



*Pray therefore the Lord  
of the harvest  
to send out laborers  
into his harvest  
(Matt. 9:38)*

For updates on the NATIONAL ACTION PLAN or resources related to the NRVC/CARA Vocations Study, go to [www.NRVC.net](http://www.NRVC.net)

## **NATIONAL ACTION PLAN**

### **In Response to the NRVC/CARA Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life in the United States**

#### ***A Result of the MOVING FORWARD IN HOPE PROJECT***

***Sponsored by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC)***

*Compiled by:*

Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC, NRVC Executive Director

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

**I**N AUGUST 2009 the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC), in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), released the results of its landmark study on recent vocations to religious life in the United States. No study of this magnitude on religious vocations in this country had ever been done before.

Not surprisingly, the study confirms that religious sisters, priests, and brothers are an aging and diminishing population. Despite this reality, the research shows that although they are fewer in number, men and women continue to respond to God's mysterious call to religious life and remain hopeful about its future and the future of their institutes. The data also provides some evidence to support the speculation that there are increased numbers of younger people entering religious institutes. These newer entrants believe religious life will persevere and that the Spirit can and will move forward in the face of diminishment.

Although the study findings are challenging, they do affirm that religious life is at a crucial, but grace-filled moment in its history in the United States. Because this research has the potential to help ensure the valuable legacy of religious life for future generations, the NRVC board decided to respond proactively to the research. They agreed that this study compels us to generate new perspectives, fresh ideas, and innovative approaches to vocation ministry in a changed Church and world.

Firm in the conviction that the future vibrancy of religious life is dependent upon an entire Church to support its promotion and many expressions, and with the generous support of the GHR Foundation, the NRVC initiated a vocation symposium titled the Moving Forward in Hope Project. The name for this symposium, the Moving Forward in Hope Project, is taken from the homily given by Pope Benedict XVI to priests and religious in St. Patrick's Cathedral in 2008. The Holy Father prayed: "May our Lord Jesus Christ grant the church in America a renewed sense of unity and purpose, as all—bishops, clergy, religious, and laity—move forward in hope, in love for the truth and for one another." This gathering took place from September 16-18 at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, IL.

The tri-fold purpose of this symposium was:

- to study in depth the data and best practices for vocational recruitment as outlined in the NRVC/CARA study;
- to find creative strategies to promote religious life from the various disciplines represented;
- to incorporate these creative strategies into a strategic plan of concrete action steps that would promote new membership to religious life.

The invited participants represented a broad cross section of the Church, and included lay, religious, and ordained members of diverse generations, ethnic backgrounds, ecclesiologies, and ideologies. The participants included vocation directors, Catholic educators, major superiors, formators, USCCB personnel, parents, youth, young adult, and campus ministers, media and communication experts, and church researchers and statisticians.

Committed in their common love for the Church and religious life, through prayer, reflection, quality input, and honest, respectful discussion, the 55 symposium participants developed the following working plan to meet the above stated purposes. The plan identifies three priorities and lists specific objectives to meet these priorities. Although this plan will give direction to NRVC in the next five years, it is understood that some of the objectives and means may change as time evolves.

NRVC is deeply grateful to the dedicated men and women who participated in this symposium. The generosity of their time and talents contributed to the success of this project. While they initially gathered for a vocation symposium, as the days unfolded, the participants quickly realized that they were experiencing something more. Their open dialogue and respectful listening became an encounter with the sacred which resulted in greater understanding, reconciliation, and solidarity. With a renewed union of hearts and minds, the symposium participants left Chicago with a clearer truth about religious life and its future, and a mutual commitment to "move forward in hope" with one another inspired by the wonder of God's Providence.

---

## PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

### PRIORITY 1

**In order to ensure the future of religious life in this country, NRVC will actively work with bishops, clergy, laity, and other church constituencies to enlist their active engagement in strengthening and promoting religious life.**

***Rationale:***

"Its universal presence and the evangelical nature of its witness are clear evidence—in any were needed—that the

consecrated life is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church...In effect, the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church..." (Vita Consecrata, #3).

Because of its constitutive nature in the life of the Church, consecrated religious life and its future in this country are issues that should not be relegated only to the existing religious institutes—they are issues that rest with all members of the Church who reap the benefits of the witness, dedication, and works of men and women who freely and lovingly consecrate themselves to God through the evangelical counsels. Religious have helped and supported the Church in its mission by establishing a multitude of hospitals, schools, colleges, universities, and social service agencies, many of which still successfully fulfill their founding missions today. These institutions continue to promote gospel values that further the Church's mystery and mission by contributing to the renewal of a more just society. More importantly, the lives of women and men religious, whether apostolic, contemplative, or monastic, witness to the Kingdom of God as experienced in our history and the present day, as we all anticipate its complete fulfillment in heaven.

Because it is so integral to the Church, religious life, in its many forms and inspired charisms, needs the full support of the hierarchy and the People of God so that future generations may benefit from its gifts of love and service.

### **OBJECTIVE 1: A-D**

- A. To encourage the bishops, either on a local or regional level, to meet annually with the major superiors in their arch/dioceses for prayer, ongoing education, discussion, and fellowship. One of these meetings may have the topic of the NRVC/CARA study.
- B. To encourage the bishops to promote religious life in their arch/dioceses through the celebration of World Day for Consecrated Life and other established programs (e.g. Operation Andrew and Operation Miryam and Joseph).
- C. To ensure that interaction with men and women religious and the theology and history life (i.e. ecclesiology, pastoral ministry, and church documents) are part of the diocesan seminary experience and curriculum.
- D. To provide assistance to clergy to help them identify and support candidates for religious life.

#### ***Action Steps and Needs:***

- NRVC will work with its episcopal liaison, the chair, and executive director of the USCCB Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations to meet the above objectives.
- NRVC will connect with the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors (NCDVD), the National Organization of Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy (NOCERCC), and other diocesan priest organizations to solicit their support for these objectives.
- NRVC will need the support of the three religious leadership conferences.

### **OBJECTIVE 2**

To convene three workshops in NRVC regions using the model of the Moving Forward in Hope Project. The purpose of these gatherings would be to develop a vocation plan for that region. These workshops may serve as pilot programs, which eventually may be used in other parts of the country.

#### ***Action Steps and Needs:***

- The NRVC leadership team will review and plan the process for these workshops.
- Invited participants are to be informed, thoughtful, lay Catholics and religious representative of various church roles and ministries. Ability to dialogue non-judgmentally with respect and openness is necessary for participation. The group should also represent a multi-cultural, ethnic, and generational diversity.
- Participants would be identified by local NRVC regional coordinators and invited by the NRVC national office.

- Insights, recommendations, and/or conclusions made from these gatherings would be communicated to the bishop, religious leadership, and other appropriate groups in the region.
- Grant money would be needed to finance these gatherings.

### **OBJECTIVE 3**

To provide instructors of faith formation with skills for effectively teaching religious vocations. This is to be done by providing workshops and resources for religious education teachers.

#### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- NRVC will work with the USCCB's Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis and the Committee on Education to ensure that teaching the different states of life is part of the religious education curriculum.
- Focus group(s) of vocation directors, Catholic school teachers, catechists, campus, youth, and young adult ministers, will need to be convened for a vocational needs assessment. The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) may serve as a resource in this area.
- NRVC will work with textbook publishers to ensure that vocation education is included in their publications.
- The NRVC Education Committee will assist in the planning and implementation of this objective.
- Grant money will be needed.

### **OBJECTIVE 4**

To explore ways in which Catholic colleges and universities may educate the campus community on religious life and to link the strengthening of the institution's religious charism with the building of a vocation culture on campus.

#### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- NRVC will connect with the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) and other organizations of higher learning to fulfill this objective.
- Other options may be explored by the NRVC Education Committee.

### **OBJECTIVE 5**

To sponsor a vocation symposium with leadership and diverse participant representation from Catholic, national youth and young adult organizations. The purpose of this gathering is:

- to educate the participants on religious life and the NRVC/CARA study;
- to engage in dialogue about the findings and to listen to each other's vocation-related experiences with youth and young adults;
- to develop strategies for increasing the awareness of religious life among young adults;
- to equip youth and young adult ministers with information, tools, and resources to work with young adults who are considering religious life.

#### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- Some possible participating organizations may include: National Catholic Student Coalition (NCSC), Catholic Campus Ministry Association (CCMA), National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association (NCYAMA), and the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM).

- Other groups deemed appropriate may also be invited (i.e. Busted Halo, FOCUS, other diocesan young adult programs, Theology on Tap, etc.).
- A planning group needs to be established. The NRVC Youth and Young Adult Committee would be charged with implementing this objective.
- Grant money would need to be obtained.

## **OBJECTIVE 6**

To develop an effective transition program for those exiting long-term volunteer and/or associate programs sponsored by religious communities or other similar Catholic organizations. Part of this program will include a vocation component.

### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- Survey long term volunteer and associate programs to identify what type of programs are already in place. The goal is to identify the “best practices” of these programs.
- Enlist the support and collaboration of Catholic Network of Volunteer Services (CNVS).
- A task force would need to be established.
- Grant money may be needed.

## **OBJECTIVE 7**

To initiate efforts at increasing the understanding and support for religious life by parents and families through sacramental preparation programs, Catholic family organizations, and parish ongoing education programs.

### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- NRVC will initiate a discussion on the important role of parental support for vocations with the USCCB Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth.
- Work with the USCCB to allow religious to give reflections or witness talks at Masses commemorating World Day for Consecrated Life.
- NRVC will need to engage the support and collaboration of national family and marriage organizations to implement this project.
- In implementing the previous religious education objectives, the NRVC Education Committee will be mindful of integrating parental support for vocation promotion into their work.

## **PRIORITY 2**

**NRVC will provide resources to assist members of religious institutes in their processing and response to the diverse challenges presented by the research.**

### *Rationale:*

Recent events in the Church have raised significant questions for religious institutes in this country which beckon reflection, examination, and a response. In fact, the results of the NRVC/CARA Study may even present more questions than answers to religious institutes in their desire to attract new membership. Given the evolution of religious life in this country, the study underscores the multifaceted complexity of the vocation question and why there may not be more.

Although the study presents best practices for vocation promotion, there are no simple solutions to the internal issues of a religious institute that may or may not negatively impact the attraction or retention of candidates. Likewise, this is true of the sociological, cultural, and societal trends that also impact the number of religious vocations.

In looking at the study data, the symposium participants agreed that there seems to be a disconnection between what newer members are seeking in religious life and what is the given reality of a religious institute and the needs and desires of its general membership. As the study attests, these issues, which usually center on generational, ecclesial, and theological differences in the members, create tension in the life of a congregation.

For example, the data suggests that newer members come to religious life not just for ministry, but out of a desire to live in community and to deepen their prayer life and Catholic identity. While some apostolic communities have strong structures for mission, structures for community, prayer, identity, and visibility may seemingly not be as strong. If this is the case, how do congregations remain faithful to their mission and founding charism and not compromise the essential elements of their vowed life as stated in their Rule and Constitutions?

Pope Benedict XVI in a November 28, 2010, address to the Union of Superiors General in Rome, acknowledged that while mission is integral to the identity of the consecrated life, vibrant prayer and life in community are key to its future renewal. The Holy Father said, “Mission is the Church’s mode of being and, in it, of the consecrated life itself; it is part of your identity; it moves you to bring the Gospel to everyone, without limits. Mission, supported by a powerful experience of God, by a robust formation and by a fraternal life in community, is a key for understanding and revitalizing consecrated life.”

Because of its implications for a religious institute’s future and ability to attract new members, the symposium participants affirm the importance and necessity of addressing these critical issues, and all their tensions, in a manner that pursues truth and greater fidelity with forthright, honest, and respectful dialogue. In order to assist religious institutes in this endeavor, NRVC is committed to the following actions proposed by the symposium participants.

## **OBJECTIVE 1**

To create a conversation tool that would enable congregational leaders to engage the members in a deeper exchange about the NRVC / CARA findings and its implications for apostolic life with respect to community, Eucharist and communal prayer, and visibility as they are experienced in their individual congregations. The focus of the conversation would be:

- What is our current experience?
- What do we aspire to?
- What are we willing to do or to stop doing in order to reach our aspirations?

### ***Action Steps and Needs:***

- This project will be developed by a small task force made of 5-6 members representative of the three leadership conferences. Included in this task force will be representatives from the National Communicators’ Network of Women Religious. The task force should be mindful of proactive internal communications before, during and after the program.
- The conversational tool should be flexible enough so that congregations may incorporate constitutional and other pertinent documents (especially as they pertain to the community life, Eucharist and the sacraments, and common prayer).
- The task force should be mindful of the use of media and other resources to be included in the program they develop. A suggested resource packet may include the study executive summary, summary of main findings, study sheet, reflection questions, etc.

- The preferred method is to pre-test the tool with a focus group so that necessary adjustments and modifications may be made.
- The task force will need to discuss the possible options for what is to be done with the results of these conversations.

## **OBJECTIVE 2**

To initiate a study of how to incorporate effectively men and women of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds into a formation program and into the dominant culture of the religious institute.

### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- The scope of this study and a refinement of its goals would be determined by a task force. Members of this task will be multi-ethnic and cultural and will include, but not be limited to, statisticians, vocation directors, and formators.
- The goal of this research is to identify best practices for incorporation and integration of men and women of different cultures into religious life.
- Grant money will be needed for this project.

## **OBJECTIVE 3**

To develop a process and resource based on the above research whereby religious institutes may engage in self assessment, visioning, and planning with regard to inviting, welcoming, and retaining candidates of varying cultures and ethnicities.

### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- This process will include, but will not be limited to the following: assessing cultural sensitivities; developing multicultural communication and relationship building; considering family issues, connections, and inclusion. In developing the process, the task force may consider a review of the “Cultural Audit.”
- Possible resources may include the following: create language and cultural resources for educating and forming the community; develop a list of materials already available from other resources; establish collaborative relationships with existing multicultural entities and organizations; provide information on the NRVC website.
- A NRVC Multicultural Advisory Group will be formed to implement this objective.
- Grant money will be needed for this project.

## **OBJECTIVE 4**

To publish reflection papers on religious charism in relation to vocation ministry.

### *Action Steps and Needs:*

- The NRVC Editorial Board will identify and invite authors to write articles for a future edition of HORIZON based on the following premise: If a charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at the time of a congregation's foundation, it should continue to be a source of renewal. How does religious charism impact vocation ministry?
- Articles should include reflection questions to be used for individual and community reflection.

## **NRVC will continue to increase the awareness, visibility, and vitality of religious life through the use of technology and media.**

### ***Rationale:***

“The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul’s exclamation: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16) The increased availability of the new technologies demands greater responsibility on the part of those called to proclaim the Word, but it also requires them to become more focused, efficient and compelling in their efforts.” (Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 44th World Day of Communications, May 10, 2010)

As the “world of digital communication” requires us to be more focused and compelling in our efforts to spread the gospel, so too is similar energy and attention required in telling the good news of religious life. Mass media, digital communication, social networking, and other similar technology have created new avenues for evangelization in the Church. While prudent caution needs to be exercised, utilization of these various forms of new communication are vital to furthering the mission of the Church.

The NRVC/CARA study attests that the use of the internet and websites for vocation promotion has the strongest impact on newer members, especially for those who are younger. Because younger people have had little exposure to men and women religious, oftentimes the internet becomes their first portal to learning about religious life or a particular institute.

Admittedly, how the media portrays religious life may not always be accurate, flattering, or inviting. The symposium participants affirmed that if NRVC is to remain committed to creating a culture of vocation, it must make optimal use of current technology to communicate a balanced, fair, and true message and image of religious life in all of its many forms. In addition, it must supplement the negative messages about women and men religious with positive, compelling messages about vocations and those who choose to respond to God’s call as sisters, priests, and brothers.

### **OBJECTIVE 1**

To create under the auspices of NRVC a national communications office for religious vocations to serve as an advocate for vocation awareness and promotion. The purpose of this office is:

- to serve as a national clearinghouse for media relations and inquiries;
- to provide and produce professional and effective resources for vocation promotion;
- to provide the media with positive stories on religious life;
- to offer ongoing workshops on communication issues for vocation directors.

#### ***Action Steps and Needs:***

- A task force will be established to organize this effort.
- Other needs for this office will be determined in consultation with other appropriate agencies, offices, and conferences.
- A request for “seed money” from a foundation will be needed.
- A timeline will need to be established once money is received.

### **OBJECTIVE 2**

To spearhead an annual vocations awareness campaign with national and local components.

#### ***Action Steps and Needs:***

- This implementation of this campaign will be the responsibility of the national communications office.
- Some suggested activities: “Take a Sister, Priest, or Brother to School Day”; YouTube Video Religious Interview Campaign; teen produced video contest on vocation stories; bike ride/pilgrimage for vocations; parish bulletin inserts; 30 spots for broadcast TV/radio reflections; 40 days of Lent vocation awareness program.
- This campaign may coincide with other established national or international vocation awareness happenings.

—Approved by the Executive Board of the National Religious Vocation Conference, February 17, 2011

---

The National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) extends its gratitude to the following participants of the Moving Forward in Hope Project:

Ms. Lisa Bagladi  
Public Relations and Marketing  
World Library Publications

Mr. Heherson O. Balabbo, CMF  
Seminarist  
Claretian Missionaries

Br. Paul Bednarczyk, CSC  
Executive Director  
National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC)

Mr. DeKarlos Blackman  
Supreme Knight and CEO  
Knights of Peter Claver, Inc.

Sr. Mary Charlotte Chandler, RSCJ  
Province Leadership Team  
Religious of the Sacred Heart  
Former Director, Center for the Study of Religious Life

Mr. Peter Cunningham  
Membership Coordinator  
USA Council of Serra International

Sr. Charlene Diorka, SSJ  
Associate Director  
National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC)

Dr. Mary Gautier, PhD  
Senior Research Associate  
Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA)

Sr. Angela Gertsema, ASCJ  
Teacher  
Apostles of the Sacred Heart

Ms. Julie Gilberto-Brady  
Communications Coordinator  
School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Board Member, National Communicators' Network  
of Women Religious (NCNWR)

Mrs. Maryellen Glackin  
Vocation Director  
Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart  
Board Member and Leadership Team Member,  
National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC)

Sr. Doris Gottemoeller, RSM  
Senior VP of Mission & Values Integration  
Catholic Healthcare Partners  
Former President, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas  
Former President, Leadership Conference  
of Women Religious (LCWR)

Sr. Maria Hughes, ASC  
Director  
Institute of Religious Formation  
Board Member, Religious Formation Conference (RFC)

Sr. Mary Hughes, OP  
Prioress  
Amityville Dominican Sisters  
President, Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)

Br. Charles Johnson, SM  
Former Vocation Director  
Society of Mary (Marianists)  
Institute of Religious Formation

Sr. Mary Johnson, SNDdeN  
Professor of Sociology  
Emmanuel College

Sr. Mary Emily Knapp, OP  
Vocation Director  
St. Cecelia Congregation Dominican Sisters

Mr. Matthew Kuczora, CSC  
Seminarian  
Congregation of Holy Cross, Indiana Province

Fr. Hank Lemoncelli, OMI  
English Language Department  
Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life  
and Societies of Apostolic Life, Vatican City

Sr. Maryann Seton Lopiccolo, SC  
Episcopal Delegate for Religious  
Diocese of Brooklyn/Queens  
Former President, National Conference  
of Vicars for Religious (NCVR)

Sr. Bernadette McCauley, SCC  
Vocation Director  
Sisters of Christian Charity

Fr. William Shawn McKnight  
Executive Director  
USCCB Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations

Dr. Kathleen Mahoney, PhD  
Consultant

Sr. Donna Markham, OP, PhD  
Clinical Psychologist  
Former Prioress, Adrian Dominican Sisters  
Former President, Leadership Conference  
of Women Religious (LCWR)

Fr. Edwin H. Obermiller, CSC  
Assistant Provincial  
Congregation of Holy Cross, Indiana Province

Br. Hugh O'Neill, CFC  
Province Leader  
Congregation of Christian Brothers  
Board Member, Conference of Major Superiors  
of Men (CMSM)

Sr. Elyse Marie Ramirez, OP  
Coordinator of Religious Vocation Ministries  
Archdiocese of Chicago

Mr. Matthew Robaszekiewicz  
Membership Services  
National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM)  
and National Association of Catholic Youth  
Ministry Leaders (NACYML)

Sr. Marcy Romine, OSF  
Vocation Director  
Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help  
Board Member, National Religious Vocation Conference  
(NRVC)

Sr. Mary Joanna Ruhland, RSM  
Associate Director  
USCCB Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations

Fr. Robin Ryan, CP  
Vicar Provincial  
Passionists, Eastern Province  
Former Director, Catholics on Call

Br. Sean Sammon, FMS  
Visiting Scholar  
Marist College  
Former Superior General, Marist Brothers of the Schools  
Former President, Conference of Major Superiors  
of Men (CMSM)

Sr. Joan Scanlon, OP  
Council Member  
Dominican Sisters of Peace

Ms. Carol Schuck-Scheiber  
Publications Editor  
National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC)

Ms. Kathy Schmitt  
Seminary Department  
National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA)

Ms. Tami Schmitz  
Campus Minister  
University of Notre Dame

Sr. Katarina Schuth, OSF  
Professor  
St. Paul Seminary

Fr. Donald Senior, CP  
President  
Catholic Theological Union

Ms. Laurie Svatek  
Campus Minister  
St. Catherine's College  
Vice Chair, Executive Board, Catholic Campus Ministry  
Association (CCMA) Board

Sr. Patricia Tekippe, FSPA  
Vocation Minister  
Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

Ms. Patrice Tuohy  
Publisher/Executive Director  
TrueQuest Communications

Ms. Terry Tuohy  
Development Director/Catechist  
St. Matthias Church

Mr. Len Uhal  
National Vocation Director  
Society of the Divine Word

Mother Shaun Vergauwen, FSE  
Mother General  
Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist  
Board Member (Treasurer), Council of Major Superiors  
of Women Religious (CMSWR)

Sr. Julie Vieira, IHM  
Partner  
A Nun's Life Ministry

Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, RSM  
Director of Media Relations  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)

Fr. Freddy Washington, CSSp  
Director of Formation  
Spiritan Fathers and Brothers

Br. Patrick Winbush, OSB  
Vocation Director  
Benedictine Monks of Newark Abbey

Fr. Andrew-Carl Wisdom, OP  
Vocation Director  
Dominican Friars, Province of St. Albert the Great

Sr. Patricia Wittberg, SC  
Professor of Sociology  
Indiana University

Sr. Shu Chen Wu, MM  
Formator  
Maryknoll Sisters

Sr. Leonarda Zielinska, OP  
Vocation Director  
Dominican Sisters of the Immaculate Conception

Sr. Judy Zielinski, OSF  
Director, Faith and Values Programming  
New Group Media