

# Holy Spirit Education Programme Shaping the Youths of St. Elizabeth

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Volunteering teacher from Poland, Martha Socha (right), assists adults from the Maggotty community in St. Elizabeth with a Microsoft Office Tool Course. (Photo: Okoye Henry)

A deep-seated need to aid rural education prompted the Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Maggotty, St. Elizabeth, to launch the Holy Spirit Education Programme that has been a cornerstone of support for the academically vulnerable and underprivileged students in the parish.

The initiative is more than 20 years old and has assisted more than 1,000 students at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, from Maggotty and its neighbouring communities, through its enduring yet diverse outreaches.

These projects take the form of a homework centre for students, transportation and lunch support for those in primary and high schools and monetary grants for tertiary tuitions.

Beneficiaries range from six to 25 years old and reside in Maggotty, Barton, Newton, Carisbrook, Cameron Hill and White Hill, among other areas.

There are currently some 119 students benefiting under the impactful education programme.

Pastor of the Holy Spirit Catholic Church and leader of the Programme, Mark Bzinkowski, said that before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 210 children supported by the programme.



Pastor of the Holy Spirit Catholic Church, Fr. Mark Bzinkowski, who spearheads the Holy Spirit Education Programme, shows off a study book to beneficiary and fourth-year nursing student at the University of the West Indies School of Nursing in Kingston, Deschanel Simpson, in a library located on the church grounds in Maggotty, St. Elizabeth.

He noted that although the pandemic destroyed the desire of many families, some still saw the need for their children to pursue their education and have rejoined the initiative that screens potential recipients.

“We try to help mostly those who have problem with paying bills for education [and] we help people who are somehow left in the care of uncles, aunties or grandmothers. These people, even though they have the best of will, they don’t know how to take care of education, because they were uneducated themselves; they didn’t have their own chance,” Fr. Bzinkowski told JIS News.

“Right now, we try to help them (parents and guardians). The parents or the people who are in charge of children, they come, we talk and then evaluate their situations,” he added.

Fr. Bzinkowski, noted that those accepted under the programme will have to maintain their school grades and attendance.

He said that throughout the years, the programme has helped to increase student attendance in schools as well as allow beneficiaries to successfully complete their schooling at all educational levels.

“We have already three teachers and an architect [and] we have two persons who finished with degrees in business. I think all of these cases are successful. Each person is a big success because they had a chance,” Fr. Bzinkowski pointed out.



Pastor of the Holy Spirit Catholic Church, Fr. Mark Bzinkowski, who spearheads the Holy Spirit Education Programme, shows the new sewing machines to be used in the new training school, which is to be opened in March.

When he came to Jamaica in January 1999, Fr. Bzinkowski noticed that many children in the community were not attending school due to financial constraints.

He sought to aid three girls with food and bus fares and his kind gesture soon garnered the attention of an overseas visitor who pitched an idea.

He said the visitor asked if more children from the area were in a similar position, and if so, she could solicit the aid of other overseas donors to fund a programme.

Fr. Bzinkowski said it was this collaboration that gave birth to the financial and in-kind humanitarian aid that has been helping to transform boys and girls into the men and women of tomorrow.

“To see sense in life, it is necessary to see goodness. I think that’s the most rewarding feeling – to be helping someone to achieve what is possible,” he stated.

Polish volunteer teacher, Martha Socha, heads the homework centre, library, and computer lab components of the initiative.

She has been in Jamaica for the past 22 years and helps children with their homework and other afterschool activities.

She also assists teens and adults in getting certified in Information Technology (IT), English, Mathematics, Art, Sport, and other courses at the centre.

“I think it’s going well, you know... . We are trying our best because we came to help people to grow and to help especially the young generation to get better,” Ms. Socha pointed out.

“It’s nice sometimes when I am in the bank or Western Union to see someone who says Miss Martha, do you remember me? I was [attending] the computer classes, now I have a job. It’s nice to see that our kids are not kids anymore. They have a better future because they got education, and with the help from people all over the world,” she added.

Fourth-year nursing student at the University of the West Indies School of Nursing in Kingston, Deschanel Simpson, is a long-time beneficiary of the Holy Spirit Education Programme.

Ms. Simpson was accepted into the initiative during her time at the St. Elizabeth Technical High School (STETHS), where she was assisted with her secondary education.

However, she got into financial difficulties in her second year at UWI and was able to receive assistance through the Holy Spirit Education Programme.

“For my first year at UWI, I had to borrow from Students’ Loan because I did not know about the [tertiary component] of the programme. However, it was in my second year I reached the point where I had to find something to pay my school fee because I did not have any one to stand guarantor for me so that I could get a second loan,” she explained.

“That is where I was again introduced to the education programme, I applied and from then until now they have been helping me to fund my education at the University,” she added.

Ms. Simpson said many students in Maggoty and its neighbouring districts owe their appreciation to Fr. Bzinkowski, Ms. Socha and all the local and foreign donors that help to keep the initiative alive.

She stated that they are lifesavers who are selflessly contributing to the community at large.

Similar sentiments were echoed by another beneficiary, Cecilia Byroo, who is currently undertaking a Microsoft Office course at the homework centre during the weekday.

“It has been a wonderful experience. I was familiar with some aspects of Microsoft Office tools such as Word and Excel. But since being here I’ve discovered so many things I didn’t know about, even though I did this in university,” Ms. Byroo stated.

“We’ve completed Word and Excel and now we’re doing Publisher, and then afterwards we’ll be going on to take a test to be certified in it,” she added.

The Holy Spirit Catholic Church intends to introduce other components to help the community and wider St. Elizabeth parish.

The church leaders are anticipating the opening of a training centre in March 2023 to provide certified skills training in the various job areas to people in the parish.

This venture will be assisted with the aid of HEART/NSTA Trust and other educational institutions according to Fr. Bzinkowski, who noted that the facility is ready.