

Mary Magdalene Church was founded June 17, 2009 by Rev. Denise Donato and a board of six trustees including: Lynne Hamilton, Deb Lense, Mike & Kathy McCarthy Proulx, Meridith Ruder and Denise's husband Phil Donato. The dream of Mary Magdalene Church began as a call in the heart of Rev. Denise Donato several months earlier, but to understand the history of this church, we have to start several years earlier with Corpus Christi Church in Rochester, NY.

Denise and her family joined Corpus Christi Church in 1991, and Denise was hired as the Family Minister in 1995. Corpus was a thriving downtown parish, which boasted weekly mass attendance of more than 2,500 people each week. Corpus had a heart for the poor and worked tirelessly to meet the needs of those who were often marginalized in society through its seven outreaches. These included a recovery house for those deal with addictions, a prison ministry which served both the incarcerated and those who were transitioning back into society, a drop-in center which served meals and provided overnight shelter in the winter months, a health center which served the uninsured and underinsured, a hospice house, clothing closet and child-care center. Corpus Christi not only ministered to the poor through acts of mercy, it was a progressive church which spoke for justice in church and society. Among other things spoke out against capital punishment, promoted peace, and actively ministered to the glbt community and worked for justice for this marginalized group.

As a progressive church, Corpus Christi supported some practices that were not approved by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1985 a gay couple had approached Fr. Jim Callan (pastor of Corpus Christi Church) and asked him to formally bless their relationship through a commitment ceremony. Same-sex marriage remained under the radar screen for several years. In addition, at every Mass, all people were invited to receive communion, regardless of religious affiliation, marital status, or beliefs. (Roman Catholic teaching held that Catholics in good standing were the only ones who were to receive from the Eucharistic Table. This exclusive practice even excluded Catholics who were divorced from receiving this sacrament.) On top of this, women were seen as equals in ministry and liturgical roles. This was reflected through Mary Ramerman's job title; she was the "associate pastor" as opposed to "pastoral associate," (the approved title for women who worked in leadership within the church.) In addition, Mary Ramerman offered the opening and closing prayers during Mass, and stood at the altar during the consecration. While Mary did not pray the words of consecration, she did hold up the wine or grape juice whenever the elements were raised together during the liturgy. Finally, during the week, Mary Ramerman, Denise Donato, and other women. would preside over communion services at the noon liturgy.

Many of these liturgical practices had been occurring for several years and were a breath of fresh air for many who found their way to Corpus Christi, but not for all. A few ultra-conservative watch dogs would frequent the parish, not to enjoy the liturgy, but to record details and file reports to the Diocese of Rochester, and the Vatican.

In December of 1997, Fr. Jim Callan published a book, "the Studentbacher Corporation" which outlined these controversial practices in detail. But perhaps the last straw came on Father's Day 1998. Doug Mandalero, religion reporter from the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, had interviewed Denise Donato for an article on women's ordination, that he was writing for the religious section of the Friday paper. Somewhere along the line, this story was moved to the front page of the paper on Father's Day. The front page centerpiece, was a picture of Denise Donato holding up a host and chalice at a Communion Service at Corpus Christi Church. It was later learned that one of the conservative watchdogs had faxed this article and picture to Cardinal Ratzinger, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the portion of the hierarchy that was responsible for preserving the purity of the faith.

In August, 1998, then Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict, wrote a letter to Bishop Matthew Clark, calling for the removal of Fr. Jim Callan from his position as pastor of Corpus Christi Church. The weekend of August 15-16, Fr. Jim and the staff of Corpus Christi Church, including Denise Donato, brought this news to the community. The reaction of the community was monumental. People were outraged. These were not just Fr. Jim's values, but these values were shared by the community at large. Twelve hundred people packed the church for an impromptu meeting Sunday night, August 16<sup>th</sup>. People were lining the aisles, sitting around the altar and standing in the doorways. Many were turned away as it was physically impossible to add any more people to the church.

That night the community was organized into several groups whose purposes were to, organize prayer vigils and protests, connect with other area churches for support, write letters to the diocese and Vatican, organize educational meetings for community members, and connect with the media. Six hundred people added their names and their energy to these committees, which came under the umbrella name of the Spring Committee, taking its name from a Haitian proverb: "You can cut away some of the flowers, but you can't hold back the spring."

Over the course of the next four months, seven more staff members (including Denise Donato) were fired and several more resigned. Corpus Christi Church was decimated. The 2,500 hundred people who attended Mass dropped to less than 250 when all was said and done. The staff members who were fired or left, in concert with the Spring Committee began to meet weekly at the Downtown Presbyterian Church and Spiritus Christi Church was born.

Spiritus Christi Church defines itself as a "Christ-centered Catholic Church reaching beyond the institutional church to be inclusive of all." It maintained the inclusive values and practices of Corpus Christi, but found it essential to take one more large step in regard to women being equal by pursuing ordination for Mary Ramerman and Denise Donato. The new community began a process of discernment which included prayer, education and discernment regarding why we might want, or not want,

to pursue ordination, explored options, and interviewed bishops. Through this process the community decided on Bishop Peter Hickman, the presiding bishop of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. As Mary Ramerman was now pastor of Spiritus Christi, she was ordained first in November of 2001. Denise was ordained a deacon in April, 2002 and was ordained to the priesthood on Feb. 22, 2003. ([link to Denise Donato](#))

In 2008, Rev. Denise began to feel like God was calling her beyond her work at Spiritus Christi, to something new. In October, this call became much more specific. She felt God calling her to begin a new community. Over the next several months this call became stronger and more defined. She became aware that many people were yearning for a new experience of church, however for any number of reasons, many of them would never go downtown to Spiritus Christi Church. She realized there was a need for an inclusive Catholic Church closer to her home in Fairport and she felt God calling her to be the one to bring that to fruition. This call was affirmed over and over again.

The first affirmation occurred in January, when Denise made an individual retreat. One of the goals of this retreat time was to determine if God was in fact, calling her in new directions. During the retreat she went for a massage at the Body Mind Center connected with Thompson Hospital in Canadaigua. As soon as the massage therapist learned that Denise was a priest, she asked Denise if she was looking for a job, as the hospital chaplain had just announced his retirement plans that morning!! Denise immediately knew that God's message in this was "Don't worry about your financial future, I will provide for you."

Following the retreat, Denise was with a friend at a coffee shop. As they were sitting in a back corner, Denise quietly began talking about her feeling that God was calling her to leave Spiritus Christi and begin a new community. As Denise was leaving, a woman sitting in the front of the shop looked up. Seeing Denise she pumped her fist in the air and said "Denise Donato, hooray for you!!" While its proximity to the discussion Denise was just having was uncanny, come to find out the woman knew Denise 30 years ago and had followed Denise's journey to ordination via the media. The incident represented another unexpected way that God was encouraging her to take this next step.

Experiences like these confirmed the call for Denise and gave her the confidence to take the next step, and bring all of this to the staff at Spiritus Christi. When Denise shared how she had felt God working in her life of late, the way she felt God calling her and the experiences she had that appeared to be affirming the call, Sr. Margie responded "Clearly this call is coming from God, so where do you go from here?"

As Denise began to vision this new church she found her self continually talking about it was the pronoun "we." "We'll" be an inclusive church. "We'll" have programing for children, etc. A few times people said to her "Who's we?" Denise always responded

“I don’t know yet. That will depend upon who God brings in the doors. All I know is that this church is not about me. The community that gathered will be in charge of its formation and direction. I’m just the one called to help it happen.”

Mary Magdalene Church began in rented space at Mountain Rise Church of Christ in Perinton on June 14, 2009. There were approximately 80-90 people at that first Mass. Some came from Spiritus Christi to provide support, others were searching for a new spiritual home, and some came just because they were curious. Upon returning home from that very first Mass, Rev. Denise received an email from a woman she didn’t know. This woman had learned of Mary Magdalene Church when she came to Fairport Canal Days, where Denise had a booth announcing the opening of a new Catholic Church. The email said “I cried through the whole Mass. I feel like I’ve been searching for Mary Magdalene Church all of my life.” Rev. Denise responded “Many of us have been searching for Mary Magdalene Church and we are just now finding one another!”

For the first few months Mass was held monthly, it then moved to twice a month. It quickly became clear that we needed to find a space to accommodate us on Sunday mornings. Finding a church with these parameters proved impossible, but we realized that we could create church wherever we were, as long as we found a place that was available to us at the time we needed. In December 2009 we moved into an office building at 401 Main St, East Rochester, NY. We converted this space, which even served as a bank at some point, into a church, and we began celebrating Mass every Sunday morning at 10:00. Then at the end of April 2013 we moved into our current location at Trinity Lutheran Church at 1008 Main Street.

Mary Magdalene Church is a small but very vibrant church community. Our congregation is diverse in regard to age, sexuality, marital and economic status. Our parishioners range from less than one year old to mid-eighties. In addition to our sanctuary, we have a small chapel with crosses on the wall to remember the children that parishioners have lost through the years. We are active in the East Rochester Association of Churches and have an active children’s ministry.

Join us at 10:00 on Sunday mornings for homilies that you will find relatable, an inclusive church community, joyful celebrations with moments of quiet reflection, a community that reaches out to support one another and our neighbors, and a Eucharistic table where everyone is welcome!