

MERCY PRAYER CENTER

Center satisfies hunger for spiritual direction

By Teresa A. Parsons
Even in their wildest dreams, the founders of the Mercy Prayer Center couldn't have imagined how well things would turn out.

They were five Sisters of Mercy who began with an admittedly fuzzy vision of building an extended community of religious and lay people whose lives would center on an esoteric 16th-century model of spiritual formation.

Less than a decade later, Mercy Sisters Mary Maureen Flood, Margaret Mary Matle, Virginia Wilson, Rita Kaufman and Therese Richardson have concocted a rare blend of talents, personalities and atmosphere that has transformed their new house at 65 Highland Avenue into a spiritual home.

A couple of high-school teachers, an elementary-school principal, a diocesan administrator and a congregational prayer coordinator established the prayer center in 1978 at Holy Cross Convent on Lake Avenue.

"We had found that there was a great hunger for spiritual direction among lay people," Sister Maureen said. "We wanted it to be a place that would develop community among religious and lay people, but first realized that we had to build our community by recognizing and evaluating our own talents."

They developed programs built around a classic mode of spiritual formation — the Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius Loyola in the 16th century. A systematic series of meditations designed to help an individual discern the will of God in his or her life, the exercises are commonly used either during an intensive month-long retreat or for a short time each day, over a period of 30 weeks.

The Mercy Prayer Center adopted the 30-week format and eventually expanded to include morning and evening sessions offered on Wednesdays from September to June.

"Looking at it from the outside, one of the prime values of the exercises is the integration of body, mind and spirit," Sister Maureen explained. "It also encourages people to continue in spiritual direction after they've finished the exercises. I think it points to the growing need in the Church for spiritual direction, particularly for lay people."

Since they began offering the exercises, the sisters have indeed noticed a surge in their popularity among lay people. Currently, both Wednesday sessions are at capacity.

"I think that the reason it's popular is because it provides people with some kind of in-depth structure for their prayer life," said Sister Margaret. "Most parishes don't foster in-depth spiritual leadership. The



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

After nearly a decade of moving its spiritual formation programs from one temporary location to another, the Mercy Prayer Center has finally found a home at 65 Highland Avenue in Rochester.

other renewal movements lead people toward that structure, but don't always come through."

As their experience increased and the demands on their time and energy expanded, the sisters began to train lay people to serve as adjunct spiritual directors and prayer guides.

"We're sisters, so our spirituality is not lay spirituality," Sister Margaret explained. "That's why it's such a blessing to have lay people leading programs and doing teachings."

Among their trainees is Pat Bauman, who met Sister Maureen through a "Mothers and Others" program at St. James Parish. Bauman made the Ignatian exercises five years ago and, afterward, Sister Maureen asked her to consider becoming a prayer guide or novice spiritual director.

"They saw the need of people in the diocese for spiritual direction," Bauman said. "Now there are a lot of us doing things we never thought we'd do."

As a prayer guide, Bauman begins a typical Wednesday session by meeting with her supervisor to handle last-minute questions or concerns. She then meets privately with a retreatant who is making the exercises for the first time. Together, they pray and reflect on the meditation for that week. The bulk of the meditations are based on scriptural accounts of particular incidents in the life of Christ.

Prayer guides and retreatants then assemble for a presentation on the theme for the following week. Afterward, guides and supervisors again meet to evaluate the session.

What many consider the genius of the exercises is their ability to continue revealing insights to the prayer guide or spiritual

director as they work with each new retreatant.

"The thing that is always overwhelming to me is how you don't even know this person (the retreatant) coming into it, and yet you really feel the love that God has for them," Bauman said. "After the exercises, the grace that is most outstanding to me is that the person's self-concept, their freedom, their awareness of God changes as they become aware of how much they are loved."

"The gift of the Ignatian exercises is that they're still unfolding even five years down the line," Bauman added. "It's really life-giving forever."

When the prayer center opened, it shared Holy Cross Convent with just one sister who taught at the parish school. By 1984, however, both the prayer center's programs and Holy Cross's religious community had grown considerably.

After they attracted 95 overnight guests in the course of a single month, the prayer center's staff could no longer ignore their need for separate quarters.

"In the beginning, we were trying to search out and see if this was a viable ministry," said Sister Margaret. "But then we found ourselves pulling back and pulling back, accommodating the ministry to the house, and we realized we needed another place."

Armed with little more than blind faith, they embarked on a search for a home for the prayer center, never dreaming that the search would last for more than two years.

Accessibility and space were two of their prime requirements. "We wanted it to be close to people who are ministering in the city — preferably on a bus line," Sister

Margaret said. At the same time, the house had to be somewhat buffered from its busy urban environment.

After rejecting dozens of proposed sites, the sisters signed a purchase offer for a house on St. Paul Boulevard in June, 1985, but were unable to raise the downpayment before the seller's deadline.

Finally, in the summer of 1985, they moved out of Holy Cross Convent and into a friend's three-bedroom summer home, from which they continued to offer spiritual direction.

Two months later, they moved again — this time to the Church of the Assumption in Fairport, where they rented rooms for their programs in the parish's religious education center.

Throughout their physical search for a home, the sisters continued to look for spiritual certainty that the prayer center should remain their goal. "We had some hard moments, wondering was this really what the Lord was asking us to do?" Sister Virginia recalled.

To help resolve those doubts and continue their spiritual development, all five traveled to the Jesuit-run Guelph Centre of Spirituality in Ontario several times for periods of prayer and discernment.

Even before they moved out of Holy Cross, several of the sisters were acquainted with Wilbur O. Gundlach. But it wasn't until the fall of 1984 that they learned Gundlach was seeking a buyer for his property at 65 Highland Avenue.

Once owned by the Precious Blood Fathers, the house had served as a nursing home, a shelter for runaway youths, and the center of a Christian fellowship group headed by Gundlach and his late wife.

With more than 25 rooms, the building offered both the privacy and space needed for the spiritual exercises. Located between Mt. Hope and South avenues, it was close to the center of the city, yet had an air of seclusion.

Backed by their congregation, which offered them a seven-year mortgage, the sisters made a purchase offer last October, and Gundlach accepted.

"We could not have purchased it if not for his generosity," Sister Virginia said.

With the added space and flexibility of having their own facility, the prayer center staff anticipates expanding their programs to include days or evenings of recollection and special retreats for teens or couples, as well as individually directed and group retreats.

"The support has always been there, but now they (the sisters) have the freedom to be able to keep the doors open," Bauman explained. "It's really our house and they are like the stewards."

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