

# Rural counselor finds ideal union of profession, ministry

By Teresa A. Parsons

People from small towns across Livingston County come to Sister Anne Alderman seeking answers.

As a woman religious with strong moral convictions, she would often like to oblige. But as a professional counselor, she prefers to elicit answers rather than offer them.

"It's people's responsibility to live their own lives and make their own choices," she said. "I can raise issues . . . but my job is not to impose my values."

Sister Alderman works out of the Livingston County Office of Social Ministry, a branch of the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry. Not to be confused with a social worker, she nevertheless refers more than a few of the people she encounters to some facet of social services. She is, above all, a good listener.

The people to whom Sister Alderman listens range from single parents, couples struggling with marital conflicts and adults whose parents were alcoholics or child abusers to the bereaved, divorced or chronically depressed. Sometimes she works with whole families whose relationships are strained to the breaking point.

Sister Alderman's day-to-day contacts with clients are seldom overtly religious, yet she views her work as very much a ministry.

"My own belief is that God works in people's lives in many, many ways," she said. "It may be that, just by being here, I might touch people's lives who might not go to someone whose goal is to make them a good Methodist or Catholic."

"It's frustrating sometimes to work with someone, and to have a sense of what would be best for them, and constantly have them



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

A former physics teacher at St. Agnes High School, Sister Anne Alderman, SSJ, left the classroom behind for the wide open spaces of Livingston County, where she is a counselor. Sister Alderman is also a resident staff member at Spirit House, a therapeutic community for women religious.

choose another option," she explained. "I believe strongly in the value of families, for example. But if I have a client choosing a divorce, I walk with them through that."

"I see my role as, I hope, drawing some people closer to God, and when they're ready to take the next step, I hand them on to the next person," she added.

Formerly a math and physics teacher at St. Agnes High School, Sister Alderman chose a career in education because she liked to work with people. Before long, she realized she was

spending far less time with people than with their test papers.

"I was frustrated by the paperwork," she recalled. "I wanted to do something that involved people even more than teaching."

Her opportunity came along in June, 1982, when St. Agnes closed. Sister Alderman spent the next two years earning a degree in counseling from Loyola College in Baltimore, Md. In May, 1985, she returned to Rochester and

began work with Sister Mollie Brown at Spirit House, a therapeutic community for women religious. The following October, Sister Alderman came upon what she regarded as the ideal opportunity. Catholic Family Center was seeking a counselor to work in Livingston County.

"I come from a small town in Wayne County, so I know that services are few and far between in a rural area," she said. "I never dreamed I'd be able to do what I most wanted to do in a rural setting like this."

Sister Alderman has been favorably impressed by the quality of the counseling services available in rural Livingston County. However, the lack of a broad quantity and variety of specialists and programs has sometimes made referrals a nightmare.

"It's difficult to refer to the next level of care," she explained. "There aren't a lot of options. People are very hesitant to go where they might be known, and Rochester is a long way (to go)."

Sister Alderman is well aware of the significance of that distance, since she spends a large part of her time driving to work from Irondequoit, where Spirit House is located. On Tuesdays, she heads for Avon. On Mondays and Wednesdays, she works in Genesee, and spends Thursdays in Livonia.

Because Sister Alderman grew up in a small town herself, she was prepared to confront some initial wariness among townspeople. She was also well aware that such small-town stereotypes as lack of privacy and suspicion of the unfamiliar could keep potential clients away from counseling.

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