

Unity Health System axes chaplain

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Catholics in western Monroe County are protesting a decision by Unity Health System — which includes the former St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester — to lay off its priest-chaplain, Father Winfried M. Kellner.

During the weekend of Jan. 10-11, scores of parishioners at Our Mother of Sorrows Parish in Greece — where Father Kellner also serves as sacramental minister — signed a petition calling for his reinstatement at Unity.

"A Catholic priest is more than a minister of the Word of God," the petition read. "Not only does he provide a consoling word to the patient and family (a valuable task), but he is also a conduit of God's sacramental life."

Unity was originally formed out of an alliance of St. Mary's Hospital and Park Ridge Hospital in Greece. The Daughters of Charity had founded St. Mary's Hospital in 1857, an affiliation that ended in December 1999 when Ascension Health — formerly the Daughters of Charity National Health System — announced that it was withdrawing from Unity Health System.

Father Kellner, who was laid off Jan. 1, said he has been working for Unity 20 hours a week since July 2001. His duties have included sacramental ministry, talking with patients and their families, and celebrating Mass twice a week. His layoff resulted in the elimination of both Masses.

Unity also reduced from 36 to 20 the hours of Sister of St. Joseph Barbara Gulino, who also works in the chaplain's office.

According to Unity spokesman David Mancuso, Father Kellner and Sister Gulino were being paid from the budget for Unity's three skilled-nursing facilities. A \$150,000 gap in the nursing homes' 2004 budget was cited as reason for the layoff and cutback, which will save \$50,000. Mancuso noted that funding cuts were made in other areas of the nursing-home budget as well.

He added that the vast majority of patients at Unity's nursing homes are on Medicaid or Medicare, and that for the last three years the system has been financially challenged. For example, he said, the nursing homes lost \$750,000 in Medicaid/Medicare funding in 2002 and \$600,000 in 2003.

Mancuso said Unity will continue to provide pastoral care to its patients.

"Obviously, we're committed to

spiritual care, and it's very important," he said.

In addition to having two other Catholics — a nun and a lay woman — on the pastoral-care staff at its Park Ridge Hospital, Unity has a volunteer network of more than 30 clergy that serve both the hospital and the nursing homes. Mancuso said he was unable to provide data on how many volunteers are Catholic priests or how many of Unity's patients are Catholics.

Father Kellner and Mother of Sorrows' pastor Father Alexander Bradshaw have sent letters to Timothy McCormick, Unity's president, protesting the decision to eliminate Father Kellner's position. Both priests' letters noted that when Unity was formed, assurances were made that Catholic sacramental and pastoral ministry would continue throughout the system.

"When a resident from one of our three nursing homes requests pastoral care from a Catholic priest, we will continue to see that their needs are met through on-call arrangements we have established with area clergy," Mancuso said in response to the priests' argument.

Yet Father Kellner told the *Courier* that Unity does not understand the importance of having an on-site Catholic priest. During an average day as chaplain, he noted that he would anoint the sick 15 to 19 times, in addition to his other duties. Now, these sacramental ministries must be performed by volunteer priests.

"I'm not a eucharistic minister, I'm not a volunteer who comes in and reads storybooks," Father Kellner said. "That's not my job. I hear confessions, I do anointing of the sick, I celebrate the Mass."

Now that he is gone, many Catholic patients may be bereft of the sacraments, Father Kellner said. He noted, for example, that when he was called to anoint someone on his last day at Park Ridge, he wound up anointing four other patients whose needs became apparent only after he arrived.

"If I hadn't been there, they would have fallen through the cracks," he said. "(Patients') spiritual advocate will no longer be there."

Father Bradshaw said the priests of Greece and the surrounding area were "dismayed by this decision" to lay off Father Kellner.

"There's only so much they can do," he said of priests who volunteer their time at Unity, noting that these priests have other obligations. "A chaplain on site makes all the difference in the world."

Michael Tedesco, spokesman for the Diocese of Rochester, also expressed disappointment about the decision.

"As many medical studies have indicated, faith and prayer are important parts of the healing process for those who are sick or injured,"

Tedesco said. "Father Kellner and Sister Gulino have provided tremendous support to many who have been cared for at Park Ridge."

Tedesco added that the diocese will hold discussions with Unity on how to meet patients' short-term and long-term spiritual needs.



Lauren Long/Catholic Courier

Candidates installed

Eight candidates for the permanent diaconate were installed as readers and acolytes during a Jan. 11 Mass at Fairport's St. John of Rochester Church. Above, Bishop Matthew H. Clark, assisted by Sister Mary Ann Birsack, installs Kevin Carges of Shortsville as an acolyte. During the Mass, Bishop Clark welcomed the men and their families, noting that they are "responding to a call they feel deeply in their hearts ..." The bishop commended them for "acting as a real reminder to us that we share this call with them through our own baptism. Living, loving and being witnesses to God's gracious invitation to salvation in Christ is a lifelong pursuit."

RECOGNIZING

- An art teacher at DeSales High School in Geneva recently received a grant, worth more than \$1,000, from the Ontario County Arts Council. Dagmar Nearpass will use the grant to bring Marcelle Toor, a graphic designer, computer trainer and photographer, to the school for a community-service arts program. Toor, a team of students and a representative from the Geneva branch of Catholic Charities will design a brochure for one of the agency's programs.

- On Oct. 15, Mercy Center with the Aging presented its first Celebrating Family Caregivers Award to William A. Sawyer of Pittsford. Sawyer, 87, has cared for his wife, Dody, for the past 20 years, as she has been severely handicapped with multiple sclerosis.

- Nicholas Hollon, a Geneva DeSales High School senior, has been named a semifinalist in the National Merit Scholarship Competition. More than 1.3 million high-school juniors entered by taking the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test in the fall of 2002. Hollon is the only semifinalist from a Finger Lakes-area school.