

Best Practices in Vocation Promotion (from the 2009 NRVC/CARA Survey)

The findings from the study suggest a number of “best practices” for vocation promotion. These include instilling a “culture of vocations” and involving membership and leadership in concerted vocation promotion efforts; having a full-time vocation director who is supported by a team and resources; using new media, especially websites and other online tools; offering discernment programs and other opportunities for potential candidates to meet members and learn about the institute; and targeting college students and young adults as well as elementary and high school students to expose them to the possibility of religious life and inform them about the institute.

Although these practices can have a positive impact on attracting and retaining new members, the research suggests that it is the example of members and the characteristics of the institute that have the most influence on the decision to enter a particular institute. The most successful institutes in terms of attracting and retaining new members at this time are those that follow a more traditional style of religious life in which members live together in community and participate in daily Eucharist, pray the Divine Office, and engage in devotional practices together. They also wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium. All of these characteristics are especially attractive to the young people who are entering religious life today

Being Proactive about Vocations

Interviews with vocation directors and others in religious institutes that have been successful in attracting and retaining new members revealed that many of these institutes made a decision at some point to do something about vocations and new membership. In some cases, the decision came from a chapter or assembly and in others it came from leadership. Whatever the case, the institute decided to be proactive and to invest some resources into vocation promotion. This took a number of different forms including appointing a vocation director and/or team to work on vocation promotion, making financial resources available for vocation promotion, educating leadership and/or membership about vocation promotion, and developing a plan of action.

The research also suggests, however, that good intentions, sophisticated marketing campaigns, and the investment of resources into vocation promotion alone will not attract new members. It is the

example of members and the community life, prayer life, and/or ministries of the institute that most attract new members.

Creating a Culture of Vocations

Many of the successful institutes are characterized by a “culture of vocations” within the institute. In these institutes everyone – not just the vocation director – has a sense of responsibility for vocation promotion and is involved in and supportive of vocation efforts. This includes leadership and membership as well as support services such as communications and development. In some cases, the institutions and ministries of the institute are also involved in vocation promotion efforts.

Vocation directors described a number of different ways of nurturing that culture such as regularly informing members of vocation activities through newsletters, e-mail correspondence, and at meetings as well as inviting members to participate in vocation fairs, “Come and See” experiences, discernment retreats, or serving as mentors or contacts for those in discernment. Members can also play an important role by praying for vocations, inviting individuals to consider a religious vocation, and by encouraging vocations in whatever setting they find themselves.

Findings from the survey of new members indicate that regular meeting with members and visits to communities are among the activities that new members found most helpful in their discernment process. Comments from new members further support the value to them of spending time with members, in whatever setting, while they were discerning as well as after they entered.

Vocation Director and/or Team

Findings from the survey of religious institutes reveal that there is a positive correlation between having a vocation director, especially one who is full-time, and having candidates and new members in initial formation. Having a full-time director is also positively correlated with having a higher number of members who have entered and stayed since 1990 as well as with a higher retention rate.

Although the relationship is not as strong, having a vocation team is also positively correlated with having new members. Vocation team was defined on the survey as more than one person directly responsible for vocation ministry. The number of team members does not appear to have a statistically significant relationship to attracting or retaining new members. However, the review of practices in some of the more successful institutes found that a few have a full-time director and one or two part-time associate or assistant directors or some other configuration that involves more than one person. At least one institute that was studied has two full-time vocation directors.

Findings from the survey of new members also suggest that the vocation director plays an important role in the discernment process. Most new members (60 percent) report that the vocation director or team provided “very much” encouragement when they were considering entering their institute (85 percent report that they received at least “some” encouragement from the vocation director) and 70 percent who met regularly with a vocation director found it “very” helpful in their discernment (93 percent say it was at least “somewhat” helpful). Comments from interview and focus group participants also underscore the importance of the vocation director. Many of these new members commented in particular about how much they appreciated the vocation director responding quickly and personally to an initial inquiry. They were also grateful for the vocation directors who were helpful and supportive without being pushy.

Several new members mentioned vocation directors who they experienced as pandering to them or giving them a sales pitch. Examples included promises of opportunities to travel and assurances that they could do anything they wanted in terms of ministry. These new members suggested that this was the wrong mindset and the wrong approach for those with authentic vocations. A few vocation directors also commented on new members wanting honesty about religious life and about life in the institute and their willingness to be challenged.

Use of Media for Vocation Promotion

According to the survey of religious institutes, using a website or the Internet for vocation promotion has the strongest impact on new membership of the various types of media about which they were asked. That is, those who reported that they use the Internet for vocation promotion are more likely to report having new members. Print materials and, to a lesser extent, advertising and TV also have some influence. There is no significant relationship between using radio for vocation promotion and having new members. Using multiple types of media also does not appear to have a significant impact. Findings from the survey of new members indicate that the younger they are, the more likely they are to say that websites, especially the websites of religious institutes; CDs, DVDs, and videos; and print and online promotional materials were helpful to them when they were discerning their call to religious life. This suggests that those who are discerning a vocation now would be even more likely to find these types of resources helpful.

Anecdotal evidence from new members underscores the importance of using new media, especially websites, to inform potential candidates about religious life and about the religious institute. Many potential candidates, especially those who are younger, have had limited, if any, direct exposure to men and women religious. For some, a website will be their first introduction to a religious institute. For many others, websites and other media such as DVDs and newsletters will help inform and educate them about the institute and about religious life.

Several vocation directors as well as some of the new members themselves raised some cautions about websites and other media. Some of the vocation directors commented that young people today tend to be very media savvy and that they do their homework before approaching an institute. Some of the younger members suggested that that websites or other media should be tested with the target audience whose impressions of what “works” may be very different from those of older members. Both vocation directors and new members emphasized the importance of honesty and authenticity in presenting the institute and suggested that websites and other promotional materials will be for naught if they do not match the reality in the institute. They further emphasized that while media may be helpful in the early stages of discernment, what matters most is personal contact and what the potential candidate encounters when he or she meets the institute and its members.

Discernment Programs

The survey of religious institutes found that religious institutes that sponsor various discernment programs are more successful in attracting and retaining vocations. In particular, those that sponsor discernment retreats are significantly more likely than those who not sponsor these retreats to have new members in initial formation and to be more successful in retaining new members. Discernment groups, “Come and See” experiences, and ministry/mission experiences are also positively correlated with new membership. Discernment retreats and discernment groups are also correlated with higher retention rates, while live-in experiences and discernment houses are related to having members in initial formation but not necessarily to retaining them. Offering multiple discernment programs is correlated with having new members in initial formation as well as with having higher numbers who enter and stay.

The findings from the survey of new members also show that those who participated in such programs generally found them to be very helpful when they were discerning a call to religious life, although there are some differences across age groups. Younger new members are especially likely to report that discernment retreats and “Come and See” experiences were very helpful. It is important to note again that many young people today have little or no direct contact with men and women religious. Discernment retreats and “Come and See” experiences may be the first prolonged exposure to men or women religious for some of these potential candidates.

Targeting Age Groups

Results from the survey of religious institutes indicate that institutes that sponsor vocation promotion and discernment programs directed toward college students and young adults are more likely to have new members than those who do not sponsor programs for these groups. Although the relationship is not as strong statistically, targeting high school students also appears to have an impact on attracting and retaining new members.

Interviews and focus groups with new members revealed that many learned about their particular religious institute through a friend or advisor at a Newman Center, campus ministry, or other college or university program. Some of the vocation directors also reported being involved to varying degrees in college and high school retreats and other programs as a way to get to know young people and expose them to religious life. Findings from the survey of new members show that 40 percent of the men and almost 50 percent of the women first considered a vocation to religious life before they were 18 years of age. More than a quarter of the women considered it before they were 14. These findings suggest that vocation directors might want to consider targeting some of their vocation efforts at those in elementary and high school. Anecdotal evidence from vocation directors also suggests a possible trend toward considering religious life at a younger age than was the case even a few years ago.

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