

Hoping to grow in faith

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The sisters of Visitation Monastery in Minneapolis are waging a multimedia campaign to draw more women.



Pashoua Herr, left, talked with Sister Katherine Mullin about how school was going during a break at the teen baking event on Saturday.

Photo: **Amy Gee**, Star Tribune

On a typical day, anything can happen for the seven sisters of Visitation Monastery of Holy Mary. As they go about their routine of prayer and community service, strangers appear at their door -- strangers who are greeted with hugs. Strangers who, within minutes of ringing the doorbell, are singing along as Sister Suzanne Homeyer plays the piano at noon prayer. Their quiet house is a place of refuge in a not-so-quiet neighborhood of north Minneapolis.

But the sisters want more -- both for the monastery and the community. They are looking to expand their reach by doubling their membership to 14.

"For a long time we've wanted new members, but we just took the bull by the horns this year," Sister Katherine Mullin said.

Through news releases, bulletin announcements at parishes, Facebook connections and blogging on their new website, Visitation Monastery is reaching out to young women with an interest in religious life.

"The effort is really to shout out with a loud voice, 'We're here, We're here!'" said Sister Joanna O'Meara.

The Visitation sisters came to the Old Highland neighborhood 20 years ago with their ministry of prayer and help for people who are marginalized or struggling financially. Since then, the monastery has grown from one to two houses and from four to seven sisters.

Doorbell ministry and more

No day goes by without four group prayer sessions -- morning, midday, evening and night -- with mass celebrated on Friday mornings, as well, Sister Karen Mohan said.

Each day has its surprises, like the time a man came to the door asking for bus money to get to work. O'Meara gave him a bus pass, then brought him into the chapel, prayed with him and blessed him. He may have only come looking for some change, but he left with a sense of relief after confiding in O'Meara about a tragedy in his life, she said.

Along with the doorbell ministry, the Visitation sisters reach out to children and families. A weekend afternoon of baking drew teenagers from around the neighborhood. Other kids show up for trips to karate lessons.

"They have a very stabilizing presence in the city," said Bob Gilsdorf, who has worked for the sisters since 1989. "They are well received and well respected," he said.

But the women are getting older and their aspirations are getting higher. They want a larger and younger membership to reach out to more people in more active ways, Mullin said. With most of the sisters now over 60, the time to start looking is now.

"We want to be able to continue here," O'Meara said. "Certainly there are many things we could be about, but we need more members to do it,

for kind of practical reasons."

Calling for younger women

Their campaign kicked off Jan. 24 with a new website co-designed by O'Meara. With a team of supporters they call Vocation Partners, the sisters are laying out a strategic plan to attract women between 20 and 45 years old. Interested women would pursue a training process that would largely involve spending time with the sisters, including a periodic "live-in," according to their website.

O'Meara said they are looking for nonthreatening ways to attract people, like hosting dinners and information sessions.

Doubling their number is a highly optimistic goal when the population of both men and women in religious orders is declining. The number of women in religious orders nationwide fell 54 percent between 1965 and 2000, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. In 2000, they numbered just under 80,000.

"We know that we are battling all the odds because young women in their 20s, 30s and early 40s have many options," Mullin said. "But we want to give them another option, and we feel it's a good one."

Homeyer said she was drawn in 15 years ago by her desire to combine her spiritual life with social activism. "This is an opportunity to combine their spirituality, religion and life in the real world," she said.

With more than 300 Facebook fans already, the Visitation sisters feel their efforts are achieving "heightened awareness," Mullin said.

"We're just bold enough ourselves to go for it," she said.

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