

A ministry of love, understanding

By Phyllis Brill, Communications Director, Atlantic-Midwest Province

A School Sister of Notre Dame for 50 years, **S.**

Rose Mary Dougherty has been a teacher in countless settings. She has taught grade school and high school, conducted lectures, and led retreats from Baltimore, Md., to South Africa on topics related to spirituality. But through the many twists and turns of her ministry, she has always been a student.

Even in the role of teacher, she is always learning. And in her current ministry of hospice care, she said, "I am learning how to live from being with the dying."

Sister Rose Mary has been associated with the Shalem Institute for Contemplative Formation in Bethesda, Md., for more than 30 years, much of that time directing its spiritual guidance program. She has also taught at the Ecumenical Institute of Theology in Baltimore since 1993.

In the early 1990s, she wrote *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*, a book that explores the underlying spirituality of group spiritual direction and offers practical suggestions. It has been translated into at least two other languages.

In 2009, she published another book, *Discernment: a path to spiritual awakening*. In it, she stresses the need to remain open to learning and reveals that her teaching discernment at Shalem Institute was a lesson in itself.

"My students quickly became my teachers, as have all those I've accompanied in the process of spiritual direction and retreats," she said.

Today, she devotes most of her time to a program she began about three years ago, Companioning the



S. Rose Mary Dougherty

Dying: Opening Fully to Living. The yearlong class offers basic skills and contemplative practices for caregivers of the dying. It is co-directed by S. Amy Hoey, RSM, and is conducted in space donated by the Holy Cross Sisters in Kensington, Md.

"It's a wonderful mix of people," said Sister Rose Mary. "There's a Buddhist nun, a Dominican sister who worked in a medical clinic in Africa, nurses, social workers ... people across the spectrum of religious and companioning experience."

Participants attend a four-hour class once a

month where they share their experiences and gain support for their companioning outside the class. Midway through the program they participate in a two-day residential retreat. What Sister Rose Mary hopes her students learn is that no two people die in the same way and no two companioning situations are the same. The gift of simple presence is what is needed.

Sister Rose Mary's own experience in companioning the dying goes back many years to her volunteer work at a hospice in Baltimore in the late 1970s, when hospice care was still a relatively new concept in the United States. That experience gave her the courage to keep vigil with a friend from another congregation who was dying of cancer.

"This sister had always told me that she wanted me to be with her when she was dying and to sing 'Be Not Afraid,' Sister Rose Mary recalled. "So I was with her on the night the nurse had told me would probably be her last and after she had been unresponsive for some time. At about two in the morning, I began
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noticing her breathing changing, and I started to sing 'Be Not Afraid.' Suddenly, she shook herself awake, and she said, 'No, don't sing that yet!'"

The sister did die a couple of hours later, "but she did it on her own time, not mine," said Sister Rose Mary, chuckling at the memory of an early lesson learned. "The hardest part of teaching companioning the dying is convincing people that they don't have to have an agenda. They just have to be there."

Her sense of humor has helped Sister Rose Mary adopt a ministry that might be avoided or feared by many others. Her humor slips into her recollection of how she grew into what she is about today.

In 1972, while teaching high school in Annapolis, Md., she "felt a desperate need to come back in touch" with herself and chose to make a 30-day Ignatian retreat. Soon after that, she became part of a team of sisters from the former Baltimore Province to be trained to direct Ignatian retreats. And in 1976, after completing her master's in spiritual theology, she began an SSND Spiritual Center on the grounds of Villa Assumpta.

While providing retreats at the center, she discovered a program for spiritual directors at Shalem, the ecumenical institute where she would eventually spend so much of her ministry. She began to work there part-time. In 1985, after the province had closed its retreat center, she joined Shalem full-time and stayed until 2004. Today, as senior fellow for spiritual guidance, she continues to teach in some of its programs.

About 10 years ago, while spending her days at Shalem, Sister Rose Mary began volunteering a couple of evenings a week at Joseph's House, a facility in nearby Washington, D.C., that offers nursing and hospice care to men and women with AIDS. In time, she

began to immerse herself more in the mystery of death and dying, both as a volunteer and through formal study. Her work at Joseph's House helped her to secure a sabbatical grant in 2005 to attend a national program on companioning the dying.

Sister Rose Mary likes to recall one incident in particular that inspired her to start her companioning program. She was visiting a dying priest at a nursing facility where another, elderly priest, partially paralyzed and in a wheelchair, would often sit with her and the patient, his longtime friend.

The elderly priest would say very little. At one point after anointing the patient, the elderly priest told Sister Rose Mary that they had given the patient to God and that now they were just "waiting with him." After the younger man died, his friend said to Sister Rose Mary, "You know, I don't know what I'm supposed to do, what a priest should do. But I can be here, and maybe that's my final vocation."

"I was so inspired by him, watching the way that he was present," Sister Rose Mary recalled, "that I began to write an outline for a program for companioning the dying. I was thinking about it primarily for retired priests and religious," whose ministries later in life shift to prayer and presence. To her delight, the program has attracted a religious and vocational mix of students.

"Sometimes you don't have to know anything about the person you are companioning," she said. "You need to let go of your preconceptions and let them be the way they will. These are the kinds of things I learn by being with the dying. It carries over into the way you are with yourself and with other people. You can stop trying to change people and make the whole world right and just be with things the way they are." ■

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centered care in a setting that is geared toward their particular needs.

The plans for this facility have been in the works for several years, which deepened the connection between our sisters and staff members. We were extremely pleased to have an Open House at the new facility at the end of January, and we welcomed the first residents from both congregations a few weeks later.

In *You Are Sent*, C25, we read, "Through our ministry, we and those to whom we are sent are mutually enriched. We are enabled to grow in communion with

God and with one another and in acceptance of responsibility for the earth and its people. This mutual giving and receiving is itself a witness in our interdependent world."

And so, our efforts to collaborate as we daily live out our SSND mission cannot help but enrich us, stretch us and help bring about that oneness for which we are sent into the world.

*Debra M. Sciano, SSND
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