

Discerning our Emerging Future: A Congregation Zoom Discussion

November 19th, 2020

Questions

1. Is there anything that surprised you or caught your attention? If so, what?

Nazareth Community:

- What caught our attention was the fact that all communities are declining.

Sacred Heart Community:

- The statistics offered were not surprising – the implications about what that will mean for those available for leadership positions and participation in Chapters were something we had not thought about before.

Group 2:

- Sense of excitement about being on the edge of something new in religious life, in the congregation and in the world
- Feeling a little nervous
- Feeling sad at the loss of my sisters; diminishment
- Feeling the challenge of this moment that also contains a degree of energy being on the edge of something bigger than ourselves with a call to collaborate with others for mission
- Responsibility to help newer members get connected to others so wider circles of connection can help them engage enthusiastically in mission

Group 3:

- Nothing was surprising.

Group 5:

- Report is a sobering reality. We have to face the future.

Group 6:

- The statistical report of our own congregation when compared to the national stats show that we are in a good place, actually the right place to start talking about future plans.
- The report calls us to look at what we want to be. This is the time to define our future. WE need to start now while we have realistic options.

Group 7:

- Not for IHM. The data underscored our lived reality. At nearly 300 members, we're heartened by signs of vitality, by having a significant number of younger members and a pool of possible leadership. We're hopeful, but not allowing our hope to lull us into complacency because the reality is that our numbers are decreasing. We feel the congregation is taking steps to lead us into our emerging future, whatever that may be.

Group 8:

- Information not happy news but believe God is working
- We (IHMs) have seen this trend in our own community coming as statistics have been share before
- There were no surprises in the information offered
- We fit into the larger national group
- The information was NOT comforting

Group 9:

- When considering our past numbers and the extent of our impact, it is difficult not to mourn what was. One is left to worry about who will bring the good news of God's word to the world. We are caught between this sorrow and the need to be open to "something new" that God's Spirit is creating.
- It is clear that we are among the larger congregations and blessed with new, younger members. We must, however, not be complacent. We need to be planning now and following the example of the Casimir Sisters with whom we have been blessed to journey in our covenant.

Group 11:

- Happy that we are one of the larger congregations.

2. How do you see the data in relation to our IHM Congregation, and how did it make you feel?

Nazareth Community:

- We feel we are better off than a lot of other congregations because of our numbers and the level of activity of our members. Terry gave a very good analysis of our community in relationship to the total report. It made us feel energized and sparked our confidence.

Sacred Heart Community:

- The IHM Forward Program that our younger Sisters participated in seems especially good grounding program for those who participated and good for all of us.
- Two of our ministries in particular- Friends of the Poor and St. Joseph's Center- need to be guarded by the Congregation as missions to the poor.
- We are amazed and blessed by our connection to our Sisters of St. Casimir. They are brave and faithful facing into their decline, making difficult but key decisions about property, care of the last Sisters, all with wisdom and faith. They model for us.

Group 2:

- Question the accuracy of data on a downward slide and that's where we're going to stay when in reality there is a generation of very service oriented individuals whose faith-based needs can be nurtured by elders
- Newer members who have been participating in inter-congregational gatherings are already initiating on their own to support one another and have substantive conversations about the emerging future of religious life – collaboration is the key

- Need to bless the efforts of newer members
- Feeling blessed as a congregation and recognizing that this places a huge responsibility on us to initiate with other groups
- Realizing significant changes can be expected in the next years so who are we going to partner with, minister with?
- Surprised at the number of much smaller congregations
- Concern for our newer members; what do we need to do for them moving in to the future?
- With the many pandemics facing us (virus, racism...) it behooves us all to be *active* in any way we can (regardless of age) to support the movement into the future

Group 3:

- Importance of INTERCULTURALITY, COLLABORATION with other women religious and congregations of women religious.
- Possibilities of creative thinking with leadership: hire and instill charism in lay people to do administration. Let those with admin talents do admin. That would free up sisters to do ministry and share their passion for the mission.
- Flexibility is important. What do we need to let go of?

Group 5:

- Sponsorship concerns - How can we maintain our sponsored works? Should we maintain them? Should we put them into the hands of trusted lay people who understand our core values and charism? How do we maintain influence?
- Looking 5 to 10 years out, where is the energy? Reality check for all of us.
- Develop strong partners for ministry.
- Step forward in grace

Group 6:

- Though we don't like hearing the statistics, it's important that we know and own the reality of our demographics.
- We were surprised to hear of the number of US congregations heading into their final Chapter.

Group 7:

- What was a bit of a surprise were the statistics on the national scene, where we saw a dramatic shift in the membership of religious congregations as a whole. We see the data as offering an invitation towards greater collaboration and deepening relationships across congregations.

Group 8:

- Information shows we are in a liminal space but we can feel the emergence of something new
- We need to be IN the questions:
 - WHO are we called to BE now?
 - What are we being called to?
- Not feeling anxious – living in the mystery with trust
- Need to look for emergent clues like the thousands of people in the food lines:
 - Who are they and who are we to them
 - Who are we to God in the light of these people

- God's signals to us come through these people and therefore, our reason to be comes through these people . . .
- Prayer will facilitate this discernment
- What keeps people in their 30's in religious life going . . . what gives them hope and joy?
- Need to note in our IHM congregation the significant loss/ deaths of sisters younger than the medium age of 80; in the past sisters who died were in their 80's +; many of the last 20 sisters who have died have been in their late 60's and 70's. WHAT IS THIS SAYING TO US?
- In time of Covid, what are we being asked to do? Collaboration with other religious congregations?
- We need to acknowledge and applaud LCWR for
 - Compiling this information
 - Initiative to pass it on
 - Knowledge is power
 - If we know where we are, we can begin to make the decisions about ministry
 - Must discern and act because the ball is now in our court . . .
- Reading the signs of the times and therefore what God is saying:
 - 50+ years ago the majority of the sisters were young . . . 50 and below . . . we discerned our energy was for ministry
 - As our majority is edging toward 80+, God (may be) is no longer calling us to . . . needing us to put out minimal energy into ministry but MISSION;
 - Being called not to DO but to BE
 - Being called to presence
- 80 today is vastly different than 80 – 50 years ago; 80 means to be rewired for Mission vs. retired from Ministry; a whole new discernment of WHO ARE YOU?
- Huge reality check regarding the thought that we may not in the future have enough sisters to attend a General Chapter
- The IHM Forward cohort needs to think more globally and reach out to other congregations
- Our new sisters are already being formed to do this through their inter-congregational gathering, classes, meetings . . .

Group 9:

- As we collaborate nationwide we will be called to assume leadership as we form partnerships with other congregations. There is excitement in the midst of diminishment and sorrow: God's plan will unfold.
- The inability of some congregations to hold chapters and elect leaders is startling. The changes through history have brought us to a new place. While we can focus on our hope for new members, we must also be open to what God is asking of us now, in our new, lived reality.
- We must lean into God as we search together for new ways to serve, lead and govern.

Group 11:

- In the past people were electing to leadership at a young age. In 5 to 10 years looking at leadership pool of those who will be under 79 is concerning.
- Data not surprising. Sense of concern over what will be happening.

3. What questions surfaced in you from this presentation?

Nazareth Community: Among the questions that surfaced were:

- How do we treat Sisters of another culture? Sisters of other cultures came to our community and left--Why?
- How are we going to respond to the changing needs that are presented to us?
- How will the needs affect our mission?
- Will we ever unite with the two other IHM communities; we felt we had more in common with the Monroe sisters than with the Phil. sisters. (Nazareth Community)

Sacred Heart Community:

- What do we do now? Are there some present options we need to consider?
- What are our strengths and weaknesses right now?
- Hopeful examples of leadership, though elderly: Joe Biden and Pope Francis.

Group 2:

- Are we willing, for the sake of mission, collaboration, to let go of just being IHM for a broader good?
- What role do our Associates have in our emerging future and what is our responsibility to them?

Group 3:

- What can we let go of to become more vibrant?
- How will we live our call and charism given our ages? Called to be PRESENCE.
- Acknowledge the data and then look for possibilities: Elderhood? WISDOM in maturity.
- How can we free things up for younger members so they will not need to carry the burden of today?
- How can we collaborate with lay people now so we free up our younger members for mission?
- Dream of Religious Life beyond the Congregation!
- Leaders and sisters need to have conversations across congregations.
- There is still wealth to tap: Associates, Circles of Grace!
- Call to Religious Life is beyond IHM... call to this way of life!

Group 5:

- What should we let go of in order to move forward?
- Look for partners in ministries that present themselves
- Be intentional in ministry choices
- Commit to intense work for vocations.
- Ask younger members what is their vision for ministry and religious life? Live into their dream with them.

Group 6:

- Can we define our impact? Do we want to make smaller impacts in many places or greater impacts in fewer places? The conversation about our legacy will bring us together and strengthen us.

- What is our legacy? That doesn't mean what are we leaving behind, rather it means, what are we building?

Group 7:

- How does the data presented impact our mission and inform our planning for a shared future?
- How might we insure that we continue to live fully while also embracing the realities of fewer members and resources?
- Might our growing smaller be an invitation to refine our priorities and re-define what is of the essence for IHM?

Group 8:

- During this Covid time, how do we "shepherd" our congregation . . . how do you give hope to the laity who are scared . . . feeling unstable . . .
- Great hope in Giovanna's profession . . . transferring from another congregation, overcoming so many obstacles for mission and the call . . . so meaningful on Founder's Day . . . what does this mean for Latin presence . . .

Group 9:

- We need to be actively engaged in embracing our new reality: what does our data tell us? How will we move forward creatively? How will we be called to utilize our sisters' gifts, to direct our sponsored works and collaborate with other congregations?
- Our younger members struggle with the pressure of the call to leadership. Age alone should not burden them with the possibility of "serving on leadership teams" for much of their remaining lives. It is clear that they did not enter the congregation for this purpose and can find it 'smothering'. They can and do lead in many ways and offer their gifts wherever they can and as the Spirit of God prompts them.
- Living in the time of Covid has put stress on many aspects of our lives. The inability of members to be together in meaningful ways was discussed. The loneliness experienced during these days and the loss of so many of our sisters can't help but color how we respond to the data that was presented.

Group 11:

- More hope for vocations. Promoting more people for entrance into the congregation. Where can we really promote?
- Where do we go with all of this? How do we do it?
- Young is an interesting term.
- How are we going to keep the energy up among us?

4. Other Feedback

Nazareth Community:

- We had an interesting discussion on how the SSC sisters handled their diminishment and what an inspiration their actions were to us. They were forward looking so that their charism is now

being carried out in many ways and places even though the sisters may not be physically present. We also talked about the Oblates and our relationship with them.

- We felt that the presentations and discussions were well done and profitable to us. Our thanks to all who made this possible.