

Fr. Bruce Ritter:

Exploited Teenagers Are Deserving of Help

By Martin Toombs
Southern Tier Editor

Ithaca — Father Bruce Ritter's description of his work in the midst of New York City's sex industry was obviously deeply affecting to the 50 persons listening to him in the basement of First Presbyterian Church May 12.

His talk was filled with stories of particular teenagers who found their way to the child care agencies he founded in the Times Square area of New York City. But, he said, everything he would say was an understatement.

He told of an 11-year-old girl who had been arrested eight times for prostitution, and each time fined \$100 in adult court, a fine which was paid by her "pimp," and she went back on the street. None of the eight times, he pointed out, had anyone, even her court-appointed lawyer, bothered to find out that she was too young for adult court.

And of the 10-year-old boy who came into "Under 21," sat down on the floor and played with toys he had brought. You see, Father Ritter explained, he was too young to ask for money, and so his "Johns" had paid him by buying him toys.

The runaways, some 20,000 of whom will flock to Times Square this year, are quickly victimized by drug addicts, and "pimped," Father Ritter said, forced to sell themselves by the hour. Unless given a way out, he explained, most will die an early death. In the last several months, he said, nine of "my kids" have been killed on the streets, "victims of this victimless crime," a concept which is the "most bizarre myth foisted on the public," he added.

A priest of the Conventual Franciscan Order, Father Ritter told how he got involved in the work with runaways, in a relation that brought alternating laughter and anguished expressions from his audience.



Father Bruce Ritter during his talk at the First Presbyterian Church in Ithaca.

It began, he related, in 1968 after a Mass he celebrated at Manhattan College, where he was chaplain. Following a homily in which he asked the students when they were going to "sell out," a student leader interjected that he should "practice what you preach." That started a thought process that resulted in his asking permission to move to New York's lower East Side to work with the poor.

Later, on a cold, snowy night, six teenagers knocked at his tenement apartment, asking to sleep on the floor. The next day one left and came back with four more, and, as Father Ritter related the incidents, he was in the child care business.

After calling "at least 24" agencies for housing, and being refused by them all, one agency official told him he had a "serious obligation to have the kids arrested."

But, he said, "as these kids kept reminding me, I had a

bed and they did not." He got cots for them, and more teenagers came. At times they even drove drug addicts from the building to get more space. And then, for "revenge," he said, he went back to Manhattan College to get students to help.

Eventually he had teenagers living in 18 apartments in the building, which became "Covenant House."

Although he had no license to operate a child care center, he noted, he began getting referrals from family court judges who couldn't find agencies willing to take teenagers who came before them. And in 1972, Covenant House received a license.

Still needed was a facility to receive teenagers on an "open intake basis" 24 hours a day, he noted, and with the blessing of Cardinal Cooke and donations from many sources, he bought a building on 8th Avenue, which was dedicated April 1, 1977, as "Under 21."

In his talk, Father Ritter emphasized two concepts: that the teenagers are "good kids," deserving of help, and that much of the problem in Times Square is caused by the fact that "we want a sex industry."

Stating that the "sex industry" is a \$1.5 billion business within 10 blocks of where he lives, Father Ritter said that organized crime is heavily involved.

The teenagers caught in the street life are good kids, "most of them just trying to survive." He has never met a young prostitute — boy or girl — who wanted to be one, he said, or who hadn't started as a runaway.

"We are the problem," he said, "We elect the judges who do nothing about these criminals," the drug addicts and organized crime figures who exploit the teenagers.

To make his point, he noted instances when society has shown its willingness to let the "sex trade" go on. He reported that a Brooklyn congressman, arrested in Washington for hiring a boy for sexual purposes, confessed in a district newsletter, and then, following a dinner in support of him attended by many nationally-known figures, was re-elected. Father Ritter hypothesized that those who voted for him wouldn't have if it had been their son he had bought.

Father Ritter's stop at the Presbyterian Church was part of his continuing effort to keep the programs operating, and to thank the

congregation for its support in the past. He noted that about 20 percent of the agency's budget comes from government sources. The rest, \$4 million, is raised privately. The agency will aid 10,000 teenagers this year, he said, with a staff of

250, 40 of whom are full-time volunteers.

In addition to financial support, he also expressed the need for more volunteers for the program, and asked for the prayers of those attending.

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Missioner Named To Conference Committee

Sister Jane Kenrick, of the Rochester Sisters of Mercy, a native of Ithaca who has

served as a missioner for the past 13 years in Santiago, Chile, has been elected to the

committee that will plan the second Mercy Latin American-Caribbean Conference. The conference will be held next year in Guatemala.

Sister Jane was chosen at the first Mercy conclave of its sort, in Kingston, Jamaica, Feb. 22-28. The planning committee was directed to write a program of formation for Latin American women who might wish to join the Mercy congregation.

Zimbabwe Celebration To be Held Saturday

Two men from Zimbabwe who have professional-level jobs in Rochester will lead the cheers at a local celebration of their countrymen's new-found independence.

Eureka Lodge 36, F & AM, 12-14 Hoeltzer St. It will follow the final community conference in a series of six sponsored by the Marcus Garvey Memorial Black Solidarity Committee and MCC. The conference, from noon until 5 p.m., is entitled "The Individual in Black Cultural Heritage." A panel of scholars in the humanities, drawn from four colleges, will discuss age and sex roles in societies of Africa, Caribbean countries and Black America.

The evening program will include a performance by the Buffalo Innercity Ballet Company. Further details may be obtained from the Pan-African Cultural Project, 325-6900, or Prof. Ushe at MCC, 442-9950.

The celebration will begin at 7 p.m. Saturday, May 31, at

The Jamaica conference drew 40 delegates from the United States, Panama, Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, Guyana, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Chile and Jamaica. Discussions centered chiefly on the Puebla Documents produced by the Conference of Latin American Bishops, with the conference president, Father Mateo Perida, guiding the study. Sister Mary Judith Heberle, superior general, and Sister Norcen Graney attended.

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