

Community of Benedict

An Interview with Sister Joanne Kollasch, OSB

The Community of Benedict at Holy Wisdom Monastery brings together women and men from different faith traditions. Formed in response to people asking Sisters Mary David Walgenbach and Joanne Kollasch how they might belong to a community, the Community of Benedict began in 1981 as the first ecumenical community at the monastery. Others followed, including a change for the Sisters' community itself in 2006.

How did the Community of Benedict start?

Sister Joanne: In 1966, the Sisters opened Saint Benedict Center, a retreat and conference facility for the promotion of Christian unity. This initiative was prompted by the ecumenical spirit of Vatican Council II in the Catholic Church. The Council ended just one year before, in 1965.

We had a number of people asking us, "Yes, you live in community, but what about us?" Usually, that question came from women and men who had attended retreats over the years at the Center. They wanted to be part of a community.

In 1980, we hosted a symposium on the 1500-year anniversary of Saints Benedict and Scholastica. One of the scholars expressed that when you examine the history, you can find any form of Benedictine community life. Sister Mary David and I reflected on that statement, along with the questions we received from people about how they could become part of a community.

Our reflection prompted us to invite people we thought might be interested in joining a community to come and talk with us. As a result of several conversations, five of us met every week for probably two hours and we talked about what a possible community would look like: "What would be its values?," "What would be its vision?" and "How could we form this community?." Once we had done that (probably three or four months later), we invited 15 who had inquired and then shared with them what we had come up with to see if they were interested. As it turned out, most of them were.

What called most people to accept the invitation? Why did some decline?

Sister Joanne: One of the values that provided a kind of dividing line about who would join this community was whether we would give a fair amount of time to the spiritual journey as well as what we would do to make the world a better place. Those two focal points are really one but in the beginning people were accustomed to speaking of one or the other: this is a community for spiritual nourishment or this is a community that goes out and demonstrates for peace. In actuality, before one can go out and demonstrate for peace or engage in meaningful work, one needs to nurture the interior life. So, some people didn't find it action-oriented enough, and others found it to be the perfect blend of the outward and inward journey.

Who joined the Community?

Sister Joanne: Right from the beginning, we attracted married people, some couples, not always husband and wife. There were the Sisters who already lived in community. The rest were people from different Christian backgrounds and family orientations.

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How often do you meet?

Sister Joanne: We meet every two or three weeks. We have a social hour. Then we have a meal that has either been prepared by three or four people in the Community or carried in. We have a program and/or share our spiritual journeys. For the program, it may be someone who knows a person who has just come back from Pakistan, or someone in the group who wants to share a ministry. Then we have a worship time together, and we close with a sign of peace.

Twice a year, we have a day of reflection and renewal. Once a year, we have a weekend retreat together. Some of the people who started the Community still belong to it. Some people have moved away and several are deceased. The Community continues.

At other Benedictine monasteries, are there Communities of Benedict or is this unique?

Sister Joanne: The Community of Benedict is particular to our monastery. Other monasteries have oblate communities similar to our oblate community. Community of Benedict is formed differently: we gather more often; the group is much smaller; we get to know each other better.

How do people become part of the community?

Sister Joanne: Members of the Community do the inviting. We have a nominating committee that recommends people to the Community. A number of us have invited people to join the Community. We do that believing these people would participate in the Community and that they would be happy with us. Of course, they are free to accept or decline. The Community is intentionally small.

Did the ecumenical aspect of the Sisters' community stem from the Community of Benedict?

Sister Joanne: Our ministry, the work we did with people was foundational for our monastery. The Community of Benedict is important in our development because it was the Benedictine Sisters' first initiative at ecumenical community. It was the first community at the monastery that had Christians other than Roman Catholics. The Sisters experienced ecumenical community as viable and sustainable. Other ecumenical communities followed.

We came to see our coworkers and our ecumenical advisory board as forms of community. The oblate community formed in 1998. The oblates form an ecumenical community rooted in various faith traditions that find an everyday spirituality in the Rule of Benedict. Sunday Assembly and the Sisters' community complete the list.

How will Community of Benedict change over time?

Sister Joanne: There was a lot of energy needed when we began it. We had to come together around the issues and values. Now, it has gone on for 27 years. It has changed. Anything that is going to live needs to change. We are asking again, "How do we give it new life?" "What is its purpose now?" and "How will we go forward as a community?" We are talking about: what has the community meant to us in the past, what does it mean to us now and what do we see as its the future.