

Benedictines in Fort Smith sell nearly 10 acres of land

written by Maryanne Meyerriecks |



FORT SMITH — The sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery are selling a small portion of their 65 acres to Reliance Health Care to build a 140-bed nursing home. Sixteen of the rooms will be dedicated to sisters who need nursing home care.

The Benedictines announced Feb. 13 that they have entered into a contract with Reliance Health Care, owner of 29 nursing homes in Arkansas, to sell 9.75 acres of land on the southeastern quadrant.

The decision represents the first phase of a plan the sisters developed over the past five years on how to best use their facilities in the face of aging and declining membership. Although seven new sisters have joined the community since 2008 — five transfers from Our Lady of Peace Monastery in Columbia, Mo., and two novices — the community now has 42 members, and 22 are octogenarians and nonagenarians.

Caring for and maintaining close daily contact with the older sisters guided the community's decision. Currently, senior sisters are cared for in the monastery's third-floor infirmary. Some of the community's concerns included the difficulties of adapting their aging building to the sisters' needs, of providing specialized services and therapies, and in overseeing and maintaining an adequate staff.

The realization that the elderly and infirm sisters needed a different living arrangement brought the sisters to another realization — that their 90 year-old, six-story monastery, already underused, would be far too large for the 30 active sisters. Even with 42 sisters residing there, housing costs represented 17 percent of the 2013-14 monastery budget — a per-capita expense of \$8,360 per sister.

“Our plan has three phases,” prioress Sister Maria DeAngeli, OSB, told monastery employees at a Feb. 12 meeting. “Phase I, selling land to Reliance for the construction of a nursing home, has already begun. In Phase II, we will build a smaller monastery to meet our current needs, near the nursing home, with a pathway connecting the two to allow us to visit one another often. In Phase III, we will decide what to do with our current monastery.”

Sister Maria estimated the Reliance building would be completed in about two years, and that construction of the new monastery, to be financed from the proceeds of the land sale and a capital campaign, would begin after Phase I was well underway.

In 2003, the sisters, then numbering 86, composed a mission statement to reaffirm the faith and values that brought and kept them together through many years of challenging ministry. They recommitted themselves to daily prayer and seeking God together in community and pledged to “respond to the needs of the people of God in a spirit of hospitality, simplicity and reverence for all creation.”

The seeds of the sisters’ three-phase plan are contained in that mission statement. Their plan enables them to adequately respond to the elderly sisters’ needs. It alleviates the sisters’ burden of maintaining a very large, high-maintenance facility, allowing the active sisters to continue their ministry and outreach to the larger community. It reflects their commitment to simplicity and good stewardship of the earth’s resources.

The sisters will continue to lease the classroom section of their former academy building to Trinity Junior High School and will continue to offer hospitality and spirituality programs at their retreat center for the foreseeable future.

“As we prepare to step in faith into the future, we ask for your prayers and support,” Sister Maria said. “We are planning one step at a time as we begin a new phase in our rich history in God’s service.”

Read Sister Maria's Feb. 19 letter [here](#).