

Sister-moms growing in numbers

Jennifer Lim/CNS

HOUSTON — For Benedictine Sister Bernice Lindsey, May 11 had a special significance for two reasons.

It was both Mother's Day and World Day of Prayer for Vocations, and the mother of three and grandmother of seven had no problem celebrating both occasions.

Like many mothers, she has adorned the walls of her office with photos: snapshots of a son, two daughters and their spouses; posed pictures of grandchildren; and a print of the whole clan. And like many mothers, she worries about their health, brags about their accomplishments and refers to them by their nicknames.

But the 56-year-old woman also wears a small pin with the symbol of her religious congregation, making Sister Lindsey quite unlike most mothers.

But she is hardly alone. She is one of a small but growing population of sister-moms: women who are widows or whose marriages have been annulled, who typically have grown children and who have discovered a call to the religious life later in life.

About 160 women belong to the

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national organization called "Sister-Moms." The group, founded by three women religious who are also mothers, began as a support group for the women in this dual vocation. The organization has had two national conferences, but mainly the sister-moms keep in touch through local meetings and an e-mail listserv.

Like many Catholic girls in the 1950s, Sister Lindsey once dreamed of becoming a nun. But her life unfolded differently: she eventually met and married a military man, and by her 20th birthday, she and her husband had started their family.

By then, she had left the church. But as her oldest child reached age 7, a motherly instinct told her that their daughter needed some grounding in faith. She brought her children to the Catholic community serving Fort Hood, the military base in Killeen, Texas, where they lived.

"Now I know how God works.

Back then, I didn't see it as that; I just thought, 'She's getting into school; she has got to have some kind of faith foundation,'" she told *The Texas Catholic Herald*.

In 1980, at the insistence of parishioners, the would-be sister attended a Cursillo retreat. At that point, she said, she started "a personal relationship with God." She eventually went into full-time ministry for the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, serving as a pastoral associate at Fort Hood.

When her husband died after 20 years of marriage, she continued her pastoral work. But she sensed "something was missing." A transfer to a job at Fort Sam Houston placed her in proximity to a vocations discernment group in San Antonio, and she took steps to explore her late vocation.

In 1991 Sister Lindsey entered the

Benedictine order in Boerne, about 40 miles south of San Antonio. But before she officially started convent life, she invited her children to dinner to tell them the news, in person. And "once they were assured" that she would not be "locked away," she said, they supported her choice.

Sister Lindsey, who made her final profession of vows five years ago, loves her new life. As a youth minister for the Priests of the Sacred Heart, she ministers at five Houston parishes and one in Wallace.

She still surprises some people when she says things such as "when my daughter was a teenager," but many say they connect with her because she knows what it means to be a parent.

The reality of communal life with her family prepared her to live in a religious community, she said. And her "real world" experience as a mother — like knowing when to take the car to the mechanic or how to buy in bulk to save on costs — is part of the gift she brings to her sisters.

"I always say, 'God has a plan.' ... He still didn't let that seed die," she said. "He just let it ferment, allowing me to do what I did, and then go forward."

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