

Priest's haven for teens provides a grip on hope

By ISABEL BOYER

The Star's Religion Writer

The Rev. Arthur E. Kelly recognized the need 10 years ago to provide arts, crafts, sports and other activities to keep youths off the streets.

There were between 15 and 20 gangs that kept the neighborhood around St. Rita Catholic Church, 1733 Martindale Avenue, tense and uneasy.

So the soft-spoken priest quietly began organizing the St. Rita Teen-age Club, now known as the St. Nicholas Youth Organization.

Having worked with more than 5,000 young people over the last 10 years, Father Kelly, a Divine Word Missionary Society priest, beams with pride when he talks about the results.

There still are problems and there still are gangs, he said, but the tension has eased and the groups are not as active.

"BUT WE still have to be on top of it," he cautioned, admitting there is room for improvement.

The organization directs much of its energy at guiding young people into positive behavior, coaxing drop-outs back into school and, in general, offering some hope to street youngsters.

When the program was reorganized in 1980 and relocated to 1644 Roosevelt Avenue, the name also was changed.

St. Nicholas was adopted as the group's patron because of his deep concern for young people — especially the troubled, abandoned, abused and exploited, Father Kelly explained.

Father Kelly now lives at the center, which is painted white and

brightened with colorful murals created by the teenagers to mask the building's past as a tired, old school building.

EACH WEEK about 250 youngsters come in to get a grip on hope, self-esteem, leadership and sportsmanship through the free activities at the center.

The young folk can purge hostilities through sports. For those who aren't sports-minded, there are dances and drama. The variety of activities matches most needs.

Crime and delinquency prevention, emergency shelter, health maintenance and care, legal and financial assistance, correction and rehabilitation are just some of the items on the group's list of priorities, Father Kelly said.

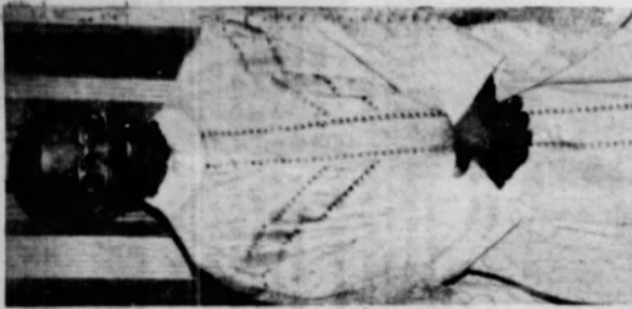
Youngsters and adults from 6 to 21 have learned to trust Father Kelly, who never doubts their potential worth.

"IT'S VALUABLE — very worthwhile," Indianapolis policeman Robert S. Patterson said of the St. Nicholas Youth Organization.

Located, as it is, in the heart of an area that has its problems, many youths go to the center who would not go to other places, Patterson said. Gang members attend the activities — not to cause trouble — but to participate.

Patterson said he feels good about the acceptance he received when he spoke to between 50 and 60 youths in the area about how police work.

"A building-based program is a very, very expensive operation. Father Kelly does a terrific job of getting the youngsters in and involved," said Jean Smith, vice president of public relations for Indiana



The Rev. Arthur E. Kelly
His efforts reduce gang activity

National Bank. THE BANK has contributed to the project.

A board of directors operates the organization under Father Kelly's leadership. As president and executive director, he is organizing a fund drive to benefit the facility.

He also is planning events for the 10th anniversary celebration, which will start in June.

One of the events will be an awards and recognition banquet for members of the Noble and Distinguished Order of St. Nicholas, the financial support arm of the center.

The celebration will continue through December.

Father Kelly said a graduation is planned Feb. 18 for young people who trained for the controversial Guardian Angels program at the center, which was one of three training sites for the group in the city.