



# FINAL REPORT ON WOMEN RELIGIOUS MOVING FORWARD IN HOPE

*A project of the National Religious Vocation Conference*

MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROSITY OF THE GHR FOUNDATION

OCTOBER 2013



**NRVC**  
National Religious  
Vocation Conference

5401 SOUTH CORNELL AVENUE, SUITE 207  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60615  
773-363-5454  
NRVC@NRVC.NET | NRVC.NET



## INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) released the results of its landmark Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life in the United States, conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

To explore the significant implications of this study for the future vitality of religious institutes in the United States, the NRVC board sponsored a vocation symposium at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois, in September 2010. This symposium, *Moving Forward in Hope*, gathered people from various Church constituencies and across theological and ecclesiological spectrums for the purposes of studying the NRVC research and developing a national plan that would further promote and strengthen religious life in this country.

The positive experience of greater understanding and acceptance achieved through honest dialogue and respectful listening in Chicago became the impetus for the symposium participants' recommendation that the experience be replicated around the country. Such gatherings, therefore, were included as an objective of the National Action Plan in Response to the NRVC/CARA Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life in the United States.

Thus began the Women Religious *Moving Forward in Hope* program which consisted of four regional gatherings for women religious generously funded by the GHR Foundation and sponsored by the NRVC. The purpose of the gatherings was to explore the ethnic and generational demographics of Catholic women in the United States and the opportunities, challenges, and implications these present to religious institutes for new membership. A secondary purpose inspired by the symposium was to provide the opportunity for respectful dialogue among religious women, intercongregationally and between members of the two conferences of women religious: Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) and Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). The goal was to foster individual and common vocation efforts while respecting the differing ways in which the various traditions, spiritualities, and charisms of religious life are lived out in the United States.

For these gatherings of women religious NRVC invited both the vocation director and the major superior or leadership team member of all canonically recognized religious institutes of women to apply to this program. Funding was granted for all the congregations that applied. A total of 115 congregational teams took part in these gatherings, representing more than one fourth of apostolic women's congregations in the United States. Originally only three gatherings were scheduled but, because of the overwhelming desire of communities to participate, another workshop was added. These workshops were held in Chicago, IL, Burlingame, CA and Latham, NY. The workshops occurred between November, 2012 and May, 2013.

### PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAM

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## REGIONAL GATHERINGS OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

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## FIVE GUIDELINES FOR DIALOGUE

The participants were asked to follow five guidelines for dialogue:

- Be fully present, open to grow in understanding and new insights.
- Listen attentively and ask clarifying questions
- Suspend certainty and judgment
- Trust in the sincerity and commitment of each other
- Appreciate the diversity among us.

## THE PROCESS

The workshops were developed by a steering committee of six religious from different congregations and conferences: Sister Paula Buley, I.H.M., Sister Joyce Candidi, O.S.H., Sister Mary Johnson, S.N.D.deN., Sister Donna Markham, O.P., Sister Maureen Martin, A.S.C.J., Sister Miriam Ukeritis, C.S.J. Sister Kieran Foley, F.S.E. and Sister Gloria Marie Jones, O.P. served as facilitators for the gatherings; Sister Lorraine Reaume, O.P., and Sister Anne Walsh, A.S.C.J., were the listeners and prepared the final report. Mrs. Maryellen Glackin served as the project coordinator, and Ms. Sheila McLaughlin was the liturgist for the gatherings.

The gatherings provided a unique forum for vocation and leadership personnel to increase their awareness of the profile and diversity of today's Catholic women. Over a three day period input from the keynote speaker as well as opportunities for small group and large group discussions allowed participants to probe insights concerning this crucial topic. Realizing the importance of these gatherings as an Ecclesial event, the days began and ended with prayer and included daily Mass. These liturgical moments set a powerful tone of communion and reverence.

In his introduction to the workshop, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, C.S.C., executive director of the NRVC, stressed the importance of Christian dialogue among all religious, summarizing the spirit of Pope Paul VI's words in *Suam Ecclesiam*: "If we are to discern a collective truth, then we must speak our own truth with clarity and intelligence, with humility not arrogance, with confidence that the Spirit is present among us, and finally, with prudence and sensitivity to the needs of others."

Reflecting the significance of these gatherings in the Church, Brother Paul also shared a letter of welcome from Archbishop Robert Carlson, Chair of the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Archbishop Carlson expressed gratitude and affirmation for the gatherings and further promised his prayers for the participants that this time would be "an experience of collaborative dialogue...[that] will generate an enriched fervor for vocations."

## PARTICIPANTS

The participants for the workshops represented both religious conferences and different geographic regions of the nation. Though the gatherings were held in the North, the Midwest and the West, participants at each site came from a variety of regions, which provided for rich dialogue. The depth of the sharing that took place in all four gatherings was testimony to the openness and collaborative spirit of the participants. The sisters came with a strong belief in religious life and a conviction that it offers a valuable way of life to which God continues to call women today. They expressed a desire to be open to learn and receive from the presenter and from one another.

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One participant shared what seemed to be in the hearts of many of the sisters: “Honest conversation in a beautiful environment allows us to really listen, non-defensively, and enables us to broaden our vision.”

## KEYNOTE PRESENTATION

The keynote speaker for the gatherings was Sister Mary Johnson, S.N.D.deN., professor of sociology and religious studies at Trinity Washington University in Washington D.C. and author, with Sister Patricia Wittberg, S.C. and Mary Gautier, Ph.D., of *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* to be published by Oxford Press in 2014.

Sister Mary spoke of the importance of using the tools of social sciences in the Church for enhancing its internal self-understanding and the effectiveness of its external mission. While our society often focuses on the individual, Sister Mary explained that sociology focuses on the group. The statistical data that she shared from several national studies emphasized the new reality of our Church in regard to geographical distribution and ethnicity with the shift of the Catholic population in the U.S. in the past quarter century from Northeast and Central to South and West. In the current reality, all four areas of the country are nearly equally balanced in the Catholic population.

In addition, Sister Mary noted that in the past 25 years three generations of Catholic adults—Pre-Vatican II: before 1943; Vatican II (Boomers): 1943-1960; Post Vatican II (Gen X): after 1960—have had to make way for a fourth generation—the Millennials—who now make up nearly 25 percent of the Catholic Church in the U.S. Fifty-seven percent of the Church’s population is now in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Highlighting the majority of young members in the church, participants were challenged to think about their own congregational demographics.

The NRVC/CARA Study of Recent Vocations showed that 70 percent of newer members were already involved in full or part-time ministry prior to entrance. With this knowledge, the participants became aware of the need to look more closely at newer members and what they are seeking in addition to ministry: namely, communal life, common prayer, and visibility. Increased diversity in race and ethnicity also has changed the face of the Catholic Church in the U.S. over the past 25 years. This dialogue became a critical part of the gathering as some members of leadership and vocation directors shared that their communities do not currently contain some of the elements for which young people are searching.

Participants began to ask themselves if they and their communities are ready to live, pray, and minister differently in order to “make space” for newer, younger, more diverse generations. In reflecting on the challenge presented, many participants said that helping their own communities to be more open to the current vocational reality was a necessity and that honest conversation among members about the core values of the congregation needed to take place. Participants looked at their own reality and asked themselves: Given the growing ethnic groups in this country, which groups are missed in vocational outreach? How does the lack of ethnic and generational diversity impact the mission and ministries of the religious congregations?

### CRUCIAL DATA

- Fifty-seven percent of the Church’s population is now in their 20s, 30s and 40s.
- Increased diversity in race and ethnicity has changed the face of the Catholic Church in the U.S. over the past 25 years.
- Only 15 percent of young adult Catholics have been invited to consider religious life
- In addition to ministry, newer members to religious life are seeking communal life, common prayer, and visibility.

The vocation directors and their major superiors delved more deeply into the invitations and challenges to their respective congregations with regard to the new data on generations and ethnicity. In those discussions the following themes were prominent:

- The need for membership to understand the cultural and generational diversity that exists in our Church today and in those discerning a call to religious life;
- The importance of choosing to minister where new vocations may be found;
- General concern about attracting young women to religious life;
- With aging membership and the challenges that accompany this reality, a concern about whether vowed members are able or willing to go where the Millennial generation is;
- The need to listen more to the younger generation already in religious life;
- Concern about the impact of the diminishment of Catholic institutions in certain areas of the country and the effects of the sexual abuse crisis on new vocations;
- Concern about the role of women in the Church expressed by Millennial women in particular;
- An increased hope for future vocations.

### INITIAL CHALLENGE

Each generation as it comes of age is shaped by significant social forces. Finding ways to engage the current membership in dialogue regarding new generations and their different ways of thinking, being, and praying was considered by many to be a good yet challenging first step.

Sister Mary emphasized that each generation as it comes of age is shaped by significant social forces. Finding ways to engage the current membership in dialogue regarding new generations and their different ways of thinking, being, and praying was considered by many to be a good yet challenging first step. One sister summarized the shared sentiments of the participants: “the call for us as we accept new candidates is to embrace their meaning, to open our hearts to this new identity, to be willing to be changed, and not fear we are going back. The young bring us to a new point. We need to realize we are imprinted by our time but we cannot hold it too rigidly.”

### CONCRETE NEXT STEPS

After much input and group discussion, the congregational teams met to develop concrete action steps for their particular congregations.

These action plans largely fell into four categories:

- To share the information from this gathering with each of their congregations and educate their membership about the generational and ethnic diversity of young people in the Church today;
- To prepare and involve more sisters in vocation efforts, with the goal of a greater outreach to the Millennial generation;
- To actively reach out to young adults where they are;
- To invite young adults to places where the sisters live and minister.

While most congregations are currently engaging in outreach efforts, each group formulated ways they could improve or increase their outreach and further educate their membership.

Some specific plans include:

- Connecting more actively with students (i.e. being present at campus liturgies, helping with Busy Student Retreats, etc.), consulting with faculty and students for their ideas on vocation promotion and including vocation education in the curriculum;
- Finding and building on connections that already exist, including alumni, local parishes, and young adult organizations;
- Seeking input and advice from young adults and forming prayer and advisory groups at schools, parishes, and through connections with young women;
- Being more intentional in outreach to multicultural and multiethnic groups;
- Using social media and technology better to share the story of the congregation and to connect with young adults and as a tool to animate membership.
- Moving out of “comfort zones” and going where young adults gather. One group of participants suggested that “all the sisters give 10 percent of their time to engaging Catholics under 40 years old.”
- Recognizing the importance of inviting people into the homes of the sisters to see how the sisters live; inviting young people to meals, prayer, retreat and service opportunities, both in local communities and in their motherhouses. Some groups suggested having sister “prayer partners” matched with a younger person or group such as a sports team or choir.
- Including young people in external service projects sponsored by the sisters;
- Offering space in the homes and motherhouses of the sisters for young adult groups to meet;
- Creating houses of discernment and/or houses where young people can share communal life with sisters;
- Using the NRVC “Keys to the Future” process of inclusion and dialogue and the Moving Forward video in the congregations as an educational tool on what people are seeking in religious life today.

## CRITICAL ISSUES MOVING FORWARD

**Establish boundaries and clear identity.** While the participants developed practical, concrete plans they were aware of profound shifts required both personally and at the congregational level. They saw the need to define, name, and claim the core values of religious life as lived in their congregation. Sometimes in trying to be inclusive, the group can lose that which is essential and unique about their congregation. Without boundaries and a clear identity, a group will not continue to function.

**Increase cultural knowledge and sensitivity.** Given that the ethnic diversity in the young Catholic population is not reflected in the majority of congregations, sisters also recognized a need to better understand the variety of cultures and to learn how to be more welcoming and receptive. Younger generations have experienced tremendous diversity and see it as a positive force in our culture. Religious communities with a dominant generation and ethnic background deepened their awareness of the need to be conscious

## ACTION PLANS

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- To actively reach out to young adults where they are;
- To invite young adults to places where the sisters live and minister.

Congregational teams also agreed to increase their outreach to young adults and further educate their membership on what people are seeking in religious life today.

## CRITICAL ISSUES MOVING FORWARD

- Establish boundaries and clear identity.
- Increase cultural knowledge and sensitivity.
- Consider how decisions affect young members.
- Increase communication among leadership and vocation ministers.
- Encourage all members to be inviters.
- Continue the work of reconciliation and healing within a divided church.
- Work with dioceses and parishes to promote vocations.
- Trust in God's providence.

of their biases and to strive for a deep listening to the non-dominant current and future members.

**Consider how decisions affect young members.** The sisters expressed their belief that leadership plays a critical role in spurring the revitalization of communities. It was suggested that leaders can ask their local houses if they are open to share life with the young. One sister reflectively questioned: “Instead of an option for the young, have we instead made an option for the retired?” Some of the leadership participants further recognized that while their congregations need to care well for their senior sisters, if the majority of their focus is on the elderly, their congregation will not be able to grow. It was suggested that before making any major decisions communities ask: “How will this decision affect the young?”

**Increase communication among leadership and vocation ministers.** Many leadership participants became more aware of the need to support and work with the vocation minister. As Sister Mary noted, “The vocation minister is at the frontier” and often aware of realities and changes in the young adult cohort. Vocation ministers can often feel alone and discouraged. Many in leadership are consumed by demands and immediate needs of membership, and that has at times led to a neglect of new membership promotion. Some sisters suggested having the vocation director present at all general council meetings as a way to ensure the importance of future membership.

**Encourage all members to be inviters.** Many participants reaffirmed that the work of vocation promotion belongs to the whole community and may require a real transformation of a congregation. The desire of the sisters to share the material at the conference with their communities was palpable. One piece of data that stood out is that only 15 percent of young adult Catholics have been invited to consider religious life. The participants shared that they want their communities to understand the demographics and the reality of young adults. As one sister said, “I need to rethink how I think.” They want their sisters to know that young people desire to make a commitment and want to sacrifice for something bigger than themselves. Along with raising awareness, sisters recognized that members need help to know how to better reach out to young adults and to share a conversation with them about vowed life. Those present recognized that sisters can help each other in this outreach, collaborating among congregations to promote religious life and its mission.

**Continue the work of reconciliation and healing within a divided church.** One transformative highlight mentioned by the sisters was the presence of sisters from both women's conferences, the LCWR and the CMSWR. The diversity of religious life was seen as a strength and blessing. Participants further expressed that while there is division and polarization in the Church, the experience of the gatherings was one of unity in a common call and commitment to Christ. For some, there was a sense of healing and reconciliation in being together that they hoped would continue.

**Work with dioceses and parishes to promote vocations.** Those gathered also were aware of the importance of the institutional Church in promoting vocations to religious life. They expressed gratitude for what has been done and also hope that dioceses and parishes would more proactively encourage those who are called to vowed life, collaborating with congregations to provide housing and ministry options and actively promoting religious life. In addition, the participants shared their desire to continue to work with church leaders and ministers to expose youth and young adults to this life-giving option to serve God and humanity.

**Trust in God's providence.** Despite some sense of anxiety regarding the aging of com-



munities and fewer vocations, the predominant feeling among the participants was that of hope in the future of religious life. Many sisters expressed trust that in God's providence, religious life would continue, as it is integral to the life of the Church. They voiced a greater confidence and renewed desire to reach out to the young, encouraging them to follow Christ in religious life.

## CONCLUSION

The many research studies shared by Sister Mary and the interaction that followed led the participants to a deeper reflection on the very meaning of religious life and on the necessity for a response to the compelling data presented. One participant shared: "When I go home, I have to embrace being an animator and agitator. We need to animate our communities to get out of our comfort zones."

As each gathering came to a close the sisters expressed their gratitude for the generosity of the GHR Foundation and for the NRVC, not only for this special gathering, but for the many forums convened by the NRVC to share important information and support those in vocation ministry. Highlights from Brother Paul's closing comments included the following information:

- 1) That while the participants will be putting into practice their concrete plans for vocation promotion and collaborating among themselves, the NRVC will continue to work to build on the results of these gatherings, aiming to help sisters in their efforts and desires to connect with young adults.
- 2) The NRVC creates environments for substantial and respectful dialogue where vocation ministers and those who support them can learn and grapple with the large questions in religious life as well as explore the practical efforts to promote vocations.
- 3) The NRVC will follow up these gatherings by holding a similar one for men.

It was apparent from these Women Moving Forward in Hope gatherings that the NRVC and religious congregations will work to invite young people into religious life—a form of Christian living that is centuries old and ever new--and together we will move forward in hope in the spirit of Jesus.

### KEY ELEMENT OF THE NRVC MISSION

The NRVC creates environments for substantial and respectful dialogue where vocation ministers and those who support them can learn and grapple with the large questions in religious life as well as explore the practical efforts to promote vocations.



### INSPIRED TO DO MORE?

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