



Engaging Aging

The Resource Center for Religious Institutes: A Companion for the Journey

Ms. Colleen Crawford

“Our role is one of attentive accompaniment as institutes and members walk their respective paths.”

*Sr. Sharon Euart,
RSM, JCD
Executive Director,
Resource Center for
Religious Institutes*

Tucked on the sixth floor of an unassuming high-rise in Silver Spring, Maryland, the Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI) is an inviting refuge amid a sea of corporate offices. In an area that has seen rampant change in industry, from Discovery headquarters to biotechnology facilities and medical therapeutics, the enduring presence of a Catholic nonprofit brings light and warmth to the neighborhood. Over the years, the RCRI office has moved and relocated in the downtown, but the organization’s central tenets of ministry remain unaltered: a commitment to Christ, an attention to professional responsibility, and an emphasis on accompaniment in an ever-changing landscape for religious institutes.

The Resource Center for Religious Institutes is faithful to its title. Its staff of four, led by Executive Director Sr. Sharon Euart, RSM, JCD, respond to the needs of nearly 500 member religious institutes varying in size from fewer than 10 individual members to over 1000 individuals. These institutes have diverse charisms, encompassing institutes and societies of women, men, apostolic, monastic, and contemplative life.

RCRI unites professional expertise and a sincere, joyful approach to service. Through personal consultation, collaborative programming, education, and

Ms. Colleen Crawford is a nonprofit consultant based in Alexandria, Virginia. For six years, she served as Program Manager for FADICA Catholic Philanthropy Network, implementing strategy and delivering resources for Catholic funders and grantee partners to identify organizational safeguarding gaps and keep beneficiaries of service/team members safe. Prior to her work with FADICA, Colleen was the first General Secretary of the Canon Law Society of America, a professional membership organization of 1400 practitioners and students of canon law. An alumna of The Catholic University of America, Colleen holds a Bachelor of Arts in English. In addition to writing and nonprofit advising, she currently serves as a Leadership Consultant for Catholic Leadership Institute in Malvern, PA.



The Resource Center for Religious Institutes: A Companion for the Journey, continued

resource development, the RCRI team assists leadership of member institutes in carrying out stewardship responsibilities.

“We are blessed to develop a wider view of religious life in our country, as well as increased awareness of the international experience,” Sr. Sharon observes. “We examine current trends and adapt to the needs of our members, delivering canonical, civil, and financial resources to serve both elected leadership and lay administrators.”

Managing canonical, civil, and financial needs in an integrated way sets RCRI apart. It recognizes that new leaders desire guidance and accompaniment as they carve out their paths. Often, these leaders do not have equivalent experience or competencies in civil and canonical frameworks, and RCRI’s “one-stop shopping” is part of its broad appeal. Professional advice and referrals cover a breadth of issues, from governance structures, property and asset management, federal and state taxation, and religious institute historical completion, to commissaries, responsibilities for sponsored works, safe environments, employment law, and elder law.

RCRI aims to provide practical and personal recommendations, with the knowledge that legal and financial needs are not the same for all institutes. The organization operates with a sensitivity to the distinctive realities of religious life, prioritizing exceptional service and flexibility in convening people, groups, and resources.

RCRI’s mission requires vigilance in responding to the current moment, while it simultaneously brainstorms and implements strategy for the future. Additionally, RCRI supports efforts to strengthen relationships between religious institutes, societies, American bishops, and the Dicastery of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

RCRI’s operations are distinct, insofar as it is not a canonically established conference like the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), or the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR). Rather, RCRI’s emphasis is on resource development for members of the three conferences of religious women and men. RCRI does not keep statistical records on the specific religious conferences to which its members belong. It functions with an awareness of members’ needs and the current trends among institutes based on primary accounts from members in consultations, conference workshops, and webinars. Also of value are critical reports and studies from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO). Focused analysis on trends allows RCRI to expand its resources to assist with governance and financial situations.

Increasingly, this approach means reckoning with two realities: (1) the decreasing number of religious institutes as the average age of members rises; and (2) the complexity and urgency of the critical issues facing religious institutes, combined with inexperience on the part of some new leaders.



From left, The Staff of the Resource Center for Religious Institutes gathered at the Center’s National Conference: Mr. Christopher J. Fusco, JCL, JD, Esq., Associate Director of Civil Law; Ms. Sabrina Hidalgo, Membership and Program Coordinator; Ms. Bobbi Besley, Bookkeeper; and Sr. Sharon Euart, RSM, JCD, Executive Director. (All photos used with permission of RCRI.)

The Resource Center for Religious Institutes: A Companion for the Journey, continued

Observed and Emerging Trends

This shifting dynamic around institute age and individual age is not exclusive to the American Church. Religious vocations saw a sharp increase in candidates in the middle of the 20th century, and indeed, some experts now interpret declining numbers as a “return” to a level of vocations to consecrated life that is more realistic.

In 2025, retired members of religious institutes significantly outnumbered wage earners, impacting the annual costs of care across congregations, and the need for support from the Retirement Fund for Religious. According to NRRO’s most recent statistical analysis, there are 49,551 Catholic sisters, brothers, and religious order priests in the United States, and more than 28,700 of these individuals belong to religious communities who receive support and services from the Retirement Fund for Religious.

That same NRRO analysis shows that the median age of members of religious institutes largely stabilized between 2015 and 2025, a positive outlook. Similarly, per a 2020 report produced by CARA and the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC), as of 2019, 87 percent of men and women religious in final or perpetual vows were born before 1960 and, thus, are in their sixties or older. CARA contrasts this figure with the percentage reported in 2009, wherein 88 percent of vowed religious were in their sixties or older. The report goes on to observe that “the unchanged proportion over the decade suggests that the influx of newer members has helped to offset the drastic decline that was anticipated as the unusually high number of members who entered in the first half of the last century age out.”

The influx of newer vocations is encouraging, yet some institutes and societies are also reaching historical completion, i.e., circumstances in which a community “completes” its journey, due in part to no new members in formation and the lack of capacity for canonical leadership in the future.

For RCRI, accompaniment and support throughout this challenging process is crucial. “Our services have shifted over the past decade to include legal and financial resources for institutes planning for historical completion,” shares Associate Director Christopher Fusco, JD, JCL. “The institutes are at very different levels of planning, beginning with accepting their future realities and assessing their unique situations and how best to move forward,” he concludes.

“We are not concerned that this consecrated form of Christian life will disappear,” Euart explains. “RCRI’s membership includes institutes in their last generations as well as an increasing number of newer institutes with younger members and emerging needs. Our role is one of attentive accompaniment as institutes and members walk their respective paths.”



Above, Participants at the 2024 RCRI National Conference, Orlando, FL.

Power of Collaboration

Despite new growth in individual communities, the declining numbers of religious institutes inevitably create conditions for a major crossroads. RCRI sees the opportunity for either increased competition or increased cooperation among national organizations that serve the same religious constituencies. Increased cooperation is its primary goal. The organization is well-positioned to facilitate collaboration on valuable, responsive initiatives among national organizations and across congregational lines.

To understand RCRI’s role in the ecosystem of religious institutes, one can trace its history. The

The Resource Center for Religious Institutes: A Companion for the Journey, continued

Resource Center for Religious Institutes was preceded by leadership efforts from two organizations: the National Association for Treasurers of Religious (NATRI), an organization established in May 1981 for the benefit of treasurers and finance managers of religious institutes, and the Legal Resource Center for Religious (LRCR), a subscription-based organization that grew out of the legal offices of CMSM and LCWR in the 1980s.

For decades, NATRI and LRCR shared an office wing in the Silver Spring building that housed CMSM and LCWR. RCRI was formally incorporated on January 1, 2009, uniting the financial and legal services and staff from NATRI and LRCR.

RCRI continues to work closely with CMSM, CMSWR, and LCWR. Through planned programming and grant-funded initiatives, RCRI also collaborates with other national Catholic networks like Catholic Health Association (CHA), Support Our Aging Religious (SOAR), and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG).

Acknowledging the essential collaboration between the Resource Center for Religious Institutes and the

National Religious Retirement Office, Sr. Sharon states, “NRRO’s mission is critical for institutes with decreasing numbers and aging members. Not only does NRRO provide financial assistance to many institutes, the staff and consultants are committed to providing educational opportunities, and their workshops are a valuable part of our annual conference.”

Creating Opportunities for Collaboration

The annual RCRI conference to which NRRO contributes is no small feat; the combination of networking and continuing education draws robust participation. Each year the team brings together approximately 900 members, attendees, vendors, and speakers. “Even though the needs of individual institutes vary, there is power in sharing experiences,” Sabrina Hidalgo, Coordinator of Programs and Membership, explains. “Our members have an opportunity to engage cooperatively and creatively, reflecting together on new challenges and trends.” Challenges are both professional and deeply personal. Through convening, RCRI’s goal is to highlight relational and responsive interventions, backed by data and experience. The 2026 conference, planned for early November in St. Louis, Missouri,



The Resource Center for Religious Institutes: A Companion for the Journey, continued

features widespread topics, including elder law issues, integrating grantmaking and community investing, repurposing property for affordable housing, addressing end-of-life care and advance directives, and preparing for perpetual stewardship. Planned sessions also cover the role of commissaries, human resource administration, emerging themes related to artificial intelligence, climate justice, social equity, and adverse childhood experiences.

Convening is at the heart of ministry for RCRI and remains one of its most beneficial membership “perks.” For smaller congregations who may

not have access to the same resources as larger groups do, the annual conference offers organic opportunities to build relationships, encounter new resources and strategies, and identify resonant themes and trends among institutes with different charisms. It is continuing education, buoyed and informed by member participation and leadership.

Common Issues Facing Religious Institutes

As a national office, RCRI has a unique perspective on the issues facing religious institutes today, including aging memberships and other immediate concerns. The staff commonly answer questions across four categories related to canon law, civil law, and financial administration: namely, people, paper, property, and policies.

People issues are diverse, ranging from profession and formation questions to the care of members, including health care, retirement, difficult behavioral

issues, psychological treatment, and cognitive issues. People issues might also include those who are separated from the institute by reason of excommunication, transfer, or dismissal. As institutes appoint lay administrators, they contend with new legal and human resource issues. Institutes must also

navigate the relationship with diocesan bishops and Rome.

Paper issues span canonical governance documents across provinces, regions, delegations, and canonical houses, to corporate documents, constitutions, and chapter decisions.

It includes cession papers, patrimony, and renunciation, alongside advice and

consent requirements. Questions about state and federal regulatory documents are common, and many institutes face challenges with archival processes.

Property issues frequently pertain to questions of ownership, divesting, and alienation of ecclesiastical temporal goods. RCRI receives questions about options for sponsored ministries, housing for members, land conservation, and public juridic persons for ministries, first among Catholic healthcare ministries, and more recently, among Catholic educational ministries.

Policy issues may be influenced by changing norms, technology, or legislation. From the protection of children and vulnerable persons to durable powers of attorney, these topics require significant attention, frequent monitoring, and timely response. Policy issues often include questions about



Above, from left, Panel at RCRI national conference: Sr. Sharon Euart, RSM; Sr. Paula Cooney, IHM; Sr. Helen Kearney, CSJ; Fr. David Cray, SSE; Sr. Jane Hibbard, SNJM; and Sr. Janice Bader, CPPS.

The Resource Center for Religious Institutes: A Companion for the Journey, continued



Left, Sr. Susan Durkin, OSU, Board President for RCRI and Past President of the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland, OH.

information technology, artificial intelligence, and social communications. Members will seek clarity on government regulations such as health benefits and political activity, together with questions about cars and travel, or records retention.

Like other Catholic nonprofits, RCRI grapples with issues brought forth by civil government. Its “Timely Topics” webinar series addresses emerging trends and policy implications through the lens of religious life. These current event webinars are recorded and archived as resources for members.

RCRI also addresses a broad range of topics through its Stewardship Webinar Series hosted annually in the spring and directed toward canon law, civil law, and management topics of interest. The organization anticipates 2026 Stewardship Webinars on the employee life cycle, record-keeping as risk management, external review boards, and obedience and behavioral issues, among other topics. For member institutes, behavior yields perennial questions, due in part to the combination of older, middle-aged, and younger members in communities, and frequently, the lack of adequate canonical remedies to address disruptive behavior.

Importantly, however, all webinars offer a private forum to ask questions, seek guidance from experts, and share wisdom with peers. This experience of community and collaboration, and the platform it af-

fords both national organizations and congregations, serves as a model for an integrated approach to problem-solving. By contrast, other RCRI resources are self-directed, like its Toolbox, or TRENDS, a proprietary software that helps religious institutes with financial management, including tracking, revenue, expense, net assets, demographics, and savings.

Like many other elective membership organizations, RCRI and its Board of Directors are attentive to the bottom line, continually reviewing membership, revenue models, and staff infrastructure to ensure a solid foundation for current and future services. The organization has been fortunate to draw on invested assets, grants, and donor contributions that permit RCRI to extend discounts to smaller congregations in need of financial assistance.

Transition Planning and Continuity

For every national organization serving religious constituents, and for the institutes and societies themselves, one theme persists: Where do we go from here?

RCRI acknowledges the importance of continuity and creativity as religious institutes prioritize next steps. Continuity (handbooks, documents, formal duties and training opportunities for new leaders, etc.) is equally as important as creativity in responding to the signs of the times and fostering cooperation for the future.

One of RCRI’s strategic resources is “Fidelity to the Journey: New Paths of Hope”, a booklet that summarizes tools and experiences from four workshops provided by RCRI from 2014 to 2020. The booklet draws on the experience of leaders who made important decisions, were in transition, or were beginning to assess the future needs of their institutes for transition planning. Together with an online Toolbox, additional workshops, and a 2018 convening between leaders of religious institutes and bishops, the project captured critical perspectives, namely, the experience of religious transition and the impact of

The Resource Center for Religious Institutes: A Companion for the Journey, continued

the local church. The Toolbox is available to all RCRI members as well as LCWR, CMSWR, CMSM, UISG and Vicars and delegates for Religious.

As RCRI looks to the future and reflects on its past, it envisions new opportunities for collaboration with other organizations working with religious men and women, as well as increased services to new leaders of institutes and societies, and to international institutes with canonical houses, regions, and provinces in the United States.

Sr. Susan Durkin, OSU, Board President for RCRI, is a proud beneficiary of the organization's services. Durkin was motivated by first-hand experience with leadership questions in her own congregation, the Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland. "When I was elected to leadership in my community, I really had no experience about how to lead a religious community," she admits. "Coming to RCRI in that first year of my leadership term, it was important for me to be able to spend concentrated time learning about things that I would need to know, canonically, civilly, and about the finances of running a religious congregation." She calls RCRI "a tremendous resource" that prepared her for the next several years of her leadership term.

Ultimately, the gift of an organization like RCRI is its ongoing commitment to shared learning. The generosity of members, particularly the larger institutes who help nurture and support smaller institutes, sets a precedent, an acknowledgement that while congregations differ, there is beauty and wisdom that comes from facing challenges and transitions together, in service to the Church.

"We help individuals identify what their specific need is, which they can sometimes struggle to name," Sr. Sharon shares. "That one-on-one service is one of the greatest member benefits that people experience at RCRI. They find they are no longer alone with the issue they are facing."

From the Office of NRRO Director Mr. John Knutsen



The landscape of religious life in the United States is ever shifting. Here at the NRRO, we strive to support religious institutes as they care for their elder members and improve retirement readiness. We do this through funding from the annual national collection for retired religious, education, resourcing and consulting. *Engaging Aging* has long been a valued part of that effort, our diverse writers sharing important individual perspectives and initiatives based on their congregations' experiences.

This year, we decided to step back and view the bigger picture. We have invited four key national organizations to contribute articles as part of a series. The Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and the Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI) are well-positioned to offer different yet complementary perspectives on the impact of aging memberships on the future of religious life in the United States.

We asked each of these organizations to address how religious life is being lived out among their member communities as memberships age, what challenges and opportunities are crossing congregational lines today, what sort of national planning is taking place to help member communities, and what insights each organization has regarding the changing face of religious life in the United States.

Kicking off this special series is RCRI, providing an overview of the resources they offer and their perspective on the ever-shifting face of religious life in this country. We are grateful for RCRI's willingness to contribute to this ongoing conversation and look forward to hearing from the three national conferences on the same themes later this year.

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
National Religious Retirement Office
3211 4th Street N.E.
Washington, DC 20017-1194

NON-PROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
USCCB

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



National Religious Retirement Office

Sponsor of the Retirement Fund for Religious

3211 4th Street, NE
Washington, DC 20017-1194

Phone: (202) 541-3215

Fax: (202) 541-3053

Email: retirement@usccb.org

Websites:

www.usccb.org/nrro

www.retiredreligious.org

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

Staff

Director

John Knutsen
jknutsen@usccb.org

Grants Specialist

Monica Glover
mglover@usccb.org

Program Associate

Karen Canas
kcanas@usccb.org

Education & Outreach Manager

Ms. Dayna Larson-Hurst
dlhurst@usccb.org