

# Efforts aim to bridge divisions in the diocese

By Father John M. Mulligan  
Guest contributor

A phenomenon unique to the Diocese of Rochester is known as "The Barge Canal Syndrome." The syndrome can be defined as "a pervasive attitude among clergy, religious and lay leadership of parishes outside of Monroe County (i.e. south of the Barge Canal) that they are undervalued and underserved by the Pastoral Office."

In discussing the syndrome, one must note a certain irony: The Pastoral Office itself is located south of the canal.

As is true in many other dioceses in the United States, our see city of Rochester is not at our geographic center. Rather, it is located in the northwest corner of the diocese, where approximately 60 percent of diocesan Catholics live. The presence of the Finger Lakes compound this problem, making east-west travel in our diocese difficult.

I spent the first nine years of my priesthood serv-

ing parishes in Ithaca, Corning and Auburn. Then after eight years in Rochester, I spent two years as the pastor of St. Stephen's Parish in Geneva, before returning to Rochester in 1983.

During those 11 years outside Rochester, I don't recall suffering too severely from the "Barge Canal Syndrome." I always found the Pastoral Office cooperative and supportive when I called upon the bishop's staff for assistance. I do admit, however, that during my time in those four regions, I heard a lot about the "Barge Canal Syndrome" from my brother priests.

Actually several syndromes are operative in our diocese. When I was at St. Anthony of Padua in Rochester, I experienced the "Urban Syndrome" —the feeling that many diocesan programs are designed for large suburban parishes rather than for our struggling, multi-ethnic city parishes.

I also think there is a "Rural Syndrome," and recently I even heard someone refer to a "Suburban Syndrome." To some degree it can be summed up by the old adage: "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence."

Enough about syndromes. Allow me to reflect a bit on a research project the Diocese of Rochester recently completed. The study was conducted by the Winters Group, a Rochester consulting group, and has become known as the Winters Group Study.

The results of this study were presented at the Feb. 18 meeting of the Bishop's Stewardship Council. After the presentation, Dan Gill, chairperson of the Stewardship Council, asked me what surprised me most about the report. I responded that I was somewhat dismayed at the finding that: "Most staff and clergy, and many in the community have a negative perception of Diocesan management," reinforced by the finding that "only 17 percent of staff and clergy think the needs of parishioners outside of Monroe County are being met."

I was somewhat consoled when the president of a local bank cautioned me not to be surprised. In his experience, those who serve staff usually do not get high ratings. And Dan Gill noted that many times the ratings get worse when you try to improve, because improvement tends to raise people's expectations faster than you can meet them and it takes time for people to see progress.

While all this may be true, I want to assure you that our Pastoral Office staff is committed to improving services to the 1,000 parish staff members and the 1,200 teachers currently serving the nearly 400,000 parishioners in our diocese.

The Pastoral Office's statement of purpose states our function succinctly: "The Pastoral Office coordinates activities and provides supportive services to parishes and institutions in the Diocese of Rochester to assist the Bishop in carrying out the mission of the Church."

Please note that our purpose is to serve the staff of parishes and institutions. We do not provide direct services for parishioners. Thus, although 90 percent of parish staffs have indicated that they do understand our services, many parishioners hardly know that we exist.

A few statistics may help you understand the scope of our operation:

- The Pastoral Office receives more than 9,000 telephone calls a month (in excess of 100,000 each year). That means our phone rings more than once a minute during office hours. I've never asked how many phone calls go out from our offices, but I'm sure the figure is at least another 9,000 each month.

- Our staff members drive more than 400,000 miles each year to help meet the needs in our 12-county diocese; that's about 8,000 miles each week;

- We receive 2,000 pieces of mail each day (over a half million a year), and our mail room processes an average of 1,000 pieces of outgoing mail daily.

In addition to our telephone, mileage and mail, our central staff spends a significant amount of time meeting with various staff and advisory groups. We do our best to make it possible for people throughout the diocese to attend these meetings by locating them in various areas. For example:

- The Priests' Council meets monthly at St. Dominic's Parish in Shortsville;

- The Synod Commission meets monthly at St. Francis De Sales Parish in Geneva, and the Priests' Personnel Board meets at St. Stephen's in Geneva;

- The Commission for Christian Formation and Education meets in Waterloo, and the Commission on Clusters gathers in Geneva;

- The Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Diocesan Board of Social Ministry meet at various locations throughout the diocese.

We are now striving to improve services to our parishes, especially those outside of Monroe County.

We now have a 1-800 number to make our Pastoral Office more accessible to parishes outside

our local calling area. We have a facimile transmitter — a fax machine — at the Pastoral Office, which gives us a new means of communication with the increasing number of our parishes that have these machines. We also have upgraded our telephone system to include voice mail, which is accessible to both internal and external callers.

Father George Norton heads up a budding telecommunications network in our diocese. We now have satellite "downlinks" for the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America at the Pastoral Office, at St. Mary's Church in Bath, St. Mary Our Mother Church in Horseheads, St. Januarius Church in Naples, and St. Cecilia's Church in Rochester. Additional links are being planned for Ithaca and Auburn.

Our aim is to use telecommunications to reduce those 400,000 annual staff miles and the millions of additional miles driven by parish staff and volunteers. Someday, we hope to convene simultaneous meetings or conferences at several sites throughout the diocese with two-way audio and one-way video via satellite.

We are planning to enhance our computer capability at the Pastoral Office. One of our goals is to have an electronic-mail link with each parish. We will also use telephone modems to transmit census, finance and development data to and from the approximately 100 parishes that have computers.

One thing is for sure, a lot is going on in our diocese. But for some, the "Barge Canal Syndrome" continues to divide our community of faith into "us" and "them." And an us-and-them mentality is not a sign of the unifying presence of Christ dwelling among us.

Let's look at how we might begin to divide us.

The Winters' survey, a communication report from an organizational Stewardship Council all stated the immediate need is better communication will enable our key beyond that us-and-them mentality, plagued us for so long.

Realizing the key role of improved communication in our future, we brought Elizabeth our staff in February of 1989 as our first professional communications director. She, H. Clark and I meet at least monthly to plan and review our progress.

We still have a long way to go, but I think that we can help the people of our diocese know more of what is going on at every church and help them realize that the helping us be church.

Currently, Bishop Clark is more involved in the issues he brings to Council, the Stewardship Council and Pastoral Council.

The Winters Group found that each program we provide at the Pastoral Office is important to some group of staff or diocese. Yet the overall quality ranking "average or above" at best. We believe the way to improve this quality ranking is our programs and services. At this Budget Committee and our Priests' helping me do just that.

Here are four other initiatives that

