

# StarTribune

## Nuns find new home at Christmas

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Sister Teresita Mater guided her walker to the front of the room where residents of the senior center were gathered to welcome her. Over several months, she and other Sisters of the Good Shepherd had moved, a few at a time, from their beloved convent in the North Oaks woodlands to this modern retirement village in Oak Park Heights.

They had grown too old, and the convent too costly, to remain independent. Finding a new home for 26 nuns hadn't been easy, and the shift would take some getting used to -- on everyone's part -- which was why Sister Teresita needed to explain something.

She is, she said, one of four contemplative sisters who spend their days cloistered in prayer, unlike the apostolic sisters, who live and work among others. Aglow with sincerity, she said she worried that some might consider her standoffish, when nothing could be further from her heart.

"We don't mingle as much," she said, "which enables us to love you all the more."

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd have, almost literally, taken a leap of faith. From the cinderblock dormitory rooms and dim hallways of the convent, the nuns have moved to Boutwells Landing, an intentional village of townhouses and apartments behind a bustling shopping center.

Their transition is being watched by other sacred orders nationwide facing the challenge of fewer members and rising expenses, yet wanting to remain true to their ministry. "There's some grief with the loss of what was," said Sister Bernadette Faulhaber. "We had to ask ourselves, 'What are we doing in this world? And why are we here, if not to help our neighbors?'"

Few neighbors may be as well-prayed-for as these neighbors, especially those living in the oxbow of townhouses next to the contemplative nuns.

"The way that we serve the residents is to get the names of everyone in the neighborhood, and each day say their name and pray for them and their extended families," Sister Beverly Hedgecoth said. She and two other contemplatives live here, while Sister Teresita is in an assisted-living wing of the main building. The kitchen and living room are sparsely furnished with chairs, tables and couches scavenged from the convent. Wall-to-wall carpet has proven an unexpected luxury.

With seven rooms in all, the nuns thought they had almost too much space -- until it came time to decorate for Christmas.

What goes where?

Like anyone who's moved to a new home, the sisters have been figuring out what will fit where. They always put up a large crib for baby Jesus, several Christmas trees and generally go all out for this most important of seasons. Boxes of decorations packed in May had been lost, sought, then found. "Someone had labeled them 'seasonal decor' and I was looking for 'Christmas,'" Sister Ann Joseph said with some exasperation. She sighed. "I'm not sure where everything will go."

Having a house means having neighbors, prompting the contemplatives' greatest challenge: maintaining their necessary seclusion within a secular community. On their first evening in the house, a neighbor brought over a casserole, which was nice, but it was a gesture that they couldn't encourage.

Now, though, after almost six months, any trepidations about being beset by good intentions, or misunderstood as aloof, have evaporated. "People are so respectful of our need to live apart in prayer," Sister Beverly said. In some ways, she added, their townhouse offers even more privacy than the convent, "where people were always going in and out."



Sister Teresita Mater, 90, played with her dog, Heidi, before heading to afternoon mass at Boutwells Landing senior community in Oak Park Heights.

The sisters also were able to continue their altar bread business, which the order has maintained for more than a century. "It's a good, contemplative way to support ourselves," Sister Beverly said.

The business once filled 600 orders of communion hosts on a weekly basis, with the nuns baking two or three times daily, cutting and packing thousands of wafers. These days, they fill about 300 orders from across the country. They no longer bake, but cut and repackage pre-made hosts, checking each one to assure that none is chipped or cracked.

"It's a very contemplative rhythm," said Sister Ann. "To be contemplative is to be in the presence of Jesus."

#### Pioneers for the future

The nuns are pioneers of sorts, said Judy Jewison, who in 2007 co-founded REALM, a St. Paul organization that counsels religious orders in the midst of change. For the sisters, the question is "how to continue to nurture religious life in a community of many other folks," Jewison said.

"My experience with this work is that the sisters bring a certain joy and quality of life to a community that is enriching for themselves and others," she said. "What a way to end your life, with good zeal for living."

That this move is about the end of life is a reality that no one dodges. As Jewison said, "They are women of the heart, women of prayer, not trained to manage an infirmary." Since the first nuns arrived last May, three of the oldest have died.

Today, the average American nun is 70 years old, and one of fewer than 56,000 religious sisters, according to the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate at Georgetown University. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says that 84 percent of orders had no new members last year, while 13 percent gained only one.

Sister Bernadette chalked up the attrition to modernization. "After Vatican II, women who wanted to do this work could do so without being sisters," such as becoming social workers or joining the Peace Corps.

While the dwindling number of the Sisters of the Good Shepard sought a welcoming community, the staff at Boutwells Landing pondered how residents might regard a sudden influx of 26 nuns. Melissa Woosley was residential services administrator for Boutwells, which is owned by Presbyterian Homes and Services in Minnesota.

"One of the things that was so amazingly remarkable about these women was that they were tentative about this whole situation, but they embraced it," Woosley said. For senior communities fielding similar inquiries, she had this advice: "It really just requires an openness to hear where they've come from and what they want to create, instead of, 'Here's our box and you have to fit into it.'"

#### Last piece of the puzzle

The sisters both stand out and blend in at Boutwells, where activities include a billiards league, yoga, manicures and an observatory from which they can peer into the heavens. Across a dining room full of graying hair, there's the occasional black or white veil. Photos of the Halloween party show nuns handing candy to happy trick-or-treaters. If anyone has felt awkward in their presence, no one's saying.

Karen and Larry Sweet moved here in 2003. "We have Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists and others," Karen said. "There's an ecumenical spirit here, and the nuns have only added to it. They were the last piece of the puzzle."

Woosley, who has since left Boutwells, calls the nuns' arrival "one of the most remarkable experiences of my career. Working with these women, I learned what it really means to have a servant's heart."

Sister Bernadette reflected on what the sisters have learned from the move, and what advice they might offer to other convents.

"I don't know," she said candidly, then paused and tried again. "To be open to what God is saying. To listen to the small, still voice within you that is speaking. You can't go into it saying, 'This is what I want. This is how it's going to be.' Because that's not going to happen.

"There's the struggle of not holding onto the old -- to take a chance and still be true to your vocation and your calling and what it's saying to you now. What am I capable of doing?"

'It's a new life'

Sister Patricia Marie Thomas used to help women from developing countries earn money by creating and selling handmade goods. Today, her service is in the primary-colored oasis of Warm World, the child-care center within the main building that draws preschoolers from the Stillwater area.

"People ask me, 'But what do you *do*?' and I tell them you sit, you read, you play. You do what the kids do."

No question, it was hard to leave the convent, she said. "But now that we're over here, I'm so busy that it helps you forget having left. I swim now and go to chair exercise. It's a new life."

The kids, who call her Sister Patricia, gathered around as she read "The Turkey Saves the Day." The story is about a lost turkey who stumbles into a strange farmyard, but finally is accepted after saving the animals from a lurking fox. "He was," she read, "surprised at his own courage."

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