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In joyous anticipation

Pews fill in area churches as the Advent season progresses.

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The sun struggled to break through the cloud cover Sunday and there was a hint of snow in the chilly air. Inside, at the altar of Arch Street United Methodist Church in the shadow of City Hall, the Rev. Robin Hynicka, the senior pastor, gathered the children around him.

"What's this?" he asked, displaying a \$20 bill. The children knew immediately, but one of them asked, "Did you steal it?"

"What?" the pastor asked, chuckling. "Where's your mother?"

Hynicka found it in a park last week while walking his dog. He used his discovery, however, to make the point that though it would be hard for him to find the owner of the \$20, "God is in the business of finding lost things and returning them to their rightful place."

On the last Sunday in Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, the faithful and those looking for answers gathered in area churches.

A study by the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life reports that church attendance in most denominations, including Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, is steadily declining in the United States. And younger people, those ages 18 to 29, attend even less regularly.

Many clergy of all faiths bemoan the sparse church attendance on most Sundays except for the major religious observances. But none of the clergy interviewed Sunday would make that complaint.

In some of the churches visited, younger adults were well represented, whether with children or not.

The larger churches, such as Holy Trinity Church on Rittenhouse Square and the Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul, had almost-full pews as the fourth and last Advent candle was

lighted.

As they have for more than 20 years, hundreds of Mummers and their families filled St. Peter's Church at Fifth Street and Girard Avenue for Mass.

The church holds the shrine of St. John Neumann, the Mummers' patron saint. Members present icons of the group - golden slippers, umbrellas, and plumes - to the altar, said Rocco Gallelli of the Fancy Brigade Association.

Although the Mummers begin preparing for next New Year's Day as soon as one parade ends, the last couple of months before Jan. 1 are extraordinarily busy, and Mass affords families the chance to celebrate the holiday season and the tradition and friendship, Gallelli said.

The holiday, as has been noted, is for the children, who were greatly in evidence in church and out of doors Sunday morning.

Plates piled high with cookies for the coffee hour at Holy Trinity sat on a table in the narthex of the church and drew the attention of many children as they accompanied their parents to the altar rail for communion.

Even as services were under way, the streets of Center City were filled with shoppers, and a contingent of a dozen or more joggers in running tights and Santa hats made their way along Walnut Street to Rittenhouse Square.

Those in need of seasonal music could get some on Walnut Street near 15th Street, where a saxophonist rendered "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "We Three Kings."

For Christians, Advent is a time of preparation and reflection. The children of St. Peter's Church at Third and Pine Streets tried on their angel's wings and halos and learned their lines for the Christmas Eve pageant.

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin, the church's rector, said there was usually a buildup in attendance in the weeks before Christmas.

Because this is a time for families and "of great joyfulness," for those who are alone, especially the elderly, "the expectation of joy makes their aloneness more pronounced" and summons them to services, Laughlin said.

For the Rev. Bill Golderer, pastor of Arch Street Presbyterian Church at 18th Street, Advent is "an invitation to take your place inside God with us."

"Open yourself to be invited," Golderer said.

As for the \$20 that Hynicka found while walking his dog in the park, it has been included in the fund to finance a youth group fishing trip in the spring.

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