

Ministries represent church on campus

By Amy Carr
Guest contributor

Anticipating the competitive job market, a college sophomore may place little weight on the question of faith on campus.

Yet, according to Father Michael Mahler, Cornell University co-chaplain, it is essential for the church to interact with the educational process and with the future leaders it will produce.

Catholic campus ministries at 18 colleges and universities in the diocese are now answering this need. At 16 secular institutions in the diocese, the Department of Campus Ministry has established individual ministries staffed by 23 chaplains and lay ministers. In addition, two campus ministries independently serve students at St. John Fisher and Nazareth colleges, which are known as "Catholic-heritage" schools.

The primary purpose of each ministry is to serve as an active Catholic presence for the academic community and their families.

"The campus ministers serve as a continuous presence of church and as an ecumenical presence," stated Sister Mary Hilaire Gaelens, RSM, director of the diocesan Division of Special Pastoral Ministries. "They run full programs, and many students and faculty turn to the chaplains for counseling."

Fourteen full-time diocesan campus ministers serve the seven largest institutions, with six of the schools having campus parishes. The 10 remaining schools are served by nine ministers from local parishes who provide part-time pastoral service.

While the two "Catholic-heritage" schools within the diocese hire their own campus ministry staffs, ministers serving the secular institutions are appointed by Bishop Matthew H. Clark, following extensive interviews and upon recommendation from Father William Lum, diocesan director of campus ministry.

"We look for someone who has ministerial experience and the skill to work with a diverse group of people in the setting of higher education," Father Lum said. In addition to such qualifications, prospective campus ministers also must have a minimum of three years' experience in pastoral service and a master's degree in theology or a comparable field.

A campus minister assumes a variety of roles, but serving as a Catholic presence for students of all denominations is seen as the crucial aspect. "I feel my role is being there for students and saying, 'How can I serve you?'" explained Father David Mura, Keuka College chaplain.

"We help people discern the very special call that God has given them as baptized people involved with higher education, and we serve anyone in the community," agreed Sister Marie Hoffman, co-chaplain at the University of Rochester.

Clearly, the celebration of Mass and the sacraments is the central aspect of all campus ministry, pointed out Father John Forni, Cornell University co-chaplain. Yet the way in which the Eucharist and other sacraments are offered varies depending on



File Photo
Muller Chapel serves three religious communities at Ithaca College. Shown here is the sanctuary area, which looks out across the town of Ithaca toward Cayuga Lake.

the type of school and the facilities available.

Both St. John Fisher and Nazareth colleges, for example, have Catholic chapels on campus, which allows for consistency in the times and location of services. "We have Mass everyday on campus for the students, alumni, and area community that regularly worship with us," explained Father Mitchell Dowalgo, St. John Fisher's chaplain.

Yet the Catholic communities on many secular campuses lack access to a perman-

ent chapel and even to a full-time priest or deacon — two situations that can preclude the weekly celebration of Mass. Many ministers also share facilities with other faiths, celebrating the sacraments in whatever location is available and calling on priests in nearby parishes to preside when needed.

"We have Masses on the Holy Days and on Fridays, and I ask the local priests that I know to say Mass for us," campus minister Sara Luna said of the situation at Monroe Community College.

"A practical challenge is that we often have to make due with less than adequate physical features," observed Father Michael Mahler, Cornell University chaplain. "Our worship space (at Cornell) is in an auditorium, and this worshipping environment is a space not meant for worship."

Such obstacles do not hinder diocesan campus-ministry programs, which serve approximately 41,000 Catholic students. Students participate in the liturgy as Eucharistic ministers, altar servers or as members of the folk group. Many ministries also offer Bible-study sessions and day or weekend retreats for the students.

"We have retreats for undergraduates and graduate students, including an annual weekend retreat at the Abbey of Genesee," said the UR's Sister Hoffman.

Pastoral and leadership opportunities are open to students through peer ministry programs and involvement in parish coun-

cil. In peer ministry, trained student volunteers work closely with professional ministers and other students to serve the community and organize ministry projects. Students also help to address their peers' pastoral needs by serving as members of campus parish councils. Such collegiate experience serves the students well when they join parishes after graduation, according to Cornell's Father Forni.

Chaplains and other campus ministers also encourage students to become involved off campus by engaging them in service to the surrounding community. Through their campus-ministry program, for example, students at St. John Fisher College annually participate in the Oxfam Hunger Fast, volunteer to tutor at area high schools and work on projects sponsored by Amnesty International. The Fisher Catholic community also sponsors a "pet-therapy" program, in which students take pets to visit the residents of the Rochester Friendly Home.

"The spirit of the campus is great," Father Dowalgo remarked. "All activities encompass other faiths, and the campus ministry receives overwhelming support."

At nearby Nazareth College, the campus-ministry program annually promotes such volunteer efforts as a Red Cross blood drive, the Big Brother-Big Sister program, in which trained students befriend needy youngsters in the community. Nazareth's Social Justice Committee also sponsors food drives for St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, and discussions on topics related to peace-and-justice issues in society.

"The umbrella entity of the campus-ministry outreach effort is working with the ills of society," explained Dr. Tom Allen, Nazareth's dean of student affairs, whose office oversees the campus-ministry program.

The campus ministries on the Genesee and Cornell campuses offer an Appalachian Service Project, in which students help families in poor, rural areas of Appalachia. The week-long program involves working and spending time with family members, especially the elderly.

"The students spend time with the rural elderly and help them around the house," said Weston Kennison, Genesee College campus minister. "It is a great thing. If the project is important, people will get involved."

Frequently these service projects are undertaken as ecumenical efforts, combining the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish communities on campus. The ecumenical spirit also offers the opportunity for joint programming, such as the Conference on Religion funded by the Cornell United Religious Work each fall. The Cornell Catholic community takes an active role in the conference, which focuses on discussions with well-known speakers on various social aspects that touch upon religion. This year the weekend event will focus on the ecology and will feature Carl Sagan as keynote speaker.

A similar relationship exists at the University of Rochester, where a few years ago members of the Newman Community invited the campus' Jewish and Protestant communities to celebrate Mass with them and, in turn, were invited to participate in the Jewish community's Passover Seder.

If the opportunity to work with campus ministers of other faiths is an advantage to the Catholic communities on secular campuses, funding is certainly a disadvantage. Unlike the campus-ministers at Nazareth and St. John Fisher colleges, which fully support their ministry offices, chaplains and lay ministers at most secular schools get no financial support from the institutions they serve. What funding these ministries do receive comes from the diocesan Division of Special Pastoral Ministries through the annual Thanks Giving Appeal.

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