

Faith, fitness and fellowship

Church starts ministry for high school athletes; first of its kind in the country

by KATIE MOORE

staff writer

HUNTERSVILLE — What do basketball, ultimate Frisbee and faith have in common? For members of the Catholic Athletes for Christ at St. Mark Church in Huntersville, they were all part of their summer kick-off meeting June 10.

Catholic Athletes for Christ (CAC) is a national organization founded by Ray McKenna, a Washington, D.C. attorney and sports chaplain, in response to Pope John Paul II's call to evangelize the world of sports and the establishment of the Vatican's office of Church and Sport.

According to the organization's Web site, the goal of CAC is to provide an integrated network of sports-oriented clergy and lay people to serve Catholic athletes, coaches and staff in the practice of their faith. It also will allow them to utilize the unique platform given to them to reach the world for Jesus Christ and his church.

At St. Mark Church, Father Patrick Hoare, parochial vicar, and Jean Whelan, parishioner, decided to implement the group as another way for teens to get involved at the parish.

The ministry was formed last summer as an alternative to the Life Teen youth group. Life Teen had been very successful, but Father Hoare and Whelan felt that there were youths at the parish who still were not being served.

"We wanted another ministry for teens," said Whelan. "It is a different door to enter your faith."

Through prayer and research, they came across the CAC Web site. After contacting the organization, they received permission to use the existing college formula, which they tailored to meet the needs of the high school athletes.

"For many high school students, athletics is an important part of the high school experience," said Father Hoare.

With CAC "we are taking something they love and tying it in with faith," he said.

The group meets every other Wednesday during the summer. Their meetings begin and end with prayer and always include an athletic activity followed by a faith sharing talk.

At the kick-off meeting, the youths were divided into groups to play indoor and outdoor basketball and ultimate Frisbee. After the games they had a cookout followed with a talk by Charlotte Catholic High School athletic director Kevin Christmas.

“I really am impressed with this group,” said Christmas, who said he was inspired by the fellowship he saw among the athletes.

The group at St. Mark Church is the first high school division of CAC in the country. The national program hopes to use the group as a model for other high schools and churches around the country.

At each meeting, approximately 12 adult facilitators are on hand to supervise the activities.

“They are former athletes who love their faith,” said Whelan.

In terms of youth involvement, leadership opportunities are available in the form of a teen advisory board.

The board, made up of rising high school juniors and seniors, attends all of the planning meetings and offers suggestions relating to the development of the program.

“They tell us what’s working,” said Whelan, who also mentioned that it was members of the teen advisory board who suggested that the group devote one of their meetings to eucharistic adoration.

“We focus on the virtues but also on eucharistic presence,” said Whelan.

“The mission is bringing Christ into your sport and showing him to others as you play your sport,” she said.

Whelan’s daughter, Mary Kathryn, is a rising senior at Charlotte Catholic High School and a member of the CAC teen advisory board.

Mary Kathryn said that the benefits of CAC vary for each of the members.

“Hopefully they get fitness, but also learn lessons about how to deal with stuff in high school and life in general,” she said.

A member of the Charlotte Catholic High School women’s soccer team, Mary Kathryn also said that CAC has helped her approach soccer with a more charitable attitude.

“Sometimes when I’m playing soccer I get aggravated and want to do things that are not very Christian-like,” she said. “This just helps me remember that we have got to stay in our faith.”

Christmas talked to the athletes about the importance of finding time for God each day, something he does by attending daily Mass.

“If we can’t give 20 minutes of our day to God then there is something wrong in our live,” he said.

His advice to the athletes: “Believe in yourself, believe in your faith and I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

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WANT MORE INFO?

To learn more about Catholic Athletes for Christ, visit www.catholicathletesforchrist.com.