

Study awakens Finger Lakes parishes to needs of disabled

By Teresa A. Parsons
When multiple sclerosis put Mary Talbo in a wheelchair six years ago, she lost more than the use of her legs.

The Wayne County resident abruptly learned that she could no longer worship in the church where she had been baptized, confirmed and married because that church wasn't accessible to wheelchairs. She couldn't get inside unless someone carried her.

"Suddenly, in 1981 they took the church away from me," she recalled. "That made a big difference just when I really needed it."

Talbo, who had been a catechist and folk-group member, resolved to challenge the situation. "I didn't want to sit at home, watch the Mass for shut-ins (on television) and have Communion brought to me at my house," she said. "I wanted what should be a community service to be available to everyone."

But her pastor resisted her suggestions for making the church accessible, asking why he should pay for expensive changes to satisfy just one person. Finally realizing that her arguments were fruitless, she began attending another church 10 miles away. There the 33-year-old sits in the crying room each week "like a baby, except I'll never get to grow up."

In contrast to the battles Talbo has lost, however, she can claim one major victory — a recently completed accessibility study of parishes in the Finger Lakes region. "Good things come to those who wait," Talbo said of the study, which she helped to inspire two years ago. "Even if it takes a while to get those church things started, maybe somebody else will benefit."

The study was conducted largely by volunteers and coordinated through the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry. A questionnaire developed for use in a similar survey of the Genesee Valley region was adapted for use in the Finger Lakes. Copies

were sent to 49 parishes in Cayuga, Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Yates Counties. Volunteers then visited each parish to interview parish staff members and examine the facilities. The final phase of the study took place last summer, when parishes that had not yet responded were contacted.

The study drew responses from 31 parishes. Of those that participated, 48 percent or 15 church buildings have ramps or at-grade entrances that are accessible to wheelchair users. Ten parishes provide areas inside the church for wheelchair seating and eight parishes reserve parking spaces for the handicapped.

At the opposite extreme, only three

parishes provided amplification systems or an interpreter for the hearing-impaired. Only one parish in the region offers religious instruction for the handicapped.

From the first, the study was an eye-opener for members of the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry's board of directors, according to Anne Meyer-Wilbur, chairwoman of the board's Catholic Charities committee. The awakening began in 1984 when Bishop Matthew H. Clark named Mary Talbo to the Finger Lakes board. There was just one problem with the appointment — meetings were on the second floor of a building that wasn't accessible.

Talbo no sooner got to a meeting before

she began urging her fellow board members to sponsor an accessibility study of parish buildings. She volunteered her own services to work on the study, which she strongly believed ought to be carried out by people who were themselves disabled. "Someone who is blind or hearing-impaired might have a wholly different view of things than I do, being in a wheelchair," she explained. "I know an incline that's too steep can't be felt by people who can walk."

Eventually, Talbo resigned in frustration from the board and from the study. She couldn't spend as much time in the Finger Lakes office as other staff members believed

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Blessed Sacrament joins the ranks of the accessible

By Tracy Dieck

When a person with physical disabilities selects a parish, one of the primary criteria is, by necessity, the accessibility of the church. Now, disabled people can add one more line to their list of potential parishes.

Blessed Sacrament Church, 259 Rutgers St., Rochester, has constructed a wheelchair ramp, which was dedicated on Sunday, September 20. "We want to make Blessed Sacrament an open church," said Father Bruce F. Ammering, pastor. "The ramp indicates the willingness on the part of the community to welcome the handicapped."

The ramp is four feet wide and consists of two 15-foot sloping sections joined by a five-foot intermediate horizontal landing, with another landing at the top. It is made of treated timber, which saved the parish nearly \$10,000 compared to the cost of a concrete ramp, according to Peter Romeo, chairman of the parish's property management committee. Romeo said the ramp

is expected to last at least 25 years.

The ramp, which cost \$2,300 to construct, was financed by the Blessed Sacrament Young Adult Planning Team, whose members raised the funds through their annual Folk Music Cafe and other events. From planning to completion, the ramp took nearly three years to build.

Blessed Sacrament is among the nearly 25 percent of Rochester parishes that have acted within the last two years to make their facilities more accessible, according to Lucy Dechaine, coordinator of services to the disabled for Catholic Charities of the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry. Most of these changes include the installation of wheelchair ramps or audio loops for the hearing-impaired, she said.

Yet the question of accessibility is not limited to these two items, Dechaine pointed out. "Accessibility can take many forms," she said. Other ways of making churches more accessible are bulletins and hymnals in large type and/or Braille,

accessible bathrooms, and designated parking spaces.

Another way of making the handicapped feel part of the community is by asking them to participate on parish councils and committees. "People who are handicapped have talents," Dechaine said. "They want to be giving, not just receiving."

And physical disability is not the only barrier handicapped people must overcome in order to participate in their faith communities. "Many people with disabilities feel they are not part of the parish life," she added, citing as additional obstacles the individual attitudes parishioners may have as a result of their unfamiliarity with disabled people.

"Individual prejudices have to be overcome," agreed Elizabeth Maurer, director of religious education at Blessed Sacrament. To help parishioners overcome these attitudes, Maurer has included in the parish newsletter a series of "Helpful Hints" for dealing with disabled people.

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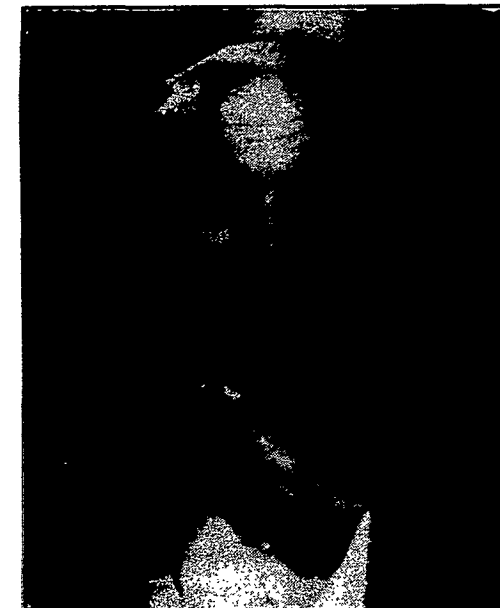
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