



Engaging Aging

Meeting Our Graced Future Together: A Joint General Assembly



Sr. Donna Dodge, SC, serves as President of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of New York and was recently elected as President of the Sisters of Charity Federation Board.

Sister Donna Dodge, SC

Sister Maureen Shaughnessy, SC

We Did It!

Those were the words of Sister Donna Dodge, President of the Sisters of Charity of New York, as we closed the joint General Assembly of the Sisters of Charity of New York and the Sisters of Charity of New Jersey on April 15, 2023. The preceding week had been both intense and amazing. It included discrete sessions for each congregation to conduct its business and elections, and joint sessions that culminated in decisions on five topics of interest and/or concern for both groups: Charism of Charity; Climate Change; Immigration; Homelessness; and insuring that the legacies of both congregations' ongoing works of peace, justice and ecological integrity continue into the future. A full agenda for sure! The joint General Assembly may have ended, but now the work begins. Both leadership teams already started meeting together in July 2023 to set in motion the ad hoc committees and groups necessary for the implementation of Assembly initiatives.

Who Are We?

The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth were founded in 1859 by Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley, nephew of Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton, and Mother Mary Xavier Mehegan, one of the first postulants of the New York Sisters of Charity. We are a pontifical congregation and have 163 members. Our ministries encompass education, healthcare, social services, and pastoral ministry. We minister in 10 Archdioceses and Dioceses in the United States and in El Salvador and Haiti. At this time, our presence in Haiti is not in person due to the country's upheaval.



Sr. Maureen Shaughnessy, SC, is beginning her second term as General Superior of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, New Jersey.

The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of New York have our origins in a group of three sisters sent by Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton in 1817 to establish an orphanage in New York City. In 1846 we became a congregation separate from the Emmitsburg, Maryland foundation. We are an Archdiocesan congregation of 153 members residing primarily in the New York

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City area with a novitiate and ministry in Guatemala. Our ministry relationships span education, healthcare, social services, affordable housing, and other areas addressing the needs of those who live on the margins of society.

How Did a Joint Assembly Come About?

For the past twenty years, both congregations' leadership teams have had a practice of meeting a few times each year to share what was happening in their respective congregations, to consider ways of supporting each other, and to identify opportunities for collaborating in areas of common concern. Shortly after our terms began in July 2019, both new leadership teams met at the New Jersey shore in Harvey Cedars. In sharing future happenings, someone mentioned that before long, we would be into our Assembly planning. We realized that both of our congregations were on the same schedule to hold our Assemblies and Elections. Half-jokingly, the question was raised: "Why not have a joint Assembly?", and as they say, the rest is history.

The two congregations' leaders had initial conversations with Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, the facilitator for the New York group, to explore the feasibility of such an undertaking, which she agreed to do. In the meantime, each congregation distributed a survey to its sisters to ascertain their openness to go forward with such a new endeavor. Overwhelmingly, the response was positive. With our congregations' support behind us,

Members of the SCNJ and SCNY Steering Committees: from left, back row, Sisters Mary Ann Daly, Maureen Shaughnessy, Maryanne Campeotto; Jean Flannelly, Jeanne Agans, Arleen Ketchum; Ellen Dauwer, Donna Dodge; Sheila Brosnan, Patricia Dotzauer, Beverly Policastro, and Mary Mc Cormick. (All photos used with permission of Sisters of Charity of New York and Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, NJ)

both leadership teams met with Sister Sherryl in July 2021 to further explore this unprecedented undertaking. The result was an agreement to move forward with the planning and to have the New Jersey congregation engage its own facilitator for its discrete sessions. Thus, the journey began in earnest. Sister Rosemary Jeffries, RSM was engaged as the facilitator for New Jersey.

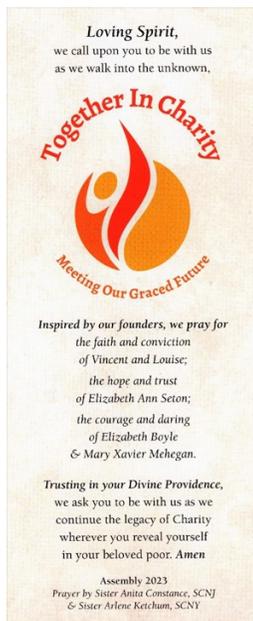
What Happened Next?

While we had conducted a survey with the sisters of both congregations to ascertain their openness to the idea of a joint General Assembly, there were some who questioned why we would do something like this, what was the benefit, what would it cost, where would we hold the Assembly, etc. So, we hosted a few Zoom meetings to give anyone who had questions a chance to voice them and to receive a response. These meetings also gave members of each congregation an opportunity to meet one another and to begin to feel more comfortable. This proved to be a positive experience for all.

Both congregations appointed Steering Committees to plan for the discrete sessions of their General Assemblies. The President of the Sisters of Charity of New York served as a member of its Steering Committee and the General



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Superior of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth served on its Steering Committee. A Core Committee was then established to plan the shared sessions of the joint General Assembly consisting of the leaders of the two congregations, a sister from each Steering Committee and the two facilitators.

The first two shared efforts for the Core Committee were designing the General Assembly logo and writing an Assembly prayer. Sisters

from the two congregations worked collaboratively to create them without a glitch, and we all thanked God!

It should be noted that all communication related to the joint General Assembly was sent to both congregations on the exact same days and signed by both congregations' leaders or by the members of the Core Committee. While this extra level of care was a bit more time-consuming, it ensured that we were sending the same message to our sisters and, as appropriate, to our Associates.

Meetings of the Core Committee were held on a regular basis to determine the overall flow of the General Assembly and to discern agenda content. The challenge came in crafting a schedule that honored time for shared sessions as well as the varying needs of each congregation for discrete sessions. We didn't want members having to roam the halls while others were in session.

Additionally, a full day in-person meeting was held twice during the year with the two Steering Committees. From the start, they decided that collaboration across the congregations was the

only acceptable mode for every aspect of preparation. They delineated the sub-committees that would be needed to do the work for the joint General Assembly as: registration; hospitality; ambiance; prayer and ritual; social; communications; technology; and hotel arrangements. Sisters and Associates from both congregations were invited to serve on these committees.

Another challenge we faced was to have the committees collaborate across congregational lines in all areas rather than work in a parallel fashion. We knew it would be easy and natural to default to "we always do it this way," but we were hoping to create something new. This extra requirement to work across congregations may not have been the most time efficient way to operate, but it did prove to be effective in other ways. In the long run, the committee members established new relationships with each other and gradually gained a deep sense of ownership for the success of the shared General Assembly. Each sub-committee had Co-Chairs and the membership included sisters and Associates from both congregations.

Location, Location, Location

Perhaps the greatest challenge that we faced was identifying a venue for the General Assembly. Our two congregations' Motherhouses are about a 45 minute drive from each other, separated by the Hudson River. Choose any bridge and you're guaranteed a busy commute! An ideal location would have been a barge on the Hudson, but we knew this was not feasible. Two members of the Leadership Teams from each congregation spent months visiting different venues. They needed to identify a place that could accommodate about 140 people in a large room, have capacity for smaller rooms as well, and be able to provide meals, lodging and the needed technology, all at an affordable price!

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We also hoped that the venue would be within easy traveling distance for both groups. In the end, we agreed on a hotel in Morristown, New Jersey as it met most of our criteria. All delegates to the Assembly were required to stay at the hotel during the entire week of sessions.

We should highlight the fact that agreeing to a joint General Assembly entailed a commitment to provide the financial resources to support it. Both congregations could have held their Assemblies locally at a very modest cost. However, we felt this new initiative was worth the effort and the cost.

Shared Gatherings

Beginning in the Fall of 2021 we held several in-person meetings, alternating the site between New Jersey and New York, to which all of our sisters were invited. Our very basic purpose at the start was to have sisters in each congregation meet one another and socialize. We had a program during two events that shared a bit of the history of both congregations and explored the virtues that are part of our shared Vincentian – Setonian tradition: Humility, Simplicity and Charity. We also printed and distributed historical and demographical information about each congregation so we could note similarities and differences.

In October 2022 we invited Sister Teresa Maya, CCVI, former President of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word and former President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, to address sisters and Associates of both congregations on the future of religious life. This gathering also included a panel with representatives from other congre-

gations in the Sisters of Charity Federation in order to situate ourselves in a wider future.

Finally, in December 2021, at an annual feast day and vow renewal celebration for the New York sisters, the New Jersey sisters and Associates were invited to be part of the liturgy and festive dinner that followed. Because of these gatherings held over the two years preceding the joint General Assembly itself, the sisters and Associates of both congregations deepened their connections with one another and built on relationships that had already existed.

We're Ready!

General Assembly 2023 opened the Monday of Easter week with 115 delegates in attendance. In addition to delegates, Assembly partners (non-voting sisters and Associates) joined us. All of the sessions were live streamed, enabling the sisters at our retirement houses to be present virtually (and they were!) Each day's schedule included time for joint sessions as well as time for discrete sessions based on the individual topics for each congregation. We began each morning together with prayer and usually ended each day together with Liturgy. It was at these times that we felt most united; the presence of the Spirit was palpable. We also mixed with each other at meals and at

From left, New Jersey Sister Noreen Holly and New York Sister Virginia Searing presenting a focus group initiative at the joint General Assembly.



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evening socials. During a joint session on Thursday afternoon, we had an opportunity to watch videos of each congregation's ministries, sharing our reactions at tables and with the larger group.

Based on our foundational desire to identify what we could do better together than we could do alone, we had surveyed the sisters in the early planning stages, asking them to name the topics for collaboration that they would like to see addressed at the joint General Assembly. It was these five, named in the beginning of this article, that became the foci for the first few days of the General Assembly's shared sessions, using a modified Open Space process. During our last shared session of the joint General Assembly, one member from each congregation presented a common proposal created by sisters and Associates in each of the five interest areas. All proposals were unanimously approved by the body.

Elections

On Friday, April 14, each congregation went into discrete session to hold their election of leaders for 2023 - 2027. Once completed, we came together for the closing ritual of the joint

General Assembly. At that time the General Superior of the New Jersey congregation introduced the new leadership team for Sisters of Charity of New York, and the President of the New York congregation introduced the new leadership team for Sisters of Charity of New Jersey. It was a poignant moment and a fitting action for our first joint General Assembly!

So, Was It Worth the Effort?

A few weeks after the General

Assembly we asked our sisters to evaluate all aspects of the experience, both joint and discrete sessions. Of interest were the delegates' answers to the question about the preparation for General Assembly 2023. Ninety-seven percent said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the opportunities that were provided. Daily prayer and rituals also received a similar positive response. More telling than percentages, however, were the written comments about delegates' overall experience with a joint General Assembly. All responses were positive, and we include here a brief sampling of their remarks:

- It promised new hope for me.
- It was challenging, ambitious, scary, unprecedented, exhausting, exciting.
- A good experience... a lot of work... collaboration means co-laboring... a portent of future for congregations to work together... not earthshattering but more a new normal.
- Let's do it again! (voiced by several sisters)

The final question in the evaluation was, "How were you changed by this joint Assembly experience?" A sampling of responses follows:

- An "infusion of HOPE"

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- Horizons are broader than before.
- It made me feel strengthened in our vitality stemming from mission – boundless charity.
- Lifted up by new creativity.
- More than changed, I was strengthened.
- A sense of peace and encouragement that I was not feeling prior to our get-together. Saw that small numbers coming together make a difference in what we can do.
- Affirmed in my belief that we need to try new things if we're serious about going out to meet our graced future. Can't let apprehension stoke fear or paralysis will be the result.
- Deep sense of hope for the Charism to thrive. Faith that together we can accomplish more.

So, was it worth the effort? We answer with a resounding "YES!"

An Impact on Senior Members

As for the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, from the very beginning, we asked all of our sisters and Associates to join in prayer for the success of this endeavor. In our Motherhouse where there are a number of retired sisters, the Assembly prayer was prayed after the celebration of Liturgy every day. In fact, we encouraged our sisters and Associates to continue the prayer even after the joint Assembly concluded because we still had one session of the Assembly to complete on July 1.

The live streaming of the days was such a plus for so many of our sisters who could not be with us in person. A number of the Motherhouse community viewed the sessions together and engaged in the discussions. It was an experience that gave hope to so many of our sisters. One of our Administrative Assistants was with the group of Motherhouse sisters for the live

streaming and guided them in the discussions. She remarked on what a wonderful opportunity it was for all.

As for the Sisters of Charity of New York, months before the opening of the General Assembly, sisters and Associates were provided with the names of delegates for whom they promised to pray in a special way. The sisters in our retirement homes took this ministry very seriously.

We were pleased that all of our retirement homes were able to participate in the General Assembly sessions via live streaming. While the delegates at the Assembly engaged in table discussions, many of our elder sisters watching from their retirement facility did the same with each other.

Almost immediately after returning home from the Assembly, it seemed important to visit with the sisters unable to attend. Expecting questions or concerns, they gave voice to an enlivening and hopeful discussion. It was clear that they were united in spirit with the delegates throughout the entire process. One of our retired sisters summed up her reaction in this way:

"I realize that everyone can and is involved in ministry from the smallest act of kindness to the grandiose deeds done by many. Due to aging I know I can't do a lot of things that need to be done in the world, but I can pray and support."

Key Factors in Our Success?

Both congregations share a common charism of Charity and already have some familiarity with each other. This element of trust, even before we came to the joint General Assembly, was very important. In addition, the pre-Assembly meetings only added to the level of comfort among sisters and Associates. Another advantage was the practice that both leadership

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teams have had of working together for a number of years.

Ongoing communication with the sisters and Associates in both Congregations was a necessary element to create an environment of buy-in and ownership. It became “our” joint Assembly as opposed to the leaderships’ experiment.

The support staff from both congregations worked extremely well together both before and during the event. Collaboration seemed a natural way of operating.

We were well served by our investment in technology that enabled us to livestream the sessions to our retirement houses as well as to those sisters and Associates unable to be present. No one was excluded from this venture. Updating everyone’s technology skills before the General Assembly was also helpful as we

invited cross-conversations through shared Zoom sessions.

Before, during, and throughout the process we all called upon the Spirit in our daily Assembly prayer to “be with us as we walk into the unknown.” As expected, the Spirit did not disappoint.

Finally, we had exceptional facilitators who believed in us, encouraged us, and walked with us throughout the entire process. We could not have had a successful experience without Sisters Sherryl and Rosemary.

Was it a risk? Definitely! But risk-taking is in our Charity genes. Consider the Seton family motto: “Hazard yet forward!” How could we do any less? Together in Charity, meeting our graced future!

New leaders, from left, Sisters Margaret O’Brien, NY; Mary Ann Daly, NY; Cecilia McManus, NJ; Donna Dodge, NY; Maureen Shaughnessy, NJ; Mary Mc Cormick, NY; Margaret Egan, NY; Eileen Farrell, NJ; Maryanne Campeotto, NJ; Sheila Brosnan, NY.



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Staff

Executive Director

Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM
sstill@usccb.org

Grants Specialist

Monica Glover
mglover@usccb.org

Program Associate

Karen Canas
kcanas@usccb.org

Education & Outreach Manager

John Knutsen
jknutsen@usccb.org

Affiliated Independent Consultants

Sister Anna Marie Tag, RSM
NRROConsult-AMTag@usccb.org

Ms. Dayna Larson-Hurst
NRROConsult-DLHurst@usccb.org