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Local

LIFT gatherings seek to attract ‘the new generation’

By Christine Williams
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BOSTON -- A new program in the Archdiocese of Boston encourages Catholics to “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens.” That line, taken from Isaiah 40:26, is an invitation to lift one’s eyes, hands, voice and soul to the Lord at LIFT’s monthly gatherings.

Each gathering attracts hundreds of worshippers to an evening of praise, adoration and an inspirational talk. The modern program uses professional lighting and sound, contemporary praise and worship music, a live band as well as video screens with worship imagery and song lyrics.

“The things that make up LIFT -- from the music to the environment to the speakers, etc. -- are all designed to help the worshipper enter into the presence of God and experience a taste of heaven,” the program’s Web site explains.

LIFT, promoted as “Catholic worship for the new generation,” attracts Catholics of all ages.

“The fruit of the ministry, which has been truly amazing to me, is that it has become multigenerational ministry,” said Father Matt Williams, the program’s spiritual director. “The ministry is geared toward young adults, but the quality of speakers and the music appeals to an older audience as well as a younger audience.”

The adoration especially appeals to all Catholics, he said.

“The Eucharist is what unites us,” he added.

“Pope John Paul II called the Church to ‘cultivate a lively awareness of Christ’s real presence -- both in the celebration of Mass and in the worship of the Eucharist outside Mass,’” LIFT’s Web site said. “Worship is what we were created to do. When we worship, we are simply partaking in what we will be doing for eternity in heaven.”

The program is meant to live out the former pope’s call with a contemporary twist, said Heather Flynn, one of LIFT’s founders.

The idea for LIFT came after Jon Niven, one of the program’s founders, visited a LifeTeen program in Arizona a year ago.

“There was such a sense of community out there,” he said. “There was this fellowship and brotherhood between everybody that I wanted to bring back somehow.”

Niven said he came back “on fire” and spoke with Heather Flynn about starting a praise and worship program with emphasis on fellowship.

“We decided that we wanted to start something that would bring people deeper into praise and worship outside of Mass,” he added.

For inspiration, the friends visited a Catholic program in New Orleans, Louisiana, called Adore Ministries. They heard about the ministry though its director Paul George, who is active in LifeTeen.

Then they contacted their pastor at St. Mary Parish in Dedham, Father Williams, to ask for his spiritual direction. Both are active in the parish. Flynn is a core member of LifeTeen and Flynn works with the LifeTeen band.

“I agreed to do it,” said Father Williams. “I felt that this was something that the Lord had truly inspired in them, and I was happy to be a part of it.”

The first LIFT evening took place in August 2006.

“There was a great energy, you could feel something there,” Flynn said of that first meeting. “You could really sense that people were engaged

in the worship and being really moved."

In August, Niven said he remembers thinking he would be happy if 50 people showed up for the initial event. Instead, 315 gathered, and the evenings have consistently attracted 400-500 people, he said.

"When you bring large groups of people together to worship, it's a very powerful experience," Flynn added.

Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley endorsed the program in a letter that September.

"In the monthly gatherings worshippers enter into the presence of Christ as they continue their discovery of what it means to be a people of God and to live out their faith," he wrote. "The LIFT worship services offer a personal encounter with Christ to our teenagers, young people and their families and provide peace and joy for all who attend."

The initial theme for talks was "Set Free," and presentations focused on realizing that all people are a slave to something and need Jesus to be set free. Now the theme is "Becoming" which addresses what Catholics should do once they are set free. The talks will hopefully give Catholics the tools they need to become holy, Niven said.

Niven marks the program as a huge success, especially considering the difficult recent history of the Archdiocese of Boston, he said.

"When you look at Boston and the way that the last couple of years have been, that's a huge gathering every month. It's just been so much more than I ever thought it was going to be."

LIFT takes place one Tuesday evening each month at the Fontbonne Academy Auditorium in Milton from 7-9 p.m. The next LIFT evening will take place on Feb. 13 with speaker Lisa Epperson. Other upcoming speakers include Bishop John A. Dooher on March 13 and Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley on April 24.

For more information on speakers and upcoming gatherings, visit www.liftedhigher.com.