

FEATURE

Ecumenical ministry forms to reach older adults

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

It's been tough for Gerald Bonfiglio of Irondequoit to get around the past year. He thrives on visits from his neighbors and their children.

"I was trying to put a fluorescent light over my kitchen electric range," he recalled of the day last year that changed his lifestyle. "I thought I could bend my back backwards, but then I heard something snap. I fractured my vertebrae."

Neighbor Nancy Pollatta, a fellow St. Salome's parishioner, has been of particular help since the accident, picking up his medicines and arranging them in a box for morning and evening. She also drives him places, since, while he can walk now, he can't drive.

"She's terrific," Bonfiglio, 86, said. "She's always doing something for me. Her husband (Frank) was terrific, too." Frank died last fall.

Pollatta, 68, will lend her experience in caregiving, which includes work with RESPITE, a program of Heritage Christian Homes, as well as the Heritage at St. Ann's Home, to the new United Ministries of Irondequoit as a member of the group's advisory board.

United Ministries is an ecumenical collaboration of Mercy Center with the Aging, which has taught 18,000 people the art of caregiving, and COME (Congregations in Ministry with the Elderly), both headquartered in Rochester. Together they hope to train many more caregivers and church senior specialists.



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
St. Salome's parishioner Nancy Pollatta helps Irondequoit resident Gerald Bonfiglio, 86, plan his medications. Pollatta visits with Bonfiglio once a week and helps him with his shopping, gives him rides to the doctor, and picks up his prescriptions. An Irondequoit ministry hopes to train many such caregivers through the churches.

Twelve Irondequoit churches, including St. Thomas the Apostle, St. Salome and St. Cecilia's Catholic churches, are supporting United Ministries. They will partially subsidize the training, including the first sessions that began recently at St. Cecilia's.

"We are delighted to have the expertise of these two agencies to assist us in ad-

ressing the holistic health of our members," commented Father Robert Bradler, president of the Irondequoit Ministerial Association. He estimated his own church, St. Thomas the Apostle, has a 75 percent senior population.

Irondequoit is the initial focus of the group's efforts because it has the highest percentage — about 30 percent — of people over the age of 60, in Monroe County, according to Sister Anne Maloy, RSM, director of Mercy Center with the Aging. Greece has the largest population of seniors, though not percentage, according to the 1990 census.

"Though they are healthy, well and active at 60, that is the benchmark of the (Monroe) county," Sister Maloy explained. In general, she added, "The fastest growing population is over 85, and if you compound that with the baby boomers moving in, you'll have a large population there (over 85). And severe chronic illnesses kick in around 80 to 85. What you see in Irondequoit is you have people aging in place. That's why you see the growth of the aging population in churches. We need to deal with concerns families are dealing with."

"One in four families is involved in caregiving for an older adult," Sister Maloy said. "All of us are aging. Women, the primary caregivers, spend 18 years raising children and 17 on the average caring for an aging parent."

Through the Mercy center, caregivers learn how to find services in the community, develop skills and confidence, and plan legal and financial arrangements, for

instance.

But they learn in a spiritual setting, with prayer, Sister Maloy said. It's important, she said, "to explain how we bring healing and forgiveness into our relationships."

Besides seeing an increase in the number of such caregivers, Sister Maloy said, "My hope and dream is to have a parish nurse and senior specialist in every one of these churches."

Whereas caregivers generally assist their families and neighbors, each senior specialist and parish nurse would serve as a resource for an entire church, and for all ages, she explained.

She added that the Irondequoit effort may take three years to establish, but that hopefully it would be the first of similar efforts in other towns.

Primarily operated through a \$25,000 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Grant, \$1,000 from the diocese through St. Salome's Church and other contributions, the ministry has hired a volunteer program director, Shirley Pudney; the Lutheran Church of the Transfiguration on Culver Road has donated office space. Health providers and businesses are also expected to join the collaboration.

Besides training caregivers, senior specialists and parish nurses, the ministry will plan leadership development sessions, to address long-range community planning.

"COME has historically been supported by Protestants and Mercy Center with the Aging has been primarily supported by Catholic churches," noted Debra Sponable, executive director of COME. "This is the first time we've worked together in a formal way."

COME trains senior specialists, and provides volunteers and case management for older adults referred by congregations. Senior specialists assess and help address church needs, building accessibility, worship services, education and social opportunities, and transportation, for example.

The new united ministry will help examine "what it means to change over time," Sponable said. "When we examine this in light of our faith, it's not just the elderly in need of attention. We all need to talk about it together in a way that values who we are."

Training is open to anyone. Information is available from the Mercy Center with the Aging, 716/244-5190, or COME, 716/442-6776.

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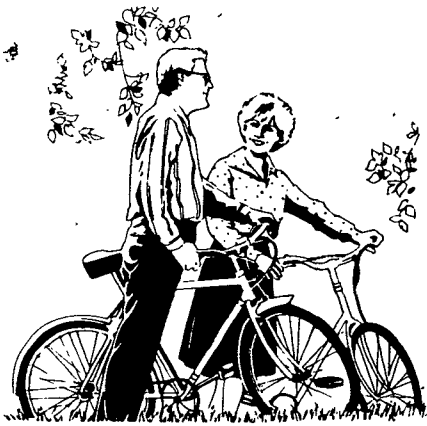
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