



DAVID MAIARETTI / Daily News

Sister Francesca Onley, who built Holy Family University from 500 to 3,300 students, wants to similarly expand the Northeast chamber of commerce as its chairwoman.

Chamber: Nun the wiser

Holy Family's Sister Francesca heads NE biz group

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When Sister Francesca Onley, C.S.F.N., was approached to lead the Greater Northeast Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, her first question was: "What would you want with an old nun?"

"And they said to me, 'Well, Sister, you have contacts and know a lot of people,'" she recalled.

"It's something that I can handle — I run meetings all the time," she said. "But I was trying to get out of it, so that's what I said to them."

Onley may be a nun, but she's no stranger to running a business. As president of Holy Family University since 1981, she has plenty of business savvy.

As the newly appointed chairwoman of the chamber's board, Onley, 75, will serve a two-year term. She has been a board member since the early '80s.

Although some folks might find it unusual for a nun to run a chamber of commerce, board member Michael Logan didn't give it a second thought.

"Honestly, it never even crossed my mind," said Logan, president of Allegra Print & Imaging, on McNulty Road.

"Hopefully, she gets her ruler out and

gets some people in line," he joked.

"It is more on the unique side," said Al Taubenberger, president of the chamber. "There's no question about it."

"I like working with someone who's closer to God than I am," said Taubenberger.

He said that Onley's leadership experience makes her a natural fit for her new role.

"She took [Holy Family] from a small commuter college to a regional powerhouse," said Taubenberger. "Her network of people — on a neighborhood basis, regionally, and even internationally — is quite strong."

"At first, I wondered what it would be like to have a Sister [as chairwoman]," said board member Steve Engel. "I thought she might be parochial in her thinking."

"But she's a perfect fit," said Engel, advertising manager at the *Northeast Times*. "She's calming, but also authoritative."

The chamber, which has 900 businesses as members, wants 1,000 by the end of the year. Its main purpose is to help businesses in the Northeast succeed through networking and the sharing of strategies and resources.

"It's all about trying to generate business for our owners," Onley said. "That's the re-

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al benefit from belonging to the chamber."

She said she hopes to help business owners who have contacted her, seeking ways to expand.

"You get to know people on a first-name basis," she said. "You know what their business is. If you need legal support, if you need health care. I guess if you need a case of beer, too, because we have a [beer-distributor] member up here on Grant Avenue — Muller Inc."

Onley has strong ties to Northeast Philly.

"I'm a Mayfair girl," she said. She attended St. Matthew School, and then Nazareth Academy for high school.

After briefly working, Onley entered the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. She taught at Nazareth Academy for many years and served as principal of the high school before joining Holy Family.

As the university's president for 27 years, Onley has developed a keen business sense.

"Absolutely, a university needs to be run like a business," she said. "So this is nothing new to me."

When Onley became president

of what was then Holy Family College, it had about 500 full-time students. Today, the Catholic institution has about 3,300 students in undergraduate and graduate programs.

As any business owner knows, the key to success is keeping your customers happy. For Onley, this means developing programs that meet her students' needs.

"We deal with students who need jobs," she said. "We're very effective in providing programs for students that lead to employment."

Holy Family has programs in education, nursing, business, criminal justice and psychology, among other disciplines. Onley, who holds a doctorate in education from Southern Illinois University, hopes that Holy Family will add a doctoral program in education soon.

Her work at Holy Family makes her an inspiration, according to two members of the chamber's board.

"When she starts speaking, you just start listening to every word," said Sally Danciu, owner of Sally's Flowers, on Oxford Avenue. "She's a visionary."

Mary Anne Benner, vice president at Beneficial Bank, said, "I'm hoping in 10 years I can have that enthusiasm. Nothing stops her." ★