



BULLETIN INSERTS

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Meet Our Religious Communities: Founding Monastic Communities

I didn't know that we have monastic communities in the Episcopal Church!

Monastic orders and Christian communities are sometimes called “the best kept secret in the Episcopal Church!” Yet, today we have 20 monastic communities, whose members live together, and 25 dispersed Christian communities.

When did this start?

In the mid-19th century, some Episcopalians began to hear a call to deeper connection with God, to deeper prayer, and to community life. The first to heed this call was Anne Ayres, who founded the Sisterhood of the Holy Communion under the guidance of the Rev. Dr. William Augustus Muhlenberg in New York City in 1852. Several women joined her and they engaged in active ministry especially serving the poor, teaching, and in health care.

These women lived together and took “promises” for three years at a time, but did not take life vows, although it was Ayres’ desire that this work be an “association for life.”

One of these sisters, Harriet Starr Cannon, went on to found the Community of Saint Mary in 1865. Mother Harriet’s dream was “complete and unconditional surrender to our Lord” and for a life of prayer, discipline, and worship. The first ministries of CSM included the House of Mercy for “fallen women” and a home for destitute children. Initially, the existence of the community was known only to a few friends.

Why was CSM kept a secret?

In the late 19th century, anti-Roman Catholic sentiments were strong. The sisters started to attract unwanted attention and were called “Romanists in disguise.” Fictional accounts were published of horrors perpetrated in Roman Catholic convents and these stories were thought by many to be true.

The CSM sisters tried to keep a low profile and were still subject to criticism and scrutiny. Public sentiment changed dramatically when several CSM sisters went to Memphis in 1878 to minister to the sick during the yellow fever outbreak. Most of them died, and they are now commemorated in The Episcopal Church calendar on September 9th as the Martyrs of Memphis.



Why is religious life in The Episcopal Church still a “best kept secret”?

Despite the positive publicity surrounding the Martyrs of Memphis, religious communities have remained somewhat hidden in The Episcopal Church, often known only in the neighborhoods where they live and serve.

In the 20th and into the 21st centuries, religious communities are ministering in social services, education, health care, prisons, and throughout the Church. They provide prayerful presences, places of retreat, spiritual friendship, and examples of spiritual dedication in community.

For more information, see www.caroa.net and www.naecc.net.