

Human rights

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Among them is Annunciation Parish in Rochester. After hearing Father Edward Dillon speak at a December, 1984, Justice and Peace Commission annual meeting, several committee members brought the idea of writing for the Urgent Action network back to the parish. They have been doing it ever since.

Currently, the committee writes about 10 letters a month — sometimes on a single case and other times on two or three.

"All these cases are really tragic, and they range all over the world," said Norm Dunn, a committee member and parish visitor. "It's depressing in a way, bringing to light all the injustice in these countries. I feel badly that our government isn't doing as much now as it has to safeguard human rights," he said. "They could bring a great deal of pressure to bear against these countries but they don't."

For the past five years, several area campus communities have also participated in the Urgent Action network. The Thompsons helped to found and still belong to one such group at SUNY Brockport's Newman Center. They have also been instrumental in organizing groups at St. John Fisher College and the University of Rochester.

Once a month, members of the Newman Communities at Brockport and the U of R outline a particular case to the entire congregation during all weekend Masses. People then have the opportunity to write letters after the service or pick up a case sheet and write later.

Nearly 150 case sheets are handed out on a good weekend at Brockport. "I have no illusions that 150 letters get written when we pass out that many sheets," Thompson said. "But even if 40 or 50 get written, that's good."

Regardless of whether a letter is written, Sister Suzanne Hoffman, a U of R chaplain, believes that an important seed is planted even among those who are merely exposed to the information.

"Universities are always accused of living 'ivory tower' existences," she said. "It's educative to be constantly saying 'look, this is happening.'"

University of Rochester students have three Amnesty International chapters from



Photo courtesy of the United Nations

which to choose — one organized by the Protestant community, one by the Newman Center and a recently established non-denominational undergraduate chapter.

The Newman Center group was reactivated nearly four years ago by the social justice committee, which now oversees the monthly writing sessions.

"As a Church community, we feel comfortable in asking that people's rights and dignity be respected," said Laura Weller-Brophy, 27. "It's comforting to be able to take some action in support of human rights."

A graduate student in optics, Weller-Brophy called the case sheets "uniformly horrendous," but said she trusts Amnesty's information. She noted that on a recent visit to the campus, former Iranian hostage

Moorehead Kennedy also had "high words of praise" for the organization.

"Because it works, it seems to me you have a degree of responsibility to do it and show some solidarity with the people that are imprisoned," she added.

A heightened sense of the same kind of responsibility was what prompted Father Benedict Ehmann to begin writing four years ago. "I felt I certainly needed to do something to fulfill the gospel mandate to reach out to prisoners," he said. "We don't get many letters back ... but we do make a dent — that's known for sure. Former prisoners have testified to that."

Father Ehmann, who coordinates a network of priests who write for Urgent Action, said that because of the annual transfers of many priests, it's difficult to keep the mailing list current. But he estimates

that 30-35 priests in the diocese receive case sheets.

A group of retired sisters at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse also write monthly letters.

Usually a page or two in length, case sheets describe specific details about the prisoner, background information and recommended actions. They also provide names and addresses of authorities as well as guidelines for composing an appeal.

Letters don't have to be nearly so long or in-depth. "I tell people that it shouldn't take any longer than writing a weekly grocery list," said Human Rights Task Force member Patricia Boyce. "It's very basic. And we don't ask that people be released if they have committed an actual crime. We ask only that they be charged or get legal representation or medical attention — whatever the situation warrants. Prisoners of conscience are the only people for whom Amnesty International works for unconditional release."

Prisoners of conscience are defined by Amnesty as those who are detained because of their beliefs, color, sex, ethnic origin, language or religion, provided they have neither used nor advocated violence.

Particularly effective are letters written on official letterhead stationery from professional people or those in a field similar to that of the prisoner. For that reason, and because professional organizations are a convenient form of network, Boyce has developed networks of doctors and health-care workers, lawyers and teachers as well as journalists and authors.

Many of the writers view their letters as an antidote to a sense of futility in the face of world problems.

"You hear so much about torture and terrorism you feel powerless. This is one thing you can do, and it does make a difference," Sister Suzanne said. "We've got to stop just preaching about being peacemakers. This is our chance to do something."

It's also a chance for renewed appreciation of the human rights Americans are guaranteed. "We take it for granted that we can pick up a newspaper and see letters blasting the Libyan action or aid to the contras. Writing a letter like that in some countries can get you five years in jail," Thompson said.

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