

Building relationships with young people

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Like most religious congregations in the United States today, ours has fewer sponsored institutions and fewer sisters ministering in them. Historically, about 75 percent of us were in schools and religious education. Now less than 20 percent of us are ministering in those areas. As a mission-focused congregation, we are at our best when we choose to focus on possibilities rather than diminishment. That mission focus became visible in 2016 at our General Chapter.

Over months of discussions and prayer, we created and adopted a General Chapter Enactment stating: “Rooted in the joy of the Gospel, we will embrace and nurture our rich diversity, commit ourselves to deepening our relationships with one another, invite others to vowed and associate life, and expand collaboration for the sake of the mission.”

Following Chapter, our vocation director used an adapted version of the World Cafe process, (theworldcafe.com) to find out where sisters were in their own thoughts about inviting young women to join our congregation. We were asked to discuss three questions:

1. Do you want to invite new members?
2. What are the challenges in inviting new members?
3. What will we/I do to promote new membership?

Most of us expressed a desire to continue to invite and support women discerning a call to religious life. However, many individuals mentioned that while they support inviting new members, this task has become difficult for them because they no longer regularly meet younger women in their lives or ministries.

We listed a number of challenges in living out this enactment: young people have limited exposure and familiarity with women religious today because there are not as many of us in active ministry as in prior years. Many young people also lack a solid religious foundation, partly due to the strong secular influence in society; as a group they tend to find organized religion hypocritical and judgmental. Further, many young adults have substantial college debt to pay off, a very real and practical concern for them. There’s also an age gap between current religious and younger women that could

lead to inadequate peer support in their religious life journeys, not providing the close community life they seek.

Believing it's possible to collectively dream of concrete actions to promote religious life, we brainstormed events ranging from parish youth groups to collaboration with campus ministers. We agreed to move forward.

Our readiness to receive young adults

As a Vocation Team we are seeking young women who are Catholic and aged 19-35. When we began our efforts to consciously invite young women to our life, we called sisters in active ministries across the country. Among the questions we asked were: who was the adult who invited you to consider religious life? What do you observe about the ministry involvement of young adults in your parish? And we asked them for suggestions for developing relationships with this age cohort.

Most sisters initially said, "Oh, I don't know any young adults." My next question was, "Do you go to Mass in a parish? Are there any young adults there?" I could almost hear the light bulb click on after that!

Our conversations then led to their co-workers in ministry and to where young adults are present in parishes, vicariates, and dioceses. If we no longer have positions in schools or parish religious education, we must make the effort to go to places where young adults are. When we meet them, we need to initiate the conversation.

Relationship development also is possible in any sponsored institutions our congregations might have. Our young-adult co-workers know us and our charisms in a way the young adults attending a parish event do not. There are possibilities for relationships if we're in schools, hospitals, or retreat centers or serving on boards.

Anecdotal research also tells us that young adults with a passion for social justice and service also may be drawn to religious life. Young adults who are part of local community or parish committees and are interested in creating right relationships with Earth and want to undo the influence of racism, consumerism, and other "-isms" are ripe for invitation to become closer to our congregation. Their heart for social justice aligns with our heart's desire. We can provide the needed community support and discernment. Why don't we invite them to walk with us?

We believe that as religious we are in the perfect position to accompany young adults as they integrate their faith with their life. Our relationships with them can provide a sense of belonging and help them to find meaning and purpose in their life. God is still calling women to religious life. When God makes that call, we want to be there to help them examine whether that call could best be responded to in community and ministry with us. The Vocation Team asked sisters and associates to keep their eyes and ears open because God may need them.

We encouraged them not to minimize their part in response to God's call to young adults. "Notice every smile in the grocery store, every 'hello' at Mass or in the dining room. We never know how God will use us." In the Emmaus story recounted in Luke's Gospel, Jesus didn't let the disciples stay where they were in their thinking and beliefs. He made an effort to walk a stretch of the road with them and established a significant relationship with them. Their encounter with him sent them back to tell the community they had seen him—alive!

As our faith develops, we learn how to live it better. Young adults think sharing their faith is something they have to grow into "someday." They don't realize it's their mission, their call, now. They are sent to other young adults. We may have to remind them.

Fostering relationships with young adults

Simply put, we take advantage of the places and opportunities where we already connect with young adults. All of us can pay attention to the young adults around us. Seeing them is a matter of shifting our attention to look for them. While I will give examples of some areas where we sisters and associates are involved, I encourage readers to adapt any of these ideas to their own congregation's needs and abilities. Some of these actions were new for us because of the 2016 Chapter, but others we dusted off as a way to refresh their sparkle. We religious too often diminish the importance to new membership of our well-established connections where we are geographically. To resist that dismissal, the Vocation Team brings forward these connections to remind our sisters of their existence and importance to young women seeking their purpose in life.

Our congregation sponsors Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida and Siena Heights University in Adrian, Michigan. We focus not only on the young adults who attend the universities, but also on relationships with faculty and staff members who work there. Some of these folks are young adults and some have young adult children. All have contacts with young people and can refer those young adults to us—thus how important are these relationships!

Environmental Leadership—One activity we have repeated for the third year is "The Environmental Leadership Experience," during which students from both our universities gathered on the motherhouse grounds for a two-week intensive course in permaculture principles, hands-on planning and gardening, and visits to sites where these principles are practiced. These students, our sisters, and lay co-workers engage with Earth during the day by planting rain gardens, weeding, and harvesting worm castings from our vermiculture (worm compost) bins, and then they have reflection experiences to distill learnings from whatever they have done that day. We ask them to share: What are you experiencing in this work? How are you feeling about it? Where was God in it?

With Siena Heights University located adjacent to our motherhouse, nursing students are paired with individual sisters in our health care center to practice the skills they are learning in classes. They practice taking a patient's history, listening and talking with elders, giving effective feedback, and sharing important information with them. This allows instructors and students to receive feedback as skills improve, but more, it allows the sisters to be in relationships of significance to the young adults.

“Adopt-a-Sister”—We also have a popular program known as “Adopt-a-Sister” in which Siena students are paired with a sister who shares a meal at the motherhouse with the student on a monthly basis. These relationships begin in the first year of university and continue throughout their university experience. Once graduated, many students stay in touch with their “adopted sister.”

Reflection and discernment days—Parishes can be sites that host days of reflection or days of discernment of future choices. A favorite of busy young adults is taking time for the quiet of Eucharistic Adoration and celebration of Mass. To help students deepen their spiritual longings, young adult retreats are offered at both our universities. Our team has been collaborating with several Michigan-based women religious to explore possibilities for offering a discernment day or overnight experience on the skills of discernment, believing we can provide an atmosphere conducive to the quiet and direction that some young adults need.

1-1 Scripture Sharing—Recently, a group of tech-savvy sisters and friars from various congregations in Ohio and Michigan offered “1-1 Scripture Sharing” opportunities conducted through Facetime and other video apps. They discussed the Sunday scriptures in Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. While this effort is still in its infancy, the married and single young men and women who have participated have enjoyed it.

Dominican Young Adults—Dominican men and women across the world have been organizing groups called “Dominican Young Adults” (DYA) into a movement that guides the formation of young people who are interested in Dominican Life. They rely on the knowledge, experience, and wisdom of Dominicans of all ages and depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. DYA members are attracted to Jesus, his message, and the way of living out the Gospel preached by Saint Dominic. We call it DYAM-USA Mission (the official title includes “M” for Movement).

DYA groups start on a college campus or in local parishes. Our Siena DYA members meet each Tuesday evening to pray and plan ways to engage other students in evenings of prayer and scripture sharing. Our campus minister, Sister Mary Jones, O.P., and I have been part of this DYA group. She works with the leaders to plan, and I participate weekly with the students. Their latest adventure was listening to and discussing short podcasts on spiritual topics. The energy and commitment of DYA

members is palpable. This is an example of “accompaniment” in the way the synod on youth and Christus Vivit encourage.

Preaching conferences—Closely akin to DYA are the annual six-day Dominican High School and Dominican College Preaching Conferences that gather students from Dominican schools to explore more deeply the charism of the Dominican Order and how Dominicans live out this charism. Students are challenged and inspired to create the same opportunities at their schools back home. To support young adults with their life choices, our congregation’s website posts a weekly blog on discernment (adriandominicans.org/BecomeaSister/ASisterReflects).

Come and See—Closely aligned with the discernment theme are the “Come and See” discernment retreats we offer, as do many congregations. These experiences encourage consideration of God’s call to religious life, whether in this congregation or another. Some retreats include several young women, others a single young woman. Following those retreats we offer young seekers additional website resources, including a series of three-to-five minute YouTube videos on ways to discern and the stories of individual sisters sharing their call.

These videos are a result of a commitment to increase our use of social media to communicate specific aspects of our lives and involvements. With our communications team we produced short videos on aspects of our charism, stories of call, and topics that arise during discernment.

Social media outreach—At the same time our team began a weekly blog about discernment which is now offered in Spanish and English. Additionally our congregation posts to our Facebook page and appears on Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, as research shows that young women look at these sites regularly. Facebook and e-mail communications let young adults know we’re paying attention so we comment on events important to them. These evoke further face-to-face conversations when we see them in real life.

RU Called?—For those young adults pondering whether their call from God is to religious life, several men and women’s religious congregations in the Michigan-Ohio region jointly host a two-and-a-half hour event titled “RU Called?” The evening features a hot meal, prayer, and two younger religious in formation who share their call story and open up the group to discussion. We try to schedule these events with local college campus ministers who can help us optimize involvement of the college students.

One key element for young adults is “service” because many desire to make a difference in the world. We invite those young people with a sense of service to be tutors at one of our seven Literacy Centers. Their open hearts receive learners and

work with them on reading and math skills. These young tutors receive recognition for their contributions in giving to others. The sisters who also serve at these centers can see changes in awareness in these young tutors as they meet the people with whom our sisters and associates minister.

Opening up our liturgical life—Because of Siena Heights University’s proximity to our motherhouse campus, students, faculty, and staff are regularly invited to our holy rituals: the Triduum, Christmas, and sisters’ profession celebrations. People from the university can also come to retreats and days of reflection at Weber Retreat and Conference Center on our campus.

Going where they are—We also think it is important to go where young people are, and thus sisters attend university events and engage with students while there. The same can be done in local communities where schools and universities may be nearby.

Encouraging our sisters and associates to be in these relationships

After a new Vocation Team replaced the original team, its members knew they needed to keep encouraging members and associates. Thus the team organized a series of three presentations for our whole congregation:

- 1) to share information about characteristics of young adults today and to ask sisters to pray for the 2018 synod on youth,
- 2) to explore our readiness to receive young adults as our potential new members, and
- 3) to examine what it takes to accompany young adults as they go through the transitions of adulthood, especially focusing on young adults pondering a call from God to religious life.

The new Vocation Team plans to continue as coaches for our sisters-as-accompaniers, presenting materials for inspiration, formation and confidence-building. Our intent is to involve as many sisters as possible, whether in compensated or volunteer ministries or retired sisters who participate as prayer partners. We see the accompaniment process simply as asking good questions and listening as we let young adults grapple with their own answers. We want to help them understand the truth, not just the facts about faith in Jesus, so they are transformed when they encounter him, as were the early disciples and as we have been.

Given the chance, we share with these curious young adults where we got our energy, how we discovered Jesus' suffering and how that led us out to marginalized people across the world—in other words, the “why” of our lives. The result of this sharing can be a communion that renews hope in our common humanity, to paraphrase Sister Teresa Maya, C.C.V.I.

Consequently we shift the place of our listening—to young adults. We believe the future will find us a more diverse congregation with generational, ethnic, racial, political, and theological differences. The young also can help us get past our discouragement or disillusionment about poor results in attracting large numbers of new members. Their enthusiasm energizes us regardless of their individual vocation path.

We believe young adults long to share what we have—community, meaningful ministry, prayer life, relationships—because these are human qualities for which we all long. Thus we continue our efforts to nurture a culture of vocations.

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