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Parish Profile

Keeping a big parish small'

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For many families, it has become the unachievable quest: bringing everyone to the table together. And the bigger the family, the more impossible it seems.

Imagine that quest in a family of 11,000. St. Thomas the Apostle in Bloomfield is such a family, one of the biggest parishes in the Archdiocese of Newark. But it tries not to think of itself that way.

"The challenge is to keep a big parish small," said Msgr. William Hatcher, who has been the pastor for 11 years. "To make sure we do things to keep people connected with each other."

For the St. Thomas family, the connection usually involves sharing the chores—whether it's in visible roles in the liturgy and religious education or in more anonymous jobs like making baptism garments. The defining image of St. Thomas, some members say, is that of an active parish.

The Church's stewardship initiative of recent years has helped make the most of that activity, Msgr. Hatcher said, leading parishioners to create ministries that didn't exist, such as a support group for parents of children with catastrophic illnesses.

In September, St. Thomas will publish a directory detailing more than 50 ministries and organizations available to parishioners.

Joan Ferraer, the principal of St. Thomas School since 2001, said the opportunities for involvement appeal to a variety of people, giving them all a "sense of community."

A community, yes, but one that is unmistakably big—and diverse. Of the 3,800 families registered at St. Thomas, more than 1,300 come from outside Bloomfield. Dozens of ethnic groups are represented (more than 30 languages are spoken by parish members), including a growing Filipino membership that numbers about 500.

In the last two years, the parish conducted nearly 300 baptisms, more than 100 weddings and almost 200 funerals.

St. Thomas has a full-time pastoral staff of nine, including Msgr. Hatcher, Father Peter Funesti and Father Gregory Hann; and five part-time staff members, including three permanent deacons.

But there are plenty of other hands to help. There are 103 volunteers for the parish's food pantry, 43 to help with clerical work, 30 who take the Eucharist to the home bound. The liturgies have the services of 77 altar servers, 36 lectors and 36 ushers, not to mention a music program with no shortage of talent: seven paid song leaders and more than 30 other participants.

"Among people I meet out in the whole archdiocese, they always say, 'Oh, you have a big parish,'" Msgr. Hatcher said. "But they also know it's a very active parish, and a very generous parish. Not just generous to itself, but outside itself. There is that outreach. We are conscious of who we can help, according to our means."

Besides its own food pantry, St. Thomas participates in a food pantry run by the Archdiocese in Newark, and is one of 35 parishes involved in an Interfaith Hospitality Network, providing food and lodging to the homeless. Every Christmas, its giving-tree program provides gifts to needy children.

And with the closing of other schools in town, St. Thomas now offers the only Catholic elementary education in Bloomfield, with 415 children enrolled from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade.

Ms. Joan Ferraer, the principal, says the 65-year-old school remains healthy financially because of the commitment of the parish. "People put their money where their mouth is, and the parish puts its money where its mouth is," she said.

The parish's contribution is budgeted at \$150,000 annually but fluctuates based on factors such as enrollment and other fund-raising. The Home and School Association has raised \$100,000 each of the last two years with such traditional fundraisers as raffles and a gala.

The parish also accommodates 700 students in its religious education program, with 50 catechists teaching classes over three nights a week. And because some parents are frustrated with scheduling, the program is starting two-week summer classes as an alternative. A waiting list has already been started.

Father Hann, who joined the St. Thomas staff last June, says the summer program exemplifies the sort of parish "ownership" that sets St. Thomas apart.

"I don't think people have to be told anything," he said. "They see a need and they fill it. You don't have to put a hook around people's necks."

Perhaps that's because it's not all about work. Brittany Scheckel calls the senior high youth group, which she has belonged to for four years, "a little family — home away from home." Some days that means 300 students at a pizza party, and some days it means shoveling snow for the elderly or sending cards to the homebound.

The Friday night prayer group started as just that—a prayer group—but has branched into service work such as helping the Missionaries of Charity in Newark. And for individual members, the group has often been a springboard to other parish involvement, including the parish council, said Ampy Escobinas, the group's leader.

And as in any family, the most valuable service sometimes is simply encouragement. The September Club, a group for senior citizens, gathers weekly for activities, fellowship and speakers who address issues affecting older people, but its members are proud of their involvement beyond their own group.

"We support everything that goes on in the parish," said Valerie Cerny, who has been a member of the club for 10 of her 42 years in the parish. "If there's a concert, we're there. If it's Irish night or Italian night, we're there for everything."

It is not a bad support group to have. The September Club is one of the biggest at St. Thomas, and draws about 60 members every week, Mrs. Cerny said.

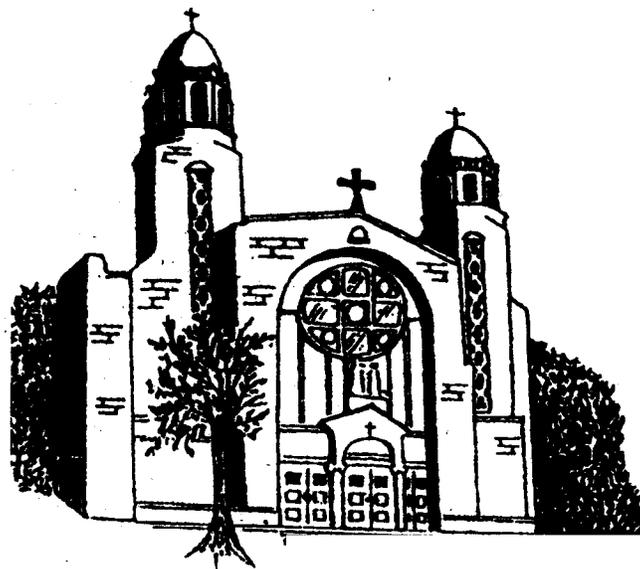
"Sometimes more," she added. "If we're eating that day, there's more."

Just one more way to bring people to the table.



Photo by Ron Monacelli

Msg. Hatcher baptizes David Yokelson at the Easter Vigil, March 26th of this year. David also received the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil



Saint Thomas the Apostle, Bloomfield