



Engaging Aging

Retirement: A View From Leadership

By Sister Nancy Schreck, OSF

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I am not a phoenix yet, but here among the ashes, it may be that the pain is chiefly that of new wings trying to push through.”
 May Sarton

While some people name a date or perhaps a year when they "retired," my experience as President of the Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque, Iowa, has taught me to take the long view of this process called retirement. Additionally, my years as an initial formation minister have given me a lens through which to see this great work. While in one way retirement may mean stepping out of formal ministry, in a much more important sense it is stepping into a deeply transformative experience. It is the epitome of ongoing formation. Decisions about where to live and what to do, though significant, pale in light of the larger inner work that must receive attention.

Congregations need to be as serious about providing an environment that is supportive of growth in this later stage of life as they are about tending initial formation. I am not talking about giving people status as novices, for there is far too much investment in the life and mission of the congregation for this identity. However, communities need to be very deliberate about providing both the environment and programs that enable members to continue negotiating this sacred time. For many with fairly good health, retirement can be an extended number of years.

It is important to remember that retirement is a new experience of life in the congregation. Members have known themselves as having expressed their religious

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life through ministry. Now, they are experiencing more clearly the meaning of the lifestyle without the contribution of their labor. Retirement is a time of leaving behind a former identity and entering into something entirely new; a time of “new wings trying to push through.” It is the responsibility of others in the congregation to support these members as they journey into this new identity.

So, the first responsibility of leadership is to provide sacred space attractive to those about to retire. By this, I mean space with solitude, stimulation, contemplation and other forms of meaningful engagement in the mission of the community. Retirement should include opportunities for service to one another in shared life and to others beyond the local living environment. A rich liturgical life is basic, as are pastoral care, opportunities for spiritual direction and counseling. Opportunities for growth in emerging theological issues, spirituality, social justice concerns, and exploration of the meaning of contemporary religious life are essential. Remember, as is often heard these days, members retire from ministry but not from religious life. Significant resources are invested into quality physical health care for our retired members. So too, it is incumbent upon leaders to provide for the broad spectrum of needs supportive of the completion of a religious life well lived.

Programs for leaving full time ministry A long history

For a number of years the Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque, IA, have participated with our neighbor congregations in providing pre-retirement weekends for members well in advance of their actual decision-making about retirement. These weekends offer a rich variety of practical advice as well as spiritual and social supports for discerning a decision to retire. Additionally, the Congregational Retirement Coordinator also meets regularly with people who are formally discerning retirement and plans a variety of programs for elders. Leadership team members are also in contact with sisters discerning the completion of their ministry, or in more difficult situations, with sisters who may be terminated from their positions. Good communication between elected leadership and retirement personnel is critical.

The years of renewal have created a different dynamic in this retirement process. Previously, more support seemed to be needed in assisting sisters with discernment and in designing programs for those in retirement. Currently, our experience is that sisters are much more self-directed and able to organize activities in which they wish to participate. Still, it remains a priority of the congregation that the sisters living in retirement are consistently engaged in the



Pre-retirement gatherings, such as the one from Fall, 2014, pictured left, give the members an opportunity to explore the creative possibilities that retirement can hold. Participating congregations in the Dubuque area include Clinton Franciscans; Congregation of the Humility of Mary, Davenport, IA; Dubuque Franciscans; Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Sisters of the Visitation; and Sinsinawa Dominicans.

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congregation's mission and Chapter commitments. The Retirement Coordinator has a significant role in ensuring that this priority is met in each member's planning.

Something new

This regular retirement programming has recently been supplemented in the Dubuque Sisters of St. Francis Congregation. Leadership has initiated programs to respond to the needs of the large percentage of members who are, or will soon be, seriously discerning retirement from formal ministry. It was not the desire of the leadership team to manage retirement, but to creatively respond to new ways of implementing the congregation's mission and to respond to the on-going formation needs of the members.

Imagine

The first program was designed to draw members in their mid-60's to mid-70's together. It was partially born of hearing sisters in this age group with highly developed skills talk about their diminishing energy and fears of being "let go" from a ministry. As a leadership team we wondered together about what would happen if we gathered this group and asked them to do "what if" thinking. What might be born if we explored with them what they always wanted to do but had not yet done? What might happen if we invited them to dream together about what new things they felt called to be about if they were not so tied to their current reality?

What evolved was a gathering titled "Older and Bolder." We talked honestly with members about not feeling guilty about reducing their ministry commitments in a healthy way. Some sisters said they would like to join others, live close to the land and explore earth spirituality. Some said they would like to experiment with a variety of liturgical prayer.



From left, Sisters Kate Katoski, OSF, Leanne Welsch, PBVM, and Kate Hendle, BVM, participate in the Dubuque area working collaboratives that focus on the experiences associated with approaching retirement.

Others hoped to work in alternative educational situations. One sister said "I came to the congregation with the hope that I could work with orphans, and that desire has never left me."

What we hoped to do together was to remove the "what ifs" and support our sisters in taking the freedom that retirement from current paid ministry could provide. We wanted them to use their expertise honed through years of skilled service in new, less taxing ways. The "Older and Bolder" weekend invited members of this cohort to think about possibilities.

The outcomes of the weekend are still unfolding. It was a particular benefit of the gathering that people could be honest about the struggles of their aging and the grace of this time in their lives. New relationships have been formed as people dream together about what could be. One of the most delightful outgrowths of this experience was the creation of a Franciscan Outreach Project located in Melrose Park, IL. A sister, now feeling free to resign from a high school counseling position, and another retired sister-principal living in the parish, decided to team up cre-

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ating a new ministry in a site served by Franciscans for many years. They had clear ties to the community and a razor sharp awareness of both needs and service resources in the area. Their vision was to provide a place to connect people with available resources. As part of their ministry they stand vigil each Friday at a nearby detention center where immigrants are sent back to their countries of origin. They also volunteer regularly in a food pantry so that they can both serve and come to know the people in need. Most delightful is the new life experienced by these sisters.

Spiritual renewal and community bonds

A second effort to serve this population was to provide opportunities for spiritual growth, e.g., short sabbatical experiences for people unable to engage in longer programs. We found in previous years that sisters would request a sabbatical between ministries. But with rising concerns about the challenges of finding another ministry, fewer sisters were making this choice. In addition, the leadership team felt a serious commitment to ongoing formation of the members. In light of the geographic spread of our members, we felt it could be helpful to bring together those sisters who might well be sharing the experience of living with each

other in retirement so that they could begin to build bonds.

For this experience, we focused on those celebrating their Golden Jubilees and the years most immediately following. The leadership team designed a one month experience with each week independent enough that anyone unable to attend the full program could still participate in shorter segments. The weeks included a personality profile, Franciscan studies, eco-spirituality, new cosmology, prayer experiences, a retreat with individual spiritual direction, and some artistic enrichment, e.g., attending a play. Some groups of sisters who attended this program together still continue to meet regularly for sharing.

Taking a wider view

A third commitment of leadership was to encourage sisters in general, but especially those in their near retirement /retirement years, to have immersion experiences in order to give new expression to the Chapter commitments of the Congregation. Some immersion opportunities were created by the



From left, Dubuque Franciscan Sisters Mary Ann Helle and Edna Ginder, Bertha Kruse, and Kenneth Hemann began sewing blankets for young infants in Haiti as a result of listening to volunteers tell the stories of their experiences during a cross-cultural exchange program sponsored by the congregation.

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leadership team for this purpose. Examples include opportunities for time in Central America, on the border in El Paso, TX, and in Mississippi. Additional congregational opportunities to experience life and service in culturally different situations impacted by poverty include: Common Venture, a congregational sponsored volunteer program; and WE-MAPP, a congregational funding source available to sisters.

An especially wonderful outgrowth from one of the cross-cultural experiences involved our retired sisters living at Mount St. Francis. Upon hearing some of the volunteers tell their experiences of working with impoverished mothers who carry their new babies from the hospital wrapped in newspaper, the sisters sprang into action and have sewn hundreds of blankets for the Haitian maternity hospital.

Inter-congregational planning: Something in seed

Dubuque has been a place of many collaborative efforts on the part of local congregations including Clinton Franciscans, Congregation of the Humility of Mary, Dubuque Franciscans, Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Sisters of the Visitation, and Sinsinawa Dominicans. Our collaboration is not only directed toward providing services for our elders but also to respond to the needs of the local community. For example, emergency and transitional housing for women and children began as a collaborative effort of the religious congregations. Peace and justice efforts, advocacy regarding immigration, and efforts to stop trafficking are part of our shared agenda. Our beginnings are replete with examples of congregations assisting one another. Long ago, we learned that we are better together. For many years there have been regular meetings of the retirement coordinators for support and skill development, annual days of enrichment for our senior

members and inter-congregational pre-retirement weekends.

Three years ago the elected leadership of these congregations decided it was time to have honest conversations about our needs and resources and how we could collaborate in the future as our numbers dramatically change. Though currently we are all in need of fairly significant physical spaces, we also knew that within 10-15 years we will all have more buildings than we need. Furthermore, ongoing duplication of services and resources is simply not how we want to live as neighbors.

So, conversations have begun. We began talking about our current realities and moved, even if rather tentatively, to some “what ifs.” What if, together we could use just one facility for memory care or other specialties? What if together we had one director of nursing for the care of our elderly? What if in the future we consolidated management of our properties? What if we shared a liturgist or perhaps business office specialties? What if, when we hired even now, we dialoged with each? What if, for example, two communities with a need for a part time nurse collaborated to share one full time nursing position? In our conversations, we clarified properties owned by each congregation, including vacation homes/convents which for all of us were seeing less use due to diminished numbers. We shared numbers and trends. We talked about the possibility of reducing costs by shared purchasing and the combined buying power of arranging for locally grown foods. While we are not making any major moves at this time, we want to continue to have the conversations so that when the time is right, the relationships are in place and the needs are clear.

This I believe! What I've come to know about retirement as a leader

1. The role of the elected leader, to be clear, is not

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that of the retirement director. Even in small congregations where the leader wears many hats, it is important to be clear about the difference in the two roles and not to presume that because one is a congregational leader she or he knows appropriate programming for elders. The elected leaders' role is that of putting the right people in place, support, clarification of programs, and funding, with participation as appropriate. Even though a large percentage of our members are living in retirement there are other important functions for the leaders to spend their time developing so as to keep alive the mission of the congregation.

2. Part of the elected leaders' role is to set the tone for retirement. The desire to give high quality care as we would wish for every member of the human family can evolve into a kind of elitist entitlement thinking if we are not careful. What is given as pure gift can come to be expected and even demanded. The culture of individualism, which is in the air we breathe in our country, at times adds to this drift. Consider, for example, the movement of person centered care. In response to just such small strands of entitled thinking, the leadership team, of which I was a part, created the concept of Community Centered Care. We believed it fit more appropriately with our understanding of genuine living of Franciscan religious life. While certainly giving attention to individual needs, we are committed to always inviting members, at whatever stage of life, to be concerned about the common good.

3. It is an unhealthy dynamic in community life when the retired members depend too much upon the elected leader for support, affirmation, and the processing of their life's journey. While the leader may feel honored to be drawn into this role, the healthiest models, it seems, are those in which the circle of care is drawn very large. By engaging the community in the care of one another, members feel a commitment

to be there for one another. The role of the elected leader is to work with the retirement personnel in creating this kind of environment.

Conclusion

William Stafford's poem, "The Way It Is," invites us to think about the thread that we hold as a guide through the whole spectrum of life with all its changes, hurts, deaths, and aging. In religious life this thread is our deep commitment to the way of Jesus. So, whether in the initial stages of life or in our final days, our call is to assist one another, doing whatever is necessary to hold on to the thread.



Sister Noreen Pierce, OSF, celebrating jubilee

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. While you hold it you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread.
William Stafford

From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

The age distribution of men and women religious in the United States as of December, 2014, indicates that approximately 54% are age 75 and older; 32% are age 60 - 74; and 13% are age 25 - 59. Take away the numbers and most members could tell you the same information just by looking around the room during a community gathering; more “elders”, some “middles,” few “young.” No surprises. But consider that those “middles” are fast approaching retirement, and you’re likely to sit up and take notice of the tipping scale.



Our author for this fall issue of *Engaging Aging* encourages us to do just that; to pay attention to the process of anticipating retirement. In a thought provoking article, Sister Nancy Schreck, OSF, details the creative programming in her community that resulted from listening to membership, encouraging them to dream, and asking the empowering question, “What if?”

Drawing from her diverse experience in positional leadership, she shares the collaborative retirement efforts of seven religious congregations in the Dubuque area. Their ongoing conversations are grounded in the belief that they are “better together,” and that duplication of resources is not how they want to live as neighbors.

Because healthy retirement takes advance planning, Nancy describes a serious commitment to the holistic development of every member. She offers a challenging interpretation of person-centered care and speaks to the importance of every member’s responsibility to “be there for one another.”

In these early days of fall, we hope you’ll enjoy the

creative energies that come from imagining your retirement in new ways. If your community has any programs or processes for members approaching retirement, we’d appreciate the opportunity to post them on our website as a resource for our readers. Please send your suggestions to the NRRO, c/o Brother Bob Metzger (rmetzger@uscceb.org).

Calendar

September 22 -27

- Visit of Pope Francis to the United States

October 6 - 8

- NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop
Tampa, FL

October 27 - 30

- RCRI National Conference; Orlando, FL

November 13

- Meeting of the Commission on Religious Life and Ministry; Baltimore, MD

November 13 - 14

- CMSWR Symposium on Religious Life;
St. Louis, MO

November 17

- NRRO Webinar Co-Sponsored with the Religious Formation Conference at 1:00 PM ET

December 14 - 17

- CMSM New Leaders Workshop; Washington, DC

Reminders

- Our webpage offers access to back issues of *Engaging Aging* and the NRRO newsletter. We also list several resources, including an annotated bibliography on retirement and aging. We are happy to receive your additional recommendations. Send your suggestions to the NRRO, c/o Bob Metzger (rmetzger@uscceb.org).

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