

Churches, center reaching out to help women

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ing the threat of AIDS, not just prostitutes. In addition to prostitutes and female intravenous drug-users, wives and girlfriends of IV drug-users can be infected, they emphasized.

The center's flyer lists a host of services ranging from help for women raising children, dealing with gynecological problems and facing illnesses to information referrals for women with AIDS, addicted to drugs and struggling to make ends meet.

The idea for the center grew out of Jayne's experience at Mary's House, a residential AIDS program administered by Catholic Charities. She noted that her dream would be to build a referral network of church, government and community services for HIV-infected women and for their family members.

Jayne pointed out that she chose the name "Mary Magdalene" for the center because of what it means to her personally as an ex-prostitute — and because of what she hopes it will mean to women such as her who can identify with the woman Jesus publicly forgave.

"The compassion that Jesus had for her — the love and forgiveness — to put her name on the center makes it very special to me," Jayne said.

That compassion should be the hallmark of the Catholic Church's approach to prostitutes, asserted Dr. Bill Sullivan, professor of religious studies at St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Ave., Pittsford. Sullivan is parish council chairman at St. Anthony of Padua, 60 Lorimer St., which is located near the Lyell Avenue area.

Sullivan's ideals of what the church should do for prostitutes would probably clash with the vision the average Catholic has of his or her parish.

In Sullivan's view, churches should non-judgmentally welcome prostitutes by setting up drop-in centers where they can eat and talk — maybe even leave their children in day-care so they can go use drugs without leaving the children alone and at risk.

But he noted that even clergymen concerned about prostitution get antsy when the subject surfaces in public. At one of a number of ecumenical Christian services held monthly for prostitutes slain in the city in recent years, Sullivan offered a prayer for area women and children who were being abused and raped. A clergyman later remarked to him that such a prayer would be inappropriate in his church on a Sunday.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Anita Jayne (left) and Kathy Moore stand outside the newly opened Mary Magdalene House Women's Outreach Center, 206 Lyell Ave., Rochester. In addition to support for HIV-infected women and children, the center will provide a host of services for women facing adversity. The center is sponsored by the Greater Rochester AIDS Interfaith Network, better known as GRAIN.

Sullivan found such an attitude to be profoundly at odds with the Gospel.

"If we don't confront that in churches then religion is phony because these are the real problems we're dealing with," he asserted.

Sullivan dedicates a considerable amount of his own time to dealing with the real problems caused by prostitution. Through a program called "Reconciliation," operated out of St. Anthony Parish, Sullivan works with men who pay for sex in the Lyell Avenue area and get caught by the police.

After conviction, a judge may sentence a "john" to attend Reconciliation, comprising four sessions, between two and two-and-a-half hours long. The sessions emphasize the harm prostitution does to society and to the men and women engaged in it.

Sullivan knows that harm firsthand. He has witnessed prostitutes being beaten by their pimps and boyfriends, endured the noisy exchange of the trade in his neighborhood and consoled a neighbor whose house was struck by

stray bullets fired during an argument.

"The neighborhood's opposition to prostitution is not moralistic," he explained. "It's a matter of quality of life."

Nonetheless, Reconciliation sessions touch upon more than just how prostitution affects property values and how it can put men in danger of sexually transmitted diseases.

Sullivan and the program's other session leaders encourage the convicted johns to talk about what happened after their arrest, who bailed them out and how it affected their life.

The men are also encouraged to talk about their attitudes toward women — which more often than not are quite negative. The men view a film in which

prostitutes describe their lives. And through a card game exercise, they learn about their own attitudes toward prostitutes and the attitudes prostitutes have toward them.

"The male has contempt for the female," Sullivan said, "and the woman has contempt for them."

Such contempt makes the violence — and the rape — that surrounds prostitution much easier to understand, he noted.

Many prostitutes accept such abuse as their lot, he added, noting that the women are often the product of violent and sexually abusive homes from which they ran away at an early age. In such environments, they learned that approval from father-figures and other adults is gained through compliance with perverse demands.

"If prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, then child abuse predates prostitution," Sullivan opined.

Yet, the men who have gone through Reconciliation have taught Sullivan that many of the prostitute's customers suffer from similar feelings of skewed self-esteem as the women they exploit. Many such men have suffered disappointment or a loss of their youthful ideals, or have drifted into the john's life from a sense of emptiness in their own.

"There are men who are alone and who are angry about that," he noted. "My meetings with men indicate a need for groups of men to get together and talk about what it means to be a man," he added.

The convicted men come from all walks of life and neighborhoods, even from other countries, Sullivan said. Yet they are all poisoned by the same attitude, he explained.

"It's an outgrowth of sexism," Sullivan said, stating rhetorically: "I have a right to sex when I want it because I can pay for it."

EDITORS' NOTE: For information on Mary Magdalene House Women's Outreach Center, call 716/663-3816, 458-3816, or the Greater Rochester AIDS Interfaith Network at 889-8050.

Obituary

Sister Virginia O'Brien, SSJ, 79

ROCHESTER - Sister Virginia O'Brien, SSJ, a diocesan school teacher for more than five decades, died at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary on Friday, May 21, 1993. She was 79.

A native of Auburn, Sister Virginia was the daughter of the late John L. and Mary (Kinsella) O'Brien. She entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1931 from St. Mary's Parish, and later graduated from Nazareth Academy and Nazareth College.

Sister Virginia taught for 52 years in the following schools: Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady of Good Counsel, Rochester; St. Stephen, Geneva; St. Anthony and St. Mary, Elmira; St. Michael, Penn Yan; as a principal and teacher at St. Mary, Waterloo; St. Mary, Canandaigua; Immaculate Conception, Ithaca; and Blessed Trinity, Auburn.

Due to failing health, Sister Virginia

retired from Blessed Trinity in Auburn and moved to St. Joseph Convent Infirmary in 1988.

According to a statement from the order, "Sister Virginia was a dedicated teacher and was much loved and respected by all her students. She had a great love of life and a spirit of joy which she communicated to all."

Sister Virginia was predeceased by her brothers, Father William O'Brien, Donald M., John L. and Paul C. O'Brien. She is survived by two sisters, Mary Ann O'Brien of Waterloo, and Joan Keefe; two sisters-in-law; seven nieces and nephews; as well as her sisters in the congregation of St. Joseph.

A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated in the Motherhouse Chapel on Monday, May 24. Interment was in the Sisters' section of Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

Counselor dispels stereotypes

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Many prostitutes are simply continuing a lifestyle that began when a parent or guardian began sexually abusing them at an earlier age, she said.

Often, a prostitute is looking for the same kind of male approval in her customers that she received from an abusive father or male guardian, she explained. And many of the men who solicit prostitutes also lack a proper sense of how to relate to women, she added.

But apparently, the old stereotypes of prostitutes are alive and well as evidenced by the opposition Peters and Kalina faced when they proposed to open Rose Haven earlier this year on the 34-acre property of the Dominican sisters in Grand Rapids.

Rose Haven has been operating out of rented homes since it began in March of 1992. Sister Kalina, who lives with the women and is one of the program's developers, stated that she wanted to have more space and a permanent location for the shelter.

Scores of the surrounding neighbors signed a petition saying they opposed the plan, and the Grand Rapids Planning Commission ruled that a zoning variance would be required to open the shelter on the Dominicans' property. The commission said under current residential zoning the shelter did not

qualify. Peters explained that information sheets distributed by a neighborhood association illustrate many of the misconceptions people have about prostitutes. The fliers warned that the proposed shelter would lead to "intravenous needles on front lawns and pimps driving through the neighborhood."

About six weeks ago, Rose Haven's staff and the Dominicans made a mutual decision to no longer pursue locating a residence on the Dominicans' property, Peters said.

For Peters, the outcome was ironic because many of the residence's opponents told the Dominicans that they could put any kind of residence for women and children there that they wanted as long as it did not cater to ex-prostitutes.

To illustrate her sense of irony, she noted that a shelter for battered women — one of the alternatives suggested by Rose Haven's opponents — would be more likely to be visited by a violent spouse or ex-boyfriend than a shelter for former prostitutes.

"We've never had any pimps come to the houses," she said. "They can always go out and get another woman."

This article contains information from the Catholic News Service.