



A liturgy for participants in the Oblate School's Ministry to Ministers Sabbatical Program.

COURTESY OF OBLATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Preparing Women for Ministry

OBLATE SCHOOL'S SOPHIA COMMUNITY PROGRAM

As the number of Catholic priests in the United States continues to decline, women are assuming roles as pastoral associates or administrators, positions once held exclusively by ordained men. These duties demand deep theological knowledge and high-level pastoral training. But acquiring this preparation can be difficult for women who are juggling other responsibilities, live far from institutions of Catholic education and have limited financial resources.

To address these obstacles, the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas, has developed an affordable academic-degree program in lay ministry designed to accommodate the family and job commitments of women already engaged in active ministry or aspiring to make that transition. The Oblate School's Sophia Community Program, begun in 2006 with Luce Foundation support, offers the opportunity to complete a Master of Arts in Ministry degree through a mix of on-campus and online courses during the fall and spring semesters and an intensive one-month summer session. Foundation support has enabled the program to keep tuition low, and the flexible schedule allows students to pursue their studies over three years while meeting other responsibilities. In addition, mentors offer guidance and encouragement throughout the program.

The summer session is particularly enriching. The rigorous academic courses make it possible to fulfill many core requirements, and a group retreat focused on spiritual formation builds enduring bonds. "We think it is important to provide an opportunity for community building, and we're seeing the creation of a network of wonderful professional women ministers who stay in touch after the program and provide mutual support," says Rita Velasquez, director of the Sophia Community Program.

Most of the women who have participated to date live in the San Antonio area or nearby towns. Many were already working in a parish or archdiocesan organization—as catechists or on special committees or as volunteers. The study program has allowed graduates to assume higher-level ministry and leadership roles—for example, running the adult faith-formation program and supervising liturgical celebrations.

"When you've already had some ministry experience and can add the knowledge that this program provides, the package is much more substantial," says Velasquez. "Pastors have told me what a difference it has made to have someone who is prepared in this way to do professional ministry, and many graduates have been offered full-time employment."

The Sophia Community's success has led the Oblate School of Theology—which has a long history of preparing students for priestly and lay ministries—to sustain the program now that Luce funding is winding down. Says Velasquez: "It was exciting to see the overwhelming support in the Oblate community to continue this work with women. It has now become a part of our institution and our mission." ■