

Good Start: Many parishes make preschool a priority

WOODSTOCK - Tricycles gliding across the narthex of the parish center at St. Alphonsus Rodriguez are a common sight. Some of the riders can barely reach the pedals; others, not yet coordinated enough to pedal, use their feet to push themselves along.

The center, built in 2005 with office and multipurpose space at the parish in western Baltimore County, was once quiet on weekdays. Now, it bustles with more than 100 children, ages 2-4.

While nearly 40 K-8 schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore include a preschool, for a handful of parishes the school day consists only of that level, among them St. Al's Preschool.

"I thought it would be a good way to reach out to families with young children," said Jesuit Father Joseph P. Lacey, pastor of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez.

'Such a love'

Other parishes well-established in the distinct ministry include St. Francis de Sales in Abingdon and St. Andrew by the Bay in Annapolis, where the pastor, Father Jeffrey S. Dausen, cherishes having small children on campus.

"There's such a love here," said Father Dausen, who visits the classrooms when he is having a tough day. "It's an intrinsic part of the mission of our parish."

A common theme among those serving in preschools is that this is more than a daycare center - it's a ministry.

"It's a way of reaching out and pulling people close to the community," said Father Lacey, who noted that the St. Alphonsus Rodriguez campus would otherwise be quiet. "We had people returning to church that hadn't really been participating."

"This is focusing on where these families are right now," said Eileen Delaney, in her

first year as director of St. Al's Preschool. "It is a real evangelizing tool when you work with young families."

Delaney, who often takes classes into church to teach religion, said she ministers to the parents as much as their children. She noted that Protestant churches use the parish preschool model without a full elementary school, and thinks it is a good option for parents who might not plan to send their children on to a Catholic school.

There is also the matter of space.

"If you have a couple rooms, you can set up a preschool," Delaney said.

It is the people, however, who make a school succeed.

'Heaven on earth'

Susan Yarnall was out of her chosen field, education, when she learned about a job opportunity at St. Al's Preschool during a scrapbooking weekend with neighbors. Working with its 2-year-olds, she said, is "heaven on earth."

"I'm never going back (to something else) because they're just too cute," Yarnall said.

"Two-year-old teachers have so much heart," Delaney said, of tending to children experiencing a group for the first time, some of them still in diapers. "People here are above and beyond."

That includes Donna Augustino, a parishioner of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez and teacher at St. Al's since its inception. In addition to laying a foundation for academics, she teaches her pre-kindergarteners life skills such as sharing, joining a group, responsibility and independence.

"They come in as little (children)," Augustino said, "then they leave as little students."

Beginnings

It was a decade ago when Father Lacey endorsed the idea for a preschool, raised by

one of his parishioners, Mindi Lawton. With a degree from Towson University and a background in early childhood, she started St. Al's Preschool from scratch in January 2009, with three children.

By the next fall, enrollment was 40.

"It became something overnight," said Lawton, who describes her work as her calling.

One St. Al's Preschool parent studied to receive the sacrament of confirmation, and asked Lawton to be her sponsor.

"We're bringing families in a positive, loving way into the church building," Lawton said. "I'm bringing families and kids into the church in any way I can."

When St. Michael in Poplar Springs decided to open a preschool, it approached Lawton, who was happy to share all of her expertise and materials.

Lawton said she eventually felt a call from God to use her 10 years of experience to launch another parish preschool. She is the director of the St. Michael Preschool, which opened in September with 21 students.

"I got to do what I love to do - what I'm called to do," said Lawton, of reliving her experience at St. Al's Preschool. "I get to do it again. ... I'm just thankful every day."