The Harvest of Ministry: Exploring the Ministry of Women Religious in Cleveland

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Catholic Sisters serve in a range of ministries and seek to extend the impact of their work to more people in need. To the outsider, the nature of Sisters’ ministries has often been reduced to its external character – providing education, health care, or social services. What has been less understood is the enduring nature of the force underlying these ministries. Sisters can help pinpoint the crucial attributes of their work. This is particularly important as many Sisters who entered religious life around the time of Vatican II are retiring from active ministry. Drawing on six focus group conversations involving 33 Catholic Sisters, key themes emerge to frame a better understanding of the work of today’s women religious. These themes can be adapted by other agencies and individuals who seek to work with people in need.

Research Purpose: The objective of this research is to describe the unique approach of women religious and to inform others who now or in the future strive to help people in poverty or with other vulnerabilities. This work builds on an earlier survey of Catholic Sisters in active ministry in the Cleveland region.1 (Fischer & Bartholomew, 2012).

Catholic Sisters were invited to take part in a focus group discussion of their ministries and the work of women religious. During April/May, 2011, six focus groups were held involving 33 Sisters, approximately 20% of the number of Sisters who took part in a 2009 survey. Sisters from 8 congregations participated in the focus groups (See Table 1).

Table 1: Congregations of Sisters Involved in the Research

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland (OSU)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sisters of Notre Dame (SND)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congregation of Saint Joseph (CSJ)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis (SSJ-TOSF)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sisters of the Humility of Mary (HM)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati (SC)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters of the Holy Spirit (CSSp)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Orders</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>288</strong></td>
<td><strong>164</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
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Note: The first column provides the count of Sisters in active ministry who were contacted about participating in a written survey; 2009 survey provides the count of Sisters who completed the survey; and 2011 Groups provides the count of Sisters in the focus groups.

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**Findings:** Many themes emerged from the rich conversations with Sisters. Themes were organized within a framework linked to a gospel-based image of gardening or farming. This imagery was frequently cited by Sisters, so we chose to draw on them as a way to convey the themes. Table 2 shows the

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<th>Temporal Focus</th>
<th>Thematic Areas</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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<td>How it came to be</td>
<td>Sowing the seeds and deep roots of love</td>
<td>Charism at the Core</td>
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<td>Leveraging Community Life &amp; Formation</td>
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<td>What it is</td>
<td>Cultivating love and nurturing God’s people</td>
<td>Care for People as Defining Quality</td>
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<td>The Power of Presence</td>
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<td>What Sisters Receive</td>
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<td>What it can become</td>
<td>Come with us into the fields</td>
<td>In Collaboration Not Competition</td>
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<td>Promoting Leadership Development</td>
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<td>Ensuring a hope-filled harvest</td>
<td>Sustaining the Commitment and Planning for Transitions</td>
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Table 2: Framework for Themes

three temporal foci, the four organic themes and the associated sub-themes. The image draws on the four phases of gardening – sowing seeds, cultivation, preparing for harvest, and ensuring future harvests.

**1. SOWING THE SEEDS AND DEEP ROOTS OF LOVE**

The first pair of themes connect with the foundation of religious life, which shapes the character of the work of women religious and allows them to effectively serve others. Here, charism, formation and the nature of community life sow the seeds of love that define their ministry.

**Charism at the Core:** The charism of Sisters’ congregations serve as the ‘guiding principles’ around which all ministry is organized. Charism, which stems from the Gospel, defines the spirit of the congregation and the formulation of their call to serve. More overarching than mission, charism traces its origin to the congregation’s foundresses.

Variously referred to in the focus groups as the ‘active ingredient,’ ‘propelling energy,’ and ‘spiritual DNA,’ charism is the thread that links Sisters to one another and to the people they serve. In this sense, charism is both timeless and evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of the people.

Charism is both a conceptual understanding of Sisters’ call to ministry and a description of what ministry looks like on the ground. Common to Sisters’ description of charism is the sense that it has both enduring qualities but is also responsive to the changing face of need in the communities they serve.

And so part of our charism is just responding in whatever way we can with the resources we have to the needs that come down the pike, and it has resulted in our being very diversified at this point and continuing to discern what are the needs now...

Though Sisters speak of their charism as central to their call and work, it also challenges them to push themselves in their ministry. As a central feature of ministry, Sisters note that the communication and infusion of the charism to lay partners is a key role for women religious to undertake.

Word cloud depictions (i.e., wordles) were developed to provide a visual representation of the terms and phrases most frequently used by Sisters that link with each theme. Figure 1 shows a depiction of words most frequently used by Sisters in describing this theme. The other word clouds can be examined in the full report.

**Leveraging Community Life & Formation:** The lifestyle of Sisters, as vowed women in community, gives them freedoms that allow them to take chances, be supported, have time to reflect, and access resources in ways that others often cannot. Sisters are unified in their view that, because they have unconditional support from their community, they have the freedom to put their all into ministry and go wherever the needs are.

I’m not alone in what I do, we do have the support of congregations that allow them to take chances, be supported, have time to reflect, and access resources in ways that others often cannot. Sisters are unified in their view that, because they have unconditional support from their community, they have the freedom to put their all into ministry and go wherever the needs are.

Another attribute is the ability to nurture oneself

“I think our ministry might be to really make known our charism, so that it can continue through people that aren’t going to choose religious life,” - a Sister.
spiritually that is encouraged by the community. Sisters also feel they are able to take risks and change course if necessary when others often cannot or will not take due to their life situation.

Sisters’ status as religious women and their role as organizational leaders can elevate others – both clients and lay co-ministers. There is an authenticity to the life of a Sister, one that is countercultural, that causes people to respect, listen, and learn from them.

II. CULTIVATING LOVE AND NURTURING GOD’S PEOPLE

A second thematic area has to do with how Sisters undertake their work in ministry, that is in translating their charism into action. The themes that became evident were a distinct focus on the care of people and on the power of presence. In addition, Sisters were quick to note how they themselves are nurtured in the process of caring and being present.

Care for People as a Defining Quality: Sisters believe their work is more effective because people feel welcome, comforted, and cared for in an authentic way. They highlight their role in building relationships with those they serve, affirming the dignity of the person and serving as a catalyst for personal development. Sisters uniformly expressed their commitment to equality with those they serve, even – or especially – when society does not project this equality. This translates into a client’s feeling of being cared for, rather than being helped or served.

But it’s the way that we work with them. It’s always encouraging them, hopefully, to move forward, to do a little bit more, to try to change what they’ve come to know as their way of living...

This feeling extends beyond experiences with the individual Sister to an association with the Sister-sponsored programs and environments.

The Power of Presence: Sisters are seen as being ‘with the people’ and that creates a strong bond with the people and neighborhoods they serve. Sisters are seen as having durable commitments to a neighborhood, both within and beyond the parish. One Sister quoted a neighborhood resident as saying “churches close, Sisters don’t.” They are a human presence that results in a direct influence in ministry, as well as an indirect influence as Sisters work with priests and the laity.

Sisters see themselves serving the mission of the broader Church but acknowledge that lay people often distinguish between them and the institutional Church. Whether it was the pain caused by the child abuse crisis internationally — or the loss experienced as churches closed in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland during 2009-2010 — sisters remained a steady and distinctive part of the Church and a positive healing presence.

So my presence among them, without me saying anything, gives them some hope. It soothes a little of that hurt. So when you talk relationship or if you want to say presence, I think that is what very often speaks louder than anything else we do is that we’re there.

Sisters speak of presence in both tangible (physical) and intangible (through prayer, bond) terms, with both being crucial manifestations of being with the people. It is a feeling of unity and solidarity with the people in the communities where they live. Sometimes it translates into Sisters having a residence near the people they serve. Through prayer, Sisters can extend their presence much further.

What Sisters Receive: Though Sisters give much in their ministry they are quick to point out that they themselves receive a great gift through their ability to serve. In fact, Sisters uniformly expressed the sentiment that whatever they give in ministry, they

“When I was teaching…one of the little boys when he had me as a teacher came in, he says ‘Oh good, I’ve got a nun,’ he says ‘because when you get a nun you get a second mother,’” - a Sister.
receive much more back. During the discussion, Sisters spoke of feeling a general sense of gratitude from those they have served and often highlighted specific instances where the response of an individual offered them a crucial gift.

...I remember he said to me 'why are you helping me?' and I remember saying to him, 'You are a very good man, I believe that,' and I said 'So this is not hard.' So this letter said 'No matter how long I have to live, I will never forget that somebody said to me I am a good man.' ...I think that for me, I think just the gift of the awareness of God's love for people, God's goodness and his reflection in the people that God has made and the fact that God cares for them, that that's powerful. That's a powerful grace in your life.

The broader experience of Sisters in service has allowed them to observe and retain a sense of fulfillment as well as an affirmation of the salience of their charism.

**III. COME WITH US INTO THE FIELDS**

A third thematic area relates to what is needed to bring ministry to fruition. Among these, Sisters see the work of ministry as requiring a collaborative spirit and the cultivation of new leaders and leadership skills. Sisters also see themselves as uniquely suited to advocate for better systems and conditions that affect the poor and vulnerable.

**In Collaboration, Not Competition:** Sisters know the value of collaboration and have increasingly pursued such approaches in recent years. They have seen both sides: in the early days, their religious communities had varying degrees of restriction or reluctance to reach beyond their own community and work together. In Cleveland, a college established to educate Sisters to become nurses and teachers, St. John's College, helped nurture the skill sets and calls. Nevertheless, it has taken the challenges of today's environment – fewer Sisters, constrained resources, and growing needs – to firmly root the commitment to, and confidence in, collaboration.

Sisters are particularly good at recognizing the gifts of individuals and in building relationships at all levels; this makes them more effective at collaboration. Sisters' willingness to engage in collaboration stems in part from their selfless view of the work, with a focus on the end goals and making use of whatever means available to get the job done. Sisters note the value of figuring it out together’ in order to work around barriers. Sisters note that there is a natural relationship between the manifestation of charism and the call to be collaborative, and that these work together. For Sisters, collaboration is a means to an end and must bring about added value to the work to be worth undertaking.

I think out of our needs come the goal of collaborating, and so that’s what we’re searching for right now is that we can’t answer all those needs, and so because of that we want to work together to make things better for children, make things better for families or life in general...we’re propelled as very authentic forms of collaboration, rather than ‘Well it’s nice to work together.’ No, it’s very real and purposeful.

It was noted that though Sisters were drawn into hierarchical structures (e.g., hospitals, schools, parishes) over time, there is a sense that they are now trying to vision and develop collaborative initiatives to meet the growing needs of the people.

**Becoming Advocates:** Sisters see value in collaboration to address systemic problems and conditions. This includes being willing to question or advocate for people within existing systems where change is needed. Sisters increasingly see a role for themselves, working collaboratively, to be a “voice for the voiceless.”

As advocates, Sisters are powerful internal and external leaders. As a group they bring a record as highly educated and accomplished women, along with their status as moral authorities working for social justice. Sisters acknowledge that as vowed women they can effectively empower others and serve as advocates for change.

...we are the ones who are best able to impact change and that may take a long time, but we can empower others as advocates to bring that change about, and I think we’re motivated to do that where others may not. So I think in spite of the constraints, we’re probably better able to bring about institutional change than most anybody, and we’re motivated to do it.

**Promoting Leadership Development:** There is an impressive history of Sisters assuming leadership roles with little training or experience in the field. Now, Sisters seek to call forth and nurture the leadership skills in fellow Sisters, lay partners, and those they serve to strengthen and continue the ministry. One Sister referred to ‘a sense of tenacity that Sisters bring that’s Gospel-based,’ and that this fuels a commitment to leadership.

Within their communities Sisters acknowledge the importance of Sisters having differing skill sets and calls. While some Sisters are called to leadership and advocacy, others are called to direct service. A full range of calls is needed for the community to be effective, and all of these are to be nurtured.

“…when I see people that are living on the edge of survival and living that way with dignity, it just constantly makes you aware that the faith is alive and well and thriving…” - a Sister.
Sisters highlight the crucial role to be played in cultivating leadership in others, particularly lay partners. Sisters seek to empower others to use their own gifts to strengthen and sustain the ministry. The conscious engendering of leadership capacity in lay leaders also allows Sisters to extend the presence of ministry into greater scope and scale than would otherwise be possible.

“Sisters don’t do things to make the daily paper. They do things to do them… the point is not to make a name for yourself or for your order or whatever. The point is to do the work…” - a Sister.

Intentional transitions - Planned transition is inextricably linked to the theme of leadership development previously discussed.

... if the transition is ‘I am grooming leadership,’ and ‘I am transmitting the mission and I’m making the charism a part of who we are and I’m grooming leadership to take my place,’ I think that’s very hopeful, ‘cause that’s really planning.

As Sisters collaborate and empower lay partners to take on leadership roles, they will take on other emergent roles. For example, they will have more time to advocate for social change that in turn helps those involved in direct service. And, at all times, they will continue to minister ‘with the people’ and with prayer.

Future Directions - Women religious have a deep knowledge of how to serve the needs of those who may feel lost within existing service systems. The Sisters have made it their mission to stay attuned to changing needs, gaps in the social service system, and to adapt their responses to meet those evolving needs.

Sisters themselves see great promise in strategies that broaden leadership, promote collaboration, and extend the charism of their religious communities to lay partners. Collectively, these efforts will allow Sisters to focus their attention in areas where they have significant expertise and effectiveness, such as staying in touch with the needs of the people, serving as advocates for change, and being present, both physically and spiritually.

The Sisters own imagery promises an abundant future for their ministries. With their foundation in religious life, enduring commitment to the care of others, and current focus on collaboration, leadership development, and advocacy, Sisters can continue to be a major force for good in our communities.

This research was sponsored by the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, specifically its Collaboration for Ministry Initiative (CMI). With research, convenings, and grants, CMI engages in collaborative efforts to strengthen the ministries of Catholic women religious in Northeast Ohio and build awareness of their work.
The Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development seeks to address the problems of persistent and concentrated urban poverty and is dedicated to understanding how social and economic changes affect low-income communities and their residents. Based in Cleveland at Case Western Reserve University’s Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, the Center views the city as both a laboratory for building communities and producing change locally, and as a representative urban center from which nationally relevant research and policy implications can be drawn.

A community resource for expertise and data analysis for over 20 years, the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development created the groundbreaking community data system NEO CANDO (Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing), a web-based tool that centralizes a broad array of indicators, making it easier to overlay and analyze disparate data. Community development corporations, foundation program officers, local governments, neighborhood activists and residents, students at the Mandel School and other institutions, the media, community reinvestment professionals and academic researchers are among those who have found NEO CANDO invaluable in their work. The Center conducts extensive training and maintains a listserv so NEO CANDO users can get the most out of its vast data collection. You can visit the NEO CANDO webpage at http://neocando.case.edu.

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