

Retreat fosters reflections on individual's 'inner city'

By Barbara Ballenger
Guest contributor

You could call this a tale of two cities — an inner city and an outer city.

It was the latter one that my husband, Jess, and I expected to explore during a weeklong retreat sponsored last January by Corpus Christi Church, our urban parish.

The announcement in the parish bulletin described this "Heart of the City" retreat as a "week-long immersion experience right here at Corpus Christi, (90 Prince St.) and the City of Rochester." Participants would experience parish and city outreach programs to the poor, would meet city leaders and would live with Father Jim Callan, pastor, at his home in an inner-city neighborhood.

Wanting to know more about urban issues, we signed up along with six other parishioners for a week of city living that went far deeper than our urban apartment and city-centered jobs could take us.

One of the first tasks for a few of us was to help the folks at Matthew's Closet, the parish's clothing min-

istry where people with terminal illnesses could spend their final days in comfort and support.

Quinlan told of a dying mother who was given the opportunity to spend precious time alone with her grieving son. She described how staff members helped a man fulfill one of his last wishes: to carry out the familiar ritual of renewing his driver's license. Again, there was that commitment to dignity.

And somewhere in the middle of the visits and the discussions and the fellowship, Jess and I discovered the inner city — the one we brought with us, the one we'd leave with.

First came a call from the private world we'd left behind. As we were preparing for a free evening to relax with other participants in the safety of Father Jim's home, we learned that our apartment had been burglarized.

The door had been kicked in during the afternoon, and a videocassette recorder and portable stereo were taken. This came after we had been discussing our fears of the city and concerns about its crime. The news required a temporary trip home to take inventory of our belongings and to sit in our cold apart-



Kellie Mc Cann/Photo Intern

Joanne Cirrincione of Corpus Christi Parish inspects a rack of clothes at Matthew's Closet June 17.

ment with our landlord until a locksmith came. What moral of dignity or compassion was there in this? Only the ironic lesson that people should leave lights on when they leave for five days.

The following day brought more bad news. Jess's grandmother in Cleveland had suffered a heart attack and was dying — another jarring irony in the wake of Quinlan's talk about Isaiah House. We were forced to leave the retreat a day early, drive to Cleveland, make decisions about life support, grieve a death, plan a funeral.

We returned to Rochester — five days, a speeding ticket and a flat tire later — trying to make sense of that string of events in light of the retreat we had left so abruptly. We realized that the experiences carried the same lesson: that we cannot separate ourselves or shield ourselves from the brokenness of a city or of a world, because we carry it inside us.

Unlike some people, we may have the luxury of taking a week off from work to reflect on the city in which we live. We may have cars or houses, edu-

cations, health insurance, regular meals. But we also know pain and loss, deprivation, long suffering, self-doubt and sin in some deep form.

That, at least, is my inner city. It is the common ground I share with a homeless woman or a convicted man. It is on that common ground that changes happen, that people help one another, that cities are healed.

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Kellie Mc Cann/Photo Intern

Ashley Huls (left) and Denisha Lamplay enjoy playtime June 17 at Corpus Christi Child Care Center, Rochester.

The eight of us on that first Heart of the City retreat were drawn by common desires: to explore not only how we can help solve the problems of the city, but to experience the Christian way to live in it.

Our group had a variety of ties to the city. Some lived there, some worked there, some only went to church there. But many of us found we could not enter this city as detached observers or even as enthusiastic volunteers prepared to help "the poor" or "the homeless." To treat people with dignity we must treat them not merely as our neighbors but as our brothers and sisters.

Since the retreat, participants have responded in a number of ways. Some are now planning career changes that bring them closer to urban and church ministry. One woman has reduced her work hours so she can spend more time volunteering and developing other interests. Some have found themselves less afraid of and less separate from the urban poor.

For myself, I plan to do volunteer work in urban ministry when my husband and I move to Cleveland later this summer. I hope eventually to do graduate studies in theology, and at some time in the future to work in pastoral ministry.

Corpus Christi held its second Heart of the City retreat in April, and is offering another starting July 5. Although it started as a retreat for Corpus parishioners only, the church is now opening the program up to the larger Christian community.

As Christians whose lives are filled with so much business and "busy-ness," we must find time occasionally to stop and evaluate whether we are really using our lives to love people as Christ commanded.

I believe it is in such times that the inner city can meet the outer city, and change can happen.

Reporter inspired to weigh ministry

A native of Akron, Ohio, Barbara Ballenger moved to Rochester in 1988 to work for the Rochester Times Union, where she is currently the reporter for city schools. She writes under her maiden name, Barbara Gerber.

After coming to Rochester, she and her husband eventually joined Corpus Christi Parish, where she sang for a time with the gospel group. The couple decided to participate in their first "Heart of the City" retreat in January, 1992.

This July, Ballenger and her husband are moving to Cleveland, Ohio, where he has received a fellowship at Case Western Reserve University to pursue graduate studies in history. She is planning to take some time off to look at various options, including a the possibility of writing for Cleveland's diocesan newspaper.

EDITORS' NOTE: For information on Heart of the City retreats, please write Jim Kamerman, 441 Winona Blvd., Rochester, N.Y. 14605, or call 716/266-7210.

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