



# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Parish clusters discover strength in unity

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In 1984 and 1985, 14 parishes in rural Cayuga and Wayne counties faced a challenge no other parish in the Diocese of Rochester had yet encountered.

Confronted with declining numbers of priests — and thus fewer priests to serve them — parishes from King Ferry to Wolcott were told that they would have to develop new structures to continue parish ministry.

Those parishes now constitute the Diocese of Rochester's first three clusters — faith communities comprising two or more parishes sharing staff and resources as equal partners. The Cayuga Team Ministry Cluster, the Northern Cayuga Cluster, and the Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity were pioneers in a process that is becoming more common both locally and nationally, as the numbers of priests available for parish ministry continue to decrease.

In the Rochester diocese, five clusters now exist, with St. Anne's, Palmyra/St. Gregory's, Marion, and the East Side Catholic Community in Elmira joining the first three clusters. And in June, the four parishes of Corning and Painted Post will unite to form the Corning-Painted Post Faith Community.

Yet the fact that clustering is becoming more common does not mean it has become any easier. The feeling most frequently cited to describe the process by those involved is "grieving."

"We said among ourselves it was like somebody died," noted Joan Dates, a parishioner of St. Thomas, Red Creek, which is part of the Blessed Trinity cluster. "It was a grieving process."

"All of us went through the various stages of what we later realized was grieving," acknowledged Father George Wiant, pastor of the Northern Cayuga Cluster. Parishioners experienced feelings of loss, sorrow and anger, he said.

Nevertheless, Father Wiant said that since his cluster was formed in 1985, the people had developed a sense of themselves as a faith community, and can now look at the change as a positive one.

"We really feel that the priest shortage has been a blessing for us," Father Wiant said. "We've been able to do things as a cluster that the individual parishes could never have done."

The path to that recognition has been a painful one, however, especially during the initial phase when the clusters were formed.

In November, 1984, representatives from eight parishes constituting what was then called the "Northeast Quadrant" met with Bishop Matthew H. Clark and were told that because of a declining number of active clergy, the number of priests assigned to their parishes would be cut.

The representatives were told that the diocese did not have a plan for them; they had to work together to develop their own structure.

"We were so angry about (Bishop Clark) not telling us what do," remarked Roxanna Smith, a parishioner at one of the affected parishes, St. Michael's in Montezuma. "We were used to a church that told us how high to jump. Now we had a leader of the church who told us to jump, but he didn't know how high or which direction."

Dates acknowledged, however, that people were skeptical that their input would affect the restructuring plan.

"A lot of people felt like the decision had been made, that what we decided didn't matter," observed Dates, who at the time was president of the St. Thomas parish council.

Soon after the process of discernment began, it became apparent to the parish representatives that the eight parishes would be split between two clusters, with St. Mary Magdalen in Wolcott, St. John Fisher in East Bay, St. Jude's in Fair Haven and St. Thomas the Apostle forming one cluster (Catholic Community of the Blessed Trinity) and St. Michael's, St. John's in Port Byron, St. Joseph's in Weedsport, and St. Patrick's in Cato, in the other (the Northern Cayuga Cluster).

As discussions continued, the planning group determined that two of the parishes — St. John Fisher and St. Michael's — should close.

"We tried to give all the reasons why it shouldn't happen," Smith recalled. But in the end, she voted in favor of closing her own parish. "It came down to financial feasibility and physical feasibility," she explained.

Reaction to the decision was strong at the time, Smith said. She was yelled at by fellow parishioners at church the day the decision was announced. "I went home crying," she remembered.

The two separate clusters officially came into existence June 26, 1985. Father Robert Smith was appointed pastor of the Blessed Trinity cluster, and remains its sole priest. Father Wiant was named pastor of the Northern Cayuga Cluster, which he continues to serve along with Father William Moorby.

At the time these two clusters came into being, the Cayuga Team Ministry Cluster — the first cluster in the diocese — was celebrating its first year of existence.

Cayuga Team Ministry, which for a short time was a six-parish faith community, now includes St. Joseph's in Cayuga, St. Michael's in Union Springs, St. Patrick's in Aurora, and Our Lady of the Lake in King Ferry.

Father William Spilly arrived as the pastor in June, 1984. His term ends in June of this year, and he will be leaving the cluster for an assignment as yet unannounced.

During the early days of the cluster, Father Spilly recalled, people were afraid their parishes would be closed.

Once those fears were overcome, parishioners had to deal with the idea that they would have only one priest among the four parishes to meet their sacramental needs. That meant reducing the number of weekend Masses — one of the first changes each

of the clusters had to undertake because of the reduced number of priests.

Originally, Father Spilly celebrated seven Masses each weekend, but in 1987, the people of the cluster recognized that the load was too much for one priest because of the distances between the parishes, and proposed that the number be reduced to four. The change went into effect in 1988.

That grass-roots decision was a sign that the people of the four parishes had begun to think as a broader faith community, not just as individual parishes, Father Spilly noted.

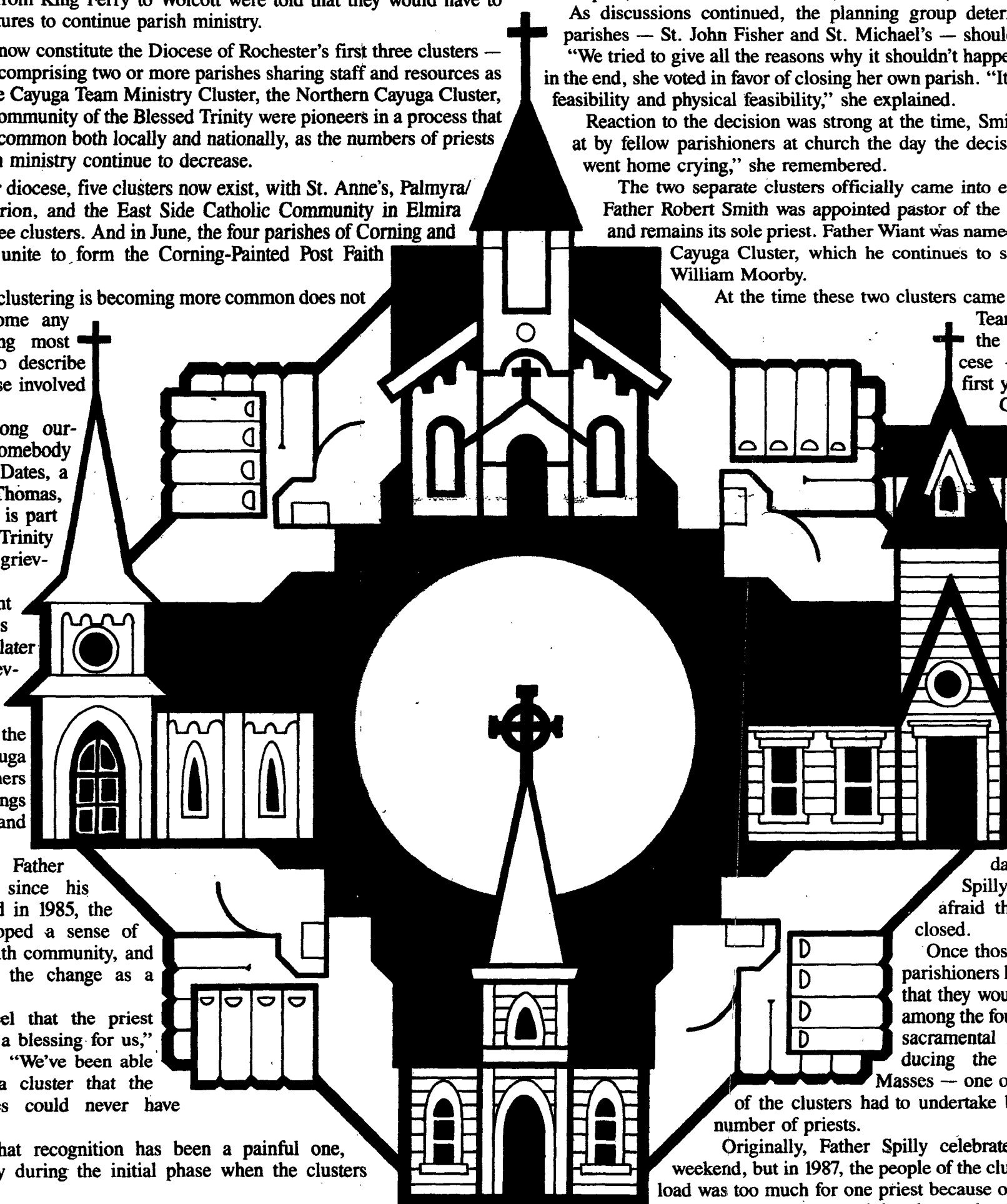
One of the early efforts of the ministry team was to find ways to draw the people of the four parishes together, while at the same time preserving the individual parishes' identities.

One illustration of this process was the creation of the cluster council. Early on, the team recognized the need for such a council for cluster-wide planning. But Our Lady of the Lake Parish had no parish council, so the team decided to wait until one could be formed in King Ferry before trying to create a joint council.

The parish formed a council in 1985, and a joint council was finally established in 1988. Administrative responsibilities are now divided among the joint council and the individual parish councils.

Another important component of the team approach is that responsibilities once

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