

## Every person's unique gift is honored

By CAROL BELL

GLADSTONE, MICH.

"I haven't heard the words 'clergy' and 'laity' in over five years," says Ellen Jensen, an elementary school teacher and member of Trinity Episcopal Church. She is smiling, animated, enthusiastic. "The whole community shares equally in leadership. So a call to ordination here is no more important than any other call."

Trinity Church is a community of Christians who live and worship and minister in a city of about 5,000 in the heart of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. A decade ago this church might easily have been described as survival-oriented, fear-driven, isolated, deprived or burned out. But today, Trinity is a vital and energetic community of women and men and children.

"Each of us knows he has a unique place in the community; each of us knows she is a unique part of the body of Christ," says Carol Clark, a retired nurse, whose whole demeanor communicates hope and courage.

Maria Maniaci, a longtime member who works at Mead Paper Co., says, "Leadership here is very broad-based. We never look to any one person to make decisions. Everyone in the congregation is part of the leadership." She adds, "It's amazing. It's very life-giving. This is what I imagine the early church must have been like."

The egalitarian leadership described by these members of Trinity Church is not unusual in the Diocese of Northern Michigan. Over the course of the last 15 years, the diocese has gained worldwide recognition as a pioneer in the development of such models for the revitalization and empowerment of small churches.

"Only a decade ago," elementary-school teacher Sue Jamison says, "Trinity Church was organized quite differently. For a few years we would have a priest. But then he — it was always he, of course — would leave. When he left, the congregation would pitch in, minister, worship, keep the community alive. Then a new priest would arrive. And we'd sit back and wait for the ordained person to tell us what to do. It was sad. But that's the way it was."

"In 1987 all that changed," Carol Clark says. "Along with many other congregations in this diocese, we embarked on a discovery process, in which the gifts of every member were identified and affirmed.

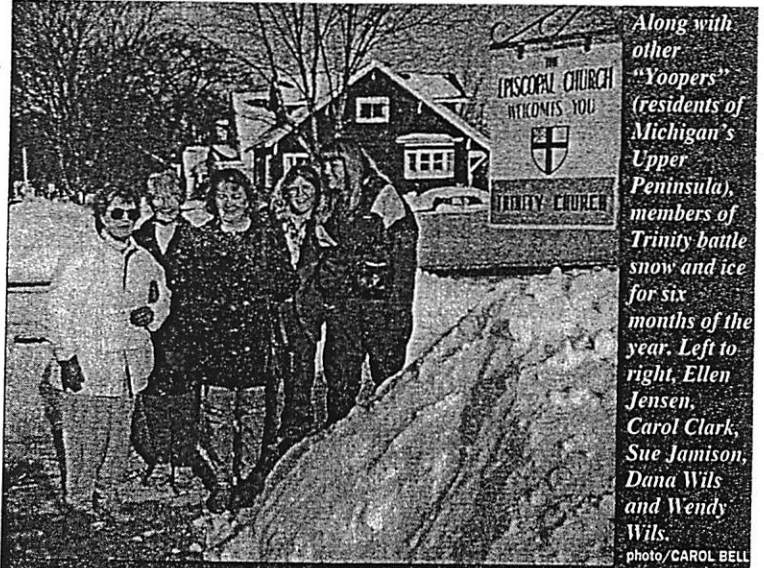
After that, the vestry called 12 of us to form a covenant group. And the covenant group met biweekly for about three years."

She describes the covenant group process, in which both theological education and community-building received major emphasis. A seminary-educated regional missionary served, and continues to serve, as consultant and resource to Trinity. But missionaries in the Diocese of Northern Michigan are just that — consultants; they are never "in charge."

After three years, the covenant group was commissioned as a ministry support team, with two of them ordained priest, two ordained to the diaconate, and five called to be preachers. Others were commissioned as coordinators of the various ministries of the church. The purpose of the ministry support team is not to "deliver ministry" to the congregation, but rather to develop and support the ministry of everyone at Trinity. "And in the discovery process, we always looked at *people*, not at tasks that needed to be done," Sue Jamison says.

Since that first commissioning, the parish has undergone a second discovery process. Now a new covenant group has nearly completed three years of preparation. According to Wendy Wils, who works during the week as a secretary, the leadership model at Trinity engenders real freedom. "We don't burn out — because we can always say no if we need to," she says.

Empowerment, equality, shared responsibility, dynamic interaction, pure joy: again and again these qualities are spoken of by the people of Trinity Church. "We thought we knew each other before we embraced the new model," Carol Clark says, "but now we have achieved such strong bonding,



Along with other "Yoopers" (residents of Michigan's Upper Peninsula), members of Trinity battle snow and ice for six months of the year. Left to right, Ellen Jensen, Carol Clark, Sue Jamison, Dana Wils and Wendy Wils.

photo/CAROL BELL



A catechumenal group meets at Trinity. Left to right, Duane Wils, Wendy Wils, Betty Kempf, Maria Maniaci and Ellen Jensen.

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such closeness. It's wonderful." Naturally, over the course of the last 10 years, conflicts have arisen. However, a commitment to openness, honest discourse and prayer always seems to have prevailed. "Certainly we disagree, often very strongly disagree, but we've always managed to work through the issues," Jamison says.

Ellen Jensen adds, "This is important: At Trinity we have not 'raised up' a select few to be our leaders. We have affirmed the leadership of all. We're all in this together, young and old!" ■

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