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## Youth gather to strengthen and celebrate their faith

### REGIONAL

Story and photos by Carolee McGrath

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**Teens gather for "Mercy in Action" youth rally at St. Mary High School in Westfield, Saturday, April 1.**

"When we go to events like the Catholic Youth Conference, what we see is 25,000 teenagers from across the country gathering to learn about their faith," Johnson said. "If people see the church fading, their focus is too limited in their own local context. When we see something a bit more broad, we see a lot of excitement, a lot of growth, not in the church's future but in the young people who are our church today."

Kathryn Buckley-Browner, executive director of the Catholic Charities Agency of Springfield, led the middle school breakout session focusing on the agency's JustFaith Ministry.

Every Step Matters Ministry (E.S.M.), led by Gigi and Jose Gonzalez, led the high school breakout session. The couple belongs to St. Mary Parish in Westfield.

Nineteen-year-old Michael Navarro, a member of E.S.M. ministry, spoke to the teens during the sessions.

"It's exciting. I used to be their age not long ago and to be here, they see that they can relate a lot. It's different hearing from an adult," said Navarro, who will be welcomed into the church this year at the Easter Vigil, April 15. He shared this message with the young people gathered.

"Jesus is wonderful... he pulls you away from all the bad stuff, everything that's negative. No matter what, Jesus loves you. No matter how tough life is Jesus loves you," Navarro said.

The Office of Youth Ministry is holding several other events in the next few months, leading up to the diocesan World Youth Day, planned for July 8 at Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Ludlow.

For more information, log on to [www.diospringfield.org](http://www.diospringfield.org).

WESTFIELD – Teenagers from across the Diocese of Springfield gathered the first weekend of April for the "Mercy in Action" Youth Rallies, organized by the Office of Youth Ministry. The rallies were held Saturday, April 1, at St. Mary High School in Westfield and Sunday April 2, at St. Joseph High School in Pittsfield. The day featured keynote speakers and breakout sessions for middle school and high school students.

"When everyone arrived we had pizza in the cafeteria. We had a keynote session with Oddwalk Ministries to get everyone up and moving and did hand motions and funny silly things," explained Gina Czerwinski, the director of youth ministry for the diocese.

Oddwalk Ministries, led by Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson, did a mix of music and faith sharing and injected a lot of humor to keep the teens engaged. The duo comes from Missouri and has led praise and worship for national events, including the National Catholic Youth Conference and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

"It's a mix of funny stuff and participation, prayer and praise, kind of whatever we can do to point them towards Christ and maybe take one more step in their faith," said Cerneka, who plays guitar.

Johnson accompanies him on the keyboard and the two play off of each other. Johnson said the youth of the church offer great hope and promise.



**Shannon Cerneka, left, and Orin Johnson lead Oddwalk Ministries.**