Catholics are so scarce in mountainous eastern Kentucky that Deacon Bill Wakefield, the chief financial officer of the Diocese of Lexington, quips that he knows “all four of them” in one remote community.

The Diocese of Lexington stretches across 16,500 square miles of central and eastern Kentucky, enfolding 46,000 Catholics in 50 counties. Most are in the breathtakingly beautiful but achingly poor area known as Appalachia. Some are in the more prosperous metropolitan counties in and around the city of Lexington.

Catholics are an extreme minority in the diocese, comprising three percent of the entire population and less than one percent in the Appalachian region, which covers 40 counties of the diocese. Deacon Wakefield says they are met with “cautious skepticism” in the region.

Catholic Home Missions provides critical support to the Diocese of Lexington to help it feed the spiritual and temporal needs of the people. Deacon Wakefield says the consistency of the Church’s presence in Lexington contributes to its acceptance. “We’ve earned our spurs because we’ve come and stayed. You don’t have to belong to a particular congregation to get help from our outreach programs,” he says.

Lush Scenery Belies Harsh Conditions
The picturesque green mountains of eastern Kentucky are dotted with flowering bushes. Small communities boast vibrant Main Streets, with medical offices, legal services, and fast food restaurants.
the air, the heady fragrance of the trees mixes with the unmistakable smell of coal. For generations, the economy has been dependent on mining coal. But most of the economic benefits of the coal leave the area, according to Deacon Wakefield, and the contemporary methods of removing coal from the mountains require fewer people than in the past.

Consequently, unemployment is high and the population is aging, as the children of miners leave the area to find jobs. In six counties of the diocese, some 19 percent are unemployed, not including people who have abandoned hope of finding work.

“The view that looks quaint from the main road becomes one of abject poverty when you turn the corner onto a two-lane dirt road heading into the hollers,” Deacon Wakefield says.

Hollers are small wooded valleys carved by rivers between the mountains in Appalachia. Each holler is isolated from others and is often home to one extended family or clan. The hollers are characterized by poverty, polluted water, poor sanitation, flooding, and land that is unsuitable for farming.

Before the current economic downturn, some 35 percent of the families in Appalachia lived below the federal poverty line, which is $21,954 for a family of four. In at least one county, the poverty rate exceeds 50 percent. “An annual income of $16,000 keeps people on the edge,” says Deacon Wakefield.

Compounding the problems of poverty and unemployment, 75 percent of the people over age 20 in eastern Kentucky do not have high school diplomas.
Church Offers Help and Hope
The Diocese of Lexington is on the front line with its outreach programs that provide food, shelter, and clothing. The programs in eastern Kentucky combine direct assistance with developing the tools to help people help themselves.

Diocesan education assistance programs help children get a good start in school and assist adults to develop literacy skills and earn their GED.

A recent initiative of Lexington Bishop Ronald Gainer is the implementation of a diocesan youth program. “This is a very concerted and deliberate effort to bring the youth of the diocese together at least twice a year,” says Deacon Wakefield.

According to Deacon Wakefield, few of the 63 parishes and missions in the Diocese of Lexington are self-supporting, despite the generosity of the parishioners. Some have only 15-75 parishioners, and most depend on the diocese and outside help.

“We’re dependent on the life-sustaining generosity of Catholic Home Missions Appeal. We’re one of those mission dioceses that would probably not be able to do all of what we’re called to do without benefactors,” Bishop Gainer says.

Deacon Wakefield says the people of eastern Kentucky are less isolated now than they were 20 years ago. Communications have improved and he thinks there is a potential for growth in the number of Catholics in the diocese.

He says an important component of that growth is the formation of people in both ordained and lay ministries dedicated to service in the mountains. There are 12 seminarians studying for the priesthood and 22 candidates for the permanent diaconate. There are also 23 participants in the first year of the diocese’s Lux Catholica master catechist program, whose faculty includes Bishop Gainer.

“We are in the business of trying to help people, of trying to be the humble and steady presence of Jesus, trying to love people. We have been called to be Christ’s missionary presence,” Deacon Wakefield says. “We try to maintain relationships with people once we’ve engaged them.”

Most Rev. Ronald Gainer, Bishop of Lexington, addresses parishioners.
The hills and hollers of Appalachia are the verdant background for the Diocese of Lexington’s ministry. Working in a region that is only three percent Catholic, the diocese’s outreach has helped change attitudes of suspicion of the Church to ones of respect. For more information about the home mission dioceses in the United States, please visit www.usccb.org/hm.