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**GHR**  
FOUNDATION

# Evaluation of the Sister Support Initiative



## EVALUATION OF THE SISTER SUPPORT INITIATIVE

MLC Group

June 27, 2023

The MLC Group is an organizational consulting firm that focuses on supporting faith-based/ values driven groups in assessing program effectiveness and organizational impact. The approach employs scientifically rigorous methods to evaluate the evolution, current status, and future prospects of organizational initiatives and related programming. The MLC Group is particularly attuned to the distinctive orientation and priorities of Catholic projects.

FRONT COVER: *Photos courtesy of the National Religious Vocation Conference, a Sister Support Initiative grant recipient.*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

The Sister Support Initiative (SSI) of GHR Foundation can be traced to Gerry Rauenhorst, founder of GHR. Reflecting during a board meeting upon women’s underrepresentation in leadership and a declining number of vocations to religious life, he wondered about root causes. In response to Mr. Rauenhorst’s query, GHR staff prepared a white paper that addressed two salient and pressing questions: “Why aren’t more women entering religious life?” and “What would it take to increase the involvement of women in Church leadership and in society?”

To better understand the origins and contemporary situation that prompted the creation of the SSI, the Initiative must be placed in historical context. Currently, religious life in the U.S. is experiencing a rapid, disorienting period of change occasioned by a significant decline in the number of women religious in the U.S. The shift can be traced to the profound sociocultural realities that have shaped life for women in the 20th and early 21st centuries, including the rise of greater professional opportunities for women, the diminishment of the role of Church in society, and smaller Catholic families not wanting their daughters to enter religious life.

The recurring cycles of decline and growth within religious communities have been well-documented.<sup>1</sup> In *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life*, the authors offer a sociological model of religious life that depicts the “Life Cycle of a Religious Community.” This model provides helpful context for understanding the current situation of many women’s religious institutes in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The first period of religious life centers around the founding person and her unique vision before moving into a lengthy period of expansion. During expansion the founding charism<sup>3</sup> is institutionalized and the community’s membership grows. The community may take on many new works and

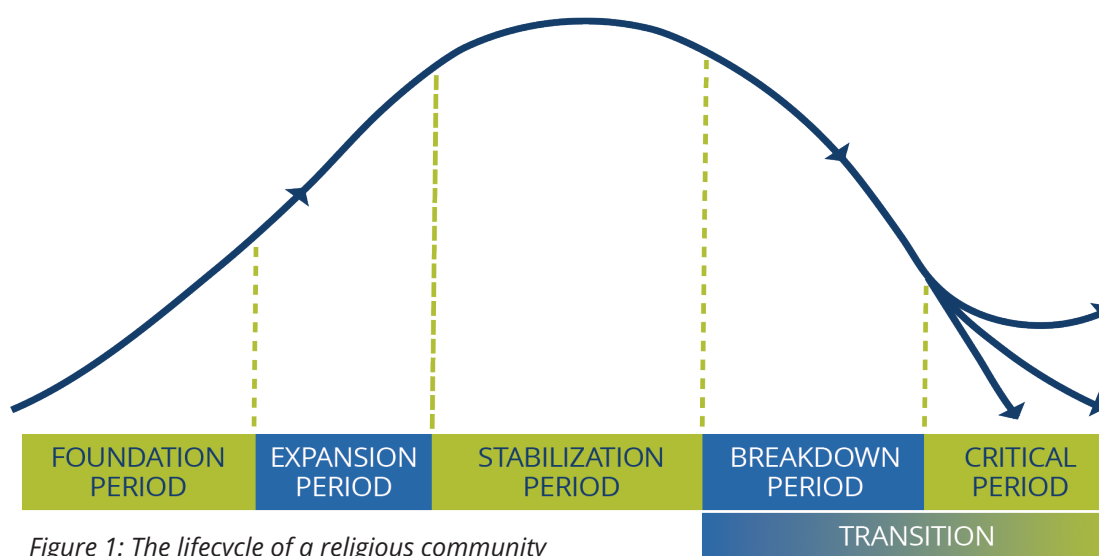


Figure 1: The lifecycle of a religious community

<sup>1</sup> Anton Lingier and Wim Vandewiele, “The Decline of Religious Life in the Twentieth Century,” *Religions*, vol.12 (2021): 388.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Coda, S.M., Raymond Fitz, S.M., et al., *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 53-60.

<sup>3</sup> **Charism**, as it relates to the life of women religious, refers to the gifts or aptitudes that individual congregations receive as part of their call to specific forms of religious life. Some are called to serve in health care, while others are called to education, social service, missionary activity, or other forms of ministry.

*We need to understand that what is happening is part of the natural lifecycle of religious life.*

experience a period of high energy, excitement, and increased membership before the stabilization period. In the stabilization period, a feeling of success and even personal satisfaction can arise from being in the community. At the same time, members can become very absorbed in their work as they strive to meet the increasing social expectations. One of our interviewees recalled her experience in noting that sisters had been characterized primarily as “worker bees” for the Church, a narrative that sisters are now actively pushing back against. This stabilization period is a time of extraordinary contribution to human well-being on a large scale. Yet, it can be accompanied by diminished intensity of communal vision and commitment among members as the community becomes progressively more institutionalized and bureaucratic.

The next period in this sociological model is the breakdown phase. During this time the community's life and work are not nimble enough to meet important new challenges. Polarization can occur when those who want to use traditional methods to solve the community's problems align themselves in opposition to those who, in varying degrees, challenge the community's “business as usual.” The model then moves into its final stage, the critical period where extinction, minimal survival, or revitalization can occur.

In reviewing the SSI, the hallmarks of breakdown can be seen, though for many that phase seems

largely complete. The denial that characterized some communities 20 years ago has softened and dissipated. Religious communities made significant investment in adaptive leadership centered on personal transformation which is central to revitalization and the capacity to develop a positive, forward-looking vision of what religious life may become.<sup>4</sup> In the areas of membership and resource development they also made important investments that are dynamic, creative, and embrace diversity, as well as promote a view that, while women religious might be fewer in number and less institutionally involved, their spiritual witness will still provide a distinctive, powerful, exemplary force for good. And finally, as the SSI evolved, new forms<sup>5</sup> of religious life began to emerge, characterized by innovative ways that communities are redefining the contours of religious life.

Additionally, the data from research supports the notion that religious life will continue. There remains an interest in religious life and an inclination to seriously entertain the idea of vocation that some grantees have surfaced and engaged with tremendous success. There is a steady stream of new entrants into women's religious life, with Superiors reporting a total of 1,085 women in initial formation as of 2019 (a decline of only 10 percent from 2009). Almost half of those in initial formation are under age 30, an increase from the 43 percent who were under age 30 in 2009. Nearly three-fourths of those in initial formation are part of the Millennial Generation, born between 1981 and 1996, and another 6 percent born in 1997 or later, could be considered part of the emerging next generation of young adults.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Cada, S.M., Raymond Fitz, S.M., et al., *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 53-60.

<sup>5</sup> The use of the term **new forms**, within the context of the Sister Support Initiative must be distinguished from its formal usage in Roman Catholic canon law. Within the SSI *new forms* refers simply to new ways of doing things, different forms of collaboration, or novel forms of cooperation between and among religious institutes and/or other service organizations. Although they do constitute new forms, they are technically informal structures. Within canon law “new forms” refers to a formally sanctioned “form of living in institutes of consecrated life *canonically erected by competent authority of the Church*.” (Canon 573–606).

<sup>6</sup> Mary L. Gautier, Ph.D. and Thu T. Do, L.H.C., Ph.D., *Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference*, March 2020, <https://nrvc.net/publication/download/9180/2020-nrvc-study-on-recent-vocations-final-march-2020.pdf?view=true>.

There is also increasing diversity in religious life which plays a major role in shaping the landscape of women's religious life today. Nearly one-third of women religious identifies as a person of color, with about 20 percent born outside of the United States.<sup>7</sup> This perspective offers an effective antidote to the overbearing narrative of diminishment and even extinction entertained by some.

Finally, the courage, vision, and creativity of SSI's grantees along with the moral and financial support of GHR Foundation has facilitated a notable break in the diminishment narrative. As the re-

port demonstrates, sisters and others who have partnered with GHR over the past 13 years have woven a network and strong relational fabric across congregations, which perhaps has been the most critical element needed to support the transformation of women's religious life. The SSI has created opportunities for creativity, resilience, reinvigoration, and a sense of confidence as women religious strike out on their journey of transformation, forging a new future for women's religious life in this country.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE SSI TIMELINE AND ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

After an initial set of exploratory grants, the SSI direction became clearly focused on ensuring **"a vital future for Catholic sisters, marked by congregations that are well-led, well-resourced and powerful in spiritual witness, leadership, and service."** In pursuit of this goal the Foundation initially concentrated on three broad, interlocking capacities: *leadership, membership, and resource development*. Later, a fourth area, *new forms*<sup>8</sup> was added.

The main approach the SSI staff pursued was an emergent strategy; given that sisters themselves weren't clear on what success would entail for women's religious life, SSI staff felt it would be presumptuous and ineffective to be prescriptive about specific, desired outcomes for the initiative. Through focusing on areas of high engagement and taking cues from partners, a successful approach emerged over time. This approach also resonates deeply with GHR's values to *lead with love, reimagine what is possible, partner boldly and*

*navigate and adapt*. In addition to GHR's broad strategic approach and the sociocultural realities already discussed, the some important events occurred during the period of the SSI which further shaped the experiences of religious communities and the transition they are undergoing. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), a body within the Vatican that works to ensure compliance with Church doctrine, investigated the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) between 2009 and 2015.<sup>9</sup> This was a

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<sup>7</sup> 2020 *Study of Cultural Diversity in Vocations to Religious Life in the United States* for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2021, :<https://tinyurl.com/diversityvocations>.

<sup>8</sup> See note 5.

<sup>9</sup> According to *However Long the Night*, a book published by LCWR in 2018, "A high-ranking and very powerful Vatican office suddenly and very publicly confronted [LCWR] with forceful questions and negative assumptions about the foundation of the lives of Catholic sisters. . . . The Vatican office threatened the autonomy and even the existence of the conference, an organization on which the great majority of U.S. Catholic sisters rely for many kinds of resources, supports, and connections. The experience rocked LCWR's officers, its hundreds of members, and the approximately 60,000 sisters who belonged to member congregations at that time."



stressful endeavor for the sisters that took time and energy away from the urgent need to address all the issues facing them. Simultaneously between 2009 and 2012, the Vatican undertook an Apostolic Visitation of U.S. religious institutes. Both resolved in favor of women religious and there were some silver linings: they bolstered a sense of solidarity among sisters in the U.S. crossing congregational lines and generated immense support from the laity who could not fathom why sisters were being investigated. While it can never be known how the Vatican's involvement affected sisters' efforts to forge a new future, GHR staff did hear comments that the Vatican interventions required time, energy and resources that could have been spent working toward a new future for religious life.

*Research changes the narrative because it shows there is vibrancy and engagement.*

In 2020, COVID-19 also became a painful reality for sisters. Not only were elderly members of the communities particularly vulnerable, the in-person relationship-building that is so critical to navigating transition had to be put on hold. Sisters were once again foisted into crisis management mode. However, many communities found that technology pro-

vided platforms to collaborate with each other and the shift to digital collaboration and resource sharing took place, a small silver lining ultimately has been beneficial to communities. However, the impact of COVID-19 slowed progress on several of the projects funded by GHR.

The following timeline (Figure 2) shows some of the major developments during the Sister Support Initiative, as well as some of the contextual realities. In looking at the timeline, it offers a broad-strokes view of SSI's emergent-strategy approach: once cross-congregational networks formed and sisters began to lean into collaboration more intentionally, a proliferation of new forms emerged. According to the data, two-thirds of the new forms surfaced in the final three years of the decade-long Sister Support Initiative. This speaks to the arc of change, with older understandings and ways of doing things diminishing, while new forms rose to address shared challenges and negotiate the curve to the sisters' shared future. The fertile soil from which new forms sprung forth, in our opinion, speaks to the success of the emergent-strategy approach that GHR staff embraced and the courage of women religious to face the grief of transition as well as the joy of fresh opportunities.

## METHODOLOGY

At the outset of the evaluation that has culminated in this report, GHR posed several questions, which framed our methodology:

- What were the outcomes of GHR's investment in this area?
- How did they come about?
- What areas of continuing need do they highlight?
- What do they indicate about the emergent future of religious life?
- What are the leaps or nudges that might help women religious move to the next phase of their development?
- How were GHR's values evident?

To garner an understanding of the SSI that was both detailed and broad required a multi-dimensional methodology. Initially, an overview

## Sister Support Initiative Timeline: 2009 to 2023

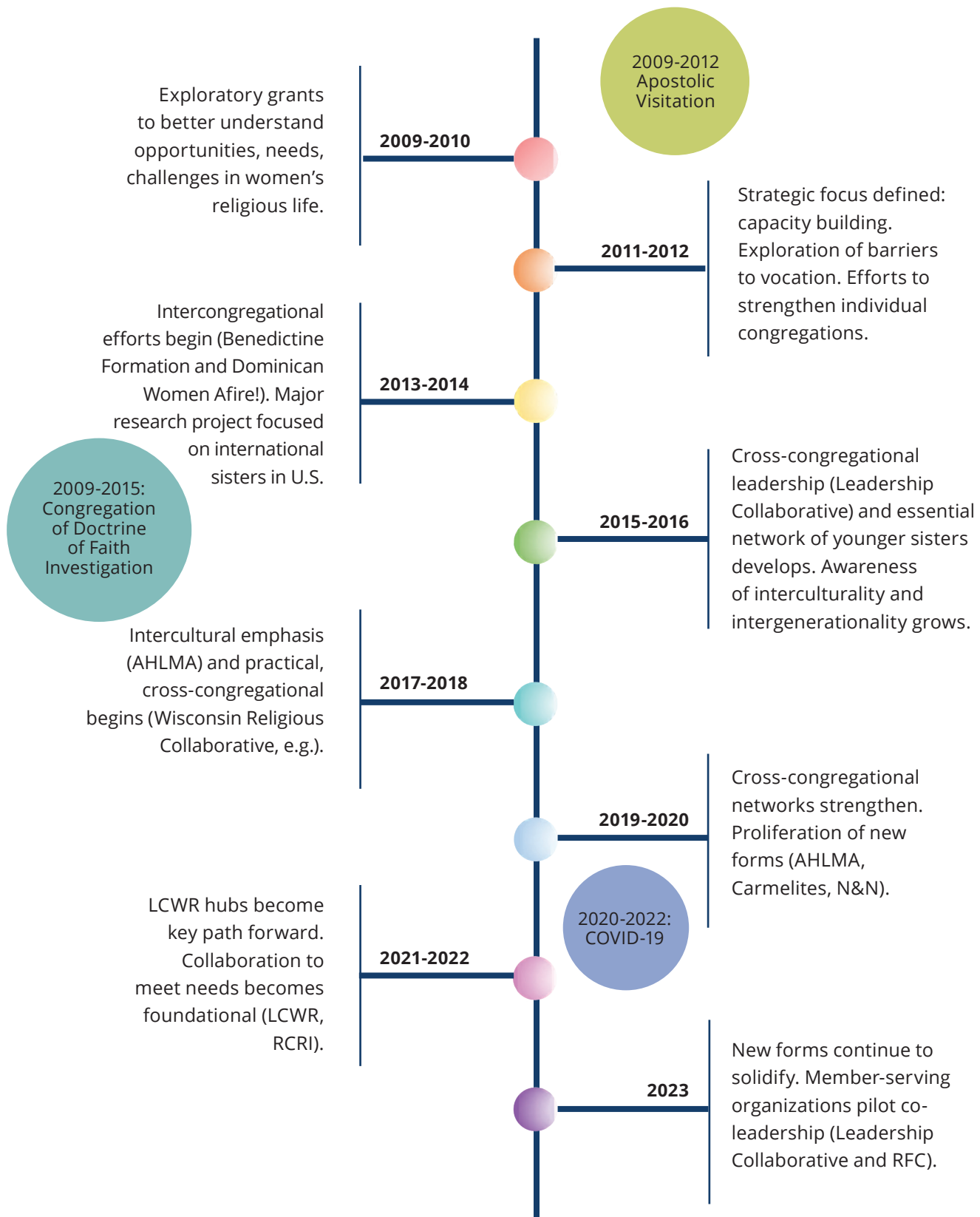


Figure 2: Sister Support Initiative Timeline: 2009-23

of the SSI initiative was generated, including the timeline, major accomplishments, and important inflection points. The overview drew upon a comprehensive review of the 54 grants that were part of the SSI domestic portfolio from 2010 to the present. Once the content and chronology of the grants were in hand, 32 representatives of organizations drawn from former and current grant recipients were interviewed. Following the

interviews, all notes were reviewed, several recordings were revisited, and key information was systematically coded. Finally, a larger framework was laid out that captured specific areas of interest put forward by GHR regarding outcomes, how change occurred, how the emergent strategy worked, and what work remains as women religious continue to negotiate the curve to the future.

## FOUR AREAS OF INVESTMENT

The SSI investment was in four interrelated and overlapping areas: leadership, membership, resource development, and new forms, with a total investment of at least \$15.58 million from 2010 through 2025. Within each area are significant accomplishments that are highlighted below.

### Area 1: Leadership

To understand the deeper contours of change that the SSI has helped usher in, the role leadership plays is essential. While older models of leadership required operational and administrative acumen, the current complexity of women's religious life calls for an adaptive style

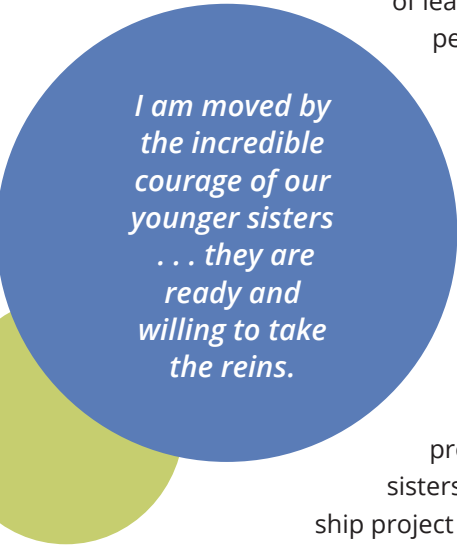
of leadership that focuses on personal and communal transformation which is essential to bring about systemic change and new expressions of religious life.

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, sensing a need for an adaptive leadership development program for their younger sisters, proposed the first leadership project that the Sister Support Initiative funded. What eventuated was an umbrella entity—the Leadership Collaborative—which houses the Congregational Leadership Develop-

ment Program, the most notable leadership development program for women religious. To date, over 500 sisters and nearly 200 associates from over 65 communities have participated in the Leadership Collaborative's programs.

The shared experience of the leadership intensive has given rise to a wide, vital network of younger sisters from dozens of congregations that reinforces the collaborative thrust of leadership's fresh face. **It is hard to overstate the sustaining force of this network of younger sisters that has grown from the Leadership Collaborative and the network's distinctive role in discerning the emerging future of religious life.**

On another front, after a robust planning process, at its 2020 Assembly LCWR leadership announced emerging orientations. At the center of this strategy is the idea of working in hubs to discern and create collaborative models of leadership to sustain religious life as well as further the emergence of future religious life. The work that LCWR is facilitating among and between congregations has provided and will continue to provide an essential forum for the future unfolding of religious life.



*I am moved by the incredible courage of our younger sisters . . . they are ready and willing to take the reins.*





## Key Grants in Leadership

- The **Sisters of Mercy of the Americas** received grants to address leadership development for women religious. Programs varied from those focused on young Mercy sisters to supporting the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (I.H.M.) leadership development to, mainly, multiple cycles of inter-congregational and international efforts. Through the Leadership Collaborative, **528 sisters** from a diverse array of communities were trained in leadership, now actively involved in adaptive leadership for religious life across the U.S. Additionally, **200 associates** received leadership development through the Leadership Collaborative programs.
- The **Leadership Conference of Women Religious** received grants that spanned multiple years. Two of the grants were for the national-level organization to steward major strategic conversations and planning around transitioning women's religious life into the future. One was focused on Region 9 and supported a collaborative, cross-congregational model to increase efficiencies and consolidate administrative functions. LCWR serves **1,350 members**, which represents about **26,000 women religious**; they are a primary mediating organization for relationship-building and the transformation of religious life.
- The **Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious** received a grant to inspire leadership for more than 300 women in parishes, schools, and communities. Several new vocations to religious life grew from this effort.
- The **Dominican Sisters** received grants to help support leadership efforts aimed at surfacing and embodying an inter-congregational Dominican identity.

## Area 2: Membership

While religious life changes and new forms emerge, today's women religious increasingly recognize that they create the bridge between the shifting present and the unknown future of "the life."<sup>10</sup> While they hold the present, they are

birthing the future. This already/not yet tension of today's religious life, gives rise to a broader understanding of membership that goes beyond focusing on increasing and retaining members. This does not mean, however, that increasing and retaining members are inconsequential. In fact, the SSI supported several grants designed

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<sup>10</sup> Within the context of the Sister Support Initiative, "the life" refers specifically to the life of women religious. Within the broader Christian context, "the Life" refers to any form of participation within the life-giving spirit of Jesus Christ: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6).



# Key Grants in Membership

- **A Nun's Life Ministry** received grants that spanned multiple years to build out their digital and multimedia resources for those interested in women's religious life and questions of vocation. There have been over 5.1 million visits to A Nun's Life website, and 1.8 million podcast downloads from 175 countries, elevating women's religious life into national and international conversations.
- **The Mexican American Catholic College** and subsequently la Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América (AHLMA) received grants to support intercultural understanding. AHLMA serves 55 congregations, and an additional 198 sisters from 23 states and two countries.
- **National Religious Vocation Conference** was awarded grants to reduce barriers to vocations and better understand, through high-quality research, the current dynamics of vocation to support religious communities and those seeking a vocation of religious life. This research has provided an important, factually based, alternative to the diminishment narrative.
- **Trinity Washington University** was awarded a grant to explore international sisters in the U.S. In addition to illuminating this topic for religious congregations, the initial report also spawned international presentations, major conferences, and two books on the topic.
- The **Religious Formation Conference** received grants to support strategic planning as well as cohort-based formation, interculturality and intercongregationality as the future of religious life emerges.
- The **Benedictines** received a grant to develop an online formation platform. Thirty-nine member monasteries from 5 countries now use the Benedictine Formation platform; another 3,200 religious communities have received their guide to setting up an online formation platform in a "pay it forward" initiative.

to advance SSI's initial membership strategy as it introduced young women to religious life and helped them discern their own vocations. Gradually, though, the SSI broadened its focus to incorporate a more comprehensive, forward-looking appreciation of membership that took account of what was unfolding in the lived experiences of women religious, their communities, and others interested in the life.

In other words, GHR began to support women religious in widening their perspective on membership. The work brought to light forces that were shaping membership as it gave visibility and voice to agents of change within the life. Four basic fields of interest emerged:

1. Diversity: Intercultural living and ministry
2. Inclusion: Integration of cultural differences, gifts, and contributions
3. Collaboration: Intercongregational/interorganizational initiatives
4. Cohesion: Intraorder and intracongregational initiatives

This breakout allows for a somewhat more focused consideration of membership elements that are present across the SSI landscape.

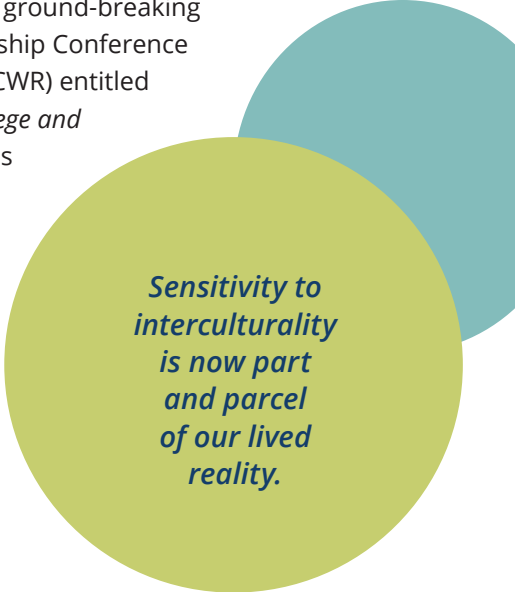
**Embracing cultural diversity** and integrating cross-cultural sensibilities into the ordinary fabric of religious communities as well as leadership, have opened new horizons for the future of religious life and its impact on society. The increasing influence of interculturality within the emerging ethos of religious life in the U.S. has brought to light the need to build capacity for intercultural living and ministry. The SSI-backed capacity building in this area with a series of grants to the Mexican American Catholic College and the Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América. The effort yielded concrete results, such as intercultural awareness at congregational chapters, community dialogues on racism, and

incorporation of simultaneous translation at congregational meetings and more.

SSI has also made significant contributions in highlighting the essential role of inclusion in the future of religious life in the U.S. For example, GHR supported a bold, ground-breaking initiative by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) entitled *Dismantling White Privilege and Racism within LCWR*. This learning journey was designed to assist women religious in understanding their racialized socialization and increasing their awareness.

The rapid growth of **intercongregational/intracongregational collaboration** is breaking down the relatively siloed routines of religious congregations. For example, with backing from SSI, the Benedictine Sisters created a tool to enhance education, formation, and communication using web-based technology for Benedictine communities across the world. Also, with support from the SSI, the Dominican Sisters Conference fielded a set of programs between 2014 and 2019 to support conversations among Dominicans in the U.S. across congregations, across generations, and among younger sisters about the future of Dominican life.

The SSI has also contributed to a more **cohesive sense** of belonging among and across religious congregations. For example, it provided resources to create space within communities for intra/generational exchange and understanding, where younger and older members' differing perspectives on the life can be constructively mediated. **Grantees universally credit the sustained support and active involvement of the SSI with "easing their way" as they move into a transformed future.**



*Sensitivity to interculturality is now part and parcel of our lived reality.*



## Key Grants in Resource Development

- The **Resource Center for Religious Institutes** received funding to build a web-based library and toolbox to help congregations navigate legal, canonical, and financial matters. The Resource Center for Religious Institutes receives over 100 visits per month to its toolbox; 3,200 copies of *Fidelity to the Journey*, a printed resource guide, have been distributed thus far.
- The **Lake Institute** at Indiana University worked with 23 congregations to cultivate fundraising skills. On average congregations increased their fundraising by 41 percent.
- In 2012, a **National Religious Vocation Conference**-sponsored study found that about 1 in 7 possible vocations to religious life were getting derailed by student loans (approximately 1,000 over a decade). In response GHR and the Conrad N. Hilton helped NRVC establish the National Fund for Catholic Religious Vocations. Through annual grants, the Vocation Fund assists religious institutes in accepting candidates who have educational debt.

### Area 3: Resource Development

This cadre of grants ranges from fundraising to debt alleviation, property divestiture and shared service models designed to create efficiencies for congregations of women religious. The predominant thread here is financial well-being and stability. Given the overwhelming need and its potential to exhaust any single source, GHR decided against focusing on direct funding for the retirement needs of elderly sisters. Instead, GHR directed its efforts toward building capacity to support resource development that would ultimately offer relief for congregations struggling with the challenges of aging members. Given fewer women engaged in ministries that generate income and steadily rising costs

associated with caring for the elderly, crafting effective resource development strategies is imperative.

The Sister Support Initiative has been a force in stabilizing religious communities as they confront real world challenges associated with their unfolding future. SSI has supported fresh approaches in the field of fundraising and development among religious communities by investing in a wide range of creative initiatives. Five areas stand out as particularly notable: alleviating student debt, creating efficiencies, fundraising capacity, enhancing organizational efficiencies, and partnering. In each area, SSI has enabled significant advancement among many religious communities.



## Key Grants in New Forms

- **Dominican Women Afire!** provides support to approximately 80 Dominican Women under 65 to navigate a path forward, cross-congregationally.
- **Carmelite Communities Associated** has established a nationwide collaborative of 11 communities creating opportunities for shared back-office services.
- **Nuns & Nones** has engaged thousands of seekers from all 50 states. There are 22 local communities, and 27 people have joined an 18-month covenantal community. Nuns & Nones has received national press coverage. The **Nuns & Nones Land Justice Project** has received funding to help religious institutes divest of properties in ways that advance racial equity and healthy ecosystems.
- The **Wisconsin Religious Collaborative** has brought together 10 communities to create shared efficiencies; the model is being replicated elsewhere.

## Area 4: New Forms

Experiments originating in the need to embrace diversity, share resources, and participate in crafting a bridge to the future have brought forth new expressions of religious life. These new embodiments move well beyond geographically rooted, individual congregations. The timeline of SSI grants indicates that 60 percent of projects were funded in the last three to four years of the decade-long Sister Support Initiative to meet newly emergent needs. For example, there is a need to embrace new ways of addressing the role and voice of younger women religious, as well as drawing upon the value of diversity, and amplifying the potential contributions of lay partners.

New forms continue to emerge. Some of these new

expressions bring together women cross-congregationally to address their needs and desires—a forum for younger women religious, for example. And some of these new expressions are practical in nature—for example the Wisconsin Religious Collaborative, a cross-congregational effort aimed at creating efficiencies in administration and finance to free up leaders to address the deeper questions related to charism and mission. Perhaps the most distinctive new form is *Nuns & Nones*, a growing intergenerational, spiritually diverse, multiracial community drawing upon the wisdom and traditions of women religious. It is a new expression of religious life, modeled on the tenets of community life, spirituality, and service, that lies outside the bounds of traditional congregational life. SSI has journeyed with Nuns & Nones from its earliest days and continues to offer support.



# OVERARCHING LEARNINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

There are some elements of change that are too broad to be contained in any single project or area of investment, but that draw across all four areas. In many cases, these changes seem to indicate a synergy and dynamism between and among discrete investments. There is something more, a kind of “one plus one equals three” quality to these learnings offered here.

According to interviewees, the Sister Support Initiative has succeeded in drawing concentrated attention to the core of religious life, gleaning what is essential to this life-form and what ideologies create barriers to new or different expressions of this life. It has underscored the need for leadership in this liminal space between past and future that cultivates “a spirituality of transformation,” in which leadership

focuses on stewarding the charism of religious life rather than investing time and energy in operational tasks that can be delegated. SSI-funded efforts have also surfaced another key need in navigating the successful transition, namely, addressing a disposition open to embracing otherness—whether that “other” is from a different age cohort or a culture.

SSI incorporates a basic orientation toward unity-in-diversity and elevates a shared sense of belonging and purpose, such as more fully inhabiting the mode of “being” as an important expression of the life for both older and younger sisters.

Interviewees also emphasized that support in moving from an age of highly structured, institutionalized presence to an age of deinstitutionalized life is also needed. They highlighted the need for creating space for the development of necessary interior resources—faith, trust, patience, courage, a spirit of

innovation—that support congregations as they reconfigure or come to fulfillment. GHR backing has allowed communities the breathing space to draw upon interior resources that have afforded them genuine joy in reconfiguring or coming to completion with intention, integrity, and a sense of fulfillment and peace.

Formation, too, requires refashioned approaches to ensure the sustainability of the essential features of religious life and its role. In response, many SSI-funded projects supported refreshed, inclusive methods and platforms for formation, thereby ensuring the wisdom of religious charisms would become available and relevant to larger audiences. Several interviewees alluded to the emerging role of women religious in society as wisdom bearers and witnesses to countercultural ways of being and doing. How can women’s religious life offer an alternative to mainstream culture’s dominant paradigm of urgency, functionalism, consumerism, and the “othering” of people and planet? How can they continue their witnessing journey as they shift the locus of their sense of worth from ministerial contributions and external validation to a deeper awareness of their intrinsic sacredness, and the sacredness of all? While hard to trace within the context of grant reports, these questions, and the need to attend to them, wove throughout many interviews. Heard in these conversations was a **shift from a “worker bee” role to providing a prophetic presence that is a hallmark of the ongoing transformation of religious life.**

Finally, several interviewees emphasized the need for supporting the emergence

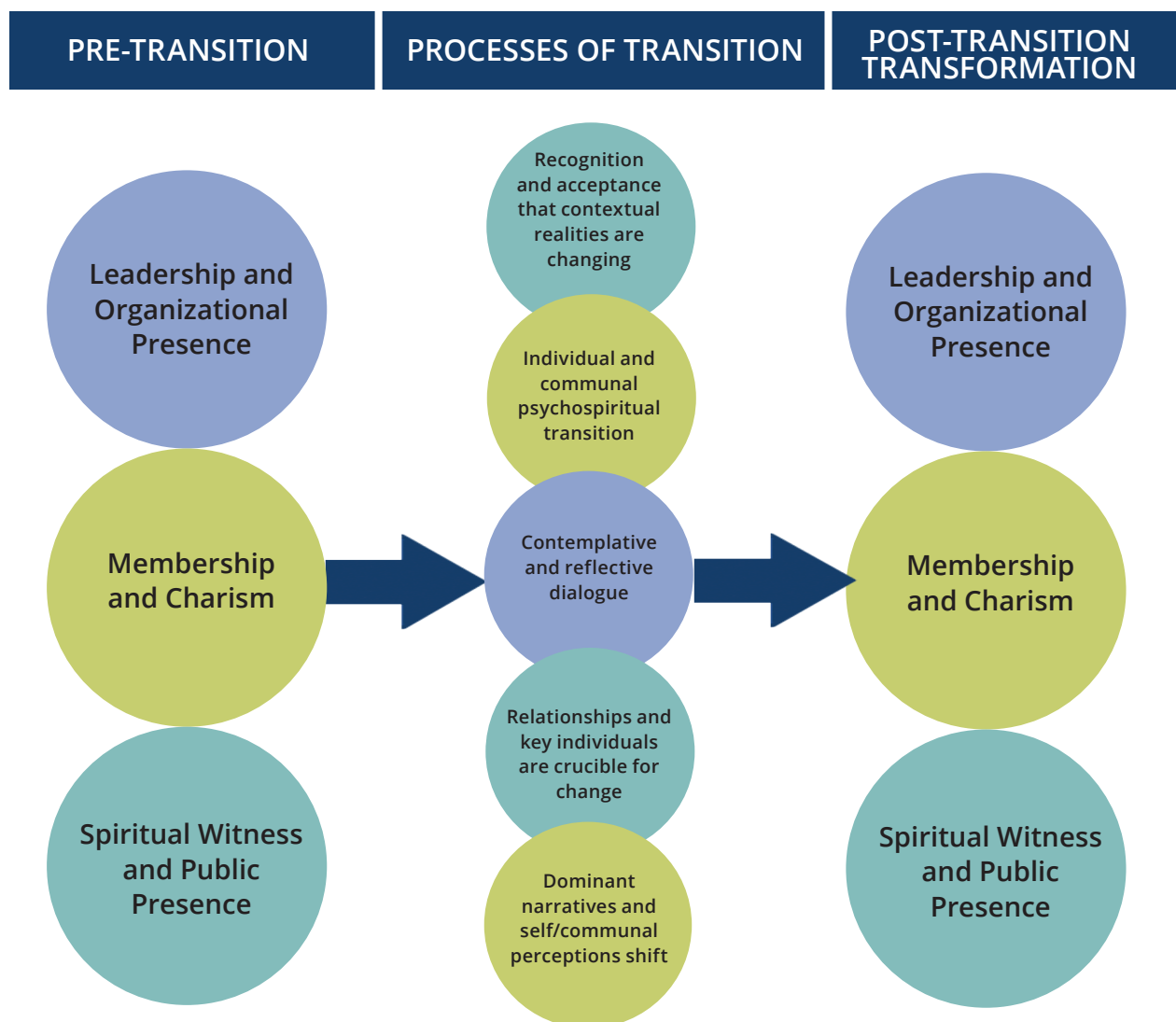
*The vision of who we are called to be and what we are called to do will continue to be born—if we stay grounded, listen, and come together.*

of new forms of religious life. They underscored the need to broaden the narrative of religious life that moves beyond diminishment and includes the longer view of new forms, emergence, and transformation. Creating spaces and times for deep conversation, trusting relationships, and discernment about the unfolding future are essential to maintaining and sustaining this broadened perspective—and as alluded to earlier, this need is even more pressing post-COVID since COVID made in-person gatherings too risky. This enlarged narrative will incorporate many elements, such as interior relationship between Self and Spirit, cohort-based relationships (whether age, culture, or otherwise), intergenerational relationships,

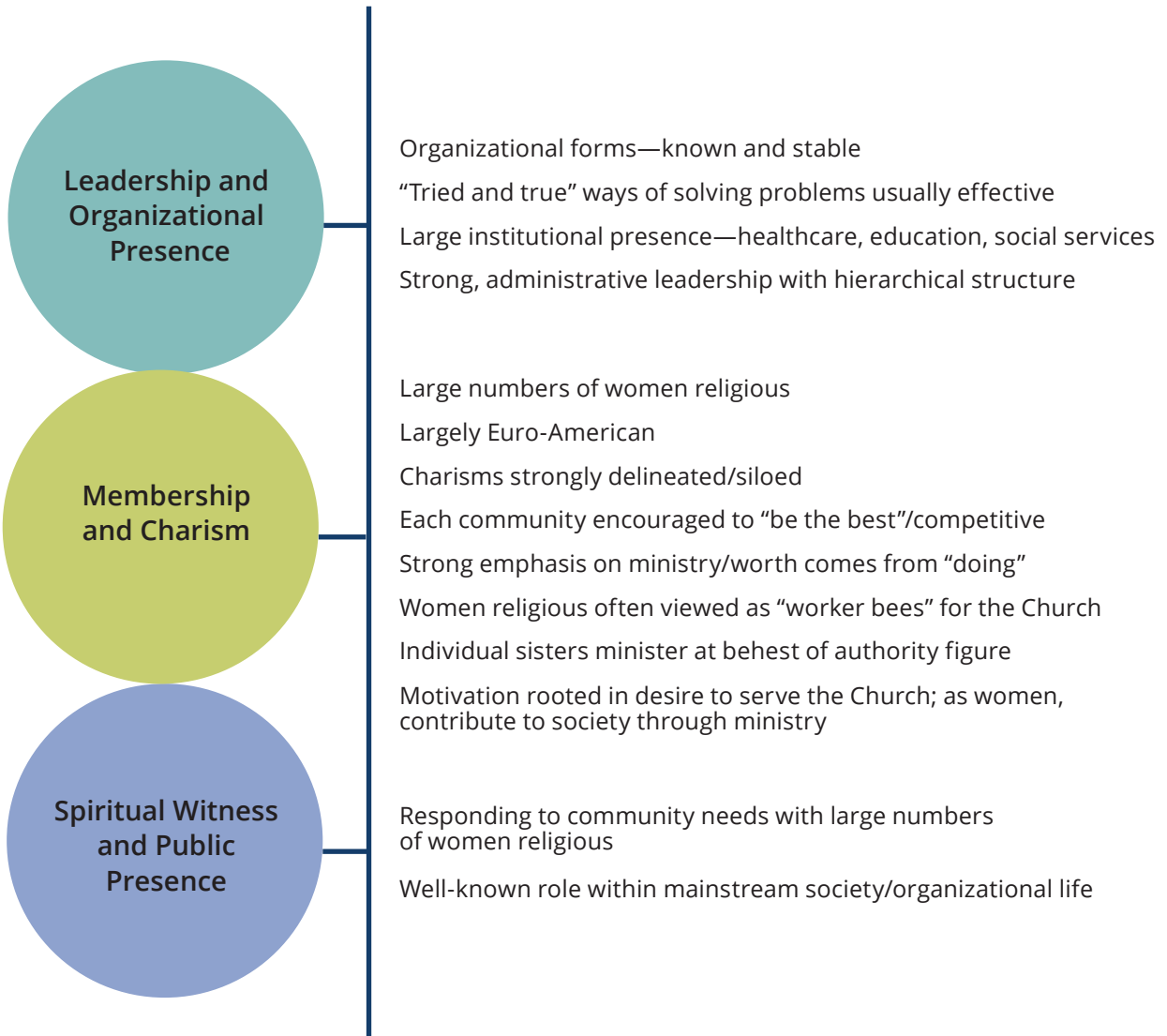
cross-congregational relationships, and interorganizational **relationships will be the primary containers in which this newness will be held, nourished, and grow. Creating the time and space for the emergence of future forms will remain a central need of women religious.**

In addition to exploring *what* the Sister Support Initiative helped sisters accomplish, it is important to consider **how** change occurred. The chart below, *How Change Occurs: Transition as Transformation*, depicts the systemic dynamics of religious life with the central column surfacing several core elements that are integral to the process of transformation. These elements are iterative and cumulative, personal, and communal, and give rise to the transformation.

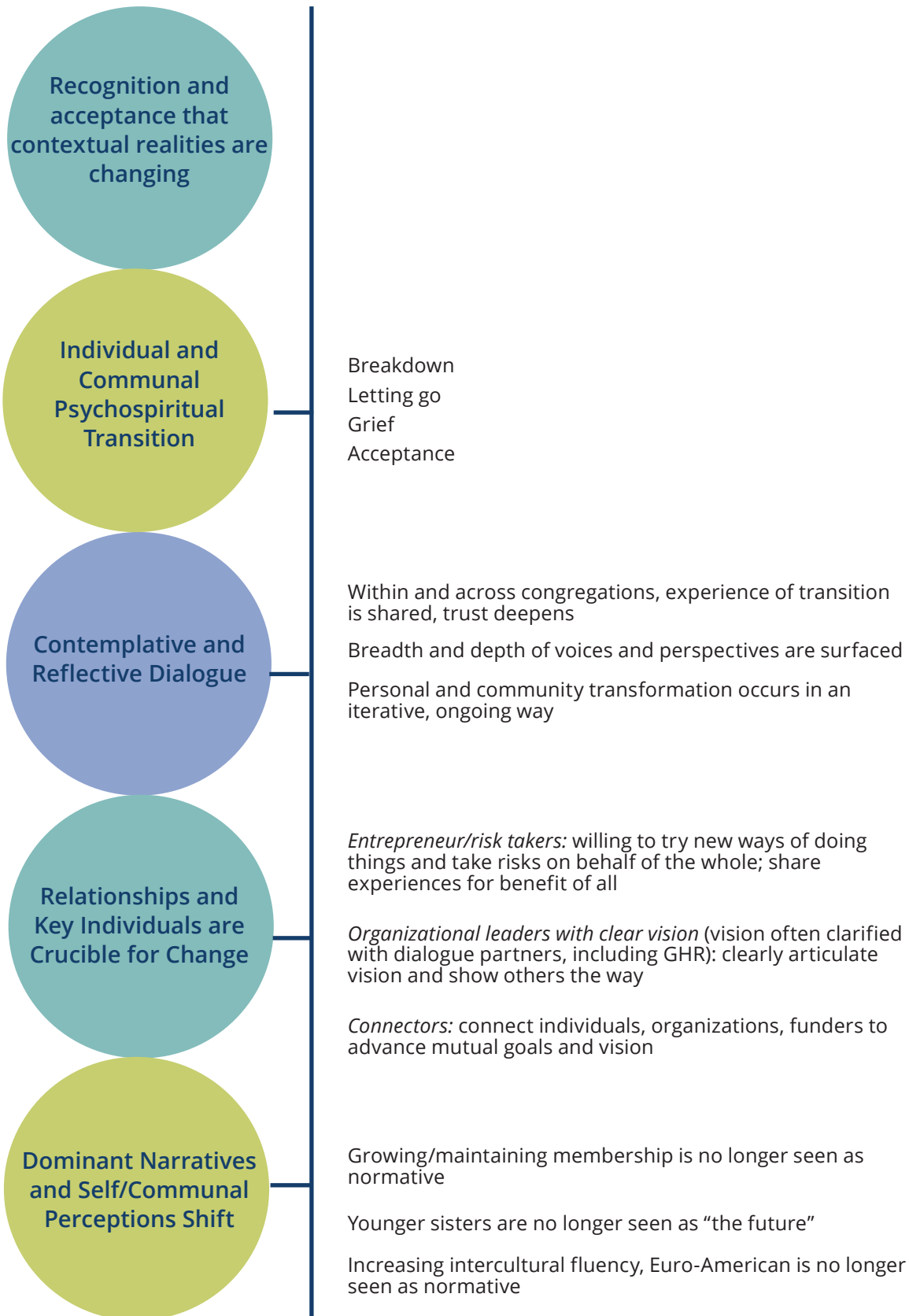
## How Change Occurs: Transition as Transformation



## PRIOR TO TRANSITION



# PROCESSES OF TRANSITION



# POST-TRANSITION TRANSFORMATION

## Leadership and Organizational Presence

New collaborative forms emerge to meet needs for community, formation, interculturality, ministry

New, shared ways of administration arise to better meet needs of all

Adaptive leadership and experimentation are central

Smaller institutional footprint/deinstitutionalization as needed

## Membership and Charism

Quality rather than quantity of presence is paramount

Charisms are seen as source of richness; celebration of unity-in-diversity

Inherent worth and dignity rooted in “being” allowing for intergenerational common ground

Individuals’ sense of calling is honored; resist “worker bee” idea

Motivation rooted in desire for spirituality and community

## Spiritual Witness and Public Presence

Ministries are smaller/frontline

Public modeling of gospel values

Challenging dominant cultural narratives of exploitation, unchecked growth, “whiteness”

Credible voice for justice in public sphere

How women religious are rather than what they do becomes key

*We’ve had some  
unlearning to do.  
Religious life is not  
equivalent to the  
ministries we do.*



## New sensibilities emerge

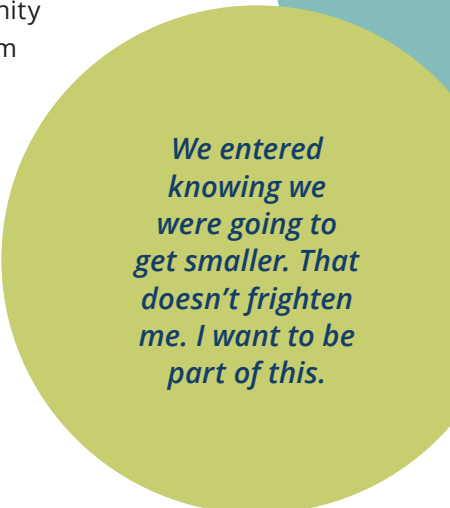
About halfway through the SSI in 2017 GHR staff noted that conversations began to shift slightly, and new sensibilities began to emerge. Sisters began to use the language of emergence and new embodiments of religious life surfaced. By directly confronting fear, grief, and denial, sisters are creating the space for a contemporary embodiment of the life. **Interviewees often mentioned the importance of seriously attending to the experience of fear and denial, building the capacity to own and integrate the full range of attendant emotions, and, finally to name that experience openly in community.** “We need to talk about this” was a common refrain. Without braving this often painful rite of passage individuals and communities will be less prepared for whatever might come next. In *Hope in Suffering and Leaders in a Diaspora Moment*, Linda Buck, C.S.J., explores the importance of carefully stewarding the old and the new simultaneously within a community of “those who are committed to co-creating emergent possibilities while still living in the declining dominant system.” This difficult and courageous work was the focal point of many GHR-sponsored convenings, conferences, and conversations.

These GHR-funded conversations also opened space for more diversity. For example, younger women began organizing among themselves, building credibility, and finding their own voice vis-à-vis the older generations. An increase in cultural diversity also encouraged the majority Euro-American sisters in the U.S. to explicitly consider the practical implications of their western cultural character traits. For instance, the individualism and achievement mentality of the Euro-American cultural heritage encountered other ways of perceiving relationships, ministry, and community life. The old, comfortable boundaries, the large cohorts of women religious, the Euro-American centered

way of doing things and its attachment to large institutional structures all began to shift, requiring introspection and reevaluation amid irreversible change.

GHR-funded programs and activities produced a network of sisters, including a robust intercongregational community of younger women, for whom large numbers and sizable institutional presence were not the norm, nor expected when they chose to enter religious life. Several younger women interviewees said that “small is good,” that “it’s fine” for them, that they have never had an experience of religious life at its 20th-century zenith, and therefore the smaller footprint was the expectation from the outset. For these women, having fewer members within their communities has motivated them to move beyond their congregational boundaries to build a peer network. Sharing living spaces, community life, and working on intercongregational ministerial efforts are the emerging norms for many of these women. Thus, the perception of norms is changing. **The dominant narrative of decline is being gradually replaced by a new narrative of collaboration, reconfiguration, and a sense that the quality of presence that sisters bring is more important than their numbers.**

**GHR was aware that certain types of people—entrepreneurs, visionary leaders, and connectors—play a central role in bringing about change.** GHR sought out entrepreneurial women—members of the Sisters of Mercy community who were willing to expand their leadership programming to other congregations, for example, have played



*We entered knowing we were going to get smaller. That doesn't frighten me. I want to be part of this.*

<sup>22</sup> Linda Buck, C.S.J., *Leaders in a Diaspora Moment: A Framework for the Emergent Religious Life*, an offering for the Leadership Collaborative's Biennial Gathering, May 30, 2019, 3.

a critical role. Entrepreneurial members of LCWR Region 9 who gave rise to the Wisconsin Religious Collaborative also played a part in launching new cross-organizational structures. Visionary leaders offer clarity and sureness amid enormous change.

*We entered knowing we were going to get smaller. That doesn't frighten me. I want to be part of this.*

The role LCWR leadership has played in offering visionary leadership has provided a crucial forum in which discernment can lead to bold action.

And when entrepreneurs and visionary leaders come together and share with others the novel approaches that are working well, they encourage those who may be more cautious in adopting new forms.

Additionally, connectors play an important role. They see opportunities and make connections

between individuals, organizations, and funders that advance the goals of each. Without these critical connectors bringing people together in mutually beneficial relationships, some innovative projects would not have come to fruition.

Finally, **the emphasis on the sisters' quality of presence in their relationships and interactions plays an important role in some sisters' emerging sense of their role in Church and society.** Some interviewees clearly see their role as bearing witness to a way of life that honors relationships, that "resists seeing anyone or anything as 'other,'" including not only people but the planet. As one interviewee asked, "how can we not do what mainstream society is doing, how can we resist the cultural norms of exploitation, consumerism, and functionalism?" There is every indication that simple presence and witness are becoming an integral element in the emergent expression of religious life.

*Participants in a Leadership Collaborative gathering, an SSI-supported effort that has trained more than 700 leaders to be "charism carriers" for women's religious institutes. (Photo courtesy of the Leadership Collaborative.)*



# CONTINUING AND EMERGING NEEDS

Although GHR is shifting its focus to supporting the ongoing global efforts of sisters working with children and families, there are still needs to be addressed in U.S.-based congregations. They range in scope from specific needs to broader, sustaining support to assist U.S. women religious as they shepherd the emergence of future religious life.

## Expand Opportunities for Relationship Building

In broad terms, expanding opportunities for relationship-building is singularly important. **To date, the development and nourishment of relationships have been the critical driving forces on the journey of transformation.**

Conversations that explore how sisters collaborate to sustain forward movement will be key. Interviewees offered some ideas.

Among others, they mentioned the need to educate themselves and their communities on the current realities of religious life, while envisioning possibilities that excite and motivate. Those communities still gripped by denial and fear would benefit from education around the natural rise and fall of religious life. And cross-congregational learning is a powerful way to multiply successful strategies across the landscape of religious life, providing hope and accessible pathways to the future. Of paramount importance will be dialogue within religious communities themselves, as well as with potential funders, to clarify their thinking, articulate what they see emerging, and state what they need to realize possibilities.

## Invest in Sisters' Leadership

Leadership is another major area that requires investment. At the moment, the leadership of women religious exhibits two salient

characteristics: stewarding the current reality (which includes significant crisis management) as well as shepherding the expression of the charisms for religious life now and into the future. Continued work in adaptive leadership will be essential. Leaders will be required to support the future emergence and expressions of religious life—not as answer-bearers but as conveners of courageous conversations. Partnering with first-rate, motivated lay professionals is another critical element: **laypeople are needed to play the vital role of partnering with religious communities to assist them with temporal matters**, such as financial issues, property divestiture, administrative responsibilities, etc. These lay partnerships are crucial, not just for freeing up current leaders to attend to issues of identity and charism. They will also model a sustainable style of leadership to which younger sisters might be drawn. As it currently stands, many younger sisters who might be prepared for leadership positions are reluctant to step forward, discouraged or intimidated by the enormous swath of tasks and responsibilities.

## Support Younger Sisters and their Contributions to Religious Life

A range of continuing needs that require support will be in place for the foreseeable future. For example, **younger sisters will need support**

**to advance their distinctive contributions and creative ideas.** And continued investment in collaboration, creative use of technology, and interculturality are needed to ensure inclusive member formation and community life. Finally, the need for mutually beneficial intergenerational approaches is still evident in religious life. Wisdom and experience must be made available across generational lines for the benefit of all. Current tendencies toward generational bifurcation will require community members of all ages to receive and respect the perspectives and ideas of others, whether it be intercongregational, intercultural or cross-congregational.

## Build Congregational Fundraising and Development Capacity

Support is also needed in fundraising and development. The humility, missional focus, and generosity of sisters sometimes results in difficulty when seeking to build capacity for fundraising for congregations' current needs or sustainability. **Focusing on the relational aspects of mission advancement and the spiritual charisms of the congregations has proven to have the greatest impact on fundraising and would benefit from further investment.**

Moreover, as there are many sister and congregation-serving membership organizations, an openness to collaboration

and diversification of revenue streams or other operational models (such as subscriptions, fee-for-service, etc.) will be needed.

## Support Evolving Governance and Organizational Models in Religious Life

Finally, communities need bold imagination around organizational structures that can, as one interviewee said, "hold the new fire" of religious life. The centrality of adaptation and creativity are replacing mechanistic worldviews in which order reigns supreme. **As women religious continue to move into the deeper waters of relationality, mutuality, and interdependence, the need for new forms of organizational life, serving as crucibles of dynamism and energy, will only increase.** Meeting the needs of the emergent future will demand originality and adaptability on the part of women religious and their funders.

## Concluding Comment

GHR started the Sister Support Initiative with the hope that they could contribute to "a vital future for Catholic sisters, marked by congregations that are well-led, well-resourced and powerful in spiritual witness, leadership, and service." While the financial investment was significant, it was the *values of GHR* that were clearly operative throughout the SSI and the *commitment to an emergent strategy* that has contributed significantly to the advancing sisters' work. GHR's approach supported the courageous and often innovative spirit with which sisters have engaged their grant-funded projects.





*Catholic sisters participate in the National Religious Vocation Conference's Moving Forward in Hope gathering, an early SSI-supported event. (Photo courtesy of National Religious Vocation Conference.)*

In GHR's experience engaging the SSI and the dozens of sisters interviewed, one of the most profound takeaways is **that sisters accomplished much** through their engagement with the Sister Support Initiative of GHR. The arc of change has been enormous in a relatively short period of time, in large part due to the courage and faithfulness with which sisters have approached this time of seismic change.

While sisters and GHR alike recognize there is still considerable work to be done, **there is a**

**growing number of sisters that have a sense of what needs to be done and how to go about doing it.** As more communities "break trail," the path for others will, it is hoped, become a bit less laborious. And, although much of the work involves grief, risk, and change, sisters seem ever-more capable of rising to the task in ways that are inclusive, collaborative, and capable of holding ambiguity. This report is intended to offer a glimpse of what is possible and provide some guidance for the unknown pathways ahead.





*A notecard with phrases spoken during a Nuns & Nones gathering, a GHR-supported new form of religious life rooted in the wisdom and traditions of women religious. (Photo courtesy of Rhino Media.)*

