

# History of Spiritus Christi Church

Thirteen hundred people gathered at Salem United Church of Christ on December 24, 1998 to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ---and the birth of Spiritus Christi Church. All were members of Corpus Christi Church on E. Main Street and had experienced extraordinary events in the past four months.

On August 13, 1998, Bishop Matthew Clark, under pressure from Rome, removed Fr. Jim Callan as administrator after 22 years at Corpus Christi Church. The Vatican had trouble with three practices dear to the heart of Corpus Christi parishioners: the prominent role of women on the altar, the blessing of gay unions, and the offering of communion to those who were not Catholic. The Democrat and Chronicle carried the news on the front page the following Sunday, which brought an extra large crowd to Mass that day. Over 1200 people came back to church that Sunday night to organize a protest against the bishop's action. Night after night, the parishioners gathered in church to hear speeches from the staff and other leaders and to strategize about standing firm on the issues. The movement to keep the inclusive spirit of Corpus Christi alive was quickly termed the "Spring Committee." (The name came from a Salvadoran proverb: "You can cut back some of the flowers, but you can't hold back the spring.")

The parishioners held weekly, police-escorted, candlelight marches from the church to Dimitri House, Corpus Christi Center, and Rogers House Restaurant. The youth group printed t-shirts and protested in front of the bishop's office at the pastoral center. They requested a dialogue with diocesan officials. On October 15, Mary Ramerman was fired from her position as associate pastor. The diocese demanded that she

remove her alb and stole and not go near the altar during any church services. She refused. She did not want to send a message that women were not holy enough to approach the altar or deserving of equal participation in the church. In protest of Mary's firing, several women in the parish put on purple stoles, a symbol of women's ordination, and continued to stand at the altar week after week. On October 22, Fr. Enrique Cadena, the other associate pastor, was granted a leave of absence by the bishop for "rest and reflection."

The week after Mary's firing, members of the Spring Committee organized a Tuesday night communion service for Corpus Christi parishioners who wanted to keep the inclusive vision alive. It was the first of many held weekly at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church, a congregation that soon became an important part of the new community's future. Mary led the services and invited staff and parishioners to share their reflections.

The crowd attending these services soon grew to about 1000 people. Fr. Jim, who had been reassigned to Elmira, returned on December 1 to celebrate mass with the community, an action that brought about his suspension from the priesthood a few days later. Meanwhile the Corpus Christi staff continued to work in the outreaches and the parish ministries.

Six staff members were abruptly fired on December 14: Jim Smith, Director of the Prison Ministry; Sr. Margie Henninger, Director of Dimitri Recovery House; Denise Donato, Family Minister; Mike Boucher, Adult Education Director; Myra Humphrey (Brown), Hospitality Minister; and Maureen Nielsen, volunteer staff resident of Pearl House, the Prison Ministry's home for women ex-offenders. The following night, the new Tuesday night community raised over \$30,000 to support the fired staff. In the following months, most of the

remaining Corpus Christi staff joined the new faith community. They included Mimi Youngman, Religious Education Director; Mike Ramich, Business Manager; Kathie Quinlan, Isaiah House Director; Eileen Hurley, Director of Corpus Christi Center; Judy Simser, Pearl House Director; Mary and Kevin Aman, Youth Directors; Kathy Welch, Jim Ramerman, and Craig Kegler, Music Directors; and Jacquee McIntyre, Parish Secretary. The sacristans and many other parish leaders also joined the community.

By Christmas Eve, many people had decided they wanted to form a new community that would be inclusive. Disillusioned by the December 14 firing of the “saints,” the folks who had devoted their lives to serving the poor, parishioners wanted to move on and stop battling the diocese.

On January 30, 1999, 500 people met at the Gateway Banquet Center for a Visioning Day for the new community. By the end of the day, plans were made to form a “New Faith Community,” whose spiritual leaders would be Mary Ramerman, Fr. Jim Callan, and Enrique Cadena. Mary became the Pastoral Administrator of the parish. The new community would rehire the former staff of Corpus Christi, and they would rent space from Salem United Church of Christ on Bittner Street.

The New Faith Community held its first weekend masses on February 13-14, 1999. Over 1100 people attended. (Ten days later, the diocese declared that the members of the new community had excommunicated themselves.) On Holy Thursday, April 1, the community celebrated its first mass and consecrated the Eucharist. The mass was held before a full house at Hochstein Performance Hall, the former church where the funerals of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass were held.

By August, the community had made three major decisions: to raise the tithing from 12% to 15%; to name the community Spiritus Christi Church; and to begin the first outreach, Grace of God Recovery House. Grace of God began with the purchase of the house on 120 Franklin Street. Over \$80,000 was raised for the new ministry in just three months. The parish also voted to adopt a statement of identity: "We are a Christ-centered Catholic community reaching beyond the boundaries of the institutional church to be inclusive of all."

By September 1999, Spiritus Christi was a "full service" church offering religious education, funerals, baptisms, weddings, unions, weekend masses, and daily masses. The new congregation was now able to celebrate its gay unions in a church building, whereas before the union ceremonies had been held offsite in homes, parks, and restaurants.

Relationships with the ecumenical community flourished. The Tuesday Noon Mass began at Immanuel Baptist Church with Rev. Dick Myers on February 2, 1999. The Monday Noon Mass at Downtown United Presbyterian Church started in March 1999. Later that year, Fr. Jim began a mass in Buffalo, which is currently held at the Episcopal Church of the Ascension. With the start of 2000, Rev. Don Hoff in Elmira invited Spiritus Christi to join him for a monthly service at the Riverside United Methodist Church. Currently a mass is celebrated there each Sunday afternoon at 5:00 PM.

Two of the issues that had prompted the formation of Spiritus Christi Church were quickly resolved: the celebration of gay unions in church and the offering of communion to non-Catholics. One issue remained: how to ordain women. A group of twenty-five people met for two years to study the issue. This group sponsored an international women's ordination conference in July 2000. The following year, Mary Ramerman was ordained

on November 17, 2001 at the Eastman Theatre. Ordaining Mary were Bishop Peter Hickman, representatives of Spiritus Christi, and Catholic and interfaith clergy from around the world. Nearly 3,000 people attended, many traveling from distant states and other countries to witness the ordination of a Catholic woman. Hundreds of parishioners, old and young, participated in the ceremony. Rev. Mary's first mass was held the following day at Hochstein.

In the spring of 2002, Denise Donato was ordained a deacon. After a year of preparation, she was ordained a priest on February 22, 2003 at Hochstein--again by Bishop Peter Hickman, the Spiritus Christi community, and interfaith clergy. That same spring, Enrique Cadena left his position at Spiritus Christi and eventually became an Episcopal priest in the Buffalo diocese. He also married and became the stepfather of two children.

Spiritus Christi continued its tradition of ministry to the poor. Beside the Grace of God Recovery House mentioned above, two new ministries were born. In 2000, Eileen Hurley gathered volunteer psychiatrists and therapists and formed Spiritus Christi Mental Health Center. Lynne Hamilton was hired as administrator two years later. Today, over fifty volunteer caregivers offer their time to provide mental health care to those without insurance.

In 2002, Jim Smith and Judy Simser welcomed women from prison and their children to the newly formed Jennifer House. Dozens of volunteers continue to visit area jails and prisons each week.

Spiritus Christi carried over two international ministries begun at Corpus Christi. First, they kept their longstanding relationship with the people of Borgne, Haiti and helped them start a grain

mill, new water purification projects, and a credit union for small business loans. Second, the ministry in Chiapas, Mexico, was expanded to include a cooperative coffee venture and a credit union.

In 2003, the parish headquarters moved to the Downtown United Presbyterian Church at 121 N. Fitzhugh Street. The needs of the congregation had grown to include space for 250 children in religious education. Dave Foster and Patty Fallon were hired as youth ministers to serve 60 teenagers. Ralph Kuitems headed a team of volunteers to remodel the space. A special meeting room was dedicated to Maureen Nielsen, who died in Haiti in 2001.

In the fall of 2003, the first Visioning Board was elected to maintain the vision of the church and to provide an accountability structure for the pastors. Ched Myers and Joanna Manning joined the board as spiritual consultants.

In 2004, Myra Brown gathered a group of racially diverse parishioners to meet weekly, sharing life stories and prejudices. Myra was appointed to serve on the Racial Diversity Board of CTA National and began attending a three year training program. The Mental Health Center opened the Living Room two days a week as a drop-in center for their clients. Amy Durkee-Pollock was hired as part-time administrator. The Mother Earth Community was formed and began leading Spiritus Christi parishioners to better care for the earth.

On January 8, 2005, the Visioning Board conducted the second Visioning Day for Spiritus Christi in the hopes of harvesting the vision for the future and deepening the values already held. The Prison Ministry began to dream of opening a residence for male ex-offenders and wrote their first grants for that project.

## History of Corpus Christi

People chose the name Spiritus Christi (Spirit of Christ) because it represents the spirit that arose from Corpus Christi (Body of Christ). Started by the former parishioners of Corpus Christi, Spiritus Christi was built on a strong foundation. Corpus Christi stood on two pillars: 1) Outreach to the poor, and 2) Inclusivity. Below are listed significant milestones in the faith journey of Corpus Christi. **Outreach to the Poor**

1977 Fr. Jim Callan is appointed parish administrator and hires Sr. Margie Henninger, who begins walking the streets to discover neighborhood needs

1977 Corpus Christi Center begins as a drop-in center and outreach to the neighborhood. It soon becomes a health center serving thousands of uninsured patients

1978 Parish begins tithing 10% of weekend collection and giving it to the poor

1979 Money first collected for Haiti and sent to Sr. Isabel Lumpuy in Port-au-Prince

1980 Supper program for the homeless begins in church kitchen

1980 Corpus Christi Child Care Center opens to serve the working poor

1980 Rogers House, a home for male ex-offenders, opens after two years of parishioners visiting Monroe County Jail and Attica Prison

1982 Winter shelter for homeless begins in church basement; later moved to Dimitri House, which opens in

1984 Sanctuary is provided to undocumented Salvadoran refugees in collaboration with the Downtown United Presbyterian Church and other faith communities. Parishioners later travel to El Salvador to connect with two sister cities.

1986 Dimitri Recovery House opens for men in recovery

1987 Isaiah House, a home for the dying, opens

1987 Rogers House Restaurant opens to employ people coming from prison  
1988 Parish raises tithing amount from 10% to 12%  
1990 Mary's House, a home for women with AIDS, opens and is run by the Diocese

1991 Matthew's Closet opens to sell "gently used clothes" and give away clothes to the poor

1992 Mission Possible Youth Retreats begin for parish teens to participate in a week of outreach

1994 Retreats in Chiapas, Mexico begin

1995 Trip to Borgne, Haiti plants seeds which result in the H.O.P.E. health clinic, grain mill, water purification projects and education initiatives

1998 Pearl House opens to house female ex-offenders **Inclusivity**

1975 Spanish Mass begins

1975 Altar girls first serve on the altar

1977 Women begin preaching on Sunday

1978 Induction loop installed to help people with hearing disabilities. Later, interpreters for the deaf begin signing at mass

1982 Parish Community Forum is established to broaden decision-making

1983 Family Ministry is formed to welcome and serve families

1983 Inclusive language is used at all liturgies

1984 Everyone is invited to Communion on a regular basis

1985 Three Hispanic ministers, including Fr. Enrique Cadena, are hired

1988 Mary Ramerman and Julie Rinella lift the cup during the Eucharist, revolutionizing women's roles at the altar

1988 Church is renovated to provide more space for people in wheelchairs and residents from group homes

1990 Gospel choir begins in order to welcome more African Americans

1992 Hospitality Ministry position is created on parish staff and Myra Humphrey (Brown) is hired

1992 City Colors Youth Group starts to reach neighborhood youth

1992 Gay and lesbian ministry starts

1992 Grape juice is consecrated for those who cannot take wine in Communion

1993 Liturgy Committee presents Mary Ramerman with an alb and half-stole

1993 First gay union is celebrated--in a couple's home

1994 Downtown Workers Mass is started to affirm people in their work environment

1996 Parishioners gather at Hall of Justice as Fr. Jim Callan is brought to trial for demanding that a tape be returned from a man who recorded it while spying on a gay and lesbian meeting

1996 Mary Ramerman begins hearing confessions during Reconciliation Services at the request of women who are uncomfortable confessing to men

1997 Church renovations include wheelchair ramp, accessible rest room, and chair lift

### **Other important parts of Corpus Christi history**

1976 Thursday Night Mass begins

1977 Silver Lake Retreats begin

1978 Parish divests itself of stocks and bonds and stops using income from Bingo

1978 First house donated to the church; sixteen more to follow. Over 100 cars donated to staff members (parish had over 70 paid employees by 1998)

1988 Parishioners provide no-interest loans of \$100,000 to fund interior church renovations

1990 Corpus Christi School moves to Oxford Street and continues to operate. Bingo departs permanently

1991 Services are held to denounce the Gulf War and pray for the people

1992 Heart of the City Retreats