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Let's join hands. The Rev. Mark Ford and parishioners pray at St. Jude's Church, located on a Navajo reservation in Tuba City, Ariz. Ford left a wealthy parish in Dallas to take the five-year assignment at two of the nation's poorest parishes.

Priest's ordeal wins over his parish

■ Reverend overcomes addiction and resurrects his commitment in the process.

By Bryan Woolley
The Dallas Morning News

TUBA CITY, Ariz. — The Rev. Mark Ford's life as a young priest in a wealthy Catholic parish in Dallas spoiled him, he knows now.

People at Holy Trinity Church showered him with gifts, affection and admiration. They called him "Father Wonderful." They pressed \$100 bills into his hands and told him to "buy a little something" for himself.

"I was taken care of," the 33-year-old priest says.

But as a priest of the Order of St. Vincent de Paul, he's obligated to serve the poor. So he volunteered for a five-year hitch on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. And when he arrived in 1994 to begin his service in Tuba City and Page, he knew he had landed in a different world.

Ford's parishes are among the poorest in the United States.

Page is a blue-collar town of about 8,000 that grew up on the shore of Lake Powell. Tuba City, also about 8,000, is bordered by the Hopi villages of Upper and Lower Moenkopi.

Most of the priests who have gone there haven't stayed long.

"When a priest leaves here, he nev-

er comes back," Ford says.

"It takes the people here — especially the Navajos — a long while to trust you. They were very distant. ... I could develop no relationships.

The first year, he painted and fixed up the two rectories, started youth groups and generally tried to get things moving.

But time moves slowly here. Ford became bored and lonely and depressed. During his second year, he realized he was in trouble.

"My way of dealing with my depression was to spend money."

He bought new vestments, new books for the church libraries and the like. But those items weren't in his parish budgets, and the balances in the checkbooks were shrinking at an alarming rate.

Then an accountant from the diocese drove out to take a look at the books. He said, "This is not good."

"All of a sudden I found myself with real depression and needing help," Ford says.

He entered a program in Albuquerque run by the Servants of the Paraclete, who treat Catholic priests who suffer from addiction, depression and other illnesses. They made Ford tear up his credit cards and face the fact that he's a compulsive spender. He entered a 12-step program.

The treatment and the recovery program have changed his life and his sense of himself, he says. They also changed the way his parishio-

ners regarded him.

"I came back. The people here had never experienced a priest who came back. It was really a keen thing for me and for the parishes that I came back. The people had seen me at my worst, and now they see me feeling good about myself."

Since his return, he has started a program called "Learning to Live Sober," to help both Catholics and non-Catholics deal with addictions. He also helped establish a soup kitchen at the church that serves as many as 165 people ever Friday.

Ford has established strong youth groups at both churches. A number of the teen-agers drop by from time to time and talk with him.

"He's an inspiration," says John Holman, a high school senior in Page. "Each of us has his questions and doubts about God, and we talk about those. He makes us feel comfortable, coming to the church."

And Ford has gained experience, self-confidence and humility.

"Even though it's very desolate, there's something about the land here that's very spiritual," he says. "There's something about this desert that brings the best and the worst out of a person."

"I've had some very empty moments here, but I've also had some very deep spiritual experiences here."

"The desert can bring you so close to God."