



# VOCATION CULTURE

*Reflection to Action*



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## PREAMBLE

**B**ETWEEN 2012 and 2013 the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) sponsored the Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope program. Generously underwritten by the GHR Foundation, these four regional gatherings brought together the vocation minister and the major superior or leadership team member of 115 canonically recognized religious institutes of women to explore the opportunities, challenges, and implications for new membership in religious life that are presented by the changing ethnic and generational demographics of Catholic women in the United States. This program also effectively fostered respectful dialogue among women religious inter-congregationally and between members of the two leadership conferences of women religious.


The final report of these gatherings identified eight critical issues for women's religious institutes regarding new membership that need to be addressed during this transformational period of religious life:

1. Establishing boundaries and clear identities as women religious
2. Increasing the cultural knowledge and sensitivity of our members
3. Considering how our communal decisions affect younger members
4. Increasing the communication among leadership and vocation personnel
5. Encouraging all members to be inviters
6. Continuing the work of reconciliation and healing within a divided Church
7. Working with dioceses and parishes to promote vocations
8. Trusting in God's providence

In response to the expressed desire of the sister participants for assistance in addressing these critical needs, the National Religious Vocation Conference is pleased to present this resource *Vocation Culture: Reflection to Action*. Its goal is to help women's religious institutes reflect on how their current practices promote, or inhibit, the development of a pervasive "culture of vocations" among both their leadership and their professed members. In numerous ways, large and small, an institute's culture may attract or deter those who are considering religious life. The reflection process outlined here is intended to assist women's religious institutes in better understanding their strengths and weaknesses around the eight critical issues identified in the report.

Complementing the *Culture of Vocations Assessment Tool* developed by NRVC for the *Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope* program, this resource is designed to be adapted to the particular situation of each institute of women religious. The process can easily be modified for a number of settings, such as for personal reflection, for small group discussions, or for larger congregational assemblies. The questions are mostly behavioral and center on the experiences of the community and its members and how they may help or hinder a vocation culture. They are designed to encourage the naming of vocation priorities for the next five years—and beyond.

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# VOCATION CULTURE: REFLECTION TO ACTION

## I. ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES AND CLEAR IDENTITIES AS WOMEN RELIGIOUS

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While the participants developed practical, concrete plans they were aware of profound shifts required both personally and at the congregational level. They saw the need to define, name, and claim the core values of religious life as lived in their congregation. Sometimes in trying to be inclusive, the group can lose that which is essential and unique about their congregation. Without boundaries and a clear identity, a group will not continue to function (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope*, p. 15).

1. How would the sisters in our community define our charism?
2. Who in our congregation best embodies the charism of our institute? What about each one led you to name her?
3. How do we express our identity and charism in our day to day reality?
4. What recent events and/or decisions did we make as a community that embody our charism?
5. How would other people describe or identify who we are as a congregation?
  - a. Are others familiar with how we pray and do they know of any prayers that are important to our congregation?
  - b. What distinguishes us from the laity as a congregation of consecrated religious?
  - c. What distinguishes us from other religious congregations?
  - d. How can we communicate to others the importance we give to prayer and a personal relationship with God?
6. How is our congregation's charism and identity considered when we make decisions regarding ministry and lifestyle?
  - a. How can our living of the vows express a counter-cultural stance?
  - b. Are there areas in our personal lives that we can revisit to take an even more radical stance in witnessing to prayer, ministry and community life?
7. How do we call forth and deepen our congregational charism as it is lived in discerners and all our members?

### Action steps:

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps we will take to establish our clear identity as consecrated women and members of our religious institutes.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

## II. INCREASING THE CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND SENSITIVITY OF OUR MEMBERS

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Given that the ethnic diversity in the young Catholic population is not reflected in the majority of congregations, sisters also recognized a need to better understand the variety of cultures and to learn how to be more welcoming and receptive. Younger generations have experienced tremendous diversity and see it as a positive

force in our culture. Religious communities with a dominant generation and ethnic background deepened their awareness of the need to be conscious of their biases and to strive for a deep listening to the non-dominant current and future members (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope*, p. 15).

1. How do we as a community incorporate forms of prayer from different generations or cultures?
  - a. Different forms of music?
  - b. Different forms of devotions?
  - c. Different forms of art?
  - d. Different forms of time and space?
2. How open are we to praying in, or learning, a different language?
3. What new leisure activities are we willing to engage in with our new members from different generational or ethnic cultures? Which of our present leisure activities are we willing to give up?
4. How many of our residences are located in areas with diverse cultures? How are we involved in those neighborhoods?
5. What does our menu look like?
  - a. Does it include a variety of ethnic foods?
  - b. How sensitive are we to different tastes, needs (food allergies), and food preferences (ethnic, vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free) of our members?
  - c. Do we complain or grumble about eating different foods?
6. How aware and tolerant are we of the varied ways different cultural groups or generations make decisions?
  - a. How they approach time?
  - b. How they handle disagreements?
  - c. How they may process differently in order to come to a conclusion?
  - d. How interpersonal relationships may affect decision-making?
  - e. How they include or do not include all voices, even if they are not at the table?
7. What are our experiences of crossing over into another culture? How did these experiences affect us?

#### **Action steps:**

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps we will take to increase our cultural knowledge and sensitivity.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

### **III. CONSIDERING HOW OUR COMMUNAL DECISIONS AFFECT YOUNGER MEMBERS**

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The sisters expressed their belief that leadership plays a critical role in spurring the revitalization of communities. It was suggested that leaders can ask their local houses if they are open to share life with the young. One sister reflectively questioned: “Instead of an option for the young, have we instead made an option for the retired?” Some of the leadership participants further recognized that while their congregations need to care well for their senior sisters, if the majority of their focus is on the elderly, their congregation will not be able to grow. It was suggested that before making any major decisions communities ask: “How will this decision affect the young?” (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope*, p. 16).

1. Given the changes emerging in this time of transformation of religious life, how do we maintain our



- hope for the future and how do we transmit this hope to our younger members?
2. How do the leaders of our institute help younger members articulate their ideas and dreams about the future? How does the rest of the community assist our leaders in this?
  3. How do we mentor our younger members and how do we allow ourselves to be mentored by them?
  4. How do younger members learn the prayer traditions, ritual customs and gestures, and songs of our congregation? Who teaches them?
  5. How open is our local community to welcoming younger members?
    - a. How are we willing to change our schedule and activities to accommodate the needs of younger members?
    - b. How do we spend time making new memories with younger members, in addition to recalling old ones?
  6. How open are we to styles of personal and communal prayer which are meaningful to young adults?
  7. How do we evaluate and adjust the number and types of internal/external ministries for the current size of our community and age of our members?
  8. Is technology viewed as a value in our religious institute? Is technology regularly updated so that members can communicate with peers in religious life as well as age-related peers in ministry?
  9. How do we allot times and resources to our younger members to prepare them for professional ministry and theological study?

#### Action steps:

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps we will take to be more conscious of how our decisions affect younger members.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

## IV. INCREASING THE COMMUNICATION AMONG LEADERSHIP AND VOCATION PERSONNEL

Many leadership participants became more aware of the need to support and work with the vocation minister. As Sister Mary Johnson noted, “The vocation minister is at the frontier” and often aware of realities and changes in the young adult cohort. Vocation ministers can often feel alone and discouraged. Many in leadership are consumed by demands and immediate needs of membership, and that has at times led to a neglect of new membership promotion. Some sisters suggested having the vocation director present at all general council meetings as a way to ensure the importance of future membership (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope*, p. 16).

1. How often do vocation and formation ministers meet with all of our leadership for resource sharing (i.e. religious life research), communication, and mutual encouragement and support?
2. How does leadership regularly highlight the importance of vocations to the membership:
  - a. In external/internal communications
  - b. In prayer intentions
  - c. In assembly agendas?

3. How does the congregational budget reflect the commitment and priority of vocation/formation?
4. In what ways are leaders present for vocation events, etc.?
5. How are women in formation encouraged to give feedback and input regarding their formation process?

**Action steps:**

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps to increase communication among leadership and vocation/ formation ministers.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

## V. ENCOURAGING ALL MEMBERS TO BE INVITERS

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Many participants reaffirmed that the work of vocation promotion belongs to the whole community and may require a real transformation of a congregation. The desire of the sisters to share the material at the conference with their communities was palpable. One piece of data that stood out is that only 15 percent of young adult Catholics have been invited to consider religious life. The participants shared that they want their communities to understand the demographics and the reality of young adults. As one sister said, “I need to rethink how I think.” They want their sisters to know that young people desire to make a commitment and want to sacrifice for something bigger than themselves. Along with raising awareness, sisters recognized that members need help to know how to better reach out to young adults and to share a conversation with them about vowed life. Those present recognized that sisters can help each other in this outreach, collaborating among congregations to promote religious life and its mission (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope*, p. 16).

1. What experiences or people drew you to enter this religious institute?
  - a. What were your earlier hopes, dreams, and ideals?
  - b. How do you share your vocation story with others?
2. How much do we know about young adult cultures? About skills of inviting?
3. What more do we need to learn to be able to invite? What are some of the ways we can learn these skills?
4. Suppose five young women are planning to enter our institute.
  - a. What do we already have in place for them?
  - b. What would we be willing to do to ensure vibrant and welcoming local communities for them?
5. How do we invite young adults to pray with us, to be with us in community, and to join us in ministry? In what other ways can we connect with young adult Catholics?

**Action steps:**

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps we will take to encourage all members to be inviters.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

## VI. CONTINUING THE WORK OF RECONCILIATION & HEALING WITHIN A DIVIDED CHURCH

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One transformative highlight mentioned by the sisters was the presence of sisters from both women's conferences, the LCWR and the CMSWR. The diversity of religious life was seen as a strength and blessing. Participants further expressed that while there is division and polarization in the Church, the experience of the gatherings was one of unity in a common call and commitment to Christ. For some, there was a sense of healing and reconciliation in being together that they hoped would continue (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope, p. 16*).

1. How do we ritualize our healing and forgiveness of one another so that we maintain an authentic joyful presence in the Church and in the world?
2. What is the balance of energy we give to holding on to hurts versus that of seeking healing?
3. How do we build relationships with bishops, diocesan priests and other women and men religious in our geographic area so as to witness to the unity of the Body of Christ?
4. How do we publicly identify the ways in which we support the Church?
5. How do we minister to those people, especially women, who seek a place of welcome in Church?
6. In what ways do we initiate and invite opportunities for respectful dialogue so as to build understanding among people?

### Action steps:

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps we can take to continue the work of reconciliation and healing.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

## VII. WORKING WITH DIOCESES AND PARISHES TO PROMOTE VOCATIONS

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Those gathered also were aware of the importance of the institutional Church in promoting vocations to religious life. They expressed gratitude for what has been done and also hope that dioceses and parishes would more proactively encourage those who are called to vowed life, collaborating with congregations to provide housing and ministry options and actively promoting religious life. In addition, the participants shared their desire to continue to work with church leaders and ministers to expose youth and young adults to this life-giving option to serve God and humanity (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope, p. 16*).

1. How are we currently present in parish and diocesan events or on college campuses? How do people know when we are present? Do we project a visible presence?
2. How do we participate in public religious gatherings such as: National Vocation Awareness Week, World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life, World Day of Prayer for Vocations, and National Catholic Sisters week?
3. How can we extend support to our local clergy and lay ministers?
4. How do we utilize the media to make our presence known in our parishes and dioceses (i.e. parish bulletins, diocesan newsletters and newspapers, parish and diocesan websites, and vocation resources distributed to parishes)?
5. What social opportunities and service oriented projects do we participate in on a local regular basis within parishes, college campus ministry centers, and dioceses?

6. How do we maintain connections with parishes and places of ministry where we have lived and served in the past?
7. What opportunities exist for us in our diocese to promote vocations to religious life? If opportunities are limited, how can we creatively witness and proclaim that religious life is still vital and valuable in the Church?

**Action steps:**

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps we will take to increase our presence in parish and diocesan life.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

## VIII. TRUSTING IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE

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Despite some sense of anxiety about the aging of some communities and fewer vocations, the predominant feeling among the participants was that of hope in the future of religious life. Many sisters expressed trust that in God's providence, religious life would continue, as it is integral to the life of the Church. They voiced a greater confidence and renewed desire to reach out to the young, encouraging them to follow Christ in religious life (*Final Report: Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope*, p. 16).

1. How does our language reflect our attitudes about vocations and the future of religious life?
2. Do we believe that this transformative period in religious life is guided by God's Providence? Do we trust that religious life will continue to be a gift to the Church?
3. What is your vision for what God wants for our congregation in the future?

**Action steps:**

1. What are the attitudes we are willing to commit to, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
2. What are the attitudes we are willing to let go of, in order to create a culture of vocations in our religious institute?
3. Name two or three concrete steps we will take to reinforce our trust in God's Providence.
4. Are we dreaming big enough? Does our communal vision extend beyond 2040?

### FINAL ACTION STEP:

Having done this reflection, what will be our vocation priorities for the next five years as:

- a. An individual?
- b. A local community?
- c. A congregation?