

FEATHER IN THEIR CAPS

Proud of years of good work, *Knights of Columbus* attract new members

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The *Knights of Columbus* are on the move.

And not just in parades, where members are easily identified marching with their plumed hats, capes and swords.

Some men began a council at Our Lady of Peace Church in Clintonville earlier this year, and others organized their own at St. Anthony's Church on the North Side and at St. Christopher's Church near Grandview Heights.

The old Roman Catholic men's fraternal organization is attracting new members.



Many are younger, in their 20s, 30s and 40s. And they generally meet at their home parishes rather than build and use their own *Knights of Columbus* hall, as their fathers and grandfathers did.

The trends are evident in the *Columbus* diocese, whose parishes account for five of the 10 new councils that started statewide in the past year, said Gerard Eckstein, the immediate past state deputy of the Ohio State Council of the *Knights of Columbus*.

Older councils traditionally used their bar-equipped halls as "more of a social club, a fraternity like a VFW or American Legion," said Eckstein, a 57-year-old Powell resident who also belongs to both veterans organizations.

The newer *Knights* councils take a different approach.

"We're going toward the parish level to get the families involved so it isn't just Dad going out the door and not coming home for three or four hours," Eckstein said.

"Another positive to the parish-based approach is to make it attractive to younger members. Statewide, our average age has dropped down to the 40s. Over 20 years ago, you were probably looking at men in their 50s."

Then and now, the *Knights of Columbus* is for men only.

The Rev. Michael J. McGivney founded the fraternal benefit society in 1882 in New Haven, Conn., to give financial help to needy members and their families while sustaining Catholic laymen in their faith. The society's headquarters remains in New Haven.

Named for Christopher *Columbus*, the society's four founding principles are charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism. *Knights of Columbus* members move up in rank, or degrees, as they achieve the four attributes. The fourth-degree members are the only ones entitled to wear the ceremonial full regalia seen in parades and at special Masses.

The society has grown to about 1.7 million members in more than 12,000 councils, most in the United States. Ohio has about 60,000 members. It's known for its fundraising, including the annual Measure-Up campaign to benefit people with mental retardation.

Councils also raise money for student scholarships to help families pay tuition at Catholic school, advocate against abortion, donate to food pantries and work to support religious vocations among youth.

"I thought it would be a worthwhile cause," said Rich Finn, 50, of Lockbourne, who joined the *Knights of Columbus* about three years ago.

His 100-member council includes men from St. Mary's Church in German Village and four other parishes. Finn worked outside St. Mary's last week, unloading Christmas trees that were being sold as a fundraiser.

The chance to help his parish and community appealed to Tom Scarpitti. So when the Rev. Kevin Kavanagh, pastor of Our Lady of Peace, suggested the parish men start a *Knights of Columbus* council, Scarpitti agreed. The council has grown fast since starting in June, with 37 members and seven more applicants.

"It is nice to get the men of the parish involved in something," said Scarpitti, a 37-year-old father who hopes his two sons follow his example when they are eligible to join at 18.

The blend of fundraising and fellowship also drew 49-year-old Randy Etter, who joined the new council at Our Lady of Peace.

"I like to stay active in the parish and community," he said. "The *Knights of Columbus* has a great reputation for service." And a reputation for secrecy.

Like the Masons, members of the *Knights of Columbus* are required to keep secret what goes on at their meetings and at the individual ceremonies marking passage through the four degrees of knighthood.

"They are very secret, very special, very meaningful ceremonies," said Mike Kilbarger, a member of the Lancaster council in Fairfield County. The five-parish council organized in 1906 and currently has 650 members.

Kilbarger, 43, joined 20 years ago, drawn by the example of his father.

"We are all of the same faith, and we are sharing the same mission. You feel involved, you feel like you're doing something worthwhile," he said. "You're serving God the way Father McGivney wanted us to carry on his works."

Kilbarger was knighted into the fourth degree by 74-year-old Eddie Baltz, who is known as Lancaster's "Mr. K of C."

A Knight for 45 years, Baltz is especially proud of the society's work in raising money to help support young men studying for the priesthood. "We have six young men, all from Lancaster, studying at the Josephinum," he said. "We're very proud of that."

The Knights of Columbus remain relevant, members said. "Our main purpose is to be the strong right arm of the church," Eckstein said.

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