

# Personal contacts mark society's service to poor

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

CANANDAIGUA — Janet Shea had been thinking about joining the St. Vincent de Paul Society at St. Mary's Parish for many years. She just never got around to it.

But eight years ago, when a friend suggested joining the service group, Shea finally acted.

"I decided to join the group because I thought there would be not an awful lot to do," observed the 67-year-old St. Mary's parishioner. "Boy, was I wrong."

She now serves as president of the group, which, Shea said, is the only active St. Vincent de Paul Society in the Rochester diocese.

As for "not an awful lot to do," in 1991 alone the St. Vincent de Paul Society at St. Mary's assisted 1,300 families; filled 581 food orders; helped pay for 22 prescriptions; made 11 purchases of work shoes; paid for two children from the parish school to go to Camp Stella Maris summer camp for a week; and helped provide 55 Christmas food baskets.

In addition to coordinating a food-voucher program in the basement of the church on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings, members of the society run a clothes closet every Saturday morning.

The organization has gotten a second wind in the past 13 years after nearly dying out in the 1970s. Up until a volunteer recruitment campaign began last summer, the society has been run by a small group of members. For the most part, Shea observed, those members are retirees.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society at St. Mary's dates back to the turn of the century, noted Mary Fennell, who served as president of the group from 1988-91. In 1907, Father James Dougherty, who was pastor at the time, asked two women at St. Mary's to start "an organization within St. Mary's for the immigrants and the poor who were coming into the (Canandaigua) community," Fennell observed.

That group was incorporated as the St. Vincent de Paul Society in 1913, Fennell said. It later became associated with — but not officially part of — an international organization that since 1833 has offered lay Catholics an opportunity to provide personal service to the poor.

The personal, one-to-one focus of the society remains one of the group's appeals, noted Virginia Pritchard, the society's current treasurer.

"You get to talk to people, and they can tell you about the circumstances and their problems," observed the 62-year-old Pritchard. "That way, we get to know people and what they need, and sometimes we can help them on an individual basis."

Since its inception, the Canandaigua



Erik Kunkel/Photo intern  
Margaret Lyttle, right, a member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society at St. Mary's Parish in Canandaigua, chats with a food-voucher recipient.

group has provided clothing — often handmade — for needy people in the entire community, Fennell said, noting, "St. Vincent's developed long before we knew the word 'ecumenism.'"

The society also rolled bandages for the Red Cross and knitted clothing items for the troops during World War II.

The Canandaigua society is separately incorporated from the parish in large part because it began receiving support from the Community Chest — the precursor to the United Way — in the 1940s. The group continues to rely on United Way funding as its chief source of income, Pritchard said.

It also depends heavily on food donations, clothing items and money — especially during the Christmas season, Pritchard observed.

The group could always use more donations, however, Pritchard acknowledged. Each month, she said, the society arranges for approximately \$800 in food vouchers at a local store, which then bills the group.

Pritchard reported that the voucher tab sometimes exceeds \$800, with the record being \$1,500 during one month in 1990. She noted that the troubled

economy and large numbers of unemployed people has increased the demand on the society in recent months.

In fact, Mary Hugenschmidt, 78, who is still active as the society's secretary, noted that 16 people came in requesting food vouchers on a Wednesday morning shortly before Christmas.

That the society still exists is in part a tribute to Sister Marie Albert Alderman, SSJ, former pastoral assistant at St. Mary's in the 1970s and '80s. Fennell recalled that Sister Alderman took over the society after Monsignor William Roche, then pastor of St. Mary's, said the group was in danger of closing down.

Sister Alderman developed the voucher system and the clothing room. Since Sister Alderman left the parish in 1988, the organization has survived and even grown, Pritchard reported, with membership reaching approximately 50 people.

Shea noted that while members join to help other people, the society also provides friendship for members.

"We do enjoy each other," Shea said. "Everybody works so well together. We enjoy doing good together."



Alma Least puts away donated clothing at the group's clothes closet in St. Mary's basement.



Volunteers Mary Hugenschmidt, left, and Alice Donovan, both members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, work to sort and fold donated clothing on Feb. 19. The retirees volunteer to serve the needy in the Canandaigua area.

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