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Church welcomes back those who strayed

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After 12 years of Catholic school and more than 20 years away from the church, Donna Cook of High Point expected a slap on the wrist upon her return.

Instead, she was welcomed back.

"I just feel stronger. I feel like I'm getting what I need for my spirit and my mind," she said. "It's like a comfort knowing the tradition. It's what I grew up with, and I just feel like I've been welcomed home."

Cook is not alone.

Inactive Catholics might make up the second largest religious group in the country, said Larry Kwan, chairman of the Evangelization Commission at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church.

IHM's Hope of Seeing Everyone Again began in January 2006 for people who have been away from the church or want to learn more about Catholicism.

"It's our way of reaching out to those people who maybe want to come back but need a little bit of a nudge, need something to ease back in to the church," said Jan Hitch, HOSEA director. "Sometimes they feel strange about just showing up and starting all over. This is an opportunity for them to enrich their spiritual growth."

HOSEA meetings are small and informal and are led by a different priest, deacon or speaker each week for several weeks. The final meeting is a question-and-answer session led by the church's pastor, the Rev. Jack Kelly.

Cook said she left the church when she was dealing with anger after her mother and sister died suddenly. Years later she started going to Quaker meetings to help cope with her anger, which helped, but she said something was missing.

When she heard about HOSEA, she decided to return.

"It was like going back was going home," she said.

James Hoague was born a Catholic, but spent 25 years away from the Church, and from religion in general.

In October, he saw an ad in the paper for HOSEA and embarked on the journey back to Catholicism with his wife, Ruth.

"There have been so many changes in the church since we had been there," he said. "They took the time to explain them all, and we felt more comfortable going back knowing more about the new ways of the church."

Ruth Hoague said changes include Mass in English rather than Latin, the priest facing the congregation instead having his back turned and many of the church's rules.

"You feel like you're participating and are more involved in Mass," she said. "Years ago you had to go to confession, say once a month; now you go once a year. You couldn't eat meat on Friday; that's changed."

In the past, Ruth Hoague said, she would have been too afraid to approach the priests and ask them questions the way she can now.

She left the church after speaking to a priest about her doctor's prescription of a hysterectomy. The priest told her that if she had the surgery she would no longer be considered a good Catholic.

The pair, nearing their 70s, said they missed the church in their lives.

"I had to think about it a couple weeks to decide for sure what I wanted to do," Ruth Hoague said.

"It was more or less a fear of confession after all those years, but there was nothing to it. I went to the priest, and when I told him why I left, he told me, 'Forget about your past and just look to the future.' "

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