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Dominican program explores, expands lay spirituality

by Paul R. Kopenkoskey by The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. -- As a student at Aquinas College in the 1980s, David Lincoln was on track to become a priest. While those pastoral aspirations were later rerouted, Lincoln still wanted to serve God in the world.

"I started to see the role of the laity was becoming incredibly important, and that's when I felt a different calling and felt at home with that calling," said Lincoln, now 43.

He started going to various churches around the Grand Rapids area, but "for some reason I did not feel I was being adequately fed."

"There was either church politics or a lack of warmth from people who were good people in doing what they were supposed to be doing, but something was calling me beyond that."

Ten years ago, Lincoln found his answer in becoming a Dominican associate, a program that requires one year of study with the Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters. It's a way of life that's moved Lincoln beyond the standard Sunday pew-sitting.

An early riser, Lincoln grabs his iPod to recite prayers he's downloaded while walking his Springer spaniel, Kerby. It's his way of preparing for whatever the new day brings.

"Becoming a Dominican has changed the way I look at life and started to change my heart in the way I think about other people," said Lincoln.

"It's important to me when I spend time with my God, I know that I need to be as grounded in his being and his presence as much as possible before I go out into the world."

Lincoln is among 114 men and women, of whom about 25 are Protestants, who have worked their way through the Dominican associate program, which is open to married, single, divorced and widowed lay men and women, as well as clergy.

Participants must attend a minimum 10 monthly meetings to study with a Dominican sister and an associate, said Sr. Mary Kay Oosdyke, the order's director of Dominican Associate Life. Completing the program does not convert them to Roman Catholicism, nor do they take clerical vows.

What it does is open a channel for associates to join with others at the Dominican Chapel, or at other local faith communities, for prayer, Dominican study days and sharing in the Dominican sisters' lives of common prayer, study, life and ministry.

It may all sound like heady stuff, Oosdyke said, but she finds most of the reasons people seek out a closer relationship with the Dominican order is to be uncomplicated.

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"They're wanting to deepen their own spirituality and somehow found the Dominicans attractive spiritually," said Oosdyke. "What the Dominicans give is a structured framework for someone who wants to deepen their spirituality in prayer, study, community, ministry and service."

Oosdyke describes the Dominican mission as "preaching in word and in deed." The one-year program includes studies on St. Dominic, Dominican spirituality, Dominican prayer traditions, understanding the call to holiness, and learning more of the order's work in social justice, homeless shelters, church ministries and ecology.

There's a feeling among associates that God is inviting them to do more with their lives, said Oosdyke.

"They start talking about their lives and (how) God is operating in their lives and feel a need to act, to do something more to enhance their Christian spiritual life," said Oosdyke. "They want to make time to be quiet and to listen to where God is in their own lives. He's there, but sometimes we're just not paying attention."

Becoming a Dominican associate opens a larger window to what it means to be a Christian. "We are all called to preach the gospel," said Oosdyke. "We bring Christ to the world to transform the world."

Rosemary Carey is a "cradle Catholic" who wanted more out of her faith. She was educated by Dominican sisters in her elementary and high school years and considers their teaching a vital part of her formation as a Catholic Christian.

It's worth making the 45-minute drive from her home in Grand Haven to Grand Rapids to plumb the depths of Dominican beliefs, said Carey, a retired director of technology at public schools and now a hospice volunteer.

"I had reached a point in my life where I had gone beyond my immediate experience with prayer and I wanted to make it more contemplative, more meaningful," said Carey.

"So it isn't just that you stay in a room but that you participate in the body of Christ. I think I'm discovering, and hope I never stop discovering, how to find peace, how to quiet myself. I think this is a

very healthy, good and positive experience.?

[Paul R. Kopenkoskey writes for *The Grand Rapids Press* in Grand Rapids, Mich.]

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