



Kyle Wilson from Ss. Peter and Paul, Merrillville, participates in a discussion on hypocrisy with other Diocesan Youth Council members during a DYC retreat at the Spiritual Life Center in Hammond on Jan. 13. (Karen Callaway photo)

'Capture our Hearts'

Youth want involvement in, connection with parish life

HAMMOND — Diocesan Youth Council members attending an evangelization weekend retreat said they want their parishes to integrate teens not only into other aspects of church life but also into leadership positions. They are concerned about teens leav-

ing the parish and the lack of a connection between Catholic teens and adults.

Or, as one youth member said, after Confirmation "there's nothing to work for."

Twenty-one members of the coun-

cil met for an overnight retreat Jan. 13-14 at the Spiritual Life Center to look at themselves and their parishes and to develop practical ways for young people to be integrated into parish life.

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Youth

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"I have this vision of teens excited about their faith," said Kyle Wilson, 17, from Ss. Peter and Paul, Merrillville. "For them, going to church, to worship God, would be like second nature."

A senior at Andean High School, Wilson admits he does not have all the answers to reuniting teens with their faith.

"All I can do is live like this and set a good example," he said, noting that an example of good morals is especially important for teens who are tempted to make some poor choices.

Teens responding after small-group discussions said youth need to see and feel that they are needed and wanted. Parishes need to be happy places, they added, and there needs to be a good relation-

ship among adult leaders in the parish.

Retreatants used adjectives such as welcoming, accepting, and hospitable to describe what they seek in a parish community. Openness and flexibility are also keys.

As one young person said, "Capture our hearts. Don't force us to do things."

"Overall, everybody should be more welcoming to youth. Take time to consider what we have to say," said Courtney Ellingsen, 16, from Holy Spirit, Winfield Township.

The Crown Point High School junior then said, "If we work together, anything can happen."

As with other teens at the retreat, Wilson and Ellingsen are involved in various aspects of parish life, including religious instruction, youth group, and parish council.

Frank Mercadante, facilitator for the weekend, called

upon the youth to be "positive-ly dangerous." Such a person, he said, has five qualities: love of God; love of others; is authentic, sincere; lives with integrity; and lives on call with the Holy Spirit.

Mercadante, executive director of Cultivation Ministries, said he also wanted teens to develop a concept

statement, to help them reach and evangelize their peers. He cited the need for a concerted effort so that youth "know that they are integrated into the life of the parish — they feel connected to the family."

This youth involvement in the life of the parish, Mercadante said, goes beyond youth ministry.

Austin Hiller Bonta, 16, is the head server at Nativity of Our Savior, Portage, where he is also a leader in the youth group and youth representative on the parish council. "Every

parish is made up of people

involved in it," said the Andean sophomore. Whether you're young or old, everyone sees each other as equal in making up the parish.

He added, "There's no real difference if you're a youth or an adult. We're all contributing. We all help to form [the parish]."

During the Saturday evening small-group discussions, teens listed the desired leadership qualities for pastoral staff, youth ministers, volunteer youth workers, and teen leaders. They also discussed ways to assist parishes in family life ministry.

"Make the Mass more teen-centered. Have more teen Masses. Make the parishes more inviting to teens," suggested Katie Ernster, 15, from St. Mathias, Crown Point. She is working to establish a youth group at her parish.

Kevin Driscoll, director of the Office of Youth and Young

Adults, said the retreat was a result of the diocesan Future Full of Hope and the need for churches to attract young people. Driscoll also said he sees two different groups of youth. One group is not coming to church on Sundays and is "not connected to ministries Mondays through Saturdays."

But, Driscoll added, "I'm also seeing an increasing percentage of teens who are fired up about their faith. What is that fire burning inside each of them ... that is possibly missing in others? What is it that young people can do to become people of evangelization, to get others excited?"

Angie Rossi, 17, from St. Mary, Griffith, admitted that getting teens involved in church activities is difficult. A teen leader and altar server, Rossi said her peers "have this idea that we just talk about God and it's boring. It's not. We do a lot."

agenda to prep session

relief, health care reform and education top the list of many legislators this year, state lawmakers are charged by the Indiana Constitution with accomplishing only one duty — that of passing a new two-year budget package by the April 29 deadline.

“Much of the legislative work done by Indiana Catholic Conference this year will be over-

Sidebar with Steve Euvino

VOICES OF YOUTH — Anyone who had doubts about the religious faith of today's youth people needed only to attend the Diocesan Youth Council last weekend in Hammond. The teens addressed a number of issues, such as leadership, parish life, and family ministry. Meeting in small groups, the young people offered some insight into their faith.

The consensus I took away was that the teens are not looking for anything their parishes cannot provide. What do they want? To be involved and connected with parish life, not as a separate entity, but included as part of the mainstream.