

Ministry to disabled moves beyond institutions

By Deacon Ed Sergeant
Guest contributor

In 1954, Father John Connolly was assigned to the Newark Developmental Center as full-time Catholic chaplain. In 1956, the first Protestant chaplain arrived. Since that time, the policy at the center has been to treat clients as "whole" individuals, recognizing their need for physical and psychological — as well as pastoral — care.

With a population of more than 3,200 at the center during the 1950s, the chaplains' responsibilities were similar to those they would have in any parish. Father Connolly offered Mass daily, and Protestant services were held on Sunday mornings. It was not uncommon to have 400-500 people from each faith group in attendance at those services.

For those unable to attend Mass or Sunday services, the chaplains made pastoral visits to the living units. Special emphasis was placed on the care of the troubled, the sick and the dying. Meanwhile, Rabbi Solomon Cohen from Rochester provided services for those of the Jewish faith.

The chaplains developed special religious-education programs, as well as programs to

prepare individuals for the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Their ministry was outstanding, and I am always amazed at how well the individuals know their catechism and prayers.

In 1985, I was blessed with the opportunity of becoming the first deacon chaplain at the Newark Developmental Center. When I started my ministry, the chaplaincy department consisted of Sister Josette Capozzi, SSJ; the Rev. Terry Wing, Protestant chaplain; and Rabbi Cohen, Jewish chaplain. At that time, 360 individuals were living on campus at the center, with another 550 others living in various residential settings through Wayne, Ontario, Seneca and Yates counties.

Since my arrival five years ago, many things have changed. I am now the only person serving as chaplain, coordinating pastoral and spiritual care for all faith groups. The name of the center has been changed to the Newark Developmental Disabilities Service Office.

The greatest change came on January 21, 1987, when the New York state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities said it would close five of its residential-services institutions by 1990 or early 1991.

Newark was selected as one of the facilities to offer a more appropriate and less-restrictive living environment to the developmentally disabled who were currently living in an institutional setting. To date, we have opened 16 new homes, with an additional six homes currently under construction.

All of the new homes are scheduled to be opened on or before April 1, 1991. At that time, the Newark campus will be closed for residential services, thus bringing an end to 113 years of institutional residential services for the developmentally disabled.

This is an exciting and challenging time for all of us who work with the developmentally disabled. It is impossible for me as chaplain to provide for the spiritual, sacramental and pastoral needs of more than 900 people living in 145 different residential locations — including family care — throughout Wayne, Ontario, Seneca and Yates counties. Living in the community means becoming part of the community, and that includes the local church or parish.

This is the challenge that lies before our community churches and parishes. As faith communities we have the opportunity to welcome, as did Christ, those who have been forced to live apart from the mainstream of society, into our churches or homes and hearts. We have before us a whole new ministry, which can be very rich and rewarding.

The U.S. bishops recognized the need for this ministry when, on Nov. 16, 1978, they published their pastoral statement on handicapped people. In it they wrote, "Recognizing that individuals with handicaps have a claim to our respect because they are persons, because they contribute to our society by their activity within it, we as church must become an advocate for and with them. We minister to handicapped persons by serving their personal, social and spiritual needs."

My ministry is to make these words a lived reality in the life of each developmentally disabled individual.

When I am asked how to go about developing a ministry with the developmentally disabled, I explain that it is very simple and not unlike any other ministry with which we may become involved. We minister by being open, warm and welcoming. As a faith community, we offer

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Victor resident Versie Hill laughs at Deacon Sergeant's remarks during his Nov. 1 visit to the Canandaigua Day Treatment Program.

vice at St. Mary's Church in the developmentally disabled



Deacon Sergeant, who is holding a photograph of family members.

Insight author chose ministry over security

In 1985, Deacon Ed Sergeant was given an opportunity to throw away the security and benefits he had built up in 18 years with Bausch and Lomb Corporation.

After much prayer and talk, he and his wife chose to take the risk, and since that time Deacon Sergeant has been working as a chaplain with the developmentally disabled.

The choice was offered when Father Paul Ryan, then a chaplain at the Newark Developmental Center, was about to leave to join the Diocese of Rochester's mission team in Tabasco, Mexico. The two men had worked together when Deacon Sergeant served a summer ministry placement there the center.

Father Ryan suggested that the deacon take his place.

Deacon Sergeant had already begun to look at his own life in terms of his ministry as a deacon. "I sat down one night and said, 'God, I don't know what you want me to do and where you want

me to go,'" he recalled.

Then the opportunity at Newark was presented to him. "What it took for me was being able to let go of the security I'd built up in my life and give it to God," he said.

In the five years since taking on the ministry at Newark, Deacon Sergeant has witnessed the evolution of ministry to the disabled from being institutionally based to being parish and church centered. He has also come to see the ministry as very much in line with his vocation as a deacon.

"I think my ministry is a very diaconal ministry," he said, "because I've been able to help individuals who have been very disenfranchised from the community, and I have been able to bring them to the churches of their choice."

Deacon Sergeant said the developmentally disabled need to be embraced by church communities because "I don't think we become whole as a church until we accept everyone."



Bill Eberhardt chats with Deacon Sergeant during a day-treatment program at Newark Developmental Center.