

Report on LCWR Assembly 2023

Drawn By Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope

The Assembly of Leaders across women's religious institutes in the US met to discern and explore the challenges and opportunities for transformation that reflect the global reality of Religious Life. The language may differ slightly, but the challenges are similar in Australia. Exploration of new ways and approaches to engage in Canonical Governance, what are the current and future opportunities for communities to find collaborative initiatives and partnerships. LCWR calls on its members to engage all the creative dimensions of the human person to imagine and design new expressions of mission and continue to envision religious life in the future. While structures are essential, the underlying priority is caring for their members in life-giving ways. This is the mission of EFCL.

This assembly was planned and delivered to enable us to look at the current realities of religious life through a vast cosmic lens. Our imaginations were stretched and wrapped in awe and wonder at the unfolding mysteries of the universe. We were called to sit and silence and reverence this vast sacred mystery. How does our story, individually and institutively, intersect with what is evolving and emerging in the larger universe, and how might we draw hope from all that we are seeing, learning, and conversing about?

The keynote address by Brian Thomas Swimme encapsulated the Assembly invitation to be open, attentive, and responsive to the sacred mystery and how this engagement leads to a continuing hope in the unknown personally, communally, and globally for us and our institutes.

The combination of speakers, processes for individual reflection and table conversations, and my attendance at the breakout session *Sacred Encounter* provided excellent opportunities to exchange insights and affirm many of the dimensions included in the EFCL Journey. The final morning immersed us in the cosmic writings of Hildegard of Bingen, and her solid female leadership was emphasised in this presentation.

The context of the Assembly was to focus our whole selves on the presence of sacred mystery, which was celebrated through prayer and ritual woven throughout the assembly. The following speakers attuned our hearts and minds to the cosmos:

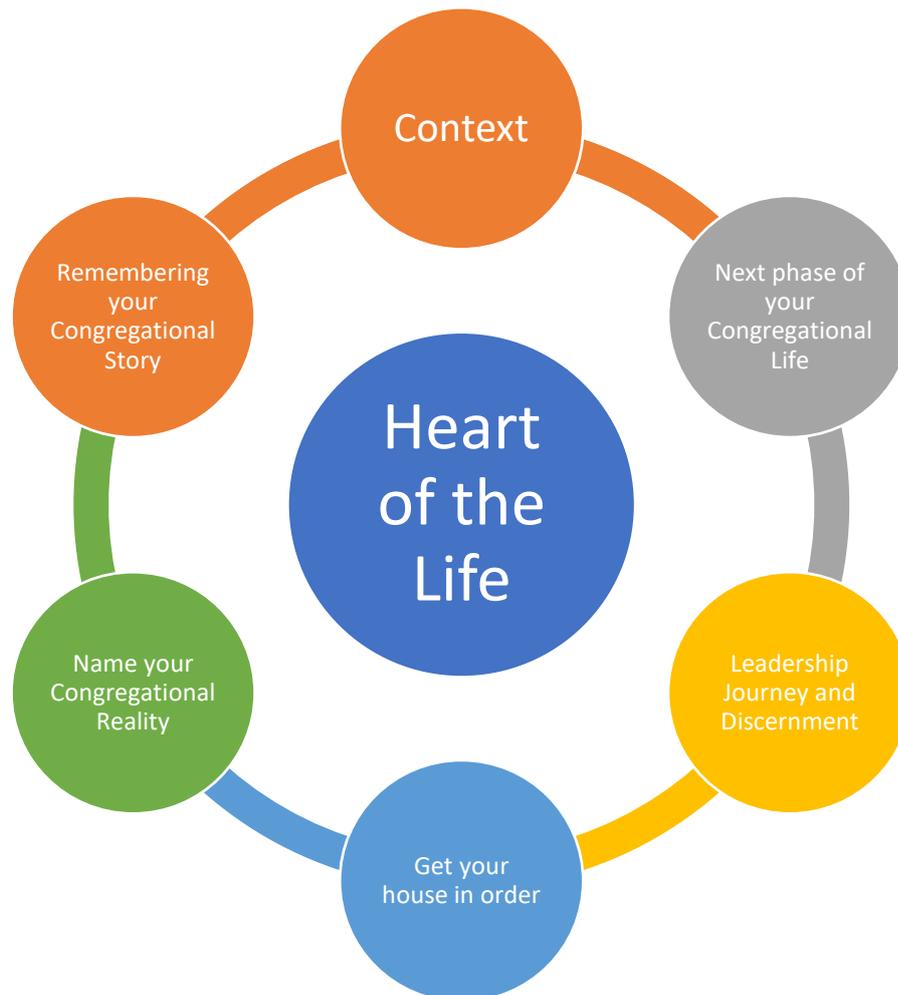
1. Brian Thomas Swimme
2. Barbara E. Reid, OP and Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM
3. LCWR presidential address by Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP

These papers are attached, and the recordings can be found on the LCWR website at www.lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2023

Breakout Session

This session reflected on three stages of the leadership journey in Religious Institutes as they address membership, property, and the future. There were clear parallels to the movements in Australia in establishing MPJPs, reflection on the care of aging members, property as a source of financial security, and how to express the essence of religious life, not identity through ministry. Mary Jo Nelson olvm spoke of the process undertaken by her community of moving to a Commissary. This involved the following steps, which needed to be completed more straightforwardly and were revisited as the experience deepened.

The Transition Journey in Religious Life



The contributions fit into three stages:

1. Pre-MPJP, where the discernment is focused on what to do with our large ministries and how these are to be governed into the future. Real Estate issues regarding the huge Mother House, which combines aged care support, retired sisters, and active members.
2. Groups on the discernment journey regarding their ministries and properties have engaged various consultants to assist them in their planning.

3. This stage is where communities have discerned their coming to completion and are in the process of gaining a Commissary or having one.

The role of the Commissary described by the participants was a hands-on high level of engagement with the community and the retired sisters, unlike the EFCL model, where the role is hands-off oversight model. The attention to the Canonical requirement should have been mentioned.

Several religious people spoke of their need to redefine the role of the Commissary and create a role for another person. This would be the Community Coordinator role in the EFCL model.

NETWORKING MEETINGS

Around the formal sessions of the Assembly, I organised to meet with the following:

Carol Zinn ssj: Executive Director Leaders Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)

Carol is central to our relationship with LCWR, and her insights into the opportunities and challenges facing religious congregations throughout the US and from a global perspective are a source of great wisdom for EFCL. CRA has invited Carol to Australia; dates are yet to be confirmed for 2024.

Key points:

- The significance of the changing attitude of the Dicastery in Rome as reflected in the meeting undertaken in December 2022 and March 2023.
- Carol emphasised the importance of EFCL being in a good relationship with CRA. As it is at the Conference level of Religious Institutes that the Dicastery sees as its primary level of global engagement.
- Carol was optimistic that Dicastery is open to dialogue in the early stages of how Conferences respond to the reality that “existing juridical instruments are often inadequate. It is, therefore, necessary to identify new ones and paths that require all-around ecclesial accompaniment.”
- Carol believes that taking the Dicastery along the journey in outlining the discerned steps of Religious Institutes and EFCL is critical to developing a fruitful relationship.
- Carol encouraged EFCL to establish a relationship with CRA that would reflect unity to the Dicastery, enabling EFCL to be present at future meetings in Rome.

Michelle Stachowiak cssf, Associate Director for Mission Collaboration for LCWR. Michelle is part of the LCWR office staff and works with Religious Institutes partnering around collaborative initiatives.

Key points:

- Collaboration is spoken of in all contexts with Religious Institutes, yet the reality of how these occur is very different.
- Younger members of Religious Institutes see themselves as partners with various social and local partners of faith or no faith traditions as long as the services are provided. This is a dilemma within some groups.

- The younger members are not interested or attentive to the significant issues facing religious institutes regarding the governance of their large ministries or how they will be supported.
- Collaborative conversations are focused for the younger members on the essence of Religious Life, excluding conversations about institutional ministries.

Anne Munley ihm, Associate Director for Discerning Emergent Future

Anne is part of the LCWR office staff and works with Religious Institutes to discern their future.

Key points:

- Anne spoke about a significant project that LCWR has undertaken to interview all leadership teams who are their members. This is eventually become a publication and will be a vital piece of research regarding the future direction of Religious Life in the US.
- Anne was very interested in how the EFCL model has a hands-off role for the Canonical Delegate and how the community makes decisions without a leadership team.

Mary Pellegrino csj, Vice President of Plante Moran

Mary's role is centred around mission, charism, and formation. The Paschal Mystery is the centre of our journey as we discover how to be prophetic today, pointing to and witnessing the Reign of God.

Key points:

- Mary is coming to Australia in 2024 at the invitation of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and would be delighted to be in conversation with EFCL.
- The consultative role that Plante Moran plays with Religious Institutes varies from dealing with property and financial issues on the one hand and the direct facilitation with Religious Institute members that Mary provides as required. This can be in giving retreats, presentations or facilitating their discernment processes.
- Mary introduced me to her team, and I have arranged for us to meet at the RCRI Conference and link them with Brad Hannagan.

Sharon Euart rsm, Executive Director Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI)

Sharon is a Mercy Sister who holds a doctorate in canon law and is the Executive Director Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI). Brad Hannagan and I will be attending their Conference in late September in St Louis, and I have arranged a meeting with Sharon and her team with Brad and myself.

Key points:

- Sharon is keen to know if there are resources that RCRI could develop to assist EFCL and the broader global response to Religious Institutes coming to completion. She would be happy to discuss this further with Brad and I in September.
- Sharon spoke of the different roles of Commissaries, how Religious Institutes discern their way forward and the varying advice provided by Canon Lawyers. So far in the

United States, the relationships between most Commissaries and their Institute have a greater level of engagement than in the EFCL model.

- Governance must emphasise the evolving movement of religious life rather than the charism of one group.
- Sharon was interested in the Australian perspective regarding the meetings in Rome in December and March.

**Alain Ambeault csv: Executive Director for the Canadian Religious Conference
Brendalee Boisvert csm, CSM President, Canadian Religious Conference**

The Canadian Religious Conference is a network that brings together the leaders of 240 Catholic congregations of women and men religious in Canada. The CRC's mission is to encourage its members to live fully their vocation in following Christ and to support them in their prophetic witness to justice and peace in a Canadian context.

Alain and Brendalee are passionate about the mission of consecrated life in the world and the Church. They are committed to assisting Canadian congregational leaders deal with the current reality and significantly move forward to completion with a focus on living the essence of Religious Life without the governance of ministries.

Key points:

- Alain outlined the similar positions of Religious Institutes in Canada and believes there is much for Canada and EFCL to learn from each other.
- Alain spoke of the Canadian experience in Rome and the conference's relationship.
- Sr. Bonnie MacLellan, csj, who was present at both meetings in Rome, felt that the energy and openness of the December meeting were not as evident in March. Bonnie told me that she thought some of the men present from Conferences and the Dicastery had reflected on the March meeting and attempted to "put the genie back in the bottle".

Pat Murray ibvm: The Executive Secretary for The International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and Mary John Kudiyirippil ssps, Assistant Executive Secretary, UISG

Pat was keen to understand the absence of EFCL from the Rome gatherings and the initial conversation related to this discussion.

Mary John joined the conversation and was interested in what was evolving through EFCL. Mary John had spent time in Australia and was interested in the outcome of the transfer of the ministries of the Holy Spirit Sisters to SVHA.

Key points:

- Pat spoke of the silo mentality in Rome and encouraged EFCL to build relationships with the Dicastery and the English-speaking canon lawyers.
- There is an urgent need for the Conferences to arrive at an emerging governance framework that can be adapted to various circumstances.

- There are global challenges facing provinces with a diminishing leadership pool or people tired from long terms and re-elections. There is also a movement within women's religious institutes not to send their younger members to look after older provinces, contributing to the wind of change. This is reflected in the discernment of our international congregations, EFCL Service Partners.

Wisconsin Religious Collaborative

The Wisconsin Religious Collaborative of ten religious institutes exists to provide a sustainable membership organisation that promotes good stewardship by sharing resources and professional expertise in finance, management, pastoral care, governance, and other areas to sustain the mission.

This was my second meeting with the group, and their most significant challenge was finding suitable staff within their available budgets.

Thresholds and Transformation

Donna Fyffe, Hilary Musgrave and Monica Brown have combined to form Thresholds of Transformation. Hilary and Monica are well known through their ministry at Emmaus Publications. I met with these three women to understand their processes as they work with one of our Service Partners and will be part of a group of four facilitating their next chapter.

The image and exploration of crossing this threshold as a transforming time that leads to a communion of discernment and hope is used consistently in EFCL Transition Team meetings. This team could be a resource for some of our Service Partners in addressing their internal issues before embracing the EFCL process. Their process is based on trust, a sacred call to unite dreams and experiences and contribute meaningfully to the new world order prophetically articulated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*.

Conclusion

As I conclude this report, I express my gratitude to the Board Members and Sharon for the opportunity to participate in the LCWR Assembly as I renewed relationships and created new networks.

In her Presidential Address: *Hope a Wide Lens for the Journey*, Rebecca Anne Gemma OP said:

Recall the times when the fidelity and witness of our own sisters allowed us to move forward in hope when we had very little left to give. Communal relationships reach beyond our congregational walls and charisms. Encounters with all creation continue to broaden our hope and expand our vision.

This is the hope that leads to the creation of EFCL and is the living ministry of EFCL in the service of religious institutes and its members.

Gratefully,

Linda Ferrington rsc
Mission Integration Manager
August 22, 2023