



Aris Economopoulos/Photo Intern

Michael Theisen (left), the new coordinator of youth ministry for the Rochester diocese, and Steve Sickies, a 10th-grader at Churchville-Chili Senior High School, ride 'The Predator' during the diocese's Family Day at Darlen Lake Theme Park July 20.

## New youth coordinator stresses networking

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Michael Theisen prefers to remain realistic, yet optimistic, about his new diocesan position.

The 31-year-old Theisen began serving as the diocese's new coordinator of youth ministry on July 1. He takes over responsibilities previously held by three people — totalling 2.6 full-time positions — who were among recent staff cuts at the Pastoral Center, 1150 Buffalo Road.

"There was a question of whether the diocese was committed to youth, and I understand that," said Theisen. "All I know is that (the diocese) is very committed, or otherwise I wouldn't have taken this job."

The key to maintaining an effective office with less staff, he said, is to employ a successful networking system.

"I guess I see my role as being a minister to the youth ministers. I'd like to create a model, showing the ministers and parishes what youth ministry is all about," Theisen commented.

"If you've got a huge parish with a solid youth group, then they could be

like a big brother or big sister to a group at another parish that's just starting out," he added.

Theisen's approach certainly appeals to Andrea Record, coordinator of religious education and youth ministry at St. Dominic's Church, 6 Canandaigua St., Shortsville.

"The biggest need in the Finger Lakes and rural parishes, I feel, is that the youth groups haven't been real strong. Coming from a parish that hasn't had youth ministry, I need some innovative, creative ideas to build on," said Record, who has worked at St. Dominic's for one year.

To better maintain this type of communication system, Theisen said he plans to create an advisory committee comprising youths and adults.

He hopes that diocesan teens will use next year's World Youth Day as a focal point for many upcoming activities. That event, which is scheduled to include a visit from Pope John Paul II, will take place Aug. 11-15, 1993, in Denver, Colo.

"I'd like to see a year of evangelization prior to that," Theisen said.

While acknowledging that he might

have to spread himself fairly thin at times, Theisen emphasized that he still wants to make a strong attempt at getting to know as many diocesan youths as possible. In addition to meeting some teens during an outing at Darien Lake Theme Park July 20, he plans to organize and attend a number of youth retreats over the next several months.

At the root of Theisen's agenda lies one objective: motivating teens to remain active in the Catholic Church.

"The biggest way to keep youths, or anyone, involved is to create a community where they can come and feel welcome and nourished; where they can be invited to speak and be listened to," he said.

"Youths have so much energy, enthusiasm and pure spirit. They can really revitalize the community," Theisen added.

The new youth ministry coordinator moved to Rochester from Richmond, Va., where he had served since 1984 as coordinator of religious education and youth ministry at Church of the Epiphany. According to Theisen, his former parish has swelled from 250 to 2,000 families since its inception in

1979. The religious-education program, he said, totaled 1,700 children at the time of his departure.

"That job really taught me how to network," remarked Theisen, who earned bachelor's and master's degrees in social work from Virginia Commonwealth University. He also has a master's in religious education from Loyola University of New Orleans.

Theisen and his wife of eight years, Mary, originally eyed a move to Rochester two years ago when they became interested in Corpus Christ Parish, which places a strong emphasis on social action.

"We were looking for a faith community to lead us in our journey," said Theisen, whose wife is a native of the Rochester area.

The Theisens and their two sons — Christopher, 7, and David, 4 — have settled into a house on Alameda Street, on the city's northwest side.

He considers himself fortunate for finding a job in Rochester which so closely links his experience and faith.

"The fact that it all came together like this is really neat; I guess it was meant to be," he said.

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