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Faith & Family

DIocese OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK ■ MAY 2004 ■ www.catholiccourier.com ■ B SECTION ■ 24 PAGES

Pastoral administrators mark 10 years in diocese

After 19 years as pastoral associate at Rochester's Holy Cross Parish, Sister Kathleen O'Connell will enter a brave new world when she becomes pastoral administrator at St. Mary's Parish in Waterloo this June. The leadership role follows many years of teaching as well as campus and parish ministry for the 64-year-old Sister of Mercy.

"I'm excited about it. I guess I saw it as another opportunity to use my gifts and talents," Sister O'Connell said.

This will mark Sister O'Connell's first assignment as a pastoral administrator, as well as the first time St. Mary's has been led by someone other than a priest. She will take the helm exactly 10 years after Sister of St. Joseph Anne Michelle McGill set out into even less-charted waters in 1994 by becoming the first pastoral administrator in diocesan history.

Sister McGill, 74, recalled that back then, neither she — nor the parishioners of St. Gabriel in Hammondsport, to whom she still ministers — could predict what lay ahead.

"They were more or less open to the idea, but had no understanding what it was all about," Sister McGill said.

Mary Lou O'Connor, St. Gabriel's secretary/bookkeeper, recalled that the parish community sensed Sister McGill's appointment was a step in the right direction. It followed many months of temporary priest assignments, bringing into question whether St. Gabriel's could survive without a permanent pastor.

"That's when we realized they weren't kidding about the priest shortage, that there



Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, pastoral administrator of the St. Felix/St. Francis Parish Cluster in Clifton Springs/Phelps, leads an April 2 Communion service at St. Francis' parish house. She has been the cluster's pastoral administrator since June 2003.

aren't priests up there in Rochester with nothing to do on the weekends," O'Connor remarked. "We very much wanted to pioneer the pastoral-administrator model to allow us to continue as a small and independent parish."

Before long, Sister McGill and her new parish were thriving. These days at St. Gabriel's, volunteerism is

widespread and parish membership is on the rise. "The people are so excited because there are young people in church now. They say they hardly ever saw young people in church," Sister McGill noted.

St. Gabriel's success under Sister McGill's watch set the tone for substantial growth of this leadership model. The

diocese currently has 14 pastoral administrators serving in permanent assignments — more than twice as many as just four years ago. Several more people are serving as temporary pastoral administrators, or are entered in a diocesan-approved pool from which appointments are made.

This trend doesn't surprise Father Michael Conboy, diocesan director of priest personnel. "We have an aging clergy and declining vocations. It seems inevitable," he said, adding that recruitment of extern priests has also been increased to address the shortage.

Yet Father Conboy is quick to emphasize that the decision to appoint pastoral administrators is far more than a Band-Aid solution. He pointed out that these parish leaders successfully manage challenging situations, such as multiple parishes and parish schools.

"I think people are generally appreciative of the work done by pastoral administrators," he remarked.

According to O'Connor, the folks in Hammondsport certainly are most appreciative of Sister McGill's efforts.

"She is loved. There's no two ways about it," O'Connor said.

A GROWING OPTION

A pastoral administrator is a person other than a priest who maintains day-to-day operation of a parish, carrying out most duties a priest-pastor would. According to Barbara Pedeville, diocesan director of management and staff services, each candidate must have a master's degree in the

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