

Mercy ministry fights stereotypes of elderly

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Most elderly people live in nursing homes.

The vast majority of the elderly are frail and sickly.

These two statements are typical of the myths Mercy Sisters Gratia L'Esperance and Anne Maloy are working to dispel about elderly people and growing old.

"Only about 6 percent of older people are in nursing homes," Sister L'Esperance said, noting that an additional 14 percent are coping with severe physical problems while still living at home.

And the remaining 80 percent, "are functioning very well," she said.

"Society has myths and stereotypes (that) to be young is good and to be old is bad," Sister Maloy explained.

What the two sisters try to show instead is that the elderly are simply living in the "third age" of life — an age many people will experience.

"It's really about ourselves," Sister Maloy noted.

For the past six years, Sisters Maloy and L'Esperance have been directing the Mercy Center with the Aging. An outreach ministry of the Sisters of Mercy, the center offers educational and support programs to help individuals and groups deal with issues involving the elderly.

These issues are becoming more important in parishes as the graying of America — and of the church — progresses. "When you look at the local church, people in the third age make up 25 percent of the population," Sister Maloy observed. "In some parishes, 50 to 60 percent."

Mercy Center with the Aging was created in 1984 to help respond to the needs of this growing segment of the population. Long supported by the Sisters of Mercy, the center is now also receiving greater financial support from the Diocese of Rochester.

In fiscal year 1990-91, the center, which is in the process of becoming a diocesan-sponsored program, will receive \$20,500 in Thanks Giving Appeal monies. That figure represents a substantial portion of the center's approximately \$44,000 budget.

The center does not directly minister to

the elderly, Sister Maloy pointed out. It focuses instead on providing programs to help individuals, parishes and groups look at the issues of aging, and to develop programs and services to meet those needs.

Currently, the center offers four programs to help parishes develop ministry to the elderly: the Family Education Series on Aging; the Project Planning Program; the Leadership Support Program; and the Advocacy Committee for Older Adult Issues.

Since 1984, more than 3,000 people from approximately 75 churches throughout the 12-county Diocese of Rochester have already taken advantage of the services the center provides.

The center staff does not try to tell parishes what to do, Sister Maloy noted. "We can go in with ideas, but it's up to the people," she said.

Nevertheless, thanks to the staff's efforts, a number of parish-based programs have developed to address the needs of the elderly, the sisters pointed out.

In Pittsford, for example, a coalition of churches — including St. Louis and Transfiguration — discovered that elderly people in the community needed transportation. The coalition created the Elderberry Express to address this need.

Other churches have responded with such measures as expanding their homebound outreach and visiting services, hiring extra staff to address the needs of the elderly, or sponsoring additional educational programs.

What many people who attend the center's sessions discover is that the issues surrounding the elderly involve more than just medical care, Sister Maloy noted.

Those issues — which are addressed in the Family Education sessions — include the physical, emotional and psychological effects of aging both on the elderly person and his or her family; finances; the legal system; dealing with government agencies and services; and even such developments as New York state's recently passed health-care proxy bill.

Once people gain a basic awareness of the issues, they can then take advantage of the center's project planning program. The program helps parishes recruit volunteers and develop ministries to address such specific needs as transportation; home



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Mercy Sisters Margaret Mary Walsh (left) and Gratia L'Esperance go through resource files at the Mercy Center with the Aging.

visitation; and support groups for those who lose spouses, or for families providing care for elderly relatives.

The center's staff also meets with groups of individuals working for or volunteering with programs for the elderly. These sessions are intended to provide support and opportunities for additional education, and discussions about new ideas and projects.

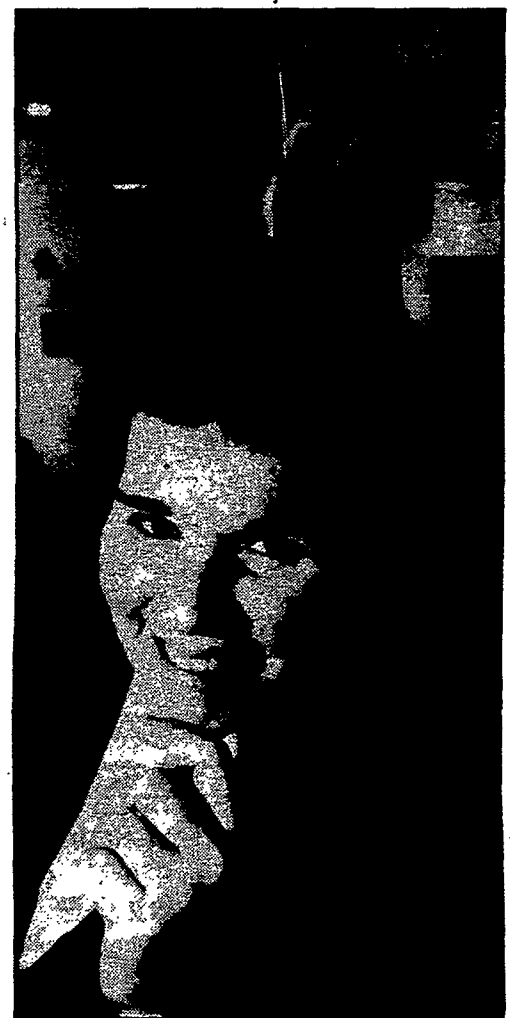
The center's staff has formed an advocacy committee to study and promote changes in public policy and in social services. This committee helps to organize lobbying campaigns and to make people in the community aware of issues.

Sister Maloy said that in the future, the staff members hope to see greater efforts in the diocese to train and support parish volunteers through a certification program such as the one implemented in the diocese for religious educators.

The center may eventually become part of the diocesan Division of Social Ministry, Sister Maloy said. This, she suggested, would allow greater cooperation in terms of the issues.

Such cooperation, and greater efforts to develop lay and voluntary ministry to the elderly at the parish, community and diocesan levels will be needed as the number of elderly people in the church grows, Sisters Maloy and L'Esperance acknowledged.

"We've got a growing population with growing needs," Sister Maloy concluded. "but we've got less personnel and less money to deal with this population."



Sister Anne Maloy, RSM, has been the director of Mercy Center with the Aging for six years.

Pregnancy Center promotes alternatives to abortion

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — The former Problem Pregnancy Center has a new name, a new address, a new director, a new owner and a new board of directors.

But the aims of the center remain the same: to promote chastity and provide pregnant women with an alternative to abortion.

On Nov. 8, 1990, ownership of the center was officially transferred from Divine Nature Ministries, Inc., to the Problem Pregnancy Help Center. The corporation title will also serve as the new name of the center, which has moved from 3254 Lake Ave. to larger offices at 3252 Lake Ave.

Patricia Amato, who has been involved with the pro-life movement for more than 20 years, became director of the center on Oct. 1. A board of directors, headed by Ray Buonemani, will oversee the operation.

The center is currently seeking incorporation as a not-for-profit organization.

The transfer completes a year of transition during which the center faced closure, only to be saved by Buonemani and a group of concerned individuals.

As of December, 1989, the center was on the verge of extinction due to a lack of



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Pamela and John Kuhn II (left) chat with Mary Ellen Bennett, a counselor at the Problem Pregnancy center. During a 1988 visit to the center, the Kuhns discovered that Pamela was pregnant with John Robert Kuhn III (foreground).

volunteers and money. Divine Nature Ministries, which started the center in November, 1986, was financially strapped and could not provide enough support for the operation.

Buonemani, who has been active in the pro-life movement in the Rochester area for many years, contacted David Long, president of DNM, offering to put together an advisory board to help save the center.

By March, 1990, that board — made up largely of Catholics — had recruited additional volunteers for the center and raised enough money to keep it open. At that point, Long suggested that Buonemani and his associates assume outright control of the center.

Buonemani formed the advisory board into a board of directors. He also solicited support from individuals and parishes, re-

ceiving both financial assistance and volunteers. Currently, those individuals and parishes have pledged \$650-700 a month for the center's operations. The rest of the center's approximate \$1,400 monthly budget is met through donations, Buonemani said.

The volunteer pool has grown to 28 in-office and phone counselors, allowing the center to add new hours to its office schedule, and to provide 24-hours-a-day phone service. An additional eight people volunteer as office staff.

In the month of October alone, the center handled 137 phone calls. Of those calls, 50 were for appointments, and 25 women actually came to the center as a result of calling.

When a woman comes to the center, Amato explained, she is given a pregnancy test kit, and then invited to talk with a counselor. The counselor advises the woman to see a doctor and, after a discussion with the woman, shows her a videotape about pregnancy.

If the pregnancy test is negative, the counselor talks to the woman about chastity. If it is positive, the discussion focuses on two options: keeping the child or putting it up for adoption.

Depending on the woman's situation, the

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