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Michelle Hillaert is the new executive director of the GIVEN Institute. (OSV News/Courtesy of Michelle Hillaert)

Michelle Hillaert, an author and motivational speaker who has spent more than 25 years working in technology and communications fields, has been named executive director of the GIVEN Institute.

The Washington-based organization's board of directors announced Hillaert's appointment April 24.

"Michelle is a natural leader, a deeply faithful woman with a heart of compassion for the challenges young women face today and on fire with the freedom that living the

Gospel brings," Sr. Mary Elizabeth Endee, a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist and the board's chair, said in a statement.

The GIVEN Institute "is at a threshold moment of growth," Endee said. She described Hillaert as "aptly qualified and eager" to work with the religious sisters and laywomen who make up "the ever growing GIVEN Network" and would help its programs and mission "to flourish."

According to a news release on Hillaert's appointment, the GIVEN Institute is a collaboration between religious sisters and "mature faithful laywomen from across the United States who encourage, inspire and support the emerging generation of young Catholic women leaders." It was incorporated in 2018 following the inaugural 2016 Leadership Forum hosted by the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious.

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Hillaert said she was "humbled and honored" to be joining the GIVEN Institute team.

"Having four daughters, nine sisters and having journeyed with many women over the years, I've seen and experienced firsthand the struggle to recognize that we are unspeakably loved by a faithful Father who pursues and thirsts for our love," she said in a statement.

"As women, we often hesitate to respond with our gifts because we don't recognize that we are uniquely gifted and that the world — especially those we encounter on a daily basis — needs us to share these gifts," she said. "I'm so grateful to lock arms with the GIVEN team, to lean in with the Holy Spirit allowing God to take the lead, and to see how His mercy and grace will continue to transform the hearts of women through this work."

Hillaert, who has an undergraduate degree in communication arts from the Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, "has a passion and proven capacity for flourishing young women in the Church through mentoring and leadership development," according to the news release. She has experience in emergency management, web applications and graphic design, marketing and social media management, podcasting, and online consulting.

Author of the book *Let Go of the Fear: Powerful Stories and Lessons on How to Live a Bold and Fearless Life*, Hillaert also has helped women as a doula and life and fitness coach. A soccer mom and singer who enjoys leading praise and worship, she lives on 3 acres in Front Royal, Virginia, with her husband, six children, three dogs, a cat and 27 chickens.

Hillaert "brings a breadth of capacity and vast energy to this vital mission," said Sr. Mary Gabriel Devlin, a Sister of Life, who is a board member and GIVEN's interim executive director. "Under her leadership, the beautiful and liberating message of the dignity and vocation of women will reach many more young Catholics through our biannual Leadership Forum and Art of Accompaniment Mentoring program, and reach countless more women through our Regional Gatherings."

GIVEN has held four leadership forums, in 2016, 2019, 2021 and 2022. Each was designed to allow participants to "receive the gift they are, realize the gifts they've been given and respond with the gift that only they can give," according to the organization.

Each young woman who attends is paired with a mature woman religious and laywoman for a yearlong mentoring program, at the end of which each young woman launches her own "action plan for the church and the world."

The next yearlong mentoring program begins with a Leadership Forum in June 2024. Applications open for participants in November 2023. Applications for religious and lay mentors are accepted on a rolling basis.