



Sister Laura Leming, F.M.I., left, talks with a University of Dayton student during a retreat as other students converse in the background. The Marianists run three universities: in Ohio, Hawaii, and Texas.

Being present is key as college students grow in faith and make plans for their future.

## Accompanying college students

**I**N 2008 I PROFESSED FIRST VOWS with the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianists) and began a new ministry as the campus minister in a residence hall at the University of Dayton, a Marianist university in Ohio. I had spent most of my professional life as a teacher and campus minister in high schools. While I had some experience of working with college students, it was still a new world to me. No more would I have captive audiences in classrooms or mandatory retreats. There were suddenly more conversations about discernment, life path, career and commitments. And, of course, there were later nights and more competing obligations for students.

Although I left college campus ministry to return to high-school ministry, the experience was invaluable as I took on the role of vocations director for our province in 2013. Research has shown that many people who enter religious life first consider the possibility in high school or before. Half of those who entered a community in 2020 had first considered religious life as a teen or child. Nevertheless, a choice for this life depends on a person's experiences and relationships in college and beyond. I knew when I became vocations director that I would need the partnership of campus

BY SISTER NICOLE TRAHAN, F.M.I.



Sister Nicole Trahan, F.M.I. is a member of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (Marianists) and currently lives in Dayton, Ohio. Trahan serves her congregation as a

member of the provincial leadership team, vocations director, and director of the pre-novitiate program. She is also a part-time campus minister at Chaminade Julianne Catholic High School and on the board of the National Religious Vocation Conference.

ministers and others who work on campus.

At a practical level, when I became a vocation minister, I already knew to hold events at times that didn't conflict with the campus ministry calendar—and I knew not to duplicate efforts. More important, I realized that I should establish a good partnership with campus ministers because they have more direct access to college students than someone outside the university. Thankfully, I could rely on relationships I'd formed and would continue to form with the campus ministers at our three universities. This is especially true with the University

of Dayton (UD), which is down the road from where I live with other Marianist sisters.

Most of my outreach to college students happens via collaboration with the campus ministry staff and others at our Marianist universities or through events sponsored by various dioceses.

For several years now the

Marianists have housed a vocations office on our three college campuses. Because I live in Dayton, most events I plan and attend happen at UD where I have my office. I also travel regularly to our other campuses at St. Mary's University in San Antonio and at Chaminade University in Hawaii.

## Collaboration is key

Because of our semi-permanent presence on campus, we Marianist vocation ministers are able to establish strong working relationships with partners and collaborators. Our vocations committee has been especially helpful. This committee has had many names over the years. Currently, it is called the Marianist Accompaniment Team (MAT). MAT, which I chair, had 10 people during the 2020-21 academic year—two Marianist sisters, four Marianist brothers or priests, two laypeople from campus ministry, one layperson from the Office for Mission and Rector, and one layperson who directs the Marianist postgraduate volunteer program.

We meet once a month to plan programs, discuss outreach to students, update our list of students who are discerning religious life, and examine ways to increase our contact with students. These meetings are also an opportunity to discuss what is happening on campus that might benefit from the involvement of a vowed religious.

We discuss how we could make that happen and who we might invite to be involved.

Another key relationship at UD has been with the university's Vocations Implementation Team. Several years ago the university established new institutional learning goals, with one being vocational understanding. The vocational goal, described briefly, is: "Using appropriate scholarly and communal resources, all undergraduates will develop and demonstrate ability to articulate reflectively the purposes of their life and proposed work through the language of vocation."

To institutionalize this goal, a Vocations Implementation Team works at integrating the language of vocations into the curriculum and developing extracurricular programming. At least one member of the Marianist Accompaniment Team has also served on the implementation team to ensure a union of efforts and vision.

## Programs that have worked

I've explained the structures that our Marianist universities have put in place to ensure that the question of life vocation be part of each college student's experience. Let me turn now to the many different programs we have tried at UD. Some worked for a time and fizzled out. Others were experiments that did not last, and others have been long-lasting. Our most successful programs have been discernment evenings, live-in experiences, and discernment retreats.

By "successful" I mean that after several years of offering these opportunities, students continue to be interested. We send a feedback survey to students after each of these and have received positive feedback. We ask questions about what was helpful, what could be better, and whether or not they would attend in the future. Over 90 percent of respondents express a desire to attend a future event and offer suggestions for future topics.

### DISCERNMENT EVENINGS

Twice a semester the vocations committee plans an evening of discernment open to undergraduate and graduate students at the university. These occur on a Friday evening and alternate between our sisters' community and one of the communities of brothers and priests in the student neighborhood. We begin with introductions at 5:30 p.m., pray the evening prayer, and share a home-cooked meal. After the meal, one or more people give input on the topic of the evening. Students then have 30-45 minutes of silent prayer/reflection with questions, quotes, or passages. Often during this quiet time the

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Blessed Sacrament is exposed in the community chapel for those who wish to pray before it. Afterward we have sharing in small groups or pairs. We hold a large group sharing and wrap up with announcements and a brief closing prayer at 9 p.m.

These evenings focus on topics such as prayer, discernment, messages from Pope Francis, or wisdom from the Marianist charism. Recent discernment evening themes have been titled: Meeting Jesus on the Way; Discernment Toolbox; Friendship, Faith, and Following Jesus; Discerning the Call to Love; Prayer in Everyday Life; Discerning in Times of Uncertainty; and St. Joseph as a Model of Discernment.

The evenings are advertised as sponsored by the Marianist Accompaniment Team, but we don't explicitly relate them to religious life. We rarely focus on discerning religious life specifically. However, the students who attend these evenings are the ones we invite to live-in experiences, discernment retreats and other events more directly focused on religious life.

Attendance at our discernment evenings range from six to 30 students, depending on what else is happening that weekend and how attracted they are to the topic. Typically attendance is around 15 to 18 students. When we've asked students for feedback, the thing they appreciate most is the quiet prayer time. It is so rare for students to take time in silence to reflect and pray. And yet they crave these things, even if they can't articulate that desire. They also appreciate the opportunity to share a home-cooked meal with members of religious communities and the chance to meet with other students who share their questions, concerns, and values.

#### LIVE-IN EXPERIENCES

Twice a year students have an opportunity to spend a week living in a Marianist community near or on campus. Students who participate in a live-in experience join the community for prayer and meals as much as possible while also attending classes and mandatory on-campus meetings. We ask students who do a live-in to spend their free hours in community so that they can get a sense of it. Often students comment that they were able to find a peace and calm that they rarely find in the hectic pace of ordinary life.

We often begin these live-in weeks with prayer, dinner, and a short orientation to the week on Monday evening. We conclude on Friday with morning prayer and a prayer of sending forth. On the days in between we will offer opportunities for conversation on aspects of community living, the Marianist charism and discernment.



Father Varghese Manooparampil, S.M. speaks with a student during a discernment evening.

At most we've had three students doing a live-in at one time. Usually we have one or two. Sometimes we have students who do more than one live-in during their college career.

#### DISCERNMENT RETREAT

Once a year MAT sponsors a discernment retreat for students considering the possibility of Marianist religious life. Retreat topics have been focused on Marianist charism/spirituality, with times for input, prayer, sharing, and socializing. Retreats begin on Friday evening and end with lunch on Sunday.

One of the most successful aspects of our retreats has been the opportunity on Saturday afternoon or evening for one-on-one conversation with a vowed religious. These "Emmaus Walk" opportunities give the discerning students a chance to ask questions, discuss their journey, get advice, or to listen to the discernment story of the religious with whom they are walking. The students set the agenda for the conversation.

Attendance at these retreats has always been rather small, with three to 10 students and typically towards the lower end of that spectrum. I have learned, though, in vocations ministry to always offer the opportunity to large numbers of people—planting seeds that may grow in ways I did not expect—while being focused on the small group that gathers.

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## The value of presence

While these programs are important, what seems more important is being present and building relationships. One thing the Marianist Accompaniment Team reflects on constantly is the value of being where students are, in addition to inviting them to join us for events. Instead of trying to add one more thing to their overflowing plates, we try to be in places where their interests and ours overlap, such as:

- 1. BEING ON CAMPUS FOR SOCIAL EVENTS** hosted by campus ministry. A great example is the beginning of the fall semester ice cream social. This is a low key way to meet new students and reconnect with students I know from our high school.
- 2. ATTENDING GUEST SPEAKER PRESENTATIONS.** While we may not interact with students a great deal at these talks, which range in topic from social justice to religious studies, we try to make sure some Marianists are there and visible (e.g. wearing Marianist apparel). Some students make the connection that since we are there, we share common interests or concerns. And sometimes there are opportunities for formal and informal conversations.
- 3. ATTENDING LITURGICAL CELEBRATIONS** on campus. Most residence hall chapels on campus have a 9 p.m. Mass once a week. There is also a mid-day daily Mass and several Masses on Sundays in the main chapel. In addition, the university hosts prayer services, reconciliation services, and other liturgical celebrations. When possible, at least a few of us attend these services and participate as needed in ministerial roles.
- 4. SERVING AS MENTORS FOR STUDENT GROUPS** or organizations sponsored by campus ministry or the Office for Mission and Rector. Since most of us do not minister on campus in an official capacity, we cannot serve as advisors. But we often serve as resource support, guest speakers, or mentors.

## Opening doors

Our presence at events and with student groups has made it easier to invite small groups of students over for prayer and meals on occasion. For years we hosted monthly women's faith sharing student groups in our

home. Many of those students have since graduated, and we've shifted to having smaller groups of students join us twice or three times a month for prayer and dinner without a formal program. That seems to fit better into their busy lives.

We have also offered our home for student groups to host meetings or day retreats. We do not live in a large convent, but we have space in our home for small groups of students to have a quiet space for prayer, dialogue, presentations, and ice-breakers. At times one or two of us are involved, but often the gathering takes place without our participation. And while our home is large enough for these gatherings to be independent of us, it's small enough that we interact during breaks and down times. The benefit is that students feel comfortable in our home and therefore are more likely to join us for prayer, community retreat days, or discernment evenings.

Lastly, our home is the site for some faith-based student organizations to complete service hours. Once or twice a year we host a yard work day. Students active in organizations through the Office for Mission and Rector come over to help with raking, weeding, and bagging yard waste. We work together for several hours and then share a meal together. In this way, students are able to fulfill part of their service requirement and get to know us in a casual situation. Many students have commented over the years how much they've enjoyed these days of work and community building.

## I do not do it alone

Because I wear a number of different hats, people often ask how I can do everything. The short answer is that I don't. Collaboration has been essential. Collaboration means that not everything depends on me. My gifts and skills are augmented by the gifts and skills of others. When I am tired and feel I cannot be more creative, collaborators step up with unbelievable creativity. My lack of time for events is filled in by the time generously offered by others. One could say that I serve more as a vocations coordinator than director.

I recognize that my experiences in vocations ministry may not be typical. However my hope is that something mentioned here can spark an idea that will help in another context. It takes the whole church working together to build a culture of vocations. Whether we minister on college campuses, in parishes, high schools, or in some other context, there is great satisfaction in helping young people be open to the possibilities of God's call. ■