

Benedictine Tech Ministries team members include, from left, Sr. Raphaela Cady, Sr. Tamra Thomas, Sr. Michelle Sinkhorn and Sr. Stefanie Macdonald. (Courtesy of Benedictine Tech Ministries)



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The lockdowns and most of the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic were over, but Benedictine monasteries across the United States were left with a new problem.

They could gather in groups inside their monasteries again, but travel and gathering in larger groups with sisters from other monasteries was still not safe, so they needed to hold hybrid meetings, where some participants were face-to-face and others joined by video conferencing.

The pandemic made almost all of us able to use technology such as Zoom, especially for one-on-one communications, but hybrid meetings involving dozens or even hundreds of people are another matter, especially when the vast majority of participants are over the age of 70.

Enter Benedictine Tech Ministries.



Benedictine Tech Ministries team members pose for a picture: from left are Sr. Michelle Sinkhorn, Sr. Raphaela Cady, Sr. Tamra Thomas, and Sr. Stefanie Macdonald "We have microphones and speakers, a projector and screen, two

laptops, five cameras, power strips, etc. — everything we need so we can go anywhere, as long as they have internet and run all the technology for a hybrid or in-person only conference," Sinkhorn said. (Courtesy of Benedictine Tech Ministries)

These four Benedictine sisters, from four different monasteries in four different states, now travel the country — in matching polo shirts — setting up and running the technology for Benedictine gatherings, whether in person, online or hybrid.

Sr. Michelle Sinkhorn, from Ferdinand, Indiana, said that once the team got started and, thanks to a Leadership Conference of Women Religious grant, bought the needed equipment, the interest in their services was immediate.

"We just had this one set of equipment, and the demand was incredible. Within the first year and a half, we were having to turn down requests — we just couldn't cover everything," she said. "Having just the four sister technicians was OK, but we couldn't get the equipment from one place to another in time."



Sr. Michelle Sinkhorn, left, and Sr. Tamra Thomas set up equipment for a conference handled by Benedictine Tech Ministries. (Courtesy of Benedictine Tech Ministries)

So they applied for another LCWR grant and not only bought a second set of equipment, but in March also held a conference to train more sisters on how to use it and adapt the equipment for their monasteries.

They're not at all worried about putting themselves out of business, as the idea was to employ more sisters to nurture their own technological abilities to help their monasteries and possibly help Benedictine Tech Ministries in the future.

"We're not competitive," she said. "We very much want other sisters to be able to learn and do what we do so they can take care of their own monasteries when needed."

The ministry rose out of a gathering of younger Benedictine sisters called 55 & Under. At the gathering in 2023, Sinkhorn said, they created a list of the sisters with an interest in technology, and out of that list came Benedictine Tech Ministries. Now, they affectionately call themselves "tech geeks."

A year later they had the LCWR grant and a website and got to work.

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Benedictine Sr. Jeanne Weber, from the monastery in Yankton, South Dakota, and president of one of the federations Benedictine communities belong to, said there were many attempts by monasteries to hold hybrid meetings after the pandemic, but only limited success.

"We didn't have the equipment or the knowledge to set up an effective hybrid meeting," Weber said, so Benedictine Tech Ministries "is incredibly helpful."

"To have it be a quality experience, especially for the people online, that's the challenge," she said.

Weber said Benedictines are focused on collaboration, so the 55 & Under attendees are encouraged to form interest groups across monasteries and come up with projects the group as a whole can consider.

She said the projects are debated like the television show "Shark Tank," but since they're all Catholic sisters and far gentler than the harsh criticism that marks the TV series, they call it the "Manatee Tank."

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Other projects that have come out of the process are a leadership training series that is up and running, and a service project to Mission House, a ministry of the Benedictine monastery in Boerne, Texas, that serves immigrants coming into the United States and the poor and disenfranchised on both sides of the Mexican border at Eagle Pass, Texas.

She said the team hopes to grow the ministry because the need is greater than they can currently fill — there have even been requests to create similar teams for areas outside the U.S.

Right now, Sinkhorn said, they don't work internationally except for one global Benedictine event in Rome.

"We don't like to take our equipment out of the country," she said. "It's very stressful."

The services are not free, but the fees the team charges only cover their costs and a stipend for their community to cover the work and time away from their own monasteries, Sinkhorn said.

"It's a ministry, not a business."