

Retirement Fund for Religious

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News

Goodbye Status Quo, Hello Future

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Preparing for tomorrow often means letting go of yesterday's ways of thinking and working. The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, understand this reality and are embracing change as a vital component of planning for the future.

The sisters serve in the United States, Mexico, Peru, and several other countries. The congregation sponsors 24 ministries, including 9 in the United States. It is also one of three religious institutes that sponsor CHRISTUS Health System, a network of more than 600 health-care centers in the US, Mexico, Columbia, and Chile. For years, the sisters focused on these ministries while putting their own needs on the back burner. By 2016, the community was significantly underfunded for retirement, with savings forecast to be depleted by 2027.

To address this deficit, the sisters participated in the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) Planning and Implementation Assistance program. The process helped the community to recognize the need for change and to adopt ways of operating and thinking that promote ongoing viability. Since entering Planning and Implementation Assistance, the community has reduced its unfunded liability by 50 percent.

Congregational leader Sister Teresa Maya talks about the process, the community's progress, and the unexpected blessings along the way.

The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, participated in the NRRO's Planning and Implementation Assistance process. Planning team members oversaw and coordinated the community's efforts. *Back row, from left:* Sisters Margaret Bonnot, Teresa Maya, and Margaret Snyder. *Front row, from left:* Sisters Leticia Rodriguez and Martha Laura Gaona.



Goodbye Status Quo, Hello Future, continued

NRRO: What prompted you to enter the NRRO Planning and Implementation Assistance program?

Sister Teresa Maya:

Simply put, we needed to reduce costs and increase income. Our aim was to create a plan that could accommodate our changing realities, enhance the economic viability of our religious institute, and enable us to continue providing services to our elder sisters in a cost-efficient and life-giving manner.



Sister Teresa Maya, Leader

Where did you begin?

The first step was getting our leadership team to agree we needed to make this [retirement funding] situation a priority. Having the whole team on board was critical. Together, we identified that we needed to create the right financial structure in order to plan for the future. Without accurate numbers, you can't do any planning or create projections. We started with a comprehensive review of the finance office and analyzed workflow, job responsibilities, and outdated processes.

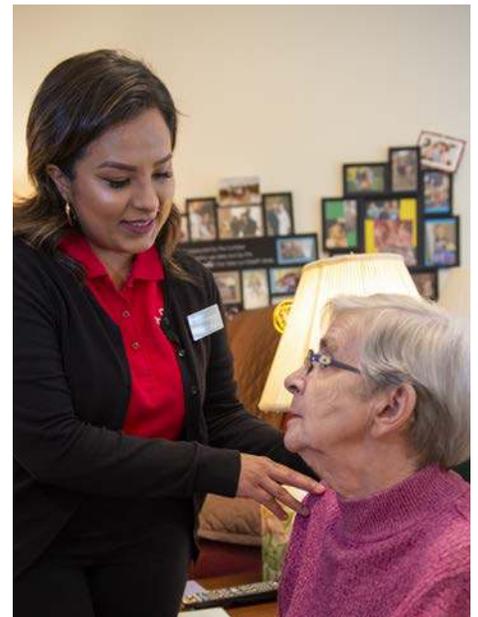


Lay staff bring their expertise to the restructured finance office. Claudia Montes Córdova, Chief Financial Officer, holds a Master of Business Administration from the University of the Incarnate Word, which was founded by the sisters.

It seemed like a simple, technical thing, but it required a change of culture. We had to move away from the idea of “doing things the way we’ve always done them” and identify all the places where we needed greater efficiencies. It was a major overhaul, but we now have a finance system that works for our current realities. It was the most important thing we did!

Has your approach to care changed?

In the mid-1980s, we established a retirement trust fund and transformed our congregational motherhouse into a continuing care facility: The Village at Incarnate Word. Through this sponsored ministry, we provide a continuum of care to an average of 65–70 sisters and to more than 200 lay residents. Although this approach worked for some time, we needed an updated model for eldercare delivery.



Frequent communication with senior sisters enables wellness team members to identify health concerns and offer preventative care. *From left:* Leila Cook, RN, and Sister Ann Geever.

Project Summary

The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, entered the NRRO Planning and Implementation Assistance process in September 2016. Between 2016 and 2018, the congregation received three Planning Assistance awards totaling

almost \$270,000. This funding, combined with consultative support, enabled the community to review and restructure its finance office, care management, development program, and ministry leadership and governance.

A 2019 Implementation Assistance award is underwriting efforts to enroll eligible members in government-assistance programs, especially Medicaid and Supplemental Social Security Income. Work continues on strategic property planning.

Goodbye Status Quo, Hello Future, continued

An eldercare consultation allowed us to assess care levels to ensure each sister was receiving the appropriate types of support. Some adjustments were required, resulting in more cost-effective care. We also reviewed the accommodations of senior sisters living in local houses,

and we invested in safety modifications, such as accessible showers, so they can remain independent longer.

And we made a commitment to wellness. We hired competent lay staff and designated two sisters as health-care liaisons. Together, this team allows our community to manage care more effectively. They also help the leadership team anticipate health needs so we can plan for senior sisters' care instead of always reacting.

Preventative care translates into savings. If we can keep one sister independent, then that covers the cost of a wellness team member for the year.



Sisters residing in independent living at The Village at Incarnate Word enjoy time together in a community room. *From left:* Sisters Eileen Friel, Josetta Eveler, and Bernadette Forck.



Recognizing that preventative care is better for senior members and better for the bottom line, the community established a wellness team made up of lay staff and two congregational liaisons. *Back row, from left:* Wellness team members Dora Tapia, Alice Perez, Michelle Denyer, Leila Cook, and Tomasa Sánchez. *Front row, from left:* Congregational liaisons Sisters Margo Kelly and Mary Pezold.

Goodbye Status Quo, Hello Future, continued

How is it possible to increase income when 85 percent of your US sisters have retired from active ministry?

Before looking at income, we needed to reduce expenses and create greater efficiencies. We began by reviewing operational expenses with our finance office and by understanding how to better manage eldercare. Both strategies have enabled us to reduce costs and thus increase the funds available for retirement.

A grant from the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving allowed us to audit and restructure our development efforts. Among other steps, we added a major gifts officer and a grant writer. Communications and development are combined in one office, which allows us to ensure consistent messaging across all our constituencies. We

are blessed to have two senior sisters who minister in the department. They offer a spirit and wisdom that help us connect better with donors.

Sisters are not great at asking for money [for themselves]. We had to educate our sisters to move through the “shame” and help them understand we are simply sharing our journey with supporters. These people want to help. They love our sisters. They want to say thank you. I read it in their letters, or they tell me in person. And we are making progress. Like our finance office, we are setting up systems. We are starting to build partnerships. Once we got past our hesitation, it’s been a mind-blowing experience of grace!

A development audit enabled the community to evaluate and expand fund-raising efforts, including adding new staff. Now development and communications personnel collaborate to raise awareness of and support for the community’s mission.



From left: Sister Corine Walsh, Assistant Director of Development, and Martha Quiroga, International Director of Development and Communications.



Keith Hitt, Major Gifts Officer



Vanessa Crispin Herrera,
Communications Coordinator

Goodbye Status Quo, Hello Future, continued

Are there other ongoing efforts to increase funding?

We are in the process of applying for government assistance and managing health-care benefits. Conservative estimates forecast that we will gain an average of \$356,000 annually for our retirement funding. Other projections double this amount.

As with development, we found that understanding government benefits is another area that requires education and pastoral care. We need to demystify the process and make it clear to our sisters that benefits paid to them do not take away from others, especially from those who are poor and vulnerable. The myths about government benefits have lingered for a long time.

Have your retirement planning efforts impacted your relationships with your sponsored ministries?

In the US, all our sponsored ministries are separately incorporated. As part of our planning, we have put in place structures to manage the congregation's relationships with them. The Village at Incarnate Word is the only US ministry for which we still own the land and buildings. Because it is our former motherhouse, it has value beyond being an asset. Nevertheless, property assessment and planning are still underway.



What have been your biggest hurdles? What challenges remain?

Perhaps our biggest hurdle was letting go of the status quo and recognizing that we could not continue to operate in "the way things have always been done." Accepting this reality is an ongoing process.

We're in the middle of property planning, and it is filled with emotional landmines. We may need to make some hard decisions. Property evaluation and assessment are helping determine the life span of buildings, maintenance costs, and space utilization. The findings provide a foundation for decision-making. We are creating a process to discern strategic directions as a community, especially if we need to pursue new partnerships or divest of some properties. How do we move forward? By rightsizing and reimagining how to best use all our space.



AÑOS **150** YEARS

SISTERS OF CHARITY OF THE INCARNATE WORD HERMANAS DE LA CARIDAD DE VERBO ENCARNADO
SAN ANTONIO

Founded in 1869, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word recently marked their 150th anniversary. During the celebration of their jubilee year, the sisters not only gave thanks for past blessings but spent time discerning the community's direction for the future. *From left:* Sisters Eleanor Geever, Margaret Mannion, Ann Geever, and Margo Kelly.

Goodbye Status Quo, Hello Future, continued

What have you learned?

Two major lessons are that change requires the right organizational structure and a culture open to change. To even begin the planning process, we needed leadership totally onboard. Then we had to restructure our finance office, develop financial controls, and set up new systems to track income and expenses. The backbone organizational pieces are crucial to the process. Without them, any change would have been cosmetic. We needed a different system to be able to think differently!

Most importantly, we learned that no congregation needs to do this alone. The NRRO support was incredible—the staff, the resources offered. Our two NRRO consultants, Linda Birochik and [Humility of Mary] Sister Carolyn Marshall accompanied us and kept us focused. Even the friendships and networking with other congregations in similar processes have been invaluable.

What is coming is difficult. We should not and cannot face it alone. We must accompany one another. We need to be at peace and trust that God is doing something new. And we have to learn that living and dying are part of life. God embraces all of it—and all of us!

Editor's Note

The interview with Sister Teresa Maya was conducted several weeks before the Covid-19 crisis began impacting US religious institutes. Recently, the NRRO followed up with her to ask how the pandemic has shifted the community's planning for future care.

Sister Teresa Maya: Our first steps were to ensure the safety of members and residents at The Village at Incarnate Word and to provide staff with necessary support. Now the leadership team and the congregation's ministries board are beginning to consider the long-term adjustments to planning that will be required post Covid-19. Despite uncertainty on the horizon and the hard work that lies ahead, we remain hopeful.

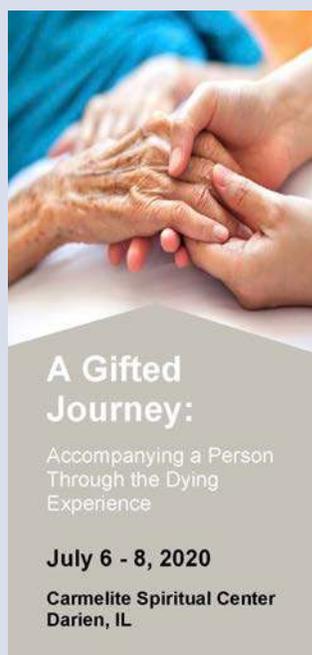
Planning Help for Today

The NRRO's Management and Continuing Education Assistance (M/CE) program offers eligible communities immediate support for retirement planning and education. Distributions of up to \$5,000 per calendar year can be used to underwrite various purposes, including financial software and training, eldercare consultations, and workshop or conference attendance. The Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, highlighted in the feature, utilized M/CE to supplement their planning efforts. Among other areas, awards underwrote demographic and financial projections, on-site facilitators to educate members on retirement planning, and analysis of the community's eligibility for government benefits.

Applications are due by November 30 each year. To learn more, visit usccb.org/nrro or contact Karen Cañas, kcanas@usccb.org.



July Workshop Canceled



The NRRO regrets to announce the cancellation of our workshop, *A Gifted Journey: Accompanying a Person Through the Dying Experience*, which was originally scheduled for July 6-8 at the Carmelite Spiritual Center in Darien, Illinois. Social distancing concerns and the uncertainties of summer travel prompted our decision. Our priority remains the health and safety of those we serve and our staff.

Message from the Executive Director

In our feature, Sister Teresa Maya addresses the importance of embracing change. When we interviewed her in early February, there was no way we could have envisioned the radical, overwhelming changes that would be taking place in our nation and world by the time this feature was published. Covid-19 has shaken us to our core, and we have all had to relinquish the status quo.

Most religious institutes have been forced to make painful operational changes to ensure the safety and well-being of their members, staff, and volunteers. Motherhouses, retreat centers, and treasured ministries are closed to the public. Even prayer and worship are altered.

Looking around us, we ache for the sorrows we see on television or read in the news. We worry not just for ourselves and our institutes but also for our communities at large and, most especially, for the poor and vulnerable. And we wonder when—or if—life will return to “normal.”

Yet, it is normal for religious institutes to respond to the times. Our congregational histories often include stories of founders and later generations reassessing mission and ministry given the needs of both those around them and the congregation. Our vows as religious call us daily to conversion—to a surrender of our own will and a growing reliance on the will and love of God.

In these uncertain days of the pandemic, the priority for religious institutes has necessarily been assuring health and safety. For now, retirement planning initiatives have (temporarily) taken a back seat, and that’s okay. Because, like the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word highlighted in our feature, religious institutes across the country are already thinking about how to respond to the

times. They are considering ways to address the care and pastoral needs of elder members in the changing landscape brought about by Covid-19. They are also exploring new means to express charism and to serve their neighbors.

Soon enough, congregations will be looking at how to integrate these initiatives with their long-term retirement needs. When they do, we will be ready to assist. After all, the National Religious Retirement Office mission is to help religious institutes embrace their current realities and plan for the future. As such, we will continue to do our utmost to raise awareness of the retirement funding challenges facing hundreds of US religious institutes. We will distribute financial assistance for eligible retirement needs. We will work to create educational resources that help religious institutes stretch retirement dollars and enhance eldercare. And we will hold in love and prayer all those who partner with us. That’s our normal.

God bless,

Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM



Looking for the Calendar?

Due to Covid-19, dates for scheduled events and activities continue to evolve. As needed, updates will be communicated through NRRO electronic bulletins. If you have specific concerns, please contact us (*see back page*).



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Stay Connected

Please send changes in address, phone, email, or congregational leadership to the NRRO, c/o Karen Cañas (kcanas@usccb.org), so that we may keep our records and mailing lists updated.

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the United States to embrace their current retirement realities and to plan for the future.

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