News
Religious Life



Women Touched by Grace participants, from left, the Rev. Julie Webb, Benedictine Sr. Betty Drewes, Benedictine Sr. Mary Luke Jones and the Rev. Tamara Franks walk the grounds at the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis on April 28. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

View Author Profile
dstockman@ncronline.org

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Without Catholic nuns, the Rev. Meghan Davis-Brass might have ended her 14-year career as a Presbyterian pastor.

Benedictine sisters have helped Davis-Brass and 88 other women sustain and strengthen their ministries as Protestant clergy through a program called Women Touched by Grace, in which Benedictine nuns teach Protestant female clergy how to be better pastors through a series of retreats.

"I do firmly believe this has been a preventative to burnout," said Davis-Brass, who lives in Newton, Iowa. "If not for this program, it's very possible I would not still be in ministry."

Women Touched by Grace began 20 years ago and brings each group together for five weeklong retreats at Benedictine monasteries over the course of two years, exploring spiritual life, female leadership, spiritual mentorship, and ways to create community.

Davis-Brass had wanted to participate in Women Touched by Grace for years. Her mother, now retired, was a pastor and was in the first group of participants when the program started in 2003. When Davis-Brass was in the seminary, her internship supervisor had been in the second group.

"I've always wanted to do it if I ever got the chance," she said. "I figured that since they have centuries of history behind them, there'd be a lot I could learn."

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>
> —the Rev. Sarah Hollar
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Davis-Brass and 19 others were in Women Touched by Grace's fourth iteration, which began in 2018 and ended April 29 in Beech Grove, a suburb of Indianapolis. The COVID-19 pandemic had interrupted the usual program, so an extra retreat was added to the schedule.

"I felt like they got short-shifted," said Sr. Mary Luke Jones, a Beech Grove Benedictine who runs the program, which is underwritten by the Lilly Endowment. "I love each and every one of them. We've had pastors from Mennonite to Episcopal and everything in between."

Each of the four participants who spoke to Global Sisters Report talked about the impact of the sisters' communal life.

"Living in community and the importance of community has been really powerful," Davis-Brass said. "Obviously, in the mainline Protestant experience, we don't have anything comparable, but I can certainly see the appeal of monastic life."

The Rev. Sarah Hollar, an Episcopal pastor from outside Charlotte, North Carolina, said she found communal living inspiring and also learned that it is not always easy.

"They immerse us in community and put us with people who have lived a sustained life in community," Hollar said. "But it takes grace and effort. You have to keep showing up."

The world needs much more community, she said, even if it doesn't mean actually living together.

"Little kids go to camp and they learn this kind of thing. Then we become adults, and we kind of lose that lesson," Hollar said. "The world is lacking a sense of making space for the other."

The Rev. Nancy Cox, an Episcopal pastor from Concord, North Carolina, said the sisters are models of how members of a community don't have to agree on everything or to be alike — they just have to make an effort.



Women Touched by Grace participants, from left, the Rev. Julie Webb, the Rev. Diana Thompson, the Rev. Sarah Hollar and the Rev. Tamara Franks leave for a field trip April 28 to the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

"Some sisters are very conservative and some are much more liberal, but they're all at the table together," Cox said. "They've committed to stay together for life. We have a society that's incredibly divided, and everyone is asking how we deal with this. The first answer is we have to stay at the table."

The United Church of Christ teachings focus on the idea of covenant, said the Rev. Tamara Franks from Boone, North Carolina. "Community," to her, means "covenant."

"So anything about community, I'm going to raise my hand and say, 'Please teach me,' " Franks said. "You live in community, you live in covenant."

The participants also said they were deeply affected by something very, very Catholic: the Rule of St. Benedict. Written around the year 530, almost 1,000 years before the Reformation, the Rule gives the basis for monastic living and daily

practices.

"I didn't know Benedict beyond as a figure in history," said Cox, who noted that the first word of the rule is "listen."

"So much of what we're taught is preaching and talking, not listening," she said. "There is much we can learn from their wisdom across the centuries."

Cox said she was inspired by how the Benedictine sisters can live a 1,500-year-old rule in a way that is not just applicable today, but prophetic.

"I gained an appreciation for what the rule looks like lived in the 21st century," she said.

The participants and the sisters understand the irony of women religious from a church that does not ordain women teaching ordained women how to be better at their vocation.

"Prior to starting this program, I knew absolutely nothing about women clergy. It's not in my realm of experience," Jones said. "But also, I realize that despite the fact ordination is denied for Catholic women, we have a very strong church and many congregations [of women religious] led by very strong and holy women."

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The participants said they are inspired by sisters' prophetic leadership, regardless of ordination status.

The program "only grew and deepened my appreciation for these amazing women," Franks said.

Cox told a story of wearing her clerical attire while visiting a convent, where the sisters told her she didn't understand how important her vocation is.

"I said, 'You don't understand the importance of what you've been doing the past two millennia,' " Cox said.

Hollar said it can be difficult to put into words exactly what participants take away from Women Touched by Grace, but there is no doubt it has changed them for the better.

"We all go back and look at our members with kinder eyes," Hollar said.

She said she is especially inspired by the sisters' ministry of presence.

"It's the pace of their lives, their willingness to hold things," Hollar said. "That idea that just with my breathing in and out with you, I can sense the Holy Spirit moving between us. They model it very well. I wonder if they are aware of what a gift that essence is."

Jones said she is proud of the history of women religious, but it's not something to dwell on when there are so many needs today.

"We don't think of it too much. We just do it," Jones said. "It's our pleasure to have these women in our midst and learn so much about them."

The fifth iteration of Women Touched by Grace begins in October and will have retreats at the Benedict Inn Retreat & Conference Center in Beech Grove and the Benedictine Sisters Retreat Center in Cullman, Alabama. The deadline to apply is May 31.