News
Religious Life



Felician Sr. Desiré Anne-Marie Findlay, vocation outreach minister, at her final profession in 2019 (Kate Buckley)



by Julie A. Ferraro

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In advance of World Day of Prayer for Vocations on April 25, Global Sisters Report reached out to a few vocation directors from women religious communities in the U.S., who shared about their ministry. To observe the day, communities are holding special prayer sessions and sharing on social media.

Sr. Desiré Anne-Marie Findlay

Felician Sisters, Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania

Sr. Desiré Anne-Marie Findlay entered the Felician Sisters after earning a bachelor's degree. While in temporary vows, she taught at an all-girl Catholic high school in southern California. When the opportunity presented itself, she volunteered to work in vocation ministry for a year prior to professing final vows in 2019. More her pace than teaching, "I loved it," she said. "I took courses through the National Religious Vocation Conference that summer. I gained training and background, and I've been doing it ever since."

Initially, Findlay was hesitant about whether she was qualified to talk with candidates who were older. After being part of the community for 11 years, though, "My experience as a religious is what I'm sharing," she said.

The pandemic has expanded Findlay's ability to reach women discerning their vocation. "We are more visible because of what we can do online," she said. "The one challenge is that women can't come to visit in person."

The Felicians welcome discerners for weekend or week-long visits at their house of discernment in Coraopolis, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "Now, they can't come unless they quarantine ahead of time," Findlay said, which requires taking more time away from classes or from their jobs.

The in-person visits by discerners are important, Findlay explained, because the women get to see the sisters' daily life, how they live the vows and their prayer life.

A discernment group held via Zoom offers women a chance to meet the sisters at a distance, she said, but getting a feel for the life is a necessary factor in making the decision of whether to apply to a community.

Still, "we had an online discernment retreat in November and had 14 women participate from around the globe," Findlay said. Those kinds of numbers would be quite unusual except for the pandemic, she noted.

Sr. Mary Yun

Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose, Fremont, California

Sr. Mary Yun was appointed vocation director by her community's leadership after she professed final vows in 2015. She entered the Dominicans as a pre-candidate in 2006 and currently lives in Los Angeles.

Yun interacts with younger women, ages 18-19, while they are freshmen in college. "When I walk with them and discern with them, it's not so much for them to enter with us, it's to find out what options they have," she said.



Sr. Mary Yun, vocation/candidate director for the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose (Courtesy of Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose)

The women who are serious in their discernment of a vocation are usually about 26 or 27, Yun noted. Those who have completed college are more serious about the possibility of entering the community.

She has witnessed that even the pandemic has not stopped women from discerning their religious vocation.

One woman, who Yun assisted during the discernment process, entered the community in June, 2020. "Her family couldn't come to the ceremony," she said.

"Our sisters couldn't even come, except for those at our motherhouse, but we livestreamed it on Zoom."

In August 2020, a pre-candidate came to live in one of the Dominicans' convents in San Francisco, Yun added.

"I was very surprised they were willing to enter during the pandemic," Yun said. "It shows God still calls people to this vocation and, no matter what, they do what they feel called to do."

Sr. Amy Hereford

Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Louis Province, St. Louis, Missouri

Sr. Amy Hereford, a canon lawyer, is one of four community members who assist discerners on their journey. Each member of the team works in vocations part-time, also serving in other ministries, she explained.

Creating forums with women to have conversations about religious life is key in encouraging discernment, she said.



Sr. Amy Hereford, vocation team member for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Louis Province (Courtesy of Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet)

Hereford described working with the other Carondelet provinces in their federation to organize five online events to reach out to women during the pandemic. She also works with Dominicans and Franciscans, and other communities around the St. Louis area for spring and fall vocation retreats.

"The future of religious life is in collaboration," she said.

When dealing with inquirers, being young at heart is vital, along with knowing where, how and when to reach out to women to have a conversation about religious life, Hereford added.

"I believe that religious life is an archetype, part of the human experience," Hereford said. While the face of religious life continues to be transformed, she noted, "people who are called to live religious life today will find their space."

Sr. Maria Victoria Cutaia

Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Clyde, Missouri

Sr. Maria Victoria Cutaia has served as vocation director for her monastic/contemplative community in an official capacity since 2016 but had been assisting with vocation ministry prior to that time. "I enjoy helping people discern where God is calling people, whether it's single life, married life or religious life," she said.



Sr. Maria Victoria Cutaia, vocation director for the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (Courtesy of Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration)

Cutaia tells each woman who contacts her about discernment that the process is not just about her and God, but about her, God and the community. Taking the risk of visiting the community, such as before the pandemic, is really where the inquirer is able to experience the way of life.

An inspiration from St. Teresa of Kolkata is reflected in Cutaia's vocation ministry. "Sometimes it's not about the numbers, it's about the quality," she said.

For some sisters, acknowledging that groups of 20 or more entering the novitiate at a time is a thing of the past is hard, Cutaia reflected. Candidates have entered since her service as vocation director began, but some inquirers decide on another path.

For her part, Cutaia finds helping women discern is a learning experience for all those involved. "Regardless of what happens, I can honestly say to them, 'Thank you for being part of the journey.' "

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Sr. Caryn Crook

Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities, Syracuse, New York

Sr. Caryn Crook has served as vocation director for her community since 2015. She entered the Franciscans in 2005, after earning college degrees, serving in Africa as part of the Peace Corps, and working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. She started a house of discernment in Pittsburgh in 2019, where women can stay from six months to a year while discerning where God may be calling them.

Crook finds the collaborative efforts of the National Religious Vocation Conference and the Pittsburgh Religious Vocation Council to be invaluable tools in her ministry. "It's a way to connect with other vocation directors who understand the joys and struggles of the job," she said.



Sr. Caryn Crook, vocation director for the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities (Julie A. Ferraro)

The support offered by the vocation directors, along with the opportunity to build friendships and relationships, is important. "It really does give you a vitamin B12 shot," Crook stated, noting how her enthusiasm is maintained by such interactions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Crook has missed the three-day National Religious Vocation Conference in-person regional meetings, with one of those days spent planning for events, another day allowing retreat time, and the other providing continuing education. The same with the Pittsburgh Religious Vocation Council

meetings, which would include a lunch and socializing before the business meeting. Yet, by using Zoom, she has noticed a lot more vocation directors, who might live farther away, can participate in the Pittsburgh-based meetings.

"The collaboration helps me tremendously," she said.

Sr. Mindy Welding

Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Scranton, Pennsylvania

Sr. Mindy Welding, who serves as vocation director for her community, finds vocation ministry unpredictable and filled with awe and mystery. She has served in that capacity since 2014, and was also assistant vocation director for the Scranton Diocese for three years.

"I love this ministry when I am able to be with men and women who are serious about their faith life, prayer life and discerning their path in life no matter if they end up in religious life or not," Welding said, adding that the opportunity to walk with young adults — and those who aren't so young — as a mentor in their journey is an honor for her.



Sr. Mindy Welding, vocation director for the Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Courtesy of Mindy Welding)

Welding said she relishes the wonderful opportunity to share prayer, to grow in prayer, to share what it means to live community — not just live *in* community — with discerners, to explore the vows and how each individual is called, in some way, to follow the Christian virtues of love, chastity, poverty and obedience.

She has served in many capacities for the National Religious Vocation Conference: participant and member, member area coordinator, national board member and, currently, the executive chair of the board

"Vocations to religious life are still happening," Welding said. "Women and men are being called, and we, as vocation ministers, are privileged to walk with those

discerning, helping them to listen to the spirit of God and where God may be leading." She sees the message spread by vocation directors as one of hope.

She keeps a quote in her office, drawn from a sister's final profession: "When you are asked into the intimacy of a person's life, you must go barefooted, barehearted, and bareheaded and treat it as sacred ground."