

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Nuns & Nones brings together millennials and women religious

Katie Gordon

Note by Douglas Kindschi, director the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University:

We are most pleased to bring back to the Interfaith Insight weekly column Katie Gordon, who served as the Kaufman Institute program manager from 2013 to 2017. She joined us right after graduating from Alma College and then left to pursue a master of theological studies degree from Harvard Divinity School. Since her graduation from Harvard, Gordon has been a national organizer with Nuns & Nones, an alliance of spiritually diverse millennials and women religious. She finds her spiritual home with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, working with an online monastery, translating monastic wisdom for contemporary seekers.

"Surprise! We're soulmates."

This proclamation comes from Sister Janet Rozzano, a Sister of Mercy in Burlingame, California. Who are the soulmates she is referencing? Non-religious young seekers and activists. These three words come from a reflection on her experience with a gathering of Catholic sisters and spiritually diverse millennials, a group called Nuns & Nones.

Most people would not think that Catholic sisters, nuns, and the spiritually diverse young folks called "nones" — who don't identify with any specific religion — would be soulmates. Indeed, it is a surprise to us as much as anyone! But nearly four years into building these friendships across our religious and spiritual traditions, every conversation and gathering around the country has confirmed it.

There is a unique and powerful connection that exists not despite of, but because of our differences. We see from different perspectives, and that enriches the deep exchange that becomes possible. And yet, we are also two groups grounded in a shared worldview and ethic. Both the sisters and seekers are curious, committed and courageous in spiritual growth, communal searching and prophetic action.

I can confirm this spark — the "Surprise! We're soulmates" feeling — because I experienced it firsthand when my journey with this constellation called Nuns & Nones began in Grand Rapids. Over the years I was involved with interfaith organizing, my encounters and conversations with the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids always stood out. The sisters provided a different type of presence in any space where they showed up.

Once I started to investigate who these sisters were, I realized that the Dominicans showed up everywhere across the city. They started neighborhood centers, they worked with local environmental efforts, they were artists and theologians, and they even founded Aquinas College. The more I saw these women, the more I realized how they were quietly building up the foundation of this city, and the more I wanted to learn.

As I got to know these sisters, I felt like I was getting to know myself in new ways through these relationships. I knew there were more seekers like me — young people in the city who were spiritually curious, hungry for community and desiring a place that would challenge us to grow, question and examine the purpose of our lives.

Feeling a hunch that we might provide a fruitful space to hold one another's questions, I got excited thinking about getting these two groups together. Over a fateful coffee date, I planned with Sister Barbara Hansen to gather these sisters and seekers together. We sent out the invites, we gathered in a circle in the living room of their retreat center, and the rest is history.



Nuns & Nones is a community made up of women religious and young women seeking spiritual connection. Together, they form a bond to support each other as they pursue their mission to help others. Submitted, Katie Gordon



Katie Gordon served as the Kaufman Interfaith Institute program manager from 2013 to 2017 in Grand Rapids.

We were not alone in exploring this curiosity in community. Actually, there were national gatherings planned for groups of Nuns & Nones in cities across the United States at around the same time our Grand Rapids group formed.

The timing was auspicious; a few of us from Grand Rapids joined a gathering in Kalamazoo hosted by the Sisters of St. Joseph, and when I moved to Boston later that summer of 2017 to attend Harvard Divinity School, my path seemed to have been laid out before me. I continued to help organize these gatherings, I met with sisters in communities across the country, and in my two-year program at Harvard Divinity School, my "ministry" was Nuns & Nones. Each person I spoke to about our experimental gatherings told me the same thing: We were on to something special.

Fast forward three years to now, and Nuns & Nones went from an idea to an organization. The heartbeat of our collaboration is sacred relationship, by which we mean a mutuality that inspires loving transformation. This heartbeat gives life to our mission: to create committed communities of care and contemplation that incite courageous action.

Somewhere in the last few years of building this collaboration between unlikely allies, we realized that what started as bridging two distinct groups evolved into a unique community in and of itself.

Our mission statement embodies what has emerged for our collective: Committed community means we are in it for the long haul; care and contemplation is the presence to self, spirit and to one another; courageous

action is the call of responding to our times. It is the combination of these three elements — committed community, care and contemplation, and courageous action — that feeds one another and makes the other possible. It is only through the container of committed community that we can practice and enact care, contemplation and courageous action.

Our world, our nation, our communities are no doubt in need of care, contemplation and courageous action. These times of pandemic and protests, threats to democracy and human life, have worn deeply on all of us. The issues we face are so entangled and complex that it can feel challenging to imagine what we as individuals might do to make a difference. We do not have the answers. But as a community, we do have a question that guides our discernment in how we practice care, contemplation and courageous action in our times. That question is: What is the next right loving action?

Catholic sisters have been living this question since the beginning of religious life. Responding to the signs of the times and the needs in the community around them, they have individually and collectively exercised this muscle of responsive listening. The millennial seekers in our collaboration have the fire and passion to keep asking this question in new ways, pushing the boundaries of what feels possible. This is what makes us soulmates: meeting at a crossroads between our traditions and generations, rooted in our shared ways of being, we connect our unique ways of seeing to imagine more beautiful futures.

I encourage you to seek out your own unlikely soulmates: Whom might you find as imaginative co-creators? Which sacred relationships might enable you to live into the deeper visions of our times? For a world in desperate need, how might you answer the question: What is your next right loving action?

interfaith@gvsu.edu

There is a unique and powerful connection that exists not despite of, but because of our differences. We see from different perspectives, and that enriches the deep exchange that becomes possible.