

North Carolina church spearheads Catholic athlete group for teens

HUNTERSVILLE, N.C. – A North Carolina Catholic parish is providing a place for high school athletes to grow in their faith by adapting a national college program for their age group.

Catholic Athletes for Christ is a national organization that provides a network of sports-oriented clergy and laypeople to serve Catholic athletes, coaches and staff members at all levels of sport in the practice of their faith.

Last summer St. Mark Church in Huntersville launched the first high school version of the program.

Ray McKenna, a Washington attorney who has been involved in sports-related ministry for many years, founded the national group in response to Pope John Paul II's call to evangelize the world of sports and the establishment in August 2004 of the Pontifical Council for the Laity's office for church and sport.

At St. Mark Father Patrick Hoare, parochial vicar, and parishioner Jean Whelan decided to start the Catholic athletes group as another way for teens to get involved at the parish. Life Teen youth ministry had been successful, but Father Hoare and Whelan said they felt there were youths at the parish who still were not being served.

Through prayer and research, they came across the Catholic Athletes for Christ Web site -www.catholicathletesforchrist.com. After contacting the organization, they received permission to tailor its existing college formula to meet the needs of the high school athletes.

"For many high school students, athletics is an important part of the high school experience," Father Hoare told The Catholic News & Herald, newspaper of the Charlotte Diocese. "We are taking something they love and tying it in with faith."

The group meets every other Wednesday during the summer. Their meetings begin

and end with prayer and always include an athletic activity followed by a faith-sharing talk.

About 12 adult facilitators are on hand to supervise activities. A teen advisory board made up of rising high school juniors and seniors attend the planning meetings and offer suggestions on how to develop the program.

"They tell us what's working," said Whelan, adding that it was teen advisory board members who suggested the group devote one meeting to eucharistic adoration.

Whelan's daughter, Mary Kathryn, a member of the Charlotte Catholic High School women's soccer team, said the benefits of the program vary for each participant.

"Hopefully they get fitness, but also learn lessons about how to deal with stuff in high school and life in general," said the rising senior at Charlotte Catholic High School and advisory board member.

She said the program has helped her approach soccer with a more charitable attitude.

"Sometimes when I'm playing soccer I get aggravated and want to do things that are not very Christian-like," she said. "This just helps me remember that we have got to stay in our faith."

At a recent meeting, after indoor and outdoor basketball, ultimate Frisbee and a cookout, Charlotte Catholic High School athletic director Kevin Christmas addressed the teen athletes, saying he was inspired by the fellowship he saw among them.

He talked to them about the importance of finding time for God each day, something he does by attending daily Mass.

"If we can't give 20 minutes of our day to God, then there is something wrong in our lives," he said.

His advice to the athletes: "Believe in yourself, believe in your faith, and I don't think you have anything to worry about."