

FEATURE

Northern Cayuga Cluster shares faith and talents

Parish Profile

Northern Cayuga Cluster

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

WEEDSPORT — Howard and Helen Finley have seen — and helped implement — a lot of changes since 1938, when they came to Weedsport, Cayuga County.

Among the biggest change was when St. Joseph's Church, with St. Patrick's Church in Cato and St. John's Church in Port Byron, formed the Northern Cayuga Cluster.

That was 10 years ago under former pastor, Father George Wiant. Now, Howard Finley said, "I think it's a pretty satisfactory organization.

"Father George Wiant is one of those people who can sell ice blocks to Eskimos. He brought it together," chuckled Finley, St. Joseph's historian.

"I'm not aware of any great opposition to the cluster," he quickly added. "I think George Wiant (now pastor of St. Patrick's Church, Victor) deserves the credit for it. He's a wonderful organizer. "The thing I perhaps like best about it is the interrelationships among the people of the three communities," Finley continued. "I think it has brought these folks closer together. It's given us a chance to know people from Port Byron and Cato we'd never known before."

One can learn the cluster's daily Mass schedule by following the Finleys around. They are the oldest parishioners at St. Joseph's — Helen gladly offers that she's six months older than Howard, who will turn 95 in December. Yet on Tuesday they attend St. Joseph's, on Wednesday St. Patrick's, on Thursday St. John's, and Friday St. Joseph's again.

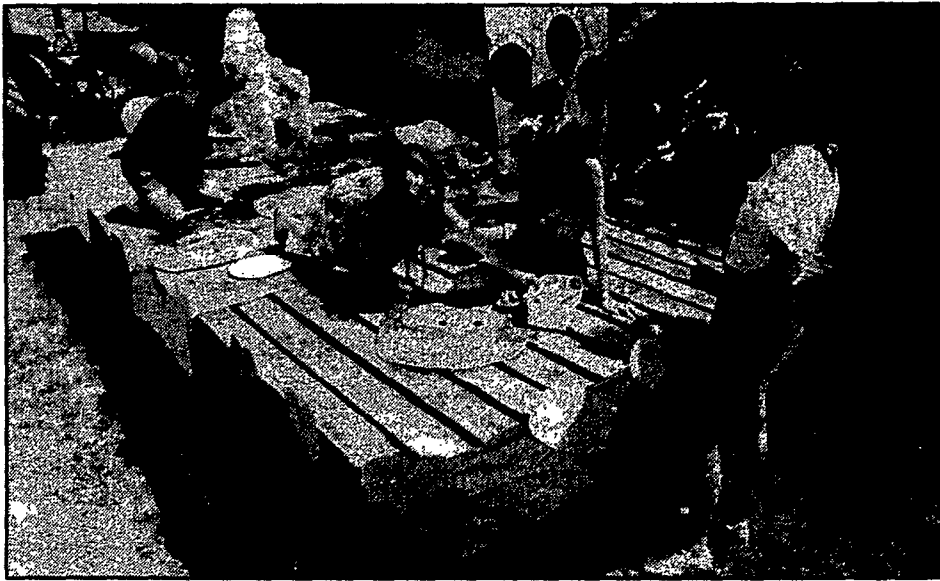
What Finley admits to liking least, however, is the fact with one priest serving three churches, that priest can't get around as often to parishioners' homes for such luxuries as a friendly dinner.

The cluster is currently administered by Father William B. Leone, pastor. The parishes share a religious education coordinator, Walter B. Sheehan, and pastoral assistant, Sister Virginia M. Taylor, RSM.

Although parishioners may feel regrets about the pastor's availability for dinners, they need only look to the parishes' pasts to see how far they have come.

Back in the early 1800s, Weedsport-area Catholics often would not see a priest for months or even years, according to the "History of St. Joseph's Church and the Catholic Church in Cayuga County, N.Y." compiled by Father Charles J. Bruton, just before leaving Weedsport in 1928. People journeyed to Albany — by horseback, stagecoach or wagons — to have their children baptized.

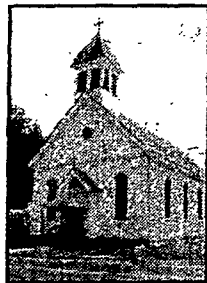
Services were conducted almost anywhere along the Erie Canal, "in the largest



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

From left, Suzanne Burnett, Brandi Burnett, Carrie Howell, William Burnett, Danielle Howell and Janine Howell build a float to represent St. John's Church, Port Byron, in the Port Byron Canal Days Parade to be held Aug. 2. The three parishes of the Northern Cayuga Cluster donated the materials to make the float.

SNAPSHOTS



St. John's Church



St. Patrick's Church



St. Joseph's Church

Northern Cayuga Cluster
2667 Hamilton St.
Weedsport, N.Y. 13166
315/834-6266

St. John's Church
Rochester Street Port Byron

St. Patrick's Church
Main Street, Cato

St. Joseph's Church
111 S. Seneca St., Weedsport

Cluster ministerial staff

Pastor:

Father William B. Leone

Religious education coordinator:

Walter B. Sheehan

Baptismal ministry:

Deacon John Tomandl

Pastoral associate:

Sister Virginia M. Taylor, RSM

Cluster secretary:

Irene Hathaway

workmen's shanty or in the nearest town hall," the history noted.

In fact, St. Joseph's first building was called the "Shanty Church." It was a small, rough-boarded structure whose exterior was never painted and interior never finished.

By 1865, St. John's was begun in Port Byron; by 1875, St. Patrick's, in Cato. "Clustering" wasn't anything new to St. Patrick's in the 1980s, Sister Taylor noted. A century earlier it had St. Thomas Church in Red Creek as a mission church.

Concerned about the current priest shortage, the cluster in the last two years has brainstormed to help lessen the load on their priest. They forwarded their ideas to Bishop Matthew H. Clark, who scheduled a visit with them Aug. 10-11.

"It really got people thinking," noted Eileen Cichello, who was on the cluster council during discussion of those plans. "One thing we talked about was what laypeople could do that priests do."

At the same time, noted Mary Degnan, parishioners have always had to take on responsibility for church projects. Parish-

ioners are actively involved in social ministry, parish board work, visitation to the homebound, small faith communities, religious education, various support groups, and more.

Yet to encourage even more participation, the cluster undertook a recent "time-talent-treasure" recruiting effort. Such efforts may at least prepare people that things are changing in the church "and maybe to be more alert to stepping in and helping," Cichello said.

For instance, parishioners began taking Communion regularly to the Evergreen Heights adult facility in Weedsport.

Cichello also chairs the Lifelong Formation Committee, which provides an umbrella for several church activities.

Last winter, the committee surveyed parishioners at Masses to help determine their interests. From that, the committee is hoping to form a cluster library to loan out videos as well as books. It also sponsored a mission and plans to do so every two years. This fall it plans sessions on, "How Adults Pray."

"If we do it right, we'll be meeting peo-

ple's needs," Cichello said. "Their lives are frantic today." Despite such "frantic lives," however, nearly 80 parishioners meet in 10 small Christian community groups, now in their third consecutive year.

"The emphasis on faith sharing is critical, and is harder than you think," Sister Taylor said, adding, "but they like it."

Parishioners had formed such groups in 1989 under the Renew program, "and there was a lot of excitement," she said. The cluster restarted them a few years ago, before many other churches began small Christian groups in response to the diocese's Synod, she noted, "but we didn't wait till we had anything perfect." Parishioners have been learning what works and what doesn't, she explained.

At the children's level, 450-500 in grades K-9 take part in the religious education classes of the three churches. Religious education (and special parish functions) in Cato soon will be centered at the old rectory of St. Patrick's on East Main Street, where Sister Taylor had been living. Meanwhile, St. Patrick's plans an expansion to accommodate worshipers who've watched Mass on television downstairs.

"We were all over town," said Sheehan, religious education coordinator. "Religious ed programs were being conducted at the library, in the chapel at the cemetery, and Sister Ginny's residence."

It is the number of children that drew Janine Howell, now a religious education teacher, to the cluster. There, her three children could find lots of friends, she said. And there, she found many herself.

"I think I'd always been 'in search of,'" she said, "and I was going to keep searching till I found it. I think I've found it. I feel I can tell Father Leone, Sister Ginny, and Walter anything."

Hers is one of 1,051 registered families in the cluster today, about half of them at St. Joseph's, one-quarter at St. Patrick's and one-quarter at St. John's.

"A lot of people of all three of these parishes are really extending themselves, taking seriously their baptismal commitment to emphasize service to one another for the love of Christ," Father Leone said.

A cluster, he noted, "provides opportunity more readily. Staff can't be everywhere at all times. If people don't get involved, a lot won't happen. People take ownership beautifully here.

"There is a family spirit in the towns. They've known each other for years and have a genuine care for one another," the priest said. "It's been a real pleasure serving the people here, a privilege."

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