

Christmas FEATURE

Church Women United heeds call year-round

By Kathleen Schwar Freelance writer

The wish for peace motivates Church Women United year-round, as it has since the war-torn Christmas season of 1941.

"We don't party and we're not a party group," said Sally Dodgson, an American Baptist and president of Church Women United in Rochester and the Vicinity, Inc.

The Pearl Harbor attack in 1941 determined Church Women United's theme. The group was organizing nationally at the time to perform services ecumenically that could not be done by one church.

Official Roman Catholic involvement in the organization came about after Vatican II. (A local historical sketch notes, however, "An early ecumenical event occurred in 1942 when Christmas carols were sung in the New York Central railroad station with Roman Catholic women.")

Today, peace and justice concerns keep the organization's women - and men - active in several units around the diocese (there are 96 units throughout New York).

- monitors courts.
• educates and advocates for housing and the environment.
• runs food cupboards.
• assembles care kits for prisoners.
• and visits homes of truant children to help increase school attendance.

Rochester's unit is the only one in the state outside New York City with a paid staff - a secretary and administrative coordinator - and office, 17 S. Fitzhugh St.

But the work is done "way too quietly" and only with a few Roman Catholics, according to Barbara Hoffman, a parishioner at Rochester's Ss. Peter and Paul Parish.



Sally Dodgson, an American Baptist, is president of Church Women United in Rochester and Vicinity Inc.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

...odic notices and perhaps by making presentations to interested groups and individuals.

Hoffman was drawn to CWU through her work downtown, rehabilitating buildings in the West Main Street area. The organization's people are understanding and open-minded, she said.

Catholic women's participation in CWU is continuing

to grow across the country. It is notable in units such as Elmira's, where Margery Nurnberg, former director of the diocesan Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, is active.

"I think they are looking for a place to be ecumenical. Some are looking for a different way of expression they aren't getting in their churches," Martin said.

One highly regarded project is the Rochester-area CWU's Task Force on Courts, begun 25 years ago out of black ministers' concern for fairness.

Programs most often develop in collaboration with other groups. "Our women are more conceptual, really pioneers in getting things started," Martin said.

Ken Glingler of Irondequoit's St. Andrew's Church is one of a few men who have heard the call to CWU, thanks to his wife, Lucille.

The 25 observers attend court procedures and report findings in a newsletter. "Some judges said, 'If you want to do some good, go help the Red Cross,' or something like that," recalled Susan Soper.

But others have expressed appreciation. Results include clearer and more audible proceedings, more efficient handling of DWI cases, and stopping one town court's practice of routinely reducing charges of speeding and disobeying stop signs to littering charges.

The project is just one reason for Hoffman's commitment. "What can one do to be inclusive with other people, to collaborate, to give hope, to be kind, to care? Church Women United does all of those things," she said.

To find out more about Church Women United, write CWU in Rochester and Vicinity, Inc., 17 S. Fitzhugh St., Rochester, N.Y. 14614-1488, or call 716/454-1813. The organization will hold its annual meeting in Rochester on Jan. 20.



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