



## Moved by the Spirit

*"...impelled by the word of God to listen and respond to the issues of our times...we will be radical signs of God's love and compassion..."*

**-From Benet Hill Monastery's Vision Statement**

The women of Benet Hill Monastery wrote their vision statement knowing full well the implications of what it means to listen and respond to the issues of our times. Over their forty-five years as a faith community, they have seen many changes in the Church and in American culture which have greatly impacted their lives and ministry. These changes have challenged them to ask the deeper questions of their faith and of their identity as a women's Benedictine community. *"To start an academy...and to build a religious community in Post-Vatican times were no small responsibilities."* writes Sister Alice Marie Hays in her book recounting the first ten years of Benet Hill's history. The same could be said of Benet Hill's decision to sell their monastery and school property on Chelton Road in Colorado Springs, Colorado and build a new monastery and ministry center in the Black Forest, just seventeen miles from the original location. Moving a monastery is no small responsibility especially in times of world-wide economic instability, Their decision to move was not based on a single discernment but rather is the result of careful and often times painful discernments over the span of Benet Hill's existence. This brief essay will trace some of the more significant moments in Benet Hill's history leading to the discernment to move the monastery.

### Foundations

Benedictine women from Mt. St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas had been ministering as teachers in both public and Catholic schools in Southern Colorado since 1914. Travel was expensive and sisters were unable to go home to "the Mount" for several years at a time. In the summer of 1959 the sisters of Mt. St. Scholastica held a community chapter meeting discerning the creation of a new foundation and girl's academy in Colorado. The

community purchased a twenty-three acre piece of property in the Austin Bluffs area of Colorado Springs in 1960.

On the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, 1963, Abbot Thomas Hartman presented Sister Liguori Sullivan with a mission cross and a copy of the Rule of St. Benedict as she and seventy sisters left for Colorado. Benet Hill became an independent priory June 14, 1965 with seventy-seven charter members from Mt. St. Scholastica transferring their vow of stability to the new foundation. The new Benet Hill community elected Sister Liguori Sullivan prioress at their first community chapter.

Among the many practical concerns of the new community, a subject not many wish to think about concerned Mother Liguori, where to bury community members when they die. She began looking for suitable options. In 1966, the sisters purchased five acres of land in the Black Forest area of Colorado Springs and applied for rezoning of the property to permit a cemetery. Two additional sections of property were purchased later that same year. In 1993 another five acres were purchased and a final ten acres in 2003. All the land is contiguous to the original purchase coming to a total of forty-four acres.

### Changes

The first Benedictine women, Benedictine Riepp and two of her sisters came to the United States in 1852 to minister to the educational needs of the children of German immigrants. Mt. St. Scholastica continued that tradition, teaching poor, mostly Hispanic children in Colorado. With the new foundation, the majority of the sisters continued teaching in the Colorado missions that had been staffed by Mt. St. Scholastica. At the monastery, the sisters opened Benet Hill Academy, a college preparation school for girls, Benet Hill Academy

opened in 1963 becoming a much loved ministry. Over the next twenty years, changes in the Church and in American culture would challenge the new community to rethink its identity as a teaching community.

The Second Vatican council brought about many changes in the Church during the 1960s and 70s. Sister Alice Marie notes, *“the summer [of 1966] brought an urgent appeal for religious to study the documents of Vatican II and it brought many questions and fears”*. Perfectae Caritatis by Pope Paul VI encouraged religious, *“for adoption and renewal of religious life... return to the sources of Christian life [the gospels] and to the original spirit of the institutes [their founders’ spirit]”*. The women of Benet Hill realized wearing the habit and many of their customs were not part of the spirit of their founder. St. Benedict. They began to question what it means to be a Benedictine community in a rapidly changing world. Sister Alice Marie says *“To build a faith community according to Benedict is the whole purpose of the Colorado venture.”*

The 1960s and 70s also brought great changes in secular society. Civic minded people worked to secure civil rights for Black Americans, to end military involvement in Vietnam and to assure women equal rights with men. Questions about standards in public education and inequality between wealthy and poor districts came to the fore of public consciousness. As a result of improvements in public education, Catholic schools saw a sharp decline in enrollment. In 1971, twenty-two Benet Hill sisters left their teaching positions. While financially devastating, the situation challenged the community to consider other options for ministry. More than seeking position which would generate income, the sisters began looking at the changing needs of society. Sisters were sent to school for further education allowing them to take positions as nurses, counselors, religious education directors and with the diocese in liturgy. Eventually, the community had to face an even more difficult situation.

Benet Hill Academy began to suffer financially. Costs to staff and run the academy had grown exponentially. It became painfully clear in the fall of 1981 that the school would need to be

closed. The community’s very identity was enmeshed with Benet Hill Academy. The sisters were asked to pray for the guidance of the Spirit while preparing for chapter discernment. Benet Hill Academy closed in the spring of 1982.

### **Creative Ministry**

With the closure of Benet Hill Academy, the community needed to refocus its energies. What would best serve the needs of the people in the local area? They began ministries in adult education including a spiritual direction certification program, Scripture study, Centering Prayer and classes in catechetics and liturgy. Leasing portions of the building to a variety of schools and religious organizations for education and worship generated income. Leasing also formed long lasting relationships with the Jewish and Protestant communities. Some sisters continued to minister in local Catholic schools as well as ministering in the San Luis Valley, Pueblo and parts of northern Colorado. In 1980 the community opened the Benet Pines Retreat Center on their property in Black Forest. Sisters offered hospitality and spiritual direction for the retreatants.



### **A Time to Trust**

*“But community was not just a subject for beginners”* Sister Alice Marie wrote in 1975 while reflecting on changes in the formation process. By 1998, Sister Alice Marie’s words must have seemed prophetic for this now mature community.

Although, numerous women entered the formation process, it had been fourteen years since a woman made final monastic profession. The realities of an aging community and aging buildings, both caring significant financial responsibilities, presented unique challenges.

Prioress, Sister Anne Stedman and the Monastic Council commissioned the *Benedictine Sisters Space Utilization Study* (SUSA) in 1998 which culminated in February of 2000. The study included site profiles for Benet Hill Retreat Center to assess the ways each site was used, who was using it, the financial implications of the way things were done and to make recommendations for the future. The results of the study were presented at the Community Meeting in February of 2000. The study showed something must be done within five years at the Chelton Road location. Besides major renovations to the building, questions of ministry and income needed serious consideration. One option was to sell the property.

If they were to sell, would they sell all of the property or parts? The study also evaluated the preferences of the sisters. Most of the sisters wanted to remain on Chelton Road. Sister Mary Jane Vigil explains, *“There were questions about the meaning of the vow of stability. Did it mean stability of place? For some it did. For others, stability meant stay with the community.”* There was deep pain and struggle within the community. Making decisions about Benet Pines did not carry the same urgency. Bill Beard’s evaluation showed Benet Pines held great potential for development. What sort of development, needed to be determined. Sister Rose Ann Barmann, prioress by the end of the study, asked the community could they *“affirm the implications of the SUSA study.”* Affirmation was unanimous.

The community had to make immediate decisions on some issues while grappling with difficult long term discernments for the future. Options like leasing to a charter school, becoming an elderly care facility or creating a catering business were immediate considerations for ministry and generating income. They decided to lease to a charter school and continue the existing ministries while they discerned their future. Over the next year the community entered into an intensive process of discernment. At the chapter meeting of June 2, 2001, the community decided to place the Chelton Road property on the market. Marketing the property was not a decision to sell but rather a step toward further discernment. Dividing the property into two parts, the school

building, gym and tennis courts as one part and what realtors called the “L”, the portion of property with the sister’s residences and the chapel complex forming the second part, increased the possibility for making the sale. By August, the realtors told the community several groups were interested in buying the property. If they would sell, what options did they have for a new monastery? Task groups explored what would be needed to purchase undeveloped properties or to build at Benet Pines. Many sites were visited and reports given to the community.

Throughout their years of discernment, the sisters articulated and prayerfully revisited their *core values* of common prayer, community life and life-giving ministry/hospitality as those values that define them as Benedictine women. These values would now take on greater significance as they envisioned a new monastery and new monastery building.



Seeking God’s preference in life takes time. While exploring possibilities for a new home, the sisters continued to pray and listen to the Spirit. Finally on September 21, 2004, in a spirit of trust, the community held a chapter discerning to build at Benet Pines. Preparations for building the monastery and ministry center began. Financing the new building was a concern. Although, many prospective buyers looked at the property, it did not sell. The sisters decided to hold a capital campaign to help finance the building project.

During their yearly retreat in June of 2007, the community blessed the land at Benet Pines. The ceremony began with Sister Liguori handing the mission cross, given to her at Mt. St. Scholastica so many years ago, to the prioresses who had succeeded her in leading the community through the years saying *“Go to our new home and God bless you”*. The sisters began the blessing in the cemetery, Carrying the mission cross the peace banners, they blessed the grounds and the place where the monastery would stand. Ground breaking would not actually occur until November of 2007.



July of 2008 brought two significant events. On July 13<sup>th</sup>, Sister Mary Colleen Schwarz made her final monastic profession, the first woman to do so in twenty-four years. Then on July 31<sup>st</sup>, Colorado Springs

Charter Academy purchased the portion of the property with the school building. The "L" remained on the market until February, 2010, when the Charter Academy also purchased it. The delay, based on funding needs of the Charter Academy gave the community time to complete the new buildings of Benet Pines. They moved to the new monastery in June 2009.

*Our Lady of Peace Chapel* overflowed with family and friends gathered to celebrate and dedicate Benet Hill's new monastery and ministry center, October 11, 2009 Bishop Michael Sheridan presided with Sister Anne Stedman in prayer, Blessings and songs of praise.

After completing the dedication ceremony, Sister Anne invited Bill Beard, the architect of the new building to share the motivation behind the design of the monastery. He told participants, *"the shape of the building is representative of the spirituality of the sisters and their commitment to the values of Benedictine life, common table"*. Later, Beard expands his thoughts this way:

*"The building is designed with the two anchors of Benedictine life, common prayer and common table, the chapel and the dining room on each end of the structure. Between these two, the building is shaped in a curve, like a cupped hand or better an embrace. Everything in the monastery happens between the two anchors. The embrace reaches and to the warmth of the southern sun, the shape of the land and to all the elements of life, creating positive space."*

For an architect, creating positive space is a matter of form, for the sisters of Benet Hill, creating positive space is a way of life, It is in their commitment to seeking God together as a community that they witness to the love and compassion of God. With all the changes in the Church and the world, all the unknowns and all the challenges, clearly these women have become a faith community according to Benedict.

By Sister Ana Cloughly, OSB (April 2010)



Benet Hill Retreat Center  
at  
Benet Hill Monastery

3190 Benet Lane  
Colorado Springs, CO 80921  
719-633-0655

[www.benethillmonastery.org](http://www.benethillmonastery.org)