

OBM celebrates 10 years

By Teresa A. Parsons

When it was established 10 years ago, the diocesan Office of Black Ministries (OBM) was only the second such office in United States.

A decade later, the office has many counterparts across the country, but remains something of a novelty at home.

"Most of the people running things in the diocese have not had a lot of affiliation with black Catholics. This is a new thing for them, still," said Jacquelyn Dobson, director of the office. "The mere presence of such an office in this pastoral center has been a consciousness-raising type of thing."

The initiative behind founding the office came from retired Bishop Joseph L. Hogan. According to charter member Jean Pryor, the bishop realized that the needs of black Catholics were not being met and called together a core group, which first met in the basement of St. Monica's School in 1975.

Pryor, currently chairwoman of the OBM board, was among those who attended the first few informal meetings. "We decided we needed a formalized structure, so the charter members put together a constitution and by-laws. From that point it just took off," she recalled. "Now there are 45 or 50 black Catholic offices in the country. Ours was the second one to be established, so we really set the tone and took a leadership role."

Treasurer Robert Laird was not a charter member, but came along soon after the first meetings. "It was a tremendous feat that it was organized at the grass-roots level, that we drew it up the way we thought it ought to be and presented it to the bishop," he said. "The people involved were charismatic. It wasn't a very popular thing to do at the time and it has taken a lot to survive in hard budgetary times."

The office was formally established in 1976, with Dominican Father Jerome Robinson as its first director. Three years later, in 1979, Father Robinson resigned and the Rev. John Walker, a Baptist minister, was chosen to replace him. In 1984, Dobson, who had worked for three years as the office's youth minister, was named director.

"We have had a priest, a minister and a lay person as directors, so their kinds of visions have been very different," Laird said.

Compared to her two predecessors, Dobson has emphasized education and spirituality. Among the programs the office currently sponsors are: an annual tour for high school students of predominantly black colleges in the northeast United States, along with support in applying for college admission; the Association of Black Catholic Women of Greater



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Jacquelyn Dobson, director of the Office of Black Ministries, has her hands full preparing for the 10th anniversary dinner, set for Saturday, Oct. 25, at the International Restaurant and Party House in Henrietta.

Rochester, a social and religious group; a local steering committee to implement the black bishops' pastoral letter, "What We Have Seen and Heard;" consultation on "black authenticity" in Catholic liturgy; and an annual retreat for black Catholic families during Lent.

"In my first couple of years, I have tried to center on being black and Catholic, or as the current slang expression says, 'authentically black, truly Catholic,'" Dobson said.

"The vision of the office has been shaped pretty much by each director," she added. "I think because he was a priest, Father Robinson appeared to be more strictly religious... while Dr. Walker's focus was more political, but not necessarily Catholic."

As directors have come and gone, it has been up to the office's board to maintain some kind of consistent vision. Charter members and their successors have agreed that there is a continuing need for black Catholics to have presence and a voice at the diocesan level.

Over the years, that voice has raised black concerns in areas from education to employment. While Dobson believes the diocesan administration has listened, the results raise questions as to whether their voice has been heard.

Bringing black clergy and religious into the diocese has been high on the office's list of priorities since the charter members first met.

"It is vital to have the visibility of black pastors. One person will not do it," Pryor said. "We need their style of preaching and communicating. They feel comfortable in contact with the black community, which is not always the case with a white priest."



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

One of the joys of my life — as I have told you many times — is the daily experience I have of God's goodness in you.

As I sit here on this warm Sunday afternoon, I am enjoying the memories of the past several days with a special appreciation for the variety of gifts the Lord has lavished on me through you.

Among the people I think of are:

- Our Sisters of Mercy who gathered last weekend for their Mercy Day celebration and who offered me a very beautiful kind of hospitality at the celebration for their sisters celebrating silver, golden and diamond jubilees. It is a source of grace for me to be in the presence of people whose first concern is for others. I had a special sense of that with our sisters that day.

- The men and women who gathered from many parts of Canada, the United States and England for the convention hosted this week in Rochester by our Ministry to Priests Team. The evident and rich pastoral experience of these people, the joy and optimism that shone from them and most of all, their powerful commitment to ministry in the Church were deeply strength-giving for me. I had the privilege of speaking to them on themes of ministerial experience and the way that experience changes us. If you do any speaking at all, you know that audiences can charge you with enthusiasm because they are willing to work and move with you. This was such a group and I am grateful to them.

- The parish community of Our Lady of Lourdes in Brighton. We gathered this morning to celebrate the consecration of their new altar and the

rededication of their church. The obvious care taken by so many to make that truly a celebration of faith was abundantly evident. I had a deep sense that the renewal of the building was a sign of the interior life of those who gathered and an expression of real awareness of who we are meant to be for one another. A touching dimension of the celebration for me was the presence of a choir of about 30 of our beautiful young people. If we could all sing our songs the way they did, many would be healed and fewer would be lonely.

- The women and men who have met with on recent evenings at Sacred Heart in Auburn, St. Thomas More in Rochester and Saint Mary Our Mother in Horseheads to prepare for this year's Thanks Giving Appeal. I am always inspired by the generosity of their commitment to our common life. People like that make me hopeful that we can all continue to grow in our appreciation of the Church as a communion of persons who somehow reflect the oneness of Christ in whom we are joined.

- My mother who tomorrow morning returns home after a brief visit with us. The older I grow, the younger she becomes. I am grateful for the reminder she is that Our Lord is never finished with us. People like her remind me that tomorrow ought to be exciting.

- Some other friends whose love, encouragement, understanding and humor are all signs to me of how wonderful and diverse are God's ways with us.

Peace to all.

The office has thus far been unsuccessful, but not for lack of trying. "We have found the cream of the crop," Pryor said. "I feel Bishop Clark is committed, but I don't know if the rest of the structure is ready to accept it. There is a lot of racism still in the diocesan structure."

Likewise, the office has "consistently and strongly supported affirmative action within the diocese," according to Dobson. "There really should be a black or Hispanic person on every staff. There is no reason why there shouldn't be. But we haven't seen great results," she said.

Such a lack of visible results has hurt diocesan credibility within the larger black community. "Those are questions we are constantly asked by the community — why the diocese has not moved in the area of employment?" said Pryor. "We would like to see the diocese on their own and hire more minorities. We have offered ways to do that. But they have not moved at the pace we would have wanted."

Consequently, she believes that both evangelization and retention of black Catholic parishioners have suffered. "Sometimes it seems like nobody cares about keeping them (black Catholics)," she said. Historically, black Catholics have been very strong... It's not only a loss to black Catholics, but a loss to the white community as well. They need to be exposed to black families, to see that we're not all single parents or teen parents or on welfare." Those stereotypes have been the focus of an ideological dispute that has cropped up within black Catholic parishes and has also dogged the Office of Black Ministries.

Perhaps because the Catholic Church is still a missionary church, particularly in regard to minorities, it has directed its best efforts at poor black people, Dobson explained.

By doing so, Pryor said, the Church has subtly helped to institutionalize racism.

"It is fine to have soup kitchens," she said.

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Diocesan Appointments



The diocesan Personnel Department has announced the following appointment within the diocese:

Father Morgan Kavanagh from the Diocese of Biloxi through the Military Archdiocese to full-time Catholic chaplain of the Veterans' Administration Medical Center in Canandaigua, effective August 17.

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