

The Best Kept Secret in The Episcopal Church By Sr. Ellen Francis, OSH

Several years ago, at the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, I was walking around in my religious habit, and someone said to me, "It's so nice that you Roman Catholic sisters are here." When I replied that I was indeed a sister, but also an Episcopalian, she answered, "But you can't be; I've been an Episcopalian all my life, and we don't have *them*." So, we found bumper stickers that said, "Proud to be an Episcopalian!" and we affixed these to the front and back of our habits.

In spite of our publicity attempt with bumper stickers, most Episcopalians still don't know that we have monastic and dispersed religious communities in the Episcopal Church. We often joke that those of us living under religious vows in The Episcopal Church—or as we call ourselves "religious"—are the best kept secret.

And this is unfortunate because we believe that religious life has something to offer everyone in the church!

Our life in Christ is all about community and mutual support. We need companionship along the way to help deepen our relationships with God and to help center our lives in Jesus Christ. Religious (monks and nuns, sisters and brothers, friars) in The Episcopal Church can provide guidance, community, and resources for the sacred journey.

Vowed religious orders and communities, over the centuries, have developed traditions and practices that assist in developing spiritual growth and discernment. These include teaching prayer practices, leading retreats, giving spiritual direction, assisting in writing and living a rule of life, giving presentations about the spiritual journey, and providing spiritual friendship. Our monastic, residential communities offer hospitality for short visits or longer retreats.

You may want to establish a deeper commitment with one community as an associate or oblate. The process usually begins with discernment and preparation, followed by a formal service of commitment. Associates and oblates pray for the members of the community and other associates and oblates, as we pray for them, and they usually give financial and other support, commit to a rule of life, and attend retreats.

We are also looking to maintain and grow our communities for the future. You or someone you know may perceive a call to a life in religious vows, and we welcome those who do to enter into discernment conversation with us.

How could we get the word out that we exist and what we have to offer, in a more efficient way than wearing bumper stickers?

For decades, it has been a dream of Episcopal religious communities to have a Sunday of observance and celebration of religious life. For a long time, we were dissuaded from putting forward a resolution to the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, because of expense, and a feeling that with so much business to transact, it would never be approved. Miracles do happen!

At the General Convention this past spring, Resolution 2022-B004, "Foundation of Religious Life Sunday," was approved. This resolution is a formal affirmation by The Episcopal Church of the importance of religious life to the church and is helping us in religious life to focus our publicity efforts. Religious Life Sunday is now established each year for commemoration on the third Sunday of Epiphany.

You can learn more about Religious Life Sunday, connect with a religious order or community, and find resources for sharing this secret with others by visiting the website: Religiouslifesunday.org.