

Salting the Earth

Three Years Later

By Father John Hempel

On Sunday, June 26, I visited the formal opening of our new medical-dental clinic in Rushville. Father Robert Buckland had at last made the dream of nine months become a reality. (Courier-Journal picture-story, 7/8/70)

As I saw what had been accomplished and the potential offered in meeting the needs of migrants, the poor and people in general, I recalled the history of the Secular Missions during the past three years.

July of 1967 saw three priests assigned to some of our rural counties to begin a new, apostolate. Without tradition or guidelines we began to investigate the needs of people that were not being met by the already existing Church structures.

Poverty became our big thrust, especially during the first year in Steuben county. It was there that Father Tim Weider saw the needs, especially of the migrants and poor settlers. His tremendous energy, drive and expertise produced Project Reach which now prides itself on a medical-dental clinic, day-care center, nursery and a self-help, low-income housing project. All this helped by VISTA volunteers and others too numerous to mention.

The areas of Yates and Seneca counties provided a fringe-poverty problem. The dream of a human-needs center, ecumenically based seemed part of the answer. With the help of Marie Updike, the Catholic Daughters and the seven churches in the Penn Yan area the first House of Concern was established. It was to be more than a store-front to meet basic human needs; hopefully, a concept whereby people would come together not only to apply the "hand-aid" but also a source of needed social change.

Three months later with the help of Hazel Westfall, Father Sebastian Falcone and the churches in Seneca County, another House of Concern was established between Waterloo and Seneca Falls.

Seven months ago the Seneca

County House of Concern was responsible for the establishment of a House of Concern in Lyons, which is supervised by the black community of that area. It is hoped that this center will someday be responsible for housing so desperately needed in Wayne County.

At present Father George Gauthier is in the area of Tioga and Tompkins counties establishing the concept of an experimental Christian community. It is hoped that this community will eventually bring about a social action thrust in that area.

Thus, another page in Secular Mission history has been written by the Rushville Clinic which will service specifically Yates and Ontario counties. Not just a building, but a cause

made possible by people — people from Penn Yan, from the House of Concern, Geneva, from Yates and Ontario counties, clergymen and people from all different churches, people from industry and government—wonderful, concerned people.

In the work of the Secular Mission we have walked through the valley of shadows, but we felt we would deny our priesthood if we only cursed the darkness. Outside of those shadows of prejudice, racism, misunderstanding and ignorance we found concerned people willing to support our efforts to be instruments bringing the light of Christ into a world which for some, appears to be a chasm of darkness, a world without hope.

As members of the Secular Mission we have made mistakes — in judgment and in actions — not all has been perfection. Humanity suffers from a potential for error. In our search for justice and mercy for those in need, we very likely have alienated and antagonized some. This is the price one must pay trying to follow in the footsteps of the Galilean.

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