

Tioga ministry celebrates 25 years

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

What began in the basement of Owego's St. Patrick Church a quarter-century ago has become an institution in Tioga County and its surrounding area.

Tioga County Rural Ministry, a nonprofit outreach celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, is supported by Tioga County's five Catholic churches as well as other denominations. Community-wide financial and volunteer support has been the key to the ministry's longevity, said Mercy Sister Phyllis McGuire, director.

"Some people donate goods and services, some donate their time, and some donate money. And some donate all three," said Sister McGuire, who joined TCRM in 1996 and became its director in 2002 upon the retirement of Mercy Sister Lisette O'Brien.

The ministry has been guided by the Sisters of Mercy throughout its history, which included a move in 1983 from St. Patrick's Church to its current location at 60 North Ave in Owego. TCRM offers an on-site emergency food pantry along with numerous other services: financial assistance for fuel, utilities, medical expenses and rent; holiday gifts and food baskets; home repairs; transportation to medical appointments; and visitations. Beneficiaries are typically out of work; single parents; those lacking medical insurance; shut-ins; and/or the elderly.

One of TCRM's founding volunteers was St. Patrick parishioner



Lella Navidi/Catholic Courier

Verna Miller, a staff member at Tioga County Rural Ministry in Owego, checks the thermostat in the food pantry July 23.

Bernadette Moesch, who recalled that it didn't take long for TCRM to catch on.

"It was pretty well supported after people got to know about it," said Moesch, a 22-year volunteer. "You met so many people and you realized how many thoughtful people there were who donated to the pantry."

The work of Sister McGuire and two part-time office workers, Verna Miller and Sandra Rosser, is supplemented by numerous volunteers. Among them is Ann Evans of St. Patrick's, who meets with people who walk in seeking assistance.

"Since the economy has been poor, more people are coming to borrow money," Evans said. "You kind of lis-

ten to their problems and you try to encourage them, help them, steer them to social services and other agencies."

Sister McGuire acknowledged the growing need for TCRM's services, saying the ministry served 2,672 people for the year ending June 30, 2003 — approximately double the number of people served in 1994-95.

"On a daily basis we get a lot of young people coming into our food pantry. Their needs for the necessities for their babies are quite high," said Sister McGuire, saying TCRM supplies diapers and a limited amount of baby food.

TCRM workers often take groceries and other goods directly to

area homes, especially for elderly residents and shut-ins. Sister McGuire said this segment of the population is grateful not only for food and supplies, but for company. "They don't want you to leave. You could be there an hour, you could be there two hours," she said.

Another notable component of TCRM is the Tioga Student Project. Since 1983 groups from area colleges have devoted their spring breaks to performing home repairs in Tioga County. This past year students from Binghamton University, Ithaca College and Cornell University did electrical work and painting, and constructed ramps and steps.

"There are people in this area who could not even get out of their trailers or homes unless these ramps were built," Sister McGuire said.

The value of TCRM's efforts is reflected in the many thank-you notes it receives. Excerpts from these letters are often printed in the ministry's newsletter, such as the following from May 2003: "Dear Sister Phyllis and Staff: Just a thank you is never enough. You have given me hope on more than once occasion. You brought sunshine to my life, the ramp is quite wonderful. Thank you one and all."

Evans, for one, is more than happy to be associated with an organization that can spread this kind of sunshine.

"There's just an overall air of kindness that's involved in this rural ministry. Everybody is so kind, it just gives you a good feeling. I just think it's great," Evans said.

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