

Orders must respond to needs, report says

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — For religious orders to survive and thrive, they need to be faithful to their founding purpose and responsive to real human needs, according to the findings of a three-year study of U.S. religious orders released Sept. 16.

While some orders have increasingly shifted members into individual and parish-based ministries, their loss of "corporate identity" and "corporate witness" has meant a loss of their vitality as a religious community, the study says.

The study was conducted by two psychologists, Vincentian Father David J. Nygren and St. Joseph of Carondelet Sister Miriam D. Ukeritis. They describe it as the first-ever in-depth investigation that encompasses both men's and women's orders.

One major tension the study uncovered was "the alienation of members of religious orders from the hierarchy and related aspects of the institutional church."

Another key problem it found was a gap between self-description and practice. While religious life is increasingly being defined in terms of a "commitment to serving absolute human need," it said, "in the general population of orders, a significant percentage do not intend to devote their energies to serving the poor directly."

Among the main elements in the three-year study were:

- A lengthy mail survey of nearly 10,000 U.S. men and women religious.
- Studies comparing typical leaders of religious orders with those identified by others as "outstanding" leaders.
- Studies of religious identified by others as exemplars of the "caring" person.
- Experimental workshops with religious identified by others as "visionary" in the sense of having a creative, articulate vision of the future of religious life.
- Interviews with recognized experts and national leaders on various aspects of religious life.

The researchers were at Boston University when they began their study, but both are now at DePaul University in Chicago. The Lilly Endowment in Indianapolis, a major contributor to religious research, funded the research and recently provided an additional grant of nearly half a million dollars to disseminate the results.

In an interview with Catholic News Service in conjunction with the release of the findings, Sister Ukeritis said the two elements identified as crucial to dynamic religious communities — fidelity to purpose and responsiveness to unmet human needs — might be obvious in many ways.

"But it was striking to us because it also came up when we weren't looking



AP/Wide World Photos
RELIGION ON THE MOVE — Tom Kyllonen (right) of Chambersburg, Pa., and Gary Hoskins, of Leesburg, Fla., carry pews from the hurricane-damaged First Assembly of God Church in Florida City, Fla. Sept. 6. The congregation held services in a nearby tent.

for it," she said.

She said that when she recently gave a talk to the National Assembly of Religious Brothers, "I used as an example the Alexian Brothers.

"They're a small group. They were founded to assist victims of the plague in the Middle Ages. And recently they claimed as one of their focal points working with persons with AIDS."

She was simply citing the order as an example of a community reclaiming its founding purpose and applying it to an unmet human need today, she said, but after her talk an Alexian Brother who was in the audience came up to her. "He said, 'I hadn't thought about it before, but we had not had men entering our community for a long time — but this summer we had two first professions (of vows), we received five people into the novitiate and we had six (other) candidates.'"

"There's an impulse to generosity among people," Sister Ukeritis commented. "As communities clarify what they're about, especially in addressing

unmet needs, people will find a way to channel that impulse."

In the words of a 55-page draft "Executive Summary" of the study, "Lack of clarity regarding the group's mission offers little to attract the commitment or capture the passion of potential members."

Another immediate implication of the study, Sister Ukeritis said, is that the analysis of differences between typical and outstanding leaders suggests ways to improve the leadership of religious orders through programs of leadership training for new superiors.

The "Executive Summary," an overview report co-written by Father Nygren and Sister Ukeritis, described "the vast majority" of religious order leaders today as "average performers." It said that both members and leaders of orders see leadership as an "increasing concern."

"The most striking weakness among current leaders is their inability to formulate a strategy to achieve a purpose or mission," it said.

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