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Kids

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Ideally, children are matched with the skills of foster parents, Lewis said. But the small number of homes available "doesn't give us the wiggle room to truly match needs of the child with skills of the foster parents," she said.

The department also normally tries to place siblings together in the same home. But sibling groups increasingly are being split because even willing foster families have limited space and capabilities.

"I can't stress enough the shortage of foster parents and the need for foster parents across the county," said Pat Slimmer, assistant director of Monroe County Court Appointed Special Advocates program, which speaks in court for children who have been abused and neglected.

Last summer she and Deacon Tom Driscoll — with the county's Department of Social Services, judges and other professionals — held information sessions about foster/adoptive parenting at her parish, Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration, and at Pittsford Baptist Church.

"Our goal is to raise consciousness about the need for foster parenting," said Deacon Driscoll of St. Louis Church, Pittsford. "We had about 11 households come forward. They're in various stages of discernment right now."

Pittsford and Perinton are among the areas in which foster homes are most needed. The deacon noted that there are two foster families in Pittsford and one in Mendon.

"When I was growing up there was a woman in our neighborhood who took in lots of foster children," Deacon Driscoll recalled. "It was a positive experience for me. They went to school with us; I played with them when I was older. They were wonderful kids, there were like 10 kids in the house. The parents were saints — outstanding, nurturing folks."

Ideally, churches could be working together to promote and support a foster-parenting ministry, he said. Deacon Driscoll has been working with the Department of Social Services to form an advisory board among various houses of worship.

The Bushes would be happy to see parish-based support networks for foster families.

"It would be an excellent idea," Barbara Bush said, "if there was a ministry in church, and you would know they would understand, and, maybe gush over the kids, welcome them."

In addition to welcoming foster children, parishioners might provide occasional respite, she and others suggested.

"We do know that (the more) foster families have strong support systems around them, the larger the opportunity for the success for a child," said Patricia Burks, program director at Children Awaiting Parents. "If they're able to use standard resources — youth programs, counseling, activities that keep them busy that are in place — the success rate of a child is much higher."

New legislation

Part of the reason for the shortage of foster homes is a new federal law, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. New York passed its own legislation Feb. 11 this year.

Although one effect of the law has been to reduce the number of families available for future foster placements, observers see the legislation as a positive move.

"I think it's wonderful, what we probably should have been doing all along," said Karen Emerton, director of Children and Family Services for the Catholic Family Center, one of six agencies that contracts with the county to provide foster care.

The law is intended to speed the freeing of foster children for adoption, and gives foster parents first choice in the adoption of their foster children. As a result, many foster parents are adopting the children placed in their care and are no longer willing or able to accept further foster placements.

Also, Emerton explained, the law requires a criminal-records check on everyone over age 18 living in a foster home. So the process of approving new foster families was delayed while agencies ran checks on their foster care providers, pending providers and applicants.

The law's intent was to make it clear that the safety and well-being of children are most important. It also was intended to help meet the goals set by President Bill Clinton of doubling adoptions and permanent placements by the year 2002.

In 1998 about 50 percent of the adop-

tions in Texas were by foster parents, and adoptions increased by 16 percent from 1998 to 1999, according to Janis Brown, a speaker at the Catholic Charities USA convention in Rochester in October. Texas also had established Swift Adoption Teams in 1995, to speed the adoption process.

Officials were surprised that the number of children who were returned home dropped by 15 percent over one year, according to Brown, Child Protective Services Division administrator for the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services.

"We are still placing children with relatives and trying to work toward reunification," Brown stressed. Children are returning home more quickly, in 9.3 months rather than the previous average of 11.7.

"It might not seem like a lot, but two months is a lot in a child's life," Brown said.

Agencies do try to return children to their families whenever possible. Although the public seems to have the old idea that "never the twain shall meet," Emerton commented, the reality is that foster families are expected to work with a child's biological family, whether to help the child be returned or to open the door to a long-term placement. "The child has the ability to know both his families," she said.

But the Bushes believe children are sometimes returned to their parents too early.

"It's hard to change negative patterns of living the children have had for years, in just 12 or six months," Barbara Bush said.

"And it may be harder for adults to make those changes than the kids," her husband added.

But the new law states that — absent compelling reasons to the contrary — if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months, steps must be made either to return the child to his or her family, or to free the child from that biological family for adoption.

F.A.N.

"We need people willing to be a foster parent or adoptive parent or both, who are willing to come forth look at America's children," said Peggy Soule, executive director of CAP.

"You don't even make any commitment before go through a training process," she said. "Taking the first step doesn't mean

taking the last step."

CAP is the lead agency for a Foster/Adoption Network of 18 organizations working to rebuild the base of available foster homes. F.A.N. organized recently and began its campaign this summer. "Realistically, we hope to recruit 375 foster families," Jones said.

The campaign aims to recruit help through churches; parent, civic and fraternal groups; current foster families; and associated workers, Jones said. The network is planning a press conference for Nov. 30 in conjunction with the campaign. Meanwhile, work has been continuing.

CAP placed literature in city Catholic churches during Respect Life Month last month. Another part of the recruitment campaign is public service announcements in publications, on the radio and television. CAP is encouraging calls to its toll-free number, 888-835-8802.

"Gail (Loomis) is the spark plug behind the history of whole thing," Jones said. Loomis is a home finder for adoptive and foster families for the Ontario County Department of Social Services.

A member of St. Mary, Our Lady of the Hills in Honeoye, Loomis explained what type of people are needed.

"Really, you have to do it for altruistic reasons," she said.

Foster parents must be at least 21 years old. They may be single. They may be renters. They also may work outside the home.

Aside from that, Loomis said, "I want people who are reasonable and who have a sense of humor. You find yourself in a lot of situations where if you can't lighten up or alleviate your own stress, it is going to be disastrous."

"It's a roller coaster ride," foster mother Janet Annonny confirmed. She and her husband, Peter, became foster parents four years ago, and have adopted one of their foster children. The two are members of St. Francis deSales Parish, Geneva, and both work full-time.

"You have to have a lot of love for children," Janet said. "They will at times really push your buttons. But they have to, I guess, in order to really make you prove that you want them."

"I think anyone who gets into this to be a family, to be a parent to the children. You do everything you can for them," she said.

Declaration

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egation from St. Michael's attended the 11 a.m. service at St. John's.

Sister Patricia Schoelles, SSJ, president of St. Bernard's Institute, addressed 375 parishioners at two services and a forum Oct. 31 at Rochester's Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word.

To further commemorate the signing of the declaration, the church's pastor, the Rev. Ralph Anderson, is expected to speak at the Jan. 18 celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at the diocesan Pastoral Office in Gates.

"Thirty years of dialogue are overcoming today 450 years of condemnation," Sister Schoelles said in her talk at Church of the Incarnate Word.

"The paper to be signed in Augsburg is above all a joint move away from our too-narrow understandings of how God works in our hearts — understandings that became too narrow because of our mutual clinging to only one part of the truth.

The key sentence in the joint declaration, she said, was "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works.

"If our two churches can reach agreement on this sentence," she said, "we can work out consensus on every other matter."

Pope John Paul said the agreement "constitutes a sure basis for the continua-

tion of ecumenical theological research and for facing the difficulties which remain with a better founded hope in resolving them in the future."

The signing ceremony in Germany began with a penitential service in Augsburg's Catholic cathedral. Catholics and Lutherans asked for forgiveness for not always having chosen the way of unity within their churches and within their lives.

Then, participants walked in a half-mile procession to the Lutheran Church of St. Anne for an ecumenical prayer service.

At the end of the service, the joint declaration was signed by Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; German Lutheran Bishop Christian Krause of Brunswick, president of the Lutheran World Federation; and by other Catholic and Lutheran participants.

In his homily, Cardinal Cassidy said Christians share the original disciples' call to build the church of Christ.

"Our task is not only to continue the building, but unfortunately we have also the duty of seeking to repair the damage that has been done to that building by the storms, conflicts and, at times, by human-made earthquakes," the cardinal said.

Cardinal Cassidy said the agreement on justification is a gift from God and moves forward "in a significant way the work of restoration of unity among the followers of Christ."

Bishop Krause said the work of the dialogue must continue so that someday Catholics and Lutherans can be guests at each other's Eucharist.

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