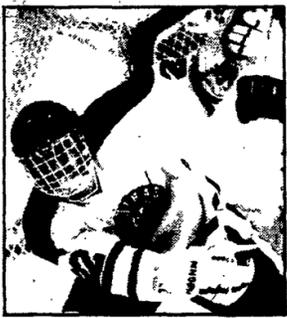




**Two triumphs**  
Post-season play continues for the boys' basketball team at Notre Dame and the stickmen at Aquinas, as both posted impressive wins. Pages 10 and 11.



# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Church aims at stereotypes that 'write off' elderly



**MINISTRY AMONG THE ELDERLY** — Although daily Mass is a mainstay for many older Catholics (center), shut-ins like Mary Helen Slaughter (top) receive Holy Communion in their homes through such programs as the one sponsored by St. Augustine's Parish. Physical needs, meanwhile, are met by such services as the S.T.A.R. program, through which volunteer Kay Bedford (bottom) helps Vera Hinterleiter with shopping and banking.

Courier photos by Babette G. Augustin



**By Lee Strong**  
Staff writer

**Kay Bedford leads an active life.**

The St. Augustine's parishioner recently completed her bachelor's degree and continues to take college courses. On a regular basis, she helps two elderly women shop and go to doctors' appointments. She also serves as a eucharistic minister to shut-ins once a month.

In addition, Bedford volunteers at Mt. Carmel House, a hospice for the dying, and is involved with efforts to create a hospice at her parish. She also swims three times a week for exercise.

**Kay Bedford is 70 years old.**

"It's taking the gifts of God and putting them to work," Bedford said. "He always gives you the strength that you need if you get up and do something."

"There's a lot of people with talent," she continued. "Some of them don't realize it. They need to be encouraged. They need to see the gifts that they have and to use them."

Irene Coveney couldn't agree more.

"I think that in this society, we tend to write (the elderly) off," observed Coveney, director of Elder Services at the Catholic Family Center. "We need to look at older people as viable members of the work force."

The elderly also constitute an increasing part of the population, Coveney noted: "The elderly population is growing by leaps and bounds," she said, adding, that "the resources do not match the need."

Figures from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that in 1984, approximately 12 percent of the U.S. population was 65 or older. The average life expectancy in the United States in 1900 was 47; currently it is 78.

As the average age of U.S. citizens has steadily risen, the church has seen an even more pronounced increase in the percentage of Catholics 65 or older, according to studies conducted by the the Third Age Center at Fordham University. Those studies conclude that 25 percent or more of Catholic parishioners are 65 or older.



"For the first time in history, many people are surviving far into old age, often remaining active and healthy long after responsibilities such as child-rearing and breadwinning have been fulfilled," said Monsignor Charles Fahey, director of the Third Age Center.

The church now faces the challenge of ministering to the needs of the elderly, and of tapping their talents and experience, Monsignor Fahey said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

"The common perception is that older people have earned the right to withdraw," Monsignor Fahey said. "We say that the older person has a responsibility to participate in the life of the church and in society."

The church is beginning to look at the need for ministry to and with the elderly, the priest continued. In New York, for example, the state Catholic conference formed a Commission on the Elderly, which produced a report for New York's bishops in 1986, and a program manual for parishes in 1987.

Jack Belinsky of the state conference served as a liaison to the commission. He said that the group concluded that one of the roles of the church is "to counteract the image of the frailty of the elderly."

That image — that older people are sickly and in need of constant help — runs counter to reality, noted Sister Gratia L'Esperance, RSM, assistant director of Rochester's Mercy Center with the Aging.

Sister L'Esperance estimated that only 6 percent of the the elderly are institutionalized, and another 13-14 percent live at home but suffer from severe or chronic conditions that require some care. Thus, she observed, approximately 80 percent of elderly people are in good health and do not require special care or help.

It is that 80 percent that tends to get neglected, however. "We've focused on people who are frail and disabled, thus reinforcing that stereotype," Sister L'Esperance said.

The diocesan church does, indeed, attempt to meet the needs of the elderly. Catholic Family Center's Elder Ser-

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