

## *Catholic Sisters in Ministry in the Diocese of Cleveland: A Period of Transition*

Rob Fischer & Rong Bai <sup>1</sup>

*Catholic sisters (sisters) continue to play a vital role addressing the needs of the poor, vulnerable and marginalized members of society. In Northeast Ohio, sisters have been instrumental in the arenas of education, healthcare, social service, and advocacy. With sisters retiring in greater numbers, this survey explores their current ministries (work and service), their plans to continue, and their perspectives on the future of ministry.*

*“Ministries, religious communities come and go. The main focus needs to be the Gospel.”*

*-Catholic sister, Age 71*

### **Research Context:**

This research provides an update to research conducted in 2009<sup>2</sup> in response to the closing of many parishes in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, primarily in neighborhoods of significant material poverty where many sisters had ministries in place. This survey, conducted eight years later, explores the ministries and perspectives of sisters as many of them transition or approach a transition from full-time ministry. The two surveys draw from slightly different groups: nonretired sisters in Greater Cleveland (2009) and nonretired and retired sisters throughout the Diocese of Cleveland (2016). Together, they inform strategies for sisters and their lay partners to sustain these ministries and their impact on behalf of people in need.

### **Purpose**

The primary objectives of this research were to (a) document the current work of sisters in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, (b) solicit their views about their plans to continue in ministry, and (c) learn their perspectives on how to strengthen and sustain ministry for the future. The focus of this survey was expanded beyond that

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<sup>2</sup> Fischer, R. L., & Bartholomew, J. (2012). Women religious in a changing urban landscape: The work of Catholic Sisters in metropolitan Cleveland. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 8(2), 2-1.

of the 2009 survey to include retired sisters and geographically to encompass the entire Diocese of Cleveland.

### Methodology

This study involves a survey of nonretired and retired sisters in the Diocese of Cleveland. The survey combined a series of closed-ended and open-ended items and was adapted in part from the survey used in 2009.<sup>3</sup> To facilitate participation of sisters from multiple orders, the study obtained an endorsement from the Conference of Religious Leadership (CORL), a collaborative organization with representatives of the leadership of most of the orders in the Diocese. The study was approved to proceed in August 2016 by the Case Western Reserve University Institutional Review Board.

Orders represented by CORL include approximately 719 sisters residing in the eight counties of the Diocese of Cleveland. CORL identified an estimated 599 sisters who were not infirm to become the focus of the survey. Surveys were distributed via hardcopy and electronic URL to sisters via their congregational leaders. In total, 358 usable surveys were returned, an estimated 60% of the respondent population. Orders generally had comparable response rates with only two orders having a response rate below 50%.

### Survey Respondents

The survey respondents are members of 12 religious orders with sisters living in the Diocese of Cleveland. Over one-half of the respondents were either Ursuline Sisters or Sisters of Notre Dame, reflecting the prevalence of these orders in the region. See Table 1.

**Table 1 Sisters' Religious Orders**

Order of Sisters	Est Survey Population	Total Responses	% Response
Sisters of Notre Dame (SND)	229	115	50.2%
Ursuline Sisters (OSU)	130	83	63.8%
Congregation of Saint Joseph (CSJ)	55	49	89.0%
Humility of Mary (HM)	44	25	56.8%
Dominican Sisters of Peace (OP)	36	23	63.9%
Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine (CSA)	27	21	77.8%
Sisters of the Incarnate Word (SIW)	20	20	100%
Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis (SSJ-TOSF)	40	12	30.0%
Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth (CSFN)	6	4	66.7%
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati (SC)	10	4	40.0%
Other Orders of Sisters*	2	2	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>599</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>59.8%</b>

\*Other Orders include Sisters of the Living Word and Sisters of the Precious Blood. These orders and several orders identified above (such as SC and CSFN) have more sisters serving in other dioceses.

<sup>3</sup> Fischer, R. L., & Bartholomew, J. (2012). Women religious in a changing urban landscape: The work of Catholic Sisters in metropolitan Cleveland. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 8(2), 2-17.

### *Nonretired and Retired Sisters*

As part of the survey, sisters were asked to respond yes or no to the question, “Are you retired?” Just under half of respondents identified as retired (49%). This is an increase in the percentage of retired sisters than in 2009, when Diocesan data showed that 37% of sisters were retired (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 5). It should be noted that the 2016 survey excluded 120 infirm sisters, the majority of which would also be expected to be retired.

Some orders have almost as many or more retired sisters as nonretired sisters represented in the survey (3 with 40-50% and 5 with 50% or more). Overall, the reality is that religious orders have a decreasing number of sisters who are working out in the community in the Diocese of Cleveland.

### *Age*

The survey respondents have a median age of 75 years. See Table 2. Among respondents, only 21 sisters (6%) are under the federal retirement age (less than 65 years old). An additional 50 sisters (14%) are below 70, which is the expected retirement age for sisters according to National Religious Retirement Office.

The majority of respondents (54%) are between the age of 70 and 80, and 25% are over age 80. Many of the sisters remain active beyond their retirement age. Retired sisters are on average nearly 8 years older than nonretired sisters (79.4 vs 71.7 years).

**Table 2 Sisters’ ages**

<b>Age range</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
<64 years old	21	5.9%
65-69 years old	50	14.0%
70-75 years old	114	31.8%
76-80 years old	78	21.8%
81-86 years old	56	15.6%
>86 years old	34	9.5%
Not reported	5	1.4%
Total	358	

### *Experience, Education and Presence in Community*

Most sisters have served in their current ministry for over a decade. On average, the sisters have been serving in ministry over 50 years based on their age of first vows. Nearly 80% of respondents hold a graduate degree of some type, reflecting an extremely well-educated group of professionally-trained women. In regard to their highest education level, 71% hold a master’s degree and 7% hold a doctoral degree. Nearly 16% reported certification in pastoral ministry, and 8% hold licenses in either nursing or social work.

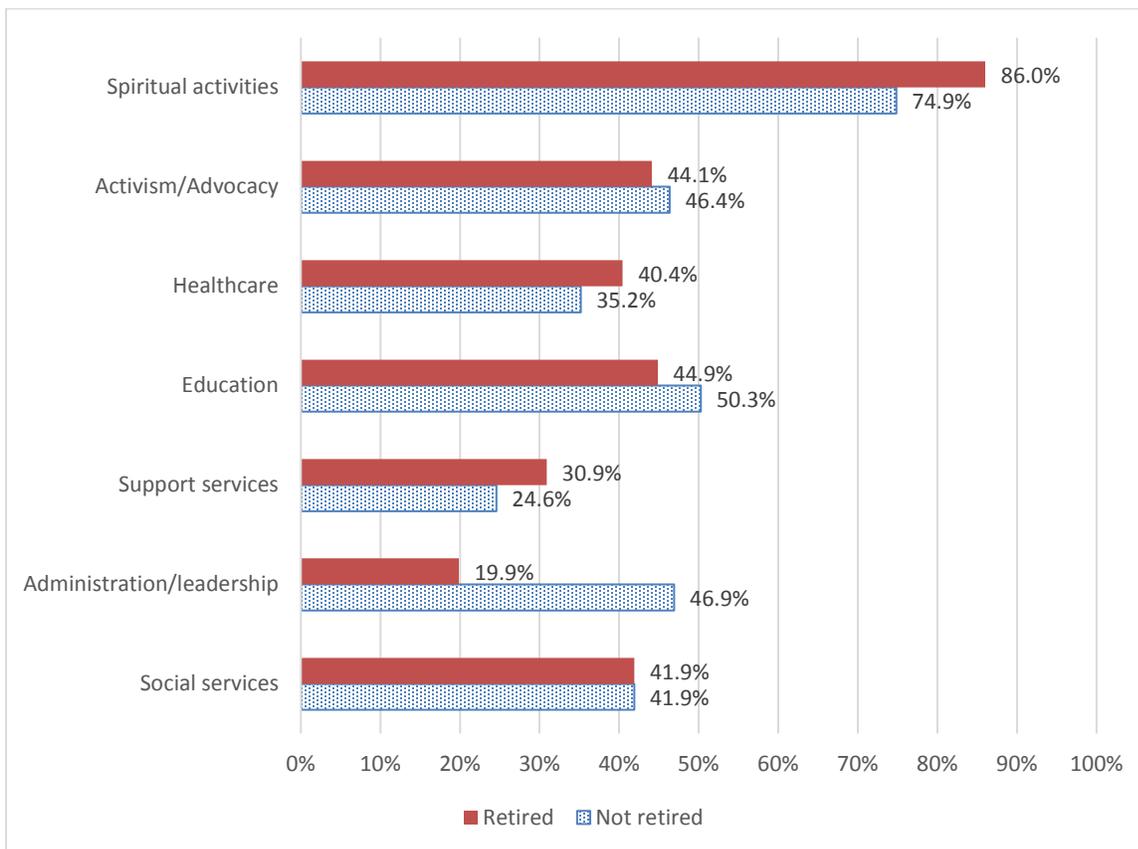
In the 2009 research, sisters identified their physical presence in the neighborhoods as very important to their service, with 60% residing close to their ministry. (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 7). In this survey, 39% report living with other sisters in community

settings and 16% report living alone in the community, while 42% live at the motherhouse. This suggests a continued commitment of sisters to live near the people they serve. The largest concentration of sisters (35%) reside in Cuyahoga County, with 14% in Geauga, 12% in Summit, 10% in Lorain, and 10% in Lake. Smaller numbers of Sisters were in Medina, Ashland, Wayne and other counties. Motherhouses or regional ministry centers are located in Cuyahoga (5), Summit (2), Geauga (1), and outside the Diocese (4).

### Ministries of Sisters

Both nonretired and retired sisters currently engage in ministries across seven domains of service – social services, administration/leadership, support services, education, healthcare, activism/advocacy, and spiritual activities. See Figure 1. The seven domains comprised a total of 31 distinct ministry activities choices (e.g., prayer/intercession, adult education, senior care).

Overall, 98% of nonretired and 77% of retired sisters reported being active in at least one of the seven domains. The percentages in Figure 1 are based on the numbers of sisters who identified at least one activity across the domains (n=179 nonretired sisters; n=136 retired sisters.) The activities did not distinguish between formal and informal roles. In fact, sisters generally identified an average of 4 ministry activities with a range from 1 to 19. Nonretired sisters were involved in the same number of domains (3) as retired sisters on average but participated in more activities (5 versus 3).



**Figure 1 Sisters' Activities by Retirement Status**

### *Ministry Domains*

Proportionally, retired and nonretired sisters are active similarly in the domains of activism/advocacy and social services. Retired sisters are somewhat more active in the domains of healthcare (including care for the elderly), support services, and spiritual activities. Nonretired sisters are slightly more active in the education domain and more than twice as active in administration/leadership activities.

There are a few interesting differences in the patterns regarding nonretired sisters between 2009 and 2016. A higher percentage of nonretired sisters are engaged in leadership and administration as compared to 2009, 47% versus 20% (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 5). Also, many sisters now identify spiritual activities as their ministry (75% of nonretired), as compared with only 21% who identified either spirituality, retreat or religious education in 2009 (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 8). Retired sisters are in spiritual activities to an even greater degree compared to nonretired sisters, which suggests that as they retire they continue to look to the spiritual needs of the people around them.

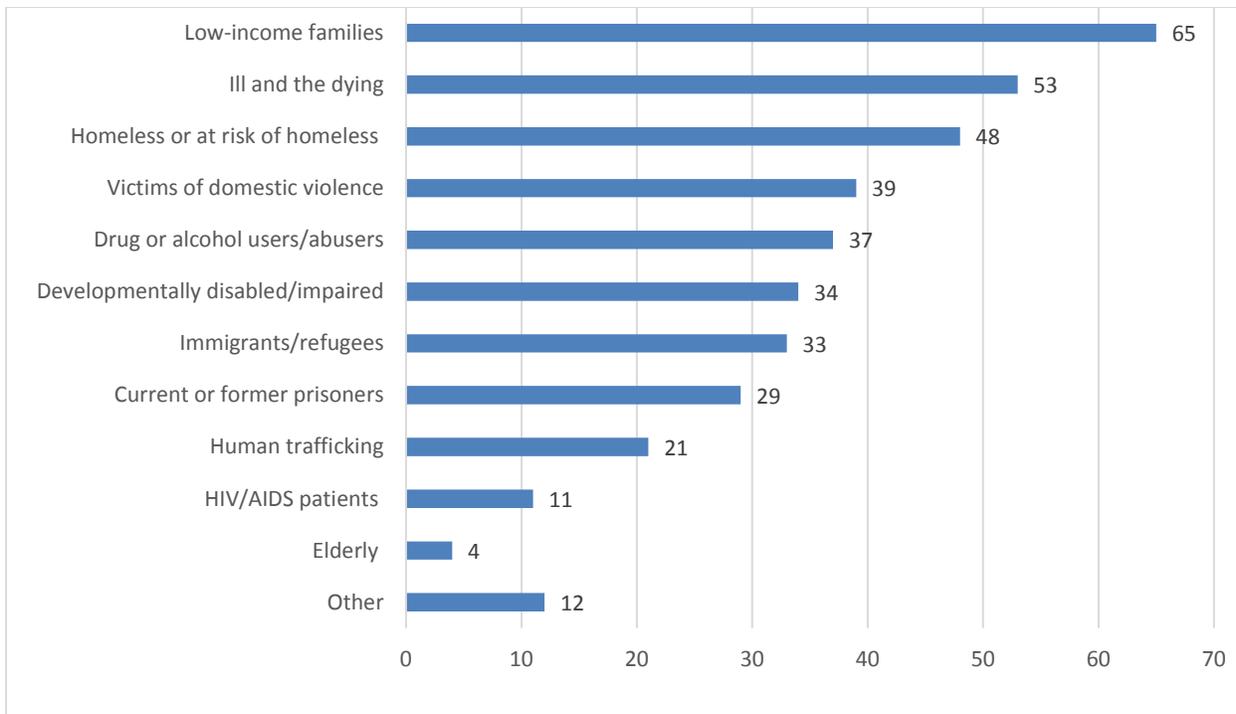
### **Sisters in Active Ministry**

Sisters who were not retired were asked to respond to additional questions about their primary ministry, its functioning, and their plans for ministry. These items pertain to the 182 sisters who were not retired in the survey population.

In regard to sisters' work ministry settings, 31% were serving at their congregation, 20% at a Catholic school, 15% at a Catholic parish, and 11% at a nonprofit. Other settings included health care facilities (6%), universities (3%), and the Diocese (1%). Other sisters (13%) reported a variety of other settings. There was a smaller percentage serving at a Catholic parish or school than in 2009 (35% as opposed to 44%) (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 2). While this change reflects increased participation by lay people, sisters remain a noteworthy presence in many churches and schools in the Diocese of Cleveland.

Sisters reported actively serving many high-need populations in their work ministries, and most individual sisters identified more than one high-need population. See Figure 2. These include low-income families, ill and dying, and people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness as the top three categories of clients.

There are even more nonretired sisters serving low income families than in 2009 (64% versus 44%) (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 10). As they leave their historic roles in schools and parishes, sisters who are still working out in the community are more likely to serve low income families as their primary target population. This presents an opportunity for sisters to continue to assist people living in poverty in formal and informal roles.



**Figure 2 Numbers of Sisters Serving Special Populations**

### *Plans for Retirement*

There is an acceleration in the number of sisters planning to retire over the next six years. When asked how much longer they expect to work in their current ministry, 38% reported 1-3 years and 34% reported 4-6 years. Smaller numbers of sisters reported an expectation to work more than 7 years (13%) or less than one year (6%). While in 2009, 58% of active sisters planned to retire within six years, now it is 78% (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 13).

The remaining 9% who did not specify the timing of their retirement reported a variety of factors that would dictate how long they continue to serve. There is no evidence that compensation was a leading driver in the sisters' plans regarding retirement. In respect to whether they would seek a new ministry in northeast Ohio if they were to leave their current ministry, 58% were positive about this occurring - 13% reported certainty, 32% said it was very likely and 13% said it was somewhat likely. The remaining 42% said this was very unlikely (19%), somewhat unlikely (12%), or unknown (12%).

### *Concern for the Future*

When asked if they were worried about the future of their work ministry, the sisters tended to be optimistic: 55% reported not being worried at all, with another 41% reported being somewhat worried, and only 4% reported being very worried. They expressed more optimism than in 2009, when only 38% were not worried and 13% were very worried (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 12).

It is possible that the earlier level of concern among sisters was linked to the parish consolidations and closures under way at that time. The current optimism aligns with the



## **Ministry Strengths and Sustainability**

### *Joint programming and collaboration*

Most sisters reported being engaged in joint programming or collaboration with the laity (79%), outside organizations (59%) and other orders (45%). Individual collaborative partners include lay adults (73%), other sisters (51%), students (32%) and others (8%).

Sisters reported the highest levels of positive feeling about collaboration with other orders (90%), the laity (97%) and youth (86%). Sisters also reported an affinity for collaboration with secular nonprofits (74%), nonprofit Catholic faith-based organizations (73%) and funders (70%).

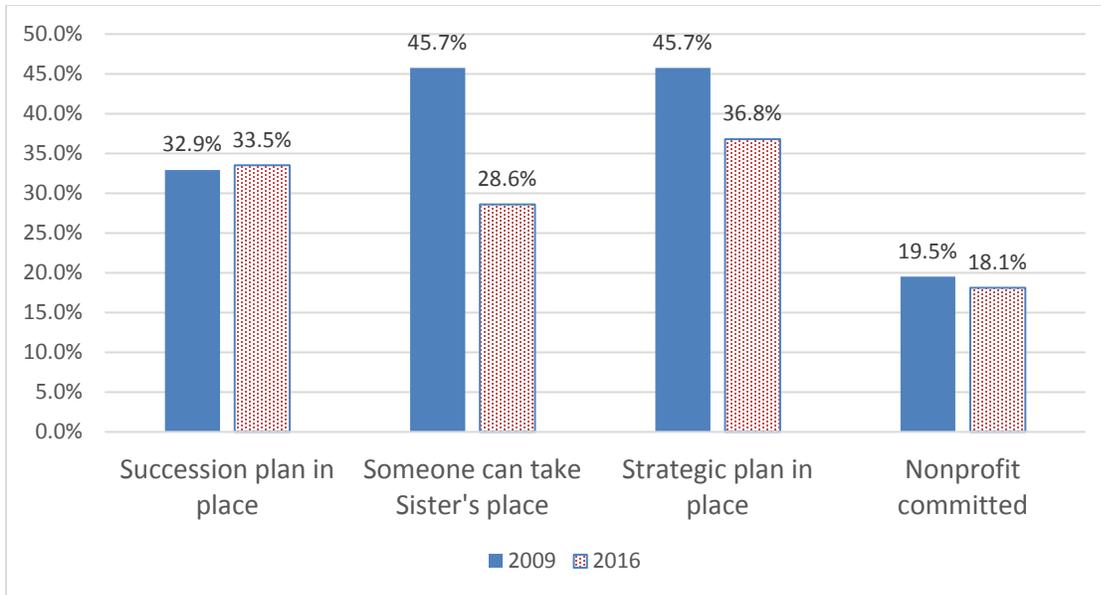
In both the 2009 and the current research, sisters' collaboration with sisters from other orders was reported to be 45%. This comparison does not reflect the depth or extent of the collaboration in ministries out in the community, which sisters' highly value according to both the survey question and in open-ended responses. Collaboration with outside organizations showed the greatest improvement since 2009 (59% from 41%) (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 11).

The benefits of collaboration identified most frequently by sisters include: helps them serve clients better, accesses complementary skills/knowledge, and ensures the long-term sustainability of ministry. The least frequently cited benefits were access to new funding sources, in-kind donations, and recipient referrals.

### *Ministry Sustainability*

Sisters were asked to report on indicators of ministry sustainability. Regarding the preceding 12 months, more than half reported that their ministry's programs had grown (53%), and 24% reported no change. A small number (7%) reported that their ministry's programs had been reduced in the past year, and 16% provided other answers. Over the same one-year period, only one-quarter of sisters reported that the ministry had received funding from new sources. Among the remainder, 40% reported no change in funding, and 34% reported no knowledge of the ministry's funding picture.

Sisters were asked to address aspects of leadership preparation and succession planning at their work ministry. Fewer than one-half (48%) reported that their ministry has leadership training in place. Approximately one-third reported having a succession plan in place, nearly identical to 2009 (Fischer & Bartholomew, p. 12). However, only one-quarter reported that there was someone to take the sister's place should she be absent from ministry, far less than the 46% reporting this in 2009. In addition, a smaller proportion reported having a strategic plan for the ministry while a similar proportion reported having a nonprofit in the community committed to sustaining the ministry. See Figure 3.



**Figure 3 Ministries with Succession/Strategic Plans**

**Sisters Perspectives on the Future of Ministry**

Nonretired sisters were asked to provide their thoughts about how to strengthen and sustain the ministry of sisters for the future in northeast Ohio. Based on a review of their comments, several themes emerged. Woven through the comments is a sense that the vision for the future must take into account the decline in the number of vowed religious. One sister said, “I think parish ministry at all levels will need to look different when there are no sisters available.” Despite this sobering trend, there is tremendous optimism and faith in the way forward, as reflected in this comment from a sister, “I think this is an exciting time for ministry and collaborations.”

**Promote innovation in collaboration between congregations**

Overwhelmingly, sisters endorse the collaborative efforts and planning that has already been undertaken. Sisters call attention to the importance of initiatives of the Conference of Religious Leadership, such as *Women With Spirit...Now*, a collaboration formed to create communities of peace and hope in Cleveland. They also call attention to *Blocks and Bridges*, a program of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, which pairs a sister with a lay partner to learn nonprofit skills and attributes of ministry. They also point to examples of inter-congregational work, such as Regina Health Center, which offers residential nursing care to religious from multiple orders, and Collinwood Neighborhood Catholic Ministries, where sisters of different orders participate in a ministry of neighborhood presence.

*Sisters, we need to stay in dialogue with each other and with others of all ages... be open to the Spirit to address the changing needs of our times.*  
- Catholic sister, Age 75

The sisters also call for accelerated efforts on this front. One sister put it simply, “why don’t all the sisters who are left join together?”

Several other sisters commented on the promise of collaboration:

- “We are looking at possible union with 5 other religious congregations in our charism family which will broaden the support we will need for the future. To work with other religious congregations is very helpful in getting ideas and support for initiatives we may not be able to carry out alone.”
- “I do believe that we need more collaboration among Religious Communities within the Diocese of Cleveland. Pooling our resources and sharing our commitment to education, Church ministry, social works, etc. can really be an asset and a needed commitment for religious presence.”
- “I believe that we will continue to work together on projects and living arrangements as long as our leadership continues to engage in timely conversations and membership is supported and encouraged to stretch us out of our comfort zones. I would have a lot of energy around living with other communities in a traditional religious environment. This space for me would be a hub to connect us and encourage and motivate us to stay active.”

### Engage retired sisters in new ways

With awareness that more sisters are retiring, many believe that retired sisters could be more effectively engaged in ministry. They see this as valuable not just for the ministry where they could participate, but also for the sisters to more fully live out their vows and passion for service.

Several other sisters commented on engaging retired sisters:

- “I would hope that we might have some way to captivate the interest and enthusiasm of the retired religious to capitalize on their (soon to be my) experience and learning and remaining energy. This would require intense and positive motivation.”
- “Sisters would like to minister as long as possible. Many times sisters cannot work endless and long hours. Helping sisters minister in less tasking ministries would be helpful.”
- “As I continue to be active in ministry, earning a part time income for my community, I also very much look forward to the time when retirement will present opportunities for creative/ unusual volunteer work.”

*“There is such a wealth of talent lying dormant in our motherhouses.”*  
- Catholic sister, age 73

### Engage youth and young adults

Sisters acknowledge the special value that young adults hold in carrying forward the charism of ministry and the life of the church. Though many sisters believe that their congregations are doing effective work in this arena, many also believe that young people must be engaged in a more concerted way.

A recent study on U.S. Catholic sisters agrees, citing the recommendation of researchers Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, Patricia Wittberg, SC and Mary Gautier that orders “should create as many opportunities for intergenerational interaction as possible, both in group settings

(social, service, or spiritual events) and in one-on-one encounters (mentoring, oral history projects, spiritual direction.)”<sup>4</sup> The report prefers young adult engagement on charism more than ministry, but the sisters comments for this research did not draw any distinction between the need to share both aspects of their experience:

- “I believe that religious communities need to expand ways for people to be part of us...as associates, people in private temporary vows, volunteers, partners in ministry.... Some may choose to be perpetual vowed members of the communities, others may morph into a new form of religious life. We cannot know the future, but we need to be green lights for whatever the Spirit is doing.”
- “As much as we can nourish the spiritual life of 21 to 35 years old, let us work toward that in multiple ways.”
- “It is vital to provide leadership training for young adults to be mission leaders since there are fewer religious available for that role.”

#### Leverage the capacity of the laity

Though young adults represent in many ways the future of ministry, sisters acknowledge the role that lay adults can and do play in the near term. They view this expanded role for lay individuals as both a mechanism to sustain the work and a path for Catholics to live out their baptismal calling.

Comments on the capacity of lay leaders include:

- “When I was growing up, it seems that nearly all the diocesan work was done by priests and nuns. I think that it's a good thing that lay people are fulfilling their baptismal commitment now.”
- “I see growing involvement of the laity to sustain our ministries. This will be a necessity, and I think the Church laity are perfectly capable of continuing the mission of the Church and the religious communities.”
- “We are running out of personnel! Lay people need to be trained to take our place as needed.”

*We need to be willing to let these people work with us and share our resources for the building of the Reign of God.*

*- Catholic sister, age 72*

#### A sense of urgency

Sisters recognize the reality of the present circumstances facing their orders and express both anxiety and acceptance. They reflect on the challenge of accomplishing the work of ministry today as they simultaneously plan for the future, when their roles will necessarily be different. While there is a sense of loss threaded throughout their comments, there is also a profound gratitude for the life of ministry and belief that the Spirit will guide the way forward. Comments on the current challenge of ministry transition include:

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<sup>4</sup> Cummings, Kathleen Sprows, Ph.D. (2015). Understanding U.S. Catholic Sisters Today, p. 22. Available at [https://publications.fadica.org/main/Publications/tabid/101/ProdID/66/Understanding\\_US\\_Catholic\\_Sisters\\_Today.aspx](https://publications.fadica.org/main/Publications/tabid/101/ProdID/66/Understanding_US_Catholic_Sisters_Today.aspx).

- “So much is now beyond our control that we used to be able to count on. People working together can accomplish a lot more than seems obvious, despite challenges from dwindling finances and smaller number of personnel.”
- “What holds me back from being involved in any collaborative work with other communities is the demands of my current ministry, as well as some health issues.”
- “Mostly I go about my ministry in the present, respectful of our history. I try not to be anxious about the future, because it's in God's hands, and in the hands of my colleagues who--I trust--share the mission in their way.”
- “I greatly fear that in the near future, the number of religious in Northeast Ohio will be drastically reduced. We will certainly need to collaborate more with lay persons and with each other. Most of our energy will go into the care of our elder members. I do hope that dedicated lay persons will pick up our charism and mission.”

## **Conclusion**

The role of sisters in Cleveland and across the U.S. continues to be in transition, as more achieve or pass the age of retirement.<sup>5</sup> In Northeast Ohio, sisters see both the opportunities and challenges in exploring and adopting new models for ministry, as many sisters transition from working full-time out in the community. This research documents the landscape for both sisters and their ministries, now and over the next several years.

This research also highlights strategies which hold promise for sustaining the ministries and their model of service for the future. Sisters identified more collaboration, the continued engagement of retired sisters in ministry, and the development of young adults and lay leaders as key strategies. While lay people work in similar domains as sisters, the sisters' charism strongly influences the ministries explored in this research. These strategies are intended to sustain that influence and its impact on the people served.

Given the age and retirement status of sisters, now is the time to leverage their skills, lived experience, and spiritual commitment in pushing forward with these strategies. The focus should be on facilitating both the role of sisters as older leaders and the development of lay partners who share sisters' charismatic framework, as they take on greater responsibilities at these ministries. The decrease in the number of sisters alone does not define the challenge. Rather, the potency of their charisms and legacy of their ministries endures.

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<sup>5</sup> National Religious Retirement Office, Population of Religious by Age Group, 1985-2017. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/national-religious-retirement-office/nrro-statistics.cfm>.