

Ministry provides relief for Tioga County's poor

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

OWEGO — For its small-town setting, this office has all the hustle and bustle of a big-city corporation.

And, according to its director, life at the Tioga County Rural Ministry is especially hectic at holiday time.

"I want to go into the (office's) food cupboard and stay there until after Christmas," laughed Sister Noreen Graney, RSM.

Sister Graney explained that low-income residents of this Southern Tier county are frequently strapped in December, largely because they have already spent much of their regular earnings on Christmas gifts.

The ministry's director described one recent day's activities at her office:

"A man showed up at the St. Patrick's Church rectory looking for food, and he was sent to us. A mother, father and child also came in here looking for food," she said.

"Others came in to bring (donations of) food. We also have a pile of mittens and hats and gifts that we're putting in Christmas baskets; there's hardly any room to move. And the phone is ringing all the time," Sister Graney added.

Demands can be overwhelming, because those people the ministry serves frequently have nowhere else to turn.

The agency's newsletter, published six times per year, describes several actual cases handled by the ministry. Portions of the November, 1992, newsletter detailed a young couple with four children in search of food stamps; a woman who needed to borrow \$30 for a dental appointment as well as cab fare to get to the dentist's office; and a young woman working as a part-time waitress who sought assistance for her rent payment.

Publicizing these cases has proven effective in emphasizing the plight of those in need, said Sister Graney. "We always get an increase in donations the first couple of weeks after the newslet-



Sister Noreen Graney, RSM, (right), director of the Tioga County Rural Ministry, hands longtime volunteer Bernadette Moesch another food basket to fill at the ministry's Owego office Dec. 17.

ter comes out," she remarked.

Financial assistance is one of many ways in which the ministry serves Tioga County residents. The agency also provides emergency service from its food cupboard, as well as Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets.

Ministry staff and volunteers make regular visits to the sick and elderly. In addition, a group of about 60 students from the State University of New York College at Geneseo work in conjunction with the ministry by voluntarily performing home-improvement projects for Tioga County shut-ins.

The ministry, which began in 1978, was originally housed in St. Patrick's convent, 298 Main St., Owego, and rectory basement, 300 Main St. In 1988 the office moved to a larger facility, located in the center of the village, at 60 North Ave.

Sister Graney, who has served at Tioga County Rural Ministry since 1985, became the agency's director two years ago. Remaining staff members include Sister Pat Colla, RSM, and Joan Basel, a part-time worker.

This staff is buoyed by nearly 100 volunteers. Sister Graney emphasized that those connected with the ministry come from a variety of religious denominations.

"We get excellent support from the people in the area," she said.

Funding for the ministry is provided through the Sisters of Mercy as well as the five Roman Catholic parishes located in Tioga County: St. Margaret Mary, 1110 Pennsylvania Ave., Apalachin; St. James, 503 Clark St., Waverly; St. John the Evangelist, 24 Rock St., Newark Valley; St. Francis of Assisi, Route 96, Catatunk; and St. Patrick's.

These organizations contribute an annual total of \$15,000. The ministry also relies heavily on private donations.

Sister Graney reported that her office provided assistance totaling ap-



Bishop Matthew H. Clark visits with Mary Graham during a tour of Tioga County on Oct. 17, 1979.

proximately \$20,000 for the months of July, August and September of 1992.

Not only does the ministry try to help assist people in short-term situations, but it also offers counseling so that Tioga County residents can become more self-sufficient.

"We try to do something toward a permanent solution to their difficulty," Sister Graney remarked.

She noted that the people the agency assists are often an inspiration to her, especially those whose own generosity leads them to financial hardship.

"I constantly reflect on all the lessons they teach me," she said. "Without their knowing it, they're certainly following the precepts of Jesus. They share, and invite others to come into their homes. But we might find this impractical; we'd say they should have kept the money for themselves."

Most of those requesting financial assistance are lent money with the understanding that they pay it back as soon as possible. However, Sister Graney admitted, "repayment is not

real high."

On the other hand, ministry volunteer Sheila Fullerton noted that residents do occasionally show their appreciation.

"People are so grateful that they not only pay back the money they borrowed, but they ask if they can help in a particular way," said Fullerton.

One such example is Sharon Pond, an Owego resident and mother of four. She and her husband, Frank, first received assistance from the agency about four years ago.

"They can always point me in the right direction," said the 31-year-old Pond, who was just named to the ministry's advisory board in September. "They are always there to help."

Pond noted that, based on current economic conditions, the agency's services have become more invaluable than ever.

"Without help from the pantry, you'd have a lot of starving families — especially children, because they can't fend for themselves," Pond said.



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor
Volunteer Kathryn Guinan prepares food boxes for families who have signed up for assistance.

Merry Christmas
and
Happy New Year
from
Bill and Donna at
**HIDDEN MEADOWS
COMMUNITY**
7289 Lake Rd., Bergen, (716) 494-1424

Good Luck to
Fr. Robert Smith in
his new assignment
Ange & Carol Palermo
Red Creek, N.Y.

★ HOTELS ★ CAR RENTAL ★ PASSBOOK FARES ★ RESORTS ★
Best Wishes for a Happy Holiday
During the Holiday Season more than ever, our thoughts turn gratefully to those who have made our progress possible. And in this spirit we say, simply but sincerely... Thank You for choosing Jean Brown Travel.
We appreciate and need your business, and look forward to working with you in the coming year.
From Jean Brown & her staff
3220 Chill Ave. • 889-9090
★ TRAINS ★ WEEKEND SPECIALS ★ COMMERCIALS ★ GROUPS ★
ALL INCLUSIVE ★ CRUISES