

Celebrating 10 years of charity and justice

By Leslie Ann Baynes
Freelance writer

ELMIRA — This year the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry celebrates a decade of feeding the hungry and working for justice. Since its establishment in the summer of 1980, the office has formed a food bank, implemented a program for the mentally ill, provided counseling for victims of substance abuse and lobbied governmental agencies on life issues.

STOSM will celebrate its 10th anniversary with a dinner at the Downtown Holiday Inn on Friday, June 29. Father Richard P. McBrien, chairman of the theology department of the University of Notre Dame, will be the keynote speaker. Father McBrien will address the church's social-issue agenda for the 1990s.

The agency offers Christian hospitality and direct service to individuals and families, and joins with the people of the Southern Tier in an effort to bring about justice in the community.

"The Diocese of Rochester has made a strong effort to merge charity and justice — the way it should be," said Lynn Shreve, STOSM's director of human services.

This merger began unofficially in the mid-1970s, with a rural outreach ministry inaugurated by Father Neil Miller and Sister Mary Kruckow, RSM. Working out of the diocesan Office of Human Development in Rochester, the pair endeavored to create a presence in areas where people needed help, particularly in the Southern Tier.

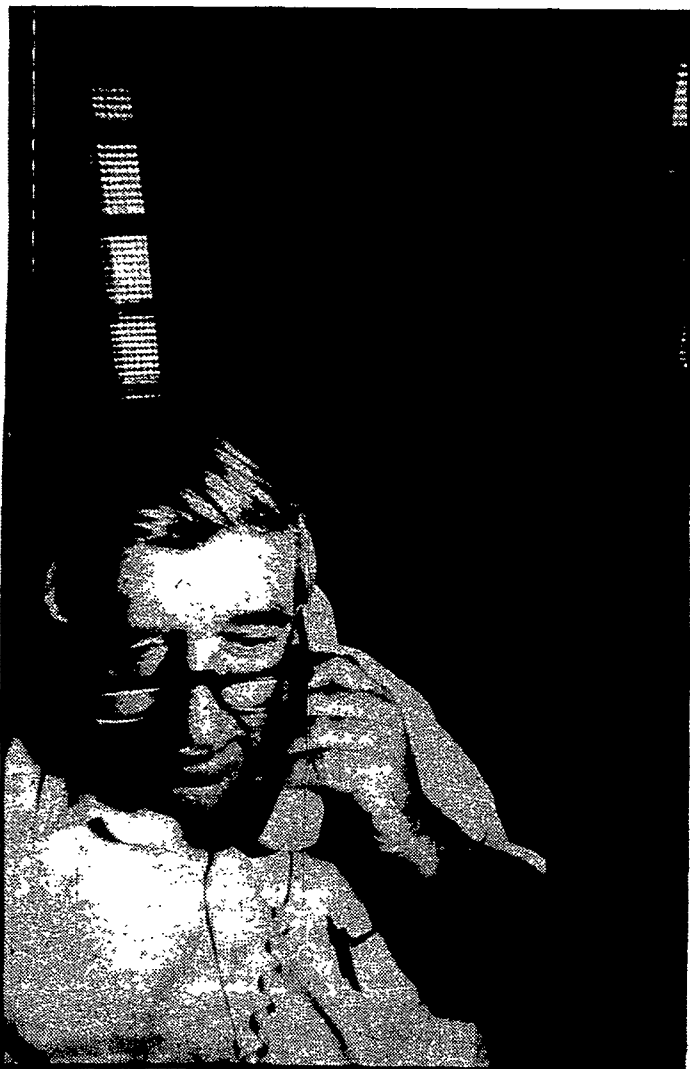
Anthony Barbaro, STOSM's executive director, said these initial efforts brought Christian hospitality to the people of area parishes — especially the poor and vulnerable — through such simple actions as providing groceries to needy families.

As their efforts progressed, Sister Kruckow and Father Miller tried to involve local parishes in the ministry, and began to act as resource people in the training and development of parish human development committees, Barbaro recalled. They also provided a link between the various parishes' social ministry programs.

Kathleen Dubel, currently the director of justice and peace at STOSM, was involved with the outreach in its early days as a member of the human development committee of Ss. Peter and Paul Parish in Elmira.

"The committee worked well on its own," Dubel recalled, "but it became much more effective as a result of Father Neil's effort to network with other parishes." Through this network, the human development committees also found that they had common concerns and could work together toward common goals. Fifteen years later this network continues to meet, discuss and plan collaborative projects.

Soon the committee began operating a center to distribute food and clothing. At first the center was located at St. Patrick's School in Elmira, and supplies were stored in the attic. The operation later moved to a store-front office on St. Clement Parkway, where it served clients five days a



Purchased Food Coordinator John Ungerland administers government food assistance programs for the Southern Tier Community Food Bank.



John Sabatini, a volunteer at STOSM's food cupboard, packages frozen beans for distribution.



Sue Houghtlaen has been a resident at the Gateways Community Residence since April of 1986. The house, which is staffed 24 hours a day, is one of several run by STOSM to provide transition shelter for mentally ill people moving from institutional settings to independent living.

Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

week. Often what those clients needed, even more than food or clothing, was simply a place to talk and someone to listen, according to Dubel.

In 1978, the center was invited to move its base of operations to Ss. Peter and Paul, the current home of STOSM. There, volunteers staffed the one-room office, as Father Miller and Sister Kruckow continued their outreach in the area.

In Rochester, meanwhile, a committee of lay people and clergy was drafting a mission statement articulating what the Elmira group was acting out. That statement, "Charities of the Future," observed that most of the existing diocesan resources for social ministry were concentrated in Monroe County, and that the people who are served by social ministry should exercise some decision-making powers over it.

"Charities of the Future" called for two basic changes in the social-ministry structure: the integration of service/charity and efforts toward social change/justice; and the decentralization of social ministry in the diocese.

The document was approved by the charities board in 1978 and by Bishop Matthew H. Clark in 1979. Its implementation created three new regional offices of social ministry: the Southern Tier office, serving Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben, Tioga and Tompkins counties; the Finger Lakes office, serving Cayuga, Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Yates counties; and the Genesee Valley office, serving Monroe and Livingston counties. In 1988, the Genesee Valley office was reorganized, taking on the name of one of its former component agencies, the Catholic Family Center.

Bishop Clark officially established the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry June 29, 1980.

The newly established office continued the work it had begun in the mid-1970s, with Father Miller acting as executive director. Its first project was the development of the Southern Tier Community Food Bank, which serves as a central site where food manufacturers and distributors may

donate large amounts of goods to be distributed to pantries, kitchens and other agencies.

In 1983, STOSM took over the operation of Gateways Community Residence from the Elmira Psychiatric Center. The program provides transition shelter for individuals moving from institutional settings to independent living.

Gateways clients — who are plagued by mental illness, alcoholism or homelessness — begin their transitions at a 14-bed supervised residence that offers instruction in such living skills as grocery shopping and doing the laundry. From there they move into two-person apartments, where they are regularly visited — with decreasing frequency — by Gateways workers.

STOSM also provides counseling services, runs a teen-pregnancy program and has established a worker-owner resource center that helps low-income men and women who wish to establish their own businesses.

Volunteers have been the backbone of STOSM's work throughout the decade. Stan Gush, who has worked at the food pantry for nine of the office's 10 years, remembers

that he began volunteering because he had just retired and was getting "under his wife's feet." He and many other pantry volunteers supply an estimated 1,000 clients with food each month.

Adeline and Genevieve Mazur worked with Father Miller's group even before STOSM officially existed. The two interview people in need and distribute clothing to them. "We get a good deal of satisfaction out of helping people find what they need," Adeline Mazur said. "We do it for the love of God. We want to do what He says — carry out His will."

In addition to providing direct charitable services for the community, STOSM aims to "integrate direct local concerns of the Southern Tier with wider church issues," Barbaro noted.

The office lobbies for legislation on such issues as abortion and the death penalty — addressing life issues "from womb to tomb," he said. He emphasized, however, that STOSM does not endeavor to duplicate programs that already exist in the community — such as the pro-life movement — but attempts to participate in and support those structures.

In these ways, STOSM attempts to fulfill its goals of working with the people, connecting them with local parishes, creating service programs and working toward social change. Father Michael Bausch, who succeeded Father Miller as STOSM's executive director from 1983 to 1985, observed that the office has "matured from a small agency to a larger one without losing its founding philosophy and theology."

In the next decade, STOSM hopes to build public awareness of its programs so that it can be "a helpful resource to all 42 parishes in the region," Barbaro said. The office also aims to further awareness "that the church has social teaching," and that the key to fulfilling that teaching in the coming decade will be creating stronger ties to parish resource teams, who can educate parishioners on social issues.