

Queen of Peace cluster schools rally in face of financial crisis

With the Queen of Peace cluster schools in East Baltimore facing an unexpected 10 percent hole in their \$2 million budget, Father Richard Lawrence, the pastor of St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore is spearheading a fundraising campaign that has raised \$56,000 in less than three weeks.

The cluster is made up of Ss. James and John School (serving grades pre-K-5) and St. Katharine School (serving grades pre-K-8). It is supported in part by St. Ignatius, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Wenceslaus, St. Ann and St. Francis Xavier, with each parish contributing 5 percent of its annual offertory collection to the schools.

The cluster's finances were severely strained when anticipated grants supporting the schools were greatly reduced. With the endorsement of St. Vincent's pastoral council, the pastor announced the budget woes in a Dec. 16 letter to parishioners and asked for donations to an emergency fundraising appeal. He personally contributed \$1,000 and asked parishioners to check with employers to see if they will match gifts to educational institutions.

Prior to his appeal, Father Lawrence also met with the pastors of the four other supporting parishes. The pastors agreed to work to keep the schools open, and the parishes are developing ways to raise money as best determined by their pastors and pastoral councils, Father Lawrence said.

The pastor was elated by the strong show of support from his parishioners.

"We're doing better than expected," said Father Lawrence, noting that the target goal for his parish fundraiser was \$50,000-\$60,000. "One hundred and 17 people have made pledges and we're still rolling."

Enrollment in the two inter-parochial schools stands at 500, down about 50 from last year. More than 70 percent of the students qualify for the free-lunch program and almost all are African-American. Less than 20 percent of the students are Catholic.

Father Lawrence noted that for more than 150 years, Catholic schools have educated children from poor families, transforming them into solid middle-class citizens with a strong sense of Christian values.

“We’ve done it for Irish kids, German kids, Polish kids, Italian kids, and today we’re doing it for African-American kids,” he said. “We need to keep doing it. We’re not going to let these schools die.”

Jesuit Father William Watters, pastor of St. Ignatius, said he has spoken with a parishioner about making a substantial contribution to the cluster.

“I’m pretty sure he’s going to be able to do something that will be very helpful,” said Father Watters, whose parish also supports St. Ignatius Loyola Academy. “He believes strongly in supporting projects that are helping the poor.”

Josephite Father James McLinden, pastor of St. Francis Xavier, said his pastoral council is exploring ways of helping the schools. The parish just completed a Josephite Share the Mission capital campaign and won’t likely launch a new capital campaign until after the holiday season, he said.

Father McLinden said it’s very important to save the cluster schools.

“They are the only Catholic (elementary) schools present in the area,” he said.

Father Peter Lyons, pastor of St. Wenceslaus and St. Ann, made an appeal in the parish bulletin for parishioners to make financial contributions to the cluster schools.

“These schools serve the people we are called to serve – the ones who benefit the most from Catholic education,” said Father Lyons, a Franciscan Third Order Regular priest.

“They help a population of people who benefit the most from Catholic education, people who have not been helped by the public school system but who have great potential,” he said. “The track record of Catholic schools speaks for itself.”

Donations can be sent to St. Vincent de Paul, 120 N. Front St., Baltimore, MD

21202. Write *“Queen of Peace Cluster Schools”* on the memo line.