

Healing

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kinds of therapies, and they're all very good," the deacon suggested.

"Talk to clergy, and then do the referrals. A lot of times you just need somebody to talk to," added Father Connor.

Yet Father Connor pointed out that many people initially balk at the thought of coming forward with their personal difficulties.

"The mind-set is, 'I'll do this on my own,'" he said.

The Elmira priest added that this attitude can become even more prevalent at the holidays because people assume

that a priest, for instance, is too busy with additional Masses and such. "They say, 'I don't want to disturb Father,'" he commented.

As Deacon Doyle noted, however, priests and ministers aren't the only options for those in distress. For example, approximately 10 percent of diocesan Catholic parishes offer Stephen Ministries, in which trained lay parishioners provide emotional support.

In Apalachin, Legault serves as Alzate's Stephen minister. Alzate's husband, Delfin, also copes with the loss of the couple's son through his own Stephen minister at St. Margaret Mary Church.

Alzate said she's thankful for Stephen Ministry "because I can't talk to my husband or family. They're going through

the same thing."

The Corning-based Transitions — Counseling for Healthy Living service handles a large volume of cases related to substance abuse. Many of these clients, Denenberg pointed out, don't actually begin to experience their severest holiday blues until January.

"A lot of times they get through the holidays and crash afterward," said Denenberg. "If anybody has had a predisposition toward substance abuse, it's likely that soon after, you'll go into it again."

Nancy Rosen, executive director of the Ithaca-based Suicide Prevention Crisis Service, also handles several situations that surface soon after Christmas and New Year's Day have passed.

"There is a certain kind of (holiday)

magic that people can get into," said Rosen. "They can pretend ... they can keep themselves going. Then it ends, and they have to face reality."

Similarly, Deacon Doyle reported that the influx of Matt Talbot clients "slows down" in December, but in January and February "we get a tremendous flow."

It becomes quickly obvious, then, that the best way to combat these problems is to address them before holiday pressures emerge.

Denenberg targets the need to "start working early on the issues so that people aren't in denial." This requires focusing attention on the subject matter as early as the end of October and running right through February, she said.

Rosen said that defining clients' "realistic expectations within their own personality" ahead of time, and developing a course of action based on those conclusions, can often restore a positive spirit to the holidays.

"If you can self-define what's important instead of trying to fit into the Norman Rockwell picture ... you may not get invited to 15 parties, but you may have one or two friends that you could make a special gift for," Rosen remarked.

Denenberg noted that Transitions helps clients "understand their reality, and that can make the holidays more meaningful for themselves once they've accepted that. Then they can move on and make choices — maybe they don't want to visit their alcoholic parents, or maybe they only want to spend 10 minutes," she said. "They'll also link with various support groups which have activities."

One such organization is Finger Lakes Social Ministry, which sponsored a Thanksgiving dinner in Lyons Nov. 10 and has scheduled another in Waterloo Nov. 25. Both events are intended for people who are separated or widowed.

"Some people have no immediate family, or their children are scattered all over the United States, or the family doesn't get along," explained organizer Carl Ritz (see story page 18).

In addition to the Thanksgiving meals, Finger Lakes Social Ministry and the Greater Canandaigua Region Widowed Persons Support Group held a Nov. 5 seminar titled, "Handling the Holidays," in which participants shared statements or poetry which have helped them through past holiday seasons.

This type of therapeutic community spirit can also be brought out, Rosen suggested, by performing outreach at holiday time as well as receiving help.

"Rather than focus on yourself, focus on someone who doesn't have any means," said Rosen. "Spend an hour with that person."

Deacon Doyle recalled that six Matt Talbot clients followed that thinking last year by volunteering to serve Christmas dinner at various outreach services in Rochester, such as the Open Door Mission. Their motivation, the deacon said, was that they could identify with the lonely feelings some of the patrons may have been experiencing.

"They came back and said it was the best Christmas they'd ever had," Deacon Doyle remarked.

Ritz to continue 'listening' in retirement

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

During a bus trip across the country in the early 1980s, Carl Ritz earned a title among his fellow travelers.

"We got to be almost a community," Ritz recalled. "I was the 'confessor.'"

So when fellow travelers and people he met along the way needed a friendly ear, they turned to Ritz — including one man in Salt Lake City who had just returned from his wife's funeral.

"We spent the whole day talking," Ritz said. "We must have drank 10 gallons of coffee."

For the past 12 years, Ritz has had the opportunity to consume a lot more coffee with people — both one-on-one and in support groups — as a program developer and then as coordinator of Finger Lakes Social Ministry's Separated, Divorced, Bereaved Program.

Ritz is retiring from his position Nov. 18, but he will hardly be leaving his ministry. He said he plans to remain active with many of the groups he has fostered, helping people to deal with the loss of jobs or loved ones. Indeed, Ritz acknowledged, it would be difficult for him not to be involved with the hurting in some way.

"Some people get energized by people, some people get discharged by people," Ritz explained. "People energize me."

Ritz joined Finger Lakes Social Ministry after 25 years with the YMCA, where he had served in a variety of counseling and administrative posts — including executive director.

Ritz explained that he decided to leave the organization because he believed it was evolving into a "health club," while he was more interested in working directly with people. After leaving the agency, the Staten Island native earned a master's degree in adult counseling from Vermont College, worked for a time at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester, and with an organization called Talent Bank Associate.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Although Carl Ritz, coordinator of Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry's Separated, Divorced, Bereaved Program, is retiring Nov. 18, he says he will continue to remain active with many of the groups he has fostered.

He joined Finger Lakes Social Ministry in 1982 as program developer to assess needs in the Finger Lakes region. Ritz found that one of those needs was support for separated, divorced and bereaved people. Subsequently, he became the coordinator of the Catholic Charities office's ministry to people hurting in some way.

Bolstered by Ritz's support and assistance, some 25 support groups have been established in the five counties served by Finger Lakes Social Ministry. These groups offer support to people who are grieving over the loss of a loved one, who are depressed about losing a job, or who are experiencing anxiety due to separation or divorce.

Ritz noted that this ministry has operated with some basic assumptions.

"We don't have a lot of answers, we do a lot of listening," Ritz said. "We try to get a sense of 'Do you have a church or parish home?' This last thing is so important, to have the back up of clergy and professional people."

These support groups, Ritz noted, provide peer support, not diagnoses

by professionals.

"We try to be as much hands-on and try to connect people (with professional support)," Ritz explained. "One of our jobs is to be a kind of conduit to help people find places where they can get help."

Ironically, Ritz himself has not felt many of the losses experienced by those he has helped over the years. He has been married to his wife, Dorothy, for "40-plus years." The couple have four adult children — a son and three daughters — now living on their own.

But Ritz said experiencing a particular kind of loss is not a prerequisite for dealing with such emotions.

"The key is empathy," Ritz said.

Ritz said he looks forward to continuing to share empathy in the years ahead.

"I really feel it's a ministry," Ritz concluded. "It's not a job."

EDITORS' NOTE: Finger Lakes Social Ministry has scheduled a recognition gathering for Ritz Dec. 2. For details, contact the office at 315/789-2686.

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