

God's Love Has a Toll-Free Number

She calls every Thursday night at the same time — her voice trembling with doubt and uncertainty. She asks, “I am saved — right? Someone told me I could lose my salvation forever. I don’t want to lose my salvation forever. Am I saved?”

“Yes, of course you are,” says the phone counselor. “God will always forgive you. You belong to Him.” After about 30 minutes or so, the counselor’s calm voice confirms the woman’s salvation, and the desperate caller is at peace. She says goodbye and seems satisfied — at least for the moment — but the phone counselor knows she will call again. She will be desperate and filled with anxiety. She will talk about visions of evil and her fears of damnation. She will tell the same story to the same phone counselor who will listen as though she never heard it before. She will provide the same comforting words in the same calm way for as long as the caller needs to hear them.

STORY BY
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The Upper Room is a faith-based crisis hotline serving people in the Catholic tradition. It trains phone counselors to recognize clues of mental illness, anxiety, loneliness, depression, and spiritual hunger. It teaches them how to help troubled callers struggling with depression and spiritual darkness. The Upper Room gives these volunteers an opportunity to help people in a special way.

“In our high-tech world of texting and emails, we often forget that people need to hear a caring human voice,” said Sister Mary Frances Seeley, a sister with the Order of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate. She is founder and president/special advisor of the Upper Room, whose mission is to help anyone struggling with

mental, emotional, and spiritual problems. “In many ways, the mentally ill are the lepers of the 21st century,” Seeley said. “In most cases, society gives them a pill and hopes they will go away. We let them know they matter.”

For more than 47 years, Sister Seeley has been ministering to the depressed, suicidal, and spiritually starved. During January 2018, she will celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Upper Room. “We may not be able to prevent the suffering of those struggling with fear and doubt,” she said, “but we can give them a caring voice and a compassionate ear. We can let them know there is someone on the other end of the phone waiting to hear their story.”

Phone counselors come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are business owners. Others are educators. Some are stay-at-home moms, grandmothers and grandfathers. Some work second-shift in factories or drive delivery trucks. Some are on welfare and want to help others who are suffering. “I guess the one quality our phone counselors have in common is that they are nice people,” Seeley said. “They are compassionate and tolerant of those human idiosyncrasies that vibrate across our phone line.”

Volunteer phone counselors do not come skilled and ready to help others. They need training. For that reason, Seeley has put together a curriculum derived from her decades of helping those suffering from mental and emotional issues. She devised a 40-hour training program that covers everything from mental and emotional issues to actual spiritual problems. “We are not only fighting for the mental health of our callers, we are fighting for

their souls,” Seeley said.

As the Upper Room enters its second decade, its board of directors is busy keeping up with Seeley’s aggressive plans to expand. She is hoping to open an office within a health care facility north of Chicago. “This move will expand our phone lines and double our ability to help people,” she said. “It will give mental health interns and seminarians the opportunity to get real-life experience helping people find mental and emotional peace and a way back to God.” Seeley plans to expand by June 2018, but funding could be an obstacle.

To obtain the funds needed, Seeley is speaking at churches and sending out letters to past donors, but that may not be enough. “We are also writing grant proposals to potential funders who will find our ministry in sync with their own missions,” she said. “We need all the help we can get.”

Sister Seeley is a suicidologist and holds a doctorate in law, policy and society from Northeastern University in Boston. She has founded and maintained hotlines across the country and has trained thousands of hotline volunteers. She is a guest lecturer in the U.S. as well as throughout Europe and Asia. She has served on the Board of the American Association of Suicidology as chief certification examiner and as the national president of the Alliance of Information and Referral

Systems. She holds an honorary doctorate from Lewis University in Romeoville and numerous honors by both local and national organizations.

“I can’t think of anyone more qualified to help those struggling with mental illness and emotional distress than Sister Mary Frances,”



SISTER MARY
FRANCES
SEELEY



**"God will
always
forgive
you. You
belong to
Him."**



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says board member, Jean Haas. "She is an inspiration to all of us."

The Upper Room began as a hotline for Catholic priests and men religious. In the early days, counselors would answer calls from clergy struggling with issues surrounding their vocation. One of the early callers was a priest who felt compelled to leave his religious order. He had been a part of this religious community for over 30 years, but, because of one incident, felt he had to leave. He talked to a phone counselor for hours about his need for forgiveness, his love for the Church, his desire for intimacy with God, and his anxiety about leaving the community. Today, he is a diocesan priest longing for the closeness of a community of prayer and

fellowship. After many phone sessions, he found the strength to visit several congregations of men religious and begin the process of re-entry into religious life as a vowed member.

Today, callers with a variety of backgrounds seek help with depression, religion, spirituality and bad relationships. Many of them need referrals to pastors, churches, and organizations in their location. The Upper Room maintains a comprehensive listing of all spiritual services available to people throughout the United States.

"One of our most important services is referral," said board member, Val Rand. "We have put literally thousands of people in touch with organizations that can help them — organizations they

would never know existed had they not called us."

"If I had to put a dollar amount on all the time contributed by our volunteers, it would exceed \$1 million," Seeley said. "They work tirelessly for those who have no one. They studied and trained to be para-professionals. Many of them drive 20 miles or more to work on the Line. They are truly conduits of God's love for His people."

According to Seeley, the Upper Room Crisis Hotline derives its name from the "Upper Room" in Jerusalem where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper. Many sacred events took place in that room from "washing of the feet" to the day of Pentecost. It was the usual place where the Apostles stayed when they were in Jerusalem.

"It was a room where they gathered for prayer, reflection, and support," Seeley said. "In a similar way, the Upper Room Crisis Hotline is a place where people can find prayer, reflection, support and guidance. It is a place they can experience the love of Christ. †



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