

Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) Explores Impact of the Global Crises and Announces New Initiatives

[Silver Spring, MD] Holding its first-ever virtual assembly, the members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) welcomed close to 900 people from across the United States and at least 13 other countries to a three-day gathering, held August 12-14.

Centered on the topic of “God’s Infinite Vision: Our Journey to the Borders and Beyond,” the participants explored together the impact of COVID-19 and new understandings of racism on the mission and lives of Catholic sisters. Recognizing that the world has been irrevocably changed through the experiences of recent months, the assembly provided an opportunity for LCWR members to explore how they may individually and collectively respond to the needs of these times. Through presentations, prayer, and small group conversations, the members shared insights on how to lead in such an uncertain time and how they might learn from and support one another as leaders.

The participants included women religious serving in leadership in their own institutes as well as LCWR associates, guests, staff, and professional facilitators working with communities of Catholic sisters. Presentations included the LCWR presidential address by Sister Jayne Helmlinger; a panel on “Grief as a Catalyst for Transformation and Hope” with LCWR members Maureen Geary, OP; Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP; and Antoinette Gutzler, MM; an evening prayer with reflections on the call to meaning-making by Sisters Alicia Costa, SSF; Jean Marie Fernandez, RGS; Jennifer Mechtild Horner, OSB; Jackulin Jesu, SCN; Janice Klein, PBVM; Lourdes Leal, CDP; Jocelyn Quijano, PBVM; and Margo Ritchie, CSJ; and a panel on “A Call to Women Religious” with three young activists Heather Malveaux, Giovana Oaxaca Najera, and Miko Vergun. Participants also had opportunities to share their own experiences and insights in small groups throughout the three days.

On the final day, the LCWR presidency – Sister Jayne Helmlinger, CSJ; Sister Elise García, OP; and Sister Sharlet Wagner, CSC – and LCWR executive director Sister Carol Zinn, SSJ presented three major initiatives of the organization. Noting the challenges facing the world and religious life, they called this a “crucible moment,” where the pandemic, racism, climate change, and concern for the future of religious congregations, have converged to create a period of “daunting challenge.” “How are we, as women religious, to respond to the pandemic when we ourselves are the most vulnerable to it and our own sisters are falling ill and dying?” the officers asked. “How are we to respond to viral racism when we ourselves have been complicit in sustaining it? How are we to respond to global warming when we ourselves are deeply implicated in the market economics that power it? And how are we as congregations to respond to these challenges when we are already fully engaged in the epic challenge of our religious lifetimes leading the way toward the end of one era of religious life into the unknown new era?”

In response to these challenges, the LCWR officers underscored the importance of three LCWR initiatives:

1. **A five-year commitment to work on dismantling racism.** The officers invited all members to participate in LCWR’s efforts to name and eradicate racism within themselves, their congregations, their ministries, and LCWR as an organization. This

commitment had been announced to the members in June. Details of this commitment are being developed.

2. **A designated fund to support the future of religious life in the United States.** The officers announced the creation of a fund, available to organizations, that will support projects impacting the future of religious life and particularly the lives of young women religious. More information about contributing to the fund and applying for funds will be shared later. The LCWR national board approved the seeding of this fund with some of the proceeds (\$1 million) which came from the sale of its Silver Spring, Maryland headquarters in 2018.
3. **A national conversation on the emerging future of religious life.** The LCWR officers launched this conversation with a challenge to all those present to create new ways for the mission of religious life to thrive well into the future. Their challenge stemmed from recent data on the future capacity of LCWR member congregations to provide leadership for their own communities. The data, gathered through a survey conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and presented to the assembly by CARA's executive director Rev. Thomas Gaunt, SJ, suggest that this is the moment for US religious congregations to find new ways to organize and administer themselves.

The officers noted that the accelerated pace of change in religious communities points to an urgent need to work across religious congregations to create new sustainable structures that assure a future for religious life. They urged leaders to seriously consider the implications of the current reality of large numbers of aging members in religious communities, and the entrance into religious orders in the United States of approximately 200 women each year, noting that there is "a clear call to our generation of leaders" to create new ways to organize the body of US women religious for mission and service.

The officers shared the broad strokes of a timeline for the next 12 months for LCWR members to explore possibilities for this new era in religious life.

The assembly closed with a blessing of the LCWR presidency, national board, and 15 regional chairs. This included a thank you to its outgoing officers including past-president Sister Sharlet Wagner. The assembly welcomed the new president-elect Jane Herb, IHM. A current member of the LCWR national board, she has been serving as the president of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Monroe, Michigan) since 2012. Additionally, the members welcomed new board members Maureen O'Connor, OSF (treasurer), Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP; Vicky Larson, PBVM; Jocelyn Quijano, PBVM; and Anna Marie Reha, SSND.