, 14, from St. Stanislaus, and Donika Lucero, 15, from St. Joseph's, were among the lock-in attendees. Both said they enjoyed a late-night game of hide-and-go-seek in their sleeping facility — and apparently their fun took higher priority than sleeping: Lee said he finally went to bed at 3:30 a.m., and Donika at 5:30 a.m.

Howard said her challenge is to convey that youth ministry involves learning more about their Catholic faith, but in much different ways than traditional religious education. "Some of them are afraid it's going to be a classroom setting. That can be a struggle, to get them to see it is a fun thing to do," said Howard, 26, who grew up in Corning's St. Vincent de Paul Parish.

However, Lee said he plans to talk up youth-ministry events to his peers from St. Stanislaus. "I don't think they think it's fun," he said. "But I think if they knew more, they would go."

Ultimately, Howard said, she hopes to see "a stronger sense of community within the five churches — for not just the kids to get to know each other, but also the parents."

"I think it's a really good idea. It helps bring all five parishes together and create unity," said Donika, whose mother, Charlotte, is the volunteer youth leader at St. Joseph's.

After six months on the job, Howard feels good about the progress made thus far.

"I actually love it," she stated. "My true passion is kids."

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