

LCWR PRE-ASSEMBLY

I've been asked to speak to you today about the "current reality," of religious life in the U.S., that is, about what the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) is seeing in terms of numbers and associated challenges. As we know, "reality" is not synonymous with numbers. While I will share some numbers, they are but one lens through which to view reality. I also offer the disclaimer that the view of reality that I will present obviously is shaped by my own experience, just as yours is influenced by your experience. My experience includes the fact that I entered a community of 500+ members in 1969; today my community numbers 139, five of whom are younger than I am. I will be receiving my first Social Security check this month. When I was sent on my first mission assignment, I was told there would be one other "young" sister in the local community. I was 25; the other "young" sister was 40.

A major influence on my view of the "current reality" is my work at NRRO. This has given me a blessed opportunity to view the kaleidoscope of religious life in the U.S. The NRRO staff is privileged to work with women and men religious, active and contemplative institutes, members of all three leadership conferences and institutes that do not belong to any of the leadership conferences. Over the years that I have been associated with NRRO, I've been privileged to visit nearly 200 communities, and I've been in contact with many more by phone. In the past five years, through our Planning and Implementation process, NRRO has been engaged intensively with more than eighty institutes in retirement planning. While this does not provide a complete picture of the reality of religious life in the U.S. today, the spectrum of religious life with which NRRO connects is possibly broader than that of any other national organization.

Before I get into the facts and figures, I want to set a broader context. I ask you to reflect with me for a moment on two stories from scripture about persons who were advanced in age – Sarah and Abraham from the Old Testament and Simeon and Anna from the New Testament.

(Slide 2-Part 1) Scripture tells us that Abraham was 99 years of age and Sarah was 90 when God said to Abraham, "My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations."¹ Both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the improbability of this! They had planned and determined how their particular legacy would live on after they were gone through Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham asked God to bless that plan and to "let Ishmael live on by your favor."² But God had other thoughts. Despite their advanced age, Abraham and Sarah brought forth new life. Abraham did indeed become the father of a host of nations.

(Slide 2-Part 2) In the New Testament, we are introduced to two more persons who are advanced in age, Simeon and Anna. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple, Simeon took Jesus into his arms and prayed what some of us remember as the Latin *Nunc Dimittis*, "Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace; you have fulfilled your word."³ We are not told Simeon's age, but we are told that Anna had "lived seven years with her husband after her marriage and then as a widow

¹ Genesis: 17:4

² Genesis: 17:18

³ Luke 2:29

until she was eighty-four.”⁴ She who lived as a prophetess in the temple and served God with fasting and prayer “gave thanks to the God and talked about the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.”⁵ Both Simeon and Anna recognize that they have reached a new moment – a moment of fulfillment. Simeon responds by saying, “Now you can dismiss your servant.” Anna responds by moving from the quiet of her prayer and fasting to proclaiming Jesus to anyone seeking ‘the more’ in life.

Abraham, Sarah, Simeon and Anna are all considered blessed by God in their old age. Abraham and Sarah are directed by God to a new horizon, a place they neither intended nor envisioned. Their experience demonstrates that no matter how sure we are of our planning, situations, events and Providence can intervene in ways we never imagined or conceived. Simeon and Anna witness the completion of their life-long hopes and dreams, and thus Simeon’s *nunc dimittis*. Anna, realizing her prayers have been answered, leaves her previously hidden life to tell others of her joy. She passes on her legacy by inviting others, not to her way of life, but to a new way of life. All four respond in gratitude and move in God to the next steps of their life journey.

With these scripture stories as background, let’s look now at where religious in the United States stand in their own aging. I will be using statistics from NRRO’s most recent data, the census data as of December 31, 2012. We received data from 550 of the 900 religious institutes in our database or 61% of religious institutes. These institutes have a total membership of 50,915 or 72% of the nearly 71,000 women and men religious reported in the latest CARA statistics. While this is not the complete picture, it is a significant portion of the picture – close to 2/3 of all institutes and ¾ of all religious.

Let’s look first at the median age of religious as of the end of 2012. *(Slide 3 – Column 1)*

Median Age	All Institutes		Women's Institutes		LCWR	
< 30	0	0%	0	0 %	0	0%
30-39	6	1%	5	1 %	1	.03%
40-49	23	4%	19	5 %	6	2 %
50-59	37	7%	19	5 %	6	2 %
60-69	130	24 %	76	18 %	28	9 %
70-79	307	56%	254	61%	218	73%
80-89	48	9%	46	11 %	40	13%

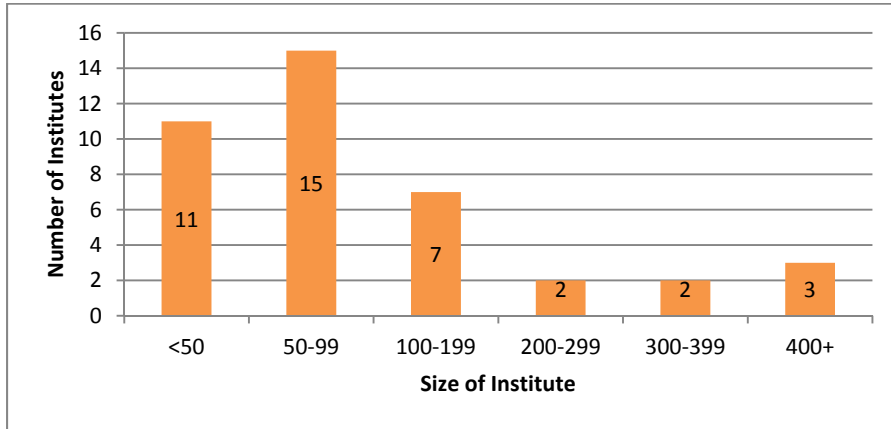
This slide shows both the number and percentage of institutes by median age. The clear majority of institutes have a median age above 70, with only 12% having a median age below 60. *(Column 2)* For women, the median age is even higher. *(Column 3)* I would ask you to note in particular

⁴ Luke 2:36-37

⁵ Luke 2:38

that of the 48 institutes with a median age of 80 or higher, 40 institutes are members of LCWR. Four among the group of 40 hold membership in both LCWR and CMSWR. 13% of LCWR institutes have a median age of 80 or higher, while only 4% have a median age below 60.

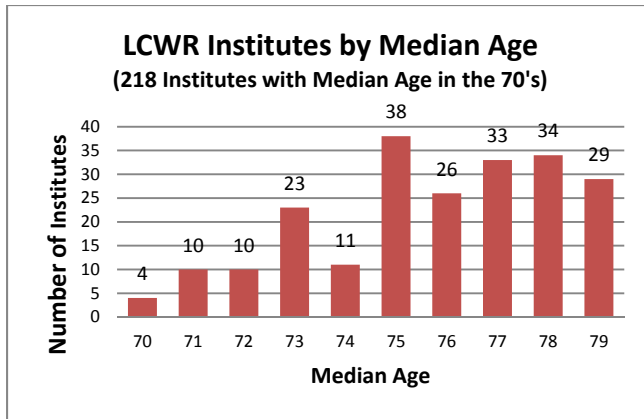
Let's take a closer look at the size of those institutes with a median age of 80 or higher. (Slide 4) While the majority of these institutes have fewer than 100 members, a median age of 80+ is not unknown to larger institutes. All institutes, and particularly the large institutes, need to be very aware of their rising median age. **Size can tend to mask the reality.**



You will recall from the earlier chart (Slide 5) that the largest percentage of religious institutes has a median age between 70 and 79. Overall, 56% of institutes fall in that range while 73% of LCWR institutes are in this category.

Median Age	All Institutes		Women's Institutes		LCWR	
< 30	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
30-39	6	1%	5	1%	1	.03%
40-49	23	4%	19	5%	6	2%
50-59	37	7%	19	5%	6	2%
60-69	130	24%	76	18%	28	9%
70-79	307	56%	254	61%	218	73%
80-89	8	9%	46	11%	40	13%

Let's take a closer look at those institutes. (Slide 6). There are 218 LCWR institutes with a median age in the 70's; 160 of those are in the upper half of that range, 75 or above. Within the next five to ten years, it is likely that a good number of these 160 institutes will reach a median age of 80. Of the participants here today, 70 reported that their community has a median age of 75-79; 17 reported a median age of 80 or higher.



The median age of religious institutes is rising steadily, if not rapidly. (Slide 7) 1985 is the first year for which NRRO has census data; in 1985 no one reported a median age of 80 or higher. By 1997, the end of the first 10-year cycle of the Retirement Fund for Religious collection, eight institutes or slightly over 1% reported median age of 80 or higher. By 2007, the end of the second 10-year cycle, that increased to 26 institutes or nearly 4%. Over the last five years, 2007-2012, that number has more than doubled, reaching nearly 9%.

Year	Total # of Institutes Reporting	# of Institutes with Median Age of 80+	% of Total Reporting Institutes
1985	455	0	0.00%
1997	705	8	1.13%
2007	677	26	3.84%
2013	550	48	8.73%

Over the years, 117 religious institutes, at some point in time, have reported a median age of 80 or higher. Some did not report this year; others have merged; for some the median age has decreased; we know of seven that are no longer in existence. For one institute, a note in our database simply says, “Suppressed.” I found information on the web about two others – the obituaries for the last sister in each of those communities—in a sense, the obituary, or if you will, the nunc dimittis, for the community itself.

You may wonder why I am focusing on age rather than retirement funding. NRRO’s mission is to address retirement funding concerns, and we do have processes in place for that. (And parenthetically, we’d welcome an opportunity to talk with you about that after this session or at our booth in the exhibit hall.)

Our purpose today is to address issues much deeper than funding. Some of you may recall the LCWR/NATRI/NRRO Collaborative Viability Project of the mid 1990's, *A Critical Juncture*. It identified leadership as a key element, if not the most critical element, of viability. Leadership definitely is **the** key issue at this new critical juncture. Funding is important, and those who are well funded may be in a somewhat better position than those who are poorly funded. After all, they have the ability to hire additional help or contract for services. But, as far as I know, it is not possible to hire a major superior.

Aging is both a personal and communal experience that cannot be stopped and can be ignored only to our peril. Yes, wisdom (we hope) comes with age. In most cases, decreased energy also comes with age. Over the past several decades, there has been a greying of the leadership of religious institutes. Is it realistic to expect persons in their late 70's or 80's to have the energy necessary for leadership?

I'll insert a personal story here. In 1980 Sister Andree Fries was elected as the president of my community at the age of 39. I was Secretary General at the age of 29. One evening the two of us were out at a local mall. We were sitting on a bench enjoying ice cream cones. Two young men -- 30ish -- stopped and asked, "Would you girls like to join us for a beer at the American Legion bar?" Fast-forward twelve years, and Andree was once again elected as our president after a six year hiatus. When we'd pass the American Legion, we'd often joke about the unlikely probability that anyone was going to try to pick us up for a beer. We had aged, as has the leadership in most religious institutes.

How does the age of your current team compare to that of 20 or even 10 years ago? Has your community begun to "re-choose" persons to serve in leadership? At the end of your term how many persons will be available for leadership? One leader recently said to me, "We no longer have a leadership pool; we barely have a puddle."

The statistical view of reality that I've just shared can be very sobering. In the LCWR *Dimensions of Leadership*, we are told that a leader is one who looks reality in the face and communicates hope. Where do we find our hope? Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone in their book, *Active Hope, How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*, point out that "whatever situation faces us, we can choose our response. . . The kinds of responses we make . . . are shaped by the way we think and feel about hope."⁶ While their book focuses on the environmental challenges facing our world, the principles apply quite well to any situation. They say that hope is something we **DO** rather than **HAVE** and that active hope involves three clear steps: (Slide 8)

1. Taking a clear view of reality (what we are trying to do here today)
2. Identifying what we hope for in terms of direction (a possible outcome of today)
3. Taking steps to moving ourselves in that direction (a possible follow-up of today)

The authors suggest that the process of moving ourselves in the direction of active hope is a spiral, (Slide 9) "every time we move through the four stations we experience them differently .

⁶ Active Hope, page 2

. . . As we allow ourselves to be guided by this spiral form. . . we are letting the world act on us and through us.”

1. Gratitude
2. Knowing our pain
3. Seeing with new eyes
4. Going forth

(Slide 10 – Line 1) Gratitude--The “Women in Spirit” exhibit pointed out the beauty and magnificence of religious life in the U.S. It certainly evoked a response of gratitude in me, and I would venture to say, in all who had the opportunity to see it. There is much to celebrate in what religious have done and continue to do. In the context of our current reality, I believe we also need to celebrate the gifts that come with aging, with greater inter-dependence and even dependence. The witness of living elderhood fully and well is much needed in our youth-obsessed and fiercely independent culture, a culture that values doing over being, personal satisfaction over fidelity. I recently visited with a sister from my community, a tiny woman whose weight probably approximates her age – somewhere in the mid-90s. Her eyesight is almost completely gone, and she is so crippled by arthritis that she chooses only clothing that doesn’t require buttons. When I asked her for prayers for the successful resolution to a difficult situation, she replied, “Yes, I will pray. But you know, whatever happens, it will be alright. God will be there.” This coming from a woman who lives with constant pain was a tremendous gift to me. Whatever happens, God will be there. Echoes of Julian of Norwich--And all will be well. The gift that she and hundreds like her are to us needs to be celebrated with gratitude. They are so much more than a “powerhouse of prayer.” Their very lives are a ministry to the rest of us. An important part of looking our current reality in the face and communicating hope rests in expressing our gratitude for the gift of these women.

(Slide 10-Line 2) The second step of active hope is acknowledging our pain. The authors say that we “sometimes find ourselves caught up in the pretense that all is well even when we know it isn’t.”⁷ They point out that “we can exist in [two] realities at the same time—going about our normal lives in the mode of *Business as Usual* while also remaining painfully aware of the multifaceted crisis unfolding around us. . . . One way of dealing with the confusion and agony of this splitting is to push the crisis out of view. As a result we tend to keep them (our thoughts and feelings) to ourselves and suffer in isolation . . . if we reveal our distress . . . we’re likely to be called overly negative or too emotional.”⁸

All of our religious communities have experienced losses, and it is important to grieve those losses. Acknowledging our pain is a crucial step toward moving forward, and denying our pain exacts a terrible price. Allow me to share a personal story to illustrate.

Back in the 1960’s the father-in-law of one of my older sisters was very ill. He had been through several surgeries to remove portions of his stomach. The “story” was that he had severe ulcers. In truth, he had cancer, but the doctors encouraged the family not to tell Emil because they believed that if

⁷ Active Hope, page 65

⁸ Active Hope, page 65

he knew the truth he would “give up.” Nearly everyone knew it was cancer, but no one told Emil. A few days before his death, as he grew sicker and weaker, his wife finally told him the truth. His response was simply, “I’ve known all along.”

I fear that this may be what is happening in some of our religious communities. We are unable to speak of the possibility of death. Perhaps we feel that acknowledging that possibility is the same as “giving up.” Speaking of it may be seen as too negative or overly emotional; it may imply failure of some sort.

The authors of *Active Hope* point out that facing distress doesn’t make it disappear, but we experience a tremendous relief on realizing our solidarity with others. Hasn’t the experience of LCWR members over the past several years borne witness to the power of solidarity? I would hope that today’s gathering might be but the first of many opportunities for supporting one another in the questions that face us at this new critical juncture.

(Slide 10-Line 3) The third step of active hope is “seeing with new eyes.” The authors of the book posit that a crucial step in addressing the ecological problems facing our world is the development of a wider sense of self—seeing ourselves not only as individuals but also as part of a family, a community, human society, the web of life.

This offers challenging implications for us as we consider the future our religious institutes. Our greatest concern, in my opinion, should not be whether our particular province, monastery or religious institute survives but rather for the continuation and evolution of this life form as a viable response to God’s unfathomable love. We need to take a collective view, to see the larger picture and ***together*** address the challenges facing us at this critical juncture. Transformation is happening whether we acknowledge it or not. Let us not only acknowledge it but embrace it, and assist in the directing of it.

What does this mean in practical terms? First and foremost, I think it requires being proactive in our planning. We must identify what we hope for and take steps to move in that direction. I doubt that any of us want the final chapter of our story to end with the word “suppressed.”

Given that more than half of the religious institutes that have existed during the history of religious life are no longer in existence, I believe it is prudent and wise to prepare for our *nunc dimittis*. Most of us have processes in place to prepare for individual death (wills, durable powers of attorney, pastoral care, etc.). Should we not extend that same care to the communal level? To take these steps does not mean that death is imminent, nor does it mean we are “giving up.” Like Sarah and Abraham we may be surprised by God, but that does not preclude the need to plan for our legacy.

One type of planning that is taking place among religious institutes is what has been termed the “covenant agreement.” RCRI has developed materials explaining this concept, and I recommend those to you if you want to understand this concept more fully. For now, I simply call to mind that the biblical concept of covenant is based in relationship and encourage you to keep that at the forefront of your mind when planning. What are the existing relationships that are important to you? Which persons or groups might be able to assist you in caring for your sisters? Just as a parents name persons with whom

they have a long-standing and trusting relationship to serve as potential guardians for their children, we need to look to those with whom we have a relationship to care for the physical and spiritual well-being of our sisters when we can no longer do that ourselves. It may or may not be another religious institute.

Provision for the administrative and management issues of the community, is another matter. This is essentially a business agreement. There are a number of models in existence for addressing management concerns. Some communities share staff – a CFO, a plant manager, a health care coordinator. Other communities have out-sourced some of these functions to for-profit service providers.

I would also note that most of the groups who have entered covenant relationships were able to bring sufficient assets for the care of the members. There are few, if any, institutes who will be able to assume financial responsibility for another religious institute. In addition, as you saw in the statistics, the majority of religious institutes have the same basic age profile. Another institute may be larger than yours, but it may not be any younger. Your planning may need to have multiple phases. As I've heard Sister Nancy Schreck say, "Planning is like showering. It's not something you do only once."

Another model that exists is one from the Netherlands. An article about this was included with an RCRI bulletin. The leadership conference of the Netherlands has established an office to assist religious institutes who are coming to completion. I believe this concept is well worth exploring. Admittedly, the U.S. has far more institutes, but this might be a possibility on a regional if not a national level. RCRI can advise about legal and canonical issues; NRRO can advise regarding retirement funding and care delivery. There needs to be someone to assist communities with pastoral concerns at this critical juncture.

I also want to include a few words about new membership. If it has been a number of years since your community received new members, I caution you to be realistic about the age gap. In a planning DVD that NRRO produced several years ago, Sr. Constance Fitzgerald talked about the vocation promotion efforts of the Carmelites of Baltimore. They began intensive outreach to 30ish aged women when their youngest sister was in her 40's; they felt they would not be able to successfully incorporate new members if they waited any longer. In contrast, we recently received a newsletter from a community announcing their vocation efforts focusing on college age students. The youngest member of this community is 66, and the median age is 77. I question whether they will be able to bridge an age gap of forty years? Where will these young women find peer support? One community I visited had one member in her 40's; the remainder ranged in age from 65 to 95. The 40-year-old said to me, "I feel like I am going to spend the rest of my life burying my sisters."

New membership cannot be about "life support" for the institute or about having someone to care for us in our old age. To borrow from the poet, Mary Oliver, to what are we inviting women to give their "one wild and precious life?"

In all of this, I would encourage you to continue to strive to "see with new eyes," particularly to explore ways that we can be sisters to one another on this journey. How can we help one another to

remain focused on the big picture—the continuation of religious life—even if it is time for my own institute to pray its *nunc dimittis*?

The fourth step of Active Hope is (Slide 10-Line 4) Going Forth. The authors of Active Hope point out that once we recognize and begin to act out of our identity as part of a larger community, we experience a new power—the power arising out of cooperation, the power of small steps whose impact becomes evident when we step back and see the larger picture, and the power of an inspiring vision.⁹

As communities age, more and more of these custodial tasks tend to fall to leadership simply because there is no one to whom they can be delegated. How can we tap into the power of cooperation, keeping our eyes on the bigger picture and the inspiring vision?

Some communities with a very high median age do have a cohort of younger members that might well be able to lead the institute forward, albeit as a much smaller community, provided they do not become overwhelmed with internal matters. I cite as an example one community of nearly 500 members. While their median age is 80, 10%—more than 40 members—are under the age of 60. How can they avoid the rather obvious danger that these members will become overwhelmed by internal custodial tasks? Would it be helpful for this group to function as a semi-separate unit? Would sharing of resources and tasks among institutes be of help? I don't have any answers, but I believe it is a critical area for exploration.

Whether we feel we are called to offer our *nunc dimittis* or to become the mothers of “a new nation,” the steps we take now will impact the future of our individual institutes and the future of religious life. This is a path that is being made in the walking. We need to support one another in our gratitude and in grieving our losses. Out of this we will find the new vision and the way to move forward.

Pat Farrell said in her presidential address, (Slide 11) “Vulnerable human beings put us more in touch with the truth of our limited and messy human condition, marked as it is by fragility, incompleteness and inevitable struggle. The experience of God from that place is one of absolutely gratuitous mercy and empowering love.”¹⁰

Many of our communities are in a vulnerable position at this time in history, affording us the graced awareness of the fragility of our individual and communal human condition. Will this be the blessing? A time of realizing “God's absolutely gratuitous mercy and empowering love” for each Sarah and Anna among us? I pray that it will.

⁹ Active Hope, page 112

¹⁰ Navigating the Shifts, p. 19