

# Religious educator discovered his career by happy accident

By Teresa A. Parsons

Charles Prindle becomes a little impatient with people who point out that he's an anomaly in the field of religious education.

It's not that he disagrees with the assessment. Prindle willingly admits that he could probably count on one hand the number of men in the diocese who, like him, work as parish directors of religious education.

As he begins his ninth year at St. Margaret Mary Parish in Irondequoit, Prindle also agrees that he has been remarkably fortunate. At 36, he has so far avoided the twin pitfalls of burnout and low morale that are so often engendered by the long hours and low salaries religious education offers. He likewise appears unscathed by the tumultuous changes in Church ministry during the last decade.

Perhaps because the characteristics that set him apart from others are his everyday realities, Prindle is not very impressed by them. Or perhaps the secret of his equanimity lies in the memory of an earlier assembly-line job in which he spraypainted the handles of BB-guns eight hours a day. "When this job starts to get to me, as any job will, I think back to that," he said.

Prindle never set out to become a director of religious education. In fact, he stumbled onto the job with little understanding of what it entailed. He earned a bachelor's degree in religious studies from St. John Fisher College, and a master's degree in community service from the University of Rochester before entering St. Bernard's Seminary in 1975 to study for the priesthood. Three years later, he left St. Bernard's to teach English and theology at Aquinas Institute.

One year at Aquinas was sufficient to convince Prindle that he did not want a career as a high-school teacher. So he responded to a diocesan advertisement seeking a director of religious education at St. Margaret Mary Parish. "Before that, I didn't even realize this position existed," he recalled.

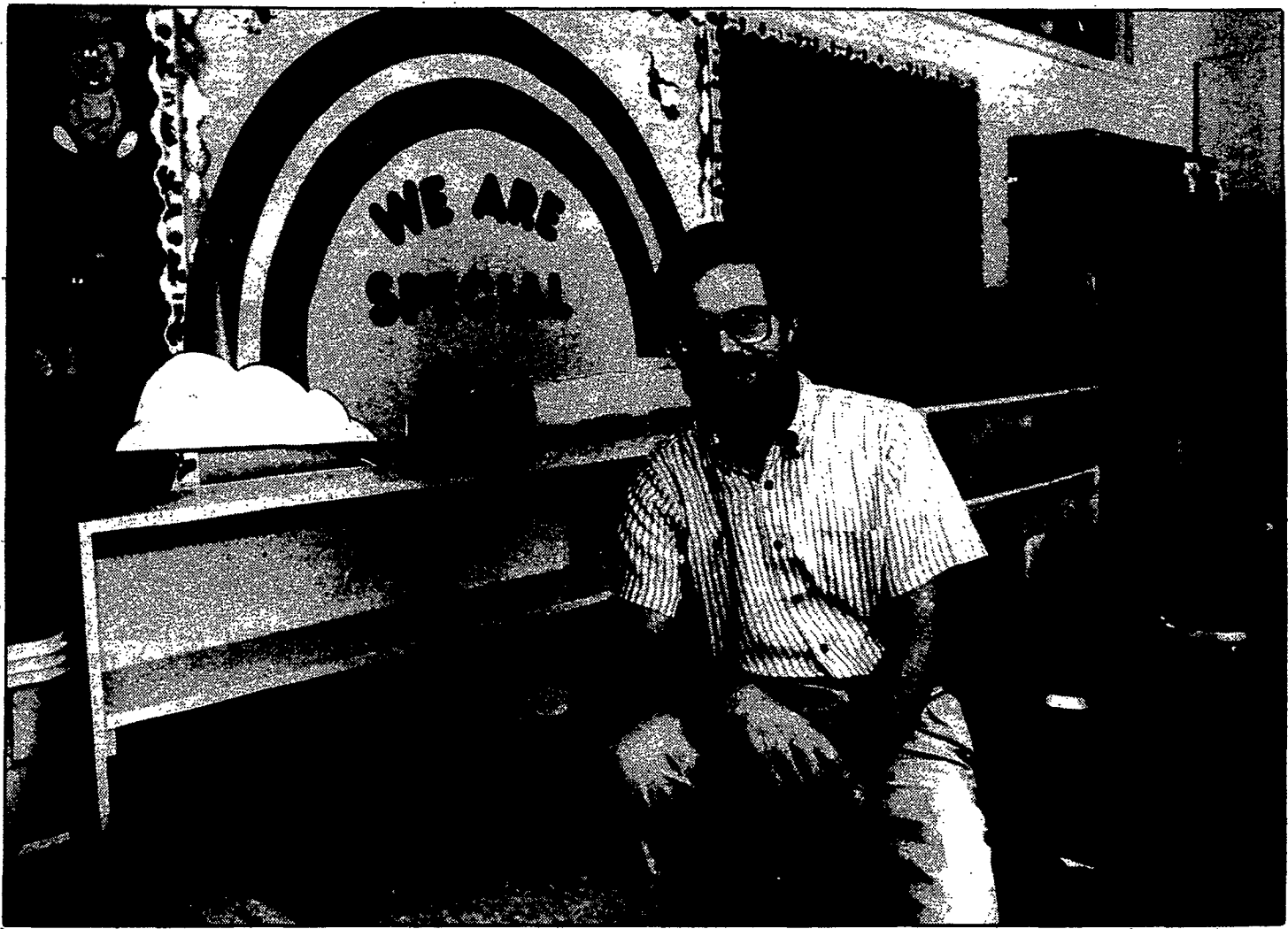
Hired in August, 1979, Prindle faced the challenging prospect of pulling together his first religious-education program in little more than a month. His theological training was more than equal to the task, but with hindsight, he wishes he had more training in the mechanics of education.

"I'm lucky because I live with a teacher — my wife," he said. "I learned a lot from her about how students learn." He gleaned what educational tips he could from workshops, conferences and trial-and-error. Another valuable resource was the monthly gathering of religious educators from the city's northeast region.

Once he established the major components of the parish's program — weekly religious education classes, sacramental preparation and adult education — the demands of the job became more predictable.

But with nearly 300 students enrolled in a typical year's program, Prindle has not lacked opportunities to continue learning and experimenting. Most students in grades two through six attend classes at St. Margaret Mary on Monday afternoons. This year, however, Prindle is offering second-through fourth-grade students a choice of attending classes on either Monday afternoon or Sunday morning. Children in preschool and first grade also attend classes on Sunday morning during the 9:30 a.m. Mass.

"The language and structure of the Mass is so adult that it's inappropriate for them," he explained. "The kids are bored out of their skulls, and so they drive their parents nuts."



Michael N. Aydogan

**Charles Prindle, one of a handful of men in the diocese who work as parish religious education directors, has observed gains in the position's visibility and professional status during the past nine years. Those gains have begun to help offset such occupational liabilities as long hours and low salaries.**

Classes for students in junior-high grades are generally scheduled on weekday evenings in a catechist's home.

Since Prindle introduced a week-long Vacation Bible School at St. Margaret Mary several summers ago, that program has become for him one of the high points of the year. "It's a whole different atmosphere where a maximum kind of learning happens," he said. "In your idealistic mind, you wish it could be like that all the time."

On the other hand, he appreciates the value of more traditional, weekly classes. "You need special times and routine times," he said. "You can't expect a child to come totally psyched for every class any more than you would expect him to be psyched about school every day. But you wouldn't give your child a choice about going to school."

Prindle has observed that parents frequently place less emphasis on their child's religious education than on other aspects of learning. He also finds that children's attitudes toward religious education tend to mirror those of their parents. Some parents force their children to attend class out of a sense of obligation. Other parents tell Prindle that their children genuinely enjoy the classes. "That actually does occur with a good teacher," he said.

Finding and keeping good volunteer catechists is the secret of any religious-education program's success. Prindle is singularly blessed in that respect, because the Irondequoit neighborhoods that make up the parish provide a steadily changing, but not overly transient population from which to draw.

Most of the catechists at St. Margaret

Mary are women in their 30s or 40s, although at least one of the 25 parishioners who usually volunteer each year is male. Prindle is not sure why more men don't choose to teach religious education. "It may be that it's seen as another branch of childrearing, and that's still perceived as women's work," he said. "But I think the quality of the teacher is

more important than the gender."

He is similarly philosophic about the mere handful of men in the diocese who work as parish directors of religious education. "It might bother me at some unconscious level, but not that I'm aware of," he said. "Percentages don't matter."

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A:

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