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porting the priorities that were ultimately chosen.

The synodal process began in 1990, with discussions held at the parish and then regional levels. The process culminated in 1993, when approximately 1,300 delegates from across the diocese participated in the Oct. 1-3 General Synod at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center. Delegates identified the final five diocesan priorities as lifelong religious education; the consistent-life ethic; Catholic moral education; the role of women in church and society; and small Christian communities. Eventually, the priorities of lifelong religious education and Catholic moral education were combined into one top priority for the diocese, called lifelong faith formation.

This priority called for the diocese to focus on religious education for Catholics of all ages, including education about contemporary moral issues and conscience formation.

"I think it raised our consciousness of the importance of adult education," said Maribeth Mancini, diocesan director of Evangelization and Catechesis. "I think that people are always hungry to grow in knowledge of their faith."

Father Joseph Hart, diocesan vicar general and administrator of the diocesan Pastoral Center, said that St. Bernard's Institute (now known as St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry) also noted a dramatic rise in enrollment following the synod.

"As the lay people began to recognize more and more their obligation in fulfilling the mission of the church, they began to equip themselves to fulfill that mission," said Father Hart, who directed the synod from August 1990 through the end of 1993.

Recently, the diocese further demonstrated its commitment to lifelong faith formation with the opening of the new St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry. The majority of the cost of the \$3 million facility is being funded by the Partners in Faith diocesan capital campaign currently in progress.

Bishop Clark said St. Bernard's has been critical to the goal of educating Catholics about their faith and enabling them to answer confidently when questioned about their beliefs.

The synod's second priority, the consistent-life ethic, called the diocese to promote the "seamless garment" philosophy, which strives to protect life from the moment of



File photo

Bishop Matthew H. Clark presides over the Oct. 3, 1993, Mass that concluded the General Synod.

conception to the moment of natural death. This means protecting those who are threatened by abortion, the death penalty, economic injustice or poverty, euthanasia, and violence, including war.

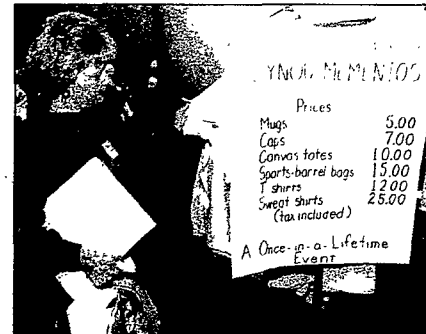
Suzanne Schnittman, former diocesan consistent-life ethic coordinator, said that her job was difficult "because I was trying to combine an advocacy of five issues that had never really been combined before."

"Consistent-life ethic, I really think, is the one issue that shook things up. The challenge of the consistent-life ethic was to find a way to network all of these issues and interests together," she said.

After the synod, the diocese established an office implementing the consistent-life ethic. Although most of the offices similarly set up to implement synod priorities since have been mainstreamed into existing diocesan ministries, the consistent-life ethic office "wasn't so easily merged," according to Father Hart. The diocese eventually placed it within Catholic Charities, renaming it the Life Issues Office.

Although it now has a different name, the Life Issues Office continues to carry out the work begun by Schnittman following the synod. Each year, the office presents the Vita Award to honor five people for their commitment to the consistent-life ethic. The office also produces a monthly consistent-life ethic calendar, which offers daily prayer suggestions or related Scripture passages.

The third priority the diocese embraced after the synod related to the role and dignity of women in church and society. This priority



File photo

Delegate Joanne Carroll checked out synod mementos during a break between meetings.

called for the diocese to eliminate restrictive gender roles where possible and to include both men and women in leadership and decision-making roles in both parish and diocesan ministries.

According to Kathleen Cannon, who served as synod implementation coordinator from 1994 to 1998, the long-standing diocesan Women's Commission was revitalized in 1995, focusing not only on women employed by the church, but on women in society as well as church life.

The diocese identified the need — especially among pastoral staffs — for education and awareness of domestic violence, hiring someone to conduct awareness training and pursuing such other endeavors as a prayer service for victims of domestic violence.

In the years since the synod, Father Hart noted, more women have been hired as pastoral associates, and St. Bernard's became one of the first ministry-preparation centers to grant ministry degrees to women.

The synod's final priority was a

focus on small Christian communities, or SCCs, that would bring together people of all ages for prayer, reflection and to share their faith. The diocese was to support the formation of these communities within larger parish communities.

"There continue to be small Christian communities, which were nurtured in that process," Father Hart said. "These for the most part would not exist if it hadn't been for the synod." He also noted that many SCCs now exist not only in parishes, but also on such area college campuses as Cornell University.

UNEXPECTED RESULTS

Small Christian communities weren't the only multifaceted groups to come together since the synod, according to Father Hart, who noted that the synod had a profound effect on diocesan unity as a whole. He said that many people, both clergy and laity, told him that the synod helped them begin to understand the church in a different way and stop characterizing people by their differences.

"They began to see deeply faithful people who differed on the solutions to various pastoral projects and yet were clearly part of the same dynamic body of Christ. It was a conversion process to a deeper unity in the local church," he said.

Many people found the process so beneficial that they've asked Father Hart whether there was a way to conduct mini-synods to solve problems that come up over time. Although he said that the synodal process is too intensive to go through every few years, "the process itself was very helpful in setting a dynamic in force."

The laity's involvement in the synod also may have been a factor in the event's effectiveness as a unifying force in the diocese, Father Hart said. The seventh diocesan synod marked the first time that Rochester-area laity were able to participate in a diocesan-wide decision-making process. This particular synod also featured much more discussion than did previous ones, which often were just gatherings at which new diocesan legislation was read to priests, he added.

People outside the diocese likewise have noted the accomplishments of the seventh Rochester synod.

"Because our synod was really quite successful here in its format, a number of dioceses throughout the United States have written for our material, and some have followed the format exactly," Father Hart said.

"It was a very exciting time to be involved with the diocese," Schnittman noted.