

# Haydenville 'saints' keep marching for Toy Fund

*BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER*

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Haydenville - Some sainted ladies from the Haydenville Congregational Church will get together this month, sing their favorite carols, eat holiday desserts and share stories about Christmas in the "old days."

They will also donate, for the 19th year in a row, to the Sidney F. Smith Toy Fund.

"We're more generous on that day than we are with the other days," said Esther Warner, a member of the church for more than 50 years.

The group, known as the Haydenville Congregational Church Ladies Aid, hopes to exceed last year's \$200 donation, which is nearly five times the amount they raised since their first Toy Fund donation in 1988, according to Norma P. Kellogg, treasurer.

In 1988, the group decided to take the \$5 to \$10 members would spend on Christmas gifts for each other and give it to the Toy Fund.

"A lot of children are not having a Christmas and we pretty much have everything we need," said June May, who has been a member of the church for about 40 years.

Today the church has about 100 members, but just three years ago it was down to this 20-member group, said the Rev. Andrea Ayvazian, who joined the church in the summer of 2005. The Ladies Aid group paid fuel bills and raised money to keep the church going during its lean times.

"The Haydenville Congregational Church Ladies Aid is in many ways the backbone of the church," Ayvazian said. "These are really the church pillars."

In 1894, 43 years after the church was founded, the Ladies Benevolent Society, the forerunner of the Ladies Aid, was created.

"They were the driving force in the church, and I guess maybe we still are," said Eleanor Loomis, the group's president.

Many have been members for more than 50 years. Besides the Toy Fund, the group donates services and money to people and organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, Northern Hilltown Food Pantry, homeless shelters, Hurricane Katrina victims and Church World Services, a cooperative humanitarian ministry that provides health and school kits to people in need throughout the world.

In addition to helping people in local, national and international communities, the group assists members of the church community in need.

"I remember as a child when my father would get laid off every winter, it was the Ladies Aid that would collect food and groceries for us," said Diane Scott, 44, who has been a member of the church since she was 4 years old. "It was just this sort of silent 'we're here to help.'"

To acknowledge their services, 16 Ladies Aid members were informally "sainted" on All Saints' Day in November, Ayvazian said. Each of the 16 women were escorted down the center aisle by a new Ladies Aid member to the deacon's bench, where they were given a cross to wear and a rose to hold as they were sainted.

"There was not a dry eye in the house," Ayvazian said.

This is the first year the group of more than 20 will announce requests for Toy Fund donations in the church's weekly bulletin, which will be given after worship services Sunday and on Dec. 16. Donations can be given to Norma Kellogg, the treasurer, who will collect and organize them at the Dec. 20 meeting.

The group used to meet at each other's homes, but now they meet once a month at the church, which was expanded and refurbished after Ayvazian became pastor.

Attendance at worship service grew fivefold since her ministry began, with more people participating in the annual fundraising fair, raffles and Ladies Aid meetings. Loomis said some people new to the church are from area towns like Florence, Hatfield, South Hadley and Amherst. The Ladies Aid raised more than \$3,000 in five hours at this year's fall fair.

"We're talking about women in their 80s who bake and sew and work for days and hours and weeks for the fair," Scott said. "It always astounds me, the amount of love and work that these women put into this."

The group said they have a close bond, and Scott refers to them as her "church moms."

Scott, of Florence, is one of the younger members of the Ladies Aid.

"We could be buying new drapes for the sanctuary and instead we're giving to the Toy Fund and I'm proud and happy that those are the kind of choices they make," Scott said. "They're precious old ladies I'm telling you."

The church has taken on 80 new members in two years, and five more will join in the next two weeks.

"Our church has been totally revived, which is wonderful," Warner said. "It's the minister that came here. She is very dynamic and a lot of people have heard about her."

Ayvazian, who was a Protestant chaplain at Mount Holyoke College before coming to Haydenville, said the Ladies Aid kept believing there would be better times, and the group loves the new members now.

"They are not holding on to the past, they are looking to the future," Ayvazian said.

One tradition they have clung to is the Toy Fund donation.

"It's a satisfying feeling, but it's nice to have the fellowship of the group too," Warren said. "It's all part of Christmas."

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Catherine Baum can be reached at [cbaum@gazettenet.com](mailto:cbaum@gazettenet.com).