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## Heaven and Earth

*The story behind the open hearts and open minds at Holy Wisdom Monastery*

BY MATT GEIGER

*Times-Tribune*

"I have been fed by all sorts of spiritualities," reflects Sister Mary David Walgenbach. "I see a common thread in all of them, and I think it makes life richer."

Walgenbach has been a member of the Order of Saint Benedict for more than half a century. She follows the rules laid out by Benedict, who most view as the founder of Catholic monasticism.

But she has also done chores alongside Lutherans, prayed with Buddhists, and found fertile, common spiritual ground with people from all walks of life. She has done it all here, at Holy Wisdom Monastery.

Founded by nuns as a school in 1953, Holy Wisdom has grown into something far more ambitious than that. Today, with an estimated 10,000 visitors annually, this sacred ground is part prairie restoration, part garden,

part temple, and, above all, a place where people of all faiths find quiet contemplation, away from the bustle and clatter of the modern world. A place where people can exist between banal thoughts - where the inner light that people of faith look to find glimmers a little brighter, far away from the hubbub of egoistic society and its ubiquitous glowing screens and petty arguments.

It is both deeply Catholic and profoundly ecumenical, meaning it embraces many different churches but stays connected to its ancient roots.

"We prayed their prayers, and they prayed ours," Walgenbach says of the many different faithful with whom the Sisters of Saint Benedict have spent time there. "We did dishes together. We played ball. We got to know each other. That's what formed our hearts in the Ecumenical tradition."



*Times-Tribune photo by Matt Geiger*

"Women started becoming lawyers, writing books, getting into some trouble," laughs Sister Mary David Walgenbach when she reflects on the changing role of Catholic women in the last 50 years. Above, she looks out over the restored prairie at Holy Wisdom Monastery.

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As she sits in a quiet room and talks about her love for the Earth and her desire to better know God, she says they are expecting a group of Buddhist monks that very evening. They will stay together, sharing the many things they have in common, and looking inward. Hopefully, they will leave knowing God a little better. And each other.

"We love them," she says simply. "And they love us."

In the golden, windswept fields outside, a group of volunteers are busy collecting native prairie seeds, which the Sisters are sharing with public parks across Dane County. In the spring, those flowers and grasses will sprout and rise toward the sky; an apt metaphor for their theology if ever one existed.

When Walgenbach reflects on the story of this singular religious center, the central theme is ongoing evolution. When you think of religious orders from the early Middle Ages, flexibility and change might not be the first things that spring to mind. But for Walgenbach and the other Sisters at Holy Wisdom, evolution is natural and healthy - as long as your roots are strong enough to handle it, that is.

"To be able to change often, one has to have a stability of the heart," she explains.

Walgenbach arrived at Holy Wisdom in 1958, a few years after a group of nuns first purchased a parcel of land and established a school there.

She studied science before she came to theology, and she was on her way to becoming a nurse when she found her true calling. But always, she carried with her a love of both Heaven and Earth.

"I grew up on a farm in Iowa," she says, "with that agrarian nature, and the contemplative that comes with it."

Like everything else in the modern world, farming has change a lot since then. What used to be a life spent breathing fresh air and working the rich soil until your fingernails were caked with black dirt, has turned into one in which many farmers inhale dangerous pesticides and fiddle with digital de-

vices while they ride in massive machines. It's a lot like the rest of society that way.

"[Farming] has changed a lot," Walgenbach says. "It has gotten very noisy. There is a lot of machinery. Cows are no longer in the pasture."

It seems that's the way of the modern world, with its many distractions from the divine. And that's *been* the way of the modern world even back in the middle ages, when religious men and women retreated from society to form holy communities where, amidst the silence, they hoped to better hear God speaking through the world around them.

Regardless of whether the year is 517, 2017 or 3017, people will always seek out solitude and contemplation, regardless of the name of their church or religion.

"I've always liked learning about who God is in our lives," Walgenbach explains.

Proofs for the existence of God - a trial in patience and attention span for all who study theology - simply "wasn't very interesting" for Walgenbach when she began her studies. She wanted to get past that and think about *who God is*.

"It's the talk of that that feeds the soul," she muses. "That keeps us in this place. The seasons of the year - death in the

fall, birth in the spring again - that wonderful cycle. Especially as one gets older, it makes things interesting."

Walgenbach began her spiritual journey prior to the Second Vatican Council, often referred to as "Vatican II." Until then, and to some extent even after, many in the church maintained that there was no need for women to interpret scripture or earn advanced degrees in theology. But Vatican II marked a significant turning point for the Catholic Church. It stressed both a push into the future (or at least, the present), while simultaneously instructing the faithful to return to scripture and the founders of their respective orders. In Walgenbach's case, that meant Saint Benedict.

By looking back to him in the middle of the 20th Century, the Sisters at Holy Wisdom found a way to blaze a trail into the future. When they turned their attention to their roots, their spiritual lives blossomed in new, sometimes radical and unexpected ways.

"There was an eagerness for Catholics and Protestants to talk ... Gradually, gradually, things started to change from the inside," she recalls. "That's always the way, with a journey."

"We started to say that perhaps not all our resources should go into schools," she

says. "We tried to think, 'How do we take our mission and our rule and apply it to the world today?' Women started becoming lawyers, writing books, getting into some trouble."

The school closed in 1966. In time, the Sisters began praying alongside men and women from other faiths, becoming an increasingly open religious society.

"There was just this explosion of dialogue connecting with other faiths," Walgenbach says.

Pluralism, feminism, and protests against the war in Vietnam all combined to create a singular time for many American Christians. Holy Wisdom was no exception.

"It was an exciting time," Walgenbach says. "Change continued to happen. People's toes got stepped on."

One eventual change is that Holy Wisdom Monastery is no longer under the official auspices of the local Catholic diocese, which is currently headed up by Bishop Robert C. Morlino, a more conservative leader than some of his predecessors. Yet the Sisters say amid these myriad changes, faith at the center of Holy Wisdom has remained the same, like the earth beneath the changing sky as the seasons come, go, and come again, to paraphrase *Ecclesi-*

*astes*. They still pray the Liturgy of Hours, they still sit in contemplative silence, they still follow the teachings of Saint Benedict. They still work. They still pray. They still see the divine manifested in the rustling prairie grass and in their fellow humankind.

"Work and prayer - that's our motto," she says. "There is a strong kernel of monasticism at the core of the Benedictine women. Granted, things don't look like they did in the 16th Century."

"Times have changed. Things are much more complicated now," she continues. "The Church has changed ... [but] I still follow Catholic spirituality even though we're no longer under Canon law."

"For Benedictines, you come to a place and you put down roots," she adds. "You connect to that place." That place is here. Today, Holy Wisdom Monastery is a sprawling 150 acres, much of which is lush, native prairie, through which, on any given day, you might find a Buddhist monk or a Methodist writer strolling and contemplating the many beautiful cosmic mysteries of existence.

"The land," she adds, "always has something to offer."

While Middleton has transformed into a rapidly develop-

ing city in those years, Holy Wisdom has actually gone back in time, with the Sisters working tirelessly to restore much of it to its native ecology.

"We pray the psalms every day, and the psalms are so full of images of the earth," she explains.

They have more than 200 oblates (persons who are not monks or nuns but who are closely affiliated with a monastery). They hold a Sunday assembly attended by people of many faith traditions. Throughout the year, thousands of people of many different faiths come and go.

And when they go, they often take something new with them. Sometimes it's a more mindful perspective. Sometimes it's literally a bag of seeds to plant somewhere else.

*They are the Ordo Sancti Benedicti, if you want it to say it in Latin and sound really erudite. The Order of Saint Benedict (OSB) is a Catholic religious order of independent monastic communities that observe the Rule of Saint Benedict.*