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Unconventional: In recent decades, U.S. nuns have entered many new fields of social service

By JoAnne Viviano, The Columbus Dispatch • Sunday May 13, 2012 8:40 a.m.

Sister Diane Kozlowski calls out to a few of the plump sheep at the Shepherd's Corner Farm and Ecology Center but gets no response. The animals continue to lie and graze in thick grass under a hot sun, ignoring her since she offers no broccoli or other treat.

Kozlowski, 59, a member of the Columbus-based Dominican Sisters of Peace, spends her days on the 160-acre working farm, which also serves as an ecology and spirituality center in northeastern Franklin County in Blacklick. The farm, she said, offers children and adults alike a chance to "be inspired by what God has given us."

Kozlowski's work is an example of how the roles of Roman Catholic nuns have expanded since the Vatican II modernization of the 1960s. Sisters have moved out of the traditional convents and schools and into federal courts, board rooms, TV production studios and myriad other places.

Now, an organization representing about 80 percent of U.S. nuns has come under fire in a Vatican assessment that says the group promotes "certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith."

That criticism diminishes a sense of hope in the church, said Sister Judy Kroeger, 64, an administrator at the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton.

"It is very hierarchical and authoritative, and that's diminishing," she said. "It's not inviting, and I believe Jesus invites us all to join around the table."

The report says the Leadership Conference of Women Religious has protested the Catholic Church's refusal to allow women priests, remained silent on abortion and euthanasia, and taken on an agenda that does not promote church teachings on family life and human sexuality. The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith appointed Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain to work with the conference of women religious in the wake of the report, which was released last month. It followed a four-year review led by Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, a member of the doctrinal group, which is made up of bishops, archbishops and cardinals. A spokeswoman for Blair said this month that he would not comment on the report.

The report drew immediate fire from many who support and work with nuns, but how much the daily work of sisters will be affected is yet to be seen. "Something will be worked out," said Sister Sharon Derivan of the Sisters of St. Francis in Sylvania, outside Toledo. "I'm not sure it will ever filter down to the daily lives of any individual sister."

The censure comes as the U.S. population of nuns is aging, and the number is declining — from 180,000 in 1965 to 56,000 in 2011, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

A 2009 report by the center found that 91 percent of the nuns were 60 or older, and that a majority of the rest were in their 50s.

One reason could be that the roles of laywomen have changed along with the roles of nuns, said Sister Judy Zielinski, 63, of the Sisters of St. Francis. Pre-Vatican II, a woman had to be a nun if she wanted to serve the church, she said.

But laywomen have since earned degrees in theology and divinity, are working in areas such as youth ministry and religious education, and are serving Communion or delivering readings at Mass.

Meanwhile, nuns have earned doctoral degrees in chemistry, microbiology and physics; taken on jobs as physicians, psychologists, university presi-



Sister Diane Kozlowski, center, leads parents and their children around the Shepherd's Corner Farm and Ecology Center in Blacklick. Photo by Jeff Hinckley, Dispatch

dents and hospital executives; and taken many other career paths. Zielinski is a television producer for NewGroup Media in South Bend, Ind.

"In the 1940s or '50s, you never would have found a sister working in television," Zielinski said. "There's been, I think, a huge creative blossoming for sisters since the '70s. There are many, many ways for women coming in to offer their gifts."

Derivan said she often encounters surprise when people learn she's a nun as well as a lawyer.

"What people need to know is that nuns are normal people," she said. "We just get up in the morning and try to live life with integrity ... the same way other people do." Although the venues have expanded beyond classrooms and hospitals, the emphasis on helping others hasn't changed.

Kozlowski's role as program and volunteer manager at the Shepherd's Corner farm is to promote spirituality and justice in an ecological setting, to adults and children of all denominations. "This mission is really based on a belief that God is made known to us in the natural world," she said. "We want people to just come and experience the gifts of being on the land." The wider network of religious roles can provide even more help to the people nuns serve, said Sisters Mary Ann Bremke, 76, and Helen Weber, 78, members of the Sisters of the Precious Blood and founders and co-directors of a free adult-literacy center in Dayton.

For example, one client with a first-grade reading level had lost his Social Security payments and was living on the streets. The sisters put him in touch with a nun at a homeless shelter and helped him find a lawyer to regain his benefits. Now, he's "as happy as a lark," Bremke said.

Derivan, 62, was once a teacher but now does legal research and writes proposed rulings in civil cases for a federal judge in Akron. Each case involves "real people," she pointed out.

"They want a fair, timely, just solution," she said. "For me, it's just a way of helping people solve problems."

Zielinski, the television producer, has worked on Christian-based documentaries as well as programs for the University of Notre Dame. She has been to eastern Europe, where she spoke with nuns who lived under Stalin and had been tortured or sent to Siberian work camps. A program to air on ABC in the fall will show how sisters recovered and rebuilt after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, she said.

"I think there's a lot of misunderstanding. I think many people don't have any idea the variety things sisters do today," said attorney Derivan. "... It's a good life, and it's a very fulfilling life."