News
Religious Life



A group gathered for a prayer service at the House of Discernment is pictured in a photo. The house is located in the Millvale suburb of Pittsburgh. (Courtesy of Caryn Crook)



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"Evolving Religious Life," a continuing series from Global Sisters Report, explores how Catholic sisters are adapting to the realities of congregations in transition and new forms of religious life. While we write often about these trends, this particular series will focus more closely on sisters' hopes for the future.



Vocations are out there. Four vowed religious women from four different communities — all of whom have been active in the National Religious Vocation Conference in recent years and who minister in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area — agree on this point.

They are working together to help those discerning their path in life, offering multiple opportunities for prayer and reflection through the House of Discernment in the Millvale suburb of Pittsburgh, while providing a unique form of intentional community for themselves.

Sr. Caryn Crook, vocation minister for the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities, recognized how discerning a religious vocation was evolving soon after she started in this ministry in 2014. As her own community was continuing its transition from five separate Franciscan congregations into one based in Syracuse, New York, properties were being sold, including a brick duplex in Millvale that had formerly served as a convent.

"I wanted to open a house where women can support each other in discerning their call," Crook reflected in 2021 in an article for Global Sisters Report.

Crook planned to have two sisters from western Pennsylvania live in the house while she oversaw the project from Syracuse. That plan, however, didn't work out, and many sisters were shifted to different locations as the congregation-wide transition continued.

Being flexible but resolute in opening the House of Discernment, Crook moved into the six-bedroom dwelling herself in 2019, becoming the director.



The sisters in residence at the House of Discernment are pictured during the Christmas season in 2024. From left to right: Srs. Kristin Matthes, Caryn Crook and Valerie Zottola. (Courtesy of Caryn Crook)

"Working in vocations has to be an evolutionary process," Crook noted. "Things change in the congregation, and the world changes and the new generations coming up look for different things. They relate differently to the times. You need to be

flexible enough to keep up with those changes."

Crook remained adaptable, welcoming women who were discerning a religious vocation and others who needed a space to discern their next step in life. She encouraged the residents to form intentional community, gathering daily for morning and evening prayer, sharing meals – including cooking – and household duties.

As the fledgling project got off the ground, Crook began exploring the addition of another dimension.

Community is an essential part of religious life, after all.

"I talked with the Pittsburgh Religious Vocations Council," Crook recalled. "I asked them to get the word out to the communities in the area, looking for any sisters who might want to move into the House of Discernment and support the effort."



Sr. Mindy Welding (Courtesy of Mindy Welding)

Enter Sr. Mindy Welding.

At that time, Welding served as part-time vocation director for her community, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. She also ministered with the Diocese of Pittsburgh as delegate for religious.

Welding and Crook were already acquainted through the activities with the National Religious Vocation Conference. She liked the idea of a house of discernment being

not only a resource for women seeking their vocation but for sisters who otherwise might be living alone.

"It's the way of religious life to be together," Welding said. "It doesn't matter which community; we are sisters."

Welding also had to be flexible as she discerned whether to move into the House of Discernment. As she left her vocation ministry within her community, she took on additional duties with the diocese: director of post-ordination formation.

Though she didn't relocate her living quarters to the House of Discernment, Welding continues to support the project. She joins the others frequently, including for "First Friday Fun" nights — where the sisters might watch a movie together in-house, go to a theatre to see a movie or play games. She and the sisters living at the House of Discernment have gone on retreat together. They've invited religious from other communities living in the Pittsburgh area — Sisters of Charity, Franciscans and Sisters of St. Joseph, for instance — to join them for activities, too.

"We want to be together and share our life," Welding said. "We want to share the joy that we have. It's good for our mental health to gather with one another and have community together."



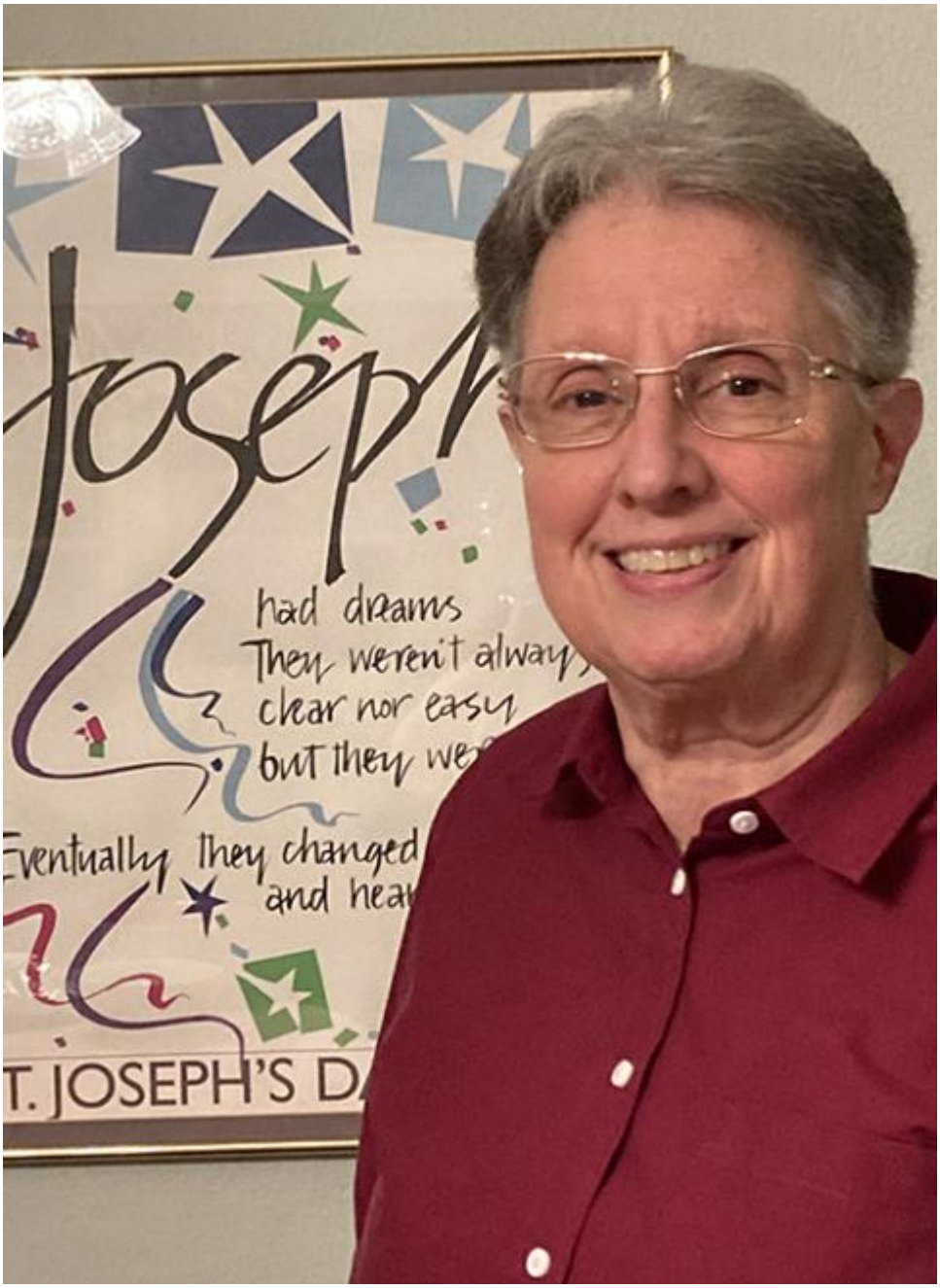
Sr. Caryn Crook, center, is pictured with friends on a walking trail near the House of Discernment, with a view of Pittsburgh across the Allegheny River. (Courtesy of Caryn Crook)

As for those desiring to discern their own religious vocation, Welding noted, "If a woman comes to me, I can offer her that opportunity to spend time at the House of Discernment. It's a gift."

St. Joseph Sister Valerie Zottola echoed that sentiment. She moved into the House of Discernment in September 2021. "I was very attracted by Caryn's enthusiasm and passion for this ministry," she said. "The House of Discernment provided an incredible venue to support my vocation work."

Zottola, who will celebrate her 50th jubilee in May and has worked in vocation ministry for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden in Pennsylvania since 2015, has — like Crook — noticed the evolution of the ministry. "As I navigated the venues which vocation ministry traditionally encompassed, it soon became evident that, now, many of these venues have changed," she observed. "With the growth in virtual

communication, it soon became apparent that I needed to learn about these platforms, try them out, and carefully discern which accomplished what I had intended."



Sr. Valerie Zottola (Courtesy of Valerie Zottola)

Living in community with other sisters at the House of Discernment impacted Zottola's daily life. "Today, sharing this religious lifestyle with other congregations in an intentional way is so very exciting," she said. "I love hearing about each

community."

She has moved from simply living in the house and supporting the project to being co-minister with Crook. "We schedule weekly meetings to support and coordinate our efforts," she said. This involves frequent contact to maintain relationships with friends of the house, organizing in-person and online programming, and being good stewards of not only the physical environment but much more: the welcoming and hospitable spirit that is integral to the House of Discernment.

In addition to their other responsibilities within the respective religious communities, Crook and Zottola coordinate a number of programs offered for discerners online. Book discussion groups have proven popular, with upcoming titles like Sr. Margaret Carney's *Light of Assisi: The Story of Saint Clare* and Fr. Murray Bodo's *Surrounded by Love: Seven Teachings from St. Francis* scheduled.

Discerners can gather weekly via Zoom for prayer and reflection.

"Every Monday is a whole new experience," Crook said of these sessions. One week, there could be a group of six listening eagerly to a talk by a vocation director with some probing questions. Another time, it could be just one person, and the conversation is deep and personal. "It's always proof that God's got this program."

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On Wednesdays, the House of Discernment goes live on Zoom for evening prayer, a faith-sharing experience open to all.

"The prayer together is very nurturing," said Sr. Kristin Matthes, who moved into the House of Discernment in November 2024. "The faith-sharing part I love. It feeds my soul, grounds me, helps me be more present."

A Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, Ohio Province, Matthes had ministered with young adults in Washington, D.C., served on her community's provincial leadership team, then spent time as a volunteer in California before moving to Youngstown, Ohio, to start a new ministry in coaching and consulting. When that situation changed, she planned to move to Pittsburgh, where she knew more people.



Sr. Kristin Matthes (Courtesy of Kristin Matthes)

Through her friendship with Welding, Matthes was invited to spend a weekend at the House of Discernment. "I really wanted to be back in community," Matthes said. Following a conversation with Crook and Zottola, she relocated.

"Being in community pulls me out of myself," Matthes said. "It's my preferred way of being in the world and a constant reminder that it's more than about me."

Much of Matthes' ministry can be done remotely, but being near a major airport is also key for her. When she's not working, she joins her housemates for programs and prayer. "I just have to show up and listen and engage, and I love doing that."

As one of the co-founders of Giving Voice, a group of under-50 women religious, Matthes holds a deep appreciation for inter-community collaboration. She understands how the various charisms can enrich each other while remaining distinct, as at a gathering hosted by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden for this year's World Day of Consecrated Life on Feb. 2. "There's nothing better than being in a room with 100 sisters," Matthes said.

Or online for a book discussion. Sisters from several congregations are coming together to explore *Reseeding Religious Life through Global Sisterhood* by St. Joseph of Peace Sr. Susan Rose Francois and Sacred Heart Sr. Juliet Mousseau.

Through such gatherings, vowed religious women continue to nourish their spiritual journeys and provide inspiration to those discerning God's call.

"Women are still seeking that life, but there are so many different forms of consecrated life," Welding said. "They are still desirous of being in relationship with Jesus Christ, doing for others as Jesus, living the Gospel message, but it looks different now."

That's why she and the sisters who live there view the House of Discernment as an asset.

Zottola concluded, "Being blessed with so very many folks who come to the House of Discernment — for a day, weekend, a month, six months, or longer, or who become a part of our lives through our virtual programs - is an overwhelming grace and privilege. How exciting it is to be invited into their worlds and hearts!"

This story appears in the **Evolving Religious Life** feature series. View the full series.