New members have abundant hope

2  Updates

3  Letter from Bishop Checchio, USCCB

4  Overview of newer members

8  Religious life today

10 Younger members reflect on the study

15 Leaders reflect on the study

21 Eight best practices for encouraging new membership
    By Carol Schuck Scheiber

25 Building relationships with young people
    By Sister Tarianne DeYonker, O.P.

30 Vocation ministry during COVID-19

31 A call to define community
    By Sister Mary Johnson, S.N.D. de N.

33 Better together: Vocation panel raises awareness
    By John Feister
Programs for Religious

Now more than ever, we need to come together for study and reflection to create meaningful faith-based and pastoral responses to changing global and ecclesial realities.

Reframing Retirement for Mission
Sharing Wisdom and Seeking Meaningful Ministry after Retirement
June 2 - June 24, 2020  Now Online

This mini-sabbatical assists the participants in making the difficult transition from a fully active ministry to retirement, with a special focus on recognizing and living their retirement years as a fruitful period of life with possibilities for personal growth, as well as new opportunities for engaging in ministry.

Hesburgh Sabbatical Program
A Community-Centered Sabbatical Program
Fall 2020 or Spring 2021

Crafted for ministers in the Church, this program based on curriculum and community is a holistic sabbatical that fosters both personal and professional renewal and provides continuing formation.

Institute of Religious Formation
Empowering formation leaders for a global Church
Fall 2020

Dedicated to preparing men and women for the ministry of formation since 1971, this year long program offers a comprehensive, spiritual, collaborative, intellectual, and experiential approach to learning, life, and ministry—all focused within the context of formation.

For more details visit ctu.edu
Editor’s Note

Good news

FOR PEOPLE living religious life, putting their all into ministry and commitment to community and charism, you’ll be happy to know your efforts not only make a difference, but are very much appreciated by the newest members of religious life. That message in the NRVC’s recently released 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life, comes across loud and clear.

The study, designed as a check-in and follow-up to the groundbreaking 2009 Study on Recent Vocations, gathered information on who has entered in the past 15 years and what they are looking for. These are the men and women who are actively building the future of religious institutes. It matters what they have to say. So HORIZON stopped to listen. And we’re glad we did because much of the news is good:

• People are still being called to consecrated life.
• They are entering communities that authentically live what these newcomers seek, namely strong communal life, prayer and spiritual development, and charism-driven ministry, cultural and generational diversity.
• Institutes that people are entering generally have made a consistent, concerted effort to invite.

As a longtime observer who cares about religious life, I am encouraged by the enthusiasm and heart that newer members have. Even with the challenges of demographic change and a world shaken by COVID-19, old and new members together are demonstrating a way to move forward that is positive and life-giving. That is good news indeed.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor cscheiber@nrvc.net

HORIZON is a catalyst for vocation discernment and the full flourishing of religious life as sisters, brothers, and priests for the ongoing transformation of the world.

NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE BOARD

Sister Kristin Matthes, S.N.D.deN., Board chair
Sister Gayle Lwanga Crumbley, R.G.S.
Sister Anna Marie Espinosa, I.W.B.S.
Sister Virginia Herbers, A.S.C.J.
Father Charles Johnson, O.P.
Sister Lisa Laguna, D.C.
Father Adam MacDonald, S.V.D.
Sister Belinda Monahan, O.S.B.
Sister Anita Quigley, S.H.C.J.
Mr. Len Uhal
Sister Mindy Welding, I.H.M.

HORIZON is an award-winning journal for vocation ministers and those who support a robust future for religious life. It is published quarterly by TrueQuest Communications on behalf of the National Religious Vocation Conference.
COVID-19 and vocation ministry

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected vocation ministry in a number of ways, primarily by canceling physical gatherings of all types. Charitable giving to religious organizations is also expected to decrease because of the pandemic’s economic toll. However, at the same time, the restrictions of COVID-19 have encouraged many creative online activities. Vocation ministers and other religious around the world have been able to share faith and hope with young people and discerners using electronic platforms such as blogs, Facebook, video-sharing, e-mails, e-newsletters, and online discussion groups.

NRVC members have continued to find ways to spread the Good News. NRVC member Sister Nicole Trahan, F.M.S. published a reflection in Global Sisters Report in April called “Grace will conquer hopelessness,” in which she noted: “... we are left with the presence of God in our solidarity, words of encouragement, our shared humanity, the coming of spring, phone calls, video chats, emails, and the care and concern we show to one another.”

Summer 2020 workshops

NRVC’s Summer Institute registration is open and scheduled for July 8-23 in Chicago, albeit with plans to comply with all social-distancing restrictions. Find updates, information, and registration at nrvc.net.


- Ethical Issues in Vocation and Formation Ministry, July 13-14, 2020. Presented by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.

- Behavioral Assessment 1, July 16-18, 2020. Presented by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.


Convocation 2020 “Focus on Hope”

Registration for the 2020 NRVC Convocation in Spokane, WA is open for Oct. 30-Nov. 2, 2020, mindful that COVID-19 restrictions may apply. Its theme is 2020 VISION: Focus on Hope. Featured speakers include Sister Anita Price Baird, D.H.M. and Father Antonio M. Pernia, S.V.D. Learn more about the keynotes, workshops, hotel, and optional excursion at nrvc.net.
May 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

How appropriate that I write to you so close to the Feast of Pentecost regarding the National Religious Vocation Conference’s recent release of its 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life, conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. The study is a window on the Holy Spirit alive in the religious institutes of our nation. The NRVC/CARA study reveals a steady influx of new, young, and culturally diverse members who are hopeful about the future of religious life amid the changing demographics of religious institutes and the Church at large.

God calls, and men and women continue to respond by choosing consecrated life. The message is that simple.

Each of you reading this letter has most likely met a religious sister, brother, priest or nun who has lifted you up and vividly revealed God’s face to you. Religious life is without question a collective gift to the Church and world that gives witness to the power of prayer, communal life, and service to others.

The pages of this special edition of HORIZON will provide insight and analysis of the 2020 Study of Recent Vocations and, it is hoped, inspire you to continue to support and invite others to consider this unique and essential way of life. Thank you for all you do to promote consecrated life. Our response to this study may be summed up in three familiar words: Come, Holy Spirit!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Bishop James Checchio, Diocese of Metuchen, NJ
Chairman of the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life & Vocations
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
A new decade in American religious life brings much hope because God continues to call women and men to consecrated life. Discerners continue to inquire about vowed communal life as religious sisters, nuns, brothers, and priests. The Spirit is leading people every year to apply for entrance to U.S. religious communities, to enter, begin formation, and make temporary and perpetual profession in diverse religious institutes and societies of apostolic life.

At the end of a decade of steady entrances to religious communities, the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) has released its 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life. We offer it as a contribution to the entire church, expanding our body of knowledge on the topic. This study comes 11 years after our first ground-breaking survey of newer entrants, completed in 2009. This latest research provides information on the women and men who entered consecrated life from 2003-2018. With the good news that religious life continues to attract new members, NRVC hopes the study data will be a springboard for making the promotion of religious life a priority for the entire church.

This latest study was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. The National Religious Vocation Conference staff, board, and members are grateful for the support of HORIZON editors from the results of the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life. Supplemented with additional data from annual “Profession Class” and “Entrance Class” reports from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Deacon Marlon Vargas, S.V.D. at his perpetual vows ceremony with the Divine Word Missionaries.
port of the GHR Foundation and the expertise of CARA. Thank you also to the major superiors and newer entrants who participated in this research.

As we review the study results and capture some of the data in the infographic on pages 8-9 (which can be downloaded in color at nrvc.net), we are mindful no study can point to just one reason why a person responds to God’s call to enter a community. There is a mystery in the call and an unpredictability in the response. The scriptures are full of stories of call, and each generation finds new ways to follow Christ. The grace of perseverance is the essence of religious life with both our oldest and newest members serving as influential role models of courage, compassion, and competence.

Religious life in the U.S. today

Over 700 diverse religious institutes exist in the United States. They vary in spirituality, charism, and mission as well as size, composition, and presence of new members. This diversity of sisters, brothers, and priests is one of the hallmarks of religious life today.

While religious orders tend to be located in areas settled by Catholic immigrants a few generations ago, today’s Catholic population, especially younger Hispanic Catholics, is now also in the West and Southwest, places where religious institutes are less numerous.

On average, roughly 200 people a year take final vows, and around 400 to 500 begin the process of formation (based on CARA reports published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops). This rate of persistence in formation has fluctuated some over the decade, but it can be attributed to the fact that entrants and communities see formation as a time for deeper discernment about whether consecrated life is a good fit. This helps ensure healthy members and healthy communities.

Overview of Newer Members

I think what attracted me to religious life is community, the outreach of helping the poor and needy, giving a voice to women and minorities, and making a difference in the world.

Intergenerational living

While age presents challenges for communities when inviting young people to join, it has not deterred those who entered from doing so. Thirteen percent of perpetually professed are younger than 60, and the identical proportion are aged 90 or older.

In ranking their attitudes about various aspects of communal life, new members give their religious institutes the highest ratings on their care and support of the elderly members. Most newer members prefer to live in communities with members of different ages (93 percent).

I like the intergenerational living. It’s hard, but I think that’s the part that keeps me in community.

Intercultural living

Newer members prefer living with members of different cultures (four in five), and newer members themselves reflect the racial and ethnic changes in the United States toward more people who claim an identity outside of European white culture. Catholics, along with the rest of the country, are increasingly Hispanic.

It’s challenging in community life when you’re learning how to get along with different personalities who have grown up in different cultures and different families and backgrounds.

Prayer and spirituality

Personal private prayer characterizes the regular prayer life of a majority of sisters, brothers, and priests in almost all responding institutes. Daily Eucharist and Lit-
urgy of the Hours are almost as common, reported by nearly nine in ten responding institutes.

As I was growing in [my] prayer life I realized that I really wanted my whole life to be that intimate communion with God, to be that life of prayer. And the more that desire grew, the more I saw the way it’s lived out in religious life.

Education
The majority (95 percent) of perpetually professed religious have at least a college degree. The majority of newer members come with considerable education as well as ministry and work experience. Seventy-one percent of new members had at least a bachelor’s degree before they entered. Eight in ten were employed, usually in a full-time position, and slightly more than half were engaged in ministry, a quarter on a full-time basis and about three-fifths on a volunteer basis.

Characteristics of younger members
The study revealed many facts about newer members.

- One-third of newer entrants (34 percent) have a relative who is a priest, deacon, or religious sister or brother.
- One in ten report that they entered another religious institute before the one to which they currently belong.

- Seven in ten considered religious life by the time they were 21, with half doing so by the time they were 17. Female respondents are more likely than male respondents to have thought about a religious vocation at a young age, that is, before the age of 14 (30 percent compared to 16 percent). Men were a little more likely to first consider religious life when they were college-age (30 percent of men compared to 23 percent of women).

- Most newer members (74 percent) participated in “Come and See” experience(s) before they entered their religious institute.

- The average age of entrance is 28 for men and 29 for women. This is a little younger than the average age of entrance in 2009, which was 30 for men and 32 for women.

- The majority of newer members experienced support in their consideration of religious life: 80 percent found support from priests and religious. Around 7 in 10 reported that friends and parishioners were a significant source of support. The large majority of parents and siblings (95 percent) expressed support ranging from “somewhat” to “very much.”

- The majority (60 percent) of religious institutes have at least one person in initial formation. About 20 percent currently have more than five people in initial formation.

Attraction to religious life
Newer members are likely to say they were attracted to religious life by a desire for prayer and spiritual growth and by a desire for a deeper relationship with God. To
only a slightly lesser degree, most new members also say they were attracted to religious life by a sense of call to consecrated life, a desire to be of service, and a desire to be part of a community.

They were attracted to their particular religious institute by its prayer life and mission, followed by its community life and the example of its members. Although the ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, they are less important than the previously-listed factors.

Newer members in religious life first became acquainted with their religious institutes in different ways. As in NRVC’s 2009 Study on Recent Vocations, the most common way to meet a religious community was in an institution, such as a school, where the members served. Besides institutional settings, other relatively common ways of becoming acquainted with the institute were through their own Internet search of websites, through a relative or friend in the institute, through working with a member of the institute, or through print materials.

Then I started thinking about religious life because living on my own, it just felt like something was missing. I was attracted to living in community with other people with the same charism, with the same spirit, with the same hopes for the world with our differences. I wanted to be in community. That was really important to me.

Hope for the future

Though fully aware of the concerns and challenges that their communities face, newer entrants to religious life are optimistic about the future. They hope to see their communities be bold, take risks, and work collaboratively with other communities and lay partners. All of their hopes have at their core a desire to continue the good works of prior generations while forging a new path for religious life.

My hope is that we work at increasing our numbers by living a joyful witness to the gospel. That we consolidate our ministries, but in doing so, that we work at rebuilding them. I hope that we become very deeply rooted in prayer, both personally and communally.

Call continues

Since 1988 the NRVC has encouraged thousands of vocation directors to do justice to the beauty of religious life by professionally promoting it, inviting a new generation to consider it, and assessing and mentoring those who express interest. As religious life continues to evolve to address the signs of the times, the NRVC encourages all in the church not to question whether to act, but how to act. Why? Because both God’s call to consecrated life, and people’s positive response to it, continue.

The NRVC website, nrvc.net, and this publication provide myriad ideas for action built on accurate information and awareness. Let us continue to dare to invite women and men to this joyful life of valuable witness and service.

If we are indeed convinced that the Holy Spirit continues to inspire vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, we can “once more cast out the nets” in the Lord’s name, with complete confidence. We can dare, as we should, to tell each young person to ask whether this is the path that they are meant to follow. Christus Vivit, 274

Sister Emily TeKolste, S.P. (center) at her entrance to the novitiate.
KEY FINDINGS ABOUT NEW MEMBERS (ENTERING FROM 2003-2018)

1. **Endless Call**: Men and women continue to respond to the call to religious life
2. **Appeal**: Drawn by prayer, spirituality, charism, community life, and mission
3. **Attributes**: Culturally diverse; embrace intercultural, intergenerational living
4. **Lifestyle**: Committed to living simply and in solidarity with the poor
5. **Outlook**: Filled with abundant hope for religious life amid changing demographics

**Characteristics of New Members**

- **3,500+ New Members**
- **Past 15 Years; 200+ Professed Members Per Year**
- **28 Average Age at Entrance**
- **81% Were Employed Before Entrance**
- **73% Attended a Catholic School For At Least Part of Their Education**
- **73% Grew up in “Middle-Class” Households**
- **71% Obtained a Bachelor’s Degree or More Before Entering Religious Life**
- **35% Discerned for More Than 2 Years**
- **34% Have a Relative in Religious Life**
- **33% Have a Parent Born Outside the U.S.**

**Vocation Awareness**

70% of new entrants considered religious life before age 21. Most:
- Accessed a wide array of print and online resources as they discerned;
- Talked to their pastors; attended vocation-related events; and
- Received encouragement from religious institutes, family, friends, parish members, and campus ministers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnic Background*</th>
<th>Age of Those in Initial Formation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian/Middle Eastern 13%</td>
<td>4% 60 and over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White 76%</td>
<td>7% 50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic 10%</td>
<td>1% Other/Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black/African 6%</td>
<td>3% Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian/Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (59 different languages) 12%</td>
<td>10% 40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese 5%</td>
<td>42% 20-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 76%</td>
<td>31% 30-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish 7%</td>
<td>6% Under 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*New members as reported by Major Superiors of Religious Institutes.

95% Found meeting with a member of the institute most helpful
74% Participated in a “Come and See” experience
66% Were invited to consider a religious vocation
Newer members see community life as what is distinctive and attractive about religious life. The majority of newer members desire to live in a community of four or more and find the following aspects of community “Very Important.” (Their ratings correspond fairly closely to the ratings of Major Superiors of religious institutes.)

**Community Life**

**Characteristics of Religious Institutes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Institutes</td>
<td>752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission Age Requirement</td>
<td>20 (Min) - 43 (Max) years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Vocation Director Term</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Budget</td>
<td>$34,039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Budget</td>
<td>$14,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have Office/Admin Support</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have Leadership &amp; Vocation Directors/Teams Meet at Least Once Annually</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept New Members</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have at Least One Serious Discerner Since 2003</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote Vocations Online</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a Vocation Director/Vocation Team</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have at Least One Person in Initial Formation</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor “Come and See” Experiences</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote to College Age &amp; Young Adults (46% to High Schools; 26% to Elementary Schools)</td>
<td>50%+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Attraction to Chosen Community**

Note: Respondents of culturally diverse ethnicities are more likely than Anglos to be “very much” attracted to their institute by the life and works of the founder/ess, the ministries of the institute, the cultural diversity of members, and the welcome and encouragement by members.

Go to NRVC.net for the complete NRVC/CARA 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life. This study was made possible in part through a grant from the GHR Foundation.

NRVC offers many opportunities for supporting our mission including membership, sponsorship, subscriptions, and participation in our events. Learn more at NRVC.net.

Younger members reflect on the study

Brother Kyle Mena, F.S.C. (center) with members of his community. On his left is Brother Joseph (J.D.) Macioce, F.S.C. and to his right is Brother Richard Buccina, F.S.C.

The gifts of old and young, faithfulness, and awareness that we are not alone in our demographic challenges are among the key themes from the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations that resonate with young religious.

Brother Kyle Mena, F.S.C. is a postulant with the Brothers of the Christian Schools and teaches at West Catholic Preparatory High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Sister Adriana Calzada Vázquez Vela, C.C.V.I. has been a Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word since 2007. She ministers at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas.

Father Daniel Kim, M.M. was ordained a Maryknoll priest in 2017 and currently resides and works in Maryknoll, New York.

Backbone: cultivating a culture of mission and creativity

By Brother Kyle Mena, F.S.C.

Sit up. Keep your back straight. Pay attention. Please don’t slouch. Stay grounded. Remember your roots. Like many educators and parents, I find myself often thinking and stating any one of these phrases in my classroom whenever I see a student slouched over or with a head down. Just when I think the message is not getting through, a fellow student taps his or her peer, encouraging that person to arise. In the process, my students and I are taught a lesson that goes deeper than outward appearances. What is cultivated through these peer interventions is self-awareness and, more important, the support available in a community. For those of us in religious life: What does it look like when we are tapped by our peers in community?

Grounds for a new beginning

In the NRVC-CARA 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life, superiors speak in depth about a lack of support for the newest members due to the age gap between old and new members. There is a deeper
concern that younger members may be less committed and less able to absorb the charism and heritage of the order—and thus there will be a lack of future leadership. Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., in *The Fire in These Ashes*, eloquently states, “Religious in large numbers are growing daily more disillusioned by the endless historical view of past forms of religious life and long excursions into futuristic speculation.... Our task is to live in the here and now.”

Chittister suggests that within the delicate balance of the here and now lies an opportunity for the older generation to connect with the younger generation while allowing newer members to be connected to each other and to the charism. The old cliché is that you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. As a new member of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, I am tapped on the shoulder daily and reminded of our honorable and valiant mission! More important, genuine humility and zeal for the mission of education has led to connections and relationships with older brothers over the years. I continue to experience a great deal of fraternal support from the older men simply in that many are ready and willing to listen to my practical questions about things like how to set up and maintain an orderly classroom, how best to embrace moments of solitude, and techniques on strengthening and maintaining my spiritual life.

In my case, younger brothers are blessed to be surrounded by young brothers who connect on a semiannual basis for what is referred to as a Brothers In Formation (BIF) weekend. At these BIF weekends, young brothers can reconnect and share their experiences both in the classroom and in community. While these weekends provide vital and immeasurable peer support, it is understood that many of the newer members in formation have no peers in their formation “class” within their community. True for some communities more than others, this lack of a peer group contributes to the overarching concern for a lack of peer support. Within this context, intercommunity gatherings take on an instrumental role as they provide grounds for fellowship, communication, and a wider scope of our universal mission of evangelization.

PERSONAL, SUPPORTIVE, WITHOUT JUDGEMENT

In her book *Catholic Cultures: How Parishes Can Respond to the Changing Face of Catholicism*, Sister Patricia Wittberg, S.C. expresses the following, “Not
only do our parishes need to speak the Good News to various ethnic cultures, we also need to address different generational cultures.” The same difficulty remains for both seasoned veterans and newer members to religious life: What is the allure of religious life and how can it be conveyed in the here and now? One can argue that what draws young people to religious life and a life with Christ is a personal, authentic encounter with someone filled with missionary zeal. In my case it was an encounter with Brother Edward Shields, F.S.C. that led me to join the “contact program,” whereby I met a cohort of young men also interested in discerning a life with the brothers. I was also personally invited to reside with a community of brothers. There I had firsthand experience with the tremendous support and respect the brothers have for one another. Last, I received a personal invitation to work as a high-school service coordinator, and there I could see the brothers’ passion for and dedication to working with young people.

At my current ministry in urban education, I often turn to older brothers and experienced faculty members for wisdom and insight into creating a vibrant classroom. As daily questions from curious students arise from the depths of their hearts, undertones of commitment and integrity fill the room—indicating that we have much to learn from the younger generation. Who do you live with? Are you allowed to have money? Do you want to be a brother for the rest of your life?

We are reminded by Pope Francis in his post-synod apostolic exhortation that “we grow in wisdom and maturity when we take the time to touch the suffering of others. The poor have a pearl of hidden wisdom and, with a few simple words, they can help us discover unexpected values.” These pearls of hidden wisdom, present in exuberant student questions, creep into the classroom each day and help fortify my vocation. Young people need someone genuine who will listen to their concerns, be present when they’ve made a mistake and need help, hold them accountable for their actions, and lead them to Christ. King David preaches this exact message in the Psalms, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”

Catholicism is changing, and teaching in an urban environment has reinforced that reality. To this end, Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B. calls all religious brothers and sisters to experience “fire in these ashes, not [the] smoldering embers” of the past. As stated by young brothers, “We are teachers [and ministers of justice] in a world that needs risky and bold responses. Let us open our horizons of creativity in order to ensure that the mission deploys its strength in the promotion of a world that is more just and in solidarity with others” (45th General Chapter, De La Salle Christian Brothers). Let us all sit up, keep our backs straight, pay attention, remember our roots in Christ, and live in the here and now.

Enthusiastically faithful to the call

By Sister Adriana Calzada Vázquez Vela, C.C.V.I.

Calzada is a campus minister in San Antonio, Texas and belongs to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.

I recently experienced for the first time the death of a sister I had lived with for four months, Sister Rita Prendergast, C.C.V.I. Yes, a lot of dear sisters have died and it has always been painful. Nevertheless, this was a whole new experience. As I read through the collection of emails Rita sent me (10 years of them), it was easy to identify two themes: “God loves you” and “just surrender to God’s will.” We lived together when I was a novice and she was 78. She was 88 when she passed. Her centeredness and hopefulness make a good lens from which to read the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life.

I am moved by the hopes for the future in this report. That is where my heart immediately went as soon as I received the report, probably because I do recognize my agency in creating the future of religious life.

A word that stands out for me in the report is faithfulness. Newer members desire to remain faithful to the call, to prayer, to God, to the people of God whom we want to serve. The report makes me smile and connects me to the initial innocence I brought to
Younger Members Reflect

Religious life: the desire to respond to a call which can be defined in various ways, the overwhelming love of God experienced in a way that could only lead me to give my life “back.” I have not lost any of these desires; the expression of them has been transformed over the years, though.

Reading all the different voices energetically expressing joy, hope, and enthusiasm for religious life should erase any worry or doubt that we will be fine. We religious sisters, brothers, and priests will continue to respond to our call faithfully. Newer members will continue to serve and journey with different communities, such as young adults, L.G.B.T.+ people, and migrants and refugees. We will continue to do it with strength, passion, commitment, and a lot of energy. We will continue to do it professionally, with “outside the box” thinking. We will continue to discern the best way to do what we are doing, just like our predecessors.

In my case, and I know I’m not the only one, I will continue to do so relying on my profound desire to remain faithful to God, until one day, finally, I not only “know” but embrace the fact that the faithful one is God, the one who loves me and to whom I need to surrender, just as my dearest Rita reminded me time and again. She fully understood what I hope to someday.

Together let’s address issues of aging and vibrancy

By Father Daniel Kim, M.M.

Kim lives and works at his community’s headquarters in Maryknoll, New York.

As a member of a society of apostolic life, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, who was ordained in 2017, I have been tasked to provide personal feedback on whatever I found most intriguing in the latest NRVC-CARA study. I found the section titled “Greatest Concern/Worry for the Newest Members” (46-48) the most striking. Many concerns listed by major superiors in this section resonated deeply with me, with the following two being the most notable:

Finding the support, encouragement, and life they need to be sustained in an aging, retired community. Helping them to experience the fire of mission, not smoldering embers (47).

New members are entering at a time when it seems we are constantly seeking clarity about the life—it is not a time of clear and direct understanding. Attending to their “future” in the midst of aging and diminishing members (48)!

The aforementioned comments highlight well the growing concern and worry for younger members such as myself. For instance, I am currently residing and working at our headquarters in Maryknoll, New York, and until recently the age-gap between myself and the next youngest member was 31 years. Furthermore, my community’s demographics by age are very top-heavy, meaning a vast majority of our men fall within the 80+ age group. So it is easy to understand that much of our leadership’s time and energy are spent on caring well for our elderly and ailing members—a very important and necessary undertaking. Unfortunately what suffers is the vibrancy and fire behind breaking new missionary inroads.

What the NRVC-CARA report seems to say is that the realities and concerns I mention here are widespread. In other words, my community is not unique in dealing with the issues of aging religious and the associated challenges (at least in North America). Therefore, any push to resolve this matter, in my humble opinion, needs to be done on a national, intercommunal level. Additionally, in that effort I would like to see the voices of younger religious expressed alongside the major superiors. That way a more balanced discussion can take place. These are a few simple suggestions gathered from not only the section that I found intriguing but the report in its entirety.

The data and the statistical analysis of this report are comprehensive and invaluable. I extend my sincere appreciation to all those involved with this project. Furthermore I hope people of all ages who belong to religious institutes will work together to ensure that our charisms not only survive but thrive today and on into the future.
NRVC MEMBERSHIP

5 ESSENTIAL BENEFITS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

VOCATION DIRECTOR MANUAL  Vocation Ministry basics and beyond! Everything you need to do your ministry well! Dozens of templates and forms that you can customize and adapt to your needs.

SUMMER & FALL INSTITUTES  Continuing Education opportunities to hone your skills in such areas as behavioral assessment, ethics, and healthy sexuality.

PUBLICATIONS & RESOURCES

HORIZON  Membership comes with an annual subscription to our unique and highly respected quarterly journal plus access to our comprehensive online HORIZON library of past issues where you can build your skills and renew your spirit. GO TO NRVC.NET/SIGNUP_HORIZON.

VISION  Our award-winning VISION Vocation Guide for discerners is distributed in print throughout the U.S. and Canada and online globally. Member advertisers receive free shipping and special acknowledgment in the guide. GO TO VOCATIONNETWORK.ORG.

NRVC STORE  Receive special Member-only pricing on all store items, including prayer cards, discernment manuals, and Busy Person’s Retreat booklets. GO TO NRVC.NET/STORE

NETWORKING

MEMBER AREA MEETINGS / CONVOCATION  Network with others in vocation ministry, find sources of support.

MEMBER DIRECTORY  Contact other members and for idea sharing and joint projects.

MEMBERS-ONLY ACCESS

RESOURCES  Videos and podcasts, discernment ideas and tech tips.

GRANTS  MISERICORDIA SCHOLARSHIP  Financial assistance for members unable to bear the full cost of NRVC professional development opportunities. NATIONAL FUND FOR CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS  Educational-debt relief for candidates seeking to enter religious life available exclusively to NRVC members. GO TO NFCRV.ORG

RESEARCH & ADVOCACY

STUDIES  Access research and reports on trends in vocation ministry. NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH  Attendance at global conferences, workshops, and youth gatherings, including NCYC and World Youth Day.

SIGN UP TODAY!

GO TO NRVC.NET/SIGNUP

Let’s listen to and support new members

By Sister Annmarie Sanders, I.H.M.
Sanders is the communications director for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The hope and zeal contained within the responses of new members in religious life to the NRVC study give us clear indicators of the work needed now and into the future to support this way of life for generations to come.

The 2020 study offers an interesting observation about the hope of newer members for the future of religious life. Noting that newer members are more optimistic than the leaders of their institutes, the researchers add, “perhaps because they recognize their own agency in creating a future for their institute.”

Without a doubt, newer members have the utmost love, respect, and reverence for their elders in religious life. However, they also see that the time has come for elders to loosen their grip on what has been in order to let the new emerge. Newer members are highly aware of the profound and rapid changes occurring in society that require us to be adaptable. They also acknowledge that they need strong spiritual grounding and solid education to discern carefully how such adaptation needs to occur within their communities and within themselves. They seem, indeed, to be acknowledging their own agency by naming both what they desire and what they need.

I wonder what might occur if we, of the older generations, focused more on the vision and potential younger members see and are articulating. Hints of the
What would it mean if newer members were encouraged to name the future they envision and were then supported to use their agency to create that future?

The findings show that newer members often feel they cannot fully express their own vision for the future and, at best, offer only suggestions or intimations of their true hopes. While the reasons for their muted voices may be myriad, this reality calls for attention.

What would it mean if newer members were encouraged to name the future they envision and were then supported to use their agency to create that future—fully and without fear? What if our institutes expected their newer members to live according to their dreams and provided what they needed to do so? What if newer members experimented, tried, and perhaps even “failed” with what they endeavored to do? Could we create a culture that prized such attempts and saw even failures as ways for us all to learn and grow into what is emerging in religious life?

The NRVC study points to the work older generations need to do to assure that newer members have a future that does not burden them with former structures and expectations that no longer fit today’s reality. Responses that indicate newer members are worried about caring for large numbers of elders or feel that they will be pressed into leadership long before they feel ready tell us that we have a responsibility to make changes now so that new members can live religious life free from undue anxiety about internal matters and with the wholeheartedness for mission that they desire.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious is initiating a national discernment on how all institutes of women religious can find new ways of supporting one another through these next decades of change. Such support might result in new networks, new ways to share resources, new ways to administer our institutes, new ways of being a sisterhood across the boundaries of our institutes. We hope such efforts will help put in place what newer members need to live religious life into the future.

A large question looms before us: Do we have the will to make the needed changes for the sake of those coming after us?

**Formation, collaboration, and investment**

*By Brother Bill Boslet, O.S.F.*

Boslet is a Franciscan Brother of Brooklyn and the executive secretary of the Religious Brothers Conference.

My thoughts about NRVC’s 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life fall under three categories: new membership, formation, and the future. Starting with new membership, “vocations” is a frequent topic at meetings of my own religious congregation, the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn. The comments from both the major superiors and the newer members, the two groups that were surveyed in the study, could certainly have been heard at any gathering of Franciscan Brothers.

The report shows that major superiors see the gap in age between older members and newer members as an ongoing concern, one with serious implications for the future of institutes.

The newer members express a concern about aging members and the few incoming members to replace the elderly. But there are newer members, and their religious formation is more crucial than ever.

Meanwhile the major superiors acknowledge that with few new members, it has been challenging to provide peer support for new entrants. Leaders realize that one solution is to provide opportunities for intercongregational support.

Superiors also worry that young people in modern, secular society do not have the faith background that was common in previous generations. And they are concerned about new members’ experiences before entering that necessitate mentoring or counseling, such as those related to a dysfunctional family.
The major superiors hope that formation programs will enable new members to have a solid foundation in religious life and will help them to incorporate that foundation into their daily religious life. Both newer members and superiors mention deliberate engagement with the wider religious community as important in the accompaniment and formation process.

As a former formation director I have long believed in the importance of ongoing formation. Prayer and spiritual direction are a vital part of religious life. These tools are also essential to the support of newer members in their formation.

What about some challenges and hopes for the future? The major superiors realize that the small size of communities is a challenge to the institutes, one that affects both maintenance of their ministries and the selection and preparation of new members for leadership roles.

However, the newer members saw that one of the outcomes of diminished size is often a recognition of the need for collaboration with other religious institutes and with lay partners in order to fulfill the mission. Those efforts at networking and collaboration can help new members and their institutes to extend their ministry despite fewer vowed members. Thus we can ask about smaller size: is the glass half empty or half full?

Lastly I would like to share the thoughts of a major superior quoted in the report whose words struck me as particularly good advice: “Try to form and give priority to creating a formation community to receive them, support them, and nurture their vocation. We put our best people in vocation and formation ministry. We also put our financial resources there, too!”

Vitality of community life matters

By Sister Mary Christine Cremin, R.S.M.
Cremin is a Religious Sisters of Mercy and executive director of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious.

The data presented in the new NRVC-CARA study should give hope to anyone concerned about the future of religious life in the United States. At the same time, it raises questions about what the lived experience of the life, at least for some, may look like in the not too distant future. Of particular interest to vocation directors and religious superiors may be information on what a significant number of newer vocations (those of the last 15 years) are looking for in religious communities.

Analyzing the characteristics of men and women who have entered religious communities in the last 15 years, the study used a combination of survey data and focus group sessions to look at four areas: 1) what attracted respondents to religious life and to their particular institute, 2) what they found helpful in their process of discernment; 3) what styles of prayer, community life, and ministry they preferred, and 4) what sustains and what challenges them in living out their religious life.

The study clearly shows that men and women are still being called to religious life and responding to the call. They are drawn by a sense of being called, and they have a desire for spiritual growth, for prayer, to be part of a community, and to be of service. Significantly, almost half of those now in initial formation are under age 30, an increase from 10 years earlier when the study indicated 43 percent were under 30.

What will come as no surprise is the importance to a discerner of personal contact with a religious and his or her community. Apparently recognizing this fact, the majority of communities participating in the study have one or more vocation directors. Surprisingly enough, however, only 23 percent of women’s communities regularly invite their vocation directors to give reports about vocation activities at the institute’s leadership meetings.

Emphasizing the significance of an institute’s prayer and community life to its ability to attract new vocations, the research shows that younger members were attracted to their particular institute primarily by its charism, style of prayer, and community life. While many respondents indicated that they first learned about their institute online, direct contact with religious through “Come and See” programs or discernment retreats was particularly important to Millennial discerners.

The major superiors hope that formation programs will enable new members to have a solid foundation in religious life and will help them to incorporate that foundation into their daily religious life. Both newer members and superiors mention deliberate engagement with the wider religious community as important in the accompaniment and formation process.

As a former formation director I have long believed in the importance of ongoing formation. Prayer and spiritual direction are a vital part of religious life. These tools are also essential to the support of newer members in their formation.

What about some challenges and hopes for the future? The major superiors realize that the small size of communities is a challenge to the institutes, one that affects both maintenance of their ministries and the selection and preparation of new members for leadership roles.

However, the newer members saw that one of the outcomes of diminished size is often a recognition of the need for collaboration with other religious institutes and with lay partners in order to fulfill the mission. Those efforts at networking and collaboration can help new members and their institutes to extend their ministry despite fewer vowed members. Thus we can ask about smaller size: is the glass half empty or half full?

Lastly I would like to share the thoughts of a major superior quoted in the report whose words struck me as particularly good advice: “Try to form and give priority to creating a formation community to receive them, support them, and nurture their vocation. We put our best people in vocation and formation ministry. We also put our financial resources there, too!”

Vitality of community life matters

By Sister Mary Christine Cremin, R.S.M.
Cremin is a Religious Sisters of Mercy and executive director of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious.

The data presented in the new NRVC-CARA study should give hope to anyone concerned about the future of religious life in the United States. At the same time, it raises questions about what the lived experience of the life, at least for some, may look like in the not too distant future. Of particular interest to vocation directors and religious superiors may be information on what a significant number of newer vocations (those of the last 15 years) are looking for in religious communities.

Analyzing the characteristics of men and women who have entered religious communities in the last 15 years, the study used a combination of survey data and focus group sessions to look at four areas: 1) what attracted respondents to religious life and to their particular institute, 2) what they found helpful in their process of discernment; 3) what styles of prayer, community life, and ministry they preferred, and 4) what sustains and what challenges them in living out their religious life.

The study clearly shows that men and women are still being called to religious life and responding to the call. They are drawn by a sense of being called, and they have a desire for spiritual growth, for prayer, to be part of a community, and to be of service. Significantly, almost half of those now in initial formation are under age 30, an increase from 10 years earlier when the study indicated 43 percent were under 30.

What will come as no surprise is the importance to a discerner of personal contact with a religious and his or her community. Apparently recognizing this fact, the majority of communities participating in the study have one or more vocation directors. Surprisingly enough, however, only 23 percent of women’s communities regularly invite their vocation directors to give reports about vocation activities at the institute’s leadership meetings.

Emphasizing the significance of an institute’s prayer and community life to its ability to attract new vocations, the research shows that younger members were attracted to their particular institute primarily by its charism, style of prayer, and community life. While many respondents indicated that they first learned about their institute online, direct contact with religious through “Come and See” programs or discernment retreats was particularly important to Millennial discerners.

The major superiors hope that formation programs will enable new members to have a solid foundation in religious life and will help them to incorporate that foundation into their daily religious life. Both newer members and superiors mention deliberate engagement with the wider religious community as important in the accompaniment and formation process.

As a former formation director I have long believed in the importance of ongoing formation. Prayer and spiritual direction are a vital part of religious life. These tools are also essential to the support of newer members in their formation.

What about some challenges and hopes for the future? The major superiors realize that the small size of communities is a challenge to the institutes, one that affects both maintenance of their ministries and the selection and preparation of new members for leadership roles.

However, the newer members saw that one of the outcomes of diminished size is often a recognition of the need for collaboration with other religious institutes and with lay partners in order to fulfill the mission. Those efforts at networking and collaboration can help new members and their institutes to extend their ministry despite fewer vowed members. Thus we can ask about smaller size: is the glass half empty or half full?

Lastly I would like to share the thoughts of a major superior quoted in the report whose words struck me as particularly good advice: “Try to form and give priority to creating a formation community to receive them, support them, and nurture their vocation. We put our best people in vocation and formation ministry. We also put our financial resources there, too!”

Vitality of community life matters

By Sister Mary Christine Cremin, R.S.M.
Cremin is a Religious Sisters of Mercy and executive director of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious.

The data presented in the new NRVC-CARA study should give hope to anyone concerned about the future of religious life in the United States. At the same time, it raises questions about what the lived experience of the life, at least for some, may look like in the not too distant future. Of particular interest to vocation directors and religious superiors may be information on what a significant number of newer vocations (those of the last 15 years) are looking for in religious communities.

Analyzing the characteristics of men and women who have entered religious communities in the last 15 years, the study used a combination of survey data and focus group sessions to look at four areas: 1) what attracted respondents to religious life and to their particular institute, 2) what they found helpful in their process of discernment; 3) what styles of prayer, community life, and ministry they preferred, and 4) what sustains and what challenges them in living out their religious life.

The study clearly shows that men and women are still being called to religious life and responding to the call. They are drawn by a sense of being called, and they have a desire for spiritual growth, for prayer, to be part of a community, and to be of service. Significantly, almost half of those now in initial formation are under age 30, an increase from 10 years earlier when the study indicated 43 percent were under 30.

What will come as no surprise is the importance to a discerner of personal contact with a religious and his or her community. Apparently recognizing this fact, the majority of communities participating in the study have one or more vocation directors. Surprisingly enough, however, only 23 percent of women’s communities regularly invite their vocation directors to give reports about vocation activities at the institute’s leadership meetings. Given that newer members indicate that their choice of a community was heavily influenced by the experience of relating to the community and sharing prayer and community meals, it would seem helpful to have regular updates from vocation directors as part of community meetings.

Emphasizing the significance of an institute’s prayer and community life to its ability to attract new vocations, the research shows that younger members were attracted to their particular institute primarily by its charism, style of prayer, and community life. While many respondents indicated that they first learned about their institute online, direct contact with religious through “Come and See” programs or discernment retreats was particularly important to Millennial discerners.
Consistent with the high value the majority of respondents placed on community life, Millennial respondents were very much attracted by the example of the institute's members and the nature of their community life. Interestingly, women were more likely than men to be “very much” attracted by the community life of the institute. They placed a high value on living together, sharing meals and leisure time together, and celebrating holidays and feast days together.

Perhaps this last point is one of the most important for institutes as they look to the future. A vibrant community that deeply shares its life, its prayer, its work, its meals, its recreation, and its joys and sorrows is a powerfully attractive sign. It’s one that any institute wanting to encourage new members will take seriously.

A new narrative of perseverance

By Sister Ellen Dauwer, S.C.

S everal years ago in her Leadership Conference of Women Religious presidential address, Sister Mary Pellegrino, C.S.J. spoke of the narrative of diminishment in religious life. The narrative seems to have grown larger and louder through frequent repetition and has subtly wound its way into much of the U.S. Catholic consciousness.

When asked if anyone is entering religious life today, I sometimes engage people in a simple experiment I devised a few years ago. I ask them how many people they think entered religious life this past year in the United States or how many people they think are in initial formation in religious communities at this time. Only one person out of dozens questioned has given an accurate answer to these questions; all others have underestimated the statistics, and most have vastly underestimated them! Unfortunately, the narrative is alive and well.

The 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life provides important tools to those who serve in vocation and formation ministries, as well as to leaders and all members of religious congregations. I dare say to all in our church and society, too. First, it promotes deliberations and decisions, conversations and consultations based in fact rather than anecdote. Many of us are steeped in the local worlds of our community, neighborhood, family, and friends; we then generalize and normalize our experiences. For example, if three women in their 40s are discerning in my community and in the communities of my friends, I might conclude that most discerners these days are in their 40s. This latest NRVC/CARA study, when paired with the annual reports of CARA on recent entrants and those recently professed, broadens these anecdotal observations to create a more accurate picture of religious life in the United States.

Another tool the study provides is that of comparison. When the NRVC’s 2009 Study on Recent Vocations was published, it raised more questions than answers. I recall a presentation of initial findings of the study at a Commission on Religious Life and Ministry annual meeting that gathered leaders of LCWR, CMSM, CMSWR, and the USCCB that resulted in lively conversation. Later at the LCWR Assembly, when the final results were reported, there were questions regarding methodology intermingled with questions about findings. The current report about newer members stands on the shoulders of the one that preceded it, gaining wisdom from experience, while providing rich data from a 15-year look back period.

Finally, this study of recent members will assist the Religious Formation Conference in its current ministry with both formators and leaders of men’s and women’s congregations. Since the beginning of religious life, formators have taken their place between the proverbial rock and a hard place as they stand on the edge of the new, in the middle of the present day, and on the waning edge of the past. They engage in mutual discernment, accompanying newer members with their questions of call and fit. They also ponder call and fit on behalf of the congregation. Formators report to congregational or provincial leadership while journeying with newer members who sometimes challenge and question the formation program and process. This study probes the concerns of leaders and newer members while also giving voice to their hopes and dreams. The Religious Formation Conference’s Orientation to Formation Program to be held in October will offer a two-day extension for congregational and provincial leaders. The insights and observations of leaders and newer members from this study will be an invaluable tool.

Pervasive narratives of diminishment need to be presented with accurate information to release their hold on people’s perception of the truth. It is my hope that this important study be disseminated broadly and discussed deeply by formators and other religious so that all may hear and believe the good news it contains.
Common prayer, common life, and common ministry are the most important aspects of a religious institute for respondents to the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life. For many, these findings will not come as a surprise. In some ways they are not much different from a similar study done in 2009 when these aspects of community life were also highly rated. The difference is that young religious now, especially in communities of men, are primarily from the Millennial generation. Those “respondents, in particular, are more likely than older generation respondents to report that living, ministering, sharing meals, and socializing with other members are ‘very important’ to them” (108).

What may come as a surprise to older generations of men in religious life whether in the Silent, Boomer, or even X Generations, is that “ministries of the institute are also important to most new members, [but] they are less important than spirituality, prayer, community, and lifestyle” (7). Another aspect that might surprise or even cause discomfort for some is that “most new members prefer to live in a large (eight or more) or medium-sized (four to seven) community, living with members of different ages at or near their ministry site” (9). The newer members are also much more ethnically diverse than their elders (6). Finally, another finding that might surprise is that new members are in their late 20s, on average, when starting religious life, rather than in their early 30s as they were in 2009 (6).

While the charism and spirituality of the institute attract newer members, they often come to know their institute through one of its works or online. The witness
Leaders Reflect

of the members of the institute and their encouragement are important factors in someone taking the step to enter. The role of the vocation director continues to be important, but together with the other members of the institute (92). Personal contact through “Come and See” programs (74 percent) and discernment retreats (59 percent) are very common among those who eventually join (87).

Once they do enter, they “identify personal private prayer as one of the aspects of religious life that is most important to them and that most sustains them now” (8). For communal prayer they tend toward “daily Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotional prayers” (8). Again, for some older members these practices, particularly the last two, might not be a regular part of their communal prayer.

New member concerns include: their ability to persevere, too much work, lack of preparation for leadership, loneliness, as well as “adapting to rapid change in society” (10). Some of these, such as perseverance, are similar to the concerns of major superiors for new members. One critical difference is that while newer members are concerned about the age gap in their institute, they “realized that more deliberate efforts at networking and collaboration can help them and their institute” (10). In fact, “they look forward to increased collaboration across generations” (11).

For leaders, formators, and vocation directors in male religious institutes, these findings offer an opportunity to evaluate the strength of communal prayer, life, and ministry. Today Catholic young adults can do ministry full-time as a first career. They do not need to join a religious institute to do that. What the institute can do is offer to accompany a young person into deeper life in Christ, in and through the life of the institute. They come looking for a life that is larger than themselves, one in which members support and accompany one another, pray together and for one another, and assist one another in their apostolic work.

When these are not present in our institutes, then why do we wonder when young men do not come to us? They are not looking for an institute to be perfect. They are simply looking for it to be striving to be authentic to the life that it proclaims. When they see and experience this, then the study shows that they will take the risk to join us, grow with us in holiness, and offer us an optimism that can be challenging, but growth-filled.
Eight best practices for encouraging new membership

Vocation directors often relish the chance to discuss the ins and outs of their ministry with people who understand it well. Members don’t always “get it.” The public frequently doesn’t. And even among practicing Catholics, myths about vocations can abound. How do the many people who contribute to vocation ministry make headway? While there are no one-size fits all solutions, HORIZON hopes these eight best practices—grounded in data and backed up by experience—provide insights that will help your community move forward.

Eleven years ago, the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) published a list of best practices after completing the 2009 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life. A decade later, the landscape has shifted a bit, but the same best practices are still relevant when it comes to vocation ministry in religious communities.

The following eight best practices are gleaned from the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life, the 2009 study, and an analysis of HORIZON articles on the practice of vocation ministry.

Quick review of 2009 recommendations
The 2009 study included an evaluation of the vocation ministry associated with communities that were receiving new members. The analysis revealed the following, every point of which continues to be relevant:
• Be proactive
• Create a culture of vocations

By Carol Schuck Scheiber
Carol Schuck Scheiber has been the editor of HORIZON since 1998. She also edits “Focus on Vocation Ministry” newsletter and is managing editor of VISION Vocation Guide, vocationnetwork.org.
• Have a vocation director, preferably with a team
• Use media of all types, including online media
• Sponsor discernment programs
• Target young adults in your strategy

While every one of the above points continues to be valid, the best practices outlined below are framed by the latest data and informed additionally by more than a decade of vocation ministry and publishing on the topic. One truism that the 2020 study confirmed is that religious communities in the United States vary substantially: they have unique charisms, distinct financial realities, different ministries, and varied numbers of active and retired members. Thus the capacity to act on each of these best practices is different from one religious order to another. Some communities must be creative with lean budgets.

2020 Best Practices

HORIZON presents the following best practices with a word of encouragement: start where you are, do what you can, and believe that the gift of religious life is worth sharing. The 2020 study confirmed that young people have a desire to grow spiritually, live communally, and perform ministry (including the ministry of prayer). Young adults—and not-so-young adults—seek their path and want guidance. Vocation ministers have the wisdom of their traditions to share with a world that is hungry for that wisdom.

1) Decide you want new members.

This sounds obvious, but in reality a community will not attract and retain new members if the members don’t want them, even if this sentiment is not expressed overtly. There are many inadvertent ways to communicate lack of interest: members are too busy, no one is willing to stay up late with a young visitor, or few people will take a turn helping with the college retreat.

On the other hand, in the 2020 study, new members repeatedly report that they were attracted to communities that showed genuine interest in them, their welfare, and their vocation discernment. Community members invited them to events, made them feel welcome, adapted to their youthful energy, and offered them an attractive experience of religious life. These themes arose many times when newer members talked in focus groups about their experiences in joining religious orders.

NRVC’s trove of articles about programming and organizing vocation ministry shows a repeated theme of congregations that have consciously worked at instilling a “culture of vocations,” which is inextricably tied to wanting new members, which is likewise tied to having a strong, positive communal life to offer.

There are communities that have consciously decided against inviting in new members, but they are a small minority. The best case scenario for communities that desire new members is to decide communally that they want them, have leaders and members that continuously prioritize that goal, and make ongoing efforts consistent with that goal. Most members need to believe in the community and its future in order for it to have a future.

2) Be all in: lead, fund, staff, and support

Both the 2009 and 2020 studies show a definite correlation between investment in vocation and formation ministry and new membership. Because vocation ministry is about planting seeds that take time to grow, it can be hard to feel gratified by “results,” and members can sometimes shy away from the ministry. Sometimes members are uncertain how to relate to a younger generation, or they prefer to avoid the possibility of an invitation being rejected by not extending one. Whatever hesitations exist, it is crucial to take the ministry seriously, to be “all in.” For maximum effectiveness vocation ministry needs someone—or some group of committed members—to give it focused, ongoing time and attention. This allows the ministry to be adequately staffed and properly funded to realistically pay for the costs involved. Vocation ministers need training in ethics, communications, assessment, sexuality, etc. (all of these are topics of professional workshops offered by the NRVC).

These days it often is a sacrifice to dedicate talented members to a ministry that will cost the community the loss of a paycheck. Still, appointing gifted members to do vocation ministry is a sacrifice that institutes are making for the sake of youth, for the sake of nurturing religious vocations, and for the sake of the institute’s future. Vocation directors and leaders need to work closely together to set strategies and goals that make sense for their community and to build the critical internal support for and communication about the ministry.

3) Go out—and invite in

Certainly many communities are welcoming middle-
aged adults, and those new members are precious parts of their communities. However the 2018 synod on youth held in Rome clearly showed how much young people want the vocational guidance that is part and parcel of vocation ministry. The NRVC’s 2020 study confirmed that newer members who joined in their 20s and 30s are usually in communities with big age gaps, but they very much want to be in their communities. Newer members in the latest study report very high satisfaction with their lives as religious.

When newer members met in 13 focus groups around the country, they acknowledged that community life without age peers can be challenging, but the large majority expressed love for their way of life in spite of difficulties. Thus there are two strong reasons to go out to young people and invite them in: they want vocational guidance, and communities must keep inviting or they create a limited future for themselves. Going out to the young means learning where they are in one’s corner of the world and building relationships with them. (See ideas on page 23.)

4) Continuously build relationships

There are no fail-proof techniques for building relationships with your target demographic. The 2009 and 2020 studies both point out that newer members entered communities where they built a relationship with at least one member … and that led them to the next step, and the next step. Vocation ministers and members of their religious communities reached out, stayed connected, kept inviting, and used many means for doing these things: social media, print and online advertising and promotion, special events, email, blogs, campus retreats, and other means.

Over its 32 years as an organization, the National Religious Vocation Conference has been key to another type of relationship-building that matters: collaborative relationships among vocation and formation ministers from different communities. Through cooperation, groups of ministers are able to do what they cannot do alone: sponsor intercommunity retreats, nun runs, high-school and campus vocation fairs, and many other types of group projects that help people to learn about religious life. Learn of one such initiative on page 29.

5) Address internal issues

If a religious community is experiencing serious deficits in any major area (e.g. quality of communal life, clear identity) those problems will naturally inhibit people from joining. The 2009 and 2020 studies both pointed out that new members are attracted to communities where they can grow in their relationship to God, be part of a joyful community with a genuine communal life, and minister to the people of God. Many communities have taken positive steps to enhance the quality of their communal life. (Outlines of these programs are available at nrvc.net. Go to “Resources,” “HORIZON library,” “Program outlines.”) New members are attracted to authentic, healthy communities, meaning that institutes that are serious about inviting in the next generation must be attentive to internal concerns.

6) Focus on other-centered ministry

Ideally vocation ministry should be outward-looking and other-centered, and, like any ministry, it shouldn’t be centered on the gratification of the minister. A sense of healthy focus and balance in the way that vocation ministry is conducted is a theme that comes through in particular in the focus group reports of the 2020 study. In relating their own vocation journeys, newer members expressed gratitude to those who walked with them, sharing wisdom, allowing them time, understanding that life experience and perspective at age 25 is different from age 45 or 65.

The study participants—members who joined and stayed—by and large feel they have found their genuine vocation, a process that required time and freedom. The challenge for institutes is to maintain a vision that is both outward (What do young people need to help them uncover God’s call for their lives?) and inward (How can we encourage a healthy community? How can we promote our community so that as young people determine their life path, they can consider life with us?)

There is a mystery to the process of vocation discernment, and each person’s journey is unique. Maintaining a focus on the pastoral needs of those making life decisions keeps institutes grounded.

7) Communicate, communicate, communicate

Both the 2009 and 2020 study clearly show that an essential part of vocation ministry is communication. Religious communities need to communicate to multiple audiences. The general public should know that
the community exists and is open to new membership. Young people need to brush shoulders with religious; many have never met a Catholic sister, nun, or brother. Others have never spoken directly to a priest. Vocation ministers (sometimes in tandem with communications directors but sometimes without anyone in this role) must get the word out about who the community is, what it is doing, and what opportunities there are for interacting with the community, such as joining it as a volunteer, associate, or lifelong member.

Some communication essentials apply in general. Every community that is welcoming new members is going to need an attractive, updated website that clearly communicates how to get in touch about becoming a member. Religious institutes need to have visibility in their local community and beyond. Because social media is a crucial form of contemporary communication, communities that want to invite targeted populations ideally have a presence on one or more platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. For plentiful ideas about forms and methods of communication, see NRVC’s online HORIZON library at “Resources” then “NRVC periodicals.”

Communication with the public ideally should steer people toward live contact with the community so that a relationship can be built. For instance, communities can advertise events on NRVC’s VocationNetwork.org calendar (a free service for any community). They might post events such as Eucharistic Adoration, volunteer service, prayer opportunities, open houses, online discussions, or service opportunities. Those events bring people together, allowing a relationship to be formed or furthered.

8) Build a culture of vocations

This final best practice encompasses the seven previous practices and then goes a step or two beyond. To build a culture of vocations means to maintain a broad vision while working in one’s own corner of the world. The 2020 Study on Recent Vocations confirms that people continue to enter religious orders despite predictions to the contrary. To build a culture of vocations brings to mind the adage “think globally, act locally.”

In the big picture, the church must always undergo renewal, becoming ever more closely aligned with Christ’s vision. From that reenergized church will come forth disciples who want to lay down their lives for the sake of others. A portion of those disciples will be called to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience in consecrated life, but most will lay down their lives in other forms of life—all of which are seen as “vocation.”

A culture of vocations sees each baptized person as having a calling to a particular state of life. Young people involved in the 2018 synod on youth asked the church to shift toward an understanding that “vocation” is for everyone. When a culture of vocations exists, all members of the church—parents, grandparents, religious, pastors, teachers, campus ministers—encourage and support the process of discernment that affords each person the time to pray, listen, seek counsel, and choose a path that will give them the most joy and sense of fulfillment.

Religious institutes can help build a “culture of vocations” in the larger church and within their own ranks. In such a culture every member of the community feels responsible for inviting new members, and every member is in ongoing discernment about how best to live his or her calling. When a culture of vocations exists within religious institutes, there is a community-wide prioritization of vocation, and each member gives what he or she can to enrich the community and bring new life.

This larger vision at the local, communal, and global levels spurs us on and but also lets us rest—in the knowledge that discipleship and calling is always and ultimately in the hands of God. Religious communities and those they appoint as vocation ministers plant seeds, water, and give praise to the God of the harvest as each generation bears new fruit.
LIKE MOST RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS in the United States today, ours has fewer sponsored institutions and fewer sisters ministering in them. Historically, about 75 percent of us were in schools and religious education. Now less than 20 percent of us are ministering in those areas. As a mission-focused congregation, we are at our best when we choose to focus on possibilities rather than diminishment. That mission focus became visible in 2016 at our General Chapter.

Over months of discussions and prayer, we created and adopted a General Chapter Enactment stating: “Rooted in the joy of the Gospel, we will embrace and nurture our rich diversity, commit ourselves to deepening our relationships with one another, invite others to vowed and associate life, and expand collaboration for the sake of the mission.”

Following Chapter, our vocation director used an adapted version of the World Cafe process, (theworldcafe.com) to find out where sisters were in their own thoughts about inviting young women to join our congregation. We were asked to discuss three questions:

1. Do you want to invite new members?
2. What are the challenges in inviting new members?
3. What will we/I do to promote new membership?

Sister Suzanne Schreiber, O.P. (right) speaks to her prayer partner. The Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Michigan have established prayer partner relationships between themselves and the students at Siena Heights College, one of their sponsored ministries.

Building relationships with young people

By Sister Tarianne DeYonker, O.P.

Sister Tarianne DeYonker, O.P. is a member of the Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Michigan, currently serving as co-director of vocations. She lives in community in Adrian. In addition she leads creative writing workshops for beginning and experienced writers.
Most of us expressed a desire to continue to invite and support women discerning a call to religious life. However, many individuals mentioned that while they support inviting new members, this task has become difficult for them because they no longer regularly meet younger women in their lives or ministries.

We listed a number of challenges in living out this enactment: young people have limited exposure and familiarity with women religious today because there are not as many of us in active ministry as in prior years. Many young people also lack a solid religious foundation, partly due to the strong secular influence in society; as a group they tend to find organized religion hypocritical and judgmental. Further, many young adults have substantial college debt to pay off, a very real and practical concern for them. There’s also an age gap between current religious and younger women that could lead to inadequate peer support in their religious life journeys, not providing the close community life they seek.

Believing it’s possible to collectively dream of concrete actions to promote religious life, we brainstormed events ranging from parish youth groups to collaboration with campus ministers. We agreed to move forward.

**Our readiness to receive young adults**

As a Vocation Team we are seeking young women who are Catholic and aged 19-35. When we began our efforts to consciously invite young women to our life, we called sisters in active ministries across the country. Among the questions we asked were: who was the adult who invited you to consider religious life? What do you observe about the ministry involvement of young adults in your parish? And we asked them for suggestions for developing relationships with this age cohort.

Most sisters initially said, “Oh, I don’t know any young adults.” My next question was, “Do you go to Mass in a parish? Are there any young adults there?” I could almost hear the light bulb click on after that!

Our conversations then led to their co-workers in ministry and to where young adults are present in parishes, vicariates, and dioceses. If we no longer have positions in schools or parish religious education, we must make the effort to go to places where young adults are. When we meet them, we need to initiate the conversation.

Relationship development also is possible in any sponsored institutions our congregations might have. Our young-adult co-workers know us and our charisms in a way the young adults attending a parish event do not. There are possibilities for relationships if we’re in schools, hospitals, or retreat centers or serving on boards.

Anecdotal research also tells us that young adults with a passion for social justice and service also may be drawn to religious life. Young adults who are part of local community or parish committees and are interested in creating right relationships with Earth and want to undo the influence of racism, consumerism, and other “isms” are ripe for invitation to become closer to our congregation. Their heart for social justice aligns with our heart’s desire. We can provide the needed community support and discernment. Why don’t we invite them to walk with us?

We believe that as religious we are in the perfect position to accompany young adults as they integrate their faith with their life. Our relationships with them can provide a sense of belonging and help them to find meaning and purpose in their life. God is still calling women to religious life. When God makes that call, we want to be there to help them examine whether that call could best be responded to in community and ministry with us. The Vocation Team asked sisters and associates to keep their eyes and ears open because God may need them.

We encouraged them not to minimize their part in response to God’s call to young adults. “Notice every smile in the grocery store, every ‘hello’ at Mass or in the dining room. We never know how God will use us.” In the Emmaus story recounted in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus didn’t let the disciples stay where they were in their thinking and beliefs. He made an effort to walk a stretch of the road with them and established a significant relationship with them. Their encounter with him sent them back to tell the community they had seen him—alive!

As our faith develops, we learn how to live it better. Young adults think sharing their faith is something they have to grow into “someday.” They don’t realize it’s their mission, their call, now. They are sent to other young adults. We may have to remind them.

**Fostering relationships with young adults**

Simply put, we take advantage of the places and opportunities where we already connect with young adults. All of us can pay attention to the young adults around us. Seeing them is a matter of shifting our attention to look for them. While I will give examples of some areas where we sisters and associates are involved, I encourage readers to adapt any of these ideas to their own congregation’s needs and abilities. Some of these actions were new for us because of the 2016 Chapter, but others we
dusted off as a way to refresh their sparkle. We religious too often diminish the importance to new membership of our well-established connections where we are geographically. To resist that dismissal, the Vocation Team brings forward these connections to remind our sisters of their existence and importance to young women seeking their purpose in life.

Our congregation sponsors Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida and Siena Heights University in Adrian, Michigan. We focus not only on the young adults who attend the universities, but also on relationships with faculty and staff members who work there. Some of these folks are young adults and some have young adult children. All have contacts with young people and can refer those young adults to us—thus how important are these relationships!

** ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP**—One activity we have repeated for the third year is “The Environmental Leadership Experience,” during which students from both our universities gathered on the motherhouse grounds for a two-week intensive course in permaculture principles, hands-on planning and gardening, and visits to sites where these principles are practiced. These students, our sisters, and lay co-workers engage with Earth during the day by planting rain gardens, weeding, and harvesting worm castings from our vermiculture (worm compost) bins, and then they have reflection experiences to distill learnings from whatever they have done that day. We ask them to share: What are you experiencing in this work? How are you feeling about it? Where was God in it?

With Siena Heights University located adjacent to our motherhouse, nursing students are paired with individual sisters in our health care center to practice the skills they are learning in classes. They practice taking a patient’s history, listening and talking with elders, giving effective feedback, and sharing important information with them. This allows instructors and students to receive feedback as skills improve, but more, it allows the sisters to be in relationships of significance to the young adults.

“ADOPT-A-SISTER”—We also have a popular program known as “Adopt-a-Sister” in which Siena students are paired with a sister who shares a meal at the motherhouse with the student on a monthly basis. These relationships begin in the first year of university and continue throughout their university experience. Once graduated, many students stay in touch with their “adopted sister.”
Reflection and discernment days—Parishes can be sites that host days of reflection or days of discernment of future choices. A favorite of busy young adults is taking time for the quiet of Eucharistic Adoration and celebration of Mass. To help students deepen their spiritual longings, young adult retreats are offered at both our universities. Our team has been collaborating with several Michigan-based women religious to explore possibilities for offering a discernment day or overnight experience on the skills of discernment, believing we can provide an atmosphere conducive to the quiet and direction that some young adults need.

1-1 Scripture Sharing—Recently, a group of tech-savvy sisters and friars from various congregations in Ohio and Michigan offered “1-1 Scripture Sharing” opportunities conducted through Facetime and other video apps. They discussed the Sunday scriptures in Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. While this effort is still in its infancy, the married and single young men and women who have participated have enjoyed it.

Dominican Young Adults—Dominican men and women across the world have been organizing groups called “Dominican Young Adults” (DYA) into a movement that guides the formation of young people who are interested in Dominican Life. They rely on the knowledge, experience, and wisdom of Dominicans of all ages and depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. DYA members are attracted to Jesus, his message, and the way of living out the Gospel preached by Saint Dominic. We call it DYAM-USA Mission (the official title includes “M” for Movement).

DYA groups start on a college campus or in local parishes. Our Siena DYA members meet each Tuesday evening to pray and plan ways to engage other students in evenings of prayer and scripture sharing. Our campus minister, Sister Mary Jones, O.P., and I have been part of this DYA group. She works with the leaders to plan, and I participate weekly with the students. Their latest adventure was listening to and discussing short podcasts on spiritual topics. The energy and commitment of DYA members is palpable. This is an example of “accompaniment” in the way the synod on youth and Christus Vivit encourage.

Preaching conferences—Closely akin to DYA are the annual six-day Dominican High School and Dominican College Preaching Conferences that gather students from Dominican schools to explore more deeply the charism of the Dominican Order and how Dominicans live out this charism. Students are challenged and inspired to create the same opportunities at their schools back home. To support young adults with their life choices, our congregation's website posts a weekly blog on discernment (adriandominicans.org/BecomeaSister/ASisterReflects).

Come and See—Closely aligned with the discernment theme are the “Come and See” discernment retreats we offer, as do many congregations. These experiences encourage consideration of God’s call to religious life, whether in this congregation or another. Some retreats include several young women, others a single young woman. Following those retreats we offer young seekers additional website resources, including a series of three-to-five minute YouTube videos on ways to discern and the stories of individual sisters sharing their call.

These videos are a result of a commitment to increase our use of social media to communicate specific aspects of our lives and involvements. With our communications team we produced short videos on aspects of our charism, stories of call, and topics that arise during discernment.

Social media outreach—At the same time our team began a weekly blog about discernment which is now offered in Spanish and English. Additionally our congregation posts to our Facebook page and appears on Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, as research shows that young women look at these sites regularly. Facebook and e-mail communications let young adults know we’re paying attention so we comment on events important to them. These evoke further face-to-face conversations when we see them in real life.

RU Called?—For those young adults pondering whether their call from God is to religious life, several men and women’s religious congregations in the Michigan-Ohio region jointly host a two-and-a-half hour event titled “RU Called?” The evening features a hot meal, prayer, and two younger religious in formation who share their call story and open up the group to discussion. We try to schedule these events with local college campus ministers who can help us optimize involvement of the college students.

One key element for young adults is “service” because they desire to make a difference in the world. We invite those young people with a sense of service to be tutors at one of our seven Literacy Centers. Their open
hearts receive learners and work with them on reading and math skills. These young tutors receive recognition for their contributions in giving to others. The sisters who also serve at these centers can see changes in awareness in these young tutors as they meet the people with whom our sisters and associates minister.

**Opening up our liturgical life**—Because of Si-ena Heights University’s proximity to our motherhouse campus, students, faculty, and staff are regularly invited to our holy rituals: the Triduum, Christmas, and sisters’ profession celebrations. People from the university can also come to retreats and days of reflection at Weber Retreat and Conference Center on our campus.

**Going where they are**—We also think it is important to go where young people are, and thus sisters attend university events and engage with students while there. The same can be done in local communities where schools and universities may be nearby.

**Encouraging our sisters and associates to be in these relationships**

After a new Vocation Team replaced the original team, its members knew they needed to keep encouraging members and associates. Thus the team organized a series of three presentations for our whole congregation:

1) to share information about characteristics of young adults today and to ask sisters to pray for the 2018 synod on youth,

2) to explore our readiness to receive young adults as our potential new members, and

3) to examine what it takes to accompany young adults as they go through the transitions of adulthood, especially focusing on young adults pondering a call from God to religious life.

The new Vocation Team plans to continue as coaches for our sisters-as-accompaniers, presenting materials for inspiration, formation and confidence-building. Our intent is to involve as many sisters as possible, whether in compensated or volunteer ministries or retired sisters who participate as prayer partners. We see the accom-paniment process simply as asking good questions and listening as we let young adults grapple with their own answers. We want to help them understand the truth, not just the facts about faith in Jesus, so they are transformed when they encounter him, as were the early disciples and as we have been.

Given the chance, we share with these curious young adults where we got our energy, how we discovered Jesus’ suffering and how that led us out to marginalized people across the world—in other words, the “why” of our lives. The result of this sharing can be a communion that renews hope in our common humanity, to paraphrase Sister Teresa Maya, C.C.VI.

Consequently we shift the place of our listening—to young adults. We believe the future will find us a more diverse congregation with generational, ethnic, racial, political, and theological differences. The young also can help us get past our discouragement or disillusionment about poor results in attracting large numbers of new members. Their enthusiasm energizes us regardless of their individual vocation path.

We believe young adults long to share what we have—community, meaningful ministry, prayer life, relationships—because these are human qualities for which we all long. Thus we continue our efforts to nurture a culture of vocations.
Vocation ministry during COVID-19

Vocation ministers have been forced to pivot during the stay-at-home orders and social distancing of COVID-19. While this global crisis has caused much suffering, it has also evoked heroism, persistence, faith, and creativity. Here are ways vocation directors can help meet the vocational and ministerial needs of youth and young adults during the pandemic.

PERSONAL OUTREACH
Whatever form it takes, it is always good to maintain contact with people in discernment and young people you’ve met during your ministry. With social distancing, the contact might involve texts, emails, instant messages, video chats, cards, or phone calls. Some people in discernment may have additional time on their hands (and perhaps additional anxiety). Some may have questions about where God fits into the picture or where their life is going. The absence of physical events may give you extra time to make a personal virtual connection.

According to Springtide Research, one third of 18- to 25-year-olds have been sheltering in place alone. Among that demographic, eight out of ten report feeling less lonely when a trusted adult from outside their household checks in on them.

ONGOING OUTREACH ONLINE
Many religious communities have ramped up the types of online prayer, worship, visiting, presentations, and discernment conversations that they offer. For instance, religious orders are offering “virtual tours” of their lives and residences on social media (recorded on YouTube, shared on all platforms). Others are convening discussion groups, scripture study, or other forms of online connection. If you’ve lacked the time or impetus to try out internet-based technologies like Zoom or Google Hangouts, this may be your opportunity to try something new.

POST YOUR ACTIVITIES AND GLEAN IDEAS
A natural hub for the many creative ways that religious are ministering to others during this pandemic is the VISION Vocation Guide Calendar. Check the calendar to see what your fellow ministers are doing. Post your events (for free) on the calendar. Remember, calendar posts are not required to be specifically “discernment” events, or one-time events. Any event or ongoing outreach that your community is sponsoring is eligible to be posted on the VISION calendar.

LEARN A NEW SKILL, DEVELOP PROFESSIONALLY
If your schedule has opened up during the pandemic, consider using the time to grow professionally. If you’ve been meaning to use a particular social-media platform to promote your community, now is a good time to start. Here’s an example of someone who did this: During the COVID-19 shutdown, Tim Tiller, the head of security for the Cowboy and Western Culture Museum in Oklahoma City had no idea how to proceed after his employer asked him to take care of social media for the museum during the time of closure. His earnest (sometimes error-prone) beginnings morphed into an outreach that has earned the museum hundreds of thousands of followers. He took a chance and created a successful social connection.

In addition to experimenting with online platforms, you might also read archived HORIZON articles on an area you want to learn more about (prior issue articles are available to NRVC members and subscribers at nrvc.net), sign up for an online class on public speaking or video production, join a webinar on young adult or youth ministry, experiment with Zoom for online small-group activities, or create a short YouTube video about your community. This could be a time to learn and experiment. Be sure to email the HORIZON editor about your inroads: cscheiber@nrvc.net.

Old forms of ministry often don’t work in a COVID-19 world, but ministers are learning to shift online and try new ways to reach and engage people.
A call to define community

The NRVC-CARA 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life contains good news for religious life in the United States and beyond. It also contains challenges. This is no surprise because as social science research reveals findings, it also points to implications and inspires people to respond. The results of this study and its implications come at a time of profound pain in the world due to COVID-19 and must be read in that context.

The good news is that those women and men who entered religious life in the United States between 2003 and 2018 bring many gifts for mission. Prayer and spirituality are very important to them and take a variety of forms. Most new members have previous work experience, and more than half were engaged in ministry of some kind prior to entrance.

The racial breakdown of the newer members is also a gift. They look increasingly like the church and the nation. Another quality they bring is cultural diversity. Almost a quarter of newer members were born outside of the United States (representing 68 countries) and their first language is not English.

And, finally, the newer members bring hope. They hold abundant hope for the future of religious life, fully aware of the challenges confronting it. These new members are entering, being formed, and being missioned at a time unlike anything in recent memory. Their ability to articulate the value that community is for members, and the ways that community is manifest within their institute is imperative.
to be involved in their congregations’ efforts to build solidarity for the sake of the common good—in the face of COVID-19—is needed more than ever.

Pope Francis, in his special blessing to “The City and the World” on March 27, 2020 said, in part, “Embracing [Jesus’] cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time…. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity, and solidarity.” (Emphasis added.) Religious life allows for and encourages the creation of spaces. It supports the recognition and discernment of the call. And it values deeply the virtues of hospitality, fraternity, and solidarity.

One finding in the study that allows the call of Pope Francis to be made manifest during these times is the call of the newer members to community. The courage to re-envision community as the creation of new spaces for the living of these virtues is needed today. Both the church and world need this witness.

On average, about 400 newer members begin the process of initial formation each year in the U.S.; their average age of entrance is 28. One way to prepare for their coming is to individually and communally grapple with the question of how to create and sustain community in this time, especially as we seek to strengthen the bonds of solidarity in the global community. This is a challenging but fruitful exercise, with many dimensions.

The definition of community is broad. Many people in our society yearn to feel part of a community, especially now, and various experiences of community can happen in many places—parishes, online, neighborhoods, workplaces, and more. Many people find community in multiple places.

Newer members would, of course, find community in many places as well, but they are attracted to community living as a distinctive aspect of religious life, that is living together and living a communal and simple lifestyle. In an individualistic society, community is countercultural. New members see community life as part of the attraction of religious life. They prefer sharing prayer, meals, and celebrations of feast days.

In terms of community size, they prefer at least eight members. This can be explained by a variety of factors—e.g., socialization in the family or in education. Larger group size has the possibility of permitting greater support and a wider network, as well as more apostolic outreach. This is not a new finding, as we saw this in the 2009 study of newer members as well, and it is not likely to go away anytime soon. In fact, the desire for community living and the need to hone communal living skills will probably increase by the time the next study is conducted.

In addition, newer members desire intergenerational living—93 percent prefer to live with members of different ages. They are not deterred by the current demographics of religious life in this country, with 13 percent of professed members under age 60, 13 percent over age 90, and the rest in between. Newer members also prefer to live interculturally.

Some religious institutes have communities the size and makeup that newer members desire, but others do not. There are many and varied definitions of community in religious life today, some shaped by the histories, charisms, and ministerial demands of institutes. The reality of the lack of housing availability and affordability in some places, and even local zoning, create constraints. Also definitions of community and desire for community living sometimes differ along generational lines. Small group size can also sometimes be problematic in that space is unavailable for newer or even long-time members.

To meet these challenges and needs, new definitions of community have arisen, and new attempts to make connections between and among religious are being made. Community in some locales is defined as a connection between individuals living alone or in small groups. The word is also used sometimes to describe a province or congregation. For all these reasons, it is clear from the study that it is incumbent on each institute to articulate the value that community is for members, and the ways that community is manifest within their institute. Only then can interested women and men get the information they need for their discernment. My hope is that the study will spur us forward in fruitful conversation and action to nurture the gift of new members to religious life.
A PRIEST, SISTER, BROTHER, AND NUN walk into a bar.... Well, not exactly. The sister, and brother are actually going into a classroom or similar, and the nun is Skyping in. And sometimes the priest too. It’s a fresh, collaborative approach to vocations awareness for religious communities.

The Religious Vocation Panel started two years ago in greater Cincinnati, Ohio, as the brainchild of Glenmary Home Missioners Brother David Henley and Missionary of the Precious Blood Father Steve Dos Santos. They soon were joined by two others, Poor Clare Vicki Griner and Sister of Notre Dame Ruth Lubbers. Two years in, with help sometimes from other vocation personnel, they have presented to about 2,000 students in about 30 schools and parishes.

It started for Henley as a way to confront a lack of awareness about religious brotherhood. “I would call up schools, even parishes in a diocese and ask, ‘Would you be interested in having a brother come and talk to the students?’” It was a hard sell. “We’ve never done that before,” or “We’ve never thought of that,” he might hear.

No wonder, he discovered, after his newly developed Vocation Panel had made some presentations at local schools: “It was fairly common at schools we visited to find students who had never heard of religious brothers in the church,” says Henley. “But what was shocking was that in seventh

**By John Feister**

John Feister is a member of the Communications Team at Glenmary Home Missioners. He was an editor at St. Anthony Messenger/Franciscan Media prior to that, and he is co-author of several books, including the Christopher Award winning Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman. He serves on the board of directors of the Catholic Press Association of the U.S. and Canada.
and eighth grade classrooms of Catholic schools we met many students who had never met a religious sister.”

Before they got to the classrooms, though, the four religious spent a summer developing a one-hour program that now offers a one-stop-shop for schools seeking to expose their students to Catholic religious life. The program functions in collaboration with a network of 20 congregations and societies present in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and the adjacent Diocese of Covington, Kentucky. It has already expanded to include more than the founding foursome.

**Witness to joy**

“We’re following the 11/11 theory. Eleven-years-old and 11th grade both are critical times in vocation discernment.” That’s Sister Ruth Lubbers, S.N.D. explaining both why they’re working to present to grade-schoolers and why the program is pushing to get onto the Vocation Awareness Week calendars at local Catholic high schools. “It’s planting seeds. We want to raise the awareness that God is calling people. We want them to know early that this is a viable way of life and a great way to serve the church, to further the mission of Jesus.” That’s a strategy not only for enriching the students’ lives now, but also for laying foundations for future discernment.

Father Steve Dos Santos, C.P.P.S. agrees: “It’s not just about recruitment, you know; it’s about giving witness to the joy of our religious lifestyle. One of the ways we do that is through the interaction that you actually see on the team as we’re giving the panel.”

That friendship and the “having it together” among the four is something that young people, with their keen interpersonal radar, can pick up on right away. Lubbers, Griner, Henley, and Dos Santos developed that confidence over several months of curriculum development. Out of respect for Sister Vicki Griner’s cloistered lifestyle, they met at her secluded monastery amid a wooded preserve just north of Cincinnati.

During the five meetings that summer of 2018 they worked out the outline of the presentation, tossing around ideas and deciding on the strong ones. “We had this ridiculously long list,” recalls Dos Santos. “We put it all together, then narrowed it down to what basically amounted to four questions.” Those questions became the heart of their program:

- What is religious life?
- What is discernment?
- What are the differences among communities?
- What are the vows?

Those four topics the group developed into talks, one for each of the four presenters. “We developed the talks in a way that includes religious life as a whole rather than trying to explain all the differences,” explains Henley. Oaths, vows, cloister, apostolic—those words might come up, but they aren’t dwelled upon. “At this age we are just trying to introduce the students to religious life, to give them a chance to meet a religious and help them to see religious vocation as a valid option as they begin to decide, ‘What am I going to be when I grow up?’”

Confidence and evident friendship among the four help deliver a warm, inspiring context for all the information. The presentations don’t show off the four communities alone; a slideshow that augments the presentation is laced with positive, diverse images of all the religious communities in their greater Cincinnati network. The Skyped-in presence of cloistered Sister Vicki Griner, O.S.C. immediately became a backbone of the program. The audiences had a strong, favorable reaction to being able to ask questions to the woman beyond the screen.

Griner has a fascinating personal discernment story and speaks from a location most of her young listeners have never seen or heard of, which piques their interest. “I’m an attorney, and I had a law practice before 2000,” she might begin. At some point she’ll add, “I have an MBA, and a JD,” and, “I converted to Catholicism due to the influence of one of my coworkers.” Of course, there are more details as the story unwinds, all of which are a bit eye-opening to the young audience, perhaps all the more with high school students. When she tells them,
“Some people thought I was crazy,” the audience gets it: they’re not being force-fed some company line.

The other panelists share their life journeys too. That authenticity is what helps the program succeed. (Henley himself once was a professional juggler—no small asset for classroom presentations. And yes, he’s been known to bring out the juggling props during presentations, but not generally for this panel.)

How it works

“I usually do the introduction part,” says Lubbers, “and invite all the participants to tell us a little bit about themselves and their community. From there, Brother David takes over with the game show.” It’s a 10-minute PowerPoint of trivia questions/answers that throw true/false questions at the students about the religious in their own diocese: How many communities are there? (lots, listed); are young people still joining (yes); what are the principal vows? and so on.

Despite it being a 10-minute icebreaker, the Brother David Game Show might well be what students most remember—it generates a lot of engagement and does a bit of myth-busting along the way.

At the heart of the program are the four topical presentations, one by each of the team leaders, five or so minutes each. Griner is first at bat, on the screen, talking about religious life and callings. Then comes what a calling is. Next is Henley speaking about various types of religious communities and how long formation takes. Lubbers then takes up the questions of call and discernment. Finally, Dos Santos explains the “big three” vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Along the way, students have seen photos not only of the presenters’ communities, but also photos from communities around the region, members of the network that spawned this panel.

Sprinkled in are questions to the students: “How much time do you spend praying? What are your gifts? Has anyone said you might make a good brother or sister?”

Finally, there are statements of fact: “Meeting with this age group we wanted to dispel some of the common myths about religious life,” says Henley, “myths such as, religious are lonely, or young people are not entering into formation.” These topics are introduced in the Game Show icebreaker, then drawn out for discussion during the question/answer session following the presentations.

“Some people thought I was crazy,” the audience gets it: they’re not being force-fed some company line.

The other panelists share their life journeys too. That authenticity is what helps the program succeed. (Henley himself once was a professional juggler—no small asset for classroom presentations. And yes, he’s been known to bring out the juggling props during presentations, but not generally for this panel.)

How it works

“I usually do the introduction part,” says Lubbers, “and invite all the participants to tell us a little bit about themselves and their community. From there, Brother David takes over with the game show.” It’s a 10-minute PowerPoint of trivia questions/answers that throw true/false questions at the students about the religious in their own diocese: How many communities are there? (lots, listed); are young people still joining (yes); what are the principal vows? and so on.

Despite it being a 10-minute icebreaker, the Brother David Game Show might well be what students most remember—it generates a lot of engagement and does a bit of myth-busting along the way.

At the heart of the program are the four topical presentations, one by each of the team leaders, five or so minutes each. Griner is first at bat, on the screen, talking about religious life and callings. Then comes what a calling is. Next is Henley speaking about various types of religious communities and how long formation takes. Lubbers then takes up the questions of call and discernment. Finally, Dos Santos explains the “big three” vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Along the way, students have seen photos not only of the presenters’ communities, but also photos from communities around the region, members of the network that spawned this panel.

Sprinkled in are questions to the students: “How much time do you spend praying? What are your gifts? Has anyone said you might make a good brother or sister?”

Finally, there are statements of fact: “Meeting with this age group we wanted to dispel some of the common myths about religious life,” says Henley, “myths such as, religious are lonely, or young people are not entering into formation.” These topics are introduced in the Game Show icebreaker, then drawn out for discussion during the question/answer session following the presentations.

We’re following the 11/11 theory. Eleven years old and 11th grade both are critical times in vocation discernment.

“When we set it up,” recalls Lubbers, “we had four topics and we thought, you know, we can easily interchange these among any one of us, but we pretty much stayed with a division of labor—each presenter became comfortable with her or his portion.”

Yet the program is anything but rigid. “We found other vocation directors for other communities who wanted to help out,” says Henley. And sometimes those folks were called on when things got busy. “But you don’t need to have 30 people in a vocation panel at a high school! We’re looking to offer a solid program with four—five or six would be fine—but we want to have a balance of a priest, a brother, and a couple of sisters.”

The good news is that there will be room for all the local communities as this program spreads. The idea, though, is to grow new teams that include people experienced from working on already-developed teams. Right now, that means the four are sharing the platform with other religious as the need arises. Henley explains, “If I’m not there on Tuesday, a Marianist or Jesuit Brother could show up to do that part of the talk. The talks aren’t written, but the outline is there, allowing for various presenters to come in and out of it.”

That was true especially during Vocation Awareness Week last year, when the team recruited other vocation ministers from the Cincinnati area to help give six school presentations during the week.

From the recipient’s side

Each school, each parish program, has its own experience of any visiting program. We talked to Tim Dillon, a teacher and chair of the religion department at Chaminade-Julienne High School in Dayton, Ohio, to see how the panel might look from a host’s perspective. The school of about 700 is sponsored by the Marianists. The Vocation Panel spent an entire day presenting to six classes of sophomore girls and boys, about 150 total, last November during Vocations Awareness Week.

“I was a bit worried that they were going to want to have an assembly, which wouldn’t have worked very well, but they had enough people that they were able to come to each of our classes,” Dillon says. That was one of the days when the panel of four expanded a bit, bringing in different panelists for different sessions throughout the day. Henley stayed on site all day, coordinating
panelists in addition to presenting.

“I thought it was paced well. There were several speakers, not just one. It had visuals with it, and I felt like it did what it was supposed to do in terms of engaging sophomores. So, yeah, I was very happy with it. You know, they’re sophomores, so it’s going to be pretty intense! It was kind of amazing to me that they were willing to do that, to come to each of the classes.”

He was surprised at how receptive his students were, as well. Tim had thought this type of presentation might be best suited to older students. “I think the presenters were very approachable. I was impressed because I wasn’t expecting some of the students to have a positive experience.” The Skyped-in nun was a plus, he says. “I felt like in terms of just giving students some sort of exposure, it was good. And I always think it’s great when they see live human beings, rather than just read about somebody. I thought they did an awesome, nice job of personalizing what religious life is about. It made a positive impression.

“I get the sense that, for the Catholic students [about a third of his students are non-Catholic] this might’ve been enriching, to see the differences among the different religious orders and just see that they’re there, and to see them all together in one place, rather than just kind of have a kind of stereotypical view of a nun, a sister, a brother, a priest.” It was worth doing, he says. In fact, in a way it filled a gap, he adds, because vocations discussion usually doesn’t happen in the Chaminade-Julienne classrooms until senior year.

“I feel like this in some ways plants some seeds that they will be able to grow a little bit later on.”

Mission accomplished.

Relationships are key

To Henley, Lubbers, Dos Santos, and Griner, the Vocation Panel is a big improvement from the one-on-one programs they’ve participated in. “It’s a lot better than speaking for two minutes at a vocation fair,” says Henley, although he’s still happy to do that, too, among the various venues of vocations work.

But there’s something in the chemistry of doing this presentation together that makes it all more interesting, more fun, and maybe a little more effective. As the program expands to include other communities, the friendship that builds the group chemistry is key. The four held an afternoon training session for other interested vocation ministers. But there’s more than training.

Dos Santos recalls gathering a new panel together: “These were three people who’d never done it before. For me it was really important that I pulled them together for an online video chat beforehand just so that we can get to know each other. There is a value in the relationship that we’re able to give witness to.”

The four agree that their experience could possibly be replicated in other dioceses. Says Griner: “I think the common goal for the vocation ministers for the archdiocese is, how do we organize something so that we’re not all trying to reinvent the wheel, where there aren’t 10 different vocation ministers contacting grade schools, high schools, trying to get scheduled for a presentation?”

Besides that practical concern, though, there’s something else going on, says Lubbers. “I think there’s something in students being able to see people from various communities, to hear different charisms but also to see us working and interacting together. There is great spirit among us, you know.”
PREPARE TO BE HEARD

We understand your desire to be an effective evangelizer.

We’re here to help.

PrepareTheWord.com

IT’S OKAY TO FEEL UNCERTAIN.
WE’RE HERE TO LISTEN.

Mental Health Helpline

888-526-9357

Professional support for clergy & religious

SLI.org | SLIconnect.org
Don’t miss

The Life

GSR’s popular series featuring reflections from a diverse panel of sisters from around the world.

GlobalSistersReport.org/Series/Life