

Praise program reaches out to young Catholics

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MILTON - The auditorium is filled with the sounds of live contemporary Christian worship and praise music. Two large video screens flank a stage, projecting worship imagery and song lyrics. Voices are raised in song, hands clap in rhythm, arms sway high in the air.

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It's lively, it's upbeat, and it's bringing together Catholics of all ages from the Archdiocese of Boston for a monthly evening of vibrant praise, worship music, speakers and eucharistic adoration.

Billed in several local church bulletins as a "workshop for a new generation," LIFT celebrated its six-month anniversary on Tuesday evening at Fontbonne Academy, with about 200 people in attendance. A non-profit ministry with no paid staff, LIFT Ministries Inc. is fully endorsed by Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the archbishop of Boston, who will be the guest speaker at a LIFT workshop scheduled for April 24, also at Fontbonne.

LIFT workshops use modern elements and creative environments to enhance worship and help worshippers enter into the presence of God, organizers say.

The workshops are led by Jon Niven, a musician, songwriter and music minister for the LIFE TEEN program at St. Mary Church in Dedham. The spiritual director is the Rev. Matt Williams, parochial vicar at St. Mary. Ordained in 2003, Williams has been involved in the Catholic charismatic renewal for several years and chairs an archdiocesan committee on improving young adult faith formation.

While LIFT is actively reaching out to teens and young adults, the program has also managed to draw in older generations of Catholics. On Tuesday, middle-aged and senior Catholics comprised about half the audience.

Among them as Lois Crowther, 57, of Hingham, attending her fifth LIFT workshop. Her 22-year-old daughter attended the first event in August and urged her parents to attend the next one, she said. "You go home singing ... you're happy, uplifted, cleansed."

The workshop uses contemporary praise music and the practice of vibrant Christian worship that is unfamiliar in many Catholic settings. This session began with praise and worship music led by Niven and the live band, followed by Christian speaker and youth minister Chris Faddis, who delivered a message about working toward unity with Christ, becoming holier, and allowing the Holy Spirit to "look into your eyes, let Him fill you tonight with His love and His grace and His mercy."

The most powerful moments came with eucharistic adoration, a Roman Catholic practice in which the consecrated host is adored by the faithful as the real presence of Jesus Christ. Over the 40 minutes of the adoration -- where many participants knelt in prayer, while some lay prostrate on the floor and others sat motionless in their chairs -- William recited prayers, Niven led song, and band members played soft instrumental guitar.

Absorbed in the events of the evening was Kerri Darling, 32, of Quincy, a regular participant in worship and praise events in other settings. She attended LIFT for the first time on Tuesday and summed it up as "awesome. I like to go wherever the Spirit leads me ... anything that encourages the Word."

LIFT is not for every Catholic, nor is it intended to be. Two first-time observers on Tuesday found the evening interesting, and the youth involvement encouraging, but their worship style leans more toward traditional prayer and devotion in a church setting.

Yet LIFT is clearly filling a niche for those seeking a more contemporary, lively form of Catholic worship and a greater awareness of Christ's real presence outside of the Mass.

The next LIFT workshop is scheduled at Fontbonne

Academy for Feb. 13 with guest speaker Lisa Epperson, International Director of LIFTEEN INC. For more information, visit www.liftedhigher.com.