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# Coast hosts

## Priest, with local Catholic youth, prepare for national conference

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The Rev. Ivan Siekmann has running-shoes style.

As youth-ministry director of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Biloxi, he favors blue jeans and bright T-shirts. He runs, never walks, the hallways in old Sacred Heart School.

Sneakers and an extra dose of adrenaline are wise choices for this 39-year-old priest because the Biloxi diocese next week will host the National Catholic Youth Conference here.

More than 2,500 teen-agers are expected for the four-day conference. It kicks off Thursday night with a Mardi Gras parade in the Mississippi Gulf Coast Coliseum.

For Siekmann, the conference wraps up three years of work. Right now, he carries around an inch-thick notebook filled with names, telephone numbers and messages.

"See this?" Siekmann asks and flips through pages of names and telephone numbers. "All these people called this morning."

His office telephone rings again.

He lifts his head and laughs. He's quite serious, though, when he discusses teen-agers and Catholic youth work.

"Youth ministry is not a luxury," he says. "The vast number of adults — here and other places — see it that way. Other adults view youth ministry as a baby-sitting service.

"It's an essential. Suicide is either the No. 1 or No. 2 killer among 15- to 21-year-olds, depending on how you view accidental deaths. Teen pregnancy, despite years of flooding kids with information, is as great as ever.

"Why do we have so many runaways? Why do we have so many high school dropouts? Why is the drug and alcohol problem as big as ever? Youth ministry is not a luxury.

"Youth ministry is important because it's a place where kids don't have to produce or show results. They have to produce in school and at home. Many teen-agers need non-parental adults to deal with their confusion."

The National Catholic Youth Conference, Oct. 24-27, offers nationally known speakers and entertainers for teen-agers, confused or not.

The Biloxi conference will draw youths and adult advisors from the eastern half of the United States, plus Canada, Central America and other foreign countries.

Built around the celebration of International Youth Year 1985, conference workshops will in-

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spearheaded the first efforts to draw the national conference here. Siekmann says credit should go to local Catholic teen-agers.

"The kids were the first ones to suggest it," Siekmann says. "I said, 'No way.' The conference had always gone to big cities with large Catholic communities, places like Boston or Detroit and Milwaukee."

He tried anyway.

Diocese officials say Pascagoula-native Maggie Wilson Brown, now executive director of National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry in Washington, D.C., did some selling, too.

Siekmann says officials liked the Coliseum and Convention Center, but the Coast's strongest selling point was the availability of walking-distance hotels and motels.

During conference week, Siekmann and hundreds of youth leaders will direct 30 different committees working on details ranging from hotel security to night-time beach bonfire brigades.

Another diocese-sponsored conference project will unfold next week at the Coliseum when a broad suede-covered banner proclaiming "God's Peace" is unveiled. The project was designed by Bill Marquez of Pass Christian and executed by Marquez and Khanh Tran of Biloxi, both members of the youth group.

Siekmann jogs down the school hall to show off the banner to a visitor.

Teen-age energy rubs off on him, Siekmann says, but five years ago he was a reluctant recruit into the ranks of youth-ministry work.

He had completed a year of liturgy studies at Carlow Seminary in Ireland when the bishop tapped him for the director's chair. He inherited a title, no secretary, and an abandoned second-floor school wing.

"This is it," he says. "I'm secretary, director, horticulturist for the plants, and second-floor janitor."

The office walls are decorated with Catholic youth newspapers, posters, and big, framed pictures of a rafting trip. Siekmann now takes teen-agers along on his vacations.

"I get energy out of kids," he says. "Celibacy tends to make a person sexless after a while, I think. If you keep up with kids, they don't allow you to change in that way."

"I can challenge kids in ways that don't work with adults. Adults develop these great facades, they know how to talk and handle themselves. Kids aren't that smart. They'll slam you in the face if you're plastic or phony."

Conference registration is \$60. To register, write Siekmann at the Office of Youth Ministry, P.O. Box 1189, Biloxi, Miss. 39533. Or telephone 436-6046.