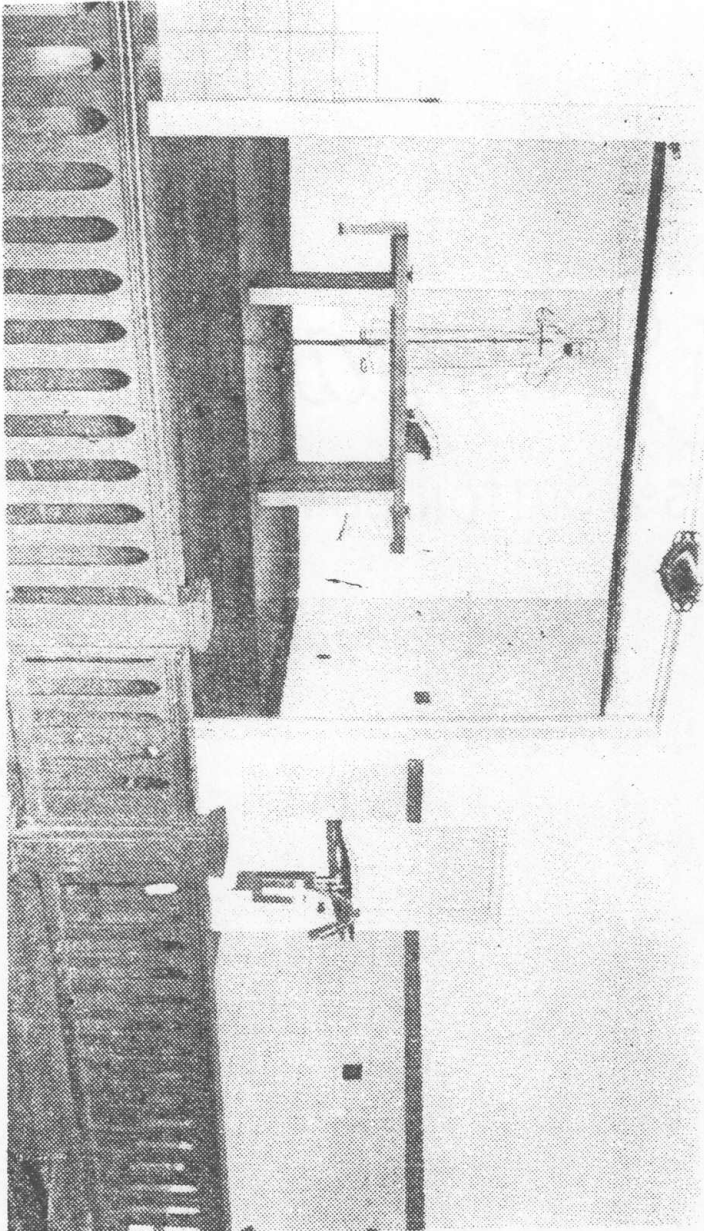


SIDC chaplains carry on ministries



The "chapel" arrangement at one end of the expansive auditorium in SIDC's Building 3 accommodates both Christian and Jewish services. A sliding door covers the Christian altar and wall hanging of Christ, leaving the podium and the suspended lamp for Jewish worship.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns



Rabbi Philip Goldberg holds the Torah that he uses in services at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

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By SHEILA CHASE

Advance Staff Writer

How does a clergyman talk about God to an adult with the mind of a child?

Rabbi Philip Goldberg and the Rev. James Malley, the two remaining chaplains at the Staten Island Developmental Center, have 49 years of experience between them communicating spirituality to the center's clients.

There's probably no one left there who remembers when Rabbi Goldberg began his ministry there. The same is true of Father Malley, though compared to the rabbi's 30 years, the priest's 19 make him seem like a newcomer.

With every turnover among staff and residents at the scan-

dalized and scrutinized deinstitutionalized institution, the two chaplains have hung on to go on about their business.

Both men have found it necessary — emotionally and practically — to expand their ministries to include the clients who now live in community-based group homes. But at the center they still conduct weekly services in the sparse chapel at one end of the auditorium in Building 3, teach catechism classes and offer counseling and informal moral support, as they have since they started.

Teaching religion to the retarded is a matter of getting it down to basics, they said.

The rabbi says there is no one left in the institution who can understand the teaching behind

the Jewish customs: "If they can understand religion or anything about it, they're out."

The residents who remain are, for the most part, too severely disabled to be placed in community homes.

But the rabbi still holds simple holiday celebrations, such as the Passover seder, for residents of the institution and foster and group homes in the community.

Father Malley has developed a catechism stripped to its bare essentials. He teaches his students about "being good" and "being friendly with God."

Some of his students are very sensitive spiritually, he said. "When I first came here, a doctor said to me, 'the idea of God is a concept. How can you teach them that?'"

"I don't think God is a concept. He's a reality," continues Father Malley.

He speaks of God as another person in their lives. In teaching about prayer, he says to them: "Try to be friendly with God by talking to him."

"I had a lot of education coming here myself," Father Malley said. "It helped me understand my own faith. What are the essentials? What can you do without?"

When it was full, SIDC was like any other parish, Father Malley said.

"It was like a small city," Rabbi Goldberg said, with nearly 6,000 residents and six chaplains to serve them all.

There were religious and social organizations, even choirs. There used to be a lot of center volunteers who joined as well, Father Malley said. "Now we don't have the numbers. Everything's phasing down. I miss it and the people who used to be here."

Page 2
43

They miss him, too. "They call and come to see me. They keep track of me," the priest muses.

The rabbi also has his ties. When a young man ran away from a group home recently, the administrators called Rabbi Goldberg. "They knew he'd come to me," he said.

Adaptable as the two chaplains are, they live in a kind of limbo. They've been waiting for the place to close for years.

"I thought I'd be gone by now," Father Malley, who lives in St. Mary's of the Assumption parish in Port Richmond, said. He used to share the position of Roman Catholic chaplain with another priest. That was in the days when there were 700 at mass every Sunday. Now there are an average of 30.

Rabbi Goldberg reports a similar decline, from 1,600 to 200 — and the latter number includes clients at the Karl Warner Center on the SIDD grounds.

With the decline, the rabbi, who used to live on the grounds and now resides in Brooklyn, has become the Protestant chaplain as well.

They may be the last remaining staff members who remember the many years before the scandals about conditions at Willowbrook and the ensuing court cases. "The big stink," Father Malley called them.

Each said change has been for the better. But they said blame was misplaced and there was a lot of unnecessary trampling by people who came in, did their damage and left.

Ironically, the rabbi said, after the court order barred ad-

missions to the institution. "I had parents tearing off my door, begging for placements." As evidence, he picked up a letter with such a request that was written just months ago.

"The group homes are better than what they had here," Rabbi Goldberg said. But he added that with the transition there was a lapse in religious care for a while: "When the (group home) doors were opened, nothing was being done as far as religion."

In the mid '70s, when admissions were stopped and clients were moved out, deinstitutionalization fever ran so high that group home residents were not permitted to come back to the developmental center for the weekly mass they were used to attending, Father Malley said.

But neither was it easy for the mentally retarded to find places in houses of worship in the community, the chaplains said.

The rabbi now focuses his efforts on making sure those in the community get religious programs. He pushes consciousness raising programs such as the "Access Sabbaths" designed to open congregations up to the disabled. He is working on getting a kosher group home for Staten Island. He reports, happily, that the Jewish Community Center provides a Sunday school and transportation for group home residents.

"Right now, I'm more active in the community. I'm expecting the institution to close," he said. And he wants to be sure that clients "get what they got here — top religious care."

107-3