

Program provides important lessons for city youths

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When deacon-candidate Bruce Clement was deciding on his summer ministry project, the last thing he planned on was working with children.

Although Deacon John Holmes of St. Bridget's Church asked him to consider youth ministry within an urban setting, Clement wanted to avoid a youth program since he currently works with young people in his own parish, St. Vincent DePaul in Churchville. In addition, his diaconal studies required him to experience a branch of ministry unfamiliar to him.

However, Father Robert T. Werth, pastor of St. Bridget's, convinced Clement that a real need existed to work with children in the projects.

"Father Bob said this was where the need was, and I would definitely find new experiences," Clement said. The deacon candidate's goal for the program was to provide safe supervision of the children while subtly getting his messages across.

Clement began his project last month when he posted a sign onto a vacant building on church property, informing city children of an upcoming meeting to convert the edifice into a clubhouse.

The only people to show up for the meeting, however, were Clement and his son, Benny. A disappointed Clement walked into Bethesda Church of God in Christ — which is located behind St. Bridget's — to listen to a Gospel choir. He left Benny doing bike tricks in front of the church.

"When I came out of Bethesda, I couldn't believe what I saw," Clement said. "There was Benny with about five kids from the projects gathered around him, watching him do tricks."

When the children saw Clement, he convinced them to walk over to the vacant building. They followed him inside and immediately began to pick up broken glass, gather rugs and clean walls. The group had doubled in size by the next meeting, when youths began to paint the building and board windows.

Not only did Clement receive overwhelming approval from the parents, but there was unanimous opinion on behalf of the community that any program designed to help children was a great idea.

According to Clement, the ages of the children range from 5 to 15. Although



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Every Tuesday and Thursday evening, deacon candidate Bruce Clement walks through the St. Simon housing project in Rochester to round up children for two hours of painting, athletics and quiet time.

most of the children are not Catholic, the deacon candidate sees in them a sincere curiosity to learn more about religion when he visits St. Bridget's or Bethesda with them.

"These kids have no preconceptions, as adults do, so they are open to learn," said Clement, a former Protestant who converted to Catholicism 12 years ago when he became a member of St. Vincent DePaul.

Every Tuesday and Thursday evening, Clement arrives at St. Bridget's at 6:45 p.m. and walks across the project's baseball field to gather youths — sometimes as many as 30 a night — for the two-hour

group because of its activities. "It gives us something to do," she said.

Tony Gadson, 11, said Clement is the reason he keeps coming back. "He's nice. He'll keep you company when you're alone, and he cheers you up," he said.

Don Bryant, 10, agreed. "I came here to take out broken glass and paint," he said. "I keep on coming back because of Bruce. I know he'll protect our place."

According to Tanisha McCloud, 9, the youths love the program. "Bruce opened the clubhouse for little kids to play, and he's always helping someone. It's also fun to learn about the church," she said.

Stephny Woods, 6, added that she learns

important lessons from Clement. "I learned not to break anything, and it's wrong to break in (a building) at night," she said.

With the summer drawing to a close, some youths are expecting the program to end, but Clement plans to keep it going.

"Our goal was to do something good and make sure it continues. It's painful for kids to get involved in something and then have it end," Clement said. "It won't disappear like so many other things in their lives."

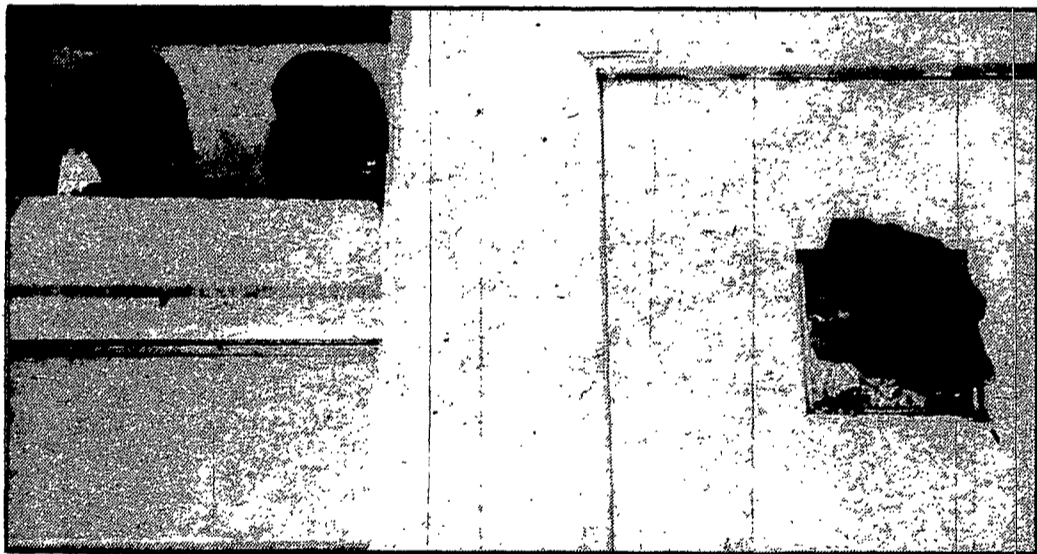
Although Clement will try to stay with the program as long as he can, other responsibilities may make it impossible for him to do so. Father Werth, however, plans to get his parishioners involved. The priest added that he, too, will work with the youths if Clement leaves.

The group will move into the church building when the weather turns cold, and Father Werth wants to establish a tutoring program — possibly using college students as volunteers — to help children with homework after school.

"It's too good of a thing to let go down the tubes," Father Werth said.

Clement said his motive of learning about urban life may have been a selfish reason for starting the program. "I was a country boy so I wanted to learn something about life in the city," he said. But most of all, he said, the children have benefitted.

"Cleaning the building was an accomplishment for them," Clement said. "They won't be able to resist the draw of the church, either. They've had a sensation of finding something based on love."



Members of the new youth program stick their heads out of the windows of the 'clubhouse,' a building they have been renovating on church property.

meeting.

"It's amazing," Clement said. "For two evenings I stood on the other side of the fence (around the field), too afraid to walk across."

Now Clement walks right through the field as children flock to him from all over the project, yelling "Hey, Bruce," and "What are we going to do tonight?"

The meetings consist of play time, which includes painting and athletics, and quiet time, during which Clement tries to teach the children important lessons such as sharing. At the end of the summer, Clement hopes to fund a group trip to Seabreeze Park.

"Sometimes the children's enthusiasm surpasses my abilities," he said. "They would be doing car washes, talent contests, hot dog stands — all in one night — if they could."

When working with the youths, Clement said there is a temptation to give them clothes, candy or gifts. Although he has repaired a few bikes with old tires from home, he realizes the most important gift he can give is himself.

Karen Bryant, 7, said she joined the



Clement consoles a young boy after a disagreement occurred among the some of the youths.

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