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Before the pandemic, Felician Sr. Desiré Findlay's calendar was completely full.

But when the vocation outreach minister came home from a retreat last March, all the scheduled conferences, college visits and other events she was planning to attend were canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic.

At first, she thought she would love the unexpected free time, but then she wondered not only what she would do but how would she connect with young women who might have a calling to the religious life.

The sister, living outside of Pittsburgh, found an outlet on social media. To express herself and also show that women religious are not just one-dimensional, she posted

some videos of herself dancing as an expression of prayer on Instagram and she was surprised by the following that gave her.

She also has used the platform to speak out on justice issues as a young Black woman, particularly last summer amid protests against racial inequities.

Encouraged by one of the young women she had been talking to about vocation discernment, Findlay started regular Zoom calls for the group where they could learn about what the sisters do, meet one another, pray and get resources to help think about what it would mean to be a woman religious.

"I feel hopeful because of the creativity we've been forced to find," she said. But she also views the online chats as a stopgap until those discerning a vocation meet the sisters in person, which she said they need to do.

"The hard part is most congregations won't allow women to move forward unless they have visited," she said, which makes it frustrating for women who are stuck in this virtual setting.

More than 1,000 miles away in Grand Prairie Texas, Sr. Emmanuela Le, national director of vocations for the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, similarly found her very full schedule come to a grinding halt a year ago. She also took her ministry online and is very ready to get back to meeting people in person and having women and their families visit the sisters.

Soon after the pandemic started, she took out her lists of young women she had been in touch with who were considering a vocation and invited them to join the sisters by social media in Holy Hour prayer each day as well as vespers, or evening prayers. Each day she sends out materials covering the readings and a reflection.

"It takes a lot of work, but I enjoy it," she told Catholic News Service March 11.

After some of the prayer sessions, she has invited those who had joined to stay and talk about what's going on or if they needed prayers, and she said this group has been like a small parish or family.

Le, who typically visits families of women interested in pursuing a vocation, has been meeting with families on Zoom but recently began in-person visits again. In early March, she flew to Las Vegas and rented a car to visit one of these families — 6 feet apart and in a park — and then flew back to Texas the same day.

The Vietnamese sister who grew up in New Jersey and never imagined she would be living in Texas, said she is excited about reopenings, particularly of their convent for open house and retreats to those who want to learn more about their lifestyle.

With the pandemic, she said, "there was a pause because of the uncertainty," and although there was never a pause in dialogue with women interested in a vocation, "the need of being connected is even greater."

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Other sisters also have found that women are still interested in vocations even in the midst of the pandemic.

Sr. June Fitzgerald, vocation director for the Dominican Sisters of Peace in their New Haven, Connecticut, convent, said that in the past six months there have been about 30 different women attending Zoom programs run by the sisters for those interested in a vocation. The group runs the gamut of those slightly curious to those who definitely feel they are called.

Her congregation was already using monthly Zoom sessions for several years so that was not something new they had to pick up once the pandemic hit.

"By happy fault, we had that in place," she said.

But even though they have been able to continue discussions online, she said she is "looking forward to meeting discerners in person."

By being online, she noted you lose a sense of community, because it's not the same as when you are getting a cup of coffee with someone or sharing a meal or a laugh in the hallway. And as she put it: "You can only do so many ice breakers and scavenger hunts" on Zoom.

Fitzgerald, like other vocation directors, similarly traveled a lot before the pandemic. She said she was typically on the road about half of each month. The extra time she now has she said is a blessing in one way to spend more time in prayer with the sisters who were not having to always rush off afterward.

Another pandemic adjustment that also has worked out, has been the order's online welcoming ceremonies for new candidates, which she said enables people to see

what this ceremony is like. The congregation also has been inviting people to join them in monthly prayer online.

When life returns to some normalcy, she thinks the order will continue its online outreach along with its in-person ministry.

"I've been meeting with discerners by phone for eight years — all my time in vocation ministry," she said, stressing that starting and ending each call with a prayer helps to "contain that holy space together."

Of course, women religious aren't the only ones facing pandemic challenges of how to best meet applicants.

Benedictine Br. Zachary Wilberding, vocation director at St. Meinrad Archabbey in St. Meinrad, Indiana, said he also switched to online work when the pandemic started by interviewing potential candidates by phone, Skype or Zoom.

He said he was "kind of scratching my head for a while," thinking about how men could visit the abbey safely during the pandemic until abbey officials worked out a plan for visitors to stay in another building, not even the usual guest house, and join the monks for prayer, some meals in silence and work periods with the novices.

"We couldn't do it all digitally. They have to have contact with the monastery. They have to see the place. They have to have some contact with community members. They have to see what we're like," he said.

Ideally, Wilberding thinks those who feel they have a calling should really visit for several days.

"I tell people, I want there to be a point in this, where you maybe start to feel a little bored or like this is getting a little monotonous, because it does. That's a reality. ... Really part of what's forming us as monks and as Christians is dealing with that. "

"We like it to be a little challenging for them," he added, which might not always come through on a Zoom call.