

Collaborative governance model helps congregations carry on with limited resources



St. Louis, Missouri

In 2013, Sr. Janice Bader, a **Sister of the Most Precious Blood** and then executive director of the **National Religious Retirement Office**, noticed more congregations across the United States in need of financial and leadership assistance than there were congregations able to provide it.

Her own was one of them. Within a year, the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood would stop pursuing new members because it had been so long since anyone had made final profession. The sisters were in the process of selling most of their motherhouse and their infirmary, which became **senior apartments** and a skilled nursing home, respectively. The sisters who had been living in the motherhouse are now tenants of the apartments, and about half of the nursing home residents are sisters.

There was no more denying that completion — when the last sister dies and the mission ends — was in the community's future, said Bader, now president of the community.



Sisters of the Most Precious Blood President Sr. Janice Bader, seen Nov. 3 in St. Louis. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

And as the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood in O'Fallon, Missouri, just west of St. Louis, were facing the future, the **Franciscan Sisters of Mary**, about 20 minutes east in Bridgeton, Missouri, were asking for help. The Precious Blood sisters knew they couldn't solve their neighbors' problems for them, but they also knew both communities would be better off if they faced the issues together.

The Franciscan Sisters of Mary had stopped pursuing new members in 2001. They **sold their convent** in 2011, and a majority of the sisters moved to a retirement community. The majority are unable to work because of advancing age.

"We have a chapter coming up in 2019, and we're anticipating the current leadership team is the last one," said President Sr. Susan Scholl. "We'll probably do an extension for one year to work on the transition. ... It's coming close to the end."

Bader said that when the partnership was proposed in 2013, covenant relationships — where two communities essentially merge but keep their separate identities in the eyes of the church — seemed to be the only option, but it did not seem to be a good one: It would only temporarily address the leadership question and would mean one community would essentially subsume the other, even if they remained technically separate.

The two communities consulted with the **Resource Center for Religious Institutes** and the **Leadership Conference of Women Religious**. Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sharon Holland, then president-elect of LCWR, suggested the communities talk to Presentation of Mary Sr. Kelly Connors, a canon lawyer who focuses on governance issues. Connors studied and worked with Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate Fr. Frank Morrisey, who had been working with Canadian congregations facing completion.

"We said to her that we were trying to put together some model that's not exactly a covenant," Scholl said. "She said, 'Let me go think about it' and came back with a very early, simple draft of how it might look."

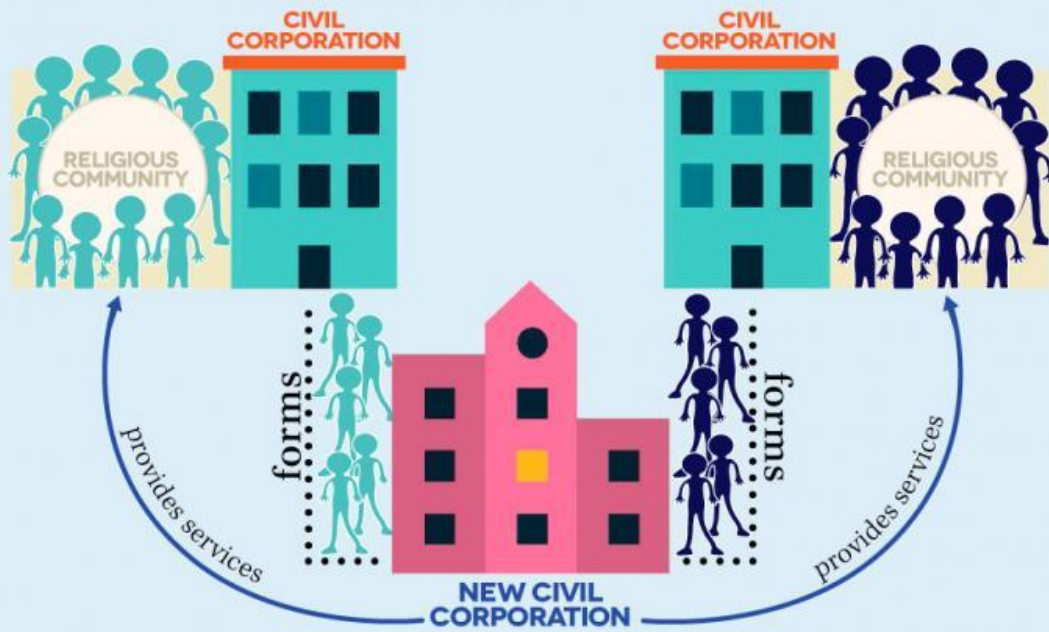
The model Connors created in late 2013, known now as collaborative governance, focuses on the civil corporations of the congregations involved. Every congregation has two identities: the entity recognized by the church under canon law and the nonprofit corporation recognized by the government.

Collaborative governance has the civil corporations from the two communities create a third corporation, which handles insurance, human resources, property management, legal issues, and all the other tasks the congregation requires as well as any management tasks needed for sponsored ministries. The congregation's leadership is then free to focus on spiritual issues.

The religious congregations appoint representatives to the new civil corporation's shared board and pay the corporation for whatever services it supplies.

THE FUTURE FOR MANY CONGREGATIONS

In collaborative governance, the civil corporations of two or more communities form a separate corporation. The religious communities then hire the new civil corporation as a management company, providing services such as human resources, insurance, vehicles, property maintenance and health care.



(GSR graphic / Toni-Ann Ortiz)

In the future, when no one from the community is able to serve on the collaborative corporation's board, they can appoint a vowed religious from outside the community as their representative. And when there is no one to be the spiritual leader, Connors said, Rome can appoint a pontifical commissary as the leader, which could be the congregation's representative to the board or, more likely, the board chair. That continues the structure of a superior with a leadership council, with the council in this case being the board members, Connors said.

Connors said this model allows each congregation to continue and ensure care for its sisters until the last sister dies.

"It's a way to ensure the integrity of each community," she said. "With a covenant, the idea is similar, except you have one community that's still capable and takes over for the other, but the reality is everyone's in the same boat. We needed to find a way to do things with integrity and honor the heritage of each congregation and give them the support they need."

The communities and their respective civil corporations continue to own all their assets, such as land and buildings, while the governance corporation simply manages those assets. When it is required, the board then provides leadership and carries out the congregation's wishes until completion.

"The idea is any employees will be employees of the governance corporation and not each individual community," Connors said. "Each community would contribute money to cover the expenses."



Presentation of Mary Sr. Kelly Connors speaks Oct. 13, 2016, at the Resource Center for Religious Institutes national conference in Anaheim, California. (GSR photo / Dan Stockman)

And those expenses might be lower thanks not only to economies of scale, but also because a small congregation may not need, say, a full-time finance officer, but would be hard-pressed to find one to work part-time. Under this model, the governance corporation would manage finances.

"We can maintain our autonomy, make decisions and direct how we want our last years to be," Scholl said. "It seems like the best of all worlds. It frees the members up to be about the mission."

'This is not a merger'

Freeing up members for the mission was a key motivator for members of the Wisconsin Religious Collaborative, which in 2015 began studying options for the 14 congregations of LCWR Region 9 in Wisconsin.

Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross provincial Sr. Patricia Cormack, who initiated the formation of the Wisconsin Religious Collaborative, said the model they're working on has not yet addressed the declining leadership pool, the No. 1 concern for Region 9 members, though the other aspects remain the same.

"This frees people up for leadership without having to worry about the administrative side of things," Cormack said. "That's what really drew us to this. ... Sisters have said, 'If I didn't have to worry about these administrative things, I would keep my name in the pool.' "

The Wisconsin Religious Collaborative has worked with Connors and Morrisey and are also considering the **Canadian Religious Stewardship** model, which provides services on an as-needed basis rather than taking over all management functions.

Sr. Theresa Sandok, president of the **Servants of Mary**, known as the Servite Sisters, and chair of Region 9, said none of the models they studied were exactly what they were looking for.

"We are diverse communities and we have different needs," Sandock said. "But we still have a lot of women religious who need someone to look after their care. The question is: How's that going to happen?"

Sandok said she suspects the leadership issue will be looked at carefully.

"Identity was one of our governing principles from the very beginning. This is not a merger. We're not all throwing everything into a single pot and everyone has to be all in or not," Sandok said. "It's about how we can partner together in ways that allow us to retain our way of life."

The collaboration will help even those communities who do have sisters available for leadership, she said.

"Younger members come in and want to do ministry, but they're pulled into leadership because there is no one else," Sandok said. "Meanwhile, sometimes those in their mid-70s have the most critical health issues. It's difficult to ask someone in their 80s to take on regular jobs. Sisters do have a right to eventually retire."

The Wisconsin Religious Collaborative has secured three-year commitments to creating and hiring a management corporation from nine communities in Wisconsin plus one just across the border in Illinois, and plans to file for incorporation of the governance corporation and hire an executive director by July 1.

And after five years of planning and working out details, the sisters collaborating outside St. Louis plan to file for incorporation and begin hiring staff for the management corporation within the next six to 12 months.

Connors said the flexibility of the collaborative governance model allows it to be used in both the Wisconsin and St. Louis situations, as it can be adapted to their particular needs. If all goes as planned, most members of the congregations taking part should not notice any change in their way of life.

'God has a larger plan in this'

Knowing they are preparing for the future and ensuring the continuation of sponsored ministries and the care of sisters has brought a measure of peace, those involved in both projects said, but there is still an element of sadness.

"It's sad to see your community coming to an end, but that's also part of the mystery of life and the resurrection," Bader said.

Scholl said change is never easy, but that is where faith comes in.

"The grief does cycle around, but there is a comfort level in knowing there is a plan," she said. "There's also the comfort of knowing God has a larger plan in this. He's guiding and leading us through to something else."

There's also the recognition of what really matters.

"When we were selling all the things at the convent, people would ask, 'How can you do this?' " Scholl said. "But it's furniture and a building. That's not who you are."

Cormack also stressed the need to focus on what's important.

"Yes, there's a sadness, but change has been a characteristic of religious life for the past 2,000 years," she said. "Only God is eternal. What's important is for us to be open to what the Spirit is calling us to."

There is also the joy of the new, stronger relationships being built through the process.

"In a sense, nobody has good answers for all of this. This is a path that's being made by the walking," Bader said.

Scholl said the bond continues to grow: "As the two teams work together, we often say, 'We're so glad we're doing this with you.' "

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