



# Engaging Aging



## Springtime of Hope Blooms In Desert

**Sister Angela Wagner, DLJC**

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*Sr. Angela Wagner,  
DLJC*

These words from Isaiah have always been meaningful for our community: “The desert and the parched land will exult; / the steppe will rejoice and bloom. / They will bloom with abundant flowers, / and rejoice with joyful song. / A highway will be there, / called the holy way” (Is 35:1,8).

The Lord has planted us in this desert place with the promise that our life, deeply rooted in prayer and praise, will blossom forth in our mission to reach out to the world with the joy of the Gospel. We call the long dirt road leading to our Motherhouse convent the “Holy Way.” Many friends and visitors have told us that as soon as they begin the drive down the Holy Way they can sense the peace and presence of God.

In the spirit of this Jubilee Year of Hope, I would like to share with you the story of our religious congregation and the adjustments we learned to make as we recognized the needs that rise with aging. We are the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, located in the northern Texas Panhandle on land we have named “Prayer Town.”

### **Our Charism and History**

As a Franciscan religious congregation, we live a contemplative life of prayer and praise in the charismatic tradition. By the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit, we serve people of all ages through evangelistic ministries such as life-changing retreats, prayer and healing ministry, dynamic music ministry, domestic and foreign missions, radio and newsletter ministry, campus ministry, prayer line and prayers of intercession, spiritual direction and



**Sister Angela Wagner, DLJC**, entered the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in 1988 and made her final profession of vows in 1997. She is currently completing her second term as General Councilor, and has been serving as General Treasurer for over 25 years. She has also served as Local Superior at their convent in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Sharing in the congregation’s charism of evangelization, she has given parish retreats, Confirmation retreats, talks and missions in the United States, Mexico and Central America.

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utilizing on-site retreat facilities. In all of our apostolates we seek to draw all people into a personal relationship with Jesus through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

We trace our founding to January 22, 1972, when our Foundress, Mother John Marie Stewart, a convert to Catholicism with the heart of a contemplative and great missionary zeal, received in prayer the inspiration for a congregation both contemplative and missionary. Beginning in her home state of Arkansas, she desired to share the graces of the New Pentecost not only in the United States but also on missions to Mexico, Japan, Russia, and Poland. Our sisters also come from a variety of countries including the United States, Mexico, Canada, the Philippines, India, Korea, Vietnam, and Trinidad. The joyful sharing among these many cultures brings a great richness to our congregation that witnesses to the Holy Spirit's gift of unity.

Each sister wears a wooden cross in her habit belt which reminds her that as Jesus' Disciples we carry our own cross in union with his. "If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps. / Whoever would save his life

will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:24-25).



*Left: The Prayer Town Cross high on the Texas property of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. (All photos used with permission of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.)*

*Right: The sisters refer to the dirt road leading to their Motherhouse in Texas as "The Holy Way."*



In 1977, we were given land in the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas. The sisters who joined Mother John Marie in those early days like to recount that when they arrived, there was nothing on the land but a windmill! Over the course of the years we built our own buildings, asking the help and advice of friends and neighbors when needed. We also kept a garden and a farm including milk cows, sheep, and chickens, while continuing to lead retreats both in our own retreat house and in numerous parishes. We established a local house in Monterrey, Mexico, and several other houses in the United States. In the spring of 1991, we received the long-awaited approval from Rome establishing us as a religious congregation of diocesan right.

In addition to our farm and garden, the Lord provided for our needs in other remarkable ways. One of our favorite stories is the "Carrot Story." Minutes after a young sister had prayed for carrots, a farmer pulled up with a truckload full of tons of carrots which lasted an entire year for the sisters and our farm animals. Now, we remind each other to make our prayers of petition a bit more specific!

As our congregation grew in numbers, we built a larger Motherhouse comprising a central building with kitchen, dining, and living rooms for common use, flanked by a residential wing and

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an administration wing, each with a courtyard. One room was designed to be our temporary chapel, which we used for over 30 years until our Foundress' vision was realized. She had told many of us, pointing to the vacant field directly outside our Motherhouse, "One day there will be a chapel there, and we will call it Our Lady of the Angels."

### NRRO Planning and Implementation Process

In 2014, we received a kind letter from the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) inviting us to a workshop to help us plan for our future needs. As a young community, we knew that we needed to plan sometime and this was just the encouragement we needed. Our founding sisters were already beginning to require more medical care and it was also clear that those of us who had entered during our community's initial building phase would have these same needs in the near future.

We had no idea where to start. While completing the questionnaire for the initial NRRO workshop, I wrote, "We don't have a plan; we have not even discussed these issues yet."

*Below, from left: Sr. Cecilia Bushnell, now deceased, and Sr. Bernadette Beamsley are pictured in front of the original Motherhouse of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, Prayer Town, Texas.*



At the workshop we learned about the many services offered by the NRRO, gained more understanding of the terms used in eldercare, and realized that the time to start planning was now. The NRRO also assigned knowledgeable and experienced consultants to walk with us through each stage of the Planning and Implementation process.

### On-Site Engagement

After an initial visit to see our convent and speak with some of the elder sisters, the NRRO recommended a consultation to help us utilize the software tool Tracking Revenue Expense Net Assets Demographics Savings (TRENDS). This would be followed by an eldercare consultation.

In 2015, the TRENDS consultation helped us to visualize our financial picture. In 2016, two NRRO consultants visited us to offer presentations for the entire community about the spiritual and physical changes in the aging process. The result was almost tangible. We experienced a greater mutual understanding and respect between the younger and older sisters. Additionally, the consultants suggested many practical modifications in our facility that would improve the day to day experience of our sisters. For example, at their advice, we installed sound-absorbing curtains in our dining room and started using a microphone. These simple changes made it easier for sisters with auditory problems to hear those who were reading or speaking.

### Expanding Participation of Members

Our next step was to create an Eldercare Committee headed by our Vicar General, Sr. Maria Crucis Koch, who guided the subsequent consultations and planning.

About six months later we invited Ms. Dayna Larson-Hurst, an affiliated independent consultant for the NRRO, to return again as a facilitator to aid us in writing a Philosophy of Health and

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Wellness for the whole congregation, as well as to conduct an open forum for input on future eldercare planning. Both proved to be pivotal experiences for us as everyone in the community was able to voice their ideas and concerns on topics such as practical needs of aging, levels of care, the use of professional caregivers, and planning for a future infirmary wing. Input from sisters residing in our local houses was also incorporated and evaluated by our newly formed Eldercare Committee.

This model of including all of our sisters, keeping them “in the loop” at every stage of the process, built a firm foundation of support because we were moving forward together as a community in this project.

### Aging In Place

When we were introduced to the concept of “Aging in Place,” we felt that this model would suit our needs perfectly. Since we are located 45 miles from the medical facilities in Amarillo, we wanted to be able to care for each sister as much as possible in-house before moving her to a skilled nursing facility. For example, we realized that just by having a larger room, a sister in need of a wheelchair would have easy access along with space for any needed medical equipment.

We had been advised by several experienced NRRO staff and consultants to consider carefully the number of rooms we needed so as not to overbuild. We decided on 6 accessible bedrooms with a nurses’ station, laundry and kitchenette.

### Renovations and Building

After several years of this initial education and preparation, we were ready to undertake the addition of an infirmary wing to our Motherhouse building. By then we had several infirm and elder sisters who had a hard time navigating the

existing spaces, especially since many doors were not wide enough for wheelchairs to pass through.

In 2017, we chose an architectural firm after speaking with several religious congregations who had recently completed building projects. From the beginning, our architects got to know us and our needs, gave slide presentations to the whole community, and patiently explained the different stages they would lead us through.

First came a facility condition assessment, followed by a functional assessment. Then we reached the master planning stage in which, together, we visualized different concepts for making larger wheelchair accessible rooms. We quickly realized that remodeling our existing small bedrooms would be difficult and would cause a lot of disruption in the convent. Consequently, we needed to build an additional wing.

Our architect helped us to come up with the concept of adding an infirmary wing perpendicular to our Motherhouse building while also expanding the current chapel. We agreed to go ahead with this plan, and the drawings were done.

About this time, in May 2018, our Foundress, Mother John Marie, passed into eternity at the age of 91. We still remembered the vision she had



*Right: Mother John Marie Stewart, Foundress of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

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experienced of the Chapel called Our Lady of the Angels.

### The Lord Changes Our Plans

An unexpected but wonderful change in our plans happened when a friend visited us. He was an architect and felt inspired to present us with an alternative sketch. His plan placed the new infirmary wing with a beautiful new chapel parallel to the Motherhouse, creating two more courtyards to complement our existing building and courtyards. When we saw the new idea, each of us instantly agreed that this was the right plan to go with. Our original architects kindly worked with us and our friend for several more months to create the new schematic design, construction document and revised budget.

### Fundraising and Groundbreaking

We were now ready to begin fundraising for our building project. During this time, the Covid pandemic hit and the prices of construction materials increased. Still, our sisters in Mission Advancement persevered, and when we had raised over half of the funds needed, we held a groundbreaking ceremony on October 4, 2022, as part of our congregation's Golden Jubilee celebration.

We hired a local Catholic company to do the actual building construction. Through contacts in Amarillo we were able to order beautiful custom-made chapel furniture and statuary from Vietnam, which arrived by ship and train just as the building was being completed.

### Dedication of Our New Aging in Place Wing and Chapel

Another one of the favorite Scriptures of our young community has been from the prophet Habakkuk. "For the vision still has its time, / presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint. / If it delays, wait for it, / it will surely come, it will not be late" (Hb 2:3).

Indeed, during these years there were times when we could have questioned whether anything substantial would come from it in the end.



Above: The new Chapel, Our Lady of the Angels.



Left: The new infirmary wing, Aging in Place, looks out onto a new courtyard.

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Yet God led us step by step with perfect timing. As we watched the lovely new building rising up from the desert sand, we saw our hopes fulfilled in a way that was beyond any of our expectations. Indeed, the fact that our whole community has been united in agreement about the new wing and chapel is proof enough that it is God's work.

The dedication of the new Our Lady of the Angels Chapel and Aging in Place Wing was held on April 13, 2024, amid great joy and thanksgiving to God. Bishop Patrick Zurek, Bishop of Amarillo, consecrated the new altar and chapel in a moving ceremony attended also by many of our friends and family.

We are extremely grateful to the NRRO, its staff, consultants, and all of the generous benefactors who walked with us throughout these



*Above, from left: Sr. Philip Ellenberger, Sr. Mary Magdalene Takazawa, Sr. Therese Socchia, and Sr. Mary Gianna Thornby in the new Aging in Place wing. Sr. Mary Gianna serves as a registered nurse.*

nearly 10 years of our Planning and Implementation process. Truly we would not have been able to do this on our own without their expert knowledge and financial assistance from the very first workshop until the time we began construction.

Several of our elder sisters have already moved into the new Aging in Place wing. Sadly, shortly after she moved in, Sr. Cecilia Bushnell received a terminal diagnosis. A hospice nurse visited daily, and our own sisters were able to care lovingly for Sr. Cecilia in the weeks before she died peacefully in her room in the new Aging in Place wing. She had been one of the sisters to attend the very first NRRO planning workshop, and it seems fitting that she should be the one to pave the way, reminding us that the goal for all of us is eternal life with the Lord.

### Into the Future with Hope

Currently we are 43 sisters, including those in formation. In addition to our Motherhouse, we have local houses in Amarillo, Texas;

*Left: Sisters gather around the new Divine Mercy statue located in the courtyard built recently as part of the renovations.*

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Monterrey, Mexico. We also have sisters in the Diocese of Legnica, western Poland, and are discerning more ministry there in the future.

In order to assure that our sisters continue to have a trained nurse available for medical needs, Sr. Mary Gianna attended nursing school and received her R.N. in 2024. Sr. Philip, our dedicated nurse since the early years, is now able to relax more and help as she is able.

We now go forward with hope into the future, confident that our sisters will have the proper setting to live out their senior years, even as they pray and intercede for those sisters who are in the active ministry.



*Above, from left: Serving as the General Council, Sr. Angela Wagner, Treasurer; Sr. Maria Crucis Koch, Vicar General; Mother Lucy Lukasiewicz, Superior General; Sr. JuanaTeresa Chung, Mission Advancement Director; Sr. Ana Chiara Richardson, Vocation Director.*

*Below: Sisters of Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ gathered in the new Our Lady of the Angels Chapel for the dedication ceremony.*



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