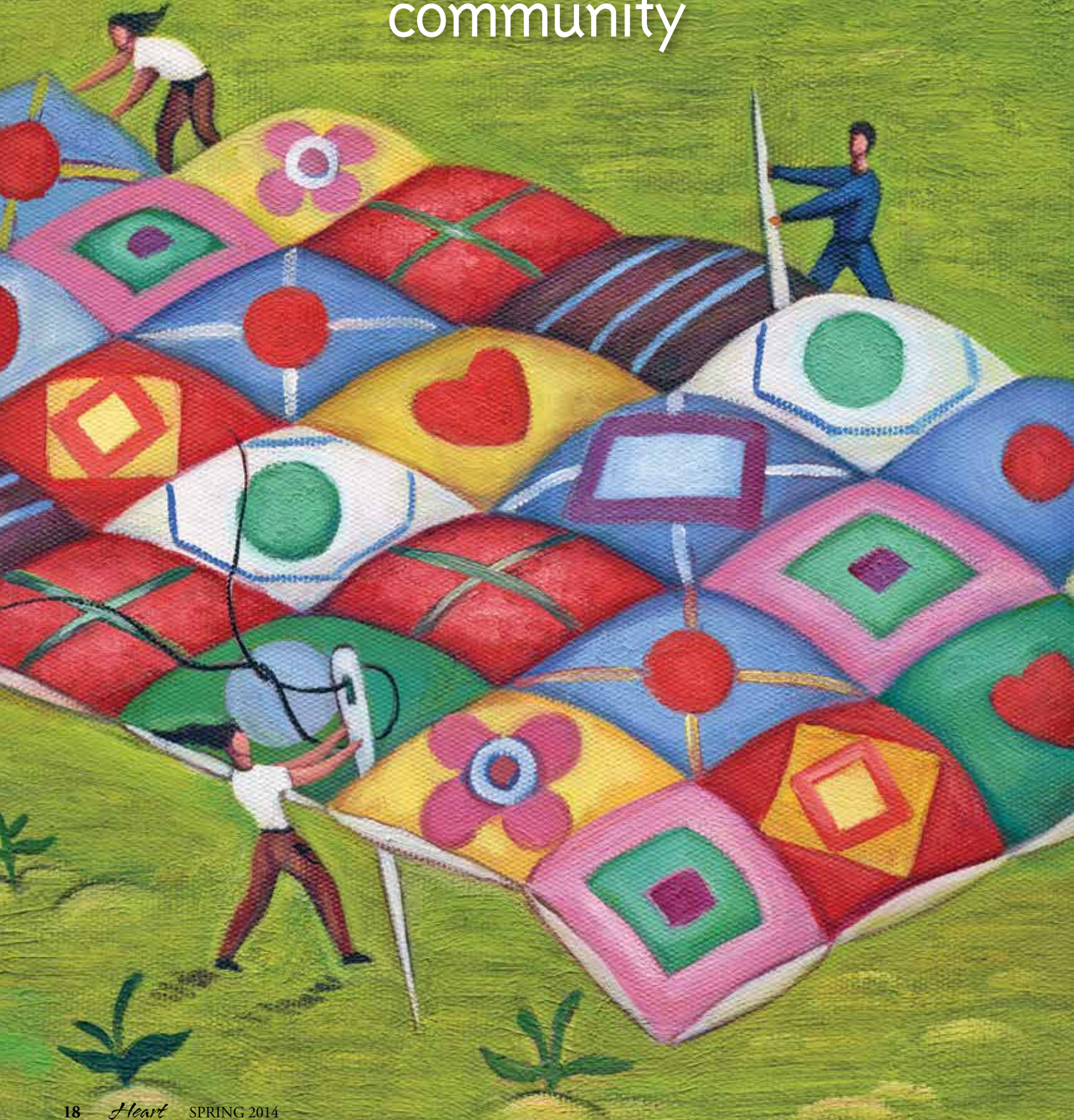


Our part in the broader community



This issue of *Heart* magazine explores several interpretations of the word “community,” all of which hold a place of importance in our lives. As apostolic women, Religious of the Sacred Heart are members of many communities beyond the Society. Here, four RSCJ reflect on the communities that are their ministries.

Living Wages, a learning community

By *Betsy Hartson, RSCJ*

My ministry, Living Wages, is a community of adult learners, seekers, neighbors, volunteers, staff and graduates.

In 1998, three colleagues and I started what has become two Living Wages Adult Education Centers in Washington, DC, home of the highest rate of functional illiteracy in the United States. For fifteen years we have assisted hundreds of low-income adults to obtain a high school diploma. These 400 graduates and their families are the building blocks of our community. We are on a journey together. They, and we, know that education is the only sure means of reaching the goals of opportunity and equality.

We draw from popular education models built on the idea that empowerment begins from within, and that marginalized people need to develop a new awareness of themselves as people, in a community context, who can individually and collectively set and achieve goals. This consciousness-raising process links the personal with the political and draws heavily upon culture, spirituality and small-group support as sources of sustenance.

We learn from one another and we support one another in the learning process. Members of our community aspire to be better parents, better workers and better citizens. At Living Wages, individuals who have struggled with school in the past are able to receive a high school diploma, apply for jobs and work toward a living wage.

Living Wages is a peaceful place where together we learn, tutor and assess, celebrate, work, eat, cook, clean, pick vegetables, sit on the deck and chat, feed the cats and celebrate successes, families, and the wonders of creation. It can best be thought of as a circle of friends, with various roles and responsibilities but with genuine equality. When graduates return, as they often do, to report on their accomplishments or to ask for further educational help, I know that I am part of a strong and vibrant community of people who care about one another and who make a difference.

God has asked us “to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8); and St. Francis prayed, “Make me an instrument of your peace.” I try to live this in prayer, in informal sharing at work, in openness to other faiths, connecting with people at the two churches where we are located, and with my “begging bowl” at home on my prayer table. I learned the concept of the begging bowl from Anne-Marie Conn, RSCJ, at a retreat years ago. The begging bowl is a bowl where I place all of the issues that are so overwhelming in our neighborhood and those who have asked for prayers for their sick children and relatives, incarcerated family members, those struggling for jobs and many more. The begging bowl is trusting in the relationship that God is with me. I put situations and people between God and me. God gives me a new light to see people and the present situation in a different way.

Building community in the West Grove

By *Rosemary Bearss, RSCJ*

The Barnyard Community Center in West Coconut Grove, Florida, like the community it serves, has come a long way since the building was constructed in 1926. Originally built to house mules and the equipment they pulled, this “barn” is now



Betsy Hartson, RSCJ, with her administrator's hat on at Living Wages in Washington, DC, where she also tutors, gardens and counsels.

These 400 graduates and their families are the building blocks of our community. We are on a journey together.

Rosemary Bearss, RSCJ, with two of the neighborhood children who come to the Barnyard for after school enrichment.



Maureen Chicoine, RSCJ, has served as parish administrator in several churches in the San Bernardino Diocese.

home to after-school and summer programs for the young people of this traditionally black and low-income neighborhood. If this building could talk, it would tell you the path has not always been easy. It has not always been fair. But this is a building of and for its community, and that's what makes it work.

To understand the Barnyard, you have to know about Elizabeth Virrick. Back in 1948, Mrs. Virrick attended a gathering to learn about the black community in the West Grove. She was horrified by what she learned: these families – most of whom were immigrants brought to Miami as maids and laborers – were living in tiny rundown shacks without indoor plumbing, on unpaved streets. Elizabeth made their living conditions her crusade. She engaged her friends to go to the Farmers Market and begin a food co-op for the neighborhood. She worked with residents to learn how to abide by laws they found difficult to understand. She established Coconut Groves Cares, Inc. She began building community in the West Grove.

The community life that began in 1948 has continued for six decades, and each generation of families has held the memories of those early days. New people arrived, and some had to leave because of gentrification, but those families who held the stories in their hearts continued to tell them, reinforcing the sense of community.

We moved into this building in 1982, when the children of the community made it clear they wanted – needed – a safe place to be after school. We have 122 children in our after school program and about 150 in our summer camp. Their families are struggling to pay for food and health insurance, but thanks to our community, the children can come here to learn to play the violin or cello, all kinds of arts, like drama or fabric design and so many other activities. Now, as before, the people of West Grove come to us when they need help to understand the law, but they also come to us to help them understand their children. And they know that we will help them.

We are always stretched for funds, but we get by with the help of our community. Agencies provide materials and personnel. The funding for our computer lab came from the local grocery store. Donors and friends are another kind of community of people who really want to help. They want our insights and they turn to us to help them figure out how they can help. Together we are creating the solutions to the challenges facing low income families in the West Grove.

Building community in a parish

By Maureen Chicoine, RSCJ

After years as a parish leader entrusted with the care of a parish by a local diocesan bishop, I have often reflected on “community.” A parish most often experiences community (or not) within the weekly Eucharist. That requires the best liturgy for which the parish has resources. It also requires a strong sense of hospitality and welcoming the stranger. To do this, parishes need subgroups of committed members: a liturgy committee, greeters, musicians and choirs, liturgical ministers and skilled presiders. Supporting the living out of the Eucharist also requires people to promote catechesis and initiation, ongoing formation and social action ministries for justice. Depending on parish composition, ministries to ethnic groups or groups dealing with issues such as bereavement, youth/young adults, divorced, and others could also be needed.

The biggest challenge for me as a parish administrator was to help these groups not only perform their tasks but to deal with community building and relationships among the ministers themselves. Discord and dissent within these subgroups damage and can destroy the effect of their ministries to the larger parish. Personality conflicts, unhealthy group dynamics and rivalries diminish the effectiveness of the most well-intentioned service.

I often turned to the letters of Paul, especially Galatians, Philippians and 1 and 2 Corinthians. It was somewhat consoling to realize that the conflict of theologies and ecclesiology, the clash of personalities and possessiveness are as old as the Christian community. I would wonder if Paul ever got the two rival women leaders in Philippi to settle their differences. Did the controversy over meat sacrificed to idols continue after his letter was read? We know from later writing that the ethnic and religious conflict between Christians of Jewish origin and those of Gentile origin was resolved eventually but only long after Paul's death.

As an RSCJ, I looked at this building up of community within the larger parish community as an extension of our charism to be women who create communion (*Constitutions* §6) while recognizing that it would be a constant source of asceticism for me, a Paschal opportunity to grow in that union with the Heart of Christ.

Thensted Center, a vital part of the Grand Coteau community

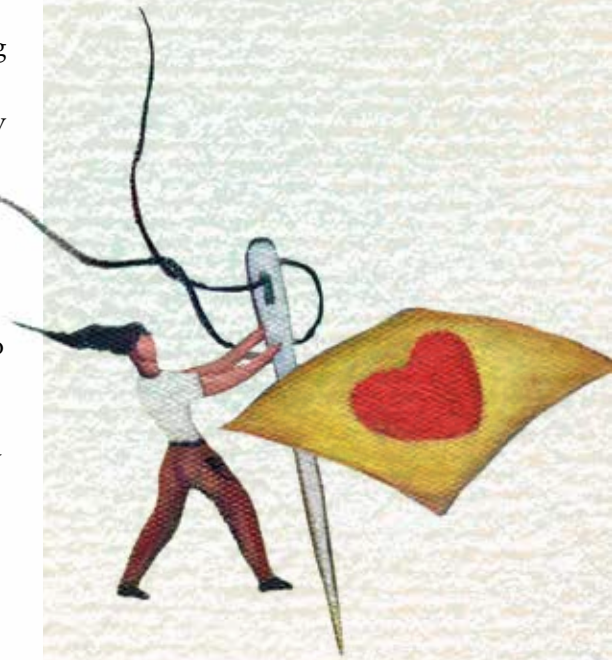
By Elizabeth Renard, RSCJ

Since its founding in 1982 by Margaret Hoffman, RSCJ, the Thensted Center in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, has always had a least one Religious of the Sacred Heart on staff. Today, that commitment falls to me.

There is a high level of unemployment in the Grand Coteau area, due in part to our relative isolation. Low incomes are exacerbated by a lack of public transportation and high rates of high school drop-out, teen pregnancy and single parent households. Our mission at Thensted Center is to educate people of all ages, races and religions to help them attain a more independent and stable standard of living. The Center offers an emergency food pantry and thrift store, as well as tutoring, summer enrichment, counseling and job skills training.

I work primarily with elderly residents of Grand Coteau and the neighboring town of Sunset. A group of thirty-five to forty senior citizens gathers twice a month at Thensted for education, socialization and a hot meal. Since there is no other program for older folks in the area, this activity is well attended. I also make home visits to many seniors who are house-bound and/or bed-ridden and bring the Eucharist as requested. The Thensted Center is operated by our parish church, St. Charles Borromeo, a place of welcome and community. Sundays become an opportunity to respond to both happy and sad news with our friends and parish family.

The challenge for me is to be open to a different culture, to listen and to keep hoping even when change is slow or seems seldom to happen. Often I am put to shame when I see the simple, unshakable faith of these folks. Many of them may not know much about Jesus, but they know Jesus. To be the Heart of Christ for others and to show forth the love of God through education is what this ministry is all about. ❖



Betty Renard, RSCJ, (left) with Julia Richard, director of Thensted Center, which serves the poor in Grand Coteau.

Before you go...



Jan Dunn, RSCJ, has recently written *Faithful Friend: Ursula McAghon, RSCJ*, about her friend and former director of probation.

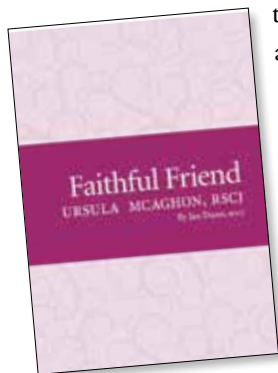
Ursula McAghon, RSCJ, (1916-2000) served for many years as director of “probation,” the period of preparation for final vows in the international Society of the Sacred Heart. She held this office during a time of turmoil and change in the Church and in the Society (1975-82).

She also served as a superior and spiritual director and helped many people to a deeper love of God. “She made many contributions to the Society, and her life needed to be written!” Sister Dunn said.

Sister Dunn did extensive research with family and the many religious that Sister McAghon

guided and influenced, and the book conveys an accurate picture of this much-loved religious.

Copies may be ordered for \$20 from the provincial office by contacting Dot Schmerbauch (dschmerbauch@rscj.org or 314-652-1500).



Cor Unum 2

From the water rises,
spiraling, pierced,
a humble bold calling
that is now time real.

Real like listening is real;
real as sisters are real
who teach me by their lived truth
and allow me the privilege
of sharing truth with them as well.

Real like the heart is real—
is real and sacred like the Heart
where gloriously divine
and completely human meet.

And the call is this:

Do not be afraid.

Ever deeper,
ever onward,
not alone.

—Kimberly M. King, RSCJ

Prayer, community, ministry, internationality

The Society of the Sacred Heart is an international community of women living a life that is wholly contemplative and wholly apostolic. Through prayer and ministry we discover and reveal the love of the Heart of Jesus in our world.

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