

## Spotlight on St. Thomas á Becket, Canton, Michigan

from ParishSOFT



St. Thomas á Becket Staff (L to R): Dave Nowicki, Anne Truax, Cathy Hulett, Fr. James Arwady, Pam Michels, Sue Miller, and ParishSOFT's Ted Zettel

“St. Thomas á Becket has something available for every age level, right from the nursery up to our seniors.”

Parish youth catch the energy and love of Christ from an early age.

When people are truly engaged in your parish mission, you'd better be prepared to take a few calls. . .it could be a local family in need, an unexpected thank-you from a faraway country, or, possibly someone from an ABC or CBS morning show.

St. Thomas á Becket parish in Canton, Michigan, is inspiring Christians around the corner and across the globe. But as any parishioner would tell you, they're just doing what God has asked of them. And all the glory goes to Him.

“We have a very vibrant, active parish,” said Cathy Hulett, who uses ParishSOFT to manage records and postings. “St. Thomas á Becket has something available for every age level, right from the nursery up to our seniors.” Take a look at their [Get Involved](#) Web page, and you'll find nearly 100 active parish groups.

### Something for Everyone

The STA-50 club gets retired parishioners over the age of 50 together for lively parties, nurse-assisted blood pressure checks, and meals. STA-50 isn't your typical bingo club—these folks organize regular outings to local casinos, theaters, and special events. Career Connections offers networking and job coaching services for employers and potential employees.

Parish youth catch the energy and love of Christ from an early age. From their first faith formation classes through the high school youth group, “Our kids have a blast!” reports Hulett. Youth minister Stephanie Tierney also serves as parish athletic director, and she runs the parish Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) basketball and Little League baseball programs. The youth center, stocked with futons, TVs, ping pong and pool tables, is a popular hangout for high schoolers, and the sense of belonging children feel translates to some 80 altar servers, 150 youth

group members, and youth who transition naturally to roles as Eucharistic ministers, ushers, sacristans, and catechists. The church is their home, and that bodes well for remaining connected to the faith through their college and adult years.



The Loaves and the Fishes window in the St. Thomas á Becket Sanctuary

In short, there's a lot going on here for the 4,000 active families and 1,100 children enrolled in the faith formation program. But what makes this parish so special is that they take the time to get to know each other, to develop the strong personal relationships needed to do God's work in a big way.

### Common Threads, Showing God's Love

Some 251 children will receive new, handmade dresses and pants and know that they are special and loved by God.

Two shining examples of this involve textiles. The Poke-n-STAB (an acronym for St. Thomas á Becket) quilters stretched their local outreach of providing quilts for ill parishioners and local hospitals across the globe when they made and shipped 108 dresses and 93 pairs of pants to children in Cameroon. Another 50 dresses went to a Mexico City orphanage. Some 251 children will receive these items and know that they are special and loved by God. The entire project and all supplies were funded through donations, and you get distinct impression that these quilters enjoy the time they spend together.

Mom Prom is a night of dancing, retro fashion dress-up, and photos with cardboard cutouts of male celebrities, all for charity. It's become an international sensation and has put both the parish and Canton on the map . . . and in the media.

Family home study coordinator Betsy Crapps chaired her sixth "Mom Prom" on February 25, 2011. The women-only event is a night of dancing, retro fashion dress-up, and photos with cardboard cutouts of male celebrities, all for charity. Woven through many decades of styles are stories—from *my mother's vintage formal* to *I suffered in this gaudy thing for my best friend's wedding*—that generate laughter, friendship, even sympathy and empathy. This year they raised \$3,200 for the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the HHT Foundation, which researches a rare blood vessel disorder that affects one parish father as well as his son and daughter.



(L to R) Katie Long , "The Duke" John Wayne, and Betsy Crapps at the Mom Prom

35 groups across the U.S. are now holding their own Mom Proms for charities, and hundreds of women are finding a new purpose for their old poufy, bow-riddled gowns.

When the Associated Press covered this year's prom, the story spread like wildfire through about 77 countries. Good Morning America's Juju Chang made a personal visit to Canton, and the Mom Prom landed a spot on the popular morning TV show on ABC.

"My goal is for women across the country to hold their own Mom Proms and raise money for causes that are near and dear to their hearts," said Crapps. And that's exactly what has happened. Thanks to one parishioner's idea, 35 groups across the U.S. are now holding their own Mom Proms for charities, and hundreds of women are finding a new

purpose for their old poufy, bow-riddled gowns. “We’re a sisterhood of bad dresses,” she laughs.

Look for continued Mom Prom coverage on the CBS Early Show during the first week of May, in the Detroit News, and Morning Show Australia (the Aussie’s equivalent to Live with Regis and Kelly). Visit [www.momprom.org](http://www.momprom.org) to register your own event, learn more, or follow the press coverage.

### Ministry in Unexpected Places

Without any help from the Associated Press, an Australian teacher found the disability concerns committee’s Web page on the parish site [www.abecket.org](http://www.abecket.org) while doing research to prepare for having a disabled child in her classroom for the first time. The site offers an etiquette guide, FAQs, and links to resources for children with special needs from the Archdiocese of Detroit and [www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org), the website of the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. It was exactly what she needed, and she took the time to write and say thank you.

“It’s kind of cool to see how far ministry can reach.”

“You don’t realize who you’re going to touch,” said business manager Dave Nowicki. “It’s kind of cool to see how far ministry can reach.”

The new website is the go-to place for schedules, staff or ministry group information, and sacramental and faith formation resources, as well as a photo and document history archive.

Nowicki watches the traffic levels on [abecket.org](http://abecket.org), which now serves as the most complete source of information about the parish, and he reports that in the year and a half since launch, the new site’s activity has grown exponentially. “It’s interesting to see the things people are looking at,” said Nowicki. “We see a big spike on Thursday afternoons when people know we’ll have the bulletin posted and on certain weekends when people are checking mass times.”

The site is indeed the go-to place for schedules, staff or ministry group information, and sacramental and faith formation resources. And now, instead of having photos available only in books, they’re posted on the website’s photo history archive, so everyone can access images from the first mass in June 1977 or celebrations from the 1980s. Old booklets, programs, and bulletins have also been scanned and archived as PDF documents on the website, preserving the past.

### Moving Forward with the Tools of the Time

“I’d like to see the paper all go away.”

Looking to the future, Nowicki is not afraid to say, “I’d like to see the paper all go away. I would hope that everything eventually becomes electronic, that everybody is contributing electronically and we have no more envelopes being dropped in baskets. And when we need to communicate with people, it’s done via email, Facebook, or whatever, so if you want to remind somebody there’s a meeting tonight at seven, they get something on their phone.”

According to Nowicki, parishioners have been receptive to all the ways they can connect with the church using the Web. “When we went to Online Giving, I expected all the younger folks to jump right in, but the senior parishioners really embraced it,” he said. “They’ll come up to me and talk about it, and while many have had us set it up for them, more will say ‘I can get it on the website? I can do that!’ and off they go.”

“Our snowbirds like that they can set up their contributions to come in while they’re away, and they don’t have to worry about the envelope.”

New possibilities for using the Online Giving system could include letting families pay for their faith formation tuition, SCRIP purchases, mass intentions, and other fees.

Technology can help parish staff connect names and faces prior to pastoral care visits.

St. Thomas á Becket launched their Online Giving program in October 2010, and Cathy Hulett is posting fewer checks and cash gifts these days thanks to the online givers. “The Online Giving has increased tremendously over the debit process we used to offer,” notes Hulett. “Our snowbirds like that they can set up their contributions to come in while they’re away, and they don’t have to worry about the envelope.”

Hulett compiles the weekly contribution report for the parish bulletin, *The Chancellor*. In addition to the usual collection amounts reported (i.e., budget, collection, loose offering, and Online Giving) she also publishes the numbers of registered families, envelopes issued, envelopes used, and online givers. The April 10, 2011, bulletin showed that of 2,909 envelopes issued, only 733 were actually used for offertory. Their 68 Online Giving offertory contributions for the week totaled over \$5,000.

When we met with parish staff in February 2011, they were discussing ways to encourage even greater participation in Online Giving. Hulett had recently met with a representative from ParishSOFT’s partner Our Sunday Visitor, and she confessed dryly to Nowicki, “Sorry Dave, I spent some money. A dollar fifty. I ordered five posters, personalized for the parish, that say ‘Online Giving is Here.’”

Those posters are part of a larger Online Giving campaign that reaches new and current parishioners through verbal and print announcements, reminders in year-end contribution statements, and high visibility on [www.abecket.org](http://www.abecket.org).

Currently, parishioners can use the system to set up planned giving to 17 funds. New possibilities could include letting families pay for their faith formation tuition, SCRIP purchases, mass intentions, and other fees. “They will always ask ‘can we charge it?’” said Nowicki. “Now we’ll have the option to say ‘yes’ when it makes sense to do so.”

When it comes to eliminating the paper, parish staff agree it’s the way to go. Hulett is currently in the midst of a full parish census update and is digging her way out of a stack of over 1,000 responses so far, with more to come. The recensus forms went out with the 2010 contribution statements, Online Giving information, and the Lenten schedule to 4,000 families via bulk mail. “We’re always looking for ways to cut back on costs, so we packed about 8 pages into that mailing. It took a full three days for our volunteer groups to stuff and seal all those envelopes.”

### **The “People” Connection is Vital**

Hulett saw a demonstration of the My Own Church system, and recognized immediate ministry potential in the church staff’s ability to view the family’s name, address, and photo on the Web. “When Father has to go out and visit somebody, even when somebody passes away, the first thing we do is pull out our parish directory book and look at their photo. When you have a parish this big, you know the name and face, but it can be hard to connect them accurately.”

She also liked the product’s ability to let members update their own information and set their preferences for publishing phone, email and address information on the Web. “I’ve got a lot of requests to keep telephone numbers private,” said Hulett. “In the thousand responses

Hulett uses every avenue to communicate with the family and get answers when she receives updated census forms that leave unanswered questions.

Notes explaining changes in a family's registration or status will help other staff know why a record was changed.

Parish records are integrally connected to the work of the Church.

we've received so far, it took me about two full weeks just to process those."

### Going the Extra Mile

In addition to checking all those Do Not Publish boxes in the ParishSOFT Family Directory program, Hulett often receives updates that leave unanswered questions.

For example, when one spouse crosses out the other's name on a census form (a common indicator of divorce), she needs to determine whether the other spouse is still participating at the parish. Has he or she moved? Should a new record be started? If children are involved, are they living with Mom or Dad? Hulett uses every avenue to communicate with the family and get answers, and often a quick phone call or a written letter requesting updates yields the information she needs to keep accurate records.

If mail is returned with a new address, again communication with the family is imperative to keep the parish records consistent. If no response is received, and a check of their record shows no contribution history or participation in faith formation or other parish activities, she sets their record to "unregistered" and "moved," always adding a date and explanation for the change in the Notes tab, so any other staff member who views the record will know why it's been changed.

Hulett is, in essence, central command for parish records. All new registrations are completed on cards and then given to her for entry into the ParishSOFT system. Being the single person responsible for family and member records makes it easy to ensure consistency for all departments. And because she likes to measure results, she's recording the date of each census update under the Milestones tab in the software. "Eventually I'll pull a report and see how many I've actually updated," she explains.

Hulett's devotion to maintaining great parish records is a big component of her personal ministry because she knows her records are integrally connected to the work of the Church. From the collection of 364 units at the Good Friday blood drive to reports for the Archdiocese of Detroit, from faith formation registration to every phone call and walk-in greeted at the front desk, good data helps staff keep the parishioners of St. Thomas á Becket fully engaged in their parish mission.

As Fr. Pat Casey summed it up in a note of thanks to staff, "Because of your efforts, I am free to stick to the pastoral ministry and not worry about business." We say Amen to that.

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