



About 300 residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center gather for a communion dinner, the first ever at the center. S.I. Advance Photo by Irving Silverstein

## 1st communion dinner held for retarded

The Rev. Arnold Ostlund stood before a microphone. He read passages from the Bible and then asked the 300 persons seated in the audience to partake in communion — to eat a wafer and drink wine, the symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Some ate, some didn't. Some understood, but most seemingly didn't.

Nevertheless, for the residents of Staten Island Developmental Center who gathered last night, the communion dinner had significance.

It was the first of what is expected to become an annual event at the Willowbrook center for the retarded, a combination communion and dinner. The Rev. Ostlund, for 16 years a Protestant chaplain at the center, called it an agape (or love) festival.

And secondly, the dinner and communion was only possible this year because the center's population has been reduced to a level that made the event manageable, with residents coming by bus from their living units to a large hall on the 382-acre grounds.

Ironically, for the Rev. Ostlund and the other chaplains at the state center, the movement of residents from the center to small community residences has made their job — along with many others — much more difficult.

Many of the center's former residents were higher functioning persons who were able to understand the Bible and its concepts of God and Christ. Now, the teaching process becomes more difficult.

That fact, the Rev. Ostlund said in his sermon last night, is of little concern. "God will not give examinations before we enter heaven," he said. "He will only ask how much we love."

Furthermore, he continued, "God does not ask that we understand why we take communion. He simply asks that we do."

"God's work is not limited to our understanding," the Rev. Ostlund said.

The communion was followed by the singing of hymns by members of the choir of Immanuel Lutheran Church, New Springville.