

# Woman's love for the written word spurs library of faith in Pewamo

my story



**A**

s a child growing up in rural Clinton County

during the Great Depression, Millie Smith was always excited to get her hands on a new book; topics didn't really matter.

Buying books was a luxury her family of 10 couldn't afford – not that the tiny farming community of Fowler had a bookstore. The closest public library was miles away.

Some seven decades later, Smith, 80, finds conditions eerily similar. The economy again is in crisis and the small eastern Ionia county town of Pewamo, about five miles from where she grew up, does not have a public library.

But this active, energetic mother of 12 was undaunted. Six years ago, she formed a committee of like-minded people at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Pewamo and, today, nearly 1,000 religious books, videos and DVDs line the walls of the parish library.

"It is all part of doing God's work," Smith said while seated against a backdrop of white bookshelves lining freshly painted white walls. "What this is about is helping people grow in their faith."

You will not find secular book titles. The library's focus is literature to educate people on the Catholic faith. Smith always has had a fondness for libraries and began thinking about a

By John Hogan | Photos by Kathy Denton

library at St. Joseph while working as a social worker for the Big Brothers & Big Sisters program.

“I was conducting an interview at a Baptist church and I saw all their books and said I’m going to do it here,” she said. “As soon as I retired, that thought came back to me again. The Holy Spirit was prodding me along.”

It did not take a lot of convincing to get St. Joseph’s pastor, Rev. Charlton O. Mason, on board when Smith approached him about the library in 2002.

“Millie saw a need and felt we all could benefit from exposure to our rich

“It’s really important to have a little something for everyone. What this is about is helping people grow in their faith.”

Catholic heritage through good books,” Father Mason explained. “She took the lead and set the ball rolling and so we enjoy a very rich collection of catholic books and a well-used library.”

Though St. Joseph maintains the small country church flavor that’s existed since its dedication in 1903, time and technology have not passed it by. In addition to books, the library boasts hundreds of DVDs and videos to accommodate patrons who came of age in the era of technology.

“You have to be willing to change to move forward,” said Smith, who lives a few blocks from the red brick church that serves 225 registered families.

## Helping hands

When Smith first started drumming up support for the library, she received plenty of encouragement, but volunteers were scarce.

“People said ‘great idea, but I’m too busy,’” she recalled of the early days. “So we got a group together and everyone shared ideas. It was pretty primitive when we first started.”



>> The St. Joseph Church library, which once served as the parish’s convent.



>> Anna Thelen going through the Dewey Decimal system master catalogues set up by Carolle Gross.

Among the legion of volunteers is Carolle Gross, a retired librarian who helped catalogue books; Carol Freund, a retired nurse; and Anna Thelen, who serves as library treasurer and orders new titles.

Despite a can-do spirit and outgoing personality, Smith eschews the limelight. She doggedly insists she is but one link in a chain of volunteers who got the library up and running. Tony Feldpausch, a

parishioner, built and installed the book shelves and the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus donated money to help start the library.

Many others served on planning committees. Then there are the church members who dug through closets and basements to assemble a wide-ranging collection of religious-themed books, covering everyone from saints to sinners and topics from catechism to canonization.



» Carole Gross puts returned books back on shelves.

important thing for us,” said Smith, who has 36 grandchildren and 28 great-grandchildren.

True enough, says Millie’s oldest daughter, Rosemary Koenigsknecht, who lives in St. Johns.

“Mom’s home boasts the second biggest library in Pewamo,” Koenigsknecht said with a laugh.

Because Pewamo and, in particular, St. Joseph are tight-knit communities, there is no need to provide a driver’s license, proof of residency or other documentation when checking out a book.

“We rely on the honor system,” Smith said.

### Spreading the word

St. Joseph is not the only parish in the 11-county Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids to boast a library, but for rural parishes without a public facility nearby, the resource is invaluable. Father Mason said the library draws people from Catholic churches in nearby Fowler and Westphalia, which are located in the Lansing Diocese.

“Many of our patrons are members of those churches, so we serve a broader sector of the church than our own local community,” Father Mason explained. “We consider the library to be one of our important missions.”

Father Mason himself has contributed books and borrows items as well. And yes, he gets them back before the due date.

“I have checked out DVDs to use in my teaching role with the school and religious education classes.” He said he finds particularly helpful the extensive collection on catechisms, which has helped him personally.

Father Mason, raised in Ionia, converted to the

“We’re doing more movies,” Thelen said. “We had a parishioner who donated 25 family movies, which are popular.”

Not all of it is high-octane reading. You’ll find several shelves lined with children’s books and videos. Adults too mentally exhausted to contemplate writings on the Council of Trent can find solace in lighter fare, such as family-friendly movies on DVD.

“It’s really important to have a little something for everyone,” said Smith, who usually is reading two or three books at the same time.

Smith fondly remembers having reading material around the house when she was growing up, including a magazine published by the Maryknoll Fathers. It served as her “window to the world.”

“The only secular magazine we had was Reader’s Digest,” she laughed.

When she started a family with her late husband, Carl, who worked for John Deere in Ionia, books played an important role in educating their children.

“Education was the most

Catholic faith in 1972. Inspirational writings on the faith were helpful then and remain so today. The library is of particular help to parishioners who work in secular jobs in business and industry, where Christian values are not necessarily conversation topics at the water cooler.

“Some of our parishioners work in these environments with co-workers who are interested and curious about the Catholic faith and also with some who are very critical,” Father Mason said. “So they felt the need for a deeper understanding of their own faith so they could articulate the faith with others.”

Raising awareness about the library is a goal this summer. To that end, the library board is sponsoring a summer reading contest for children called “Library Pizza Lottery” and a Defender of the Faith contest loosely modeled after the TV game show *Jeopardy*. Book discussion groups are planned.

“We have to think outside the box to get people in here,” Smith said.

To keep up with the latest titles, Smith and others tune into programs on Eternal Word Television Network

## Millie Smith’s Top Five religious books (other than the Bible):

1. *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* by Immaculee Ilibagiza with Steve Erwin
2. *Led by Faith: Rising from the Ashes of the Rwandan Genocide* by Immaculee Ilibagiza
3. *Our Lady of Kibeho: Mary speaks to the world from the heart of Africa* by Immaculee Ilibagiza with Steve Erwin
4. *Seven secrets of the Eucharist* by Vinny Flynn
5. *St. Monica: The Power of a Mother’s Love* by Giovanni Falbo

(EWTN), particularly a segment in which new releases are reviewed. Thelen is asked to track down the latest title to spark Smith’s interest: *Tear in the Desert* by Rev. Ron Camarda, chaplain for the U.S. Navy.

“She gives me first shot at reading the new books because she knows I read pretty fast,” Smith said.

As more people in Pewamo and surrounding communities learn about the library, Smith says she believes it

will become a popular destination. It is open during regular church office hours and after 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. Masses every Sunday.

Father Mason suggests the parish library will be a source of pride for the bedroom community sandwiched between Grand Rapids and Lansing.

“Pewamo has neither a gas station nor a full grocery store, but we have a wonderful Catholic library,” he said with a laugh. “Thanks, Millie.” ☺



» Members of the committee who helped to make the library at St. Joseph Church a success are (from left) Carolle Gross, a retired librarian who helps catalog books; Aaron Epkey, director of religious education at St. Joseph; Millie Smith, library founder; Carol Freund, advisor; Bruce Frechen, library committee chair; and Anna Thelen, treasurer. Missing from photo are Father Mason, Leah Kramer, advisor; and Mike Phelen, secretary.