

LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS  
2022 ASSEMBLY – ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

*Embracing a Traveler's Heart: Mapping Our Journey*  
*LCWR Presidential Address*  
*Jane Herb, IHM, PhD*

As LCWR members, “we embrace our time as holy, our leadership as gift, and our challenges as blessing.”<sup>1</sup> We gather for this Assembly as congregational leaders together with our colleagues and partners from organizations with whom we journey together, living the gospel message. Look around you. The face of this Assembly is changing, and we are gifted with such changes, becoming more diverse racially, culturally and in age. We are blessed to be here.

Where do we find ourselves today?

We gather in a world shattered by violence as wars continue, with the latest in Ukraine. Throughout our global community and within our nation we are confronted by senseless acts of gun violence, particularly ongoing hate crimes. We stand with the Marianites of Holy Cross following the kidnapping of one of their sisters, Suellen Tennyson, MSC and the Sacred Heart Sisters in South Sudan after the murder of two of their sisters last August, Mother Mary Daniel and Sr. Regina Roba Pasquale.

While we celebrate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson’s appointment to the Supreme Court, we are also troubled by the confirmation hearings that, at times, seemed more like harassment than appropriate dialogue. The racial divide continues within our country as we also live out our commitment to the Spirit Call Within a Call.

Within our Church, we are energized by the call of Pope Francis to a synodal church. The call to synodality resonates with us as we stay grounded in our commitment to contemplative dialogue. The invitation to encounter, listen and discern gives us hope as we strive to live our call to be the People of God, an inclusive church that welcomes all. We are blessed with Pope Francis renewing the call to a post-Vatican church. Yet, we are curious about those within our Church who challenge and confront this movement.

We are gradually moving to a post-COVID world, and we have hope that the vaccine is available to all in our global community and that all will be vaccinated. We mourn with our brothers and sisters world-wide as the number of deaths approaches 7 million and the number of cases of COVID surpasses 500 million. As leaders, we ponder the lessons learned by this global pandemic and we are committed to live life differently.

What I have shared is a brief snapshot of some of our external realities. As leaders of congregations, we recognize that the past two and one-half years have challenged us in ways that we have not been challenged before. For many of us, a good part of our time in leadership has been during the global pandemic. Overnight we were tossed into a world of uncertainty. One day we were having communal dining in our motherhouses; the next day all residents were served in their rooms. Our sisters were isolated, and we tried to find ways to connect with

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<sup>1</sup> LCWR Call for 2015 - 2022

them. Each day brought new awareness of how to work to ensure the safety and well-being of each person. Some of our communities were hit hard with deaths from COVID and we could not gather to celebrate the lives of these women who had given decades of their lives to living the missions of their congregations. We struggled to mandate vaccines for our employees, knowing that we would lose some key staff. Some LCWR members needed to extend their leadership term as chapters were postponed. We learned to connect for assemblies in a virtual world. Yet, during these years, we were called to carry forth our chapter directions and respond to the emerging needs of our brothers and sisters.

As congregational leaders, we responded enthusiastically to the LCWR process of Discerning Our Emerging Future. While each of our congregations is faced with the emerging reality of our demographics, this discernment has invited us to walk together, exploring what may be possible. Many of us are faced with property, building issues, or finding creative ways to continue our sponsored ministries. As I pondered the various exchanges of the virtual conversations we have had over the past years, I realized that, while we are true to our founding charisms, it seems we are leaning into the future of religious life, perhaps not simply the survival of our own congregations.

We continue to live in a liminal space. The word liminal is derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold; that is, the bottom part of a doorway that must be crossed when entering a building. As such, a liminal organization needs to unlearn old behaviors, challenge the status quo, take risks, and learn.<sup>2</sup> Something is coming to an end, and we do not know what is emerging. This time calls forth radical trust while it is also a time of creativity and passion.

In the midst of all this, we are called to open our hearts to *Mystical Wisdom: Following the Spirit's Beckoning*. The stage has been set and I wish to offer my reflections as we walk the journey into the future together.

As I prepared these remarks, I recalled the presidential address of Marcia Allen, CSJ in 2016 where she extended a prophetic invitation to engage in experimentation, exploration, and creativity as we lived into our realities.<sup>3</sup> Marcia cited statistics from the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) survey from 1995 and 2005.<sup>4</sup> The reality continues to emerge today and into the future. Congregations are becoming smaller and the number of members over age 70 is increasing. The data reported from religious institutes of men's and women's congregations were – and are – startling. Marcia's challenge to us then – and I believe it is a continued challenge for us today – is to a new horizon. The horizon that Marcia invited us to is “a horizon of expectation: a far-wide imaginal scape in which we can expect every possibility and potential that might await us.”<sup>5</sup>

Preparing this reflection reminded me of a novel that I was introduced to years ago.<sup>6</sup> The story is of a monk, Fra Mauro, a cartographer to the Court of Venice. Fra Mauro remains in his cell

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 1

<sup>3</sup> Marcia Allen, “Transformation – An Experiment in Hope,” LCWR Presidential Address, August 10, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Sources: Statistics for reporting years 1995, 2005, and 2015, based on data submitted to the National Religious Retirement Office by participating religious institutes; 2025 projections based on William M. Mercer Mortality Tables for Religious.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> James Cowan, *A Mapmakers Dream*, Boston, MA: Warner Books, 1996.

and is attentive to those who stop by or those he invites in to give him information as he follows his desire to create the perfect map of the world. The essence of the story is that he learned to perceive the reality for the map through the eyes of others. The author recognizes that “True philosophers are those who embark upon a voyage into the unknown, unsure of their destination or whether they might even return.”<sup>7</sup> Fra Mauro realizes that the experiences of those who come to visit him changes him. At times, the map he was creating was laden with conflicting views. To complete an exact map of the world, the monk realizes that he must learn to look at the problem from another perspective and to abandon the normal perceptions of the work to attain a deeper sensibility. The journey of Fra Mauro is a journey to the very limits of the way we imagine our world. I believe that is our journey also.

As I embarked on shaping a few thoughts as we look to the future of religious life, I wondered – and I encourage all of us to wonder – who might be invited into “our cells” as we shape the future of religious life. I had four such shaping conversations.

The first was with conversation partners that included a commissary, a leader from a congregation entering the next phase of its journey, one that is moving to a new governance structure and one who is an LCWR board member.<sup>8</sup> I also listened carefully at the spring meeting of the Contemporary Religious Life Committee as we looked to the future and the needs of the LCWR members. There were several descriptors and images that emerged from the initial conversation with other leaders and members of the Contemporary Religious Life Committee. The general theme of evolution was present while recognizing that we are rooted in our charisms and connected to one another. The image of the seasons surfaced, and it seems that we are in the season of autumn, letting go and being open to what is to come. I heard that this is a time of nurturing a seed, tending to it so that new life may emerge, which invites Spring. However, I don’t believe that we can avoid a time of winter, where there is a starkness, an emptiness.

The second part of the conversation that I pursued was about looking into the future, perhaps 20 years hence. We recognized the call to mystery, a deeper and broader call. Religious will remain rooted in a contemplative spirit as we nurture our spirituality. Yes, we will be smaller and will need to simplify structures while responding to the invitation to interdependence. There will be a communal focus as new ministries are explored together. The relationship with our Church will continue to challenge us with the hope that we will truly be a synodal Church.

All agreed that we will need to widen our tent as we look to shape religious life for the future. Key conversations need to happen with our newer/younger members. Opening conversations to an inter-religious dialogue will broaden our perspective. Our lay colleagues and trusted advisors with whom we have worked will be important conversation partners. The Nones and Nuns have joined us on our journey in a mutually enriching relationship. The Contemporary Religious Life Committee in a particular way spoke of moving from “either or thinking to that which is both-and thinking,” thus creating space for diversity and for the new to emerge.

The third conversation partner was a town hall meeting with the members of Giving Voice. Let me offer a bit of background on the choice of this conversation. On July 29, 2021, the program

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Cooney, IHM, Pushpa Gomes, CSC, Pat McDermott, RSM, Mary Jo Nelson, OLVM,

“On Being” presented an interview with Krista Tippett and Jen Bailey, a young pastor and social innovator.<sup>9</sup> Their conversation reflects the importance of having inter-generational conversations. Krista believes that the cross-generational accompaniment is essential to meeting this century’s callings towards belonging and healing. Jen, citing a prayer of Oscar Romero, written by Fr. Ken Untener, “It helps, sometimes, to take the long view,”<sup>10</sup> invites the perspective of Krista and others who are invited to reflect on their experience. The two women respect and value their friendship and inter-generational conversations.

I found encouragement for these last two conversations with Laurie Brink, OP in her book *The Heavens Are Telling the Glory of God*<sup>11</sup>. I was particularly drawn to Laurie’s reflection on generational differences as she explored the implications of the New Cosmology, the theological reflections on the science of the universe, for religious life. Laurie gives a picture of the different generations in religious life today (2022).

- Approximately 62% of religious in the United States are in the Silent Generation (born 1925 – 1942).
- Approximately 32% of religious in the United States are in the Baby Boomer Generation (born 1943 – 1960).
- Approximately 5.4% of religious in the United States are Generation X (born 1961 – 1981).
- Less than 4% of religious in the United States are Millennials (born 1982 – 2004).

Exploring generational differences, according to Brink, reminds us that while we are all religious, we do not come from the same experience, nor do we have a common vocabulary. Those who know Vatican II from the history books have a different reality than those who experienced the impact of Vatican II on their lives as religious. As religious our lives have unique historical, social, cultural and, perhaps, spiritual contexts to our lives. Understanding these differences and entering conversations together is important as we look to the future of religious life.

Following the invitation from the Giving Voice leadership, 24 sisters<sup>12</sup> joined me for a Town Hall meeting one evening. I suggested the following as discussion starters.

- In the spirit of Rip Van Winkle, if you fell asleep for 20 years, when you woke up, what would religious life look like?
- We often refer to religious life as prophetic. What does that mean to you?
- As you imagine leadership in the future, what does it look like?

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<sup>9</sup> *On Being*, National Public Radio, July 29, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Laurie Brink, OP, *The Heavens Are Telling the Glory of God*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022

<sup>12</sup> Nodelyn Abayan, SSS, Guadalupe Aguilar, OLVM, Chioma Ahanihu, SLW, Jane Aseltyne, IHM, Dina Bato, SP, Jessi Beck, PBVM, Kelly Biddle, OP, Melissa Carnardo, SCL, Chero Chuma, CSJP, Grace Mary DelPriore, CSSF, Meg Earsley, FSPA, Margaret Foley, OSF, Annie Klapheke, SC, Eilis McCulloh, HM, Theresa Petrazzello, CSJ, Limeteze Pierre-Gilles, SSND, Rose Ngieyen, SP, Kari Pohl, CSJ, Kathryn Press, ASCJ, Amy Taylor, FSPA, Thuy Tran, CSJ, Audra Turnbull, IHM, Nicole Vareren, SND, Kelly Williams, RSM

In the spirit of transparency, several of those that joined me on the call needed to google Rip Van Winkle! In a small way, this reminded me of the different perspectives that we bring to such a conversation. The spirit of the exchange with the sisters was hope-filled. The acknowledgement of the reality that congregations are becoming smaller brought them back to the founding of the communities at a time when the congregations were smaller and nimble. The experiences of these women, both in formation and in Giving Voice, is inter-congregational. The image of a butterfly emerging was one that was used as they discussed the emerging of religious life in the future. Diversity among the group gathered is a reality that continues to emerge for these women. The prophetic call of religious life takes the form of speaking our truth with integrity. This witness will be inter-cultural, allowing grace through the Spirit to enter our lives. As these women looked to the future, they saw a future that is less institutional. Living the vowed life continues to call them to give witness within our global community. Leadership for the future was described as circular and mutual, finding other ways to deal with the administrative tasks. There is a desire for a mission-driven focus and not one of maintenance.

The final group to join me in such conversations were representatives from the Leadership Collaborative.<sup>13</sup> I posed similar questions to this group as I did with Giving Voice, but without the reference to Rip Van Winkle! Twenty-nine women joined me on this call. Some of the same themes emerged as they had with other conversation partners. Congregations will be smaller and more diverse. We will be interconnected. There will be collaborative efforts and the need to return to the spirit of our founders and our charisms. In a particular way, this conversation yielded insights regarding structures that need to change as we move into the future. Religious life will be less institutional as we find ways to look at the need for our special ministries in the futures of our sponsored ministries. Two of the challenges posed were the need for the corporate structures of congregations to evolve, and the need to involve our lay colleagues in the discussions. In doing these things, can we look at our canonical structures (congregational leader and team) to function differently? One participant referenced Anthony Gittins, CSSP challenging us to move from perfectionists to prophets, managers to martyrs and from maintenance to mission. It will be important to use our collective voice to speak the truth within our Church and in response to the societal situations that emerge. These women also spoke truth within with a sense of hope as religious life is reborn and conversations such as this will continue.

What have I learned as I “sat in my cell” and listened to these conversation partners? Through these listening sessions, I heard five calls emerging. I am reminded of a homily given by Julie Casey, IHM in July 2006. Julie stated, “There is something about a call that changes us, transforms us, that won’t let us go. Each of these and all of these have hints of Spirit in them that invites us to choose who we will be, what we will do.”

### **The call to transformation.**

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<sup>13</sup> Gloria Agnes, MM, Teresa Bednarz, RSM, Clare Marie Beichner, SSJ, Mary Kate Birge, SSJ, Linda Buck, CSJ, Krista Clements, FSPA Affiliate, Sue Ermnster, FSPA, Margaret Farrell, RSC, Fran Fasolka, IHM, Jeanmarie Gribaudo, CSJ, Pauline Gunda, RSM, Monica Gundler, SC, Michelle Hetherington, RSC, Rebecca Hodge, OP, Janet Kinney, CSJ, Donna Marie Korba, IHM, Clara Kreis, CDP, Denise Lyon, IHM, Beatriz Martinez, SSND, Julie Matthews, RSM, Ann McGovern, RSM, Aneesah McNamee, OP, Montiel Rosenthal, SC, Mary Stanco, HM, Grace Surdovel, IHM, Diane Trotta, OP, Claudia Ward, RSM, Rose Weidenbenner, RSM, Mindy Welding, IHM

The conversations I had with the various groups reflected the changes that are taking place. All around us and within our congregations we are faced with a myriad of changes. We can adapt to the changes, but the deeper call is to transformation. Ted Dunn in his book *Graced Crossroads* invites us to that place of transformation. Dunn challenges us to create a new narrative that moves beyond outdated paradigms.<sup>14</sup> Victor Frankl invites us to a new place with these words. “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”<sup>15</sup> Often in my conversations the image of nature was used as an example of the transformation that happens. Such is true as we think about the universe and that it is a work in progress, constantly transforming and evolving. Dunn reminds us that transformation is multidimensional including personal, interpersonal, and organizational. The need for such transformation is here now. This is our work.

### **The call to vulnerability.**

When I began my term in leadership, I chose to engage the services of a mentor/coach. This proved to be a gift as I started on the journey of congregational leadership. One of the first things she did was invite me to be vulnerable as I engaged members of the team. This was not the easiest thing for me to do, but I believe it served me well. As I listened to the conversation partners that I gathered, I realized that this call is true for us if we really want to be open to the power of transformation in our lives. This will be true particularly for the next three to five years.

As we journey to the future, when we are vulnerable, we allow ourselves to be “anchored in God’s grace, wisdom, acceptance and love.”<sup>16</sup> We are familiar with the work of Brene Brown as she unpacks the meaning of vulnerability in her books and various TED talks. She invites us to think about vulnerability as the courage to show up when we have no control over the outcome. Nothing could be farther from the truth as we engage in our emerging future! In *Dare to Lead*<sup>17</sup> Brown invites us to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous. Vulnerability is that emotion that emerges during times of uncertainty and risk. As we are anchored in God’s love, we need to trust. Brown assures us that we need trust to be vulnerable and we need to be vulnerable to trust.<sup>18</sup>

### **The call to prophetic witness of religious life.**

As I referred to the prophetic call to religious life with the conversation partners, I was challenged as to what we really mean by that often-used phrase. The potential Assembly Resolution that continues our focus on the intersection of racism, migration, and climate crisis invites our prophetic voice and action.

In reflecting on this, I was drawn to the recent publication of *Desire, Darkness, and Hope*,<sup>19</sup> a series of essays engaging the thought of Connie FitzGerald, OCD. Considering impasse today, I was drawn to the words of Shawn Copeland and Connie FitzGerald, whom we will have the

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<sup>14</sup> Ted Dunn, *Graced Crossroads*, St. Charles, Missouri: CCS Publications, 2020

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 255

<sup>16</sup> Hillary Musgrave, “The Gift of Vulnerability,” Community Works, Inc. Newsletter, January 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead*, New York: Random House, 2018

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Laurie Cassidy and M. Shawn Copeland, editors, *Desire, Darkness and Hope*, Collegeville, MN, 2021

pleasure of hearing later in the Assembly. Copeland refers to impasse as “the strange and discomforting societal situation that we ourselves have made through our refusals to live mindfully, attentively, reasonable, responsibly, and lovingly in relation to the Divine to other human persons, and to the entire created order.”<sup>20</sup> As we embrace the intersection of racism, migration, and climate change, does this not describe the impasse we experience? Copeland invites us to share in the passion of Connie FitzGerald and engage in contemplation that has the potential to lead to transformation of human consciousness for global change.

Amid the critical issues before us, we may feel helpless. The dark night of our world can lead us to the experience of impasse, and it is there that there is the opportunity for creative growth and transformation. FitzGerald, in her classic essay “Impasse and Dark Night,” reminds us that it is during societal impasse that “God makes demands for conversion, healing, justice, love, compassion, solidarity, and communion.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it is in the call to contemplation and our commitment to these issues that we can discover anew the prophetic call of religious life today and into the future.

### **The call to synodality within our Church.**

This past year we were invited to participate in Synod 2023. I must admit that this invitation was met with both optimism and a bit of skepticism. Pope Francis, in the preparatory document for the Synod, was clear as to the purpose.

The purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to be nourished, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.

In so many ways, the processes and approaches women religious have used in a post-Vatican II church mirror the concept of synodality. Now, we are invited to take our learnings and bring them forward as we listen to the call of the Spirit.

Over these months, our communities have met to respond to the invitation to participate in this preparatory phase of Synod 2023 and we have encouraged listening sessions in our areas of ministry and in parish communities. LCWR also held various listening sessions. Our response expresses our desires, our needs and those we hear from our brothers and sisters, particularly the marginalized. The LCWR response that was sent to Rome included our desire for a Church that is inclusive and welcoming, that hears the cries of the people on the margins and our Earth as well as seeking ways to heal a Church that is experiencing polarization.

I am encouraged by our continued commitment to the Spirit Call Within a Call that deals with systemic racism and our desire to educate ourselves in areas such as understanding our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers. I am at the same time challenged by the continued call over the years within our Church to deal with the sin of racism as well as proclamations that further exclude the LGBTQ+ communities. Can we find a way to bridge these gaps and remain faithful

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 91

to the call of the Spirit at this time in history? I am encouraged by Cardinal Tobin's words at the opening of the Synod.

The synod recognizes that the People of God, those whom God has called out of darkness into God's light by virtue of their baptism, are called to walk the same road in the right direction. ... Just as the pandemic shone a harsh light that revealed the cracks in our society and its values, the genius of the synodal process is that it will starkly reveal just how little-traveled is the road to the synodal Church and how anti-synodal is the culture of a controlling hierarchy with a passive laity.<sup>22</sup>

I believe that this is our call as we desire a transformed Church. LCWR renewed our commitment to speak to the Gospel call for human dignity and respect that is relative to the horrific situations in Buffalo and Uvalde and the obvious manifestation of white supremacy and gun violence associated with these violent acts. We also called on our brother bishops to join us. My hope is that we will come together with a desire to be in communion and to participate as broadly as possible for the sake of the mission of our Church.

### **The call to create Mary and Elizabeth encounters.**

At the Union of International Superior Generals (UISG) Assembly, we reflected on the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth during our times of prayer. Mary, pregnant with new life, seeks out Elizabeth, a woman of wisdom. As Mary meets Elizabeth, the child within Elizabeth leaps with joy. Both women, pregnant with new life meet one another and are blessed by this encounter. We need the Marys and Elizabeths on our journey to the future. Let us create spaces for such encounters.

So, what is the message for LCWR members? We need to look to the future with both our heads and our hearts. As we do so, the future of religious life needs to respond to the transformation that is happening within us as the changes are happening around us. We need to be nimble and to risk as we look to the future. We are called to trust in the mystery as God calls us from the future. There is a call for more diversity as we embrace interculturality. To engage in the divine dance into the future will take courage and a spirit of hope.

What better place to gather as we ponder our journey into the future than here in St. Louis where the Gateway Arch, which once represented opening up the west, can symbolize our gateway to the future. As we pass through the arch, let us consider widening out tent for future conversations. In the spirit of Judy Chicago's art installation entitled the "Dinner Party," I encourage us to invite others to our table, where all are welcome. I return to an adaptation of the words from *A Mapmaker's Dream*, "Render [the future of religious life] in the form you hope it might one day attain, rather than accept anything else."<sup>23</sup>

I close with the words of Margaret Brennan, IHM and a former President of LCWR, that invite us to have "travelers' hearts."

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<sup>22</sup> Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Homily, October 17, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> James Cowan, *A Mapmaker's Dream*. New York, Warner Books, 1996.



A temptation for any traveler is to 'settle down' and 'settle in' – to domesticate the urges and impulses that beckon forward. All persons and groups, and especially institutions, are subject to this subtle temptation in the name of stability and order. Our turning – our readiness to risk the future, it seems to me, is only if we have traveler's hearts – where waiting is a respite, not a rooting. It is to have a watchful eye on the changing horizon and to know the moment when it is time to say, in the words of Walt Whitman, "We have stood here like trees in the ground long enough ... Let us sail for open waters where we have passage."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Margaret Brennan, IHM, "Waiting in a Traveler's Heart," *Turning Points in Religious Life*, edited by Carol Quigley, IHM, Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987, p. 236