

DIOCESAN NEWS

GRCC

Continued from page 5

needs have surfaced. "Almost any public issue that came along, we had a group that studied it," noted Rev. Lawrence Witmer, who served as the organization's executive director from 1976 until June of this year.

"It has consistently been or provided an arena for collaboration, planning and program development by the churches," Rev. Witmer continued. "It's been a symbolic center of community life. It has provided a door to the Christian community."

GRCC began as an outgrowth of the ecumenical movement that had led to Christians collaborating on social issues and ultimately to the establishing of the national Council of Churches in 1908.

The local federation was established

in 1919 with 53 member churches. At its height in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the organization had some 275 member churches, Rev. Witmer said.

During the 1960s, racial unrest led to problems for the organization, noted Rev. Harrison Williams, who is helping with the anniversary celebration.

GRCC became directly involved in efforts by the FIGHT organization to challenge Eastman Kodak Company and Xerox Corporation's hiring practices.

"Some saw it as an improper activity for religious groups," Rev. Williams observed.

Consequently, some churches quit the organization and the loss of their financial support forced staff reductions.

A second factor affecting the organization in the 1960s was the Rochester diocese's increasing involvement as a result of the Second Vatican Council's call for ecumenism. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen

encouraged such efforts, and Monsignor Charles Boyle even became a member of the organization's board of directors.

Bishop Sheen's successor, Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, pushed for the organization's restructuring so that denominations, rather than individual churches, could seek membership. Upon heeding this suggestion, the organization's name was changed to Genesee Ecumenical Ministries. The late Father Henry A. Atwell served as the organization's first executive director from 1972-74.

Rev. Witmer noted that the denominational structure did cause problems, however, in part because it provided little if any room for small churches and church-related organizations. The organization's recent restructuring in 1991 allowed denominations, individual churches and church-sponsored organizations to join. GRCC currently has 120 organizations as members, including the

Rochester diocese and several Roman Catholic parishes.

Margery Nurnberg, who served as GRCC's president for two years and who has been involved with the organization since 1978, noted that GRCC paved the way for improved understanding and cooperation between the Catholic Church and various Christian denominations.

"It has had an impact on every single person in the Diocese of Rochester," Nurnberg said in a telephone interview from her Elmira home.

GEM and GRCC helped to promote awareness that "Christianity is wider than any denominations, the work on behalf of the poor is much bigger than any one denomination," Nurnberg concluded.

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EDITORS' NOTE: Tickets for the banquet cost \$20 for adults, \$15 for youths. For tickets or information about the banquet, contact GRCC at 716/254-2570.

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