

Eight best practices for encouraging new membership

2020 HORIZON No. 2 Spring — New members have abundant hope

By Carol Schuck Scheiber

Vocation directors often relish the chance to discuss the ins and outs of their ministry with people who understand it well. Members don't always "get it." The public frequently doesn't. And even among practicing Catholics, myths about vocations can abound. How do the many people who contribute to vocation ministry make headway? While there are no one-size fits all solutions, HORIZON hopes these eight best practices—grounded in data and backed up by experience—provide insights that will help your community move forward.

Eleven years ago, the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) published a list of best practices after completing the *2009 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life*. A decade later, the landscape has shifted a bit, but the same best practices are still relevant when it comes to vocation ministry in religious communities.

The following eight best practices are gleaned from the *2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life*, the 2009 study, and an analysis of HORIZON articles on the practice of vocation ministry.

Quick review of 2009 recommendations

The 2009 study included an evaluation of the vocation ministry associated with communities that were receiving new members. The analysis revealed the following, every point of which continues to be relevant:

- Be proactive
- Create a culture of vocations
- Have a vocation director, preferably with a team
- Use media of all types, including online media
- Sponsor discernment programs

- Target young adults in your strategy

While every one of the above points continues to be valid, the best practices outlined below are framed by the latest data and informed additionally by more than a decade of vocation ministry and publishing on the topic. One truism that the 2020 study confirmed is that religious communities in the United States vary substantially: they have unique charisms, distinct financial realities, different ministries, and varied numbers of active and retired members. Thus the capacity to act on each of these best practices is different from one religious order to another. Some communities must be creative with lean budgets.

2020 Best Practices

HORIZON presents the following best practices with a word of encouragement: start where you are, do what you can, and believe that the gift of religious life is worth sharing. The 2020 study confirmed that young people have a desire to grow spiritually, live communally, and perform ministry (including the ministry of prayer). Young adults—and not-so-young adults—seek their path and want guidance. Vocation ministers have the wisdom of their traditions to share with a world that is hungry for that wisdom.

1) Decide you want new members.

This sounds obvious, but in reality a community will not attract and retain new members if the members don't want them, even if this sentiment is not expressed overtly. There are many inadvertent ways to communicate lack of interest: members are too busy, no one is willing to stay up late with a young visitor, or few people will take a turn helping with the college retreat.

On the other hand, in the 2020 study, new members repeatedly report that they were attracted to communities that showed genuine interest in them, their welfare, and their vocation discernment. Community members invited them to events, made them feel welcome, adapted to their youthful energy, and offered them an attractive experience of religious life. These themes arose many times when newer members talked in focus groups about their experiences in joining religious orders.

NRVC's trove of articles about programming and organizing vocation ministry shows a repeated theme of congregations that have consciously worked at instilling a "culture of vocations," which is inextricably tied to wanting new members, which is likewise tied to having a strong, positive communal life to offer.

There are communities that have consciously decided against inviting in new members, but they are a small minority. The best case scenario for communities that desire new members is to decide communally that they want them, have leaders and members that continuously prioritize

that goal, and make ongoing efforts consistent with that goal. Most members need to believe in the community and its future in order for it to have a future.

2) Be all in: lead, fund, staff, and support

Both the 2009 and 2020 studies show a definite correlation between investment in vocation and formation ministry and new membership. Because vocation ministry is about planting seeds that take time to grow, it can be hard to feel gratified by “results,” and members can sometimes shy away from the ministry. Sometimes members are uncertain how to relate to a younger generation, or they prefer to avoid the possibility of an invitation being rejected by not extending one. Whatever hesitations exist, it is crucial to take the ministry seriously, to be “all in.” For maximum effectiveness vocation ministry needs someone—or some group of committed members—to give it focused, ongoing time and attention. This allows the ministry to be adequately staffed and properly funded to realistically pay for the costs involved. Vocation ministers need training in ethics, communications, assessment, sexuality, etc. (all of these are topics of professional workshops offered by the NRVC).

These days it often is a sacrifice to dedicate talented members to a ministry that will cost the community the loss of a paycheck. Still, appointing gifted members to do vocation ministry is a sacrifice that institutes are making for the sake of youth, for the sake of nurturing religious vocations, and for the sake of the institute’s future. Vocation directors and leaders need to work closely together to set strategies and goals that make sense for their community and to build the critical internal support for and communication about the ministry.

3) Go out—and invite in

Certainly many communities are welcoming middle-aged adults, and those new members are precious parts of their communities. However the 2018 synod on youth held in Rome clearly showed how much young people want the vocational guidance that is part and parcel of vocation ministry. The NRVC’s 2020 study confirmed that newer members who joined in their 20s and 30s are usually in communities with big age gaps, but they very much want to be in their communities. Newer members in the latest study report very high satisfaction with their lives as religious.

When newer members met in 13 focus groups around the country, they acknowledged that community life without age peers can be challenging, but the large majority expressed love for their way of life in spite of difficulties. Thus there are two strong reasons to go out to young people and invite them in: they want vocational guidance, and communities must keep inviting or they create a limited future for themselves. Going out to the young means learning where

they are in one's corner of the world and building relationships with them. (See ideas on page 23.)

4) Continuously build relationships

There are no fail-proof techniques for building relationships with your target demographic. The 2009 and 2020 studies both point out that newer members entered communities where they built a relationship with at least one member ... and that led them to the next step, and the next step. Vocation ministers and members of their religious communities reached out, stayed connected, kept inviting, and used many means for doing these things: social media, print and online advertising and promotion, special events, email, blogs, campus retreats, and other means.

Over its 32 years as an organization, the National Religious Vocation Conference has been key to another type of relationship-building that matters: collaborative relationships among vocation and formation ministers from different communities. Through cooperation, groups of ministers are able to do what they cannot do alone: sponsor intercommunity retreats, nun runs, high-school and campus vocation fairs, and many other types of group projects that help people to learn about religious life. Learn of one such initiative on page 29.

5) Address internal issues

If a religious community is experiencing serious deficits in any major area (e.g. quality of communal life, clear identity) those problems will naturally inhibit people from joining. The 2009 and 2020 studies both pointed out that new members are attracted to communities where they can grow in their relationship to God, be part of a joyful community with a genuine communal life, and minister to the people of God. Many communities have taken positive steps to enhance the quality of their communal life. (Outlines of these programs are available at nrvc.net. Go to "Resources," "HORIZON library," "Program outlines.") New members are attracted to authentic, healthy communities, meaning that institutes that are serious about inviting in the next generation must be attentive to internal concerns.

6) Focus on other-centered ministry

Ideally vocation ministry should be outward-looking and other-centered, and, like any ministry, it shouldn't be centered on the gratification of the minister. A sense of healthy focus and balance in the way that vocation ministry is conducted is a theme that comes through in particular in the focus group reports of the 2020 study. In relating their own vocation journeys, newer members

expressed gratitude to those who walked with them, sharing wisdom, allowing them time, understanding that life experience and perspective at age 25 is different from age 45 or 65.

The study participants—members who joined and stayed—by and large feel they have found their genuine vocation, a process that required time and freedom. The challenge for institutes is to maintain a vision that is both outward (What do young people need to help them uncover God’s call for their lives?) and inward (How can we encourage a healthy community? How can we promote our community so that as young people determine their life path, they can consider life with us?)

There is a mystery to the process of vocation discernment, and each person’s journey is unique. Maintaining a focus on the pastoral needs of those making life decisions keeps institutes grounded.

7) Communicate, communicate, communicate

Both the 2009 and 2020 study clearly show that an essential part of vocation ministry is communication. Religious communities need to communicate to multiple audiences. The general public should know that the community exists and is open to new membership. Young people need to brush shoulders with religious; many have never met a Catholic sister, nun, or brother. Others have never spoken directly to a priest. Vocation ministers (sometimes in tandem with communications directors but sometimes without anyone in this role) must get the word out about who the community is, what it is doing, and what opportunities there are for interacting with the community, such as joining it as a volunteer, associate, or lifelong member.

Some communication essentials apply in general. Every community that is welcoming new members is going to need an attractive, updated website that clearly communicates how to get in touch about becoming a member. Religious institutes need to have visibility in their local community and beyond.

Because social media is a crucial form of contemporary communication, communities that want to invite targeted populations ideally have a presence on one or more platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. For plentiful ideas about forms and methods of communication, see NRVC’s online HORIZON library at “Resources” then “NRVC periodicals.”

Communication with the public ideally should steer people toward live contact with the community so that a relationship can be built. For instance, communities can advertise events on NRVC’s VocationNetwork.org calendar (a free service for any community). They might post events such as Eucharistic Adoration, volunteer service, prayer opportunities, open houses, online discussions, or service opportunities. Those events bring people together, allowing a relationship to be formed or furthered.

8) Build a culture of vocations

This final best practice encompasses the seven previous practices and then goes a step or two beyond. To build a culture of vocations means to maintain a broad vision while working in one's own corner of the world. The *2020 Study on Recent Vocations* confirms that people continue to enter religious orders despite predictions to the contrary. To build a culture of vocations brings to mind the adage "think globally, act locally."

In the big picture, the church must always undergo renewal, becoming ever more closely aligned with Christ's vision. From that reenergized church will come forth disciples who want to lay down their lives for the sake of others. A portion of those disciples will be called to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience in consecrated life, but most will lay down their lives in other forms of life—all of which are seen as "vocation."

A culture of vocations sees each baptized person as having a calling to a particular state of life. Young people involved in the 2018 synod on youth asked the church to shift toward an understanding that "vocation" is for everyone. When a culture of vocations exists, all members of the church—parents, grandparents, religious, pastors, teachers, campus ministers—encourage and support the process of discernment that affords each person the time to pray, listen, seek counsel, and choose a path that will give them the most joy and sense of fulfillment.

Religious institutes can help build a "culture of vocations" in the larger church and within their own ranks. In such a culture every member of the community feels responsible for inviting new members, and every member is in ongoing discernment about how best to live his or her calling. When a culture of vocations exists within religious institutes, there is a community-wide prioritization of vocation, and each member gives what he or she can to enrich the community and bring new life.

This larger vision at the local, communal, and global levels spurs us on and but also lets us rest—in the knowledge that discipleship and calling is always and ultimately in the hands of God. Religious communities and those they appoint as vocation ministers plant seeds, water, and give praise to the God of the harvest as each generation bears new fruit.

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