

YOUTH

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Bishop Matthew H. Clark, a fixture at virtually all of these gatherings, said the sheer numbers are a great instrument for young people's faith development.

"The biggest, single most powerful element of this is they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, 'Yes, I'm not alone in this,'" he stated.

COOL TO BE CATHOLIC

Much of this success in youth ministry sprang from a firm foundation laid by Theisen's predecessor, Patrick Fox, now the director of faith formation at St. Joseph's Parish in Penfield. Until 1993, a long-standing staple in diocesan programming for teens was Bishop's Day with Youth, a one-day convention Fox established for both junior-high and high-school students.

As WYD '93 was approaching, Theisen said he sensed that parishes were ready to deepen their commitment to youth ministry. Bishop Clark recalls a strong movement in this direction as well, largely due to World Youth Day and another major event from 1993 — the diocesan Synod — during which "a great number of our parishes identified youth and youth ministry as a very high priority."

Following the success of the pilgrimage to Denver, Theisen sought to maintain the focus Bishop's Day with Youth had placed on prayer, celebration, guest speakers, faith-sharing and workshops while expanding the program into an all-weekend event for high-schoolers only.

Since the first convention in 1994, numbers have increased almost yearly. At the same time, diocesan participation at NCYC has shot up dramatically. Theisen, who in 2001 was promoted from coordinator to director of diocesan youth ministry, said these chances for youths to bond with hundreds of their Catholic peers is "an incredible experience. They are on fire."

That fire was lit in 1997 for a small group of youths from St. Patrick's, Owego, St. John the Evangelist, Newark Valley, and St. Francis, Catoonk. Dan and Anita Martin, youth ministers, brought nine people to the Diocesan Youth Convention that year at SUNY College at Geneseo.

"It was extremely intimidating at first. Here we were from this rural part of the diocese," Anita Martin recalled of her Tioga County parishes' first trip to the convention.

But by the convention's end, she said, "The kids caught the bug. They brought their enthusiasm back." She noted that participation nearly tripled for the 1998 convention, and her region has posted strong numbers ever since for both the diocesan



Leila Navidi/Catholic Courier

A group of youths pray and reflect before singing "Wade on the Water" and moving to the next station along the prayer walk. The stations featured a Bible reading pertaining to water and a lesson on which to reflect.

convention and NCYC.

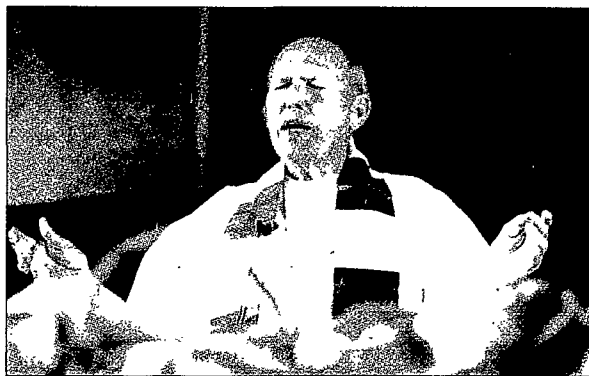
One of the Martins' youth-group members, Tara Maslin, has now attended three Diocesan Youth Conventions as well as the NCYC in 2001. "I felt like I got closer to my faith. Every time I went, it got stronger," said Tara, 16, who plans to return to the NCYC this fall in Houston.

Meanwhile, Spencerport's St. John the Evangelist Parish saw a rise in NCYC participation from 18 in 1997 to 48 in 1999. "They see other kids who are Catholic and recognize that it's cool to be Catholic," said Sue Versluys, who served as St. John's youth minister from 1992-2001 and is now program specialist for the diocesan Office of Youth Ministry.

Sean Judge, 14, of Immaculate Conception in Ithaca, said he enjoyed attending his first Diocesan Youth Convention Aug. 9-10. "It's pretty fun, nothing like basketball camp. There, your respect is based on your skills. Here, the respect is all around," said Sean, who also plans to attend his first NCYC in Houston.

High participation levels also can be attributed to parish adults who get involved through chaperoning and fundraising. Bishop Clark praised the parishes' support, saying these events have "given the entire community a chance to realize what it means to be church."

Theisen noted Bishop Clark's deep connection with youth ministry has been another major reason for the Rochester Diocese's shining suc-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Bishop Matthew H. Clark gives the homily during the convention's Aug. 10 Mass.

cesses. The bishop is serving his second consecutive three-year term as the U.S. bishops' episcopal liaison to the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

"It not only makes a difference locally, it makes a difference nationally that a bishop takes a big chunk of time out of his extremely busy schedule," Theisen commented.

Bishop Clark said his commitment comes not from an obligatory role as bishop, but as someone who genuinely cares about young people. "They really do energize me in my own faith," Bishop Clark said. "I don't think we appreciate enough how powerful an influence young people of faith have on the rest of us."

BALANCING ACT

On the other hand, big events can be draining. In Toronto, shortly after the pope's closing Mass for WYD '02, Theisen quipped that it was great he came so close to Rochester — and he hoped the pontiff would never again venture that near for World Youth Day.

Theisen was perhaps only half-joking: WYD '02 ended a 12-month stretch that also saw two Diocesan Youth Conventions and an NCYC. Currently, Theisen said, his office is asking parishes about the possibility of cutting back slightly — for instance, not having a diocesan convention the same year as NCYC.

"What the last couple of years have taught us is that balance is very important. How much national vs. diocesan vs. local can one fully support?" Theisen asked rhetorically.

With all the time and money spent on diocesan and national events, Theisen explained, parish youth ministry runs the risk of getting pushed aside: "You want the youth minister to go up to a youth and say, 'How are you doing' rather than, 'Where are your (registration) forms.'"

Although conventions and the like are key in connecting teens to the larger church, Versluys said youth ministry also means responding to adolescents who cannot or choose not to take part in large events. This is especially true of troubled teens, she said.

"Telephone calls, greeting them in church, birthday cards — if we really are into comprehensive youth ministry, we reach all the kids in our parishes," Versluys said.

And yet, Theisen said his office wouldn't continue offering big gatherings "if I wasn't seeing the positive results." Tara, for one, said the NCYC in Indianapolis has yielded many positive memories.

"Once you get there, you realize how awesome it is — being in that arena, and knowing all those people are there for the same thing," she said.