

After 38 years, North Little Rock youth director retiring

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



When your faith is as strong as Christie Powell's, you might find yourself involved in dozens of activities in your parish, diocese and community.

After 38 years of parish and youth ministry, Powell is preparing to retire after Dec. 21, although she plans to stay involved in a few notable activities a while longer.

Many people in Central Arkansas know Powell for her involvement in Little Rock's Christmas Caravan, an event that gives toys and clothes to children and families in need.

"My plan is to retire after Dec. 21 because that is the date of the Christmas Caravan. I've worked on the Christmas Caravan for 20 years, and I just can't just drop that," she said. "I'll probably keep doing the Caravan, even though I'm retired."

Powell, youth minister at Immaculate Conception Church in North Little Rock, has watched the Christmas Caravan far exceed her expectations over the past two decades.

"There were just five, six, seven of us who used to go by the Broadway Bridge and hand out Christmas toys all Christmas Eve," she told *Arkansas Catholic*. "Over the years, it's grown and grown and grown. A couple of years ago, I had to rent the (Bill) Clinton (Presidential) Library parking lot, and then we moved from there.

“We teamed up with St. Mark’s Baptist Church on 12th Street (in Little Rock), and it’s gone from providing Christmas for just a few to now hundreds, almost a thousand. We provide new toys, new coats, new everything that one day — we try to make them feel super special. We have food trucks that give free breakfast, we have hot chocolate, coffee, we have everything brand new. It’s just a day that’s special for them too. It’s grown over the years to the huge event that it is, through the grace of God. He had his hand all over it.”

Powell, a parishioner at Immaculate Conception Church, has also ministered to teens at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in North Little Rock (Marche) and Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton.

The Christmas Caravan became an opportunity for Powell to show youths their faith in action.

“Over the years, I’ve watched kids give the coats off their backs and the shoes off their feet, and you can’t teach that. They have to experience that and be a huge part of it. That’s one of the things that I look back on over the years and I’m pretty proud of.”

Another event that Powell and her youth groups have been involved in for many years is the Tenebrae Lenten service at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church. Father Shaun Wesley, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Church in Carlisle and Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church in Slovak, organized the first Tenebrae services in Arkansas.

“Years ago, when I first started teaching, I was teaching at Sacred Heart in Morrilton and ... one of my students at the time was Father Shaun Wesley,” Powell said. “... Over the years, we stayed connected and became friends. After he went to the seminary, he introduced me to the Tenebrae. ... I said, ‘Let’s do it.’ And over the years, it’s grown.”

One of the highlights for Powell has been taking teens to see the popes when they are in the United States.

“When I was at Immaculate Heart, back in 2008, we got the chance to see Pope Benedict XVI in D.C.,” she said. “... I heard he was coming to D.C., but we didn’t have a ticket to anything. And I told the teens and the families, ‘We’re going to go to D.C., we’re going to follow the pope, we’re going to find out his route, I don’t have a ticket to anything, we’re just going to see if we can find him, and if you want to come with me, then come on, but I can’t guarantee we’re even going to see him.’”

Powell had 74 people sign up to go to the U.S. capital. She rented two buses and raised \$20,000 in less than six weeks.

“It was miracle after miracle, the way the money was coming in and the way people were helping. It was just unbelievable,” she said.

Then, Powell got a phone call from a woman at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. She had heard that Powell was organizing a group to see the pope.

“She said, ‘Well, I’ve got some tickets for you.’ And I said, ‘You’ve got tickets for me?’ And she said, ‘Yes, but I only have 75.’ And I just started crying. I said, ‘Oh my gosh, I only need 74.’ ... But in the end, we were part of a private audience with less than 2,000 people to see the pope, and it was the hand of God. We had faith, and we wanted to go see the pope ... and we saw him so many times up close and personal.”

In 2015, Powell took 53 youths and their parents to Philadelphia to see Pope Francis.



Christie Powell gives a talk to junior high students at Immaculate Conception School in North Little Rock during the summer of 2023. (Courtesy Christie Powell)

After nearly 40 years of working with youth and young adults, Powell said she has formulated the best advice to help them through the trials they might face: prayer.

“I would advise that you pray, and then pray and then pray some more. Until you sit down and pray and listen to God speaking, you’re not going to hear what he has to say, you’re not going to grow a relationship,” she said. “It all centers around your prayer life. ... I look back over the years, and I’ve talked to God about the good, the bad and the ugly, and my needs and my plans. And it all starts with prayer...”