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Vatican officials and U.S. bishops traded views in a rare open meeting. Page 4.

# CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester

Thursday, March 16, 1989

50¢

24 Pages

## Small communities pioneer covenant course

By Richard A. Kiley  
Staff writer

Has the covenant signed last May by Rochester's Roman Catholic and Episcopal bishops — calling for their dioceses to move toward a closer understanding through dialogue and prayer — begun to accomplish what it set out to do?

Pose that question to Margery S. Nurnberg, director of the Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, and she'll tell you that the answer depends on where you look.

"The covenant is bringing many Catholic and Episcopalian churches in the smaller areas together," Nurnberg said. "It is affirming in the smaller communities and has at least started relations in the larger areas."

Rev. Mary Ann Taylor, an Episcopal deacon at St. John's Episcopal Church in Honeoye Falls, agreed, pointing out that Catholic and Episcopal churches are more identifiable in smaller towns than they are in urban areas.

"It's amazing how easy it is to do things together around here without much fanfare," the Rev. Taylor said, citing a recent community Lenten supper dealing with the Christian response to AIDS. "Churches around here are doing a splendid job."

Nurnberg nevertheless observed that the covenant is "not a way to eliminate differences" between the two faith traditions. During the past two months, in fact, two such differences have caused some Catholic-Episcopal tension. Last January, a dozen Episcopal clergy — including Bishop William G. Burrill — joined the Rochester chapter of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, publicly stating their support for a woman's right to choose abortion.

In addition, Catholics and some Episcopalians have questioned last month's election of the Rev. Barbara C. Harris as the new Suffragan Bishop-elect of Massachusetts. The Rev. Harris has never been a full-time rector of a parish and her views on homosexuality have worried some Episcopal and Catholic clergy and laity.

Yet, concern over the Rev. Harris' election didn't stop Corpus Christi Church in Rochester from sending her a congratulatory card along with eight pages of signatures.

"We were delighted. The people couldn't wait to get their names on the card," said Father James B. Callan, administrator of the parish. "She wrote back to us and said she'd like to visit. I can't see her election affecting (the covenant)."

Likewise, Nurnberg does not see any negative ramifications from the latest series of events. She said that abortion "has never been an ecumenical issue" and that the election of the Rev. Harris makes it "even more imperative to dialogue in view of our responsibilities."

The covenant has spurred an abundance of activity at Church of the Good Shepherd and St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Henrietta. The two churches — both part of the Henrietta

"It's important to have something in writing. It is something we can hold up and say, 'Here is an example of how our two traditions can work together,'" he noted.

St. Augustine's Catholic Church — the site of the covenant signing last May — and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church have continued a relationship begun nearly 15 years ago. According to Nurnberg, the two parishes have celebrated Pentecost vigils together, jointly support an emergency food program, and combine their efforts to operate St. Theresa's Center at St. Augustine's.

On a broader scale, one immediate result of the covenant was for both dioceses' churches to begin praying "for our bishops, Matthew and William, and for each other" during the liturgical Prayers of the Faithful.

Yet not all churches — especially Catholic ones — are doing so.

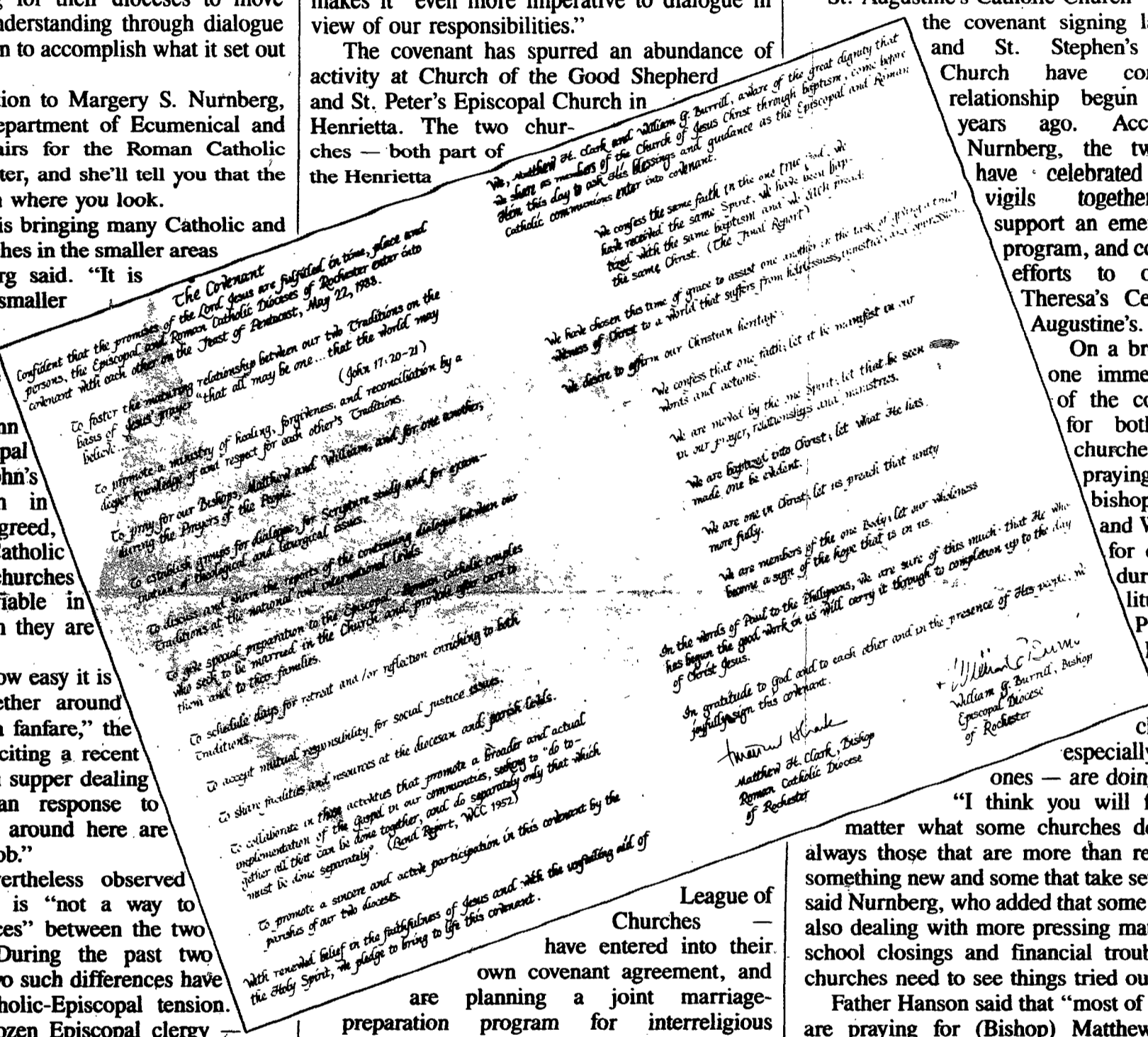
"I think you will find that no matter what some churches do, there are always those that are more than ready to start something new and some that take several years," said Nurnberg, who added that some parishes are also dealing with more pressing matters such as school closings and financial troubles. "Some churches need to see things tried out first."

Father Hanson said that "most of our parishes are praying for (Bishop) Matthew," although some churches — mainly in the Southern Tier — may not be doing so because the geographic boundaries for the Catholic and Episcopal dioceses of Rochester are not the same. Episcopal churches in the Southern Tier are under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Syracuse, and Rochester's Catholic diocese also extends farther west than does the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester.

Nurnberg said that she and Father Hanson are in the process of sending out questionnaires to each church in the respective dioceses "to find out where they are with the covenant." They have also met or talked with the Council of Churches in Seneca Falls, Corning-Painted Post, and Elmira to help resolve any questions churches in those areas of the diocese may have.

Retreat days geared toward clergy and lay people will also be offered later this year to help parishes better understand what the covenant actually means. Nurnberg believes some churches are still confused about the covenant's purpose.

"It's a matter of education. The covenant is not a merger; it's not a call for Christians to lose their



League of Churches — have entered into their own covenant agreement, and are planning a joint marriage-preparation program for interreligious couples.

"Our program is going to bring completely Episcopalian couples into our marriage-preparation program," said Martha Jodoin, a parish official who is also executive secretary of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. The two churches have also held joint prayer retreats and Good Friday services.

Both dioceses are also in the process of preparing three brochures for ecumenical couples planning to wed. Deacon Brian McNulty of St. Augustine's Church, and his wife Lynne, a deacon at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, also will use their own experiences to prepare a pamphlet on how to build an ecumenical marriage. Father Richard Comegys of St. Stephen's, meanwhile, will collaborate with a yet-to-be-named Roman Catholic priest on how both Catholic and Episcopal priests can counsel ecumenical couples.

According to Father Bruce Hanson, ecumenical officer for the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, officials from both dioceses intend to use the relationship between St. Peter's and Good Shepherd as a model for other Catholic and Episcopal churches thinking of forming new relationships.



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