News
Religious Life



Sisters at the LCWR Region 7 regional assembly April 5 participate in an activity where the device they hold only lights up and makes noises when everyone in the circle is connected by holding hands. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



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Congregations of women religious from across Indiana and Michigan gathered April 4-6 to try to write a new, regional story across charisms.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious holds an annual general assembly, and the leaders of its several regions meet regularly. But this first-ever regional assembly was for any sisters the congregations wanted to bring, not just those in leadership.

Another major change: While there was a schedule, there was no end-goal for the 130 sisters gathered, no set target for the event to achieve.

"We have no agenda, no plans — this is not a strategic planning session," Sr. Dawn Tomaszewski told Global Sisters Report. Tomaszewski is the superior of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary in the Woods and a member of the events planning committee. "We'll see where the Spirit takes us."

> 'Even communities coming to completion still have to finish their story.'
> —Sr. Teresa Maya
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Sr. Maxine Kollasch, superior of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan, and a planning committee member, said most of the sisters attending who are not in leadership have probably never attended such an event. The only request organizers made was that congregations extend invitations in a way that considered interculturality and age.

"It's the perfect place to collect data and different ways of doing things," Kollasch said.

Presenter Sr. Teresa Maya, a former LCWR president and a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, told attendees the point of the gathering was to start writing a new story of religious life. Most congregational histories seem to cover the first decades of existence and the work being done now, but leave out the middle years, she said.

"We need to ask ourselves, what was your congregation like 70 years ago, or when you first joined or were formed, and what do you want your congregation to look like 70 years from now?" Maya said. "Even communities coming to completion still have to finish their story."



Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Sr. Chidalu Ohalete works on a group art project as part of the LCWR Region 7 regional assembly April 5. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

Maya said that congregations for years have been talking about walking in darkness and making it through the night, but it is in those moments when true hope arises.

"How long have we been saying as institutes that we are in the night? Like 20 years!" she said to laughter. "It's the longest night ever!"

That, too, is part of the story, Maya said.

"Charism is, above all, a narrative. Do we believe our charms still have narrative power?" she said. "What are our stories? What are our narratives that still have that soul in them and how do we put them forth to a world that desperately needs them?"

She later told Global Sisters Report the narrative of religious life seems to focus on the past and a distorted view of the present.

"I think the challenge for U.S. religious is that they keep comparing themselves to themselves 40 years ago," Maya said, looking only at the much smaller number of sisters compared to its peak in the 1960s. "But all around the world, [congregations] are so much smaller than here," despite the perception that sisters are disappearing.

Though the three-day event focused inward on religious life, the outside world was inescapable: The majority of attendees were disappointed they couldn't attend the April 5 Hands Off rallies across the country, and many took group photos with rally signs to show their solidarity. But many sisters could not be in any of those photos for fear of immigration reprisals.

"Just when 'diversity' has become a bad word, we are called to be truly catholic," Maya said.

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Facilitator Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, superior of the Springfield Dominicans and a former LCWR president, told Global Sisters Report she hopes the Region 7 leaders will bring the assembly to other regions as a model.

"LCWR has been so wonderful for bringing leaders together, but here we have other members. It's a pilot project, but it's the way to go," Gemma said. "The influence of one congregation with another — not on, but with — is so powerful."

Tomaszewski told attendees April 4 the idea for the regional assembly came up in October 2019, only to be delayed for years by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"But COVID taught us a lot of things, not the least of which is the interconnectedness, the interdependence of all creation," she said. "Truly, something that started in one corner of the world changed everyone's lives on this planet forever."