

Future leaders immersed in experience

written by Malea Hargett |



Young adult Catholics from the city and the country met in Arkansas and Mississippi last week to immerse themselves in the reality of the rural Catholic Church.

Catholic Extension, a national fundraising organization for poorer dioceses based in Chicago, hosted the four-day event called Emerging Catholic Leaders in Little Rock, Hamburg and Camden, Miss. The 12 young adults, ages 21 to 36, met July 10 with Catholic Extension leaders to learn about the national organization that they call the “best kept secret in the American Catholic Church” and to hear from Bishop Anthony B. Taylor about life as a Catholic in Arkansas, where the state is less than 5 percent Catholic.

On July 11 they traveled to Hamburg (Ashley County) to meet with small but growing Hispanic community of Holy Spirit Church. On July 12, they traveled to Sacred Heart Church in Camden, Miss., a predominantly black Catholic church.

Catholic Extension supports 91 mission dioceses in the United States, including Little Rock. Many of the building projects in this diocese were made possible by Catholic Extension grants over the decades.

“Our only purpose is to strengthen poorer dioceses in America,” Extension president Father Jack Wall told the young leaders who came from New York City, Boston, Idaho, Kentucky and Montana. Maria Izquierdo, 32, the executive assistant for the vocations office, was nominated by vocations director Msgr. Scott Friend to attend the immersion experience.

Izquierdo represents one of the areas where Catholic Extension is trying to spend more of its resources: supporting the training and employment of Hispanic leaders in parishes. According to Catholic Extension, more than half of the Church is Hispanic but less than 10 percent of the paid leaders are Hispanic. Catholic Extension is dedicating \$15 million to support 100 Hispanic leaders. Father Wall said two of the leaders will be hired to work in Arkansas, including one at St. Raphael Church in Springdale, which is the largest parish in the diocese with more than 20,000 registered members.

While Catholic Extension is concerned with Catholics who are leaving the Church, it is more concerned right now with the lack of access to Catholic churches in some rural areas.

“Some four million Catholics have left the Church because there is no church or no priest or no structure,” Father Wall said.

Amy Pasden, 36, of Chestnut Hill, Mass., said her experience in Boston is very different. In her archdiocese, the Catholic population has dwindled.

"There used to be lots of people and lots of churches," she said.

As an active member of her parish's young adult ministry, Pasden said she wanted to learn about Church in other parts of the country.

"For me the biggest fascination is the cultural differences," she said. "(Yet) the Church is so unifying."

Bishop Taylor said because Catholics in Arkansas are a minority, many of the Anglos know their faith and don't take it for granted. He said, however, many of the Hispanics moving to Arkansas are Catholic by birth but have not been able to receive religious education. New missions have been created in the past decade to serve the new communities of Hispanics moving to rural parts of the state. In other places, they have helped revitalize the parishes already existing.

"We are growing. We have been blessed. All of this takes money, but it is a happy thing," he said.

Bishop Taylor told the leaders about Missionary Carmelites of St. Teresa, who served at St. Barbara Church in De Queen for many years. As they built up more Hispanic lay leaders, they were asked to relocate to Holy Spirit Mission in Hamburg in 2011 to develop their leaders and provide religious education. With an average attendance of 133 people at Sunday Mass and only 120 seats in its current church, the Diocese of Little Rock is looking to relocate the church where more space would be available for Mass and classes.

"It was very powerful," said Terry Witherall, national representative for strategic initiatives for Catholic Extension, of the experience in Hamburg. "It was so inspiring and so moving. So many of the parishioners greeted us when we arrived. It showed us the importance of the Church for them."

Witherall noted that the Hispanic parishioners, many of who work in farming, greeted them on a Wednesday in the late morning when they would normally be working. Sister Gisela Rivera and another nun, who spend their summer in Houston at their motherhouse, returned to Hamburg for the occasion.

"These churches don't have material resources, but they are so full of resources for the Church and they are on fire for the Church," Witherall said.

Izquierdo, who was born in Hermitage, said she enjoyed visiting Hamburg because some of the new parish leaders are people she knew growing up in Warren.

"It was a very moving experience because I knew a lot of the parishioners there," she said. "To see them so motivated and coming together there was so motivating."

On July 12, the group traveled to the Diocese of Jackson to meet Bishop Joseph Latino, celebrate Mass and attend a Praise-a-thon with the black community. The Praise-a-thon is an ecumenical event where choirs from various churches met at Sacred Heart Church to sing. The young adults also visited the parishioners' homes and attended a fish fry.

Izquierdo, who had never visited a black Catholic church, said she enjoyed the Praise-a-thon and seeing how the Christians came together to sing and worship.

Witherall said Catholic Extension started meeting last year with young adults to inform them about the organization and get their input how it can spread its message to Catholics. She said Catholic Extension plans to meet annually with the young adults to ask them to be "ambassadors" for the organization.

"We support our local church and we are called to support the missions. Sometimes we forget that there are missions right here in the United States," Witherall said. "A lot of young adults are engaged in the local church. These are young adults who represent young adults across the country. They love the Church and want to be leaders in the Church."