

Ecumenical JOSHUA group seeking better world (2.24.06)

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'We believe that we are all children of God who deserve respect and a better future'

By Jeff Kurowski, Compass Assistant Editor

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They came from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, various faiths and political affiliations, but the nearly 400 people who gathered at St. Matthew Parish for JOSHUA's first public action event all shared a common thread.

"All of us share the value that we want the community to be a better place," said Barbara Shiffer, JOSHUA president. "We all share the value that we believe that we are all children of God who deserve respect and the right to a better future."

JOSHUA (Justice Organization Sharing Hope and United for Action), a congregation-based group in Green Bay, was formed in May of 2004 to empower people to act together for justice. Founding congregations include Nativity of Our Lord, St. Bernard and St. Matthew parishes, and the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross.

Two new JOSHUA congregations, Resurrection Parish and First United Methodist, were welcomed at the public gathering, which featured the theme, "Many Faces: One Community, Celebrating Faith and Values." The public action program included prayer, music and summaries of JOSHUA issues presented by committee members.

"The format was very directly linked to our grassroots methodology," said Shiffer. "We want to get as many lay people involved as possible."

"It fit in with our theme, 'Many Faces: One Community,'" said Mike Westenberg, director of Religious Education at St. Matthew Parish and a JOSHUA board member. "It was an opportunity to showcase the variety of people and variety of issues, so we didn't want one person to dominate up front."

Julie Srenaski of the JOSHUA Education Sub-Committee discussed diversity in the schools. The issue has drawn considerable attention in Green Bay in relation to a proposal to build a fifth public high school. Srenaski, a teacher at Franklin Middle School, spoke of the benefits of diversity while she was a student.

"Although I didn't realize it at the time, I was very fortunate to have attended Franklin Middle School and West High School," she said. "Not only did I meet people who were different from me, but I became friends with them. I learned about their lives and cultures, and truly began to understand them. Our schools can and should take an active role in embracing diversity."

Dr. Dan Nerad, superintendent of the Green Bay Public School District, was honored. Paul Jadin, former mayor of Green Bay, was recognized for his work with the East Side Task Force. Dr. Nerad thanked JOSHUA for its support. Ninety members of the organization attended four forums to discuss school zoning and the proposal for a new high school. He asked those in attendance to continue their support by voting for the fifth high school on Nov. 7, 2006.

"It was wonderful that Dr. Nerad made the association between diversity and the high school issue," said Shiffer. "He sees that interconnectedness. We have to be involved in the community as people of faith."

"We have to find ways to bring people together," said Westenberg. "We (JOSHUA) choose an issue and focus on solutions to the issue from across the political spectrum. Instead of stopping at the first right answer, we can see that there are multiple answers. As we stick to it and work together, we can find answers that everyone can buy into."

When JOSHUA was formed, affordable housing was the organization's initial focus. A Workforce Housing Task Force, which includes Karen Johnston, diocesan director of Catholic Charities, was introduced at the gathering.

JOSHUA's new Spanish-speaking arm, JOSUE, was also introduced. Ana and Fernando Campos, JOSUE co-chairs, spoke at the public action meeting.

"In Green Bay, the number of Latino immigrants continues to increase and this does not please too many people," said Fernando. "We are hard working people. My supervisor praises me at work, but he will not accept me as a neighbor."

JOSUE is offering a "Know Your Rights" information session at 6:30 p.m., March 6 at St. Philip the Apostle Church in Green Bay. As a follow-up to the introduction of JOSUE, Bp. Robert Morneau, pastor of Resurrection Parish, and Sheila De Luca, pastoral associate, read a message from Bp. David Zubik about the human rights of immigrants.

"Sometimes, I think we forget our immigrant roots," said Westenberg. "If you look at the pattern of settlement for this area, just in the city, how do we associate the Catholic steeples we see around? They were formed by a particular ethnic group. JOSUE is an opportunity for the primarily Spanish-speaking folks to get together as a group, with some community leaders and to find better ways to get into the community."

Other presentations included Dick Vogels, discussing workforce housing, John Delwiche explaining the need for a new mental health center, and Jayne Baumgart who offered witness to the call for treatment instead of prison.

JOSHUA is following up the public action event with "Faith and Value Discussions" in March and April at participating congregations. The discussions will feature an exchange of facilitators. For example, a member of West Moravian Church may facilitate the discussion at a Catholic parish.

"It keeps with our whole mission of being an inter-faith organization," said Shiffer. "These are listening sessions. They are not going to be meetings where information is presented. We want to become clearer about our faith and how our faith moves us to act."

"For us as Catholic congregations, it's a wonderful opportunity to talk in plain language about Catholic social teaching," said Westenberg. "How do you view this world around you? If it's not in tune with your faith, what can you do to make it better? We need to work together to meet the challenges."