



Wisconsin Religious Collaborative

The Wisconsin Religious Collaborative (WRC) forges ahead on an unknown but powerful journey, bringing together women religious from multiple charisms and locations. As times change and the future becomes more uncertain, the women who have led development of a new land, cultural changes, health crises, and countless other societal developments throughout history are coming together again to lead through the evolution of religious institutes in the United States and the world.

No one knows the perfect formula for navigating through the changes to come, and surely there is more than one path. But a group of women religious in Wisconsin and Northern Illinois (see Table 1) came together and decided to build something new. These women realized the power of supporting each other, sharing resources, and collaborating on solutions to problems not even yet known. The leaders of these nine religious institutes came together without a certain plan but with a certain vision. In 2020, the Board of Directors for the Collaborative confirmed the following Mission and Vision Statements, defining the work to be done:

Mission Statement: The Wisconsin Religious Collaborative exists to provide a sustainable membership organization that promotes good stewardship by sharing resources and professional expertise in finance, management, pastoral care, governance, and other areas in order to sustain mission and meet the needs of individual religious institutes and their members.

Vision Statement: It is our hope that developing a structure to foster collaboration in internal governance and management functions will allow leaders and members to give their energy, time, and attention to mission.

In 2020, the Collaborative is focused on developing programs and services in response to the identified needs of the member communities. The areas of focus for development are shown in Table 2. To guide the development of these programs and services, seven Advisory Committees were formed. These committees consist of women religious as well as lay partners and include local WRC community members and national experts. The volunteers that serve on these committees provide expertise and valuable contacts for WRC to leverage.

The Collaborative has established five goals related to the development of these programs and services and continuous exploration of potential futures for women religious institutes. The five goals are shown in Table 3. The Collaborative must remain flexible within the overarching strategic plan to ensure goals are met and members see real benefit in a timely manner. In addition, nonmember subscription models will be identified to enable the greatest collaboration and participation. The WRC continues to meet with nonmember communities within the region and nationally to collaborate and share learnings to date.

While work is under way to achieve these goals, it is important to reflect on how the Collaborative came together. As Pat Cormack SCSC, president of the WRC, shared in the Leadership Conference for Women Religious' (LCWR's) *Winter 2020 Occasional Papers*, "I found myself thinking about what would happen if



the communities from my LCWR region (Wisconsin) would band together to create something new. I mentioned to region members my idea that some type of cooperative might help to provide internal management functions if we could just figure out how to structure it.”

“I realized that to move forward we had to dream together. I invited those who had interest to come to a meeting in October 2015. As a result, five leaders volunteered to form a group to research the possibilities. We were able to get grant funding and spent two years developing the Wisconsin Religious Collaborative.”

The Collaborative was officially incorporated in 2018, and a lay executive director was hired in January 2019. A thorough needs-assessment was conducted in the first half of 2019 to confirm and elaborate on the areas identified for attention through the initial research. The executive director met with the leadership teams of each member community and conducted a guided discussion. In the second half of 2019, the results of those discussions were affinitized into topic areas and program ideas were developed to address them. The Board of Directors confirmed the program areas and agreed on prioritization of the work to be done. With the strategic plan and program development roadmap in place, the Advisory Committees were formed, and development work has begun.

An initial challenge has been access to women religious who have the capacity and time to advise on program development amidst their primary work and ministries. The executive director has committed to minimizing the demand as much as possible, by increasing efficiencies and limiting the Advisory Committee work.

Another challenge is the broad spectrum of needs among member institutes. For example, some of the members have robust social justice programs and don't see a need for a collaborative program. Other members don't have the resources to dedicate to social justice management and would like support. When this occurs, the executive director and the Board of Directors consult on how to address and whether the program should remain a priority. In addition, new opportunities continue to arise through the information sharing and outreach, specifically regarding programs for development and ways to approach or solve the identified member needs.

The Collaborative is unearthing the many similarities and differences across member institutes. While some needs and attributes are universal, some are quite disparate. This broad spectrum requires rigorous communication and a clear process for managing priorities. Further, because of the many differences in structure and governance, many institutes cannot participate via membership but still want to collaborate. Therefore, the WRC must consider subscription models for programs that can be stronger with additional institutes participating outside of full membership.

The development process also is highlighting the question of how many member institutes the Collaborative can effectively serve and what geographic spread is workable for the types of services desired. This is another consideration in developing some type of subscription model. The Collaborative is receiving inquiries from congregations with limited financial resources and will need to consider how and whether we might provide services without jeopardizing the viability of the organization. It is a challenge to balance the desire to help everyone with the judgment of what is feasible.



The Collaborative will continue working toward solutions on these issues, as well as considering the larger issues around governance models. The Governance Advisory Committee is serving as a think tank, discussing options and considering new paths forward while seeking continued awareness of emerging models. WRC welcomes collaboration and sharing with other organizations and individuals who are developing models and programs of their own. Please visit the WRC website at www.WRCollaborative.org or contact the executive director, Lyn Korte, at Lyn@WRCollaborative.org.

Table 1.
NINE FOUNDING MEMBER INSTITUTES OF WISCONSIN RELIGIOUS COLLABORATIVE
Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes, Fond du Lac, WI
Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, LA Crosse, WI
Sinsinawa Dominicans, Sinsinawa, WI
Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross, Green Bay, WI
Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, Milwaukee, WI
Servants of Mary, Ladysmith, WI
Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, Merrill, WI
Sisters of the Divine Savior, Milwaukee, WI
Sisters of the Living Word, Arlington Heights, IL



Table 2.

PROGRAMS IN DEVELOPMENT
Resource Library Online
Staffing and Management Program
Assessment Package
Pastoral Care Program
Health Agency Collective
Ongoing Formation
Social Justice
Archives Practices
Governance
Health Care and Aging Housing
Fleet Collective
Initial Formation Collaboration
Archives Partnership
Mental Health Resources
IT Services



Table 3.

GOALS FOR THE WISCONSIN RELIGIOUS COLLABORATIVE

Establish and implement two to three service programs or projects able to provide management assistance in requested (by the member institutes) areas of need.

Recruit and incorporate at least one to two additional member units.

Share information and presentations about the Wisconsin Religious Collaborative with other regions of LCWR and RCRI.

Seek additional grant funding in support of the Collaborative.

Explore whether canonical status as a public juridic person would enhance the services available to member institutes.