

Features

Gates pastor dreams of expanding an earthly 'domain'

By Teresa A. Parsons

Father Gerald Dunn spoke only half in jest as he gazed across the fields surrounding Dunn Towers to the silhouette of Rochester's skyline and called it "my domain."

He doesn't own the apartment towers that loom behind St. Theodore's Church on Spencerport Road. And although he proudly counts a construction worker's hard hat among the dozens of hats decorating his office walls, Father Dunn didn't bolt a single beam.

But if he had crafted both buildings with his own two hands, Father Dunn could hardly be more intimately acquainted with every corner and crevice, from the tastefully appointed lobbies to the sunny laundry rooms and neat hallways lined with sprinkler systems and smoke alarms.

Nor do there appear to be many residents whose health and family histories aren't familiar to him.

For their part, many of the elderly and disabled people who call Dunn Towers home greet the priest like a combination Santa Claus and dorm counselor, regaling him with warm praise and an occasional heated complaint.

"What are you bringing me?" he asked as he passed one woman waiting in the vestibule for the bus to a nearby supermarket.

"I've got a kiss for you, Father," she responded. "That's better than anything you'll find in this bag."

As he prepared to celebrate 40 years of pastoral and diocesan service last week, the 65-year-old pastor of St. Theodore's Church could well have settled back to savor the warmth and admiration of his neighbors and parishioners.

He's responsible for the presence of \$8 million worth of federally funded and state-supervised housing for seniors and disabled people. Dunn Tower I, opened in 1975, contains 192 one-bedroom and studio-sized units on 13 floors. The eight-story Dunn Tower II, with 100 one-bedroom apartments, opened in 1980. Not only are both buildings clean and pleasant and well-maintained, they also are financially solvent.

Instead of basking in the reflected glory of past successes, however, Father Dunn daydreams out loud about improving the two buildings and what he'll do "the next time around."

"I could go into other kinds of housing if I wanted to. I have the record," he said. "It's too dense here for any more buildings, but if I found some land somewhere else ..."

Thanks in large part to Father Dunn's efforts, the Town of Gates offers more units of subsidized housing for seniors than most suburban areas in Monroe County provide. In fact, as many as half of the county towns outside the City of Rochester have no subsidized housing at all for senior citizens.

Funds for most varieties of subsidized housing have suffered from stiff federal cutbacks during President Ronald Reagan's administration. And while the bulk of the area's subsidized housing for senior citizens is located in the City of Rochester, county housing officials report that during the past two decades a steady stream of seniors have moved to suburban and rural towns and villages. In most cases, the elderly population in those areas has far outstripped the supply of subsidized or affordable housing.

Father Dunn doesn't claim to have foreseen the shift in population. But he acknowledged that divine guidance must have had a hand in the success of a housing developer who began knowing next to nothing about government programs, construction, or apartment management.

When he began his housing endeavors, Father Dunn now freely admits, he had little more than a vague idea of helping meet the need for affordable housing among senior citizens.

During 10 years as pastor at St. Monica's Church, he had observed the growth of the nearby Plymouth Gardens housing complex. He also recalled crowding into the apartments of Plymouth Gardens residents to celebrate Mass because he was denied the use of the building's community rooms for religious services.

Father Dunn's interest in housing for senior citizens had a personal source as well: his mother, Harriet Dunn, was living alone in a house that was becoming increasingly difficult for her to manage.

Soon after he became pastor of St. Theodore's in 1968, Father Dunn began to envision possibilities for the acres of vacant land at the rear of the church and school. "I put some feelers out," he recalled. "People told me, 'You don't know what you're getting into. I didn't,



Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal

Father Gerald Dunn receives a warmer greeting from Dunn Towers resident Laura McDunning than most landlords can expect.

but I learned!"

One local developer warned that town officials would never approve the kind of housing Father Dunn was considering. "That's all I had to hear," he said. "I need a challenge like that!"

The first Dunn Tower developed on what Father Dunn called an "if/come" basis. "Everybody was willing to sacrifice — consultants, contractors, architects," he recalled. "If (the funds) came through, they got a job. If not, then they made a donation to charity."

Parish and diocesan leaders' support was relatively easy to enlist. In a stroke of fortune that many Gates residents would now regard as miraculous, Father Dunn also won approval from the town's various planning and zoning boards after a single presentation.

But the project was stalled when state officials, who had agreed to fund the project, backed out, pleading a lack of money. "Right now, the state is pretty much bankrupt as far as housing is concerned," Father Dunn said. "That was the beginning of the problems."

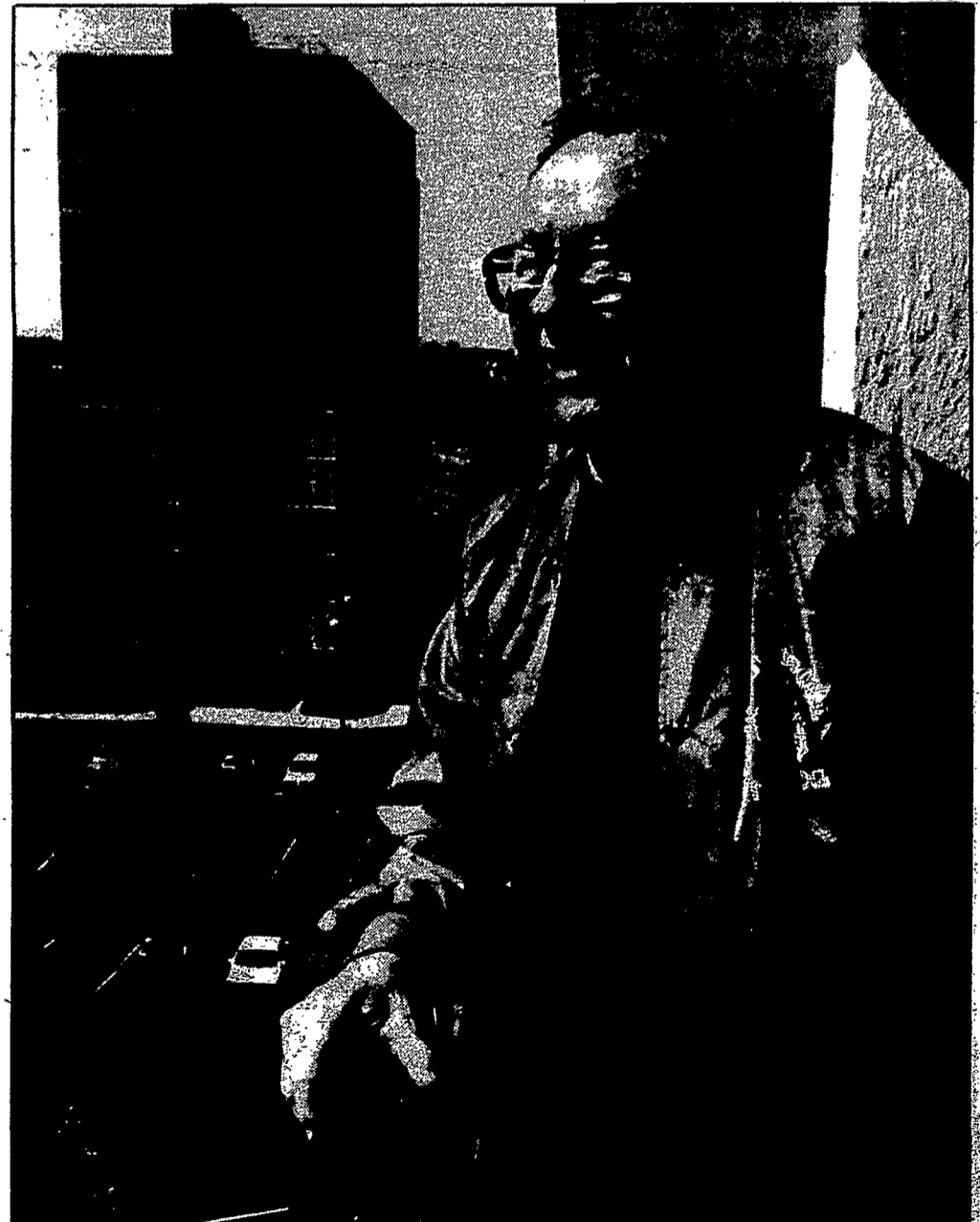
Instead of wilting at the first roadblock, however, the priest began telephoning town officials, who in turn referred him to Richard Rosenbaum — then head of New York state's Republican Party. After exchanging a few jokes and pleasantries with Rosenbaum over the phone, Father Dunn outlined his dilemma. "You're a go," Rosenbaum told him.

Meanwhile, Father Dunn traveled to Buffalo and New York City to observe other housing projects. Because Rochester's long and often harsh winters intimidate many seniors into staying indoors, he opted for a high-rise building.

"There's all kinds of motion going on here all year long," he said of the towers. "People can visit, which they wouldn't be likely to do if the weather was bad and they had to go outside. They're afraid of slipping on the ice or driving."

Despite the aura of success that surrounds Father Dunn today, fewer than half of his proposals for funding have been accepted. He is also quick to admit that if he could redesign the first Dunn Tower, at least one of the elevators would be larger to accommodate ambulance gurneys. Staff offices would be enclosed by glass rather than by walls, and the building's common kitchen on the first floor would be considerably larger. Father Dunn learned most of those lessons in time to incorporate them into the design of Dunn Tower II.

While his subsequent proposals for new housing have been stymied, Father Dunn has continued to search for ways to improve both buildings. At present, he is investigating the possibility of "enriched housing," a program



Father Gerald Dunn surveys the green fields of Gates from a balcony in Dunn Tower II with Dunn Tower I looming in the background.

that would provide residents with some non-medical support services, such as community meals or help with household cleaning and transportation.

At times, Father Dunn's dual role as pastor and "landlord" creates complications. Because Dunn Towers relied on state and federal funds, for instance, St. Theodore's parishioners cannot receive preference over other applicants to live there — a situation that has posed some

ticklish public relations problems. In general, however, the towers and the parish have proved to be good neighbors.

"They like being near the church?" Father Dunn said of the towers' residents. "Some of the (people) in wheelchairs haven't been to a church in years. Here they can just wheel across the parking lot!"

Many residents, in turn, serve as parish

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