

Features

East Bloomfield parishioners face peacemaking challenge

By Teresa A. Parsons

About one-third of the members of St. Bridget's Parish in East Bloomfield promised last week to change.

Their promises were of the small-change variety — nothing radical or political or even obvious.

A couple of kids promised to spend less time watching television and more time reading and talking with parents, brothers and sisters.

Several men and women determined to pause occasionally throughout the day to pray silently for peace.

A few parishioners are making a conscious effort to remain open-minded and compassionate toward people and issues they have hitherto not accepted — and may not have understood.

The results of such private changes will be difficult to measure. But the 50 people who gathered under a yellow-and-white-striped tent on St. Bridget's side lawn to take part in one or more sessions of Jesus Week I, July 24-28, believe that collectively their quiet efforts at peacemaking can have a "ripple effect" on their parish and on the Village of East Bloomfield.

"Frankly, just sitting out here under the tent, listening to the birds and smelling the grass made me feel really peaceful," said Carol Creswell, a village resident and parishioner since 1980. "This has made me feel good about living in a small community."

Jesus Week was the brainchild of discussions between the pastor, Father John J. Philipps, and Deacon Claude Lester, who was recently assigned to St. Bridget's — located a few blocks north of Routes 5 and 20 in the village west of Canandaigua. In the process of "fleshing out" Lester's new role, both he and Father Philipps concurred that the parish needed to "do something."

"We wanted it to be an opportunity for families, to be on the theme of peace and to incorporate Bible study, but we knew we did not want it to be a typical classroom experience of sitting still and folding your hands," Lester explained.

"We stressed intra- and inter-personal peace, as opposed to the global or political perspective," he added. "People felt comfortable with each other, and because of that comfort level, they have been more open to the challenge to be a peace maker."

Because Jesus Week was a first for St. Bridget's, few parishioners knew what to expect. Seeing the tent, some envisioned an old-fashioned, table-thumping revival. Others anticipated scholarly Bible study sessions.

Those who attended ranged from barely school-age to "Third Age." Despite the disparity of their ages and expectations, most people were engaged by what they found: an entertaining yet informative combination of games, discussion, Scripture study, slide-shows and films — what participant Roger Silvernail summarized as "a lot of good food for thought."

"(Jesus Week) helped me to focus in on peace in a different way than in the day-to-day, workaday world. You had to concentrate on it, analyze it, bring it uppermost in your mind," observed Silvernail, a Congregationalist who attended the event with his wife, Terry, who is a parishioner.

"It's been a chance for us to get together and become more of a parish family, which is what we've been striving to do," Terry Silvernail added.

Attracted by the event's unusual nature, Dan Worhacz, a parishioner for the past 14 years, found that the pleasant, outdoor surroundings made it "easy to be here."

"There was no pressure; nobody put you on the spot," he said. "I found it more or less a refresher; it helped get your mind back on track."

Nine-year-old Sophie Snell of Bristol Center characterized the week as "more than fun." The most lasting image it left in her mind was a slide showing someone helping an old woman. "It reminded me how people have helped me," she said.

What others may remember is the challenge Jesus Week offered during Thursday evening's closing session. After sharing a picnic supper, participants were asked to select cards from a deck of possible peace making activities to be carried out from day to day.

Few people seemed to regard the assignment lightly. Rose Anne Dredger, who came with her husband and two of their children, was torn between a pair of similar options: simplifying her lifestyle or living as she'd honestly like, without the pressure of "keeping up with everything."

Finally, she opted for what seemed the more preliminary step of simplifying her life. "I think it will mean looking at things in a different way, probably not worrying so much ... just going back to basics a little more," Dredger explained.

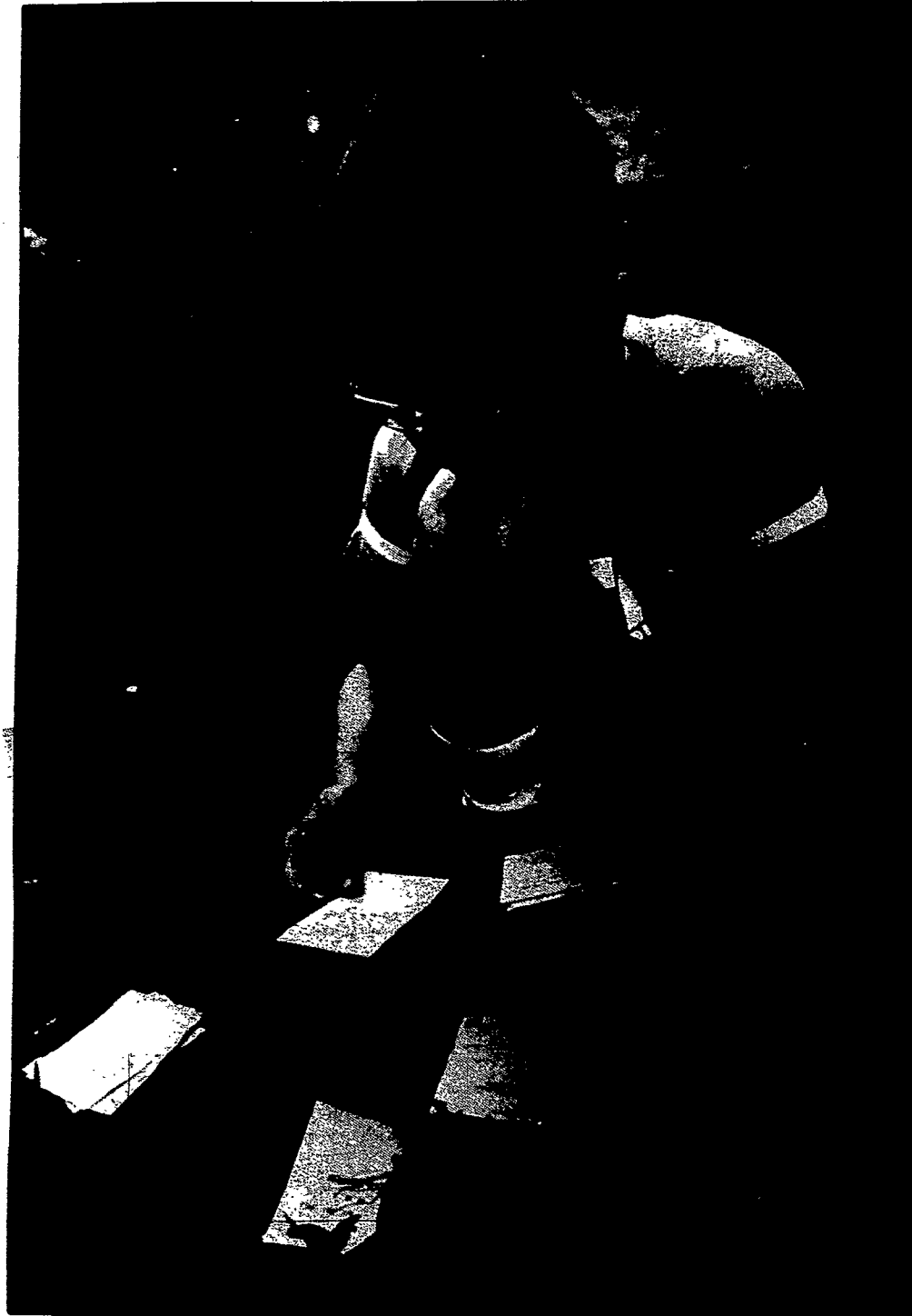
Although Father Philipps noted that the yellow-striped tent would soon be gone, evidence of the change of hearts at St. Bridget's will remain in the shape of a yellow peace rose taking root in a sheltered spot on the parish grounds, and a "Go in peace" sign posted along the sidewalk near the church's front entrance.

The changes are small, but as one card in the peace-making deck reminded participants, "Every small or large action, thought or belief, is part of the worldwide network for peace in our time."

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Ten-year-old Matthew Lester of Centerfield deliberates over a deck full of possible peacemaking activities during last Thursday's closing session of Jesus Week I at St. Bridget's Church in East Bloomfield. The summer program entertained and informed nearly 50 people of all ages with games, discussions, and audio-visual presentations.

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