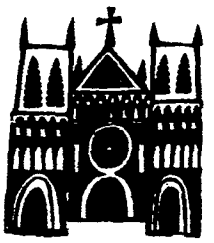


# Finger Lakes parish community opens its arms

## Parish Profile

St. Gabriel's,  
Hammondsport



By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

**HAMMONDSPORT** — It doesn't matter whether you're a year-round resident or summer inhabitant, or even if you're just staying for the weekend.

Upon entering St. Gabriel's Church, you immediately become accepted as part of the community.

This sense of welcoming is advocated by people such as Marion French, who has been a St. Gabriel's parishioner since she and her husband, John, were married there in 1950.

"There's something about St. Gabriel's that seems to draw us and hold us. I look around and I see familiar faces, and I get a feeling of comfort and family," remarked French. "But then I see new faces and I hope whatever it is about St. Gabriel's that has kept us here, we can share it with these people so that they stay."

Sister Anne Michelle McGill, SSJ, who became pastoral administrator this past June, has placed a heavy emphasis on spreading the parish's warmth to those people who attend St. Gabriel's only while they vacation for the summer on Keuka Lake.

"We call them summer parishioners, not visitors," explained Sister McGill. "We ask them to sign a card so that we can stay in touch with them the whole year."

These temporary residents comprise a large majority of St. Gabriel's congregations at this time of year. Sister McGill estimates that an average of 150 people attend each of three weekend Masses during the summer; however, in this parish of approximately 125 families, the number is significantly less when the snow flies.

"If we have 40 or 50 at a Mass, we're doing well," commented Marilynne Eckel, a St. Gabriel parishioner for the past 46 years.

While congregation sizes fluctuate with the seasons, the church building has been a mark of stability in this Steuben County village resting on the southern end of Keuka Lake, in the heart of Finger Lakes wine country.

Located at the corner of Sheather and Church streets, St. Gabriel has been



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer  
Sister Anne Michelle McGill, SSJ, (left), pastoral administrator at St. Gabriel's Church, and Marilynne Eckel, a parishioner for the past 46 years, pose in the Hammondspport church.

housed at its current site since 1885 — approximately 27 years after the parish was founded as a member church of the Buffalo diocese.

A fire ravaged the church in 1908, and a new structure was built the following year. Another mishap occurred in 1935, when, according to John French, a flood which swept through the village caused extensive damage to the church.

Yet the flood did not deter from the church's appearance which has remained largely unchanged over the past several decades.

"It looks especially pretty now," Marion French remarked.

Although the building remains the same, those who attend St. Gabriel's have endured a number of changes in recent years.

In fact, St. Gabriel's is experiencing a development that no other parish in the Rochester diocese has yet encountered: Sister McGill has become the first lay parish administrator in diocesan history.

Her appointment was brought on by the departure of Father Gerard J. McMahon, who vacated his pastorate at St. Gabriel's in October of 1993 when he transferred to the Diocese of Scranton,

Pa.

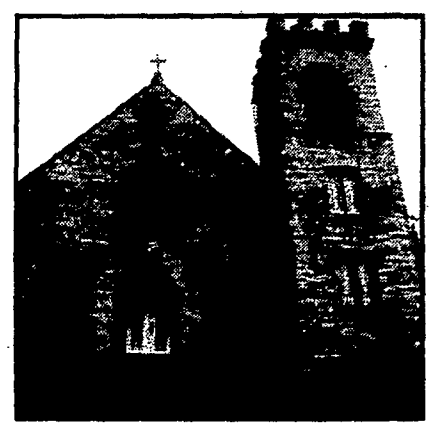
Over the ensuing months, temporary priest administrators filled in at St. Gabriel's while diocesan officials struggled to find a replacement due to the ongoing priest shortage.

A typical solution to this dilemma in recent years has been to cluster with another parish. Yet the St. Gabriel parish council instead voted in January to remain a separate entity, and to hire a pastoral administrator.

Tied into this change was the ending of St. Gabriel's affiliation with St. Patrick Church in Prattsburg, which had been St. Gabriel's mission for 114 years. St. Patrick's is now clustered with St. Januarius Church in Naples.

In her role at St. Gabriel's, Sister McGill performs all the pastor's functions except for sacramental duties. Most weekend Masses are celebrated by Father Robert W. Hammond, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Bath.

Since her arrival two months ago, Sister McGill has made a concerted effort to familiarize herself with the community. In addition to the information cards for summer residents, she has emphasized face-to-face contact with all parishioners.



## SNAPSHOTS

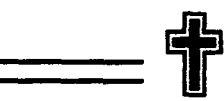
**Name:** St. Gabriel Church  
**Address:** 78 Sheather St., Hammondspport  
**Significant dates:** Founded 1848; church moved to its current location in 1885; church rebuilt in 1909 after fire destroyed original edifice.

"My first priority was to get to know the people," she said. "I've set aside two nights per week so they can come in and talk."

Several other projects been started at St. Gabriel's since Sister McGill assumed pastoral-administrator duties. The first parish festival in several years was held on Aug. 20; a parish census will take place in September; and the religious-education program is being updated.

Activities such as these will require an increased amount of lay input, which Eckel views as a positive step.

"I don't think we've utilized the talent we have," said Eckel, who performs several volunteer duties within the parish. "Now is the time to draw on those people."



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