

CONTINUED...

Christians

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gularly on social ministry projects — such as Thanksgiving or Christmas baskets — or to foster joint service projects.

For example, St. Stephen's Episcopal and St. Augustine's Catholic parishes in Rochester worked together to create Elisha House, a home for the terminally ill.

And St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Mendon is working with Mendon Presbyterian Church and St. Mark Lutheran Church to create Benin Casa, a home for the dying.

In the Finger Lakes area, Catholics and other Christian groups worked together to create and support the Rushville Clinic, and in Geneva the community lunch program and the Center of Concern.

The church as a whole began to be actively involved in ecumenism following the Second Vatican Council and its 1964 Decree on Ecumenism.

In recent years, Pope John Paul II has repeatedly made greater unity of Christians a goal for the church as the millennium nears — and has dedicated himself toward achieving that end.

The pope specifically set greater Christian unity as a goal in his 1994 blueprint for the last years of the 20th century, "As the Third Millennium Draws Near."

"Among the most fervent petitions which the church makes to the Lord during this important time," he wrote, "as the eve of the new millennium approaches, is that unity among all Christians of the various confessions will increase until they

reach full communion."

The following year, the pope reiterated that theme in his encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* ("That All May Be One"). In it, he acknowledges that the Catholic Church has made mistakes in the past in the ways it has related to other churches and pointedly declares "that, in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, Christians of one confession no longer consider other Christians as enemies or strangers but see them as brothers and sisters."

He added that while churches differ in a number of areas, "There is an increased awareness that we all belong to Christ."

In light of this awareness, Christians are moving toward greater unity, and, the pope hopes, toward "full and visible communion."

The exact nature of the "communion" is yet to be determined, but the work is well underway, noted Brother Jeffrey Gros, FSC, associate director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, during a telephone interview from his Washington, D.C. office.

Currently, Brother Gros said, the Catholic Church is formally talking with a number of Christian denominations about full communion, including Eastern Orthodox churches, the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The church is also talking with a number of other Christian denominations about ways to work together.

Christians have begun moving toward unity by finding what they share in common — such as the basic articles of faith contained in the Nicene and Apostles'



creeds, Brother Gros noted. Many churches have also reached consensus on such areas as baptism, and thus recognize the validity of the sacrament when it is administered through a different church.

The pope noted that a key to Christian unity is prayer, Brother Gros observed.

"The core of the ecumenical movement is prayer," he said. "Prayer for our own change of heart, prayer for the renewal of our church, prayer for dialogue with other churches for deeper understanding, and to search for the common truth of the Gospel. It's a fundamental change of attitude that's called for."

This "change in attitude" is something that began at local levels across the world, noted Brian McNulty, a permanent deacon who heads the Diocese of Rochester's Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. And the diocese has been witness to many such efforts.

"One of the things that happened is

that people saw we could do social service together, and we've done that well," McNulty said, citing such efforts as homeless shelters, soup kitchens and food pantries. "We did the service, but we didn't do the prayer and dialogue locally."

One attempt to help foster dialogue locally is an informal ecumenical group that has recently begun meeting to study *Ut Unum Sint*.

"The purpose in gathering these people is to take John Paul II at his word," observed Msgr. William Shannon, a member of the group. "He said, 'I can't do this by myself. I need your help.'"

The monsignor praised the encyclical for its positive, joyful and honest tone — and noted that the pope used the word "dialogue" some 74 times.

One of the issues the pope raises in the document — and indeed, one of the key issues in the ecumenical discussion — is the primacy of the pope.

"Primacy can be simply a place of honor," Msgr. Shannon said. "It can mean someone who leads in charity. It can also mean the Bishop of Rome is the one who finally expresses the faith of the church."

"If you look at the Scriptures, there is no question that there is a special place of honor given to Peter," Msgr. Shannon continued. But the various Christian churches have a different understanding of the nature of "primacy," he noted. Thus the group hopes to develop a report to be sent to the pope detailing their own understanding of the concept.

Brother Gros pointed out that discussions of the nature of papal primacy are going on at national and international levels, such as in ongoing discussions between Catholics and Lutherans.

The eventual goal, as the pope has stated, is full communion, Brother Gros acknowledged. But disagreements over a number of issues — such as holy orders — need to be resolved.

Thus while the pope and the church are urging greater efforts toward unity, there is at the same time a desire not to hurry too much, Brother Gros cautioned.

Nevertheless, he said, "We have a great deal to be grateful for in terms of the progress."

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MISSION NEWS

On Christmas Eve, 1932, two missionary priests baptized the first 12 members of the Church in Wa in northwest Ghana. Today, just a little more than 12 decades later, Catholics in Wa number 156,00 or 24% of the total population.

†Anselm Bemile was in one of the first baptism classes in the area. Later, he would become a catechist in the Wa Diocese and the father of eight, including a son, Paul, who is today Wa's newest bishop.



†"As I look back, I see the finger of God at work in my life," Bishop Paul Bemile said. "I also see God's work being accomplished in me and the whole diocese through the Propagation of the Faith. It is the Propagation of the Faith which is at the very heart of the growth of the church here, and which helps it continue to grow. I rely on those who so faithfully support the Propagation of the Faith for the future growth and evangelization of this vibrant local church."



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