

Churches welcome Easter parade of visitors

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By Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette

The Rev. Kurt Bjorklund, senior pastor of Orchard Hill Church in Franklin Park, uses postcard invitations to attract people to attend the Easter service.

North Hills residents recently received large, green postcards depicting a crown of thorns transforming into a garland of flowers. They were invitations to attend Orchard Hill Church in Franklin Park today for Easter services.

The independent evangelical church, which normally has about 2,000 in attendance each weekend, drew 12,000 on Christmas Eve. The Rev. Kurt Bjorklund, the senior pastor, doesn't think he will have that many today, but he's making sure that everyone in the region knows they will be welcome. He hopes that the postcards reinforce invitations that he encourages members to extend to friends.

"We find that many who come at Easter and Christmas find some value and will come back," he said. "It ends up being an introduction or reintroduction for people who have been too busy to get to church or have been burned by something that happened in a church in the past."

Easter, which celebrates the Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead, has from ancient times been the holiest day on the Christian calendar. Although Catholics are required to attend Mass every Sunday, there is a traditional emphasis on Easter attendance as a minimum standard of faith. People usually interpret that as Easter Sunday, rather than the 50-day Easter season. The Orthodox, who share the date with western Christians this year, have similar expectations.

Yet, even without the extra outreach that churches such as Orchard Hill do, attendance also rises dramatically at most Protestant churches on Easter.

Gallup polls have consistently found that more than 60 percent of Americans say they will attend church on Easter, compared with about 40 percent who say that they will in

any given week. The Barna Group, a research organization for matters related to churches and religion, has determined that most of the extra faces on Easter result from all the people who attend intermittently showing up at once.

That's the story at St. Louise de Marillac Catholic Church in Upper St. Clair. Its many extra Easter Masses include twice holding two simultaneously, so that those who can't fit into the church worship in the gym. The maintenance staff guides people to park on the lawn, and police guide them out afterward.

The Rev. Michael Caridi figures that about 35 percent of his 9,000 parishioners attend on a typical Sunday, but 70 percent show up on Easter. Apart from encouraging Lenten confessions and devotions, he makes no additional outreach.

"It just seems that people know inside their heart that something big is going on in their faith. Even if they don't come all the time, their conscience compels them to be here to celebrate the Resurrection," he said.

He's glad to see faces he hasn't seen regularly.

"Sometimes the regularly attending parishioners get a little irritated that maybe there aren't seats for the people who are always here. But I try to stress that it's a sign of hope that people come. So we try to have a well-planned and executed Mass with joyful music. We try to make it very attractive and orderly so that people will see that something good is going on here. Maybe it will attract them to come back."

The Orthodox also see a huge surge on Easter -- though Palm Sunday's is even larger.

Because the Easter service begins at midnight, families with small children may skip it, said Father John Chakos, pastor of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church in Mt. Lebanon.

A typical Sunday at Holy Cross draws about 450. On Palm Sunday, Father Chakos passes out about 1,200 palm crosses. He expected about 1,000 people for the midnight Easter Liturgy.

It's not that strangers have suddenly decided to go to church at midnight.

"Everybody comes," he said. "Whoever is a member, they come. It's the one time of year when people who haven't come the rest of the year know that you have to come. I don't want to use the word 'obligatory,' but your whole identity as a Christian is validated by coming at this time of year."

He's been known to make a light-hearted quip about their sudden appearance, "but we don't get really preachy with them. We are happy that they are there and we try to let them know that we are happy they are there."

Although East Liberty Presbyterian Church -- also known as the Cathedral of Hope -- doesn't have canons about Easter attendance, it also sees a significant rise, typically up to 500 from 325.

Last year the congregation, which is one of the city's more theologically liberal churches, sponsored billboards and television spots for its Easter services. That raised Easter attendance by about 100 to 600, said the Rev. Randall Bush, senior pastor.

While advertising clearly helps, other factors are at work. Because it's so rooted in the culture, "people almost automatically think of attending church on Easter and Christmas Eve," he said.

Adult children and grandchildren who don't normally go to church may attend if they are visiting the grandparents, he said. Others who aren't consciously seeking spiritual renewal may see Easter attendance as a chance to connect with old friends and relive "fond memories of being in church for such holy days," he said.

Easter sermons tend to be non-threatening. It's a "guaranteed upbeat message. Resurrection is a popular topic, similar to the birth stories on Christmas," he said.

Most churches that do major promotions have large congregations and budgets to match. Smaller congregations often lack both staff time and money.

At St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Wilkinsburg, regular attendance in the low 50s rises to the 80s on Easter.

The Rev. Nancy Chalfant Walker sends an Easter letter to the congregation, and puts the Easter schedule on the church website. But she is stretched so thin for time that she can only dream of other inexpensive promotions, such as Facebook invitations, a lawn banner or putting fliers in stores. She'd love to mail postcards to neighbors.

"Hopefully next year," she said. She loves to see new faces.

"For me the most important thing is to talk about the good news of the Resurrection and that fact that, because of Jesus, we have hope. I don't want to be chewing anybody out," she said.

While St. Stephen's is a long established congregation whose oldest members remember attending with their parents, NorthBridge Community Church in Cranberry is just 4 years old. But it still gets an Easter increase, from about 250 to 400.

There is no special outreach because the evangelical church has a year-round emphasis on inviting people to church, said the Rev. Jayson Samuels, associate pastor.

"We spread by word of mouth. But I think the people in our church leverage that at Easter and Christmas. It's an easy ask at that time of year," he said.

"There definitely are latent feelings of 'I should probably go on this day.' Maybe not way out on the East Coast or the West Coast, but the majority of our nation grew up with some kind of church background."

At St. Patrick-St. Stanislaus Kostka Catholic parish in the Strip District many of those at Sunday Mass are visitors staying in nearby hotels, and still more commute from outside parish boundaries. The Rev. Harry Nichols figures the parish averages 850 on a typical weekend, but expects an extra 200 for Easter. It might go a bit higher this year because Bishop David Zubik is celebrating the 11 a.m. Mass.

Father Nichols doesn't do any extra promotion for Easter, but tradition does some for him. It's a common practice in Pittsburgh for Catholics to visit seven churches on Holy Thursday, emulating an ancient custom in Rome. St. Patrick and St. Stanislaus draw busloads, in part because they were once home to St. John Neumann, Blessed Francis

Seelos, Blessed Francesca Siedliska and, briefly, St. Katherine Drexel.

"We get an unbelievable number of people who come to both St. Patrick and St. Stanislaus, hundreds and hundreds, for personal adoration. It goes on until midnight," he said.

He wants everyone who sets foot through the door to feel welcome, whether it's a brief visit for prayer or a return to church after a long absence.

"I love the old story of the priest who told visitors not to take a bulletin because they didn't have enough for the once-a-year people. But it's apocryphal, and it would be self-defeating," he said.

"Obviously there are people who come back to church for Holy Week, with the additional opportunities for the [sacrament of] Reconciliation. I think there's a way of encouraging people to participate in the life of the church, and to do it in a very positive way. Beating them over the head on that day won't do any good."

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