Voices of Sisters
Ministry
Religious Life



Sr. Jayne Helmlinger (center), a Sister of St. Joseph of Orange, began her term as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious at the group's 2019 assembly in Scottsdale, Arizona. With her are Adrian Dominican Sr. Elise García (right) then president-elect, and Holy Cross Sr. Sharlet Wagner (left), then the new past president. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Jayne Helmlinger

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As my tenure in the office of president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) closes, I'm filled with gratitude, joy and hope in this present moment and as I look to the future. Here are highlights of my last three years in LWCR leadership.

President-elect (August 2018-August 2019)

Coming from the West Coast (Orange, California) and having spent my ministerial life in health care, I did not know many of my LCWR sisters. When I entered my congregation in 1986, I did so alone. In my almost 25 years in health care, I often was the only woman religious in the room (I was in administration and not in the clinical side of this beloved ministry). Being a part of LCWR since 2011, I realized what I had not known was missing in my life — peers in ministry across congregations!

Through LCWR, I was able to encounter sisters who were younger, my age and older. I loved this continuum of age in ministry, and it has truly enriched my life as a woman religious. We all share the same vocational call, and we express it through our particular charisms. This was a personal aha experience for me and one that I will continue to nurture for the remainder of my life.

Another set of experiences afforded entry into the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, conversations and prayer with both the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. These times of prayer and interaction were reminders of the continuum of life within the U.S. church and the ongoing importance of building relationships and bridges among ourselves as we respond to God's call in our lives.

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At the start of my tenure in the office of LCWR presidency, I was a member of a six-sister design team, charged with looking to the future and asking ourselves, what is

ours to do? How ought we be leading in this time of immense change? To what is God calling us as women religious, in service of our members and the people of God?

This yearlong process enabled us to practice, in real time, what we came to identify as our "emerging orientations." As we lead, we look through these five lenses to further the mission of the Gospel in today's world: global, porous borders; integrative partnerships for religious life and mission; mission focus in the public square and being technologically astute.

In February 2019, a group of LCWR members participated in an interconference gathering in Chiapas, Mexico. Men and women religious from Canada, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States met to dialogue on the migration caravans traveling through each of our countries. This gathering was rich in relationship building, education and cultural experiences in and around Chiapas. LCWR participants saw this as living out emerging orientations of global, porous borders and integrated partnerships for religious life and mission.

One insight from this experience is the deep inner desire I/we have to connect globally with our sisters and brothers. Engaging in this experience brought home the changing face of religious life around the world and how language and culture are not impediments to living fully into our call as men and women religious. On the contrary, this diversity enhances and expands our ability to respond to the signs of the times in new and creative ways as we learn and grow in understanding and experiencing what it means to embrace interculturality in ministry and community.

President (August 2019-August 2020)

Coming out of the August 2019 LCWR assembly, our desire was to live out our assembly resolution:

> Responding to God who loves all of creation into being, we recommit ourselves to create communion and examine root causes of injustice. We particularly focus on the intersection of racism, migration, and climate crisis. We recognize a sense of urgency and pledge prayer, education, and advocacy. We will use our collective voice, resources, and power in collaboration with others to establish justice which reflects God's creating love.

Each of us was moved to advocacy, prayer and action as we watched with horror the experiences of those seeking asylum in the United States. U.S. Catholic Charities asked sisters and associates to respond to the ever-increasing needs of our brothers and sisters arriving in the United States. The response was phenomenal and gives us a glimpse into how we can move into the future, together. The power, influence and effectiveness of our collective response demonstrates our ability to respond in the present and look to the future with bold faith, foresight and flexibility.

As 2019 came to a close, and 2020 began, who among us could have foreseen the immense challenges that faced us as COVID-19 spread around the world? As leaders of congregations with some of the most vulnerable impacted by COVID, our focus was necessarily on the well-being of our sisters and those with whom we serve.

Again, our collective response to the mounting needs of our brothers and sisters were met with ingenuity, creativity, daring and grace. Networks formed over the decades were accessed to assist our brothers and sisters from around the world — and often accomplished through emails, phone calls and virtual meetings. It brought home to all of us the fragility of life and the importance of the ministry of presence. As this pandemic continues, our response is far from finished. The need for our presence, ingenuity and creativity in responding to the aftermath of this pandemic is before us, and I'm confident in our ongoing response to the ever-growing needs across the globe.

With the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, a new day dawned for many of us as we faced the reality of generations of racial violence and injustices flowing from white privilege. We continue to grapple with this reality and the impact of racism on the spiritual, economic, civic, and physical realms of our sisters and brothers of color.

As a conference, it was crystal clear that LCWR needed an immediate and long-lasting response to racism within our own congregations, our conference, and in society. I recall my first Zoom call among the presidency (Dominican Sr. Elise García and Holy Cross Sr. Sharlet) and Sister of St. Joseph Carol Zinn, LCWR executive director, after George Floyd's murder. We spent hours talking as we processed what it meant for us as individual sisters, LCWR leaders and within our own congregations. While the word "awakening" may be offensive to some, it was a time of deep soul-searching and an urgent desire to respond with more than words and good intentions; we needed LCWR to begin the hard work of identifying racism

within ourselves, our systems and ways of thinking and being.

The four of us quickly involved the LCWR board, region chairs and national office ministers to devise a plan to move forward as a conference. At the August 2020 assembly and with conviction and strong resolution, the members of LCWR approved what we've come to refer to as Spirit Call within a Call. While this is a five-year commitment to rid ourselves of racism within and among us, we realize it is a lifelong journey.

Past President (August 2020-August 2021)

As I moved from president to past president of LCWR, we were in the midst of a fierce presidential election in the United States. The anxieties, frustrations and divisions across our country were growing in intensity and violence. As women religious we were challenged in responding to our deep desire for civility and dignity in the political debates occurring in all sectors of our society and in the church. The assembly resolution of 2019-2022, which speaks to the intersectionality of racism, climate crisis and migration, helped us focus and respond to the increasing need for our voice and presence in the public square (another emerging orientation!).

As leaders of LCWR, the presidency, region chairs, and national office ministers began working with consultant Kathy Obear to educate ourselves on individual and systemic racism and its impact on our brothers and sisters of color. While this work with Obear ended at our August 2021 board meeting, the real work of integrating all we've learned into our ways of leading will be lifelong and require us to practice the virtue of perseverance. It is in listening, and being vulnerable and honest with one another, that the soul work of our Spirit Call within a Call will guide us on this transformational journey.

As I conclude my term in the office of the presidency, I do so with deep gratitude in my heart. It has been a humbling experience and one that will continue to bear fruit for the remainder of my life.

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