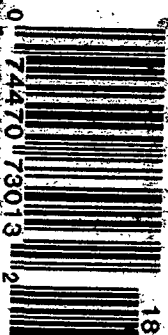


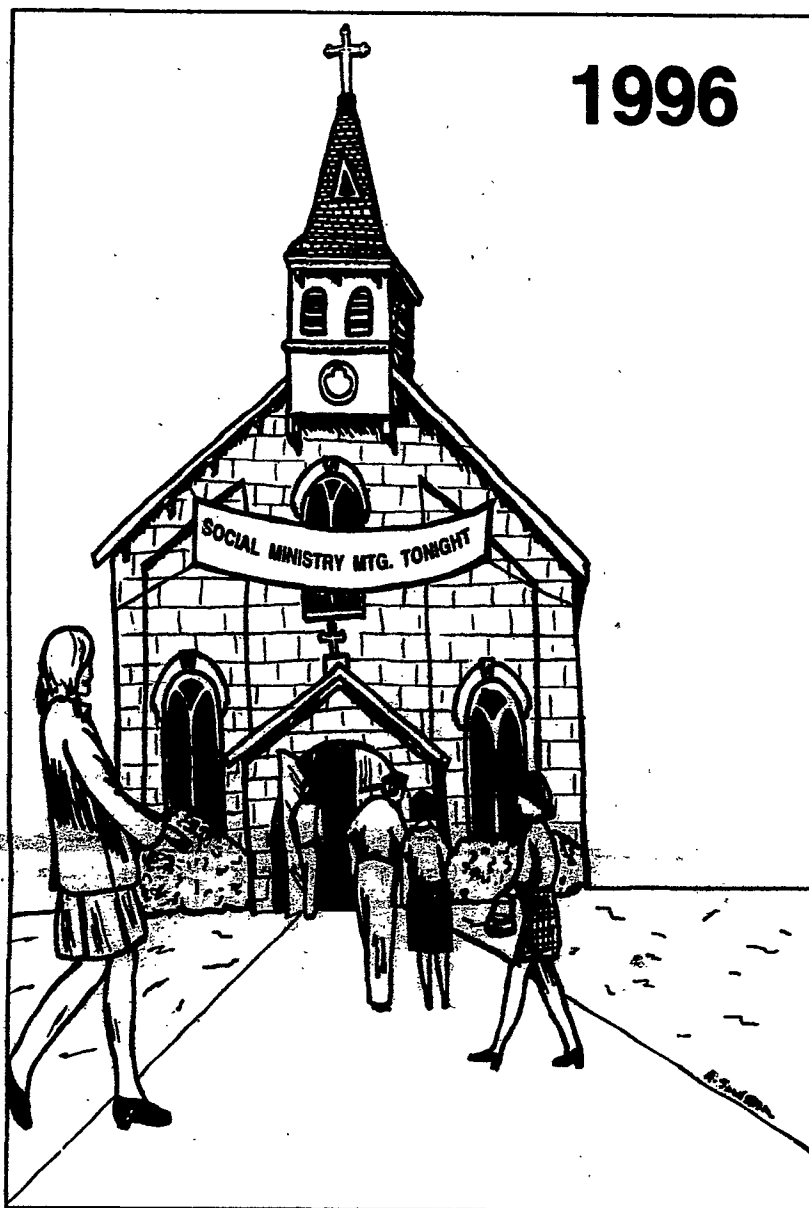
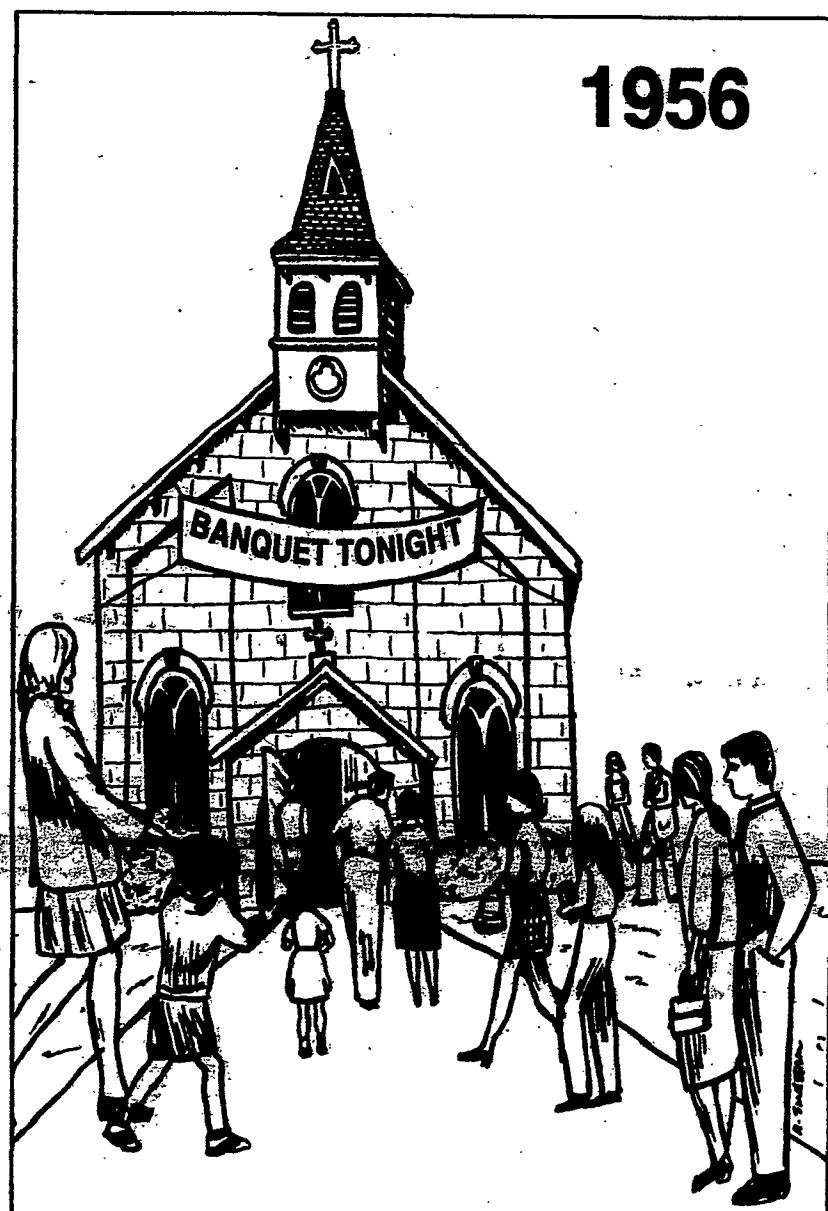
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Where Are They Now?



Modern parishes' social emphasis shifts from large numbers to diverse ministries

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Think of the biggest and best social outings you've attended. Lots of dancing and laughter. People packed into the doorways.

To many younger Catholics, it may come as a complete shock that these events could take place at a Catholic church.

Yet in the 1950s, one of the hottest spots in Rochester was Immaculate Conception Church. Friday-night youth dances, coordinated by the late Father George S. Wood, regularly drew crowds exceeding 1,000.

"That was the place to be on a Friday night. Kids from all over the city, of all religions, came to those dances," recalled Father Edward A. Zimmer, assistant pastor at Immaculate Conception from 1949 to 1956. "I still meet people all the time who say to me, 'I remember the Immaculate dances. That's where my husband and I met.'"

Parish gatherings at the turn of the century were even more massive, observed Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, pastoral associate at St. Mary's Church of Rochester. She noted that in 1895, a St. Mary's parish picnic attracted 10,000 people to Ontario Beach Park in Charlotte.

In addition to picnics and dances, the parish filled other important needs for Irish, German, Italian and Polish immigrants of the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s. Parish-based schools, credit unions and bowling lanes helped provide havens for parishioners who

might experience language barriers and prejudice in other social settings.

"The church was *everything* for people. It had a heavy responsibility toward socialization," remarked Father Robert T. Werth, pastor of Rochester's Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward.

Yet that was also an era that predated television, computers, ethnic assimilation and mass migration to suburbs. Now, as we approach the year 2000, Father Werth noted that a changing society has led to a very different Catholic Church.

The European ethnic groups, he acknowledged, "are now part of the fabric of American society and no longer need the church for socialization or education. We can go to the theater or the YMCA, or move to the suburbs."

However, Father Zimmer suggested that these societal developments have had negative effects on parishes — and their parishioners as well.

"I wonder if we've become so isolated from one another that by staying with entertainment we enjoy alone, it's cut into our interpersonal relations. When the Immaculate (Conception) dances started, television didn't exist," said Father Zimmer, now a retired priest who assists at Rochester's St. John the Evangelist Church on Humboldt Street.

"The church was the center of a social gathering, and for better or for worse, TV came along and kept people home," Father Zimmer continued. "On the one hand it kept the family home together, but social outreach took

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