News
Religious Life

The 2021-2022 leadership team for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Clockwise from top left: Sr. Jane Herb, president; Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, president-elect; Sr. Carol Zinn, executive director; Sr. Elise García, past-president. (GSR screenshot)

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August 14, 2021

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The annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious came to a close Aug. 13, capping a gathering like no other in the organization's history.

Although it was the second assembly to be held virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic, this year's event was more retreat than business meeting, with a condensed schedule and shortened sessions and more opportunities for contemplation and small group discernment.

It also examined the very soul of the organization and its member congregations as Catholic sisters reckon both with the history of racism and prejudice in the church and religious life and the future of religious life itself in the United States as the number of sisters continues to drop precipitously.

It began Aug. 11 with a fiery presidential address by Sr. Elise García, who acknowledged sisters' complicity in racism and led the leadership in apologizing and praying for forgiveness. García chastised the church, its bishops, vowed religious and institutions for participating in the origin and perpetuation of "our nation's perduring sin of racism," including the Vatican's sanction of the slave trade in the 15th century and congregations of sisters who excluded Black women or mistreated the few who did join.

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The assembly continued Aug. 12 with a mystical and literary keynote address by Sr. Mercedes Casas Sánchez, who urged the more than 1,100 registered for the assembly to see religious life in terms of its entire history, marked by foremothers fueled by vision. The challenge before religious life is to create space within religious life so charisms can grow rather than merely survive, she said.

The event ended Aug. 13 with the presentation of Lifetime Achievement Awards — the first time the organization, which represents about 80% of the more than 40,000 sisters in the United States, has given them — and a quiet, reflective transfer of leadership as the terms of regional officers, national board members and presidencies came to an end for some and began for others.

Past-president Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, a Sister of St. Joseph of Orange, California, ended her term in the presidential triumvirate; president and Adrian Dominican Sr. Elise García became past-president; president-elect Sr. Jane Herb of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary became president; and Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois, became president-elect.

Executive Director Sr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, thanked Helmlinger for her three years in the presidency.

"We're deeply grateful for your thoughtful approach to every conversation, for your thorough reflection on every matter that came before us," Zinn said. "We thank you for your listening ears, your listening heart, your deep, contemplative spirit."

The first session of the day, which was for members only, continued LCWR's national discernment on the future of religious life and included a role-playing session of a leadership team conversation in which half the team wants to begin collaborating with other congregations immediately and the other half wants to proceed slowly and cautiously.

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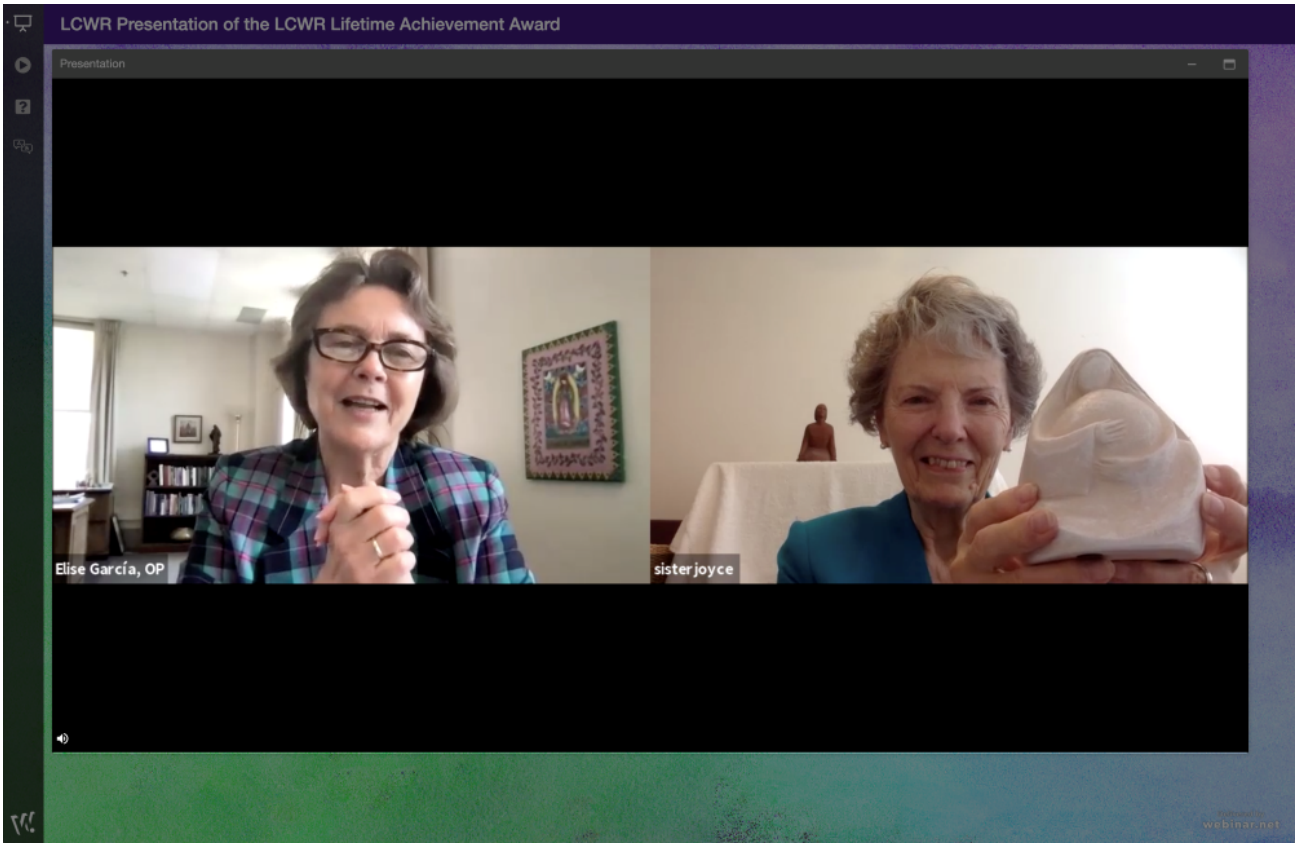
Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Amata Miller, left, accepts a Lifetime Achievement Award from Sr. Jane Herb, then president-elect of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, on Aug. 13, the last day of the 2021 LCWR assembly. (GSR screenshot)

St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean, left, accepts a Lifetime Achievement Award from Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, then past-president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, on Aug. 13, the last day of the 2021 LCWR assembly. (GSR screenshot)



Presentation Sr. Joyce Meyer, right, accepts a Lifetime Achievement Award from Sr. Elise García, then president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, on Aug. 13, the last day of the 2021 LCWR assembly. (GSR screenshot)

The recipients of the Lifetime Achievement Awards were:

- Sr. Amata Miller, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and an economist who has taught countless sisters and students about economics as a tool for social justice;
- Sr. Helen Prejean, a Sister of St. Joseph whose tireless advocacy against the death penalty was made famous in her book *Dead Man Walking* and the movie of the same name; and
- Sr. Joyce Meyer of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is a member of the board of directors of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Global Sisters Report's international liaison. (Editor's note: The Hilton Foundation is a major funder of Global Sisters Report.)

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Meyer reflected on her decades of traveling the world, including once riding on the back of a motorcycle in Vietnam disguised as Vietnamese woman and a time she dressed as a Muslim woman to visit a sisters' school in Afghanistan that taught children with disabilities.

"I remember it with great joy, mostly," Meyer said. "We were all together, defying the darkness — and sometimes the suffering — that surrounded us."

Prejean said if she has achieved anything, it has been because of her fellow sisters and the Holy Spirit.

"God bless our sisterhood. I love that we are free agents of the Gospel in the world," Prejean said. "I don't do anything apart from the sisterhood."

Asked how she got into economics, Miller said she remembers "with horror" the day her mother superior assigned it to her. She didn't like math and just wanted to go back to teaching elementary school.

However, she had grown up with a passion for social justice, so she "learned how to teach economics as economic justice and social justice." She said young sisters and economists must seize this moment as more and more people question capitalism.

"But after all these years, it looks like maybe I was the right woman in the right place at the right time," Miller said. "I'm humbled by the award."

Next year's assembly is currently planned as an in-person event in St. Louis. This year's gathering was supposed to be in Orlando, Florida.

The assembly closed with a song that began it, "Heaven knows where we are going, but we know we will get there."

Sr. Carol Zinn, executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and the three-member presidency recognize and thank LCWR staff on Aug. 13, the last day of the 2021 LCWR assembly. (GSR screenshot)

This story appears in the **LCWR 2021** feature series. View the full series.