

Features

New position fulfills an old dream, vicar for religious says

By Lee Strong

For more than two years, Sister Dolores Banick, IHM, knew what she wanted to do, but didn't know exactly how to go about it.

"I knew I wanted a ministry of service for men and women religious," she explained. "I was convinced I would be happiest in working full-time with men and women religious."

Sister Banick came to that conclusion during eight years of directing women in formation for religious life, and of conducting retreats and providing spiritual direction for both men and women religious. Working with both men and women, she noted, "was the time I found most fulfilling."

This spring, when she saw an advertisement for the position of vicar for religious for the Diocese of Rochester, she knew she'd found an opportunity that might let her achieve her dream. "When I received the job description ... I knew it was what I was looking for," she said. "I thought I would be fulfilled here."

Sister Banick became the diocese's second, full-time female vicar for religious in August, 1988. She replaced a team consisting Sister Muriel Curran, SSND, who served full-time as vicar, and Monsignor Gerald Krieg, who served as part-time co-vicar.

The new vicar comes to the job with a wide range of experience. For 17 years she taught or worked as a school administrator. For eight years, Sister Banick was coordinator of formation and director of novices for the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. From 1987 to 1988, she was archdiocesan coordinator of adult religious formation in Washington D.C. She has been a spiritual director and a retreat director for 10 years.

In addition, Sister Banick has worked with her congregation's committees on spiritual renewal, retreat, liturgy, constitutions and community prayer. She holds a master's degree in school administration from the University of Dayton and a master's of applied spirituality from the University of San Francisco.

Sister Banick believes that the varied experiences of her career have prepared her well for the job of vicar for religious. "I believe my work in spiritual direction, liturgy and prayer and in the area of religious vows has made me conscious of all the areas of religious life," she remarked. "Spirituality is an important part (of the job), but of course there are other parts. My experience in the past in terms of administration will also help."

The two-year search that eventually led Sister Banick to the Diocese of Rochester began when she left her position as coordinator of formation in 1986. "It was an interim period in my life when I finished with formation," she said. "I felt that that period of my life was over."

For the 1986-87 school year, Sister Banick served as temporary principal at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel High School in Asbury Park, N.J., while searching for a position in which she could pursue her dream. She then took the position of coordinator of adult religious formation in Washington.

"The reason I took the Washington job was because it was in the area of religious formation with adults," Sister Banick explained. "It was not with religious as I wanted, but I felt it would be a good experience for me to work with lay people. We do a lot of collaboration in the Church now."

Collaboration is a word Sister Banick uses frequently when talking of the role of religious

men and women in the diocese.

"We seek to collaborate with all that local Church means," Sister Banick said. In meeting with some of the religious of the diocese since her arrival, she learned "they feel they have an excellent pastoral leader in Bishop (Matthew H.) Clark, who seems to communicate the message of welcoming the gifts of religious men and women to collaborate with him in the work of the local Church — namely, the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

The nearly 1,100 men and women religious of the diocese contribute to it in a wide variety of ways, Sister Banick noted. They teach and tutor, operate prayer and retreat centers, and work in hospitals, parishes, health-care centers, prisons and centers for the poor. The religious also contribute their "radical lifestyle of sim-

sonally is to meet with all the men and women religious of the diocese," Sister Banick said. "I think it's important for me to know where they are to catch a little of their spirit. I think it helps to begin and foster that relationship so that they feel at home in calling upon my services."

Those services will include providing spiritual direction and counseling, directing retreats and days of reflection, facilitating conferences, and affording access to such resources as psychological counseling.

Sister Banick described providing services as the pastoral part of the vicar's job, but noted that it is only one dimension of the office.

"The vicar's office has an ecclesial dimension, because I believe the vicar has to be an ecclesial presence representing the bishop to re-

sis among women religious nationwide. This month, many dioceses will participate in national collection to create a retirement fund that will be apportioned to the various religious orders throughout the country. The Diocese of Rochester, however, has chosen not to participate in the national campaign, opting instead to rely on a local, five-year campaign scheduled to begin next spring.

Another issue Sister Banick will have to contend with is housing for women religious. The WRCC had set July 1, 1989, as an early target date for women religious to assume their own housing costs. Sister Banick observed that the congregations will not be able to meet the target because further study is needed on such issues as total costs, numbers of sisters and alternative housing arrangements.

To assist her with her work, Sister Banick will also be forming a Council for Religious to replace the Diocesan Sisters Council. The Sisters Council voted itself out of existence on September 17, because its members believed that the council had fulfilled its major purposes — including the hiring of a woman vicar for religious — and that the diocese needs a council representing both men and women religious. The new body will serve as an advisory group to the vicar.

Sister Banick credits Sister Curran with laying the foundations for much of what she wants to do, and particularly praised the former vicar for fostering a closer working relationship between men and women religious in the diocese.

Sister Curran also broke ground in terms of being a woman vicar. In 1970, when the Sisters Council first began asking that a woman vicar be appointed in the diocese, only two women religious held that office in the United States. By 1981, when Sister Curran was appointed, that number had grown to 77. Currently, 93 women religious serve as vicars.

"Many dioceses have recognized that it is a role that a woman can do and do well," Sister Banick observed. "It's a job that doesn't need an ordained priest."

At the same time, Sister Banick noted, that although sisters represent the majority of religious in the diocese, the vicar's office is not intended to serve only women.

"The vicar for religious is the pastoral representative of the bishop to the men and women religious of the diocese," Sister Banick noted. "The vicar is to be a communicator, a catalyst, an advocate, a nurturer for all religious."

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Sister Dolores Banick, IHM



licity and prayer," she said.

"I think there's a certain prophetic witness within the Church that (religious) bring," Sister Banick observed. "I think the prophetic witness that I talk about finds its essence in the vows. They're counter-cultural. (The vows) have a ramification for all the social justice issues, not only locally but globally."

One of her goals as vicar for religious, Sister Banick observed, will be to "foster, encourage and promote religious life itself" and to "seek to stimulate the prophetic witness of that life."

Sister Banick's more immediate concern about her new job, however, is to get to know the diocese and the religious working within it.

"I guess the biggest challenge for me per-

religious men and women," Sister Banick said. "I see myself as a collaborator to Bishop Clark in his ministry to religious."

As part of that role, Sister Banick will also be a member of various councils and committees in the diocese, such as the Intercongregational Council and the Women Religious Compensation Committee. In addition, she noted, her office is part of the Division of Personnel, Planning and Development, "which requires my being at meetings and which allows me to network with other people in the division."

Sister Banick pointed out that being part of the personnel division will help her deal with some of the issues facing women religious in the diocese, including the retirement-fund cri-

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