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# Ministries of Catholic Sisters in the Diocese of Cleveland: Assessing Capacity and Opportunity in a Period of Transition\*

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## Abstract

Catholic sisters have long played a vital role in addressing the needs of the poor, neglected, and vulnerable members of society. In northeast Ohio, sisters have been instrumental in the arenas of education, healthcare, social service, and advocacy. This research builds on research conducted in 2009 on the characteristics of the ministries of Catholic sisters. Using a survey approach, responses were collected from 358 Catholic Sisters in 12 religious orders, approximately 60 percent of the sisters living in the Diocese of Cleveland. The study explores sisters' current ministries (work and service), the plans for their ministries to continue, and their perspectives on the future of ministry. The research highlights several avenues for strengthening the transition of ministry activities as the number of retired sisters continues to increase.

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Catholic sisters have played a significant role in North American society since 1727, and over time, these sisters have tackled a vast array of service and ministry work, especially filling an important gap in the social safety net for vulnerable populations (McNamara 1998; Small et al. 2014). The overall population of religious sisters, however, has dramatically declined from 181,421 in 1965 to 49,833 in 2014, a 72 percent decline in the last fifty years (Berrelleza, Gautier, and Gray 2014). Aging of members is one of the challenges faced by sisters and other religious vocations. According to Cummings (2015), only 9 percent of sisters are younger than sixty, and more than two thirds of vowed religious men and women are older than sixty-five (Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier 2014). Due to the natural aging and a decline in the overall number of women taking religious vows, the future of the Catholic sisters' ministries in communities of need is concerning (Cummings 2015).

The lives and work of Catholic sisters in the United States have received marked research attention over time, including many book-length examinations (Fialka 2004; Kauffman 1995; Koehlinger 2007; Lewis and Appleby 2004; McCauley 2005; McNamara 1998; Munley 2002; Taylor 2007). These assessments, however, are often specific in terms of geographic location or a particular area of ministry (e.g., health care, education) (Small and Csank 2009; Small et al. 2007). In addition to the various roles that sisters adopt in their lives, researchers often focus on evaluating the strength of the sisters' beliefs (Briody and Sullivan 1988; Juteau and Laurin 1986; Petersen and Takayama 1983; Wallace 1991; Wittberg 1989). In a major review of the knowledge base about the work of sisters, Cummings (2015) concluded that "there has not been much contemporary research on sisters' ministries" (p. 28). There has been little systematic collection of data on the current nature and scope of these ministries, making planning for the future quite challenging.

Some literature speaks to the attributes of sisters' ministries in regard to functional properties as well as the underlying charism. Charism is described as "the 'active ingredient,' 'propelling energy,' and 'spiritual DNA'" and "the thread that links sisters to one another and to the people they serve" (Fischer and Murphy, 2013: 4). The existing literature has pointed out that Catholic sisters often work multiple ministries, and the majority of them work nearly full-time in their ministry efforts to serve vulnerable populations (Fischer and Bartholomew 2012). In terms of sustainability, however, the literature points out a lack of a systematic plan regarding how to sustain ministry services in the face of an aging Catholic sister population (Csank 2002; Small et al. 2014). This study aims to address the gaps in knowledge by documenting the ministries of Catholic sisters from their perspective, including their assessments of how their ministries can be strengthened and sustained going forward.

### *RESEARCH CONTEXT*

In 2009, the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland announced the closing of some fifty parishes primarily in neighborhoods of significant material poverty where many sisters had ministries in place. A survey of Catholic sisters in active ministry was conducted to examine the deployment of sisters' resources and inform their planning process (Fischer and Bartholomew 2012). The present survey, conducted eight years later, explores the ministries and perspectives of sisters as many of them transition or approach a transition from full-time ministry. The two surveys draw from slightly different groups: non-retired sisters in Greater Cleveland (2009) and non-retired and retired sisters throughout the Diocese of Cleveland (2017). Together, they inform strategies for sisters and their lay partners to sustain these ministries and their impact on behalf of people in need.

The primary objectives of this research were (a) to document the current work of sisters in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland and (b) to solicit their perspectives on how to strengthen and sustain ministry into the future. The focus of this survey was expanded beyond that of the 2009 survey to include retired sisters and geographically to encompass the entire Diocese of Cleveland. This broader population allows examination of the full expanse of sisters' work in this regional community.

### *METHODOLOGY*

This study involves a survey of sisters living or serving in the Diocese of Cleveland. The Diocese comprises eight counties of northeastern Ohio with 185 parishes serving nearly 700,000 Catholics. The survey instrument combined a series of closed-ended and open-ended items and was adapted in part from the survey used in 2009. To facilitate participation of sisters from multiple orders, the study obtained an endorsement from the Conference of Religious Leadership (CORL), a collaborative organization with representatives of the leadership of most of the orders in the Diocese. The Case Western Reserve University Institutional Review Board approved the study to proceed in August 2016.

Orders represented by CORL include approximately 719 sisters residing in the eight counties of the Diocese of Cleveland. CORL identified 120 sisters who were infirm who were excluded from the survey. Surveys were distributed via hardcopy and electronic URL to sisters via their congregational leaders. In total, 358 usable surveys were returned, an estimated 60 percent of the respondent population. Orders generally had comparable response rates, with only two orders having a response rate below 50 percent.

The survey respondents are members of twelve religious orders with sisters living in the Diocese of Cleveland. Over half of the respondents were either

Ursuline Sisters or Sisters of Notre Dame, reflecting the prevalence of these orders in the region (see Table 1). It should be noted that several orders have many more sisters serving outside the Diocese, but only sisters who were within the region were included in the survey population.

**Table 1: Sisters' Religious Orders**

<b>Order of Sisters</b>	<b>Est Survey Population</b>	<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Sisters of Notre Dame (SND)	229	115	50.2%
Ursuline Sisters (OSU)	130	83	63.8%
Congregation of Saint Joseph (CSJ)	55	49	89.0%
Humility of Mary (HM)	44	25	56.8%
Dominican Sisters of Peace (OP)	36	23	63.9%
Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine (CSA)	27	21	77.8%
Sisters of the Incarnate Word (SIW)	20	20	100%
Sisters of St. Joseph - Third Order of St. Francis (SSJ-TOSF)	40	12	30.0%
Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth (CSFN)	6	4	66.7%
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati (SC)	10	4	40.0%
Other Orders of Sisters*	2	2	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>599</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>59.8%</b>

\*Other Orders include Sisters of the Living Word and Sisters of the Precious Blood. These orders and several orders identified above have sisters serving in other dioceses.

#### *Non-retired and Retired Sisters*

As a matter of administrative record, sisters are classified by their orders as either retired or non-retired. Within the survey, sisters were asked to respond yes or no to the question, "Are you retired?" Just under half of respondents identified as retired (49 percent). The percentage of retired sisters has increased from 2009, when Diocesan data showed that 37 percent of sisters were retired (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 5). It should be noted that the 2016 survey excluded 120 infirm sisters, the majority of whom would also be expected to be retired. Some orders have almost as many or more retired sisters as non-retired sisters represented in the survey (three with 40–50 percent and five with 50 percent or more). Overall, this finding affirms that religious orders have a decreased number of sisters who are formally working in the community in the Diocese of Cleveland. Despite their

retired status, however, many of these sisters are actively engaged in volunteering and informal ministry.

### *Age of Sisters*

The survey respondents have a median age of seventy-five years (see Table 2). Among respondents, only twenty-one sisters (6 percent) are under the federal retirement age (less than sixty-five years old). An additional fifty sisters (14 percent) are below seventy, which is the expected retirement age for sisters according to National Religious Retirement Office. The majority of respondents (54 percent) are between the ages of seventy and eighty, and 25 percent are over age eighty. Many of the sisters remain active beyond the age of retirement. Retired sisters are on average nearly eight years older than non-retired sisters (79.4 vs. 71.7 years).

**Table 2: Sisters' Ages**

<b>Age range</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>&lt; 64 years old</b>	21	5.9%
<b>65–69 years old</b>	50	14.0%
<b>70–75 years old</b>	114	31.8%
<b>76–80 years old</b>	78	21.8%
<b>81–86 years old</b>	56	15.6%
<b>&gt; 86 years old</b>	34	9.5%
<b>Not reported</b>	5	1.4%
<b>Total</b>	358	

### *Experience, Education, and Presence in Community*

Most sisters have served in their current ministry assignment for over a decade. The sisters have lengthy ministry careers, on average over fifty years based on their age of first vows. Nearly 80 percent of respondents hold a graduate degree of some type, reflecting an extremely well-educated group of professionally-trained women. In regard to their highest education level, 71 percent hold a master's degree, and 7 percent hold a doctoral degree, with 10 percent holding a bachelor's degree. Nearly 16 percent reported certification in pastoral ministry, and 8 percent hold licenses in either nursing or social work.

In 2009, sisters identified their physical presence in the neighborhoods as very important to their service, with 60 percent residing close to their ministry (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 7). In this survey, 39 percent report living with other sisters in community settings, and 16 percent report living alone in the community,

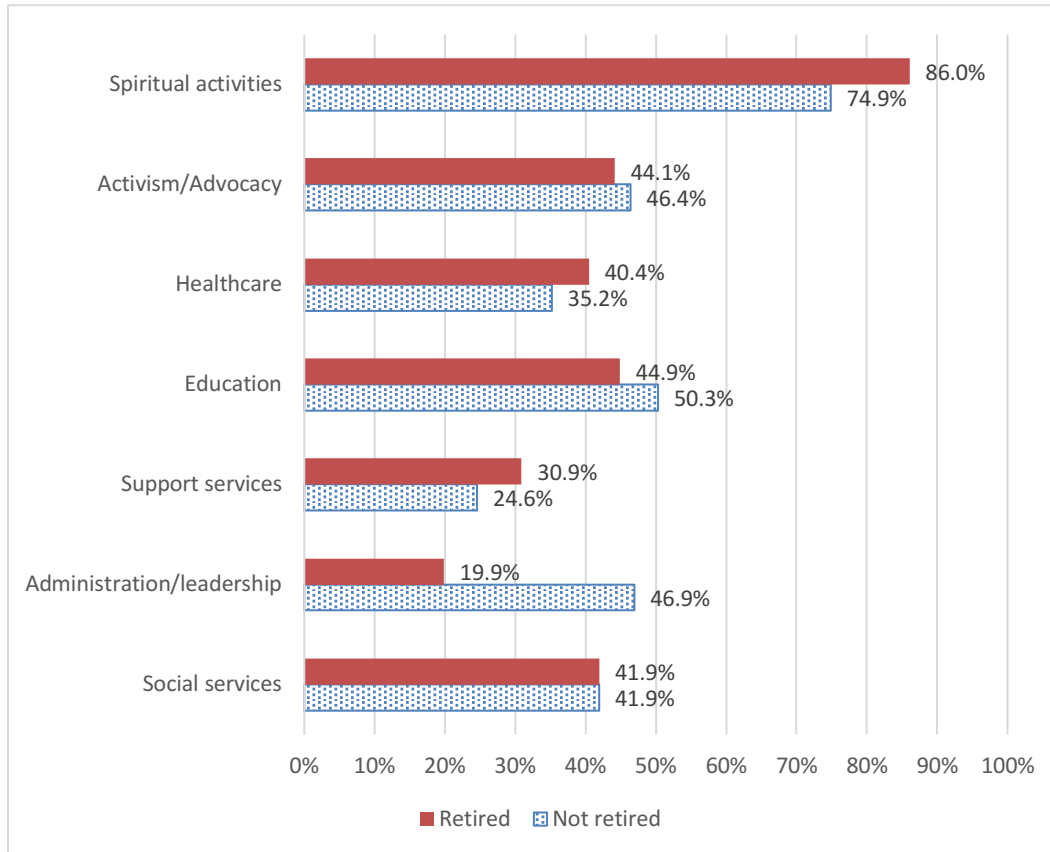
while 42 percent live at the motherhouse. This finding suggests a continued commitment of sisters to live near the people they serve. The largest concentration of sisters (35 percent) reside in Cuyahoga County, with 14 percent in Geauga, 12 percent in Summit, 10 percent in Lorain, and 10 percent in Lake. Smaller numbers of sisters were in Medina, Ashland, Wayne, and other counties. Motherhouses or regional ministry centers operated by orders are located in Cuyahoga (5), Summit (2), Geauga (1), and outside the Diocese (4).

### *MINISTRIES OF CATHOLIC SISTERS*

Both non-retired and retired sisters report being currently engaged in ministries across seven domains of service: social services, administration/leadership, support services, education, healthcare, activism/advocacy, and spiritual activities (see Figure 1). The seven domains comprised a total of thirty-one distinct ministry activity choices (e.g., prayer/intercession, adult education, senior care). The social services domain included activities such as parent education, counseling, and providing food assistance. The administrative/leadership services domain included activities such as congregational leadership, diocesan leadership, and non-church administration. The support services domain included activities such as bookkeeping and secretarial support. The education services domain included activities such as preschool, high school, and university teaching as well as adult education. The healthcare services domain included activities such as working in hospice, nursing, and senior care. The activism domain included activities such as advocacy and lobbying activities on such issues as the environment and social justice. The spirituality domain included activities such as prayer and intercession, outreach, parish-based ministry, retreat, and spiritual direction.

Overall, 98 percent of non-retired and 77 percent of retired sisters reported being active in at least one of the seven domains. The percentages in Figure 1 are based on the numbers of sisters who identified at least one activity across the domains ( $N = 179$  non-retired sisters;  $N = 136$  retired sisters.) The activities did not distinguish between formal and informal roles, so sisters were at liberty to report all their engagements. In fact, sisters generally identified an average of four ministry activities with a range from one to nineteen. Non-retired sisters were involved in the same number of domains (three) as retired sisters on average but participated in more activities (five versus three). This pattern suggests that non-retired sisters may be more deeply involved in fewer focal ministry areas as compared to their retired colleagues.



**Figure 1: Sisters' Ministry Activities by Retirement Status**

### *Ministry Domains*

Proportionally, retired and non-retired sisters are active similarly in the domains of activism/advocacy and social services. Retired sisters are somewhat more active in the domains of healthcare (including care for the elderly), support services, and spiritual activities. Non-retired sisters are slightly more active in the education domain and more than twice as active in administration/leadership activities.

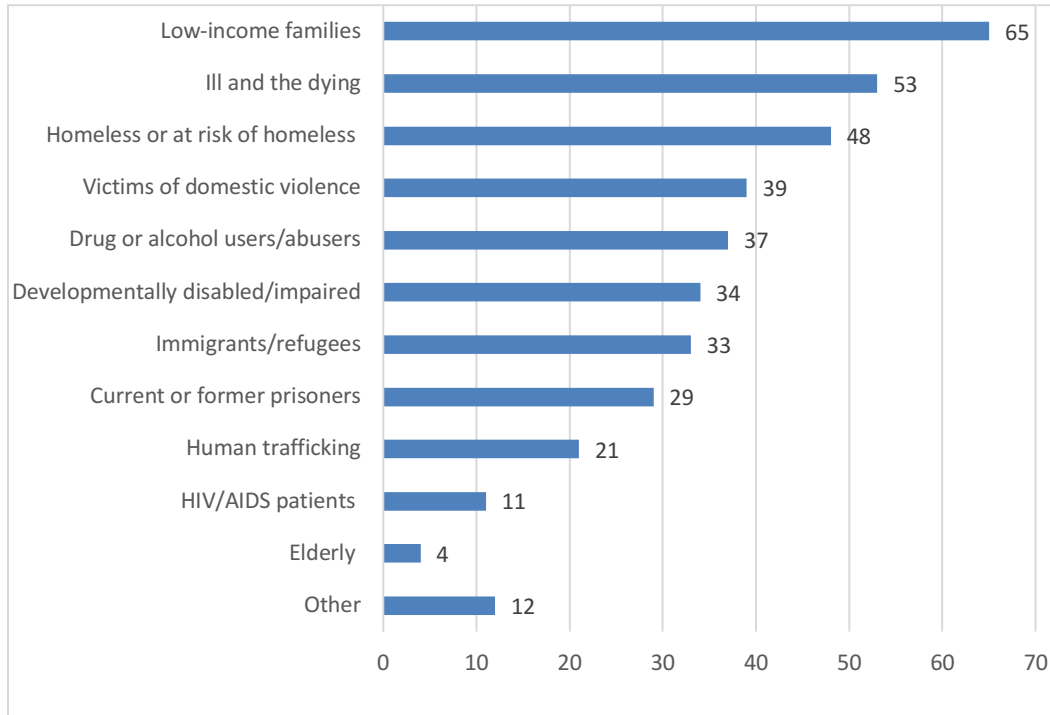
There are a few interesting differences in the patterns regarding non-retired sisters between 2009 and 2016. A higher percentage of non-retired sisters are engaged in leadership and administration as compared to 2009, 47 percent versus 20 percent (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 5). Also, many sisters now identify spiritual activities as their ministry (75 percent of non-retired), as compared with only 21 percent who identified spirituality, retreat, or religious education in 2009

(Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 8). Retired sisters are engaged in spiritual activities to an even greater degree compared to non-retired sisters, which suggests that as they retire they continue to look to the spiritual needs of the people around them.

### *SISTERS IN ACTIVE MINISTRY*

Sisters who were not retired ( $N = 182$ ) were asked to respond to additional questions about their primary ministry, its functioning, and the plans for the ministry's future. In regard to sisters' work ministry settings, 31 percent were serving at their congregation, 20 percent at a Catholic school, 15 percent at a Catholic parish, and 11 percent at a nonprofit. Other settings included health care facilities (6 percent), universities (3 percent), and the Diocese (1 percent). Other sisters (13 percent) reported a variety of ministry settings. There was a smaller percentage serving at a Catholic parish or school than in 2009 (35 percent as opposed to 44 percent) (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 2). While this change may reflect a growing role for lay people in these settings, sisters remain a noteworthy presence in many churches and schools in the Diocese of Cleveland.

Sisters reported actively serving many high-need populations in their work ministries, and most individual sisters identified more than one high-need population (see Figure 2). These populations include low-income families, the ill and dying, and people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness as the top three categories of clients. There are even more non-retired sisters serving low-income families than in 2009 (64 percent versus 44 percent) (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 10). As they leave their historic roles in schools and parishes, sisters who are still working in the community are more likely to serve low-income families as their primary target population. This focus presents an opportunity for sisters to continue to assist people living in poverty in formal and informal roles.

**Figure 2: Numbers of Sisters Serving Special Populations**

### *Plans for Retirement*

There continues to be an acceleration in the number of sisters planning to retire over the coming years. When asked how much longer they expect to work in their current ministry, 38 percent reported 1–3 years, and 34 percent reported 4–6 years. Smaller numbers of sisters reported an expectation to work more than seven years (13 percent) or less than one year (6 percent). While in 2009, 58 percent of active sisters planned to retire within six years, the current survey shows 78 percent report this intention (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 13).

The remaining 9 percent who did not specify the timing of their retirement reported a variety of factors that would dictate how long they continue to serve. There is no evidence that the compensation derived for their order was a leading driver in the sisters' plans regarding retirement. In respect to whether they would seek a new ministry in northeast Ohio if they were to leave their current ministry, 58 percent were positive about this occurring: 13 percent reported certainty, 32 percent said it was very likely, and 13 percent said it was somewhat likely. The

remaining 42 percent said this was very unlikely (19 percent), somewhat unlikely (12 percent), or unknown (12 percent).

### *Concern for the Future*

When asked if they were worried about the future of their work ministry, the sisters tended to be optimistic: 55 percent reported not being worried at all, another 41 percent reported being somewhat worried, and only 4 percent reported being very worried. They expressed more optimism than in 2009, when only 38 percent were not worried (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 12). It is possible that the earlier level of concern among sisters was linked to the parish consolidations and closures underway at that time. The current optimism aligns with the majority of sisters' beliefs that there is an organization committed to sustaining the ministry. Overall, 47 percent of sisters report their order is committed, 18 percent believe a nonprofit is committed, 13 percent believe the Diocese is committed, and 16 percent believe another organization is committed. These perceptions of commitment suggest that sustainability of ministries may be less of a concern presently for many sisters.

### *Potential for New Leaders in Ministry*

To probe the issue of lay persons taking over ministries, sisters were asked if they believe that someone who is not a sister could do their job. The clear majority (87 percent) responded that they thought a non-sister could do their job, but they did point out several potential issues in such a transition. These challenges include the increased costs likely associated with attracting and retaining such individuals, as well as the need to ensure adequate formation and commitment to the mission in these individuals. Sisters were asked about their position titles in their current job and reported a great variety of roles. What is clear from sisters' work titles is that many hold organizational positions of responsibility, leadership, and influence. An analysis of position titles showed that approximately 9 percent of sisters reported holding a senior executive position (e.g., president, CEO, executive director), and 39 percent reported a director or leadership team position (e.g., directors of retreat center, advancement, program coordinator). In addition, 23 percent reported a ministerial position title (e.g., pastoral minister, director of religious education, chaplain, music director), and 12 percent reported an educational job title (e.g., teacher, professor, librarian, archivist). The remaining 17 percent of sisters reported position titles related to caregiving or administrative support (e.g., office manager, receptionist, support worker). Though some position titles suggest that the function could readily be done by a lay person, many reflect a role that requires deeper spiritual training and commitment.

### *Joint Programming and Collaboration*

Most sisters reported being engaged in joint programming or collaboration with the laity (79 percent), outside organizations (59 percent) and other orders (45 percent). Individual collaborative partners include lay adults (73 percent), other sisters (51 percent), students (32 percent) and others (8 percent). Sisters reported the highest levels of positive feeling about collaboration with other orders (90 percent), the laity (97 percent), and youth (86 percent.) Sisters also reported an affinity for collaboration with secular nonprofits (74 percent), nonprofit Catholic faith-based organizations (73 percent), and funders (70 percent).

In both the 2009 survey and the current research, sisters' collaboration with sisters from other orders was reported to be 45 percent. This comparison does not reflect the depth or extent of the collaboration in ministries out in the community, which sisters highly value according to both the survey question and in open-ended responses. Collaboration with outside organizations showed the greatest improvement since 2009 (59 percent from 41 percent) (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 11).

The benefits of collaboration identified most frequently by sisters include the following responses: helps them serve clients better, accesses complementary skills/knowledge, and ensures the long-term sustainability of ministry. The least frequently cited benefits were access to new funding sources, in-kind donations, and recipient referrals.

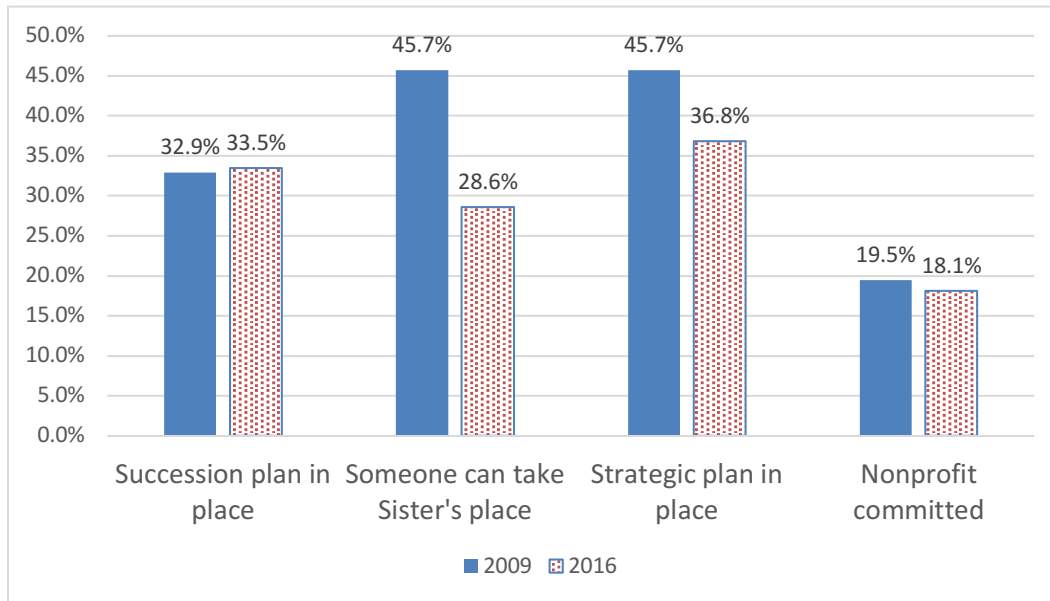
### *Ministry Sustainability*

Sisters were asked to report on indicators of ministry sustainability. Regarding the preceding twelve months, more than half reported that their ministry's programs had grown (53 percent), and 24 percent reported no change. A small number (7 percent) reported that their ministry's programs had been reduced in the past year, and 16 percent provided other answers. Over the same one-year period, only one-quarter of sisters reported that the ministry had received funding from new sources. Among the remainder, 40 percent reported no change in funding, and 34 percent reported no knowledge of the ministry's funding picture.

Sisters were asked to address aspects of leadership preparation and succession planning at their work ministry. Fewer than one-half (48 percent) reported that their ministry has leadership training in place. Approximately one-third reported having a succession plan in place, nearly identical to 2009 (Fischer and Bartholomew, 2012: 12). Only one-quarter, however, reported that there was someone to take the sister's place should she be absent from ministry, far less than the 46 percent reporting so in 2009. In addition, a smaller proportion reported having a strategic

plan for the ministry, while a similar proportion reported having a nonprofit in the community committed to sustaining the ministry (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Ministries with Succession/Strategic Plans**



### *SISTERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF MINISTRY*

Non-retired sisters were asked to provide their thoughts about how to strengthen and sustain the ministry of sisters for the future in northeast Ohio. Based on a review of their comments, several core themes emerged. Woven through the comments is an acceptance that the vision for the future must take into account the decline in the number of vowed religious. One sister (age seventy-four) said, "I think parish ministry at all levels will need to look different when there are no sisters available." Despite this sobering prospect, there is tremendous optimism and faith in the way forward, as reflected in this comment from a sister (age seventy): "I think this is an exciting time for ministry and collaborations."

#### *Promote Innovation in Collaboration between Congregations*

Overwhelmingly, sisters endorse the collaborative efforts and planning that has already been undertaken regionally and nationally. Sisters call attention to the

importance of initiatives of the Conference of Religious Leadership, such as *Women With Spirit...Now*, a collaboration formed to create communities of peace and hope in Cleveland. They also note *Blocks and Bridges*, a program of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, which pairs a sister with a lay partner to learn nonprofit skills and the attributes of ministry. They also point to examples of inter-congregational work, such as Regina Health Center, which offers residential nursing care to religious from multiple orders, and Collinwood Neighborhood Catholic Ministries, where sisters of different orders collaborate in a ministry of neighborhood presence. The sisters also call for accelerated efforts on this front. One sister (age seventy) put it simply, “Why don’t all the sisters who are left join together?”

Several other sisters commented on the promise of collaboration:

- “We are looking at possible union with five other religious congregations in our charism family which will broaden the support we will need for the future. To work with other religious congregations is very helpful in getting ideas and support for initiatives we may not be able to carry out alone.” Sister, Age Sixty-five
- “I do believe that we need more collaboration among Religious Communities within the Diocese of Cleveland. Pooling our resources and sharing our commitment to education, Church ministry, social works, etc. can really be an asset and a needed commitment for religious presence.” Sister, Age Seventy-one
- “I believe that we will continue to work together on projects and living arrangements as long as our leadership continues to engage in timely conversations and membership is supported and encouraged to stretch us out of our comfort zones. I would have a lot of energy around living with other communities in a traditional religious environment. This space for me would be a hub to connect us and encourage and motivate us to stay active.” Sister, Age Seventy-one

### *Engage Retired Sisters in New Ways*

With awareness that more sisters are retired or soon retiring, many believe that retired sisters could be more effectively engaged in ministry. They see this approach as valuable not just for the ministry where they could participate but also for the sisters to live out more fully their vows and passion for service. The envisioned approach would go beyond informal volunteering to offer a mechanism to keep retired sisters engaged.

Several other sisters commented on engaging retired sisters:

- “I would hope that we might have some way to captivate the interest and enthusiasm of the retired religious to capitalize on their (soon to be my)

experience and learning and remaining energy. This would require intense and positive motivation.” Sister, Age Seventy-eight

- “Sisters would like to minister as long as possible. Many times sisters cannot work endless and long hours. Helping sisters minister in less tasking ministries would be helpful.” Sister, Age Sixty-three
- “As I continue to be active in ministry, earning a part-time income for my community, I also very much look forward to the time when retirement will present opportunities for creative/unusual volunteer work.” Sister, Age Seventy-three

### *Engage Youth and Young Adults*

Sisters acknowledge the special value that young adults hold in carrying forward the charism of ministry and the life of the church. Though many sisters believe that their congregations are doing effective work in this arena, many also believe that young people must be engaged in a more concerted way.

A recent study on U.S. Catholic sisters agrees, citing the recommendation of researchers Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, Patricia Wittberg, SC, and Mary Gautier that orders “should create as many opportunities for intergenerational interaction as possible, both in group settings (social, service, or spiritual events) and in one-on-one encounters (mentoring, oral history projects, spiritual direction)” (Cummings, 2015: 22). The report highlights young adult engagement on charism more than ministry, but the sisters’ comments in the survey did not draw any distinction between the need to share both aspects of their experience:

- “I believe that religious communities need to expand ways for people to be part of us...as associates, people in private temporary vows, volunteers, partners in ministry.... Some may choose to be perpetual vowed members of the communities; others may morph into a new form of religious life. We cannot know the future, but we need to be green lights for whatever the Spirit is doing.” Sister, Age Seventy-seven
- “As much as we can nourish the spiritual life of twenty-one to thirty-five year-olds, let us work toward that in multiple ways.” Sister, Age Seventy-two
- “It is vital to provide leadership training for young adults to be mission leaders since there are fewer religious available for that role.” Sister, Age Sixty-five

### *Leverage the Capacity of the Laity*

Though young adults represent in many ways the future of ministry, sisters acknowledge the vital role that lay adults can and do play in the near term. They view this expanded role for lay individuals as both a mechanism to sustain the work and a path for Catholics to live out their baptismal calling.



Comments on the capacity of lay leaders include:

- “When I was growing up, it seems that nearly all the diocesan work was done by priests and nuns. I think that it’s a good thing that lay people are fulfilling their baptismal commitment now.” Sister, Age Seventy-eight
- “I see growing involvement of the laity to sustain our ministries. This will be a necessity, and I think the Church laity are perfectly capable of continuing the mission of the Church and the religious communities.” Sister, Age Seventy-four
- “We are running out of personnel! Lay people need to be trained to take our place as needed.” Sister, Age Eighty

### *A Sense of Urgency*

Sisters recognize the reality of the present circumstances facing their orders and express both anxiety and acceptance. They reflect on the challenge of accomplishing the work of ministry today as they simultaneously plan for the future, when their roles will necessarily be different. While there is a sense of loss threaded throughout their comments, there is also a profound gratitude for the life of ministry and belief that the Spirit will guide the way forward. Comments on the current challenge of ministry transition include:

- “So much is now beyond our control that we used to be able to count on. People working together can accomplish a lot more than seems obvious, despite challenges from dwindling finances and smaller number of personnel.” Sister, Age Sixty-eight
- “What holds me back from being involved in any collaborative work with other communities is the demands of my current ministry, as well as some health issues.” Sister, Age Seventy-two
- “Mostly I go about my ministry in the present, respectful of our history. I try not to be anxious about the future, because it’s in God’s hands, and in the hands of my colleagues who, I trust, share the mission in their way.” Sister, Age Sixty-six
- “I greatly fear that in the near future, the number of religious in northeast Ohio will be drastically reduced. We will certainly need to collaborate more with lay persons and with each other. Most of our energy will go into the care of our elder members. I do hope that dedicated lay persons will pick up our charism and mission.” Sister, Age Sixty-nine

### *CONCLUSION*

The role of sisters in Cleveland and across the U.S. continues to be in transition, as more reach or pass the age of retirement. In northeast Ohio, sisters see both the

opportunities and challenges in exploring and adopting new models for ministry as many sisters transition from working full-time in the broader community. This survey research documents the landscape for both sisters and their ministries now and over the next several years.

This work also highlights strategies which hold promise for sustaining the ministries and their model of service for the future. Sisters identified more collaboration among religious communities, the continued engagement of retired sisters in ministry, and the development of young adults and lay leaders as key strategies. Though lay people often work in similar domains as sisters, the charism of the sisters' religious communities strongly influences the ministries explored in this research. These strategies are intended to sustain that influence and its impact on the people they serve.

Given the age and retirement status of sisters, the time is ripe to leverage their skills, lived experience, and spiritual commitment in pushing forward with new strategies. A focus on facilitating both the role of sisters as seasoned leaders and the development of lay partners who share sisters' charismatic framework is called for as lay partners take on greater responsibilities at these ministries. The sheer decrease in the number of sisters alone does not define the continuing challenge. Rather, the translation of the potency of their charisms and sustaining the legacy of their ministries endures.

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