News
Ministry
Spirituality



Sr. Darlene Kawulok of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Los Angeles Province, (second from left) takes a picture with women living at Medaille House in July 2019. Medaille House, founded in 2013 by the St. Joseph sisters, started offering virtual discernment retreats in 2020. (Provided photo)



by Julie A. Ferraro

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

March 22, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Described by various names — houses of hospitality, houses of welcome, houses of discernment — intentional communities have cropped up in the last ten years to connect sisters with those who are seeking spiritual growth, even if they don't plan to enter religious life.

Such communities — some in the planning stages or recently opened despite the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic — are intended to encourage residents to learn about the respective congregational charisms, while discerning their next step in life. For their part, the sisters share their enthusiasm for a wide variety of ministries, their daily prayer, meals and recreational activities, emphasizing how their spirituality is reflected in all aspects of their lives.

Sr. Marie Mackey, of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, is in the process of establishing such a ministry on the grounds of the Passionist Monastery in Queens. Inspired by Pope Francis' document *Christus Vivit*, issued in 2019 after the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment, she finds the project a way to give back for the blessings she has received in her vocation. "What greater way than to be a house of welcome and house of hospitality and live the spirit of *Christus Vivit*," she said.

The 70-year-old former convent, which had previously been the residence for sisters serving at Immaculate Conception Catholic Academy and the surrounding parishes, is being renovated prior to members of the Christus Vivit Community coming together this summer. Mackey, along with School Sister of Notre Dame Sr. Nancy Gilchriest, moved into the building in late January. They had attended college together decades ago.

"When Marie told me about it in August, I thought, 'Wow, what a wonderful place to truly experience in a new way God's love with young people,' " Gilchriest said. "The more I prayed about it, I saw it as an invitation to be part of this."



Sr. Marie Mackey, Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, left, and School Sister of Notre Dame Sr. Nancy Gilchriest on the steps of Christus Vivit Community House in Jamaica, in the Queens borough of New York. (Provided photo)

Mackey had been contemplating such a ministry since 2003, but prior efforts met with obstacles. When she heard that the few remaining sisters were moving out of the convent last year, she presented her proposal to her community's leadership team.

Her insights that a lot of people are hungering for community were met with support. Not only were sisters eager to help, but also local organizations are supplying donations of time and material.

Both Mackey and Gilchriest work in vocations for their respective congregations. While Christus Vivit Community will not specifically focus on discerning religious vocations, the ministry reflects the sisters' effort to invite young women and men to share their life and charism. The five to six residents, ages 18-30, will share prayers, meals and chores with the three to four religious, Mackey said. "We'll have a

facilitator work with us so we can have the best community experience possible."

The intentional community will occupy about half the building, which has 22 bedrooms. The remaining rooms will be used for retreats and programs, Mackey said. The closure of retreat houses in dioceses around New York City and Long Island inspired this facet of the ministry, she added.

There remains a lot of work to do before those who have already expressed interest in being part of the Christus Vivit Community gather together for the first time, Mackey acknowledged. "This is an experiment, it's organic."



Immaculate Conception Convent in Jamaica, in the Queens borough of New York, home of the newly established Christus Vivit Community for young adults and religious. (Provided photo)

Gilchriest is excited for the work to be completed and the community to begin growing together. She looks forward to interacting with the residents. "Hearing the goodness in others just delights me."

The Caritas Community opened its doors in July 2020 in Orchard Park, New York. Occupying the former convent belonging to St. Bernadette parish, women ages 21-45 are invited to be part of the intentional community.

Mercy Sr. Jenny Wilson, theology teacher and the diversity, inclusion and equity coordinator at Mount Mercy Academy in Buffalo, expressed a similar excitement about this new ministry sponsored by her congregation.

"I love my life as a Sister of Mercy, and I want to share that with others," Wilson said.

Wilson and Mercy Sr. Colleen O'Toole, who will both live at the house, had attended the annual "Mercy-ing" gatherings for sisters aged 50 or younger, organized by the Sisters of Mercy, and were inspired by conversations about the future and new ways of living in community.

The chance to experience the togetherness of sharing faith and sharing who one is can't be done in today's society, Wilson said. Caritas Community will be centered around the values of spirituality, simple living and community.

"We're looking to show people the passion and the life that the sisters have," Wilson said.

While no one has yet taken up residence, the convent will allow six to eight women to join the sisters, hopefully when COVID-19 restrictions are eased. As with other intentional communities, there is an application and screening process. The residents will also pay a modest rent to cover housing, food and utilities.

Advertisement

COVID-19 has impacted other intentional communities, as well. Medaille House, founded in 2013 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Los Angeles Province, closed briefly in 2019, but started offering virtual discernment retreats in 2020.

Every month, eight to ten women join the online gathering, from as far as Scotland, Canada and Hawaii, Sr. Darlene Kawulok said. "Where geography used to limit us, these virtual retreats have opened us beyond those limitations."

Kawulok plans to continue offering virtual retreats even once the in-person Medaille House intentional community reopens at some point. "This whole new virtual Medaille has taken on a life of its own," she said. "I'm just amazed at how the spirit works in these virtual modalities."



Sr. Gina Fleming of the Dominican Sisters of Amityville, and executive director of Dominican Youth Movement USA, is one of the sisters living at the Dominican House of Hospitality, Huntington Station, on Long Island. (Photo provided)

For Sr. Gina Fleming, a Dominican Sister of Amityville, New York, and executive director of Dominican Youth Movement USA, a real joy has been the ongoing relationships with members of the House of Hospitality community in a renovated convent on the grounds of St. Hugh of Lincoln Church, Huntington Station, Long Island.

Fleming describes this intentional community as not just a house of discernment, but as a chance to join the sisters in prayer and in dialogue. The sisters started it in 2013 as an outreach to young men and women who haven't had the opportunity to meet Dominicans.

Fleming has enjoyed the interaction at the House of Hospitality at St. Hugh's with the 10 residents who have joined the sisters for various periods over the years, mostly those serving with Dominican Volunteers USA or college students from out of state.

"They learn enough while they're here to espouse the Dominican way of living and spirituality when they leave," Fleming said.

An added bonus has been the relationships established with the residents' friends and family, always welcome for visits, she said.

When the residents leave after a year or more, many keep in contact, and continue to be part of the community. "It's that kind of connection that has to be made," Fleming said. "They become part of the house, part of the order in their own way."

Other Dominican congregations across the country continue to sponsor their own Houses of Hospitality, Fleming said, despite COVID-19. The Dominican Sisters of Springfield recently opened the Cor Unum community in Illinois, and McCormick House in Madison, Wisconsin, sponsored by the Sinsinawa Dominicans, is listed on the Dominican Youth Movement USA website.



Sydney Boyer, former resident at the Dominican House of Hospitality, Huntington Station, Long Island (Provided photo)

Sydney Boyer lived with the sisters at St. Hugh's while serving as a Dominican Volunteer from 2017 to 2018, providing skills training and teaching English to immigrant women. She didn't know what she wanted to do after she graduated college. She found meaning in praying morning prayer with the sisters during the week, and valued the spirituality and the quiet time.

"It's the little things that keep community alive," Boyer said, like watching crime dramas with the sisters in the evening, or always counting on dessert after dinner.

She grew to understand that sharing a dorm with college roommates is different than being in community with adults. "I did develop an awareness for other people's needs," she said.

Being influenced by the Dominican sisters who ministered as social workers, Boyer returned to college, earning a graduate degree in social work from Fordham University last May. She has since signed up for a year of service with AmeriCorps, assisting at a health center with those who don't have usual access to health care.

"I've kept in contact with sisters," Boyer said. "We've kept that community alive, which is really nice."