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Parish Twins

Msg. Gerard C. Krieg remembers when a white parishioner told him how deeply affected he had been by a Ugandan priest who had worked at St. Stephen's Church, Geneva.

The parishioner told the monsignor, St. Stephen's pastor, that he loved the Ugandan priest so much, "I can no longer be prejudiced against the black man," the pastor remembered.

Meanwhile, John Oughterson, the parish's associate youth director, recalled his trip to Uganda last July to witness the ordination of another Ugandan priest, Father Philip Odii, who had also stayed at the Geneva church. While in Uganda, Oughterson visited a Catholic church also named St. Stephen's, which the Geneva parish calls its "sister" parish.

"I felt so comfortable being a minority," Oughterson recalled of his visit with the Ugandans. "So many of the younger kids had never seen this white skin before," he added; showing his hands. "I took the time to give everyone a handshake."

Such stories are among the many fruits of parish-to-parish partnerships, sometimes called "twinnings" or "sister" relationships. Like St. Stephen's, several diocesan parishes have extensive ongoing relationships with other parishes, abroad or here in the Diocese of Rochester. These "twinned" parishes include ones in Webster, Penfield, Greece, Brighton, Henrietta, Rochester and Pittsford.

Mission here, there

Oughterson said St. Stephen's Uganda lies in the Diocese of Tororo, home to Father Odii and 500,000 Catholics, one-third of the population in the diocese's region. St. Stephen's has supported its Ugandan sister parish since December 1993, when the U.S. church began donating 1.5 percent of its weekly collection to St. Stephen's Uganda. In fact, donations from the Geneva parish have enabled parishioners there to build a new church building, slated to be completed Dec. 26 - the feast of St. Stephen, Oughterson said.

St. Stephen's, Geneva, has hosted a total of eight priests from Uganda, all of whom have come to the parish for pastoral training periods lasting several months. The parish began hosting Ugandan seminarians in the early 1990s, after a Ugandan priest visited the parish and made an appeal to help the missions, Msgr. Krieg said. Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, La., sponsors the Ugandans here, he added.

Ironically, the parish has become so enamored of the Ugandan priests that Msgr. Krieg said St. Stephen's could become a mission, in a sense, of the Ugandans. Given the priest shortage facing the diocese, Msgr. Krieg would like Ugandans to be considered for parish service in his area, he said.

Msgr. Krieg himself traveled to Uganda in 1993 to witness the ordination of Father Peter Okoth, who had spent five months at the Geneva parish for pastoral training. The pastor noted that his relationship with Ugandans like Father Okoth had helped to dispel the stereotype he had, that growing up in primitive huts - as Father Okoth and other Ugandans had - automatically meant one was ignorant.

"They may live in mud huts, but their awareness of Shakespeare and the world's philosophers would put most Americans to shame," he said.

Both Oughterson and Msgr. Krieg added that their church's connection to Uganda

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Photo submitted by Our Lady of Lourdes, Brighton

Marian Carney Ryan talks with a Tanzanian villager.



Photo submitted by St. Stephen's, Geneva

Father Philip Odii blesses John Oughterson in Uganda.

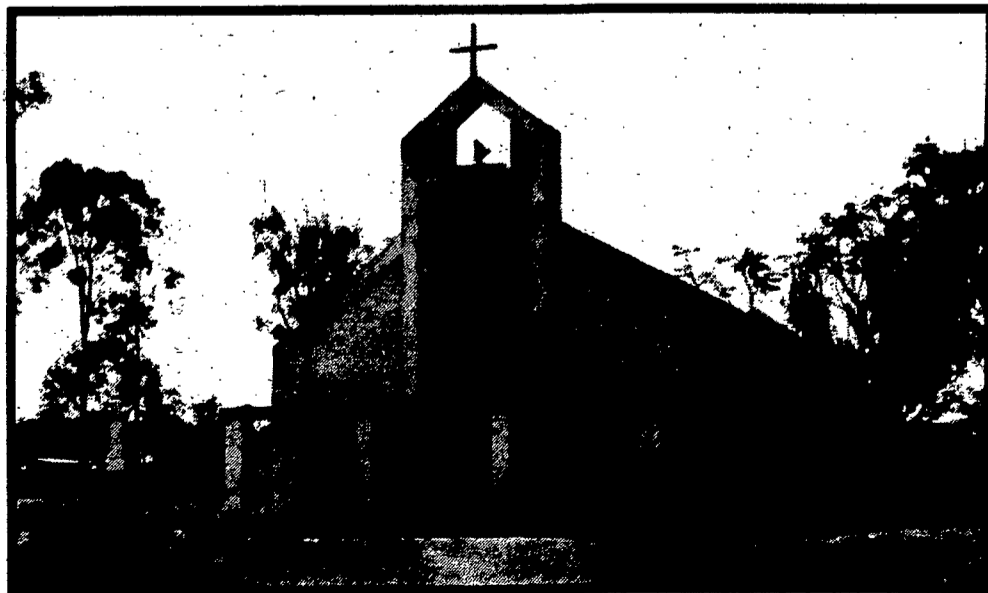


Photo submitted by Our Lady of Lourdes

St. Bridgita's Church in Tanzania, sister parish of Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Brighton.

STORY BY ROB CULLIVAN