



Wedding Guide 1986

Diocesan board surveys need for ministers' wellness center

By Teresa A. Parsons

Diocesan officials are sponsoring a study this fall to determine whether a "wellness-consultation" center would effectively serve the needs of ministerial personnel in the diocese.

Members of the Diocesan Clergy Health Board, which has initiated the study, envision that such a center could offer professional psychiatric, psychological and spiritual counseling to priests, religious and lay ministers who suffer from problems ranging from chemical dependency to sexual dysfunctions. The clinic would also include a preventive, educational component through which ministers could become familiar with concepts of sound mental and emotional health, according to Father James A. Schwartz, a board member and director of the diocesan Ministry to Priests program.

Few statistics are available to indicate whether professional ministers suffer from mental or emotional problems more often today than in the past. Whether the incidence of such problems is growing, or whether it is only the public's awareness of them that is growing is a hotly debated issue. Father Schwartz notes.

"My own thinking is that they are more common today," he said. "There is certainly more sexual exploitation in society at large, and that is, in my opinion, reflected in the clergy and in ministry."

Lay ministers as well as priests and religious are experiencing greater stress than ever before in their chosen work. "Much more is expected from the ministry of the priest that was once the case," Father Schwartz explained. "There was a day when the priest celebrated Mass, and that was beautiful as far as people were concerned. Now people say they are leaving the Church because a priest's homilies are boring or because he's not reaching out to unchurched people effectively... He is now expected to collaborate, which is right and healthy, but also stressful."

Likewise, lay persons and particularly women are breaking new ground in the area

of ministry. "Across the board, there is excitement over that but there is also stress and pain," Father Schwartz said.

In the past, priests and religious were generally sent to treatment centers outside the diocese when they encountered emotional or mental health problems. Although a wellness clinic would not replace such intensive treatment programs, Father Schwartz hopes that it could reduce the need for inpatient care in the long term. "We would hope to get fewer people in a crisis situation and have to use hospital care less often," he said. "At the same time, when that is necessary we could offer a more coordinated approach to after-care when the person comes back."

Among the questions the study will seek to answer is whether such a clinic would meet needs not addressed anywhere else in the community.

Ministers, for instance, need counseling that deals with their spiritual, emotional and psychological health in a holistic fashion. They may also be more sensitive than most people to the social stigma attached to the need for treatment, and might avoid locations where they would be likely to be recognized.

A University of Rochester graduate student is conducting the study under the supervision of Dr. James Zimmer, director of the master of science in community health program at Strong Memorial Hospital.

The student, Margaret Goetting, plans to interview diocesan ministers and administrators. She will also gather information on the types of wellness programs established by six other New York dioceses. In addition, she hopes to compile accurate statistics on the numbers of ministers within the diocese who have sought treatment that the clinic could conceivably provide.

Goetting hopes to complete the study and submit her findings to the Clergy Health Board before the end of the year.

In the meantime, anyone who wishes to offer input on the study is asked to contact Father Schwartz, (716)461-2890.

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