

Methodists in Oklahoma form lay monastic order

by [Meagan Ewton](#) in the [February 10, 2021](#) issue



Matt Scraper (left) stands with his father, Randy Scraper. (Photo courtesy of Matt Scraper)

For some, the term *monasticism* may bring up images of chanting monks or helpful nuns. For Matt Scraper, monasticism is an important part of his life and faith as an elder in the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church. Scraper leads the

Order of St. Patrick, an order for clergy and lay contemplatives.

“The fact that we’re not a political caucus within the church is one reason I think we’ve been able to develop some meaningful relationships within the church,” Scrapper said. “We’re just trying to create space for people who have a shared calling to live out that calling together, separately.”

The Order of St. Patrick launched in 2015, with an emphasis on secularly cloistered life—a phrase that essentially means living in the world in families, not in a monastery.

“Most monasteries or convents find their monastics withdrawing from the world and living together in a monastery, but St. Patrick took his monastic communities and they lived with people—not to convert, but to share the love of Christ with no expectation,” Scrapper said. “As a result, it was the most successful evangelistic ministry in Christian history.”

Judy Conner, a retired UMC pastor and the order’s spiritual director, learned about Celtic theological practices years before she learned about the Order of St. Patrick. The Celtic prayers and liturgy felt organic and life-giving to her, and she saw parallels between those practices and the order’s rule of life.

Conner works with those who have recently taken orders to prepare them to be *anam caras*, or soul friends, to new novitiates. Leading spiritual formation efforts is a call that Conner has felt since college. She said she feels compassion for pastors who have had their spirits broken in the course of their ministry.

“I believe that the Order of St. Patrick is the open door that God’s been preparing me for my whole life,” she said. “I’m able to do what God gave in my dream to me years ago. I’m working as spiritual director with the pastors and laypeople that are in the order, and it’s been phenomenal.”

Mark Polson, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Idabel, Oklahoma, and dean of the order’s novitiate experience, said monasticism has fascinated him for a long time, but because of his family and pastoral role, he didn’t think a monastic life was possible.

It wasn’t until the COVID-19 pandemic changed the world’s circumstances that he remembered reading about the Order of St. Patrick on Facebook.

“I was really looking for something to refocus, ground, refocus my spiritual journey, and it seemed like an appropriate time to do so, to learn more about it,” Polson said. “I was excited to see the unique structure of the OSP to be secularly cloistered, to be at home but still be under the monastic roof through the rule.”

As dean of novitiates, Polson creates and maintains community spaces for those trying to discern whether they’re being called into the monastic life, and if so, whether they’re being called to the Order of St. Patrick. He thinks the benefits of engaging faith in a monastic community can be tremendous—though he doesn’t believe the monastic life is for everyone.

Scraper agrees, referring to the different calls on people’s lives as “the diverse ways we are all called by the Holy Spirit.” He said that the order is open to helping people explore whether they have a monastic call on their life.

“I believe in my study of scripture that Christ loves unconditionally, proactively, and sacrificially,” Scraper said. “I believe we can spend a lifetime trying to do that, and it wouldn’t be a wasted life. That’s what I hope we can do.” —Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church