

STANDARD DEMOCRAT

Preacher finds calling after career changes

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the Rev. John Harth

ORAN - Most people have trouble choosing their professions and change careers several times. The Rev. John Harth, pastor at Guardian Angel Catholic Church, is no exception.

Harth grew up on a farm in Mendota, Ill. As a sophomore in high school, he started to work in the radio business in his hometown. After graduating, Harth transferred to a radio station near Charleston, Ill., while he attended Eastern Illinois University.

"My interest in work started to increase while my interest in school decreased," Harth laughed. He once again moved to Lakewood, N.J., where he worked at another radio station.

In the early 1970s, Harth finally made his way to Southeast Missouri. Jim Withers of Withers Broadcasting, who was also affiliated with the radio station in Mendota offered him a job at KGMO. Harth worked there with news and sports for a year, until he got a job at Channel 12 News.

"I worked there for seven years - from 1974 to 1981," Harth said. During that time, he did a little bit of everything, but was primarily a news reporter and anchor. When he left, he was doing the Breakfast Show and noon weather forecast.

But something odd started happening Harth's last couple of years at KFVS-12. "It was kind of unusual and strange," he said. "But I would hear something in a song, read something or see something and it would tug at me." Harth now thinks this was God's way of asking him to reconsider his vocation.

As a Catholic school student in the 1950s and 1960s, Harth was often encouraged to consider the priesthood. But when his pastor helped him to land his first job at the local radio station, he assumed that being part of the media was his vocation. "I never really gave the priesthood that much thought," Harth said.

Harth went to his hometown for a weekend, where he filled in as lector for the Mass. After Mass, he said one of his mother's friends approached him, telling him that he should be a priest. Coming back to Southeast Missouri, he talked to some of his priest friends then made a decision.

"I figured if it won't go away, then maybe there's something to this," he said. "So I went from there."

One of Harth's first decisions was whether he wanted to be in the local diocese or go to Mendota. "I chose to stay here, which has been an excellent choice," he said.

Harth went to the seminary in Columbus, Ohio, where his studies included scripture, learning more about the Catholic faith and field experience. While in Columbus, he also served as co-host for a religious television program, as well as working as a hospital chaplain and with campus ministry.

After being ordained, Harth returned to Missouri and has since officiated in Joplin, El Dorado Springs and Neosho before being assigned to Guardian Angel in Oran three years ago.

Harth stays busy with several responsibilities as an ordained minister. He is in charge of the parochial grade school, where he periodically drops by and tries to eat lunch there as much as possible. "I try to offer a ministry of presence," he said. "I support the faculty, be with the students and give a good influence."

Although the high school students have youth leaders in their groups, Harth also attempts to be involved in them as well. "I bounce in and out," he laughed. Other duties include home and hospital visits, weddings, funerals and baptisms.

As chaplain to the Guardian Angel Council 4311, Harth offers moral support for members. He also serves as a police chaplain and has been active in the International Conference of Police Chaplains for the past 13 years, receiving over 600 hours of training.

Harth first became involved in the police chaplain program when he read an article about it in the Joplin newspaper. He helped set up programs in the other two communities he lived in before moving to Oran.

"There was no chaplains program in the immediate area," Harth said of Oran. North Scott County Ambulance was the first organization to ask Harth to be a chaplain. He now works with the Oran police department, Oran Fire and Rescue and Scott County Sheriff's Department.

As a chaplain, it is Harth's responsibility to provide counseling and support to law enforcement personnel and the public, both in normal circumstances and in times of crises. These include family tensions, job stress and other situations, as well as providing law enforcement officer with the perspective of a pastor rather than police.

In his little spare time, Harth likes to "putter around with photography." He is also a licensed basketball referee. While he can't be scheduled to officiate at games, he can help out in a pinch.

Although it took Harth a while to discover his vocation, his background was good experience for public speaking.

And he learned an important lesson along the way. "The most important thing is to ask God to help you find the direction he wants you to go."