

Group's mission: Fill churches with more men

Having noticed that men have become a vast minority in Northeast Baltimore Catholic parishes, St. Anthony of Padua parishioner Paul Gerhardt and a group of his friends decided to unite with a mission to lure members of his gender back to church.

So was born the Northeast Catholic Brotherhood a little more than a year ago, and with about 25 men from three area faith communities participating, the group has ignited a movement that inspires religious and community involvement.

"We're a pretty informal group, but we're serious about getting men back in the church and contributing to the community at large," said Mr. Gerhardt, 50, of Gardenville. "I'm really enthused by what we've accomplished in the last year and I think our outreach efforts are only going to grow."

Each month the group meets in the Gardenville rectory kitchen at St. Anthony of Padua for a casual dinner and to plan out its outreach programs, ministries, and how to get male Catholics - especially younger men - involved with the area parishes.

Represented in the group are parishioners at St. Anthony Padua, Most Precious Blood and St. Francis of Assisi, Baltimore, and this year they hope to attract Catholics from other regional churches.

On a recent Tuesday night over beef stew, about 15 members of the brotherhood reflected on the past year and agreed there is hope for their gender's participation in church activities.

Having hosted prayer groups, liturgy discussions and undertaking several service projects, their progress is steady but sure, said Ken Gray, a 40-year old Hamilton father and St. Anthony of Padua parishioner.

"We started a really positive partnership with Archbishop Curley High School this year," Mr. Gray said. "Their students are required to perform service projects and

we've gotten them involved in some of our projects. It helps them out as it helps us out."

Those projects include the continuing renovation of an unused building on the St. Anthony of Padua/Mother Mary Lange Catholic School campus they are transforming into a youth center and the Good Samaritan Car Wash, he said.

The car wash was an impromptu enterprise last summer when they learned a fellow parishioner had lost her father and couldn't afford the marker for his interment.

"Within an afternoon, we pulled together, planned the car wash and then we raised the money for the marker," Mr. Gray said. "We discovered we could mobilize on short notice. Now, we want to make this an annual event to support a worthy cause."

Last October the brotherhood organized a living rosary at St. Anthony of Padua, with a group of 49 Catholics holding rosary beads the size of a softball that lit up as the participant began reciting his "Hail Mary," said Joe Wehberg, 47, of Belair Edison and a parishioner at Most Precious Blood.

"That's a tradition I think we'll continue for years to come," Mr. Wehberg said. "You know, it was fun and it showed everyone how enjoyable (religious involvement) can be."

The group still has no officers and their monthly meetings remain informal, but their commitment to a male population boom in Northeast Baltimore parishes is fierce.

When Mr. Gray's truck was stolen several months ago, the brotherhood collectively prayed for a positive outcome. A few days later Baltimore City Police recovered the vehicle and charged a suspect.

"We prayed that truck back into your driveway," Mr. Gerhardt said as he winked his eye at Mr. Gray. "God is behind us. I'm sure we men have a future in our faith."

Those interested in finding out more about the Northeast Catholic Brotherhood can call the St. Anthony of Padua parish center at (410) 488-0400, extension 209, or email rakurtz@comcast.net.