

Mergers, clusters and closings:

Circuit-riding tradition reborn in rural ministry

Part II of a two-part examination of new parish formations in the Diocese of Rochester
By Teresa A. Parsons

They don't travel on horseback, but the staff of the Cayuga Team Ministry has a lot in common with the old-time circuit riders — ministers who traveled up and down the length of Cayuga Lake hundreds of years ago.

"I like to think we have the missionary spirit. You have to be kind of flexible," said Sister Brigid Quinn, RSM, pastoral assistant. "We're doing some of the same things the Jesuits did back in the 1600s."

Roads are a lot better these days, but mileage still takes its toll on the team's three members —

Sister Brigid; Father William Spilly, pastor; and Deacon John Prave. They may each drive up to 500 miles a week covering the southwestern part of Cayuga County — from Cayuga on the north end to King Ferry, 22 miles to the south. In between are the communities of Union Springs and Aurora.

It's a wonder their total mileage isn't higher. Consider that the team has three parish councils and numerous other committees — from worship committee to building and grounds — to attend as well as one weekday Mass per parish each week and four Masses each Sunday — except in the summer, when there are seven.

Then there are religious education classes, social ministry meetings, pastoral counseling appointments and visits to parishioners all over the region and in nursing homes and hospitals in Auburn and Ithaca.

"You learn to pray in the car," Father Spilly noted.

The four villages share a common lakefront, but that's where most of the similarities end. Each community and each parish has a distinct and precious identity.

"There are some people whose families have been in these churches for four, five or even six generations," one parishioner noted. "That makes for a deep attachment."

Our Lady of the Lake in King Ferry serves a farming community that identifies with Ithaca to the south, whereas St. Joseph's in Cayuga is within seven miles of

Auburn. Aurora, the home of St. Patrick's Church and Wells College, is the geographic and academic center of the cluster. The closest to a suburban area is Union Springs, where St. Michael's is located.

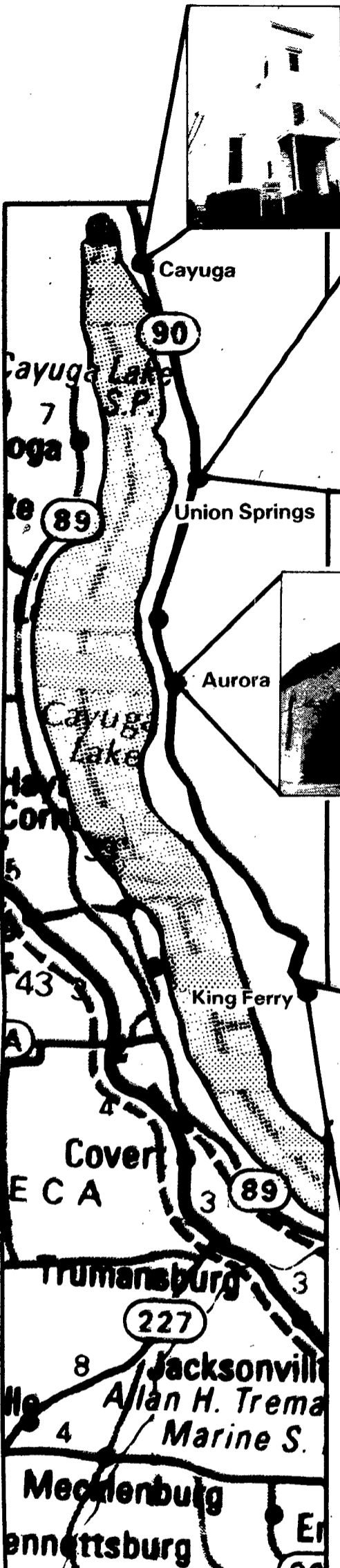
"They were not a natural cluster," Father Spilly said.

Clustering is only the latest in a series of organization changes the four Cayuga Lake parishes have survived in more than a century.

Our Lady of the Lake, built in 1868, was considered a mission church until 1913. St. Joseph's, the oldest parish in the diocese, was a mission of St. Aloysius Parish in Auburn for many years prior to 1973.

Even earlier, St. Joseph's, along with St. Michael's and St. Patrick's, were alternately missions of one another and were jointly served for many years by a single priest.

"From our point of view, they're all equal. No parish is better than any other," Father Spilly said. "We've tried to emphasize that their own identities will never be lost, but that there are things they can share."



Father William Spilly, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry, said he is energized by serving four different communities. But parishioners fear that he and the rest of the team are overworked.

The Cayuga Team Ministry was the first of three rural clusters organized in the Diocese of Rochester so far. The other two, formed last April, are located in the northeast corner of the diocese and include eight parishes.

Faced with the retirement in 1984 of two Cayuga-area pastors — Father John Hayes of St. Patrick/St. Michael's and Father Richard Stanton of King Ferry — the diocese in January, 1984, convened representatives of the planning office, priests' personnel board, area priests, deacons and parish representatives in an early version of the Process for Institutional and Ministerial Consultation (PIMC).

Their original plan — announced in May, 1984 — called for six parishes in southern Cayuga County to comprise two related clusters under a single ministry team. St. Joseph's, St. Michael's, Our Lady of the Lake and St. Patrick's were designated as one cluster; the other included St. Bernard, Scipio Center, and St. Isaac Jogues, Fleming. The team was to include: two priests, Father Spilly and Father Paul Cloonan; two sisters, including Sister Brigid; and one part-time deacon.

The ministry team actually formed was smaller than planned because by May, 1984, the vast majority of sisters had already been assigned elsewhere.

Then Father Cloonan went on sabbatical in the fall, leaving the three-member team with six parishes. They coped for four months with help from Sister Lisette O'Brien and an occasional visiting priest. But finally in December, learning that Father Cloonan was to be reassigned, Father Spilly told the diocesan personnel board: "We can't do this any more" and the two parishes were reassigned.

At the same time the cluster was formed, the diocese announced the closing of St. Hillary's Church in nearby Genoa and reassigned the mission church of All Saints in Lansing from Our Lady of the Lake to St. Catherine of Siena, Ithaca.

Everybody knew there was a priest shortage, and no one was really shocked by the changes. But they were deeply felt nonetheless.

Nancy Dillon, a King Ferry parishioner for 18 years, reacted with surprise and apprehension. "I knew there was a shortage of priests, but I didn't know it was that bad that you'd have one priest for four parishes," she said. "Then we heard about the church closing in Genoa and a lot of us were afraid they'd close this church too."

Tim Quill, a lifelong parishioner of St. Joseph's in Cayuga and current parish council president, viewed the cluster as both inevitable and positive in the long run.

"Realistically, we knew there was going to come a time when something was going to be done," he said. "I don't think it hinders us not having a priest."

But with the benefit of hindsight, both Quill and Father Spilly believe that the parishes suffered from the lack of precedents.

In the first place, four months was not enough time to put the plan into effect, according to Father Spilly. "This is the wave of the future, clustering," he said. "But statistics don't tell the story. You've got to realize you're dealing with people and their faith lives."

Henry MacDonald, president of St. Michael/St. Patrick's combined parish council, compared the situation to a sudden an-

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Father William Spilly, pastor

nouncement that all the doctors were moving out of town. "This was a social trauma they experienced and people reacted with anger and concern," he said.

"It's very easy to see now what they did wrong," Quill said. "The diocesan representatives came and said 'we want your ideas' but it seemed to us like they had already decided."

"I understand they couldn't go along with everything that was suggested," he said. "But they didn't treat us as if they were interested. They just didn't seem open to listening to what we had to say, and we were very frustrated."

In future consultations with parishes, Quill suggested that diocesan representatives be more aware and sensitive to local history and parishioner involvement.

"They ought to let the people have input on what churches would go together best," Quill said. "I think it would also be a good idea to let people who are already involved in a cluster give their ideas and describe how it's working (to parishes under consideration). People resist change. They're afraid of the services they're going to lose."

Quill credits team members for turning that fear and resistance into enthusiasm.

"They're the glue holding it all together," Quill said. "We are very lucky to have them."

"As far as St. Joseph's is concerned, we're

Continued on facing page

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Southern Cayuga cluster parishes are (from top): St. Joseph's; St. Michael's; St. Patrick's and Our Lady of the Lake.

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