Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



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> "[This study] is a service to religious communities who are preparing for the future, and it has been for me and others an opportunity to review our lives with gratitude."
>
> —From a sister participant

Our survey team was so affirmed to hear input like this — from individual sisters all over the world about the Life Satisfaction Scale for Apostolic Women Religious. ( LSSAWR is an intergenerational and international assessment tool designed to provide information to individuals and congregations about their current levels of satisfaction as apostolic women religious.)

We were amazed that to date the instrument has been used by thousands of sisters — from 25 to 95 years of age — around the globe, from all six populated continents and many countries of the world. It is a tribute to the global networking ability of sisters that they have learned about it through Facebook, Global Sisters Report articles, from other congregations, and from individual sisters.

Generously funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (which also funds Global Sisters Report) and supported through Duquesne University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, this assessment tool is an agent and monitor of change, progress and growth, in general life satisfaction and in five key areas of religious life: congregational character, individual well-being, membership viability, holistic growth and commitment, and interrelationships.

Sisters are excited that they are now able to use the Congregational Reports of their community and the online LSSAWR manual to compare their personal scores to those of their community, to sisters world-wide, or to their generational cohorts. I can hardly wait for the norms for all generational cohorts in religious life (silent, baby boomers, Generation X and millennials) to come out!

Individuals can use information gleaned from the project for personal reflection, to achieve change and growth in their commitments to the consecrated life form; congregations can use them for ongoing assessment, and to actively engage in the planning of the preferred future of their religious congregations.

Our team was particularly gratified that over 93% of the respondents left one or more positive comments about the tool at the end of the survey, describing it as "comprehensive," "very interesting," "thought provoking," "relevant" and "insightful," but also "clear" and "easy to follow." We were especially grateful that many sisters took the time to provide a more detailed explanation about its implications for religious life. Here are some examples of the comments shared:

> It is: needed … an eye-opener … an excellent tool … a useful resource.

Because

> It is about the reality of our life in our communities and how one is seeing herself leading it.
>
> It helps to review our motivations that moved us and continue moving to remain in the vocation to which we have been called. It also helps us to be responsible and faithful to this mission and continue to look for ways to serve … [to] maintain what sustains us in the fundamentals of our religious life… .
>
> We have few serious studies to assess where we are and thus also be able to provide channels for a more conscious and full life.

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Our team was also moved by sisters' statements of gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the international LSSAWR project and for the work that was being carried out by the project team. Some of these responses emphasized the contribution the instrument can make to religious life in general and to their congregations in particular. Sisters also commented on its value for communities preparing for the future. Examples of such extended responses include the following:

> Thanks … very helpful … good survey … insightful questions … thought provoking.

> Got at the heart of life as a religious. I especially appreciated that some of the questions had to do with my experience as a religious.
>
> Help us to become more aware of our life style.
>
> Results may give us all support for living a fulfilling religious life today and in the future.

A significant number of sisters' comments revealed that their experience with the survey was positive because it enabled them to gain personal insight and facilitated personal growth:

> Enabled me to reflect on my current life as a religious, and also my past in how it influenced who I am, and an insight into the future.
>
> I get to know and understand how I see and live my life as a religious woman.
>
> It really helped me to revalue my state of life and my community and congregational coexistence… .

Some sisters observed that completing the LSSAWR challenged them and made them aware of issues they would not have thought of:

> It made me think deeply about who I am in our community, something I usually avoid at all costs! God bless your work. I hope it will be of value as time goes forward.
>
> Challenging. But a call to honesty at my present moment of personal diminishment.
>
> The questions challenged me to answer from my core. Thank you, Sr. Clara for this wonderful work and contribution to assess the life satisfaction of women apostolic religious.

Besides commenting that the act of responding to the questions gave them opportunity for personal reflection and insight, sisters also highlighted the value of receiving feedback individually and congregationally based on their scores. Examples of this kind of response include the following:

> Very comprehensive, made me think about my feelings and discernment over the years, found the explanation of my own scores very helpful
>
> It was helpful that I could be honest. The results were helpful to me. Thank you.
>
> Very thought provoking — I'd appreciate seeing our combined congregational totals.
>
> I hope the other sisters in our Province take this.

In reviewing the comments, my colleague Dr. Crammond and I were pleased that the sisters have recognized the intrinsic value of the international LSSAWR — namely that it goes beyond organizational matters! We tried to make the instrument sensitive to the sisters' desires to make vital and viable choices, and remain true to their calling as apostolic women religious in the context of today's world.

Personally, it has been a great source of satisfaction to me to hear that it is "an opportunity to review [their] lives with gratitude," for it has been for me as well. The team and I are very grateful to hear that the purpose of the LSSAWR is increasingly understood and that a large number of sisters world-wide have experienced its beneficial use. We are grateful for everyone who has supported the project, and we look forward to the continued participation of apostolic women religious world-wide.

(By the way, the materials are currently offered in English, Spanish and German! Check out our website that is regularly updated with new data analyses, participant interviews, and new published articles.)

[Maria Clara Kreis is a native of Germany and has lived for 20 years with her religious community of the Sisters of Divine Providence in the United States. She is currently the grant project coordinator and lead researcher at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.]