

Study reports accessibility of Monroe County churches

By Teresa A. Parsons

How would you like to attend a bible study class at a nearby parish and find — halfway through the evening — that you can't use the bathroom?

If you are wheelchair-bound, you will find specially designated parking areas and a smooth, level parking surface at 87 percent of Monroe County Catholic churches. But only 13 percent of those churches have wheelchair-accessible bathrooms. And even fewer — 8 percent — have accessible bathrooms in their church halls.

If you're one of the 60,000 Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester who are physically or mentally disabled in some way, these may, of necessity, be your most important considerations in choosing a faith community.

These and other factors in parish accessibility have been measured in a study recently released by the diocesan Ministry with the Disabled. Altogether, 77 parishes in Monroe County were surveyed on 10 criteria during the past year.

In addition to parking lots and church bathrooms, the study looked at church walkways, entrance ramps, seating arrangements, amplification systems and interpreting for deaf or hearing-impaired persons. Church hall entrances and bathrooms were also examined. Although the diocese has adopted a regional approach to religious instruction for disabled people, this was also a criterion in the survey, to increase public awareness of where programs are centered.

Beginning in 1984 with the southwest area of Monroe County, each parish was visited by a two-person survey team. One member of each team was disabled.

Several parishes — St. Elizabeth Seton, Transfiguration and Holy Ghost — were unable to be surveyed because their facilities were under construction. Other parishes are in the process of constructing ramps or arranging to provide services. But as organizers pointed out, the survey is an informational tool and was not designed to point a finger at any parish.

"The survey is not intended to criticize parishes that are not accessible in one way or another," explained Greg Zuroski, staff liaison for the ministry. "We're trying to provide an informative service to people who are disabled, telling them where they can take part in church functions and where they can't."

Educating the community to existing services is one of several goals the Ministry with the Disabled has adopted since it was created in 1983. Members also hope to consult with parish and diocesan groups in planning new programs and activities so that disabled persons can participate, to advocate for disabled people on legislation and public policy issues, and to monitor and provide advice for existing programs.

The Ministry with the Disabled is particularly well-qualified for this task since most of its members are disabled. Others work with disabled people or have family members who are disabled.

The Diocese of Rochester in 1982 established a steering committee which, in turned, formed the basis for founding the Ministry with the Disabled as a program of diocesan Catholic Charities. Impetus for the

diocesan action came from the 1978 U.S. Catholic bishops pastoral statement on the handicapped, which called for greater inclusion of disabled people in the life of the Church.

The initial proposal for the Ministry with the Disabled stated: "Key to development and growth of a totally inclusive Church and full involvement of disabled people in diocesan and parish activities is the application of the experience and insight of disabled people in planning for diocesan and parish life. A beginning is to make parish and diocesan facilities accessible to members of this community."

Many suburban churches and parish facilities built within the last 15 years are already accessible. St. Rita's Church in West

Webster even has a ramp leading to the sanctuary. The Diocesan Pastoral Center has recently added a ramp to its entrance, and accessibility is now one of the factors considered in granting diocesan approval to any building or renovation plans.

"The point is that a lot has already been done, but there's also a lot left to do," Zuroski said. He plans to expand the survey to include other regions of the diocese and to continue updating Monroe County's results.

Zuroski added that copies of the individual parish reports, upon which the study is based, will be available at the Pastoral Center as well as at the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry, 50 Chestnut St.

The following is list of Monroe County Catholic churches, organized by criterion and by region, which are accessible.

Church entrance or ramp

66 percent

Note: Some churches may have ramps, but are not included because of steps or other obstacles that make them inaccessible. Some parish ramps are also so steeply angled that a person in a wheelchair or using a cane would be unable to negotiate it alone. A level space at the top of the ramp is needed for a wheelchair-bound person to open the door.

Southeast: Corpus Christi; Good Shepherd; Guardian Angels; Our Lady of Lourdes (ramp in progress); Our Lady Queen of Peace; Our Lady of Victory; St. Anne; St. Boniface; St. Joseph, Rush; St. Louis; St. Mary, downtown; St. Thomas More.

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Jesuit Volunteer did study legwork

By Teresa A. Parsons

"Ruined for life" is the unofficial slogan of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and after two years in the corps, John Scully knows why.

"I will never again view things as I did before this experience," he said. "Overall, I think I place less importance on material success. I question the traditional American values more."

For the past year, Scully has been assigned to the diocesan Ministry with the Disabled where his largest task and accomplishment has been compiling a study of church accessibility to persons with disabilities. He personally visited more than half of the 77 parishes included in the study, in most cases taking along a disabled person.

"You make a larger impressions with someone disabled," he said, adding that his companion often noticed things he overlooked, like a ramp angled too steeply for wheelchairs or a small step that he might not have noticed.

While completing the study, Scully was involved in enough other activities to give "ruined for life" an entirely different meaning — exhaustion.

As a volunteer at the Action Center for the Disabled, he gathered letters of support and helped with transportation. He read for the Association for the Blind's Rochester Reading Service, and provided staff support and transportation for monthly meetings of the Ministry with the Disabled steering committee.

Somehow, he also found time to successfully advocate with Rochester Transit Service (RTS) for a change of policy. Senior citizens and persons with disabilities who are eligible for reduced off-peak fares formerly had to pay with cash. Scully and others argued that a monthly pass should be available because people in those categories typically live on fixed monthly incomes and would prefer to buy a pass when they receive their checks. It's also a group that doesn't need the hassle of getting correct change. In the end, he won a partial victory when RTS agreed to issue a 10-ticket pass.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of his job was to enable the people he worked with to accomplish their objectives without actually doing things for them. "He threw himself into the work, but didn't take over the leadership role," said Greg Zuroski of the Ministry with the Disabled. "He worked all hours, all week. You don't usually find that kind of dedication in either paid staff or volunteers," Zuroski added.

The attraction of Jesuit Volunteers for Scully was the organization's ideal of service to the Church, a simple lifestyle and community living. "I liked the idea of just doing something without money as my motivation," he said.

Scully spent his first year as a Jesuit Volunteer in Philadelphia working for a program that supplied frozen, home-cooked meals to seniors and persons with disabilities. Working more directly with disabled people had been his original goal, but there was simply no such program available to him that year.

In addition to affecting his value system, Scully said, the life of a Jesuit Volunteer has helped him to grow as a person. Coming from a middle-class, suburban lifestyle in Seattle, Wash., the move to a poor, inner-city neighborhood and the restrictions of a small monthly stipend were revelations.

So was community living. "It's certainly broadened my awareness of feminism within the Church," he said, noting that having grown up in a "brothers-only" family, he never considered the Church from a woman's



John Scully

point of view.

His volunteer experience has also helped Scully in choosing a career. This fall he enrolled in a joint educational specialist program offered by the University of Rochester and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology. When he graduates from the two-year program, he will be qualified to teach deaf and non-deaf high school students.

His advice to anyone considering the Jesuit Volunteer Corps is simple. "Don't take yourself too seriously," he said. "Relax and have fun."



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