

St. Mary's forms heart of downtown

Parish Profile

St. Mary's,
Rochester



By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Zip codes.
Forty-eight of them.

All belonging to parishioners of St. Mary's Church, 15 St. Mary's Place.

When parishioners talk about St. Mary's diversity, they often mention the zip codes.

"People come from all over the county to come here," said Peggy Edwards, chairwoman of the parish council at St. Mary's which marked its 160th anniversary July 13.

What attracts people seems to be a variety of assets unique to St. Mary's.

Many parishioners noted that the church's musical groups make a good first impression on visitors.

"We've got one of the finest organists in the city," Joe Hofman said about Phillip Lioi, the parish organist.

The handbell choir is nothing to sneeze at, either. On Saturday, July 23, this choir, along with two parish vocal groups, will perform on the White House lawn, according to Helen Halligan, minister of music.

Music may be just the icing on the cake, however, since other parishioners insist that the church seems welcoming to anyone whether they're young, old, married, divorced or single.

"No one is a stranger," said Harold Hacker, a parishioner for 40 years. "They come here, and they are immediately welcome."

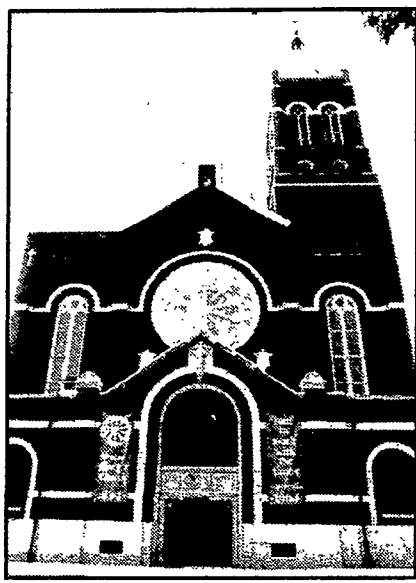
"We'll have a parish dinner," Edwards said, "and people will come, not because it's a parish function and they feel they should be there, but because they know it's going to be fun."

Mary Frances Collins echoed Edwards' sentiments, noting that she and her daughter, Maura, travel from Fairport just to attend St. Mary's services.

"There's a community feeling here," Collins said. "There's a commitment to downtown."

"It's worth the drive," Maura added. Hornell native Sandy Conway, a member of the parish since 1978, remarked that the parish staff has recently served as her emotional anchor.

"I've had two deaths in my family in the last few years," she said. "Each time,



Vital statistics

Name: St. Mary's Church
Location: 15 St. Mary's Place,
Rochester
Number of households: 730
Significant dates: Established
July 13, 1834; current church completed in 1858; school opened in 1857, closed in 1950; church renovated in 1987; Dugan Center completed in 1993.

members of the staff called me at home."

St. Mary's has been home to thousands of Catholics since it was founded by Irish immigrants who had left St. Patrick's Church — at that time the only Catholic church in town.

A group of immigrants purchased a former Methodist church on South Avenue, housing the new parish there. The current Romanesque St. Mary's Church was completed on South Street — now St. Mary's Place — in 1858.

About half the parish's current households are located within a few miles of the church, according to Sister Joan Sobola, SSJ. But, unlike most parishes which are surrounded by residences, the immediate area around St. Mary's constitutes a different kind of "neighborhood" — the business community of downtown Rochester.

Members of that community often attend St. Mary's daily worship services, and they began talking regularly with parish staff about current issues in the mid-1980s, Sister Sobola said. Out of those discussions emerged St. Mary's Community Forum. The forum eventually became the Downtown Community Forum, which features dozens of speakers, conferences and luncheons devoted to a variety of public and timely

topics.

Many DCF events take place in the Dugan Center, a lower-level meeting room completed in 1993 and financed by a bequest from the late Ray and Maybelle Dugan, parishioners for 60 years.

The parish often collaborates with other community groups, churches and organizations to sponsor DCF programs, Sister Sobola said.

The church's information booklet notes that DCF exists "to foster a better informed citizenry, to encourage active participation in community affairs and to emphasize the diverse human dimensions of the Rochester community."

Furthermore, the booklet says that the DCF "offers an open and free exchange of ideas in a community setting that is ecumenical, non-partisan, ethical and democratic."

DCF presenters have spoken on a wide range of issues, from the changing political climate in Eastern Europe to the use of humor in everyday life. The forum also hosts monthly Jewish-Christian dialogues and features talks on women's spirituality.

According to parishioners, the forum's organizers don't shy away from booking controversial speakers on issues like abortion or from tackling such complex topics as health care and education. Such an open-minded attitude characterizes the parish's goal in promoting the DCF, remarked Owen Crumb, a member of the DCF's advisory board.

"We don't try to solve problems, but we bring them to the attention of people who need to know about them," Crumb commented.

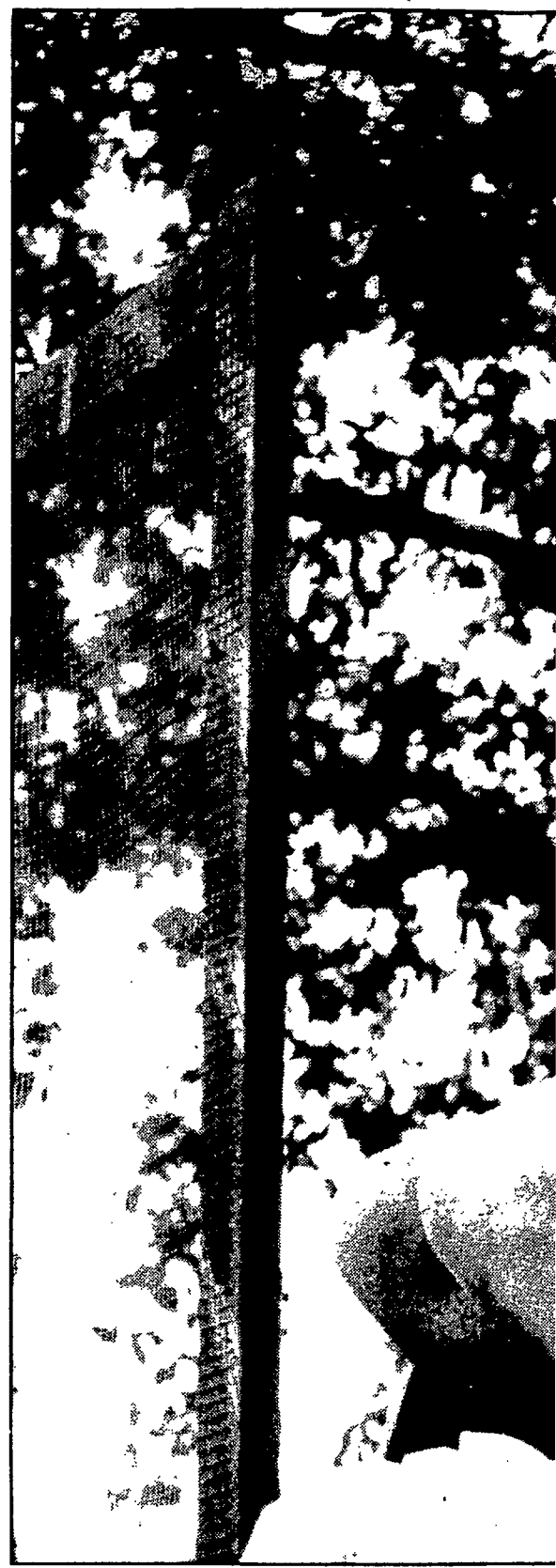
DCF events are frequently broadcast on local news radio stations, and DCF speakers are often featured on television and in the local newspapers.

The DCF has even received national attention as the subject of a 1991 article in *Church* magazine. St. Mary's was one of four parishes studied as a model of social action for other churches. The article labeled St. Mary's a "public church" that "builds bridges between parishioners' faith and their lives as workers, citizens and consumers."

Long before it began hosting the DCF, St. Mary's was a church that tried to meet the community's needs. A cursory glance at the parish's history reveals a continual commitment to the needs of city inhabitants.

In the parish's early years, the Sisters of Mercy operated a "House of Mercy" for the "protection of distressed women of good character" who had suffered from the Depression of 1857.

"The women were provided with sustenance and asked to help with domes-



Parishioners of Rochester's St. Mary's Church picnic on June 26. Featuring the games for children, music, antique cars and Coffey, who volunteered for dunking-booth d-

tic chores in return," according to a parish history completed in 1984 by Gerald Muhl and Father Charles Bennett. "They were never considered servants of the sisters. They were treated as individuals training for better jobs when times improved."

The House of Mercy later featured an employment office, the history noted, where "the elite of Rochester came ... to find a maid, housekeeper or ship clerk."

The parish history recorded numer-



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