

# HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

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## YOUNG MEMBERS REFLECT ON STUDY, MAKING VOCATION TRANSITIONS WORK

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# HORIZON



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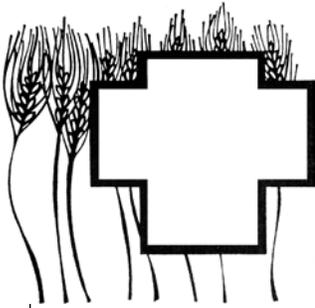
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# HORIZON

HORIZON began as a vocation journal in 1975. Today, as a quarterly publication, it serves a readership of more than 2000 in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries.

## HORIZON serves as a resource:

- To assist vocation directors in their professional and personal growth as ministers;
- To educate and engage educators, directors of retreat centers, formation personnel, community leadership, bishops, campus ministers, librarians, priests, religious, laity, and anyone interested in vocations and their role in vocation ministry.

## HORIZON has a threefold purpose:

- To provide timely and contemporary articles relative to vocation ministry;
- To provide an opportunity for the exchange of ideas on pertinent issues in the field of vocations;
- To highlight some of the current resources available.

## National Religious Vocation Conference

HORIZON is published by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The NRVC is an organization of men and women committed to the fostering and discernment of vocations. It provides services for professional vocation directors and others who are interested and involved in vocation ministry. It proclaims the viability of religious life and serves as a prophetic, creative, life-giving force in today's church.

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

## Season for change

**I** DON'T RECALL MANY of my college lectures, but, surprisingly, I still remember my freshman English teacher quoting Ecclesiastes and telling us that the summation of human wisdom is to know the “season” we are in and to act accordingly. That gave me pause (in part because I was astonished that he would quote the Bible in the secular environment of my campus).

As the years roll by, I understand better the insight of Ecclesiastes. “To every thing there is a season.” How much wiser that is than the advice served up in business books cheerleading us to embrace the sometimes senseless or even cruel changes in our workplaces. In Ecclesiastes, we see that with God’s gift of wisdom, we can perceive the moment and respond appropriately in faith. Our response often involves a change.

This edition of *HORIZON* contains a strong theme of change, of the shifting of seasons. In our lead article newer members note the changes their communities are undergoing and the changes in this new era of religious life. They reflect on their own experiences of religious life in light of the findings of the 2009 NRVC-CARA study. The study continues to filter through religious communities. As this edition goes to press, the National Religious Vocation Conference is formulating a vocation action plan based on the data and the expertise of those who gathered in September for the “Moving Forward in Hope” symposium.

In addition to looking at what young religious have to say about the NRVC-CARA study, this edition also directly examines transitions within vocation ministry—whether they involve moving on from vocation ministry (page 16) or helping welcome a new member (page 20).

A new ministry or a new member are both big deals. But sometimes change comes in small packages, such as starting a new program or project. This edition offers “Secrets to successful service projects” (page 26), with tips on organizing or tweaking a service venture. We also offer guidance for beginning to use the powerful tool of Facebook for vocation ministry (page 31).

Finally some changes take generations. The racial divisions in our nation and in Western culture at large require the healing of many change agents. Our book review (page 33) and resource list (page 36) address ways that we might be one of these agents of healing within our own communities. As the article points out, racial reconciliation has a direct link to vocation ministry.

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). This is our season to be vocation ministers. May we each apply ourselves with the shrewdness of a serpent and the heart of a lamb.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor,  
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Young members of religious communities find their own experiences reflected in the NRVC-CARA study. They are hopeful and have plenty of ideas about how to build a future.

# Young voices respond to the NRVC-CARA study of new members

BY SISTER ELIZABETH KOVACS, SCC; BROTHER JESÚS ALONSO, CSC; SISTER KAREN OWENS, SSJ; AND PATRICK GILGER, SJ

## STUDY RINGS TRUE

By Sister Elizabeth Kovacs, SCC

“**Y**OU’RE THE YOUNGEST NUN I’ve ever seen! Are you for real?!” Yes, at age 26, I get that a lot. Many people are incredulous that young men and women are still answering God’s call to the priesthood and religious life in today’s society. According to the 2009 study conducted by the Center for Applied Research of the Apostolate (CARA) for the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC), there are currently over 2,600 men and women in initial formation throughout the country. And here’s an even more positive finding: they are *happy and fulfilled* by the religious lifestyle.

In two years I hope to profess perpetual vows as a Sister of Christian Charity (SCC), and I am now working as an emergency department nurse at Holy Spirit Hospital in Camp Hill, PA. My religious vocation is everything to me.

When I read the results of the NRVC-CARA study on recent vocations, I found the majority of findings extremely encouraging. The executive summary states that, on the whole, new members prefer the “... traditional style of religious life in which members live together in community and participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together. They also wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the church and the teachings of the magisterium.” Without hesitation I must say that I

wholeheartedly agree with these preferences. The results corresponded with my own sense of religious life in several areas.

## Eucharist, devotions essential

The study concluded that the Millennial Generation (those born after 1982) highly values the importance of Eucharistic

### ***What is the NRVC-CARA study?***

In August 2009 the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate published “Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference” (NRVC). Since its release, the report has elicited great interest from individuals and organizations in the U.S. and abroad. NRVC has given numerous presentations about it, and religious communities are studying and acting on the findings. A commission of multi-disciplinary church professionals gathered in September 2010 under the banner “Moving Forward in Hope” to strategize ways the church can respond to the study results.

adoration, daily Mass and Divine Office. Jesus in the Eucharist is our life-source; therefore we consider it vital to reverence this gift. I am convinced that, should we neglect Eucharistic devotion, our lives will lose direction, and we will soon forget the reason we entered religious life in the first place. Celebrating daily Mass together and praying before the Blessed Sacrament unites us in ways deeper than we can appreciate. It is God's work within us that enables us to stay together. Left to our own human resources, we would lose tolerance for life in community! Jesus Christ is our life's sole purpose and unites us as sisters—nothing else has this power.

## Ministry not top priority

While ministry is essential to apostolic religious life, it is not the highest priority. The findings suggest that most new members give greater importance to community and spirituality. This resonates with my own experience. During my period of discernment, I wanted to be an SCC so fervently that I didn't care what ministry I was assigned, as long as they accepted me into their community! Their prayer and interactions together attracted me more than their apostolic works.

CARA also found that new members seem to have strong preference for serving in ministry with other members of their religious institute. This definitely has many advantages. At the hospital where I work my nurse manager happens to be one of the sisters of my community. Her presence there has really helped me to adjust to my role in the emergency department.

She strongly encourages an environment of Christ-like service for all our patients. She shows our staff compassion, goes to funerals, prays with patients and their family members, and visits sick employees who are unable to work. She is an excellent role model for me, and I am grateful for her support, understanding and advice.

While ministry is essential to religious life, it is not the highest priority. The findings suggest that most new members give greater importance to community and spirituality. This resonates with my own experience.

## The habit matters

I was not surprised that the study concluded that the religious habit is an important factor for most new members. The study showed that the religious habit is more highly valued by Millennial new members than by new members from the Vatican II Generation. In our congregation, the generation gaps are most evident when the issue of the habit is raised. At our last provincial Chapter, this issue sparked some controversy. The eldest and youngest members sought to maintain the existing regulations regarding the habit, while the middle-aged sisters preferred broader and more lenient regulations. Our habit consists of the veil and a simple, modest black and white skirt and blouse or black or white dress.

To me the witness of the religious habit is invaluable. It allows others to know, just by looking at me, what I stand

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for and whom I represent. The patients who come into our emergency room usually react positively to my religious attire. Most are surprised that all nuns aren't at least 70 nowadays! I've also found that my coworkers try harder to control their language and their topics of conversation when I am around. With my prominent white habit, they can't easily forget that there's a nun present!

## Community life core to calling

The study reported that most new members regard community life as very important. Living, praying, working together, and having a "sense of a common purpose" is

I consider community life one of the main reasons to enter religious life. What distinguishes us as consecrated persons is our life in community.

strongly desired by those entering religious institutes today. I consider community life one of the main reasons to enter religious life. We can all do charitable works in the name of God as laypersons, but what distinguishes us as consecrated persons is our life in community. We give witness to

others that life together in peace and joy is a possibility. Our collective witness serves as an eschatological sign of the Kingdom.

It is quite interesting that, statistically, religious institutes whose members live alone are less likely to attract new members. Young people today are thirsting for belonging. We want to be a part of something that is greater than ourselves, and we need the presence and guidance of our experienced members. I value the fact that I live with 23 other sisters, many of whom are involved in the hospital or one of our congregation's schools.

## Witness of members has impact

Eighty-five percent of new members say that the example of the members of their communities strongly attracted them. The members' "sense of joy, their down to earth nature and their commitment and zeal ... were extremely influential on their choice to enter a particular religious institute."

The example of the sisters definitely had a huge impact

on my decision to enter the Sisters of Christian Charity. They provided gentle encouragement during my discernment, leaving me free to discern and make my own choices. My sophomore theology teacher, an SCC, was my best guide during this process. I often went to her—in private, of course, so the other kids wouldn't think I was weird—and asked questions about her life, as well as about her personal discernment before she entered the community. She used to say, "Pray very diligently. And after a while, if it is God's will that you enter, you'll just know it." Just know?! I was looking for concrete answers at that point, not some nebulous response like that!

"Come and See" experiences, discernment retreats, and other opportunities to spend time with members are especially important for the young adult age group, according to CARA. The discernment weekends that the SCCs provided were definitely helpful for me. I met others my age who were also considering religious life, and I found it very beneficial to talk with them about their discernment journeys. These weekends also allowed us to become acquainted with other sisters, including postulants, novices and professed. We were able to hear their vocation stories and ask them questions. I attended several of these experiences and was always very disappointed to see the weekend come to a close.

Sure enough, just as my teacher said, I did come to "just know" that God wanted me to enter the convent. After a period of discerning, visiting the SCC motherhouse, e-mailing and talking with sisters, and checking out various communities on the Internet, I entered the Sisters of Christian Charity right after my high school graduation. I have absolutely no regrets about my decision to enter at age 18. I have always been a happy person, but the joy that I have experienced in my religious life is deeper than I could have ever imagined.

My sisters in community continue to inspire me every day. The witness of their devotion to the Eucharist, our mother foundress, one another, and their ministries truly motivates me. I love them all very much and want to emulate their virtues.

From the results of the CARA study, I know that others share my sentiments. An overwhelming number of young respondents stated how much they value the example of the members of their own religious institutes. Thank you to all the experienced men and women religious for being such great role models for those of us who have many years of service ahead. We're watching you ... no pressure!

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## Challenges of today

No matter how good the example of members is, religious life today still presents newcomers with a number of challenges. The life today is not as structured as it was for our older members years ago. We don't answer to bells as they did, and therefore must constantly strive for a balanced lifestyle. This is not easy when we face overtime at work, parish committees, miscellaneous volunteer projects, and household chores in those convents with elderly and handicapped members.

We also have more freedom of choice today; consequently, more responsibility. We are less likely to have members of our religious institute with us in our workplaces. Do we allow ourselves to blend in with our co-workers, when they engage in negativity or pettiness? We must remain firmly rooted in our vocation, so that we don't lose our personal identity. It's easy to get caught up in mainstream society when we are immersed in it.

There is no adequate way to express my gratitude to God for my religious vocation and my community. He has blessed me abundantly throughout my entire life. I am grateful for the opportunity to write this article and tell others just how wonderful my sisters are.

Will I be able to give witness to Christ as well as my sisters? Not yet, perhaps. But if I keep focused on God, stay rooted in my SCC community, renew my vows daily, and resist temptations, I have hope of becoming the holy witness that God is calling me to be.

*Sister Elizabeth Kovacs, SCC belongs to the Sisters of Christian Charity and works in the Emergency Department of Holy Spirit Hospital in Camp Hill, PA.*



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## LET'S BUILD UP COMMUNITY AND PRAYER

*By Brother Jesús Alonso, CSC*

**T**HE NRVC-CARA STUDY presents a significant opportunity for religious communities to identify what attracts young people to them. Because the study

surveyed multiple generations, it provides insight into the mindset of religious membership as a whole and delineates ways we can restructure our communities to enrich our lives and the lives of those we invite. It allows us to begin a serious dialogue on how to foster companionship and faith formation among ourselves. Regardless of the number of years each of us has been a religious, we all consider our Christian faith and Catholic tradition as central to our growth and development. Thus, each of us yearns to share our most important choice and lifestyle with those we encounter. However, as members of religious congregations we recognize the significant obstacles facing our communities in communicating our zeal and desire for religious life. Two obstacles of which we are all keenly aware are our aging membership and the significant decrease of religious membership, in general, in the United States. Despite these trends, it is certain religious life will retain its presence in the U.S. church, and our challenge is to continue to live in a manner that continuously and constantly invites others to make a similar commitment. This study provides a means by which we can begin adjusting our own communities to become more welcoming and lifegiving.

This study provides a means by which we can begin adjusting our own communities to become more welcoming and lifegiving.

### My own experience

My perspective on these issues flows from my own experience. I joined a community founded shortly after the French Revolution. Our French founder, like many others of his time, observed the great need to educate youth, and he developed a particular charism of Christian education. Shortly after our order began, our founder sent members of the society to missions in Asia and North America where we have had a long and productive history. Thus, ours is an international congregation and, importantly, an order with two societies—priests and brothers. Our congregation was largest just before Vatican II, and like many others has slowly decreased in size ever since. We are a predominantly Anglo community, with the majority of our North American membership over age 60.

In joining this religious order, my preference was to become a religious brother, and I have been for the last seven

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— Vita Consecrata, 1996

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years. I fall within what the study shows is a common trend of having been educated in a Catholic educational institution—in my case a university founded by the brothers' society—and having joined the formation program during my final academic year. Before being educated by the brothers, never did I consider religious life as an option, but I began thinking about it after a live-in experience with the community. I became further involved with campus ministry, participated in retreats, received guidance through spiritual direction, and was in constant contact with the community. At that point I made the choice to pursue religious life. In many ways my experience is typical of new members in the study. The fact that I'm Mexican-American is not typical, but even the trend of minorities joining religious life is increasing.

Given the environment in which my vocation emerged, there was little need for a vocation minister to approach and inquire about my interest to religious life. Many of the brothers on campus, in effect, functioned as vocation promoters by simply inviting me to their community functions and following my progress throughout my tenure

at the university. Thus my experience with a formal vocation director was minimal at best.

### Challenges for brothers highlighted

The study makes it clear that I joined religious life during a low ebb. The estimated 62,000+ religious in the U.S. compose less than .002 percent of the total population. (To think that such a small cohort has had such a significant influence on American society is enlivening.) Another revealing fact is that women religious have three times the numbers of male religious, yet both women's and men's societies have almost equal numbers of candidates/novices/ members in temporary vows. Such numbers point to the significant struggles women's religious orders are undergoing: most have an aging population with few to no people in formation.

The struggles of women's societies appear to parallel those faced by brothers. As a member of a mixed order, these issues are evident when various priest provinces in the U.S. are able to consistently attract young men, yet a

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candidate for the brothers is few and far between. Lack of vocations to the brothers becomes an issue at various levels in a mixed congregation, especially one such as ours that has codified equal representation (parity) at the highest level of governance. More importantly, however, our congregation values its mixed heritage of brothers and priest religious; yet with fewer and fewer candidates for the brother's society, maintaining a congregational culture of two unified societies becomes a considerable struggle. This lack of growth among brothers hints that the brothers' influence within the congregation will suffer. Diminishment is not something many religious brothers take lightly, especially after struggling to attain equal respect and recognition from those in the priest society.

Diminished membership causes multiple problems: provinces retrench their resources, sapping growth and dynamism. Many current leaders are advanced in age and find it difficult, but not impossible, to conjure the persistence and energy needed for the job. Our institutions and ministries have complex governance, sponsorship and legal codes, making their maintenance a full-time task for any provincial or unit leader. Hence, the problems are many, and the members are few.

## Optimistic about prayer, community life

Despite these observations, like many of the young religious in the study, I remain very optimistic about our current situation. The study clarifies important aspects of moving forward. One important aspect is the desire, especially of younger religious, to identify with the church via traditional forms of prayer. Communal prayer is an opportunity to celebrate our faith with the men and women in whom we have placed our utmost commitment. It reminds us daily of our communal obligations and is also an avenue for inviting others into a valued and sacred practice.

Our community life has significant basis in our communal prayer. New members in the study placed great significance on community life in all its forms—living in common, ministering with our confreres in and outside our institutions, praying in common. The majority of young religious had some form of personal contact or experience in community before deciding to join a religious society. It seems communities are at their best when consciously planning and living these practices. Communal life, ministry and prayer provide an important atmosphere of support for all religious and an especially important foundation for newer members

who minister in a highly secularized society. If we faithfully keep to communal prayer and nurture community life, we will be taking part in what the study identified as the best vocation practices. Although it is important to have a full-time vocation promoter, equally important is the community life into which new members are initiated. Vocation promotion becomes a communal effort through a conscious building of community.

To remain conscious, faithful and committed, we must also pay attention to what the study showed the older portion of new members value: faith sharing. Faith sharing allows us to overcome some of the obstacles presented by generation gaps. Dialoguing within our own communities could also help us see what we need to do to build a future. We may come to the same conclusions as the study, but by arriving at those conclusions ourselves, we have a better foothold for taking action.

As we look to the future, it is important to remember that our communities began small and grew because of the faith, zeal and energy of our founders. We may be decreasing in size, but these trends need not predict our daily practices nor our community's future. ■

*Brother Jesús Alonso, CSC has been a Holy Cross brother since 2003. He is completing a Ph.D. in microbiology and has ministered as a teacher at San Juan Diego Catholic High School and as assistant promoter of vocations for his province.*



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## COMMUNITY AT CENTER OF DESIRES AND STRUGGLES

*By Sister Karen Owens, SSJ*

**T**HROUGHOUT MY LIFE I have often longed to live for a cause greater than myself, to share “a sense of being part of a larger whole dedicated to a common purpose” as one responder put it in the NRVC-CARA study. That desire is what brought me to a parish as a young adult and filled me with a desire to be an active member in that community. I had an ever-growing faith in God and began to long to share in that faith with others. Ultimately I heard a

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call to pursue religious life because of this parish community that helped me deepen my relationship with Jesus and with others, while teaching me the power of a life of service. It was Ignatian Spirituality, a parish soup kitchen, and a strong faith community that brought me to understand that my desire to be part of the larger whole, to live for a larger purpose, was of and for God. Pursuing religious life awakened me to a new sense of life and provided an opportunity to grow amid the challenges and joys of prayer, ministry and community. Religious life makes little sense if the community element is missing, and it is communal life that has provided me the

Ultimately I do not think significant age gaps or newness are barriers to living a quality shared life, as I have found sisters 40 years older than myself ready to experience life with me. More importantly, I am aware that I have a great deal to learn.

greatest lessons and the most significant challenges. The NRVC-CARA study of new members revealed that the intense joys and struggles of communal living are not just my experience but one shared by many newcomers to religious life. My own story of community life began four years ago when I began the formation process within a large, apostolic congregation of women whose median

age is close to 70. We serve in varied ministries as we seek to live our charism as a healing presence, as bearers of Jesus' way of unity and reconciliation. Our mission is about being a presence in the lives of our neighbors in every place and situation, including our own community. When I began meeting with the vocation director, I worried that I would somehow not be deemed right for religious life or for this congregation, but I prayed at the start of each meeting that I be totally myself and allow this journey to be of God. My director helped me learn more about the congregation and the importance of discernment.

Moving into community proved a difficult transition, as I left behind my own space and a lifestyle I thoroughly enjoyed in order to live with women from varied generations, experiences and styles within what was the unfamiliar culture of religious life. I entered a congregation full of women well-established in their relationships, lifestyles and ministries.

While their energy, charism and Ignatian spirituality fit like a part of my being, I remained unsure how to belong to and be part of the community. I moved into my first community house less than four years ago and have lived in six different places for various lengths of time. It is hard for me to become rooted or to establish deep relationships with so much transition. The report spoke to specific challenges of religious life unique to this moment in its history—that of wide generational gaps, a lack of peer groups for newer members, difficult integration into community, and differences in the way in which the church is viewed, et cetera. My own experience echoes these themes.

## Community well worth the effort

The challenge of finding one's way into community is significant for me. I connect with one of the statements made in the NRVC-CARA report: "It's difficult to find my niche, and it's hard to develop mutual relationships with older sisters—their friendships are already established." In most of the local communities I have lived in, many members have lived together for 10-20 years. These friendships have lasted large spans of the sister's adulthood; their ministries, social activities, and so on reflect those deep commitments to each other. They are companions on this path. However, for me, the large age gaps, the small number of peers, the newness of this life and the demands of ministry, prayer and studies make it difficult to find true companions quickly in community.

In this is a call to believe that these relationships will burgeon with time and experience. Ultimately I do not think significant age gaps or newness are barriers to living a quality shared life, as I have found sisters 40 years older than myself ready to experience life with me. More importantly, I am aware that I have a great deal to learn from the women who have been part of religious life longer than I have lived. I have much to learn of their fidelity to God, the church and each other, especially considering they have lived decades filled with the joys and challenges of renewal and stagnation, hope and despair, growth and decline, and much more. Why and how do they stay and hold firmly to their faith? What formed them? There are women of greatness within my congregation who live whole, inspiring, holy lives that I would be graced to learn from. They have lived and continue to live for the life that is bigger than themselves. Ultimately it is the common purpose and mission of the sisters, their core spirituality and their love of life that help make the "yes" I made to God and the congregation worth the slow, sometimes difficult

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integration into community. They are a group of women who are—as one respondent put it—“a compelling witness.”

## Balancing action and contemplation

As I moved through the formation process, I found myself moving more deeply into relationship with God, desiring more than ever a balanced and harmonious life. As I read through the report, I found myself reflecting on balance and the larger themes that seem to unite all of us in religious life. I came to religious life because I want to follow God with all of my life, to let this common mission define my being, to live deliberately. Along the way I have learned it is essential to come to a balance with the major elements of this life: prayer, community and ministry. In a larger culture so often out of balance, the greatest service religious life may offer is the witness of living whole and healthy lives together for God.

Having just begun my first ministry as a woman religious, I find that there are moments where each major facet of religious life (prayer, community living and ministry) can be more appealing than the others, but each needs to be cared for fully. There is always more to be done, more opportunities to serve. A potential difficulty arises when living and ministering with the same sisters; ministry can become pervasive. It is especially easy to bring work home when it is shared.

I have also come to find, as a member of a congregation of women with tremendous gifts, that the wisdom they have gained by a lifetime of experiences has become a gift of guidance and support for the benefit of my own ministry. Their support makes my ministry possible. Being recently professed, there are times when I still long for the novitiate, where much time was afforded for the deepening of prayer and spirituality; however, I am coming to see the grace of an apostolic life as an opportunity to find and share God in many different ways. The call to balance is great for me at this moment. It is important to experience daily each major facet of religious life (prayer, community living, and ministry) and to remain aware of the times when one can be more appealing or challenging than the others. A good day-to-day rhythm is essential because I am called to be a contributing member in prayer, ministry and community—to be with and share Jesus in the whole of life.

In the end the NRVC-CARA report did not offer much in the way of surprises. No matter what type of religious community one enters, there are fundamentals that we all hold in common and hope to strengthen: a desire and need

for prayer, both communal and personal; and a place in the mission of Jesus as a laborer in ministry and a vowed member in community life within the church. Whether a group takes on more modern or traditional prayer styles, wears the habit or modest clothing, or is large or small—these fundamentals pull and sustain us through this life. It is here, then, that we must strive to continue to grow, renew, challenge and be challenged. It is in these fundamentals that newer members and, I am sure, all in religious life gain purpose, strength and hope. It is here, too, where members are called to be companions, be companioned, and to find balance.

## A new moment

The data is before us; the desires of those newly entering are placed in both quantitative and qualitative analysis, but how does this affect religious life as it is lived? What impact does this have on discussions about our lives? Throughout my reading, I kept coming to a very simple yet complex question: What now? It is a new moment in religious life, and the path before us may not be clear, but it is a path of God and toward God, with each other. What comes now for the report, for religious life, and for me? I do not know what will come of this study, of the future of religious life, or of my own journey on this path, but I do know that as I strive to walk in faith with the women God has placed in my life—the sisters with whom I pray, serve and share—I am part of something good, something beyond myself. ■

*Sister Karen Owens, SSJ belongs to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia. She lives in Philadelphia with six community members and currently serves as director of a community center.*



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## STUDY PROVIDES CONSOLATION, DESOLATION, INSPIRATION

*By Patrick Gilger, SJ*

**N**O DOUBT MANY HORIZON readers have heard Karl Rahner's insight: “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” The

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NRVC-CARA study on recent vocations to religious life lends experiential credence to Rahner's great insight in that much of it reveals young religious' longing for "a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence."

Longing for that experience is certainly what drew me to the Society of Jesus and to the church. I'm 29-years-

Are we just bad strategic planners? Is no one available? Is the continuity of our institutes not as important to us as we might present publicly?

old, come from a historically Catholic family, and have now been a Jesuit for eight years. I went to college at Creighton University in Omaha, NE and went through the RCIA program there specifically in order to become a Jesuit—to become one of those men who had forever

linked for me those liberal humanist values with the sincere longing of the heart for contact with Jesus.

As I write these words I find myself again grateful for the way those good men gently led me toward not just the mind, but the heart of Christ.

My vocation director was one of those men. A wonderful, zany middle-aged priest who laughed a lot, taught me to pray, took interest in what God might be doing with me, and didn't let me (to use his words) "dodge the issue." But neither did he pressure me to become a Jesuit, and he never even intimated that he would've considered my not entering a failure. In his vocational book the only way to fail was to fail to listen to God. I respected the fact that he didn't pander to me or seem desperate for vocations, but instead gave me tools to better understand what God was doing with me. He was one of more than a few of those men who seemed to have experienced something I had not, something I wanted, something very much like that "genuine experience of God" of which Father Rahner speaks.

But this essay is not about my vocation, it's about my reflection on the state of vocations as presented in the new CARA study. In the remainder of this essay, I've mostly begun my thoughts by quoting from the executive summary of the study; at other times I've begun new thoughts stirred up within me by reflection upon the study. I hope you will forgive me the Ignatian language I've used

to frame each section. So, with that speed-dating vocation story as pre-lection and fair warning: on with it.

## More love, more joy

New members are drawn to religious life primarily by a sense of call and a desire for spiritual growth .... More than anything else, they were attracted to their ... institute by the example of its members.

Ignatius of Loyola wrote: "I call consolation every increase of faith, hope and love...." What a consolation it is to learn why new members are drawn to religious life. I hope that we can feel the joy of it. Certainly it is true that I was only able to imagine myself as a Jesuit because of the joyful and somewhat mysterious example of my future brothers. "What do they know that I do not?" I would ask myself. I did not know then that I should have substituted "who" for "what."

Ministries ... are less important than spirituality, prayer, community and lifestyle.

This provides a grip on an answer to a question that rises within me, and I think within others, now and again: why make the sacrifices that religious life demands when I could do nearly all the same work as a layperson? I wish I had a pithy answer. Certainly there is truth in saying that our symbolic witness as religious has value in and of itself, or that we must respond as Christ calls us as individuals. But leaving aside vocational queries, the point of the above statement seems not to denigrate our ministries but to emphasize that for many young religious it is *a way of life* that calls and sustains much more than *a particular ministry*.

That distinction is certainly true for me. Not yet being a priest, even after eight years in the Society (insert overly-long-Jesuit-formation joke here), nearly all that I've done could have been done well by a trained lay minister. And, yes, yes, yes, there is still a distinction between my doing it as a Jesuit and another doing it, but the point stands: it is not centrally the work I do that sustains my vocation.

This certainly relates to a further point unearthed by the study, the discovery that "most new members indicate a relatively strong preference for ministry with other members of their institute." I would even go so far as to

say that, for me, I would rather work with my brothers doing something I simply enjoy than work alone doing the job of my dreams.

**Most new members indicate that they want to live, work, and pray with other members of their religious institute.**

A full-throated, full-hearted, Amen to this finding. I'm consoled to find that I am not alone in this. Over the eight years I've been a Jesuit one of the ways I have come to understand my vocation is as a call to intimacy, to a depth of relationship, of vulnerable companionship with those to whom I minister, with the Lord, and *with my brother Jesuits*. They are not my first priority, and I am not theirs, but a vital and vibrant companionship is a *sine qua non* for the health of my vocation.

And I know the following statement may not be true for all those called to religious life, but: I would not be able to be a religious on my own. I depend on my brothers to be living signs of Christ's love and companionship in my life. That is, I depend on them to actually care about me! To actually be my companions! To be, as we Jesuits say, my "friends in the Lord."

So when the study shows that "the higher the number of members who live alone, the less likely an institute is to have new members," I find myself nodding along. And when the study shows that "the frequency of mentions of community life suggests that this is a particularly important aspect of religious life to most new members" I am again consoled in the hope that many are listening, and in the faith that much can be done.

## Hard to find peer support

**Three-fourths of the institutes of men and two-thirds of the institutes of women have at least one person currently in initial formation.**

"I call desolation... darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit..." wrote my spiritual mentor, St. Ignatius. And indeed there are moments of darkness and turmoil in the findings as well, moments in which I stop and ask myself cynical rhetorical questions: We have to say "at least one person" in formation? When talking about over two-thirds of the religious institutes in the United States? I know we want to be responsive to the Holy Spirit, I know that we don't want



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to rely solely on human judgment, but that is hard.

Instead of just throwing those hard words out there and walking away, let me put forward one suggestion as to why they are so hard. As I said, I'm 29-years-old. Simply put, the small number of 29-year-olds in religious orders means that many young religious lack an extensive peer group; sometimes we lack any peer group at all. While I'm fortunate enough to be in a larger order, grateful to have peers in religious life, often I find myself finding friendship outside the Society of Jesus rather than inside it, and that's wonderful—to a point. But let's be frank, in the North America of the 21st century young religious need supportive peers within religious life.

When I was in college, I had a group of close friends, men with whom I was in a fraternity at Creighton University. Out of the 50 or so of us who were in the fraternity at the time, seven or eight were considering a vocation to the Jesuits ... including my three closest

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friends. Now I was not an outsider to normal university life, but somehow the Jesuits there and the great staff and faculty at Creighton had made it possible for a social fraternity—the same kind that throws keggers (yes, we did that too)—to have seven or eight young men considering religious life. Now did they all join? No. But the point is that my peers were one important factor that made discovering my vocation possible. Isn't it logical to say that I would need something similar in terms of sustaining it?

A final point. I have spoken to, not dozens, but a number of young women who have mentioned that they wished they could become Jesuits. And honestly I think the relative presence of peers is a big part of the reason why. We young religious need peers with whom we can learn what it will mean for us to be religious in the first half of the 21st century. At least I do.

**Although most religious institutes report that they have a vocation director, he or she is full-time in less than half (46 percent) of these institutes.**

I was shocked when I read this. Perhaps my innate naïveté should be credited, or maybe I've been sheltered by the rather large organization of the Jesuits. Whatever the reason, I found myself saddened reading this statistic. I'll not pull punches—are we just bad strategic planners? Is no one available? Is the continuity of our institutes not as important to us as we might present publicly?

I'm sure there are as many reasons as there are institutes for why this is so. Some good reasons no doubt. I certainly want to be one of those who trusts that the Lord will give on the Lord's own time, but don't we bear responsibility too? What have we done for Christ? What are we doing for Christ? What ought we do for Christ?

It's with the thought of responsibility in mind, and the Ignatian dictum to pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on us, that we must proceed. It seems to me that we must plan. If we believe that our institutes do the work of the Lord and we want them to continue, we must put in the legwork required to see them do so.

## Build a vocation culture

When I think of what has cultivated and sustained vocations over the centuries, one of the common

denominators to which I always return is culture. Not just that vocations happen within a culture or that we each are brought up within one or multiple cultures, but that vocations are sustained within groups in which they have meaning. Think of St. Augustine being forced into the role of bishop by his friends and neighbors. Those neighbors—that church!—understood the value of Augustine as their bishop so well, so implicitly, that they demanded he do it.

My grandmother, Pat, is 81-years-old. She is a faithful German Catholic from Iowa and is “proud as punch” (to use her words) that I am going to be a priest. Her support is important to me, and it is unquestioning. But it does not replace the understanding of my peers, my family, my culture. My parents and my two younger sisters love me to pieces, but by their own admission they do not understand why I chose this life or why I love it. They support me as much as they humanly can, but they do not live in a culture that gives immediate understanding and value to the phrase “my brother the Jesuit,” “my son the Jesuit.”

I believe part of the reason the United States experienced an explosion of vocations in the 1950s is because those young men and women experienced a culture that provided just those categories. “My brother the Jesuit” meant something not just to religious but to virtually everybody. I suspect that many young adults in our 21st century North America of the iPhone have next to no idea what it would feel like to be understood by their culture. This is a hard thing. The study finds that “many new members did not experience a great deal of encouragement from their parents, siblings and other family members.” This is hard.

Now to propose, in an article in a magazine, that our whole culture is the problem is both unhelpful and untrue. But we can take something away from the discussion nevertheless. The point is that this loss of implicit meaning is why it is so important for us young religious to nurture peer support or to live with one another in sustaining communities of faith (yes, even intergenerational communities!). Maybe we can't change an entire culture, but we certainly can search out the paths down which the Holy Spirit will blow. And this study gives us tools for finding just such paths.

## Tradition offers solid ground

Again, the wisdom of St. Ignatius: “May Christ our Lord give us all His perfect grace always to know His most holy

will and perfectly to fulfill it.”

I have spent the past three years working as the director of the Red Cloud Volunteer Program, which is a full-time, post-graduate, volunteer program for young adults who want to pursue their relationship with God in an intercultural and inter-religious context. The nearly 40 young adults—yes, even younger than me—with whom I’ve worked closely over these years are so generous and so good, and I am grateful to them. Although generalizing is often unhelpful, if pressed, I would say that each one of them is looking for a path, for something firm to stand on. It seems to me that these young adults are looking for something trustworthy by which to measure the worth of the seven billion voices ringing in their ears.

Now I’m a convert to Catholicism. I learned to pray the rosary in a parking lot in college. My family has never prayed a novena. Becoming a Jesuit has meant being given a tradition, given a devotion to the Sacred Heart, given the wisdom of the Spiritual Exercises. And it’s that tradition that I’ve attempted to give, in turn, to those generous Red Cloud volunteers who have allowed me to minister to them. It seems to me that tradition understood in this way—as sure ground upon which to make a stand, as tested ways of being human, as having little to do with conservatism or liberalism—this sense of tradition is what I find young adults seeking. It has something to do with sure footing in a confusing world.

Having worked this past year with the Lakota people at Red Cloud Indian School, and having walked through the Spiritual Exercises, one of my volunteers had the Latin phrase and Jesuit discernment tool, *agere contra* (work against desolation) tattooed on his forearm. Surely that’s a sign of at least one young adult on the lookout for something that’s been tested by more than just a focus group. Perhaps he is on the lookout for Karl Rahner’s “genuine experience of God” that emerges from “the very heart of our existence.” The NRVC-CARA study points to what we must do if we are to present the riches of our tradition and way of life to the many young men and women of our time who, like the tattooed young man, are seeking to rest their hearts within the solid fortress of God. ■

*Patrick Gilger, SJ is a teacher and volunteer coordinator at Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, SD.*



## **What next?**

### **Three ideas for vocation ministers**

- **Receive well those who want to come.** With love and gratitude bend an ear to better hear their holy desires. While remaining faithful to our own institutes, and while recognizing that our candidates not only need to be but desire to be formed, I pray that we will show a willingness to adapt.

- **Pursue those who might be on the fence.** Name full-time vocation directors from within our institutes. Hire charismatic lay companions to work alongside them. Challenge both our flexible and our intransigent members to build communities of open hearts around Jesus. Beat the bushes for new members while keeping our expectations high. Uncover within ourselves both the conviction and the methods to tell young people that this life (say it fast!): “might just be for them.”

I pray that we take the time to think and pray and discuss not just what we will say and do, but how we will say it and do it, so that the traditions our founders have given us can again stir desires and calm fears.

- **Ask for help from the laity**, especially those in our apostolates. While earlier I brushed past the support I’ve been given by my lay friends, I know it to be true that I would struggle much more to find meaning in what I do if my friends and co-workers didn’t offer me so much support. I pray that our companions in this church can help us build a culture within which our vocations—like Augustine’s—will have a fierce immediacy of meaning.

—Patrick Gilger, SJ

Want to leave gracefully when it's time to go? Try these tips from someone who has been there.

# Five steps to a smooth transition out of vocation ministry

BY SISTER ANITA LOUISE LOWE, OSB

**A** FEW YEARS AGO when I was in the midst of transitioning out of vocation ministry and into my new ministry as director of liturgy for our monastery, I often said, "There's nothing about this transition that's supposed to be easy, is there?" That could probably be said of any transition. It can be difficult to leave a ministry into which we have poured our heart and soul. It is hard to let go and trust that someone else can and will take the reins and move the ministry forward, and, perhaps, in a different direction.

Any time of transition is fraught with challenge, and that's especially true when dealing with vocation contacts. Questions to be addressed include how to ease the transition for those in vocation discernment with our communities and how to ensure that contacts don't fall through the cracks during such times. At the same time transitions are also full of possibilities. A person stepping into a position brings with him or her new energy and enthusiasm for the ministry, as well as new ideas to be tried.

During my 10 years of vocation ministry I had the

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privilege of working with other members of the community who served in vocation ministry on either a part-time or full-time basis. Having two people in the office assisted greatly during the times of transition. Yet, even then, transitions were always a bit difficult. One person moving out of the office needed to pass projects and information onto another, and the person moving in had to learn what vocation ministry entailed and the specific details of the work itself. Projects in full swing often had to be put on hold or at least slowed down in order to allow for a new person to become oriented and settled. As I look back on those years and my own transition, I acted out of five main principles: share information, offer support, let go, participate and pray.

## 1) Share information

I truly enjoyed my years of vocation ministry, and as I left my position I wanted to see the ministry continue and succeed. Therefore, the first principle for me in my transition was that of sharing. First of all it was helpful that Sister Agnes Marie, who had been working with me for several years, was continuing in vocation ministry. Secondly I found it helpful to have time with Sister Michelle Catherine, who was joining the office. I showed her various files, explained and demonstrated our computer software, and gave her time to explore and ask questions. I believe it was helpful that we had some overlap time so that we could work together, but I also recognize that there were moments when I needed to back off and allow her to explore and become acquainted with the office and the

files. Then, we were able to meet again when she was fresh and had further questions to ask of me.

As I shared what I had done and the ways I went about doing my ministry, I consciously tried to say, “This is how I did it, but it’s not the only way it can be done.” This allowed me to explain the procedures and the theory behind why I did what I did and yet to concede that there is not necessarily one right way to proceed.

An important part of sharing concerned the vocation contacts. It helped that we had a well-established database system. We had recorded in each person’s file any pertinent information gleaned from conversations and visits. I encouraged Sister Michelle to acquaint herself with the information about the women in contact with our community. I also encouraged her to introduce herself to these women both through our newsletter and through personal correspondence, e-mails, and phone calls.

As soon as I knew that I was moving out of vocation ministry and also knew who was being named to work in my place, I informed our contacts. I spoke with those with whom I had journeyed closely, allowing them to hear about the transition from me and giving them a chance to voice any concerns they might have. For those in general contact with our community, I wrote an article in our monthly newsletter, announcing that I would be moving out of vocation ministry. In the same issue, Sister Michelle Catherine wrote an article introducing herself to our contacts.

I have always believed that the women in our vocation programs are in contact and relationship with the *community*,

not simply with whoever happened to be the official representative of the community for a period of time. Because of that philosophy, I believe that the transition with the women went quite smoothly. Those in closer connection with our community were not in contact only with me. They had sister prayer partners or sister companions who corresponded with them and visited them. Thus, while I may have been the official representative of the community for a contact, I was not her only bridge to the community.

As I look back on my own transition, I see a few principles out of which I tried to act: sharing information, offering support, letting go, participating and praying.

## 2) Offer support

The second principle for me was offering support to the new vocation minister. This was not a one-time offer. Rather, I have continued to be available to Sister Michelle Catherine whenever she needed to ask a question or talk through an issue. Those of us who have been in this ministry know that there are times when we simply need a sounding board, and we need someone to listen who understands the challenges of this ministry. I have tried to be available with a listening ear and an offer of support.

Part of offering my support involves another principle, participating. Throughout the years our community has stated that while vocation ministry may be the task of some

members, it is the responsibility of all. Every member of the community is responsible for doing her part to promote vocations. We offer a variety of ways for community members to be involved, including praying for vocations, being a prayer partner, being a companion to a woman in more serious discernment with us, speaking about vocations at schools and parishes, and writing one's story for the vocation newsletter.

### 3) Participate like any other member

Once I had shared the information I needed to share and had answered questions they needed to ask of me, my task was to step back and let go.

As I left vocation ministry, I stated that I would be willing to do whatever Sisters Agnes Marie and Michelle wanted me to do. I recognized that sometimes it can be helpful to have some separation, to not be overly involved. Yet, I wanted to offer support

and participate as would any other member of the community. I have been assigned as a prayer partner to a woman who is fairly new to our contact list, someone who was not in contact with us when I was a vocation minister. I also have given a couple of talks in schools when that's been requested. Participating in the vocation ministry of the community, while allowing for some separation from one's former ministry, requires some delicate balancing. I wanted to do my part but knew I didn't want to get over-involved right away.

On a personal level I believe it was helpful that I was away from the monastery for a period of time after I moved out of vocation ministry. I spent two months in Rome participating in a study of the Rule of Benedict. When I returned home, I began my new position in liturgy. The time away marked the transition for me. It also allowed Sister Michelle the chance to settle into the position without my being constantly present (or even nearby).

### 4) Letting go of my role as director

This leads to the principle of letting go. As I mentioned before, I truly enjoyed my time in vocation ministry. As I look back, I realize that I had been in the ministry long enough to be comfortable but not long enough to have become burned out. As I moved out of this ministry my main task was to let

go. I needed to entrust this ministry to Sister Agnes Marie and to Sister Michelle. Once I had shared the information I needed to share and had answered questions they needed to ask of me, my task was to step back and let go.

Now I am a community member with a community member's responsibility of supporting our vocation efforts and those who lead them. That means that I am still interested in what happens with this ministry, and I am willing to do my part. It also means that I may not always agree with particular

### *How long should vocation ministers serve?*

There is no single answer to this question. Each community needs to come to its own decision, given its resources, ministry demands and abilities. Here are some general guidelines that might help direct decisions about staffing vocation ministry.

1) More than five years at a full-time level is advisable when possible. Done well, vocation ministry entails significant training, and significant time is needed to develop skill sets and good instincts. See the NRVC recommended curriculum for vocation ministers in the public documents section of [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net).

2) The NRVC Study on Recent Vocations in 2009 showed that communities that succeed in attracting new members invested in vocation ministry, supporting at least one full-time minister, if not more. Many communities fund support positions for vocation ministers, such as administrative assistants who help keep databases up to date, assist with communications, etc.

3) Overlap time can be helpful. Allowing an incoming minister to spend time with an outgoing minister can allow for continuity.

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strategies and directions of the ministry. I can state that disagreement, just as can any member of the community. But, I need to remember that those entrusted with these decisions may have more or different information than I do. I need to let go of what I knew of vocation ministry in order for them to be able to embrace what they now know of the ministry and the women who are in discernment.

## 5) Pray for everyone involved

The final principle for transitioning out of vocation ministry for me is, I believe, the most important: prayer. This principle builds on that of supporting the current vocation ministers. One of the most important ways I can show my support for these sisters and their work is through my prayer for them and for the women with whom they are in contact. When a vocation event is coming up, such as a Come and See Weekend or our Junior High Camp, I offer a word or two of encouragement and my prayers for a successful event.

In addition to entrusting this ministry to those who follow me, I also realized that I needed to entrust it to God. No vocation director can take the future of the community on his or her shoulders. It is a ministry that has many challenges and also many blessings. As a former vocation director and a member of this community, my task now is to pray for vocations and to participate in vocation ministry in whatever way I can. God is the one who calls those who will join us. We, as community members, need to do our part to invite people to consider this way of life and to live our lives in a manner that would enable someone to want to join us. We also are called to pray for those whom God calls, to pray that they will be open to hear this call and to respond with generosity. We also are called to pray for those to whom the ministry of vocations has been entrusted. Their task—while it can be rewarding—can be difficult and challenging. As someone who “has been there,” the best gift I can offer to those currently in vocation ministry is the gift of my prayer for them, for their work, and for those with whom they work.

Transition is never easy. It is, however, a normal part of life and of ministry. We give of ourselves wholeheartedly until the day when we move on and need to let go just as wholeheartedly. In doing so, we move forward to embrace our new ministries while still offering our support to those who have followed us. As community members, we continue to lend support, share our ideas, and participate in vocation ministry, praying that God will bring this good work of ours and our successors to fulfillment. ■

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Vocation ministry by its very nature involves many transitions—for discerners, ministers and the community. We can grow in wisdom and spirit if we pay attention to transition and give it its due.

# Healthy transitions for new members, ministers and the community

BY SISTER MERCEDES J. McCANN, RSM

**T**he French have a saying that we often hear in English as well: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*—the more things change, the more they remain the same. This may be a truism when we speak of change as a situational shift. However, change becomes quotidian when it only represents an external shift. For it to influence one's life in a deeper way—such as the change we seek during entrance to religious life—simple change must be morphed into a transition.

In his seminal works on change and transition, speaker, author and consultant William Bridges identifies important differences between change and transition and purports that unless one goes through a transition process with the major changes in one's life, the change never really gets processed. Worse yet, if the change has left a negative impact, the consequences of that impact are doomed to be repeated over and over as subsequent changes are experienced, each consequence re-emphasizing the negative impact.

Vocation ministers find themselves in the role of

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helping applicants navigate a tremendous change: from individuals to members of religious communities. Yet, not only vocation ministers but all of us in religious life have experienced multiple changes over our lifetimes. These may have been major changes, such as a change of ministry or ministry placement or community living situations, or they may have been more minor changes within one's ministry or community. Concomitant with those changes were the natural changes in one's own life such as aging, death, diminishment of relationships and so on. Depending on how we have responded to those changes, they left us either stronger and more serene or angrier and more reactive to subsequent changes. Bridges suggests that if we processed those changes as transitions, we were more likely to have emerged on the other side of them healthier and more fit for the next change. So the more things merely change, the more they will remain the same.

A wise former major superior once told a group of novices to keep on changing, for to stop changing is to die. This was in the early 1960s. Little did she know that her sage advice was a portent for many years of major change to come in religious life. Oftentimes religious resisted the change and even more, the transition it involved. Looking back from the vantage point we now have, the changes do not have nearly the hold on religious they once did. However, if they were experienced as arbitrary changes and were never really processed in a transitional manner, they are often revisited in the changes religious experience today and raise fear and resentment as well as other negative feelings.

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Bridges distinguishes between change and transition. He defines change in terms of situational shifts, often shifts over which we have very little control. At one time a change in ministry or community living constituted a situational shift. For many years, religious had very little control over where, when or how we were sent from one ministry and community to another. These, indeed, were situational shifts, and few of us had the psychological savvy to process the shifts as we went along. On the other hand, Bridges, defines transition as a process. It is the manner in which we detach ourselves from the former ways things were and embrace the ways that are becoming.

## Stages of transition

The transition process has three stages: ending, neutral zone and beginning. If we imagine the way things were and the way they are becoming as two peaks, there is a vast and sometimes deep gorge between the two that Bridges defines as the neutral zone. It is in this place that we spend a great deal of time, and it is this place that we resist the most in the transition process. In fact, the neutral zone is the reason most of us move pretty quickly through the change process and avoid the transition process that is so important if we are to be graceful in our movement through life.

In order for Bridges' concept of transition to take place, an ending has to be precipitated. This is where Bridges states the transition process begins. In the endings process there is an experience of relinquishment that may be accompanied

by sadness, anger, pain, sometimes joy, as in leaving a particularly difficult situation or, at its deepest, conversion. From the ending process a person moves into the neutral zone. This period is like swinging between two trapezes. On the one hand, one is letting go, yet, on the other, one is uncertain about what to grasp. There is often nothing to hang on to and it is a leap of faith and hope to stay in the neutral zone. Multiple ambivalent feelings emerge in this zone. There is certainly uncertainty, doubt and worry. At the same time there may be a sense of opportunity and excitement at the prospect of a new beginning. The final stage in the process is what Bridges terms "beginnings."

Beginnings are signaled as the individual emerges from the neutral zone and he or she begins to make emotional commitments to what the new possibilities might be. Creativity about a future emerges, and energy levels begin to rise. As time goes on individuals begin to feel at home in the new reality. That is the good news: the bad news is that shortly the whole process will begin all over again!

Some view this constant cycle as diminishment, others as an opportunity for growth. The former will more likely attempt to rush through the process and just get it over with, while the latter will be more inclined to transition through the process all the while working internally to be conscious of what is happening to them as they work their way through it and how they are responding to it.

Depending on how we respond to change, it leaves us either stronger and more serene or angrier and more reactive to subsequent change.

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the work he had begun. He had rejoiced when they “got it” and remonstrated when they did not. By his example he had illumined the Way; the way to salvation, the way to spread the Good News; the way to love one another and live in community. He had retreated from the disciples in prayer, thus showing them the Way to converse with God. He had also sent them out to proclaim his message to all whom they would meet. He had been their exemplar in living a life of simplicity and commitment and had engendered in them the confidence to follow. At each juncture he had urged them to reflect upon and not react to the changes they were experiencing in their lives so that the life they were being called to would seep in deeper and deeper.

Each day of Christ’s public life was an ending, an ending in that Christ grew into the knowledge that he would leave them or that they would have to leave him in order for the Kingdom to be spread. With open hands and heart he prepared them to have the courage they would need to take flight and move out on their own, hopefully to spread the message he had taught them. What vocation or formation minister has not felt the same? Two, three, four or more years are typically spent in instruction and example of how best to live religious life. As Christ formed personal relationships with the disciples, so do vocation and formation ministers form personal relationships with newer members or aspirants.

Men and women in the initiation process share themselves at very deep levels with vocation and formation ministers, and such sharing presupposes a very intimate bond. Where do these ministers go to process their transition away from the newer member?

### Ministers cope with member transitions

Well hopefully there are vocation and formation teams in place within the religious community. This is the first and best place for vocation and formation ministers to process the feelings of loss, perhaps ambivalence about moving the newer member on, and apprehension about whether or not the newer member will make it in the next portion of the process. While great attention is placed on the transition ritual for the newer member, little is ritualized for the vocation minister or formator. A ritual of letting go is an apt one for these ministers, just as the Last Supper was a ritual of “letting go” and remembering for Christ and the disciples.

Absent the presence of a vocation or formation team within the community, these ministers might avail themselves of their supervisors. With a supervisor, they might also

With respect to change and transition in the formation process, we often concentrate on the man or woman going through the process when we are thinking of who needs the assistance to cross the valley of the neutral zone. However, many people are affected by the transition in the life of the newer member, namely, the formation director, other newer members and the local community in which the newer member lives, as well as the community at large.

### Paschal mystery as model for transition

The paschal mystery serves as a template for examining the transition processes of those beginning or already in religious life. As we read the paschal story, we can identify with many of the characters. First, there is Christ, the ultimate formator. He had spent three years forming the disciples to continue

ritualize the “letting go” of the newer member and share the feelings they have around the person moving on. The hazard of not ritualizing the “letting go” is that formators and vocation ministers will cling to the newer member or vice versa. This shackles both them and the newer member to the old ways and inhibits the newer member from fully committing to the next part of the process, much less to the new formator.

## Community feels transition, too

Another often neglected entity in the transition process is the community in which the newer member lived. Those who have lived in community know that the movement of one member either in or out of the local community changes the entire complexion of that community. If healthy bonds have been formed between the newer member and community members, his or her movement to the next stage of formation often leaves a hole not only in the place but also in the hearts of the remaining members. While promises may be made to keep in touch, often distance and time preclude that happening on a regular basis. And even if relationships have been strained between the newer member and community members, often the newer member is “honored in the breach,” and the lack of his or her presence is keenly felt.

We see this in the account of Judas in the paschal story. He must have made an impact for better or worse since he continues to be mentioned in the Gospel story. And as the paschal mystery is recounted through the Acts of the Apostles, the comings and goings of members of the discipleship are honored by the writer, and their impact is recounted for all to read. So, too, should the remaining community gather to recount the impact, for better or worse, of the departing newer member on the community. It is especially important when one member may have had a fractious relationship with the newer member that is not entirely resolved. Working that out with the community may put the relationship in perspective and offer solace to the remaining member, since that remaining member may find he or she was not a “voice crying in the wilderness.”

And for those for whom the relationship with the newer member was good, working through the transition of the loss of that member offers an opportunity to speak of how their hearts were touched along the way. Ritualizing the feelings of the community in the context of prayer after the newer member has gone is a beginning, but the conversation needs to continue as new feelings emerge. If there is openness to

## *Tips for coping with major life transitions*

- Recognize the three, sometimes overlapping stages of change:

1. **Ending** (sadness, anger, pain, sometimes joy)
2. **Neutral zone** (uncertainty, doubt, worry, ambivalence, anticipation and excitement)
3. **Beginning** (rising energy, sense of commitment to new reality).

- Allow time for processing the emotions that accompany the three stages. Processing might include:

- ◆ Rituals, such as prayer services, blessings, goodbye meals, welcome meals, etc.
- ◆ Journaling
- ◆ Talking with a good friend
- ◆ Joining a support group

processing the feelings community members share regarding the movement of newer members, there is not likely to be resistance at the prospect of accepting another new member in their midst. To be a welcoming community for new membership is not easy, and this needs to be acknowledged by leadership as well as formators. The coming and going of newer members by virtue of the formation process takes its toll on local community membership, and the opportunity to process the feelings this engenders helps the community to transition more easily from one newer member to another.

## Meeting new member needs

Finally, formators need to be attentive to the needs of the newer member. The newer member is probably the most attended to person in the transition. However, Bridges points

out in his books that transition stages overlap, and just because one might be in the beginning stage does not mean he or she is fully out of the neutral zone. New beginnings bring with them feelings of insecurity and periods of adjustment. Movement from aspirancy to candidacy brings with it many unknowns, and regression to former stages of transition is

Jesus was acutely attuned to the transition process. He allowed his disciples to work it through and used their fumbings as opportunities for education to help them move on.

common. The same may be said for transition from candidacy to novitiate and novitiate to temporary vows. Each of these transitions is fraught with hazards, and formators must be attuned to the many indicators that a newer member is struggling with the transition. The temptation is for the newer member to retreat to the former stage in the transition

process or even to regress to a former stage of development where one feels more secure and at home.

## Jesus: guide to graceful change

Throughout his public life with the disciples and after the resurrection, Jesus was acutely attuned to their transition process. He allowed them to work it through and used their fumbings as opportunities for education to help them move on. At the Last Supper he even indicated that further fumbings would occur, especially in the case of Judas and Peter but also for all the others in that they would desert him. Post-resurrection stories abound with further transitions for the women at the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Peter, John and others. Each time Jesus guided the disciples out of the neutral zone of confusion and steadied them for the new beginning. The entire 40 days after Easter, from the appearances to Mary Magdalene and the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to the fish fries on the beach, these were a ritualizing of time spent together over the prior three years. The Ascension was a final ritual of leave-taking with the promise of the Spirit ringing in the disciples' ears. No candidate or novice will be confronted with a resurrected formator or miraculous appearances by a vocation director, (although many were confronted with "miraculous" appearances along the way!), but, for many entering religious

life, the new territory is as bewildering for them as it was for those first disciples.

The proof of the success of Jesus' guidance and example was the courage and tenacity with which the new community was able to establish itself and preach the Good News. Because Prisca, Lydia, Peter, Paul, John and others had prayed, processed and communicated with one another and worked through the many transitions of the preceding three years, they were able to move through the ending of Jesus' physical presence among them and on to new beginnings in the Christian community. The Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of John, Paul and Peter are replete with endings, neutral zones and new beginnings. Paul, in particular, was a master of transitioning from one place to the next, even from one ideology to another, sometimes gracefully and sometimes not so gracefully, but never with an arbitrary change and always processing the transition. His very letters are an indication of his transition process.

## Those who do not stay

A final word about those who choose to leave the community altogether while in the formation process. Approximately 50 percent of those who begin formation do not stay in the community, according to the 2009 study by the Center

### ***Recommended reading***

This article referred to two excellent books by writer and speaker William Bridges. They give a fine outline of the transition process and provide the steps one can take to go from being focused on change to becoming immersed in transition.

- *Transitions*, by William Bridges, Perseus Books, 1980.
- *The Way of Transition: Managing Life's Most Difficult Moments*, by William Bridges, Perseus Books, 2001.

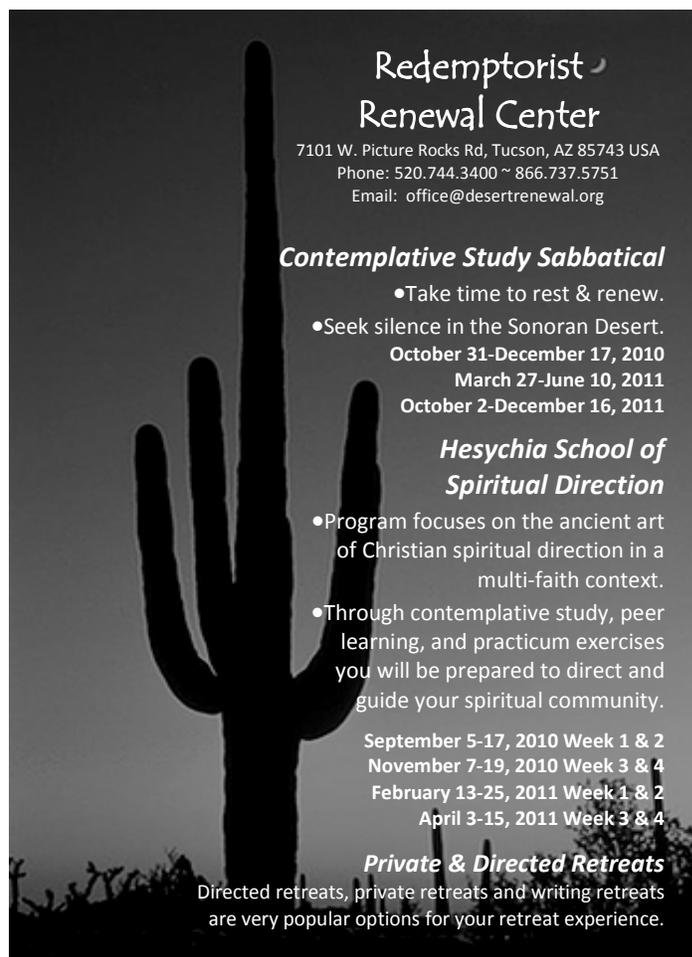
—Sister Mercedes J. McCann

for Applied Research in the Apostolate, sponsored by the National Religious Vocation Conference. While seldom are these leave-takings as stark as they were decades ago when those in formation often left under cover of darkness, never to be spoken of again and leaving the remaining candidates or novices bewildered as to what had happened, nevertheless, religious communities may not be as aware as they could be about the impact the departure of a newer member has on other members.

Certainly prior to the individual's departure there should be some ritualizing of the life he or she lived among the membership and the contributions that were made.

This ritualizing needs to take place among newer members who journeyed with the person and also among members with whom the individual lived. After the departure of the newer member, time should be devoted to processing the impact of the departure on the rest of the group of newer members. Feelings of anger, resentment, sadness, etc. need to be addressed and normalized. Some may have been privy to the struggles the individual had in making the decision to leave, while others may have been totally in the dark. Each and all need to have a forum in which to express these feelings and have them honored. We have no ritual to follow in the paschal story, but we do know that not everyone chose to follow Jesus. In the Acts of the Apostles we read of differing ways of following, some more radical than others. We can only assume that the different paths people chose were honored, and those who walked for only a short time were appreciated and prayed for as they chose another way.

And what of formation and vocation ministers when a newer member leaves for another way of life? Hopefully a forum exists for them to process what the departure means to them personally. The formator has lived in the same hope of a newfound life that the newer member has hoped for. The dreams of a future shared in the same community have been birthed, and the dissolution of those dreams may be difficult for the formators and vocation ministers to deal with. While the boundaries of confidentiality preclude any discussion of the newer member, nevertheless, these ministers need to find a forum to help them transition through the departure. The support of the community is essential, and a loving note or gesture of understanding can make the transition process easier for the formator. An acknowledgement that the departure of the newer member cannot have been easy for them goes a long way in helping them transition gracefully through the process. If there is no formation team in the community, a supervisor can be of assistance to the formator



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in the transition. Peer supervision with others in the same ministry is an excellent way to preserve confidentiality within one's community while still addressing the needs of the formator and vocation minister.

Our lives go unexamined when we merely change from one thing to another. While transition takes longer and is often messier, it affords us the opportunity to examine carefully the process of change we have been through. It allows us to grieve our losses, mourn our mistakes, rectify our errors, rejoice at our successes and exult at the hand of God that has seen us through the desert of the neutral zone. With each successive transition, we become more adept at handling the changes in our lives and more aware of the gifts we bring to our changes and the pitfalls of which we need to be aware. At each juncture, Christ, the ultimate formator, meets us to walk with us and guide us along the way. ■

Service experiences can help young adults to get to know religious, deepen their faith and assist those in need. A seasoned youth minister shares what he has learned over the years about organizing group service programs.

# Secrets to successful service projects

By JAMES KNOWLES

**A**T TIMES, IT'S HEALTHY to ask yourself, "Why do I continue to put myself in this same type of situation? Have I learned anything from my mistakes"? When it comes to service experiences, I must confess, I have asked those questions more than a few times. Now, don't get me wrong, I am convinced that direct service experiences, done correctly, give a whole new perspective to the participants and leaders of who we are as church and what we are called to be as practicing Catholics.

My own background has been in youth ministry (from the local to the national level), Catholic secondary education, and related publishing. During the past 35+ years, I have been directly and indirectly involved in directing service projects, sometimes attending projects "ready-made" for groups and other times planning my own. There are pluses and minuses of each type of service, and my hope in this article is to focus mostly on "do-it yourself" events.

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*James Knowles has been active in youth ministry for over 35 years as a Catholic high school teacher, parish and archdiocesan youth minister, executive director for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry and now as a national sales manager at St. Mary's Press. Jim has been married for 28 years and has two children. He also serves on the Catholic Youth Foundation, USA Board of Directors.*



## First: why serve?

One of the first questions to ask yourself is: Why bring a group to a service project in the first place? If you are looking for something that will challenge, help get participants out of their "comfort zone," and cause everyone to "live out the Gospel," then taking a serious look at service projects is almost a given. A few years ago, I was asked to do a workshop at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress entitled, "Youth Mission Trips ... What You Need to Know." What was interesting is that of the 250+ participants, quite a few were young adults looking for a service experience for themselves, whether sponsored by a college, religious order or any type of service provider.

The interest seems to go beyond all the options available for teens, but it was their service experience as teenagers that stimulated the young adults' thirst for more. It has been said that this generation of teens and young adults, more than any other in recent history, has a real desire to serve others and is actively looking for ways to make a difference in their lives and in society.

If you decide to plan a service trip yourself, there are a few very specific questions to ask before you pack up everyone and head out. Should I stay close at home or travel? Should I go a few or several hours away? What level of cross-cultural experience do I desire for my group? Do I need to work with an agency? If so, which one? How do I pull together a program? What about volunteers? And how much will it cost?

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## Benefits of leaving home to serve

There is something exotic about travelling to help other people, even though in most cases you can find the same need close to home. When I was directing the Workcamp Department at Group Publishing, over 75 percent of the groups who attended travelled an average of 5 hours or more to the Workcamp or service opportunity. If the leaders were asked why they traveled so far, they said they used the actual trip to help create community, set expectations and help prepare their group for what was to come. Their overall goal was to take what they would experience and bring it back home to begin work there. Of course if you asked the youth directly about their intentions, their responses ranged from wanting to help others to meeting new people. My own children, now young adults, say that the mission trips they experienced in high school helped them see how others less fortunate than they are live and struggle. It gave them a better appreciation for what they have, and in my daughter's case, service trips helped her choose to study education in college.

Of course with any service experience that involves travel, if you are planning it yourself, you must have a reliable partner at your service site. Perhaps this might be a community of sisters, brothers or priests. Or it might be a parish with which you have ties. In some cases your group might try to connect with an organization like Habitat for Humanity. Whatever the situation, you will need to arrange for lodging and meals (can you make your own?), review the work that needs to be done, calculate the supplies you'll

need and, of course, plan the most important part—the aspect that integrates everything—the *program*, that is, what you will do with volunteers outside of the service itself.

Direct service experiences, done correctly, give a whole new perspective to the participants and leaders of who we are as church and what we are called to be as practicing Catholics.

## Questions for shaping your program

In most instances, agencies like Habitat for Humanity welcome volunteers for the myriad projects they want to complete. Most, however, do not offer any program ideas, so usually that is up to you to devise. I have found it helpful to keep in mind the following questions:

- What times of day will I have available for programming?
- What overall theme do I want to get across to participants? This might be one core principle of Catholic social teaching like “solidarity” or “care for God's creation.”
- What type of process will you use to “connect the dots” between the service and theological reflection?
- What are the elements of the program? How do I incorporate music, prayer, reflection, small group or large group discussion?

- How and what do I plan for the post-trip? The Pastoral Circle (insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, pastoral planning) is one example of how to incorporate the program and the follow-up.

## Pastoral Circle model for service programs

Perhaps one of the greatest tools for the whole process of integration of the program and the actual service is the use of the Pastoral Circle. Briefly, the four elements of the Pastoral Circle are:

**Insertion Experience**—whereby one has an experience of the social issue. This is the step of deciding where your service experience will take place and the types of service you will participate in. If you are working on homes for people who can't afford to do the work themselves, what issues might have contributed to this condition? What does the church say about these issues?

**Social Analysis**—whereby one uncovers the root causes of and values connected to the social issue. This is where you “connect the dots” from the questions asked in the section above, digging deeper to see what root problems cause the social conditions connected to your service.

**Theological Reflection**—whereby one judges social

issues and their underlying causes based on the value system of one's faith. If you happen to have all girls or all boys in your service experience, be aware that their value systems might be different, and be ready to adapt your reflection to meet those unique perspectives.

**Pastoral Action**—whereby one acts on the judgments in a manner consistent with one's own values. What will the action plan be when you go back home? How has this experience impacted participants' own judgment?

One of my best experiences of using the Pastoral Circle was when I was working for the Archdiocese of Denver, and we wanted teens to wrestle with the Gospel after being directly exposed to a variety of examples of people in need, including a emergency room in a downtown hospital, a shelter for the homeless, the county jail and a soup kitchen. The program was called SPLUNGE, Special People Living a Unique, Nourishing, Growthful Experience. (This was in the mid-1980s, and acronyms were popular!)

We would gather the approximately 25 who signed up to stay at an inner city parish in the church basement. Every day we would meet to prepare the teens for that day's service. After the actual experience, we would meet in small groups to debrief. Students would write about their feelings, and we encouraged questions that led to what might be some of the root social causes for the conditions they observed. In addition we had a local politician meet with them to share the perspective of the local government's role in helping others. To wrap up the day we would lead them in a prayer service or liturgical experience that somehow would connect back to Catholic social teachings.

When participants left, they took home a plan of what they were going to do to implement change in their parish. Some offered to help the elderly of the parish, whether by doing errands or bringing food. Others met with their parish council to give a summary of their SPLUNGE experience, including steps the parish could now take to aid the less fortunate. SPLUNGE was truly something that stuck with the young participants.

Today these types of experiences can be found in the Archdiocese of Portland, the Archdiocese of Baltimore and Denver. Although most are geared for parishes in their respective dioceses, I know parishes from other dioceses are welcomed as well. Those seeking a similar program may want to check with their local diocese to see if similar service experiences are offered. Perhaps the best place to begin such a search would be the Office for Youth Ministry since many direct service opportunities originate in these offices.

### *Resources for exploring justice themes*

#### WWW.EDUCATIONFORJUSTICE.ORG

Sponsored by the Center for Concern, this site offers program suggestions with a variety of themes. This site is particularly helpful if you hope to include elements such as cross-cultural experiences, local community representatives who share their stories, visits to a local community center, or samples of cultural music or food.

#### WWW.MEDIALIT.ORG

Sponsored by the Center for Media Literacy, this site has some resources for helping groups do social analysis.

## Mistakes to avoid

One of the biggest mistakes planners make is **over-estimating the amount of time a work project takes**. For example, you have a group of 10, and you are helping to paint a house for a single mother with three young children. Plans might call for preparing the house by caulking and power washing and spending three days on painting. Suddenly the volunteers say they will finish early, and you have two days left. What's your back-up plan? Unless you have experience estimating work projects, find someone who does, such as a contractor, a house painter, or someone who works for an agency that does this kind of work. These professionals can help you estimate both time and supplies. Additionally it helps to have a back-up plan in case the work finishes early. This could be another house that might need a bit of help. Or perhaps the homeowner might have other projects. You'll want to watch your budget and keep in mind the skill sets of your volunteers. It's one thing to clean up a garage, another to fix a leaky roof.

Another common mistake is **not delegating**. Some planners believe they can take care of the details, arrange food and lodging, run the program, and make sure there is enough work. But it also can be nice to not shoulder the full burden yourself. You may want to gather volunteers who will each concentrate on one aspect of the experience. It's helpful to meet together as a team several times before the actual experience. As coordinator, it is your responsibility to make sure volunteers are doing their jobs, but there is a fine line between enabling them and constantly checking up, which drives volunteers crazy.

The final mistake I have found in coordinating service experiences is that planners tend to **underestimate what the participants can do**, not just work-wise but also in not challenging them to connect the work to the social Gospel. It takes effort to help volunteers link their experience with the Gospel, but when this is done well, volunteers return home with deepened faith and some idea of an "action plan" for responding to the needs in their local community.

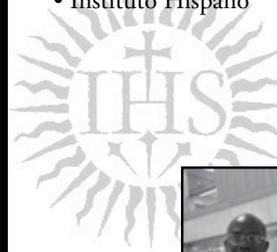
## Overview of a three-day experience

Here is a sample overview of a three-day service experience involving a group of 10 young adults with three project coordinators (including the person directing it). You decide to travel three hours away and have connected with a church you know in that location. The church has identified two

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homes of parishioners unable to keep up their homes. You have completed the preliminary work of planning supplies, all of which will be provided by the church. In addition, you will be staying at the parish school, using its kitchen to cook, classrooms to sleep in, and the showers in the school gym. Everything is set from a work perspective. In addition your team has helped plan the program, each taking responsibility for specific days. Each day's program integrates the overall theme and includes questions for group discussion and individual reflection. You even have a back-up plan if you finish work early. The schedule for each day is:

- Wake up, breakfast and cleanup
- Morning prayer
- Volunteers divided into two team of 6-7 each (smaller teams allow better bonding and sharing)

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- Travel to work sites, bringing packed lunches
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- Lunch and possibly prayer
- Three to four hours of service in afternoon
- Reconvene at sleeping area
- Prepare dinner, clean up, relax
- Evening prayer, reflection, sharing

For the final day and program, it is always good to challenge participants about how they are going to integrate their experiences back home. What is their "action plan"? What will they do differently? To help with re-immersion, set a time to debrief, showing pictures of the project and planning follow-up, such as a one-day service experience back home.

Whichever direction you take regarding service experiences, they can be truly rewarding opportunities if

you do your homework. What better way can young adults experience the Gospel and be challenged to live it out? Sometimes youth and vocation ministers feel that all they are doing is planting seeds. But remember that after the planting, tending and tilling comes the harvest. ■

### ***Too much work?***

If planning and organizing a service experience is more than you can bite off, these organizations sometimes offer pre-planned service trips that your group may be able to join.

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES <http://crscollege.org>  
CENTER FOR MINISTRY DEVELOPMENT [www.cmdnet.org](http://www.cmdnet.org)  
YOUNG NEIGHBORS IN ACTION [www.youngneighbors.org](http://www.youngneighbors.org)

Social networking has such great power for enhancing vocation ministry, it is worth wading into unknown waters to use this free technology.

# From fear to Facebook: first steps into social media

By CAROL SCHUCK SCHEIBER

**T**HE FIRST TIME for anything can be scary. Remember the first day of the school year? The first time behind the wheel of a car? First vows? For vocation ministers who have not yet forayed into social media, the first step can feel daunting, especially for those who consider themselves something less than a computer whiz. How do I do this? What if I make a mistake? What if something potentially delicate or embarrassing ends up on my page? How will I have time for this?

The concerns are legitimate, but most vocation experts today agree that the risks are manageable and the potential payoff in communication, connection and—yes, even time savings—is well worth the effort involved. Those who use Facebook (and this short article will strictly look at Facebook since it is the premier social networking site) say it is valuable because:

**1) It allows them to stay in touch and initiate contact** with many discerners and prospective

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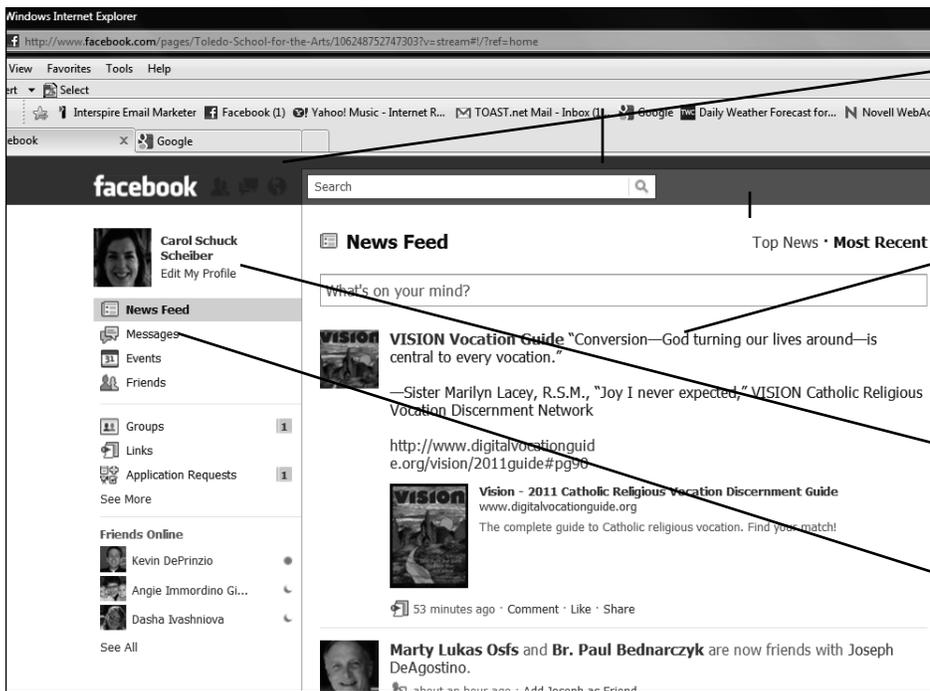


discerners. Because it is a network, you can choose to begin communications with “friends of friends,” thereby expanding the circle of people your ministry can touch.

**2) Facebook is free and makes it easy to publicize vocation events.** By using the “event” tab of your Facebook account, you can quickly and easily get the word out to many contacts and get their feedback about attendance.

**3) Facebook can help your young adult contacts to better know you and your way of life.** The day-to-day “here’s what’s happening in my life” reports that Facebook facilitates bolsters a human image of you in young adult eyes. Facebook contact can enrich the real-life contact they have with you. Many things people write in the “news feed” section (prompted by the question, “What’s on your mind”) are trivia. But significant news is often reported on Facebook, too: births, deaths, accomplishments, graduations, new homes, etc.

**4) Facebook allows you to get to know your contacts better.** It does not replace personal contact—it enhances it. In the world of vocation ministry, Facebook is one more way to explore who discerners are, what they spend time on, what their hobbies are, what makes them laugh.



This area is for friend requests, messages and notifications. A number in red appears when there is activity.

This is your "wall." When you write on it, your Facebook friends see your comments. They also see pictures or videos you post. You see the same for them. Posts can also come from organizations that you choose to "like" on Facebook.

This is my "profile." It only has my photo and name, but many people also list personal details and interests.

The message area lets you send messages to a specific person or group of people. Messages will come to them as both regular e-mails and Facebook messages.

**5) It's fun.** Vocation ministers who have taken the leap into social networking strictly for the good of their ministry report that they ended up enjoying it.

Sister Sheila Stevenson, RSM sums up the benefits of using Facebook for vocation ministry: "I have engaged with both serious and casual discerners on Facebook. They get a glimpse into my life, and I get to know what they are interested in and how we might connect. I can't believe I waited so long to get into Facebook. The benefits have far outweighed my initial fears."

## What about privacy?

You are always in control of what appears on your Facebook page. You can edit your profile as you like. You add and take down your own photos. You can set your page up so that only people you approve as "friends" see your page. If a "friend" makes a comment you don't want on your "wall" (the conversation part of your page), you can remove it. Also, you can deactivate your page at any time.

A few things you should know about what is seen by others: when you make a comment on someone's "wall," that comment can be seen publicly. When someone tags (or labels you) in a photo, that can be seen by those who view the photo. Simply be conscious of your primary audience (for vocation ministers, that would be young adults) and how you

come across to others in the comments you make, both on your own wall and on the walls of friends, organizations and colleagues. Be professional.

## Getting started

The easiest way to begin on Facebook is to have someone who is experienced and comfortable with the technology sit down with you as you set up your account. The set up does not take long (it can be done in a matter of minutes if your profile is minimal), and once your page is up, the experienced person can introduce you to the various capabilities. Perhaps if you're part of a regional vocation ministry group, the group can make social networking the focus of a meeting, setting aside time for hands-on help with setting up or refining accounts. Be sure to join the NRVC group on Facebook. (Those who are already Facebook savvy might want to share tips on using the technology in the NRVC Facebook group.)

If your main goal is to use social networking to enhance your ministry, then begin your Facebook account with that in mind. Only "friend" a few trusted people at first, and then expand your network as you become more adept. The technology is user-friendly, and you will learn as you go. Just keep in mind your goal as you use it: to increase your visibility and connection with discerners and prospective discerners. Eventually, your first time on Facebook will become a positive, distant memory, like many other firsts. ■

# BOOK NOTES

## Book challenges us to racial justice

BY SISTER DAWN M. NOTHWEHR, OSF

**M**ost experts in racial justice see the Catholic Church as “Those who preach, but don’t practice.” In this stellar work, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), African American priest and moral theologian Bryan N. Massingale asks: “Does Catholic faith have any relevance for the struggle for racial justice and equality in 21st century America?” Then in the style of a superb teacher, he “develops a Catholic approach to racial justice more adequate to a nation, church, and world of increasing diversity and pluralism; and ... demonstrate[s] how a serious reckoning with the African American experience would enable Catholic social ethics to address some of its deficits and lacunae” (x).

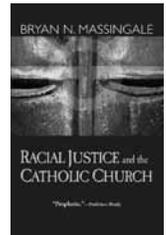
Massingale identifies three obstacles that block effective engagement with issues of racism that wise

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religious communities and vocation ministers will attend to (xi-xii): “We don’t know what we are talking about ... we lack clarity and agreement as to what constitutes ‘racism’ in a so-called ‘post-racist’ society.” Second “we don’t know how to talk about it—especially in mixed race settings.” And third, “we really don’t want to talk about it ...” because “a specific racial group benefits from our nation’s racial hierarchy.” In fact, we fear “the personal and social change such honesty would demand.” It is just easier to keep on saying, “Let’s be nice to each other.” Having never been on the receiving end of racism, most white Americans (including members of religious orders) fail to grasp its brutality. We thus readily minimize the reality and deep harm done. We are blind to the benefits we gain from racial harms done to others, and we “are loathe to redress a system that benefits [us].”



But where sin abounds, grace abounds even more! While emphasizing that the complexity of racism in the U.S. includes far more than black/white concerns, Massingale unfolds an empowering and prophetic response to these three obstacles—and more. He judges inadequate the “common sense” notion of racism as disrespect, racial slurs and ethnic jokes directed to disparage people of color. Instead, using Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan’s understanding of “culture” Massingale shows the enduring strength of racism in that “there is a dynamic that remains constant despite shifts,

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that morphs to assume new forms and manifestations [of racism] (15).” This dynamic is the culture that is racism.

Racism is deeply ingrained in U.S. culture and indeed, defines it. In the U.S. racism functions as a way of interpreting human color differences and influencing collective connections, conventions and practices in American life. To live in the U.S. is to be immersed in a culture of racism. The culture of racism is a shared reality, a belief system, a formative reality that shapes (deforms) our actions, speech

If we truly value the Gospel, its mandates, and the authenticity of our charisms, before we try to host vocation events, at the very least, we must do the prior work of examining our racialized consciences.

and thought. Racism is a culture that provides a set of meanings, values and beliefs about life that are also expressed symbolically. It lives in our art, music, language, clothing, dance, etc. Racism thrives in the soul of the U.S., and its most lethal form is what Charles R. Lawrence calls “unconscious racism,” operating as “a negative—yet not conscious, deliberate,

or intentional decision-making factor due to the pervasive cultural stigma attached to dark skin color in Western culture”—and I suggest, also in religious orders (26). Unconscious racism feeds and nurtures white privilege (the advantages dominant groups gain from harm done to the disadvantaged), effectively sustaining unjust racialized social, political, economic and ecclesial structures, institutions and practices.

Throughout this text, Massingale poignantly illustrates how “racial justice is not now—and never has been a passionate matter for American Catholics” (77). A case in point is the 1979 U.S. Bishop’s pastoral letter, “Brothers and Sisters to Us” (BSTU). Catholics are at least 46 percent people of color, Massingale states, and they celebrate Mass in numerous languages. “So, who is the ‘us?’” he asks about the title of the pastoral letter (45). Massingale asserts that this example and other Catholic magisterial efforts fit what Lonergan termed “a flight from understanding”—the refusal of unwanted insight when such insight would entail changes that are costly, painful or demanding” (76). BSTU strongly and prophetically stated that, “racism is a sin” that is tied to economic injustice; it has an institutional character; and it

defines the church as a racist institution. However BSTU was never implemented, preached, studied or promulgated in the vast majority of U.S. dioceses and parishes! To date, only three individual U.S. bishops have addressed white privilege in pastorals on racial justice and then implemented anti-racism action plans.

## Racial justice for our communities?

Working with women and men religious and other persons privileged to study graduate level theology in preparation for ministry in the church, I find the “common sense” understanding of racism most pervasive. (Similarly many religious from outside the U.S. are unaware of the racisms that exist in their native contexts.) Therefore what most religious and ordinary Catholics believe, teach and do fails to maximize the wealth of the moral, spiritual, theological and social justice resources of the Catholic faith for anti-racism work. Thus I find Massingale’s discussion “Toward a More Adequate Catholic Engagement,” most hopeful and empowering. Massingale offers Eric Yamamoto’s categories of recognition, responsibility, reconstruction and reparation as a beginning framework for racial reconciliation (97). Herein lies the work for all Catholics, especially members of religious orders.

While acknowledging that “women (and men) of Spirit” built the Catholic Church in the U.S., and granting that they rendered excellent services to many and various ethnic groups, there is also no denying that often those same “good religious” molded and sustained the Catholic Church in compliance with racial segregation and complicity in structural racism. Further, U.S. Catholics, especially those in religious communities, continue to live in a false reality if we assume that our religious charisms are untouched by the particular form of racism embedded in the culture of our respective founders or foundresses and the privileged white majority that embodied and practiced them within a racially segregated church. Today, any candidate coming to our communities from a racial, ethnic, or cultural background other than the dominant one (usually white, European) will immediately notice and be affected by the (no doubt unconscious, but very real) racist presumptions that drive “our way of life.” For those exploring religious life today, authenticity is everything. Young adults (especially prospective candidates of non-dominant groups) will immediately spot hypocrisy and our communities will never get a second look.

Positively almost every religious community has a

charism that can include embracing racial reconciliation. If communities function in complete ignorance of the nation's Original Sin as it exists in their midst, candidates will not necessarily name that fault, but they will be repelled by it. For the sake of our own integrity as Christians, and for the good of the church, we of the dominant culture must learn to recognize racial injustice in its many forms and our complicity in it and act to remove this pox from our houses.

Open admission and discussion of racisms that exist among us can play a refreshing and positive role. Not only can such activities validate our community's public claims to be agents of justice, but those who are affirmed and drawn in by the integrity and transparency of such open talk about race will join their lives, experiences and gifts to further the fight against racial injustices.

In a manner most compatible with the Gospel, today's youth are much more fluid than their elders about racial boundaries. Many young adults—particularly urban dwellers—exist in an inter-racial world where dating, friendships, etc. easily cross what were firm racial barriers for the generations that inhabit religious communities. This distinct reality makes racial awareness in religious communities all the more necessary, lest our tables be seen as less inclusive than that of the Liberator we proclaim.

## Changing face of the church

Today the church is literally a more colorful people. Census data only confirms what is readily seen each Sunday morning. At least one in three Americans are Latina/os or people of color, and almost half of the nation's children under the age of five are members of traditional racial minorities. "Many of our nation's urban centers are now so-called 'majority-minority,' meaning not only that people of color are the majority of the population, but also that no single racial or ethnic group constitutes a numerical majority" (9).

Already today, in a phenomenon known as the "browning of the Catholic Church," in some parts of the U.S., Hispanics constitute over 50 percent of the Catholic population. In the pews set in place by German, Polish, Irish or Italian hands in the 19th and 20th centuries, Hispanics, Asians and blacks now sit. If we truly value the Gospel, its mandates, and the authenticity of our charisms, before we try to host vocation events at, the very least we must do the prior work of examining our racialized consciences.

As Massingale asserts, we must lament—allow ourselves to specify our complicity and to feel the suffering of the

silent, but certain, genocide of people of color across the U.S. and the globe. Then, we must cry out to God for assistance; and from that stance, draw upon the spiritual and practical wisdom of our charisms toward real resolution of the harm we have done.

Lament is often the hardest for privileged people! Yet, clearly—if the festering wound is to be healed, it must be lanced! Lament is ultimately a hopeful act because it leads to compassion, a visceral engagement that overrides social, political, economic and religious boundaries. Especially for the privileged, this deep inner shift to identify with the other, leads (not to pity) but to becoming a genuine ally seeking justice with the oppressed. This cross-racial solidarity is—a "firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good," ... "the good of all and of each individual, because we are all responsible for all" (116).

Open admission and discussion of racisms that exist among us can play a refreshing and positive role. Such activities validate our community's public claims to be agents of justice.

Privileged peoples must set aside stereotypes for a genuine friendly interest in others. They need to gain a heightened, sustained ability to see and feel the pain of the out-group. And, finally, they must make the profound move to a kind of transformative love which arouses their moral imagination, enabling them to feel some of the pain of those "enmeshed in the racist conditions central to the lives of the oppressed others" (118). Transformative love goes beyond being an ally and includes risky bearing of the hostility of racism. Such movement embodies the conversion to which all Christians are called in baptism: to be "one in Christ Jesus," and which is sustained in the Eucharist. All of this also shapes our identity as Christians, indeed, the culture of our religious communities.

So, to which culture will we attend? Which culture will potential candidates of color find still shaping our religious communities? Our parishes? Our institutions? Massingale's book is a worthy guide for every Catholic. It must be read, prayed with and then re-read, but ultimately set aside so as to act directed by the Reconciling Spirit. If unconscious racism remains unacknowledged, it is toxic. Will we practice ... or only preach? ■

## Resources for racial reconciliation

**W**HY SHOULD A VOCATION minister promote racial reconciliation? Vocation ministry can thrive only when a community is true to the Gospel and true to its charism. A community that embraces racial reconciliation will be more authentic, a crucial characteristic when inviting others. Also young adults are part of the “browning” of the American church and tend to expect racial diversity and understanding. How can a vocation minister promote racial understanding in his or her community?

- Encourage community leadership to prioritize racial reconciliation.
- Involve the community in racial reconciliation.
- Increase your own awareness and that of others by using the resources below.

### CHURCH DOCUMENTS

*Brothers and Sisters to Us*, U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979 [www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml](http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/bishopspastoral.shtml)

*What we Have Seen and Heard*, 1984, pastoral letter on evangelization from the black bishops of the United States [www.nccbuscc.org/saac/WhatWeHaveSeen.pdf](http://www.nccbuscc.org/saac/WhatWeHaveSeen.pdf)

*The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society*, 1988, The Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, [www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCJPRACI.HTM](http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCJPRACI.HTM)

*Contribution to the World Conference Against Racism: Racial Discrimination*, 2001, The Pontifical Council For Justice and Peace, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, 2001, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

### HORIZON ARTICLES

Making the Most of Diversity, theme edition, *HORIZON*, Spring 2004, (NRVC members can access *HORIZON* archives at [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net). Non-members can order back copies by writing to [nrvc@nrvc.net](mailto:nrvc@nrvc.net).)

### BOOKS

*Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, by Father Bryan N. Massingale

*Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, by Laurie M. Cassidy and Alexander Mikulich

*That They May Be One: Catholic Social Teaching on Racism, Tribalism and Xenophobia*, by Sister Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF

### ORGANIZATIONS

Archdiocese of Chicago Office for Racial Justice, [www.dwellinmylove.org](http://www.dwellinmylove.org)

Southern Poverty Law Center, [www.splcenter.org](http://www.splcenter.org)

Crossroads Anti-racism Organization, <http://crossroadsantiracism.org>

Pax Christi USA anti-racism initiative: Brothers and Sisters All, [www.paxchristiusa.org](http://www.paxchristiusa.org)

### COMMUNITY PROCESSES

Cultural Audit, a process developed specifically for religious communities to promote racial reconciliation. Complete kits available at [www.nccv-vocations.org](http://www.nccv-vocations.org)

Racial Sobriety, a process for organizations to promote racial healing and understanding. Developed by Father Clarence Williams, CPPS, [www.racialsobriety.org](http://www.racialsobriety.org)

Communities with active anti-racism teams: Sisters of Providence (contact Sister Jenny Howard, [JHoward@spsmw.org](mailto:JHoward@spsmw.org)), Sinsinawa Dominicans (contact [opjustice@aol.com](mailto:opjustice@aol.com)), Congregation of St. Joseph, LaGrange, IL (contact [InfoLaGrange@csjoseph.org](mailto:InfoLaGrange@csjoseph.org))



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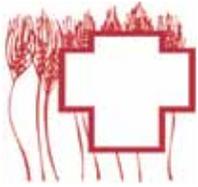
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