

### **Like nun other**

#### ***Mercy sister breaks mold, brings Catholicism to unlikely venue***

by KATIE MOORE

staff writer

WINSTON-SALEM — As the assistant chaplain at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, Mercy Sister Larretta Rivera-Williams serves as an ambassador for the Catholic faith — although that’s not technically in her job description.

As a Catholic working predominately with Protestants, she regularly finds herself in contact with people who have never been around a Catholic nun.

Her positions as assistant chaplain and as a pastoral resident in the School of Divinity allow her to represent Catholicism in an ecumenical environment, where she has plenty of opportunities to engage in theological discussions with students and faculty.

“What brings me light and joy is being in dialogue with Divinity School students on theological issues,” she said.

“She makes Catholicism user friendly,” said Ginny Ireland, director of admissions and student services for the Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

“She is able to communicate the faith across denominational and cultural lines,” Ireland said.

Catholicism is actually the largest denomination represented among undergraduate students on the WFU campus, according to Sister Rivera-Williams.

There are approximately 100 to 150 students who attend weekly Catholic campus ministry meetings.

However, within the School of Divinity, the religious representation is predominantly Baptist, followed by Methodist and Episcopalian. Within that realm, Sister Rivera-Williams is definitely the exception.

However, as the only African American sister in the state of North Carolina, she is used to being somewhat of a novelty.

### **Intrinsic yearning**

Sister Rivera-Williams celebrated her jubilee anniversary as a Sister of Mercy, during a Mass at St. Gabriel Church in Charlotte in 2008.

She believes her calling to religious life was intrinsic, dating back to the time “when I was being formed in my mother’s womb,” she said.

A North Carolina native, Sister Rivera-Williams was born in Winston-Salem, where she attended Catholic school as a child.

She remembers playing church with her friends in the neighborhood when she was 5 years old.

“There was something in me way back then that was calling me to church ministry,” said Sister Rivera-Williams.

“When I look back I can really see God’s finger on all of that,” she said.

In middle school, she lived across the street from the Franciscan sisters who taught at her school, St. Benedict the Moor School, in Winston-Salem.

“There was something really mysterious about them,” she said. “I was always curious.”

When she was in seventh grade, there was one sister who used to play basketball and football with the students

That was when her perception of women religious began to change. That was when she realized they were human.

When she attended Bishop McGuinness High School in Winston-Salem (now in Kernersville), she worked in the school office and got to know the Sisters of St. Joseph, who ran the school at the time.

During her junior year, one of the sisters asked if she had ever considered a vocation to religious life.

At that point, she still had never seen a black sister.

“I didn’t think it was something I could do,” she said.

After high school, she attended Sacred Heart College in Belmont. It was there that she met Mercy Sister Pauline Clifford.

“Everyone went to her room on Saturday mornings to eat cereal and watch cartoons,” said Sister Rivera-Williams. “She seemed so alive, so real.”

“That was the first real experience I had with a Sister of Mercy,” she said.

In terms of role models, she said that there wasn’t one particular sister that had an influence on her.

However, she does have a deep appreciation for the role of women religious in the history of the church in North Carolina.

“A lot of the workings in the church would not have matured nor manifested had it not been for the sisters,” she said.

Eight years after she graduated from college, Sister Rivera-Williams entered the convent of the Sisters of Mercy.

Now, almost 26 years later, she feels confident in her decision to pursue her calling to religious life.

“There is always something in everyday that makes me grateful for what I’m doing,” she said.

### **Education and ecumenism**

This year marks Sister Rivera-Williams’ seventh year on the WFU campus.

However, she’s been an educator for much of her time as a Sister of Mercy.

She taught religion at her alma mater, Bishop McGuiness High School, from 1980-1982 and at Charlotte Catholic High School in Charlotte from 1986 to 1996.

In 1995, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), which resulted in her having to step down from her teaching position.

“I no longer had the energy to move around,” she said.

It was at that point that she asked to come home to Winston-Salem.

She returned to her home parish, St. Benedict the Moor Church, where she served as a pastoral associate.

“I was the first Sister of Mercy to come to the Winston-Salem area,” said Sister Rivera-Williams.

While she was working at the church, she began taking a course in clinical pastoral education.

As part of her certification, she served as the weekend volunteer chaplain at Wake Forest Baptist Medical.

With her MS in remission, she began teaching a course on the art of ministry at the WFU School of Divinity.

From there, she took a position as a pastoral resident in the School of Divinity, where she served as “a liaison between students and faculty.”

Then three years ago, she took the position as assistant chaplain of the university.

She said she likes this position because it has provided her with “access and availability to the whole campus,” where as before, with her pastoral residency, she was limited to working with the 100 students in the School of Divinity.

As assistant chaplain, she provides spiritual direction and counseling, or what she likes to refer to as “compassionate listening.”

“She has a great sense of humor and she is a great listener,” said Anne Jones, a first-year Divinity School student. “We all come here and dump our worries on her and we leave laughing.”

“She has been a true friend and a good mentor,” said Reggie Mathis, a third-year Divinity School student. “The space she creates with her presence is a wonderful respite,” like “a breath of fresh air.”

### **Powerful presence**

There isn't anything typical about Sister Rivera-Williams.

“She breaks every stereotype of a Catholic sister,” said WFU's Ireland.

“To witness and to live out the Gospel values, which I think were modeled and articulated by what we can grasp from Scripture,” that is the role of women religious in the church today, she said.

“There is no wrong way, there is no right way,” she said, but “I'm constantly striving and hoping that we're doing it God's way.”

In terms of her role at WFU, she said, “I feel that my being here has given people a whole different appreciation for the Catholic Church.”

In that respect, her presence alone is one of the biggest parts of her ministry.

“You can't change or make an impression on anyone if you leave or walk out,” she said.

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