

By SHEILA CHASE

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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."

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