

Structures for facing the future

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Today the calendar is taken for granted. It's such a familiar institution we don't need to think about how to organize the days and months of the year.

Centuries ago it was a different story, as historian Daniel Boorstin points out in "The Discoverers" (Random House). The author is the librarian of Congress.

Initially, Boorstin writes, the moon became "the first universal measurer of time." The Roman historian Tacitus reported 2,000 years ago that the Germanic tribes timed their meetings to coincide with the new moon.

"But what hunters and farmers most needed was a calendar of the seasons," Boorstin observes. "A way to predict the coming of rain or snow, of heat and cold" so they could plan the year's events.

People struggled mightily over a long period of time to put together an accurate calendar, Boorstin indicates.

The Babylonians tied their calendars to the observable phases of the moon. About 432 B.C., they developed a lunar calendar based on a 19-year cycle: Seven years of 13 months and 12 months in the other 12 years.

But a lunar cycle was an "attractive dead end" for humans, Boorstin says. It was too complicated.

Boorstin explains that the Egyptians originated their solar calendar around 3200 B.C., organizing the year around 12 months of 30 days plus five days at year's end.

The Egyptian calendar, following the earth's movement around the sun, worked so well, Boorstin adds, that people relied on it for centuries.

A system for measuring time is an institution developed over the centuries. I think that the road institutions travel is a tortuous one. It is not easy to develop workable structures to simplify our existence.

I asked some people for their views on institutions. For Richard Conklin, institutions "last longer than individuals." They provide a ready way to pass things on from generation to generation. Conklin is director of public information at the University of Notre Dame.

Having institutions in place means "we're not constantly inventing the wheel," said Greer Gordon, assistant director for adult religious education and marriage preparation in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

Ms. Gordon said the church institution helps people to "focus on human need. It allows us to work toward a vision."

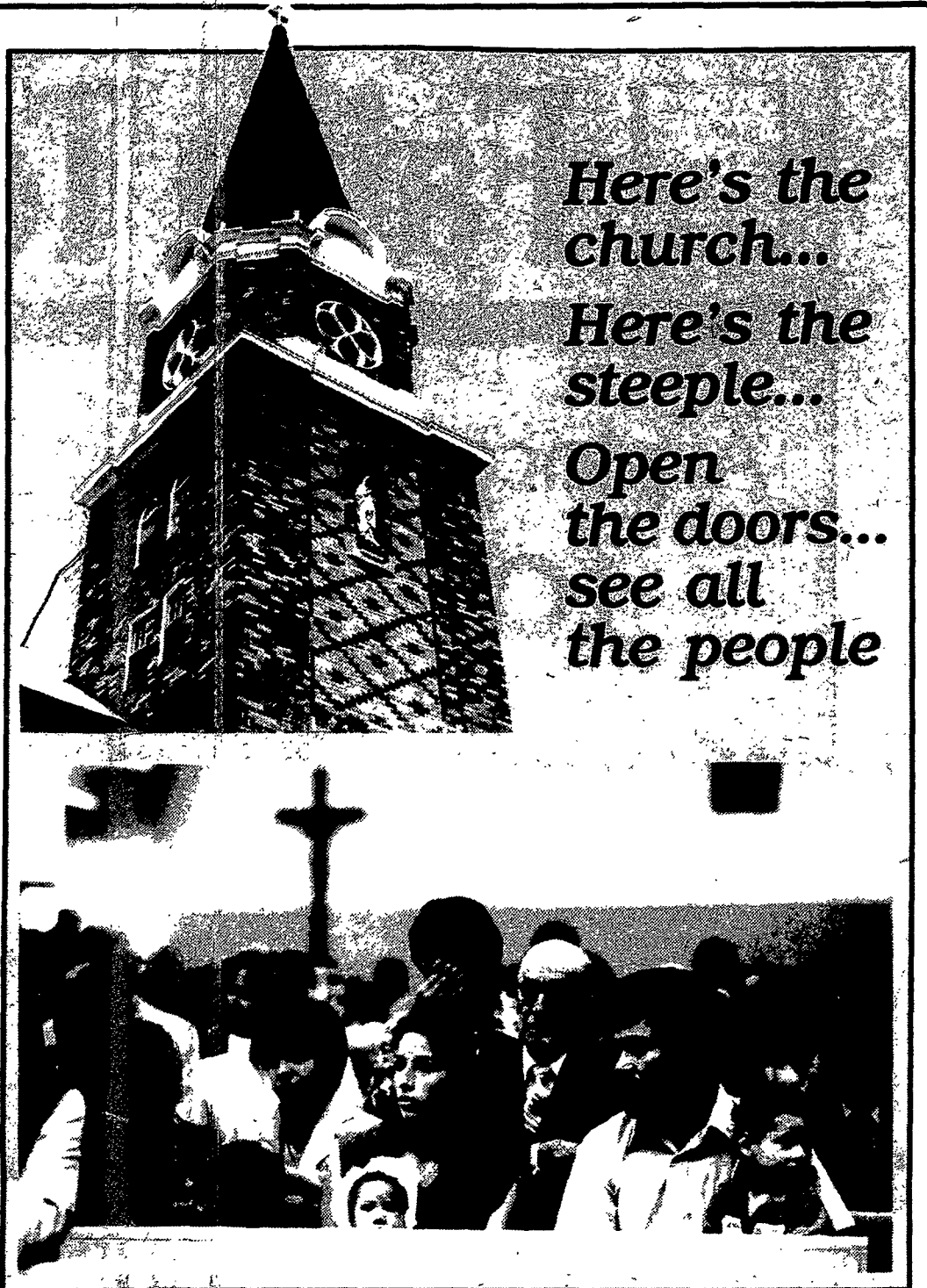
And she credits the institution with helping to keep her responsibilities sharply focused. "Without the structure to guide me," she said, it would be easy to duplicate the tasks of other archdiocesan offices.

Conklin told how he came away from a two-year stint as head of the Fort Wayne-South Bend diocesan pastoral council with a "better sense" of the diocese's role in helping parishes "be vibrant communities."

This was brought home to him, the administrator said, as the institution began to adjust to the new lay leadership emerging in the diocese as "fewer and fewer priests" are available for non-sacramental duties. Conklin said diocesan authorities made it "their job" to establish educational programs to train and enrich parish lay leaders.

In that case, Conklin said, the diocesan institution had the facilities to do something that the individual parishes would have been hard pressed to accomplish.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Here's the church...
Here's the steeple...
Open the doors...
see all the people

Organization and community: Not an

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

God once drew a motley crew of refugees to himself and formed them into a community. As the Old Testament account tells us, it was at Mt. Sinai that these refugees became a people peculiarly God's own.

It was then that Moses took blood "and sprinkled it on the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of his'" (Exodus 24:8).

The people entered into an intimate relationship with God and with each other.

They became a community. And at the Last Supper Jesus would take a cup and say: "This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of many" (Mark 14:23-24).

The early Christians considered the Eucharist a sacrificial meal that formed a people, a com-

munity.

This kind of thinking is basic to the church: It is a community of people called to live in loving union with God and with each other.

For St. Paul, the notion of community was very important. When the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth were splitting into groups on the basis of personal allegiance, he was devastated. Paul cried out: "Has Christ, then, been divided into parts?" (I Corinthians 1:13).

And, according to the structure of the Greek sentence, we should respond by answering, "Yes! By your factions and disputes you effectively have divided Christ."

Paul would identify the community with Christ — a Christ continuing in time and space. "The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body, and so it is with Christ" (I Corinthians 12:12).

Once again the Eucharist is

seen as the sign of unity among Christians. "Is not the cup of blessing we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Because the loaf is one we, many though we are, are one body, for we partake of the one loaf" (I Corinthians 10:16-17).

In fact, when Paul reprovved the Corinthian people because they abused the eucharistic meal, it was because they were turning it into an occasion for disunity. They were eating and drinking "without recognizing the body," the community (I Corinthians 11:29). By their callous disregard of each other they were profaning Christ's body.

Of course, the evangelists and Paul were only reflecting the mind of Jesus. He founded a community. Of course, a community without leadership, without a visible principle of unity, can soon dissolve into chaos. So Jesus provided for leadership