

Religion News



—News Staff Photographer Gail M. McGee

ACTING WAS DIVINE — A skit led by the Rev. Ronald B. Mierzwa delights little parishioners at Our Lady Help of Christians Church in Cheektowaga. Illustrated sermons are part of

Childchurch, a program that seeks to involve young Catholics in church activities and to promote their participation in worship and liturgy.

Church Has High Hopes for Program That Gets Children Into the Spirit

By JOHN SINCLAIR
News Religion Reporter

One of the best ways to assure that adults will be active in their church is to stimulate their interest and activity when they are children. That is one of the aims of Childchurch, a new program in the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo.

The purpose of Childchurch, according to its chairman, the Rev. Ronald B. Mierzwa, is "to encourage children's prayer, to deepen our own prayer life and to promote children's participation in worship and liturgy."

Father Mierzwa, associate pastor of Our Lady of Help of Christian Church in Cheektowaga, said children often are left out of worship services, a fact that results in their lack of interest.

Childchurch seeks to involve children more in the service by making more of it relevant to them.

Before you can reach the children, however, you have to reach

the adults to show them how.

"We had to reach the priests, the sisters, the religious educators and others interested in bringing the children more actively into the church," Father Mierzwa said.

To do this, Childchurch set up a series of seminars in different regions of the diocese. Father Mierzwa said 200 adults were expected at the first seminar in March, but more than 500 showed up.

Now, more than 800 adults have gone through the workshop and are taking the message into their home parishes.

Father Mierzwa said the seminars explore ways to include children in worship, one of which is finding special features in the Mass where children have a chance to participate.

For example, he said, children might be in an offertory procession or do a dramatization at the reading of the Gospel.

"Children can do the reading,"

he said, "or help in planning a religious slide show."

Other possibilities are in the area of liturgical dance and gestures or taking parts in an illustrative sermon.

Childchurch hopes to provide a variety of prayerful experiences for children in a variety of ways without distorting the liturgy.

Father Mierzwa said children as young as 3- or 4-year-old can get a basic exposition of faith, using puppets to illustrate different points.

"Of course, there is more participation by the children after they enter school," he said.

At his own parish there is "Rainbow Sunday," an illustrative sermon, once or twice a month at the 9:30 a.m. Mass.

"We have had standing room only for these services," he said.

Childchurch will hold more workshops in the spring, and a four- or five-week course is being planned to review the program.

"Children in church are constantly being told to shut up and sit down," Father Mierzwa said. "We think there should be more times when they can stand up and take part in the worship and liturgy."