Ithaca College:
Parishes on campus: Challenging tomorrow's leaders today

By Teresa A. Parsons
Part two of a three-part series.

Ithaca College is likely to call it a "student organization." The Diocese of Rochester views it as a campus ministry. So it's not widely known that within the confines of the college is a parish of more than 2,000 souls, complete with parish council, sacramental programs, liturgy, finance and human development committees, and staff and budget shortages.

"We're perceived as small and budgeted as small, but we're more like a parish than most people think," said Father John DeSocio, who along with Sister Virginia Taylor, RSM, comprises the entire parish staff. "We're like a little city."

Sprawled across a hilltop at the southern end of Cayuga Lake, this "city" is the largest private residential college in New York State. It's also one of the few that has continued to register a steady growth in enrollment during recent years.

The campus parish has seen a similarly steady growth in the numbers of students, faculty and staff who pass through the doors of Muller Chapel, the college's interfaith center. All three weekend Masses consistently draw capacity crowds. Weekday Masses and Communion services are also well-attended. The 25-member parish council claims a range of subcommittees that sponsor social, spiritual and educational activities, from cookouts to Bible study. Parishioners even sponsor a foster child from Bolivia.

Because the Catholic parish shares Muller Chapel with the Protestant and Jewish communities, all three groups enjoy a lively ecumenical atmosphere. Throughout the year, they work together on a variety of activities, from Seder Suppers to Good Friday services and an interfaith retreat.

Student ownership is the source of the parish's vibrance, according to the chaplains. "People are here because they want to be here," Sister Virginia explained. "What people are used to saying, that 'We've lost the young people,' is not as true as it might have been 10 years ago."

Parishioners at Ithaca College challenge the stereotypes of radicalism and apathy left over from the 1960s and 1970s — the concept that campus faith communities are necessarily outside the mainstream; that members are either barefoot radicals with shaggy hair or denizens of Animal House; or that campus liturgies are so far out that they verge on the sacrilegious.

Masses at Ithaca tend toward an informal, folk style with an occasional dialogue-style homily, but both chaplains agree that few visiting parents would be uncomfortable with the kind of service they find at the chapel.

Students, on the other hand, are enthusiastic. "Homilies and liturgies are geared to where we are right now," said parish-council member Susan Kimball, 20. "We're changing, reassessing the values we've grown up with, testing our moral standards. The people here play a supportive role to help you find out who you are. I think it works because they use their own personal experiences to say 'We've been there.' They try to show us how to be Christ in the world."

Sister Virginia is less confident that she and Father John always get their message through. "Sometimes it's difficult to translate the gospel call to realities in their lives, like exams and finals," she said. In her view, students appear to be less interested in justice and peace issues than they have been in the past.

Kimball, a junior, believes the interest is still present, but channeled differently. "Back in the '60s, students were really vocal and active, but how much was really accomplished?" she asked. "We just focus on different ways to accomplish the same thing."

Although the majority of campus parishioners are students, the community is less homogeneous than Sister Virginia expected when she came to Ithaca last year. "Some students come from very conservative backgrounds and find it difficult to adjust. They

need the familiar ritual and surroundings," she said. Since Muller Chapel is an interfaith center, statues and other traditional images are conspicuously absent. Other students find that once they become accustomed to the campus parish, it's difficult to go back to their home parishes, she added.

Founded in 1963 as a Newman Club, the college's Catholic community has moved steadily closer to the model of a typical parish. In part, that lessens the adjustment students must make when they arrive as well as when they graduate to another parish. But it also gives them an experience of leadership that might not be available to them elsewhere.

"Here we really feel like it's our place," Kimball said. "When you're involved as a youth representative at your home parish, you really feel like a token. And let's face it, how many people our age would be president of parish council anywhere else?"

Both Sister Virginia and Father DeSocio have observed that students who are leaders in the campus parish frequently become parish leaders after graduation. "Leadership here is good background for making a difference in some other parish," Father DeSocio said.

"We want to give them a good experience of Church so that, as they mature, they can get by and develop in parishes," Sister Virginia added.

Both chaplains agree that among students, the greatest pastoral need is stability. "Everything is changing so much in their lives that they really need someplace they can count on," he said. A large part of the chaplains' job is to create that kind of atmosphere in a community that's more transient than that of any parish neighborhood. Aside from faculty and staff, virtually the entire parish changes every four years.

"We have to have a constant building of leadership," Sister Virginia pointed out. "You're always looking at freshmen and sophomores."

But there's a fine line between recruitment, evangelization and proselytization, she added. "We don't push it (religion) in anyway," she said. "I'd say we're open rather than pushy."
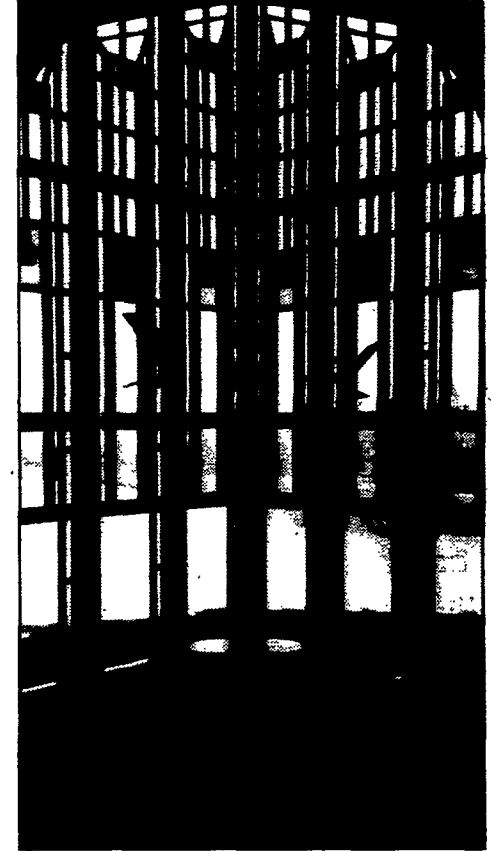
One of the ways they hope to reach more students with that message is by establishing peer ministry on campus — what Sister Virginia calls "a living, caring presence, student-to-student."

Although peer ministry already happens informally on campus, parishioners also would like to make their presence known formally to those who might not otherwise think of the parish when they are in need.

Kimball and another student brought the idea back with them from a national conference they attended in New Orleans last year. Through such programs as "Soup and Substance" — which combines a guest speaker with a shared meal — or by providing coffee and snacks during a study session, parishioners and other students (particularly freshmen) could meet and socialize, thereby welcoming newcomers to other parish activities.

This year, peer ministry is still a vision waiting to happen. But the reality of campus ministry is that students like Susan Kimball who initiate a program may graduate before it begins to bear fruit. She, for one, doesn't seem to mind.

"Things have to start somewhere. No one who starts something here will be around to reap the benefits," she said. "But it will be nice to look back and know I made a difference."

Students share a casual meal on the lawn outside Muller Chapel. Members of the Ithaca College parish hope to reach out with similar events to even more people, providing "a living, caring presence, student-to-student" through a peer ministry program now in the planning stage.

Muller Chapel serves all three religious communities at Ithaca College. Shown here is the sanctuary area, which looks out across the town of Ithaca to Cayuga Lake.

Outdoor rosary service set for feast of the Sacred Heart

A special celebration of the rosary has been scheduled for Friday, June 6, in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary on the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

The prayer service will be held at 237 Rye Road, Greece. Rye Road runs off Latona Road between Ridgeway Avenue and Ridge Road. Participants are asked to bring lawn chairs, if possible.