



Company of strangers

A dozen members of a Canandaigua congregation each spent \$50 and a week's hard labor to reach out to neighbors who've become friends. See page 8.



Expectant elf

Two Rochester-area camps recently overflowed with premature Yuletide spirit. For the identity of the mysterious airborne visitor this elf awaited, see page 16.

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Chaplains prepare clients, communities, for transition

By Teresa A. Parsons

Deacon Edward Sergeant celebrated something of a triumph last Thursday.

During a communion service at the Newark Developmental Center, he held up a garish string of green, glow-in-the-dark beads. "What is this?" he asked the members of his congregation.

"A rosary," several voices answered. "What do we do with the rosary?" he continued.

Amid a chorus of different responses, one man whispered: "Pray to Jesus."

That response was correct enough to be the high point of weeks of patient and repetitious explanation. But if Sergeant allows two weeks to go by without repeating the question, chances are that no one will remember the answer.

Concepts like theology, community or liturgy mean nothing to most Newark and Craig developmental center clients. They have no interest in debating the merits of the Second Vatican Council, the bishops' pastoral letters, or the politics of the Church in the United States.

For them, the Church still exists in its simplest and purest form as love beyond reason or explanation.

As chaplains at the developmental centers, Deacon Sergeant and Sister Elizabeth A. Hughes, RSM, personify that love to clients. During a weekly communion service at the Newark facility, "Deacon Ed" moves about the room, hugging clients, holding their hands, smiling, singing and gently prodding them toward an awareness of their own holiness.

As Sergeant raised his hands in a gesture of blessing, a curious reverence descended on the group despite the cacophony of extraneous sounds some individuals continued to make. The atmosphere belied claims that time and precious resources are wasted on religious education for those whose understanding will al-



Linda Dow

Deacon Edward Sergeant has developed a style of Communion service that's heavy on hugs and songs, in order to meet the special needs of Newark Developmental Center clients with moderate-to-severe developmental disabilities.

'You can't give them a homily ... What they can understand is a smile or a hug.'

Deacon Edward Sergeant

of hospitality parish communities extend to developmentally disabled people. "I would like to see people go beyond awareness, to extend friendship, warmth, openness and understanding," Sergeant said. "It may not always be enough to say, 'you're welcome' on behalf of the parish. You may need to be creative, to see a need and meet it."

Members of some parishes have already responded to the special needs of developmentally disabled people moving into their communities. St. Michael's in Newark offers weekly religious-education programs for more than 75 residents of area group homes.

But there are virtually no blueprints for teaching or preaching to people whose disabilities are moderate to severe. "What I do is what I've learned works," Sergeant said. "Every person responds differently. You need to try to address each person individually at whatever stage of development they're at."

During his Thursday services, Sergeant relies heavily on music, group participation and such audio-visual aids as filmstrips. He has also incorporated the sign of peace, prayers of petition and other participatory parts of the Mass. "When people are having fun, that's when you can teach them," he said.

But members of Sergeant's Thursday congregation are "high-functioning" people. Earlier each week, he offers a prayer service for more profoundly retarded clients, many of whom can communicate only with their eyes and their smiles. Most of them will never attend a community church. "The community has to go to them, to provide them with an experience of love," he said. "You can't give them a homily or share the theology of Eucharist with them. What they can understand is a smile or a hug. That's enough for me and that's what I have to teach the community."

Both Sister Hughes and Sergeant are trying to organize networks of volunteers in parish-

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Sister Elizabeth Hughes

ways be limited.

Sister Hughes can recount any number of instances in which Craig residents have exhibited unexpected flashes of awareness, whether by kissing a crucifix or bursting into a long-forgotten hymn or prayer.

Whether her friends ever display any tangible indications of spiritual understanding, Sister Hughes continues to believe that religion is their right. "I believe in the healing power of the Eucharist, and I believe that the Spirit is in these people," she said. "Certainly if Jesus would want to come to anybody in the Eucharist, it would be to them."

Ever since the 1950s, the state of New York has upheld the idea that people under its care have a right to spiritual and religious services. Within institutions, those services have been relatively easy to provide to clients.

By 1991, however, both the Craig and Newark centers will close. As part of the state's continuing effort to de-institutionalize the mentally retarded, residents will move into community-based homes. Once such transitions are complete, clients' access to worship and spiritual guidance will depend largely on the staff at each residence and on the openness of local parishes.

Between now and 1991, chaplains bear much

of the responsibility for educating and advocating with parish and residence staff so that the spiritual needs of the developmentally disabled continue to be a priority.

The goal of closing the centers is to integrate residents as much as possible within the larger community. Clients and the state agencies responsible for them can both benefit from the move to community-based homes. They offer residents a more normal, less restrictive environment by permitting them greater dignity, privacy and identity. In addition, smaller, neighborhood-based homes encourage more community involvement.

De-institutionalization is also more economical for the state, since the centers will turn over to the public school system responsibility for such services as education.

Craig, which is located in southwestern Livingston County, currently houses only 138 men and women — down from close to 2,000 in the 1960s. Most who remain are either severely disabled or have special medical or emotional needs. Several hundred former Craig residents are now living in more than 30 community residences scattered throughout western New York.

More than 600 clients have already moved from Newark's Wayne County campus to com-

munity residences in Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Yates counties. The 348 men and women who remain in the institution will be moved to as many as two-dozen more community homes still in the planning stages.

Members of the rural communities in which most of the homes are located have overcome their initial reluctance and have largely accepted the presence of the homes, according to Sergeant.

Whether community residents ever involve their disabled neighbors in the life of their community, however, is another matter. Sergeant believes that church communities are critical to the success of any effort at integration. "Our clients are never going to belong to the Lions or the Rotary. The only chance they may ever have to be part of the community is through the local churches," he said. "I would like to see all our clients participating in a religious community to the best of their ability."

An initial obstacle to his hopes is the fact that only 10 percent of parish buildings in the diocese are fully accessible to the handicapped. Even fewer parishes offer religious-education or worship services geared to the needs of the developmentally disabled.

What is far more difficult to measure than accessibility or services, however, is the degree

es where community homes are or will be located.

They are looking for people who will conduct a simple prayer service in the homes of those unable to attend a church. Others are needed to transport group home residents to church.

Both chaplains have found volunteers to be slow in coming and difficult to retain. The rate of burnout among volunteers is quite high — in part because the frequent transfers of clients between community residences prevents volunteers and residents from establishing close relationships.

Their biggest problem to date has been finding Catholic parishioners who are interested and able to get involved. "I think there's an attitude that someone else will take care of it," Sergeant said.

Meanwhile, neither Sister Hughes nor Sergeant is convinced that the state will continue to fund their chaplaincy positions once the institutions have closed.

"I'm not concerned for my own job," Sergeant said. "My major concern is that (clients) can continue to receive the sacraments and develop spiritually. But if, in four years, the state no longer provides for a chaplaincy program, our clients' spirituality will die."