News
Religious Life



The Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Hamden, Connecticut, has had 10 young women join in the past five years. Featured in this photo from summer 2019 are some of them: Front row, from left, Sr. Justine Reina Praxedes, Sr. Ashley Strobel; back row, from left, Sr. Catherine Ann Phillips, Sr. Christina Skelley, Sr. Allison Masserano, Sr. Kelsey Shaver, Sr. Elizabeth Doyle, Sr. Catherine Broderson and Allison Zink (Courtesy of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus)



by Gail DeGeorge

View Author Profile
gdegeorge@ncronline.org

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An event in a Toronto pub eventually prompted a woman in her 30s to discern a call to religious life. A vocations director describes herself as "a 'talent scout' for God and my congregation." One community hired a 33-year-old married woman as a vocation coordinator because of her theology background and her familiarity with social media.

These were among the more than 50 responses to Global Sisters Report's invitation to share how congregations are reaching out to younger women and about new members under age 40 who have joined their community in the past five years. We solicited the submissions following a December story about how U.S. congregations are inviting young women to consider religious life. "Millennial nuns" are getting attention in U.S. media, with both the Huffington Post and The Washington Post writing on the topic in the past six months.

Through our reader submissions, we learned that a strong online and social ministry presence is vital. Following up with outreach through email, retreats, blogs and online forums were important next steps. Many said the key is developing personal relationships. Some recounted a lot of outreach but still few U.S. vocations. Several are finding young women in other countries interested in vocations. We also received some submissions from congregations in Kenya, Uganda, Australia, Canada, India and elsewhere.

We are sharing some of the submissions in a three-part series this week to observe the World Day for Consecrated Life. They have been edited for clarity and augmented with additional information from follow-up phone calls and emails.



Sr. Christine Rattini, 37, at her August 2019 ceremony of perpetual profession (Courtesy of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus)

Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Ten young women under the age of 40 have entered the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus based in Hamden, Connecticut, in the past five years, said Sr. Angela

Gertsema, vocation and postulant director. The community reaches out to younger women by offering discernment retreats, come-and-see events, Prayer and Pasta with local communities, service opportunities when possible, and individual vocational accompaniment. Four of the 10 women who have entered are postulants, two are novices and four are junior professed.

"Two of the women are alumnae of high schools where we have or are serving," she said. "One woman had us in elementary school, one woman met us on a 'nun run' when she was in high school, two of the women heard of us through priests in their colleges, and three women found us online."

They have all finished their undergraduate degrees and were drawn to the congregation's charism and to community life, she wrote. The congregation encounters young women "through social media, at parishes, in schools and through a variety of events."



Sr. Angela Gertsema, postulant directress for the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, left, with postulants in the fall of 2019. From left: Gertsema, Christina Girau, Patricia Young, Clara Johnson, Allison Zink (Courtesy of the Apostles of the Sacred

Heart of Jesus)

Daughters of Mary Immaculate

The Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianist Sisters) are active at both the University of Dayton in Ohio, and St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, and have community houses within walking distance of the campuses. College-aged women are invited to the houses on a regular basis, wrote Sr. Nicole Trahan, a GSR columnist who is the community's vocations director and director of pre-novitiate formation in Dayton.

"The difficult thing is remaining in contact after they graduate," she said. "But we've tried our best with social media and emails, Christmas cards and texts."

Sr. Gabrielle Bibeau, 31, said she came to know the sisters at the University of Dayton in 2008, when she was a freshman.



Sr. Gabrielle Bibeau made her first vows with the Daughters of Mary on May 27, 2017. Sr. Laura Leming, novice director, is with her at the podium. (Courtesy of Sr.

Gabrielle Bibeau)

"I would frequently visit their house for prayer and dinner, and I did some discernment retreats with them," she said.

After graduation, she moved back to Indianapolis, where she is from, and worked in parish ministry for several years. She then moved back to Dayton, became a pre-novice in 2014 and made her first vows in May 2017. She is currently based in Dayton and is a research and program assistant at the North American Center for Marianist Studies. She has also written columns for Global Sisters Report.

Sr. Emily Sandoval, 33, entered the novitiate on Aug. 15, 2018. She met some Marianist sisters at the 2012 Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, near where she was living at the time. There were no Marianist sisters in California, so a Marianist brother invited her to discernment days, and she began to learn the Marianist charism through them.

"That relationship between the brothers and sisters as well as their sense of community were what initially attracted me to the Marianists," she said.



Sr. Emily Sandoval made her vows as a novice with the Daughters of Mary on Aug. 15, 2018. She is with novice director Sr. Laura Leming. (Courtesy of Sr. Nicole Trahan)

Dominican Sisters of Peace

Sr. June Fitzgerald of New Haven, Connecticut, the vocation director for the Dominican Sisters of Peace, describes herself in her LinkedIn profile as "a 'talent scout' for God and my congregation." She manages and coaches the other members of the vocations team, Srs. Mai-Dung Nguyen and Bea Tiboldi, who with Fitzgerald run a multifaceted program to "reach out to women where they are through personal appearances, emails, social media, and online and in person gatherings," wrote Dee Holleran, manager of public relations and communications.

"The real work of bringing a woman to religious life is out of our hands," Fitzgerald said. "Opening that woman's heart to the idea of religious life — that is the work that God does. We begin to help during that next step of active exploration by attending gatherings where these women might be: Catholic conferences, schools and college religious offices."

Once introductions to the Dominicans of Peace are made, contact is maintained through weekly blogs and daily Facebook, Instagram and Twitter posts, and online and conference-call discernment groups. The women are then invited to attend a retreat at a motherhouse or retreat center.



Sr. Ana Gonzalez, 39, with Sr. Pat Dual, director of formation for the Dominican Sisters of Peace on July 13, 2018. Sr. Margaret Uche, who also made her vows that day, is in the background. (Courtesy of the Dominicans of Peace)

The results have been dramatic, Holleran said: The Dominican Sisters of Peace have five women in active formation and 14 in discernment. The last few come-and-see retreats have welcomed more than 10 women each. Twelve women came to the most recent come-and-see event and retreat managed by Nguyen at the congregation's motherhouse in St. Catharine, Kentucky.

"I am pleased to say that the diversity of ethnicity, professional status, and age among these discerners reflected the wide diversity of our own congregation," Nguyen said.

The vocations team stays in touch with discerning women through an online Emmaus Discernment Group that allows them to be part of a community of women also considering religious life and to ask questions of each other and of sisters, Holleran said.

"We are finding that this online group has given these women a real opportunity to walk this road together," Tiboldi said. "They are building trust with each other and with us, and this has led to more questions and deeper, more meaningful conversations."

Sr. Ana Gonzalez, 39, made her temporary vows in July 2018 and is ministering as a coordinator of international admissions at Albertus Magnus College in New Haven, Connecticut. Sr. Bea Tiboldi, 40, made her final vows last year.

Related: A connection of equals: How sisters bridge the age gap



Sr. Mary Kate Mensch with her parents, Dave and Louise, in front of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius profession book at Mensch's profession of first vows in September 2019 (Courtesy of Sr. Deborah Borneman)

Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius

Sr. Mary Kate Mensch, 35, professed her first vows in September to join the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius. The community offers days for vocation discernment for women ages 18 to 40 annually, which includes time for communal prayer with the sisters, an evening meal, a time to talk with the sisters and hear their stories of call and commitment, and time with the vocations team to discern their vocation, wrote Sr. Deborah Borneman, who is also the director of member relations and services of the National Religious Vocation Conference.

The congregation also holds an annual Servant Leadership Award prayer service for high school juniors and seniors in Pennsylvania and Indiana. The congregation stays visible through parish ministries in the Dioceses of Charleston, South Carolina; Gary, Indiana; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Scranton, Pennsylvania; Syracuse, New York; and New York City, working as directors of faith formation, evangelization and religious education and as teachers, catechists, principals and guidance counselors. Sisters also serve in nursing centers, outreach centers for the poor and hospitals. The congregation's daily Mass and adoration chapel at the Basilica of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Danville, Pennsylvania (some 100 miles northwest of Philadelphia), are open to the public, and it also holds periodic communal prayer services.

Sisters of the Precious Blood

The Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton, Ohio, hired Jenna Legg, a married woman, in 2018 as their vocation ministry coordinator.

"Normally, I get a few puzzled looks when I tell people a married woman is helping women discern if they are called to religious life," said Legg, 33. "But I have a background in theology and had worked in youth and young adult ministry for about 10 years before signing on to work with the sisters. My experience with these age groups has been vital in vocation ministry.



Sr. LaKesha Church, left, with Sr. Joyce Lehman on Aug. 25, 2018, when Church made her first vows to the Sisters of the Precious Blood (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Precious Blood)

"Essentially, a vocation minister is a communicator," she added. "I communicate the good news of who we are and what we do to young adults. But I do this in 'young adult language.' As a young adult and with my experience in ministry with young people, I know how to talk with them. I know ways to start and maintain conversations. And as a married person, I'm seen as nonthreatening."



Sr. Mumbi Kigutha, center, with Sr. Donna Liette and Sr. Carolyn Hoying from the Chicago community of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, where Kigutha prepared for vows. Kigutha made her first vows on July 28, 2018. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Precious Blood)

Legg said she's increased the congregation's social media and online presence because that's how more and more young adults are finding religious communities.

"So far, we've seen good results. Obviously, formation takes time, so it's too early to tell just how well it's working. But we are in conversation with more women than when I started," she said.

She analyzes where the congregation is advertising to make sure it is getting to the right audience and travels around the Midwest to colleges and young adult groups.

"I'm constantly texting, emailing or videoing interested women," she said. She also arranges meetings in person.

Two women in their 30s made temporary vows in 2018. Sr. LaKesha Church, 38, is from Cleveland and found the community online through Vision Vocation Match. She is now a religion teacher at two different Catholic schools in Dayton. Kenyan Sr. Mumbi Kigutha, 40, was in another religious congregation when she met some Sisters of the Precious Blood in the U.S. and decided to change communities. She works for Jesuit Refugee Services and as a college campus ministry at Calumet College of St. Joseph. Three women under age 40 are in the beginning stages of discernment.



Sr. Kristine Fernandes made her first profession with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto in May 2019. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto.)

Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto have offered a variety of faith and recreation programs to young adults for more than 15 years through a program called Faith

Connections, said Sr. Rosemary Fry, vocation director. On the last Tuesday of the month, the Formation House holds either Mass or prayer and then supper with about up to 20 young women to share about their spiritual lives. The community has also offered weekend retreats for young women since the early 1970s.

"These programs put us into regular contact with young women, their concerns, hopes and aspirations," she said. "This relationship with them also helps us to experience the world through their eyes and be present to them."

Several sisters also offer spiritual direction with young adults, mostly to women. Their most recent member, Sr. Kristine Fernandes, 41, made her first profession in May and came to know the community by meeting a sister at a Faith Connections event in a pub, Fry said.

"She was not considering religious life at the time and was living a very independent, successful life in her mid-30s with a prestigious job, frequent travel, many friends, and her own condo," Fry said. "Meeting a sister and having a conversation raised questions for her that would not go away. Eventually, she contacted the vocation director to get rid of these questions and the related feelings so that she could settle back down into her good life. One thing led to another, and she joined our formation community about 18 months later."

Related: 'Genuine encounters' key in recruiting young women to religious life, say sisters

Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary*

The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary have spoken to all the junior religion classes at Holy Names Academy, students at other local Catholic schools, and to young-adult groups in parishes about vocations and religious life, wrote Sr. Mimi Maloney and Sr. Teresa Shields, vocations co-coordinators for the U.S.-Ontario Province.

"Both we, and some of our sisters, have done this, but we are trying to get more sisters involved in our various geographic regions," they said.

The sisters attend a number of events. A meet-and-greet on vocations was held with students at Santa Clara University's campus ministry center in November 2019, with another planned for Feb. 2 for the World Day for Consecrated Life and on May 3 for

the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. A day retreat is being offered on vocations to junior high school students at the Academy of the Holy Names in Tampa on Feb. 20. A mini-retreat about vocations, "The Fire of Desire," was offered to young adults last April and two more are planned: one in March in Campbell, California, and one in April in Santa Cruz.



New members of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, including candidates, novices and temporarily professed, in October 2019. (Courtesy of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas)

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas recently shifted from a design in which vocation ministers served particular areas of the country to one membership team for the U.S., wrote Sr. Eileen Campbell, director of new membership.

"We are looking at where there are women who are showing interest in religious life now and where there are women who we would like to invite to see how that team

should work," she said. "Our efforts are focused on relationships: how to begin them, how to sustain them."

In addition to the vocations team, "we have many 'animators' who work locally to find the women with whom we want to be in relationship," she said.

The congregation has increased its online and social media presence and is developing a podcast about the sisters' vow of service and how that is lived today, which they plan to launch in the fall. The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas have 10 sisters under the age of 40. Of those, seven are in the United States, and five of those women have entered since 2015.

[Gail DeGeorge is editor of Global Sisters Report. Her email address is gdegeorge@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter: @GailDeGeorge.]

**This story has been updated to include additional information on the outreach efforts of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.*

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This story appears in the **World Day for Consecrated Life** feature series. View the full series.