

Journey with Diocese takes many turns for Sandy Gay

LAKE CHARLES – Sandy Gay has worked for the interests of the people of the Diocese of Lake Charles in a variety of roles for longer than there has been a Diocese of Lake Charles. Now she has taken on a challenge not unlike the other ministries she has headed in her more than 26 years of service at the diocesan level.

Gay, who most recently directed the Secretariat for Christian Formation of the Diocese, was appointed to start up the newly created Office of Disaster Relief and Recovery by the Rev. Msgr. Harry D. Greig, Diocesan Administrator. Her office will be in the Catholic Service Center, now housed at 1112 Bilbo Street in downtown Lake Charles.

Following the aftermath of Hurricane Rita, Msgr. Greig asked Gay to spearhead the effort to determine what relief the people needed and how the Diocese and other entities were going to be able help those in need.

"When I returned Msgr. Greig asked me to learn as much as I could about what was going on," Gay said. "I began visiting Cameron and Hackberry on a regular basis. What a privilege that was, to be able to see the spirit of the people and to be able to walk with them in what was a devastating experience."

Now more than nine months after Hurricane Rita came ashore, this new office has come out of that learning experience and is

taking shape.

"It is certainly in direct response to the devastation after Hurricane Rita, which pointed out to us that we were not prepared or at least organized in a way to respond quickly to a disaster," Gay said. "Certainly Catholics have been part of everything that's going on but as an organized visible organization we weren't ready for this."

This new office is made possible by a grant from Catholic Charities USA, which also gave the Diocese funds to provide direct assistance to people in need following the devastation.

"We received a three-year grant from Catholic Charities that would finance an office that specifically would get us ready for a disaster. To help us find our place in first response, to help us learn how to work for relief, and to help us learn how to work for recovery.

"Part of my responsibility will be to collaborate with all state and local agencies, whether they are governmental or service oriented, so we have one united approach to all of these issues in the Imperial Calcasieu area. Additionally I will be responsible for networking with and collaborating with the other Dioceses of the State, so we can be ready to assist each other, depending on where a disaster hits."

As everyone found out with Hurricane Rita having a plan that you hopefully will never have to implement is better than not having a



Sandy Gay working the phones

plan in an emergency.

"The value of that is not only being prepared for an emergency, it is better handling life as we know it," Gay said. "We didn't realize how many people we were not serving until we had this emergency. Hopefully, we will all do our jobs better because we are more focused on all the people and their needs."

Gay admits that she is on a "tremendous learning curve."

One thing that will help her in this regard is the hiring of Greg Patin, formerly of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, by Louisiana's Bishops to coordinate disaster plans among the seven Dioceses.

"He has a great deal of experience and will be an incredible person for me as I learn," Gay said. A three-year grant from Catholic Charities also made it possible for the Louisiana Catholic Conference to hire Patin, who is based in Baton Rouge.

Even nine months after Rita's landfall, help continues to be needed by some people. Long term assistance is also available, according to Gay.

"We are still giving some direct aid to people

and now we have the availability of case management. This is so that when we find a situation where it is really clear that the people are in great need we can refer them to case management, so that someone stays with them for months until they get their lives back."

The same Catholic Charities grant that funded the startup of the diocesan office is also providing funding for the case management for those who are in need of long term assistance.

One of the things Gay has noted in her work is how difficult it is for some people to admit they need the help.

"We have people right now for whom this is the first time they weren't able to handle their own business," she said. "This isn't generations of people who couldn't handle their business, these are people who were making it. They just don't know where to go. It was a devastation that we really had not anticipated. So, how do we help them to help themselves?"

"We have to talk some people into help, she continued. "Give it to somebody who needs it has become a refrain."

Making the work of the Church known in this situation as well as in any disaster is also a part of her job.

"One of the things is how we become visible," she said. "The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux has established what they call a Matthew 25 Group. They have green t-shirts with 'Matthew 25' and 'Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux' on them so that any time they are of service they are wearing those shirts."

"We are looking at adopting that statewide, putting our own diocese name but the same shirt and the same logo, like the Red Cross," she continued. "You will be able to recognize that the Catholic presence is here. It is not about patting ourselves on the back, it is about giving visible support, which for me is Evangelization, showing that the Church cares."

Gay sees her new position as a "rare opportunity."

"To be able to do this in the last years of my ministry, to be able to get a new perspective, I don't know very many people that get this chance," she said. "I have a new challenge that was given to me and I am very grateful for it. I think I will be a better person for it."



A dozen couples from across southern Louisiana attended the recent session that trained them to do In-Home Marriage Preparation in their churches. Jan and Lloyd Tate of New Orleans were the presenters.

In Home Marriage Prep training held in Diocese

LAKE CHARLES – Engaged couples have, for many years, received some form of preparation for marriage in the Catholic Church. In years past there were meetings with clergy, with large groups of like minded couples as well as weekend experiences and small groups of couples meeting in the home.

On Saturday, June 17, a dozen couples met to receive training in the "in home" method of marriage preparation at Tabor Retreat Center of Saint Charles Center in Moss Bluff. The all-day training session was sponsored by the Office of Family Life Ministry of the Diocese of Lake Charles, headed by Kathy Owen.

The trainers for the day, Jan and Lloyd Tate of New Orleans, have been working with to-be-married couples for

nearly 30 years, according to Owen.

"They said they have done every sort of marriage prep work and that this type was the best they had found," Owen said. "These trained mentors will go back to their parishes and help engaged couples in preparing for the Sacrament of Matrimony."

Besides Owen, the Rev. Rommel Tollentino, associate pastor of Our Lady Queen of Heaven Church, was also present.

Unlike large group meetings, the In Home Marriage Preparation program is designed to have one mentoring couple work with one engaged couple at a time in the confines of the home. "There are six meetings with the couples," Owen said. "These meetings take place over a 12 week period giving time be-

tween the sessions. The engaged couple are given assignments and homework to do between the sessions."

The two-hour sessions are broken down into the following topics: Family of Origin; Expectation of Marriage; Communication and Conflict Resolution, Sex and Sexuality, Moral Decision-making and Natural Family Planning and The Sacrament of Matrimony, according to Owen.

Many see this format as the best way to encourage a spirit of trust that develops between the two couples. The engaged couple, once they are married, can then come back to their mentors when problems arise.

If any married couple is interested in becoming involved with the In-Home Preparation program as couple-mentors, they should call Kathy Owen at 337-439-7426, Ext. 23.

LCC applauds Gov. Blanco for signing conditional ban on abortion

BATON ROUGE – The Louisiana Catholic Conference applauded Gov. Blanco for signing into law a conditional ban on all abortions in Louisiana except to save the life of the mother. The law, approved overwhelmingly by the Louisiana Legislature in its general session that concluded June 19, would go into effect only if the U.S. Supreme Court overturns its 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that permitted abortion on demand.

Although Gov. Blanco said she wished the bill had included exceptions that would have allowed for abortions in cases of rape or incest – amendments that lawmakers soundly defeated – she signed the bill because of the broad-based support it received in both chambers and because it was consistent with her personal views on abortion.

"There was some concern that she might allow it to become law without her signature, and we know there was some internal debate about that," said Daniel Loar, executive director of the Louisiana Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's seven Catholic Bishops. "We're very happy the governor did sign the law."

Loar said some observers had questioned the need to pass the law now. But he explained that if Roe v. Wade should be overturned in the middle of 2008, it would leave Louisiana without an enforceable abortion law.

"The Louisiana law which passed in 1991 has been blocked by the courts, and we would have no law on the books," Loar said. "We would have to pass another law. In the interim, another 11,000 babies would be aborted."

Loar said the "trigger clause" – the law would go into effect only if Roe v. Wade is overturned – has the added benefit of not allowing abortion advocates to challenge the law in court.

"This way we're not putting money into the pockets of abortion lawyers," Loar said. "The law would go into place immediately."

Loar said he believed Louisiana is the first state to pass an abortion law that would be triggered by the overturning of Roe v. Wade. South Dakota has a law banning all abortions except to save the life of the mother, and the constitutionality of that law is expected to wind up being decided by the Supreme Court.

"Hopefully the composition of the court will be changed by then," Loar said.

In other matters, legislators concluded a second year of intense debate without passing any bills to regulate or outlaw cloning. Four study committees have been authorized to hold hearings over the next several months to further discuss the issue.

"After two very hard-fought years, basically the legislators told both sides that they don't want to fight this issue and they wanted to take a truce for the year," Loar said. "That's why you have these study committees."

Loar said the House Health and Welfare Committee would study the issue of the sale of human embryos. A special House committee will investigate regenerative cellular therapy and technologies such as stem cell research and somatic cell nuclear transfer. Loar said the LCC would provide testimony at all hearings.

Another Senate study committee will look into advanced health care directives and "do not resuscitate" bracelets that have been proposed by Senate president Don Hines, D-Bunkie.

"I'll be working with the Catholic Hospital Association making sure the Catholic perspective is reinforced," Loar said.

LCC objections helped

kill a "sleeper" bill that would have allowed a financial institution to charge up to 300 percent annual interest on loans of up to \$3,000 in which financially strapped persons put up their cars as collateral.

"Poor people would have lost their cars, which is their means of making money, under this predatory loan practice," Loar said. "We and other church groups helped kill the bill."

The LCC supported a \$1 an hour increase in the minimum wage for Louisiana residents, but the bill got only 41 of the 53 votes it needed in the House for passage.

Charitable pharmacies such as those run by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul were spared from a bill that would have given preference to prisons and state mental institutions to receive excess Medicaid prescription drugs for free. The LCC argued that prisons and mental institutions already are mandated to get those drugs through the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, "so it would have crimped the supply for the working poor. We got that changed so that the charitable pharmacies get first shot."

Another bill was amended to allow charitable pharmacies to opt out of accepting contraceptives if it conflicts with their religious beliefs.

The next legislative session will be a two-month fiscal session starting April 30, 2007. Also on the horizon are the September 2007 elections. Loar said about half of all state lawmakers will be subject to term limits (a maximum of 12 years of service). He expects some House members to seek Senate seats, "but about half of the House members will be brand new" after the 2007 races.



Joshua Thibodeaux of Our Lady Queen of Heaven Church and Haydee Courville of St. Philip Neri Church in Kinder help each other overcome the perils of one section of the "ropes course" during activities of the Advanced Christian Leadership Institute. Standing by to assist the pair should they run into trouble are counselors, from left, Lance Clifton, Zack Hamilton and Russ Crawford. Standing behind Thibodeaux is Chris Ackoway. Fifty-six Catholic youth and 28 adult staff took part in programs of the Christian Leadership Institute and the Advanced Christian Leadership Institute at the Emory Wallace Retreat Center near Bundick Lake recently. The annual summer program, sponsored by the Youth Ministry Office of the Diocese of Lake Charles, has provided summertime leadership training for the Catholic youth of the Diocese since 1986.