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Laity to carry sisters' legacy forward

by Denise Simeone

FIRST PERSON

RED PLAINS, OKLA. -- The Red Plains Spirituality Center, an outgrowth of the former Red Plains Monastery, was closing. The Benedictine sisters of this Oklahoma monastery had faced a difficult decision. With the aging and shortage of sisters residing at their monastery, the sisters decided to become members of another Benedictine monastery, Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kan., which they formally did in 2009.

Benedictine Sr. Anne Shepard, prioress of the Mount St. Scholastica, and I first met together with the Red Plains sisters in May 2010. I had been asked to begin working with them as a facilitator for the process of transitioning their spirituality center and its programs as they continued their physical move from Piedmont, Okla., to Atchison. Some of their members had already made the move to Atchison and the six who were left, with the help of the Atchison community, were undertaking the task of not only closing the center's buildings but also deciding how to pass on the legacy of their programs that had served men and women in Oklahoma for many years.

As we began our first meeting we pondered the scripture of the coming Sunday's celebration of the Ascension, reflecting on Jesus' words that disciples in the church have heard for centuries.

It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth? (Acts 1:1-11). The Gospel too reminded disciples that they were to be witnesses to all Jesus had proclaimed (Luke 24:46-53). In the second reading for the day, Paul promised the spirit of wisdom, enlightenment and hope to all who respond to the call of Christ (Ephesians 1:17-23).

It seemed appropriate that the sisters of this Benedictine living group would begin their deliberations about passing on their heritage with readings the church community hears as a commissioning of disciples to do whatever was necessary to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

For more than 25 years, the staff of the Red Plains Spirituality Center had developed and led a Retreat in Daily Life experience for men and women of many faiths who wished to deepen a sense of the sacred in their lives by daily reflection and prayer using the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Aided by spiritual directors, participants met in groups for seven months. In addition, a formation program was designed and began to educate people as spiritual directors. In this course of study over four years, participants developed the practices and skills to continue as guides in this ministry with others as well as be group leaders for the Retreat in Daily Life.

At the beginning of 2011, more than 1,300 persons had participated in the Retreat in Daily Life and more than 100 persons had completed their certification in the Spiritual Director Formation Program through Red Plains.

I spent many months with the sisters, outlining, imagining, discussing, praying and deliberating, always with the coming Sunday's scriptures. We explored multiple possibilities that would ensure these programs could continue to serve the people of Oklahoma.



The sisters imagined passing off the formal leadership of the programs to one or

more laypeople by the fall of 2011. That decision would mean discerning and mentoring lay leaders. In fall of 2010 several laywomen were identified who would be willing to undertake the leadership of these programs as the Sisters of Benedict Implementation Team. By March 2011 members of that team, Mary Diane Steltenkamp, Joanne Fogue and Kay Britton, began working with the sisters in anticipation of the time they would become responsible for the programs.



Jointly they addressed questions of sustainability, continuation, budgets -- all

the details overseen by the sisters for so many years.

Discussions about an umbrella organization began and eventually the joint decision of the Mount St. Scholastica community, the Red Plains sisters and the lay leaders was to accept the sponsorship offer of the Office of Worship and Spiritual Life of the Oklahoma City archdiocese. In an unusual approach, the

members of Implementation Team are not diocesan employees or members of diocesan offices. Rather they form a new entity sanctioned and sponsored by the archbishop and diocesan leaders. Together they will carve out the future shape of this new leadership model.

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Sept. 24, 2011, was chosen as the formal date to mark the passing of the legacy to lay leadership by a vespers prayer service witnessed by Archbishop Paul Coakley, diocesan leaders, community members of Mount St. Scholastica, and guests. Their invitation to that service quoted a scripture passage that has become their sustaining prayer: "Everything that you have heard me teach in the presence of many witnesses ... pass it on to trustworthy people, so they in turn will teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

The sisters of Red Plains will begin their final move to Atchison in May 2012. During their final year in Oklahoma, the sisters will work under the lay leadership of the Implementation Team.

The sisters' wrestling with decisions even while dealing with feelings of loss and leaving what was their home was hard work. Images of Christ's paschal mystery of death and life abounded in discussions over the months. Expressions of trusting God's providence and hoping for a future beyond what could be seen were plentiful.

By Advent of 2012 the last of the Red Plains sisters will have moved to Atchison, and there begin with their sisters a yearlong celebration of 150 years of ministry by Mount St. Scholastica. The Red Plains Spirituality Center will have formally closed but the history and legacy of the Red Plains sisters will be told in the story of their new adopted home.

The Implementation Team under the auspices of the archdiocese will continue the leadership of the Retreat in Daily Life and the Spiritual Director Formation Program. The participants in that fall's retreats in Oklahoma will hear of the journey of the Red Plains sisters even as they begin to deepen their own spiritual journey. Those considering becoming spiritual directors will continue to follow their call in education to serve others.

The legacy of the Red Plains sisters, crafted and deepened at the foot of the cross, will find new life. Their walk in trust, not without pain and fear, passed the work of discipleship to trustworthy people so there might still be witnesses to the Good News proclaimed by Jesus Christ as it continues to be lived out in Oklahoma.

[Denise Simeone is a freelance consultant and a writer for *Celebration* magazine.]

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