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Bishop Fulton J. Sheen speaking at Temple B'rith Kodesh, Jan. 30, 1967.

File photo

Bishop Sheen set pattern of ecumenism

EDITORS' NOTE: This is the third in an occasional series about Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen's years as bishop of Rochester.

Aaron Braveman well remembers listening to Bishop Fulton J. Sheen the night of Jan. 30, 1967, at Temple B'rith Kodesh in Brighton.

"I was mesmerized," recalled Braveman, then the temple's director of education. "His public appearance was really captivating."

"What I remember was, I think it was his opening statement, 'We are all children of Abraham,'" Braveman continued.

Bishop Sheen said "all the right things," Braveman added. "He said the things I would have expected him to say considering the history of Jewish, Catholic relations, the Holocaust and all. This was an opening for reconciliation. I think he did very well."

That night, in fact, Bishop Sheen became the first Roman Catholic bishop to speak at a Jewish house of worship in the Diocese of Rochester.

His visit signaled the pattern of ecumenical and interfaith outreach he would develop during his three years as the bishop of Rochester. The degree of his involvement would have been unlikely for a Catholic bishop just a few years earlier, but became possible in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) with its call for greater openness to non-Catholics. And Bishop Sheen readily took advantage of that call.

Indeed, between the January 1967 B'rith Kodesh talk and his retirement as bishop of Rochester in the fall of 1969, Bishop Sheen helped to foster cooperation among the diocese's religious communities. He launched new initiatives and encouraged others that had begun under his predecessor, Bishop James E. Kearney.

He preached at other faiths' houses of worship, and at ecumenical events.

He encouraged cooperation between St. Bernard's Seminary on Lake Avenue and the Protestant Divinity School at South Goodman Street and Highland Avenue. That encouragement led to cross-registration, cosponsored events and speakers, joint social work projects in the inner city and talks about sharing a campus — a reality that came about in 1981 when the seminary became St. Bernard's Institute under Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

Bishop Sheen directed Catholic charitable groups to work with non-Catholic organizations to combat poverty and substandard housing — one of the long-term fruits of those efforts is the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation. And in light of increasing Catholic involvement, the all-Protestant Rochester Council of Churches was restructured into Genesee Ecumenical Ministries in 1970, which in turn became the current interfaith Greater Rochester Community of Churches.

Such efforts on his part surprised Catholics and non-Catholics alike in the diocese.

The late Rev. Richard Hughes, former executive director of the Rochester Council of Churches, was quoted in the Sept. 12, 1967, *Wall Street Journal*, as declaring, "From his broadcasts and his books, we expected a personable, dynamic religious conservative. We got a man infused with the whole spirit of Catholic ecumenism. He's become an exciting presence in this town."

And the Rev. James Rice, former ministry staff with the Presbytery of Genesee Valley, told the *Catholic Courier* in a June 3 telephone interview that though ecumenical cooperation had begun in the diocese before Bishop Sheen's arrival, "He fanned it alive. There was an ember, a small

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STORY BY LEE STRONG