

# Church seeks ways to battle recession's effects

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kitchens and regional food pantries. Agencies and parishes in the Diocese of Rochester report that the recession can be felt whenever clothing is distributed, meals are served or medical vouchers extended.

A letter thanking St. Lawrence Parish, Greece, for food donations to the Hilton Community Council of Churches summarized the recession's current impact.

"The need this year has been greater than ever and we are most grateful for your support in helping us to assist the hungry in our midst," the letter stated.

The recession and related woes topped the list of parish social-ministry concerns in a recent survey commissioned by the Catholic Family Center's Justice and Peace Department.

The five most-frequently cited concerns among the 45 responding parishes in Monroe and Livingston counties were hunger (33 parishes), homelessness (33), unemployment (28), national health care (22) and reform of the state budget process (12).

St. Helen's Parish, Gates, will discuss the state of the economy during its Feb. 12 "town meeting," said Sister Nancy DeRycke, SSJ, pastoral associate.

Sister DeRycke noted that her parish distributed more Christmas baskets to low-income families this year than it has needed to do in past years. And the parish is receiving a higher level of requests for hats, scarves and gloves than is normal for this point in the winter, she said.

Also during the last few months, donors to the parish have been responsive to the recession, Sister DeRycke added.

"People have been very generous with money," the pastoral associate observed. "Some have mentioned, 'Please use (my donation) for a family who's going through tough times.'"

One of the most telling examples of such recessionary influence among diocesan Catholics was the increase in donations to the 1991 *Catholic Courier*-Social Ministry Christmas Appeal, noted Judy Taylor, the appeal's coordinator.

According to Taylor, the 1991 campaign pulled in more than \$71,000, representing an increase of almost 12 percent in donations over the 1990 figure of \$64,576.

Christmas Appeal contributions are disbursed by vouchers to needy families and individuals through various urban parishes in the Rochester area and through the regional offices of diocesan Social Ministry — Rochester's Catholic Family Center and the offices of social ministry for the Southern Tier and the Finger Lakes.

Giovina Caroscio, executive director of Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, noted that in the last few months her office has distributed all of its monthly \$600 Christmas Appeal allocation in vouchers to needy clients.

"We could probably give out twice that much," she concluded.

Such challenges to church resour-

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**Justice & P**

**The results in numbers**

- 48 of 95 parishes responded to the survey
- The top five justice problems identified are hunger groups aimed at 34 parishes, homelessness (33 parishes), unemployment (28), national health care (22) and state budget process (12)
- CHD is one of the largest (28), national health care (22) and state budget largest funding program (12)
- 11 parishes want assistance identifying an issue to work on or beginning an organizing campaign
- 36 parishes collect and distribute food to families
- It has been distributed
- 21 parishes support service projects or programs from the Parish Budget, Catholic Family Center's French House, St. need of our
- House of Hospitality/Catholic Worker House
- parishes indicate their most significant
- of the last three years was in food and
- and distribution
- Ministry committees rate the
- fair pastoral care as very good to
- as good, and one as poor. 11
- to answer this question
- ave about who are designated to work

More than 7 million Americans are out of work

ces come at a time when Catholic agencies and parishes must tighten their own belts.

Caroscio pointed out, for example, that FLOSM's maternity-services program suffered a 50 percent decrease in state funding last year. Other agency services have also suffered cuts due to a decrease in diocesan funding from fiscal year 1990-91 to fiscal year 1991-92, she said.

"(The poor) need agencies like us more, but we're in a bind because we have to lay off staff," she said.

Father John Mulligan, vicar general and moderator of the diocesan pastoral office, pointed out that the diocese itself has had to tighten its financial belt in the last few years. At the same time, diocesan agencies like FLOSM are suffering state funding cuts that the diocese can not make up.

The fiscal situation is worse for Catholic dioceses and agencies out-

side New York state. While the church in New York plays a vital role in supplementing the state's vast public and private social-welfare system, Catholic agencies in Pennsylvania and New Jersey are their states' primary providers of social services.

City budgets in both states already have been cut to the bone, and as urban administrators dig into the marrow of their services — police and fire protection, trash collection and road repair — their increasingly poorer populations have nowhere else to go for help but the churches.

The urban church, therefore, is finding itself stretched to the limit.

The \$5.7 million social-services budget of the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., is operating with a 2-percent deficit, according to Monsignor Martin Ryan, secretary of the diocese's Catholic family and social services agency.

The local United Way branch cut budgets 10 percent, the city doesn't

contribute anything, and the State of Connecticut is considering measures that would cut services to addicts and the mentally ill, Monsignor Ryan said.

Many people without insurance can't even afford the average \$20 hourly fee for the diocese's counseling services, he added.

Father Joseph Garvin, executive director of Catholic Social Services in Philadelphia, said "more single males, young males" than ever before are asking for service.

Despite the somewhat bleak picture such observations paint, those who deal directly with the human casualties of the recession are exploring ways to arm the unemployed for the economic battles they must face.

In the Rochester diocese, one Catholic agency is attempting to counteract the demand on its services by attacking the root causes of unemployment.

In response to the greater numbers of people using the agency's services, the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry conducted a forum for the region's unemployed at Elmira Heights' St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Thursday, Jan. 23.

STOSM responded in a similar fashion about eight years ago during the nation's last major recession, noted Kathleen Dubel, the office's director of Justice and Peace. As they did in 1984, Southern Tier social-service agencies, colleges and banks came together to provide unemployed area residents with tips on finding jobs, procuring public assistance, upgrading their education and restructuring their debts.

Speakers at the Jan. 23 forum also emphasized the need for unemployed workers to pool their knowledge of the job market and share referrals when possible.

St. Alphonsus Parish in Auburn may soon mirror STOSM's efforts on a smaller scale, according to Stasia Sage, a member of the parish's social-ministry committee.

Sage said her committee is considering opening up a storefront at which the unemployed could meet, swap job-hunting tips and share referrals.

Elmira resident Essie Moore is a living example of the positive results such a storefront might produce.

Moore attended the STOSM forum to find out where she could get training to be a computer operator. The trip turned out to be profitable one for Moore. She learned that as a laid-off worker drawing unemployment benefits she may be eligible for occupational-skills training under a program sponsored by the Private Industry Council of Chemung-Schuyler-Stauben counties.

For Moore, gaining marketable skills may be the opportunity to exit the revolving door of factory hiring and layoff periods.

"Whenever I get my foot in the door, it seems like I come back out," she said.

**EDITORS' NOTE** — This article contains reporting from the *Catholic News Service*, Washington, D.C.