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Small Business Insights

➤ From the October 8, 1999 print edition

Lafayette's monks turn to tree farm for retirement years

John Schmitz Special To The Business Journal

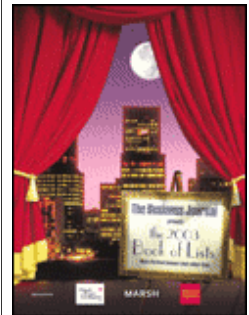
Although the bindery, bakery and wine warehouse earn the most income for Our Lady of Guadalupe today, in future years the monastery will lean heavily on its tree farm to provide for the monks' retirement. "It's our insurance program," Father Richard said.

Unlike other religious orders, the Trappists are passive recruiters, relying almost totally on word of mouth. In the last five years only four men have joined the monastery near Lafayette, Father Richard said. Therefore, it won't be long before production slows down as the older monks begin cutting back on their work hours.

This is especially true with the three monks tending the tree farm. With their average age pushing 75, Father Richard said it won't be long before a professional logging contractor has to be hired. As more monks leave the workplace, he said, the monastery will turn to the outside world for most of its help.

With more money spent for labor, there will be less revenue for the monastery, but the tree farm is a great asset: Timber harvests will eventually surpass by far the combined income of the bakery, bindery and wine warehouse.

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Unlike conventional companies, the Our Lady of Guadalupe isn't that worried about bringing in people from the outside to staff their industries. The little community realizes, Father Richard said, that the monastic life is a hard sell today.

One of the chief barriers in getting young men interested in the monastic life, he said, is the vow of stability. Arguably the most limiting of all religious vows, it requires that a monk stay in the same monastery for the rest of his life.

As for the recruiting obstacles, "We don't worry too much about it," Father Richard said. "We're just going through a phase of the culture where our lifestyle is not too attractive right now. We're grateful for what we've got. God will take care of the rest. It may be that we weren't meant to last."

Still, Father Richard holds hope that a small number of men will continue to explore the monastic life each year and decide to stay. "We can't sell ourselves down the river yet. In 10 to 15 years that discovery of a long-term commitment may be worth something."

Portland timber consultant Scott Ferguson is now managing the monks' 7 million board feet of timber so that harvests are well within sustainable levels; that is, less timber is being harvested than the amount of new wood being grown annually--about 500,000 board feet.

In a few years, Ferguson will bump up the harvest as more and more board feet accumulate. Twenty years down the road, when most of today's monks will be fully retired, the harvest will be approximately equal to the amount of new wood grown each year and provide hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales.

"We'll have a more mature forest," Ferguson said, "and it's advisable at that time to cut more heavily."

The tree farm is a classic example of compromise in timber management in that it takes into account not only the economic aspects but also recreation, wildlife and livability.

Some of the evergreen trees butt up against the abbey grounds, and the tranquility is important to the monks and visitors on retreat who find solace in the woods. Ferguson and the monks have chosen to hold these trees in reserve.

The monks have instructed Ferguson to manage their timber under the strict guidelines of the Forest Stewardship Council, which requires a management plan emphasizing sustainability and forest health. Wood harvested under such a plan is called certified' and it often carries a premium with it.

Father Richard said that the tree farm and the wine warehouse are in the best position to generate significant income when they become fully staffed by outside help.

"We'll still make a profit off those," Father Richard said. "The bindery is another question, because if we start hiring people down there, we won't be making any money. In the bakery, there may be a possibility [of still turning a profit]."

Men interested in looking deeply into the Trappists' order and experiencing the lifestyle firsthand can do so by making a one-month monastic-life retreat at the monastery. During that time, they will attend classes on the order and have a chance to practice meditation.



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