

Bon Secours Sisters pull out all the stops on vocations

The thought of becoming a nun had never crossed Patricia Dooley's mind. Then, as she deepened her prayer life and felt a call to devote her life to service, the Virginia resident began searching the Internet for religious orders. A health care journalist for 20 years, Dooley was interested in a community whose mission included health care ministry.

Through the Internet and conversations with women religious and priests, Dooley discovered the Sisters of Bon Secours – an international congregation she knew nothing about, but the one she would ultimately join.

Dooley entered the community during an Aug. 15 ceremony at the Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriotsville – the order's U.S. headquarters.

"I felt at home with the sisters," said Dooley, 51, noting that she had talked with a sister about the community for months before entering. "I decided, I'll take the step until God is no longer asking me to move forward. I never felt like I was to stop."

Dooley's story is a familiar one to Sister Patricia Dowling, vocation director for the Sisters of Bon Secours. The religious community has worked hard to reach out to women through the Internet with Web sites, blogs and social networking pages on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn. The order also produced a 30-minute program that has been broadcast on Catholic television stations in Massachusetts and Ohio.

"It's good to take advantage of the technology because we're trying to increase the visibility of religious and priests," Sister Patricia said. "We're planting seeds and getting the word out that the religious life and the priesthood is alive and well. You can't choose what you don't know about."

Sister Patricia noted that the high-tech outreach efforts have been accompanied by more traditional means like advertising in newspapers and national vocation journals, sponsoring discernment retreats, visiting Catholic schools and holding

college retreats. Personal invitations to consider the religious life remain the best way of reaching out to those who might be considering the religious life, she said.

Pulling out all the vocation stops is working for the Sisters of Bon Secours.

In 2007, 199 people inquired about joining the community. That number shot up to 263 last year. In the last five years, 8 women have entered the Sisters of Bon Secours. Ranging in age from the early 30s to the late 50s, the women are all U.S. citizens.

“Especially in the last four years, there’s been a marked increase in the number of women who are inquiring,” said Sister Patricia, who has worked in vocation ministry for eight years. “People of all ages are exploring the religious life. Older women are discovering that even though they have done it all, they still have a lot more to give and are searching to use their gifts in different ways.”

Sister Patricia said it is important for religious communities to employ fulltime vocation directors who try to be creative in promoting vocations.

Dooley will spend a year and a half as a candidate before entering the novitiate and then take her final vows as a Sister of Bon Secours. The entire process will take up to six years.

For those considering the religious life, Dooley believes it’s critical to be unafraid.

“I would say to be open in your heart and mind and in your prayer life,” she said. “Take the quiet time to listen. God is good and he would not lead us to anything that was not good for us.”