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Abstract

In many communities, women religious play a vital role in addressing the needs of the poor, neglected, and vulnerable members of society. Catholic Sisters have long been active in the areas of education, health care, outreach, and advocacy in northeast Ohio. In high-poverty urban areas such as Cleveland, women religious continue to provide essential services, support, and spiritual guidance. The experience in Cleveland is relevant to other cities where the population has shifted from an urban center to suburban areas, leaving inner-city churches with declining membership and support. Survey data collected from 164 Catholic Sisters from fifteen religious orders in Cleveland and the surrounding area illuminate the characteristics of Sisters' ministries and suggest ways in which proactive and collaborative efforts can enhance the provision of services now and in the future.

[†] This research was sponsored by the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, specifically through its Collaboration for Ministry Initiative (CMI). With research, communications, conferences, and grants, CMI engages in collaborative efforts that strengthen the ministries of Catholic women religious in northeast Ohio. The authors wish to thank all the Catholic Sisters who took part in this study. The authors also wish to thank Mary Ann Murphy, OSU, an Ursuline Sister of Cleveland, who provided vital research support to this study, and Lynn Berner and Kathy Csank, who provided helpful feedback.

Since the arrival of the first Catholic Sisters in the North America in 1727, these women religious have undertaken a dramatic breadth of service and ministry activities (McNamara 1998). Some 180,000 Sisters were in ministry in the United States by 1965, although four decades later, their numbers had fallen to approximately 57,000 (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2010).¹ The work and contributions of Catholic Sisters in the United States have been detailed in numerous book-length accounts (see, for example, Fialka 2004; Kauffman 1995; Koehlinger 2007; Lewis and Appleby 2004; McCauley 2005; McNamara 1998; Munley 2002; Taylor 2007). These presentations often describe the distinctive role of Sisters in particular geographic areas and/or in categories of ministry (e.g., health care, ecology). Other authors have examined the religiosity of Sisters as well as the various roles they have taken on in religious and other contexts (Briody and Sullivan 1988; Juteau and Laurin 1986; Petersen and Takayama 1983; Wallace 1991; Wittberg 1989). The present study seeks to extend the knowledge base by documenting the ministries of Catholic Sisters from their own perspective and making observations about the nature and strengths of these ministries.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Between 2006 and 2010, the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland engaged in a process of consolidating the number and distribution of parishes to reflect changing demographics in its eight-county region. The process ultimately resulted in a reduction in the total number of parishes by fifty (approximately one quarter); many of the parishes that were closed were in Cleveland's inner city. In urban neighborhoods where churches have been anchor institutions and providers of critical services, the loss of these parishes created a potentially serious gap in the provision of services that help to maintain the residents' well-being. In anticipation of the impact of this wave of parish closures and consolidations, many women religious began to consider how they could respond to the needs of the communities that would be affected. While they generally knew many of the other Sisters working in these areas, data were needed to get a collective sense of where Sisters currently worked, which ministries might be at risk, and where they should focus their attention.

As part of this work, we undertook two data collection strategies: We completed an inventory of the assignments and ministries of women religious to assess the geographic distribution of sisters, and we conducted a survey of almost 300 Catholic women religious in active ministry in the Cleveland region about the

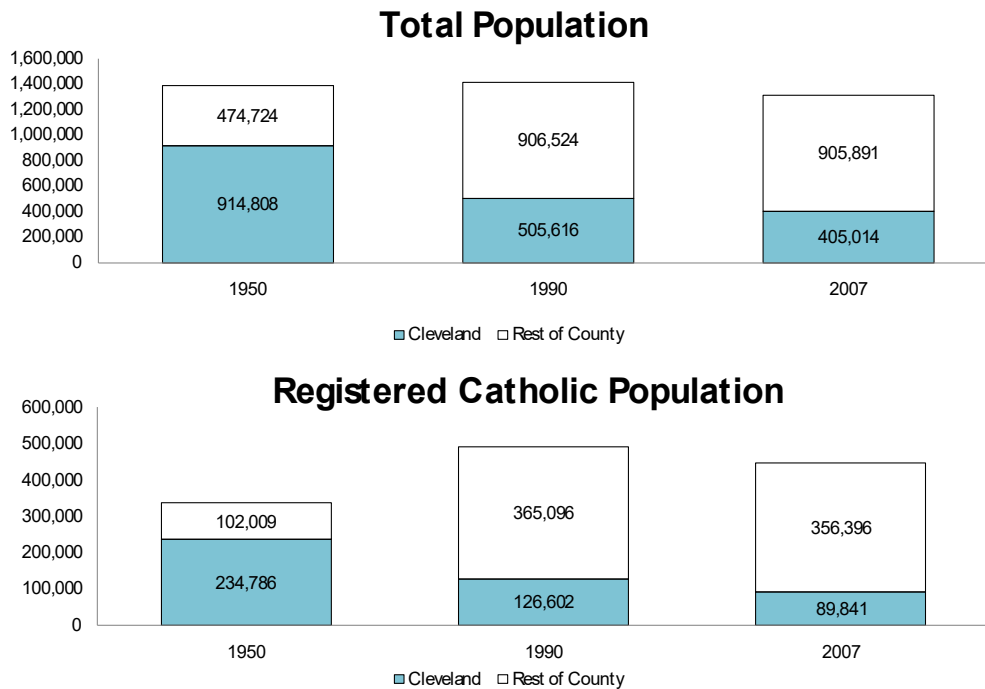
¹ The number of women religious has declined in many Western nations, as a result of changing societal structures and other forces (Ebaugh, Lorence, and Chafetz 1996).

nature of their work and the impact of the forthcoming parish closures. This work is relevant to women religious and others looking for effective responses to shifting community realities.

The major objectives of the research were to develop a baseline assessment of the work of women religious in the region; solicit perspectives from women religious themselves about their challenges, needs, and vision; assess the strengths and opportunities for collaboration; and compile data that would illuminate the unique approach and spirit of women religious as conveyed in these ministries.

The focus of the study in the Cleveland, Ohio, area highlights the economic and social realities of a region that has experienced decades of population loss and economic decline. In the latter half of the 20th century, poverty in Cleveland increased and spread out from the center city. As people migrated to the inner- and outer-ring suburbs, an increasing proportion of poor families was left in the center city. In recent years, poverty has also increased in inner-ring suburbs. The Cleveland metropolitan area continues to be one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States, and the segregation and sprawl particularly disadvantage African-American residents. Figure 1 shows that the shift in the Catholic population mirrors the trend in the total population over this period in that most now live outside the City of Cleveland.

Figure 1: Population Trends in Cuyahoga County



Driven by population and fiscal realities, in 2006, the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland initiated a process of parish clustering among its 224 parishes, in which groups of parishes collaboratively developed recommendations for the diocese. The diocese announced a plan in March 2009 whereby twenty-nine parishes would close and forty-one parishes would be involved in eighteen mergers. The result of this was fifty fewer parishes operating in the diocese by June 30, 2010.²

METHODOLOGY

We developed an inventory and conducted a survey of Sisters in ministry in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, the urban county that surrounds Cleveland. The survey combined a series of closed-ended and open-ended items and was adapted in part from a survey that was used in a key study conducted in South Carolina (Small and Csank 2009; Small et al. 2007). Given the multitude of religious orders that are active in the Cleveland region, a crucial step involved seeking and receiving an endorsement of the study from the Conference of Religious Leadership, a collaborative organization with representatives from the leadership of the majority of orders. The study was approved in August 2009 by the Case Western Reserve University Institutional Review Board.

To assess the impact of church closings and mergers, we sought for participation in the survey the Sisters who were currently in ministry in the community in Cuyahoga County. Although approximately 1,100 Catholic women religious resided in the eight counties of the Cleveland Diocese, some groups were not included in the survey effort. These groups were retired Sisters (397); administration, leadership, and support staff of the orders (141); and contemplative nuns (58). Among the remaining 514 Sisters, an estimated 70 percent, or 360, resided in Cuyahoga County (Diocese of Cleveland 2008).

Using congregational listings and public records and with the assistance of an Ursuline Sister of Cleveland, we compiled a listing of Sisters along with their ministry sites. Congregational leaders from each order reviewed the listings for accuracy. We distributed surveys in early September 2009 to approximately 288 Sisters, along with a stamped return envelope. In total, 164 usable surveys were returned (57 percent). It should be noted that in December 2008, the Vatican initiated an Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States, involving nearly 400 U.S. religious congregations and approximately 59,000 practicing Catholic Sisters. A survey of major superiors of congregations

² On March 14, 2012, the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland announced that the Vatican had issued a reversal of the closings of thirteen of these parishes on the grounds that the bishop had not followed church law or procedures in his handling of the closures.

was being done concurrently with our study, and this may have lessened Sisters' willingness to participate in our survey.

FINDINGS

Women from fifteen religious orders participated in the survey. Over half the respondents were either Ursuline Sisters or Sisters of Notre Dame, reflecting the prevalence of Sisters from these orders in the population surveyed (see Table 1). The median age of respondents was 64 years, and 16 percent were 75 years old or older; the median age for all Sisters in the diocese is 72.5, so this somewhat younger group of respondents reflects their engagement in active ministry. Nearly half of respondents (46 percent) had begun their career in the ministry in northeast Ohio in 1964–1974, and overall, the median number of years of experience in their current ministry was nearly twenty. Over 80 percent of respondents held a graduate degree of some type, reflecting a highly educated group of professional women.

Table 1: Religious Orders of Respondents

Order of Women Religious	Survey Population	Total Responses
Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland	88	49
Sisters of Notre Dame	71	44
Congregation of Saint Joseph	25	14
Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis	24	12
Sisters of the Humility of Mary	15	10
Sisters of the Most Holy Trinity	12	3
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati	12	10
Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament	11	6
Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine	10	5
Sisters of the Holy Spirit	7	5
Orders with smaller numbers of Sisters serving in the county ^a	13	6
Total	288	164

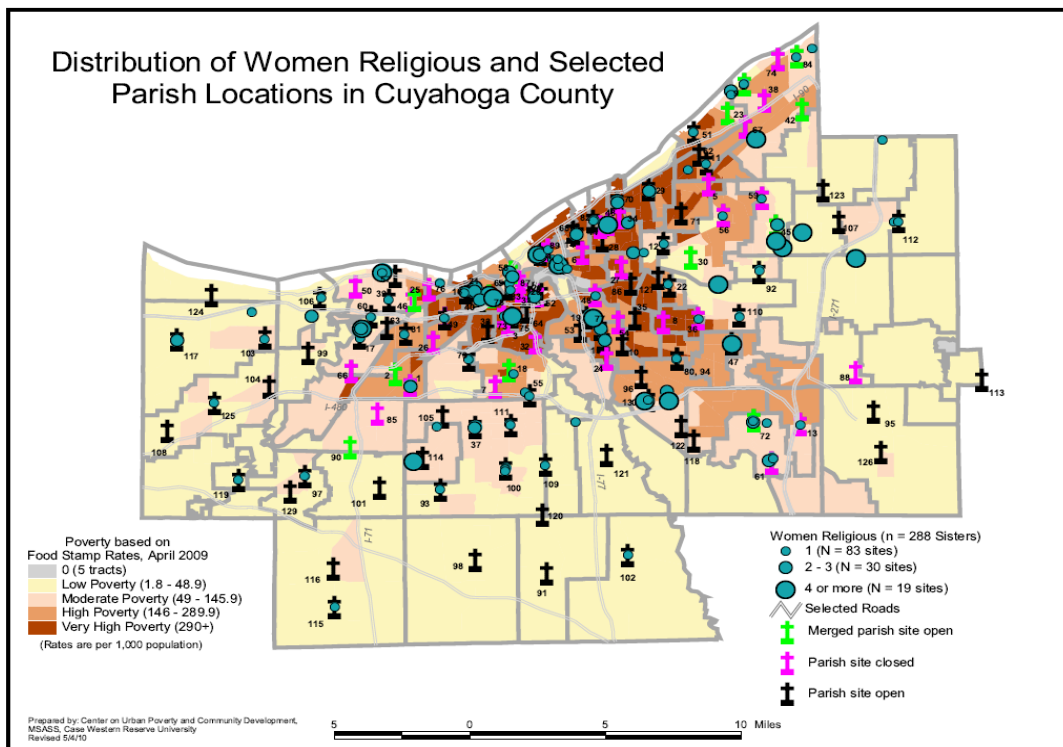
^a Other orders include the Dominican Sisters of Peace, Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate, Mercedarian Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Society of the Precious Blood, Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and Sisters of Providence.

The survey results can be summarized according to a number of descriptive themes, as follows.

Presence in the Community

Nearly 60 percent of respondents resided in the geographic area where their primary ministry was located, and 88 percent of these Sisters believed that their physical presence in the geographic area was either extremely important or very important to their effectiveness in ministry. As one Sister noted, “The greatest challenge is to maintain groundedness in the face of overwhelming injustice.” Figure 2 shows the geographic spread of Sisters across Cuyahoga County. In general, the Sisters’ ministries were concentrated in areas of higher poverty, particularly in the City of Cleveland. In addition, there were many neighborhoods in which several different ministries operated in close proximity to one another.

Figure 2: Women Religious in Cuyahoga County



Diversity of Ministries

The ministries that the respondents reported reflect the diversity of the work Sisters do and the charism that they and their order bring to ministry. When asked to name their primary ministry, nearly half of respondents (42 percent) identified an educational setting and role. Religious education in the parish setting was the

primary ministry of an additional 16 percent of respondents. Besides this majority in the area of education, Sisters are spread out over many fields (see Table 2).

Table 2: Primary Ministries of Women Religious

Ministry Type	Percentage of Respondents
Education (preschool to postsecondary)	42
Religious education (e.g., Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Director of Religious Education, liturgy)	16
Social services	10
Administrative duties (e.g., diocesan)	7
Hospice and health care	6
Congregational support ^a	5
Counseling, family services, adult education	4
Retreat, spirituality, and intercessions	4
Other	5

^a Defined as service to the religious order, such as caring for other Sisters or duties at the motherhouse. There was some overlap of responsibilities of this group and those of the administrative group that was not surveyed.

This is, at best, a rough characterization of the ministry of Sisters, in part because many Sisters found the notion of identifying a “primary” ministry foreign to their way of working.

Involvement in Multiple Ministries

Although the sample was designed to encompass employed Sisters, the survey did ask how many ministries a Sister worked in beyond her primary ministry, typically in a volunteer capacity. It is notable that 99 percent of respondents reported being involved in more than one ministry. More than half of respondents reported involvement in two ministries, one quarter reported involvement in three ministries, and 13 percent reported four ministries. Sisters reported working an average of 41 hours per week, but the range was 7–80 hours of work weekly; 21 percent of Sisters worked fewer than 30 hours per week, 43 percent worked 30–40 hours per week, and over one third (37 percent) worked more than 40 hours per week.

Site and Size of Ministries

Sisters reported that their ministries were housed at a diverse set of community sites, including parishes, churches, or schools (44 percent); sites operated by their

order (17 percent); independent 501(c)(3) agency sites (12 percent); hospital or health care facilities (10 percent); college campuses (7 percent); diocesan offices (4 percent); and other sites (6 percent). Many hospitals, senior care facilities, and colleges are sponsored by orders of women religious, although they maintain separate 501(c)(3) status.

The ministries also varied substantially in regard to the numbers of people served annually (see Table 3). Overall, 19 percent of ministries served fewer than 100 people, 44 percent served 100 to 499, 12 percent served 500 to 999, and 25 percent served 1,000 or more. Nearly half the Sisters reported that in the preceding twelve months, their program had experienced an expansion (46 percent), and a similar number reported that the programs were about the same size (44 percent). Only 5 percent reported that their program had been reduced.

Table 3: Size and Scope of Ministries

	Median Number	Smallest	Largest
Full-time paid staff	8.5	63% served fewer than 20	8% served more than 100
Part-time paid staff	3.0	88% served fewer than 10	2% served more than 100
Volunteers	7.0	57% served fewer than 10	4% served more than 100

Funding of Ministries

Sisters' ministries received their funding from a great variety of sources. Financial data were provided by 59 percent of respondents (97). Half of the respondents were in a ministry that received 90 percent or more of its funding from a single source, and 88 percent were in a ministry that received 50 percent or more of its funding from a single source. The diocese or host parish or school and the Sister's order were the two largest sources of funding that were identified. Nearly one third of the ministries were reported to be receiving governmental funding, although the vast majority of these were in school settings. Just over one third of respondents reported that their ministry had sought funding from a new source (39 percent), and approximately one quarter of ministries had obtained funding from a new source (26 percent). Forty-three percent had not yet sought funding from new sources. Over half of the new funding that was sought was funding from charitable foundations.

People Served by Ministries

As to the characteristics of their targeted service population, respondents reported on the presence of general populations and special populations in the focus of

their ministry (see Table 4). What is abundantly clear from these data is that, regardless of the population that a particular ministry's effort targeted, the population that was served routinely shows a greater degree of need than was anticipated. For example, although just over one quarter of respondents reported that low-income families were their primary target population, 44 percent reported that low-income families were served by their ministry.

Table 4: Target Service Populations of Ministries

Service Population	Percent Identifying as Their Primary Population	Percent Reporting That Ministry Serves This Population
<i>General Populations</i>		
Youth: grades K–8	35.4	47.0
Families	34.2	61.6
Seniors: General population	20.7	37.2
Single adults	20.1	35.4
Youth: grades 9–12	18.3	33.5
Infants, toddlers, preschoolers	15.9	29.9
Young adult: college age, 20s, and 30s	14.0	23.2
<i>Special Populations</i>		
Low-income families	27.4	44.5
Ill and the dying	15.2	26.2
Homeless or at-risk	12.8	26.8
Developmentally disabled	11.6	22.6
Drug/alcohol users	8.5	19.5
Victims of domestic violence	7.9	18.9
Former prisoners	7.3	14.6
Immigrants/refugees	6.1	13.4
Incarcerated	3.7	7.3

The beneficiaries of Sisters' ministries lived throughout the county, but among the top fifteen identified ZIP Codes served by ministries, nine were located in the City of Cleveland. These ministries served people from many faith traditions; 47 percent served mostly Catholics, 38 percent served mostly non-Catholics, 2 percent served those with no faith tradition, 6 percent of respondents did not know, and 7 percent did not respond.

Use of Collaboration

The survey asked Sisters about their ministry's collaboration with other entities, and 72 percent reported being engaged in collaboration of some kind. The term *collaboration* has a range of meanings but fundamentally reflects the act of working together. At a minimum, collaboration may reflect such activities as information sharing, referral of clients, and cooperative planning. Collaboration may also be much more substantive, including joint programs or shared staffing. Nearly half of Sisters' ministries were engaged with Sisters from other orders (45 percent) and with diocesan organizations (48 percent). To some extent, ministries were collaborating with nonprofit or governmental organizations (41 percent) and with faith-based organizations (34 percent). Among Sisters who reported collaboration, over two thirds reported collaboration across two or more domains. This might reflect the multiple ministries in which Sisters are engaged, many in a volunteer capacity, beyond their primary ministry. Sisters see many benefits to collaboration (see Table 5), most frequently citing as benefits the increased ability to serve clients better; to participate in advocacy, awareness, and education; and to develop and operate joint programming.

Table 5: Potential Benefits of Collaboration

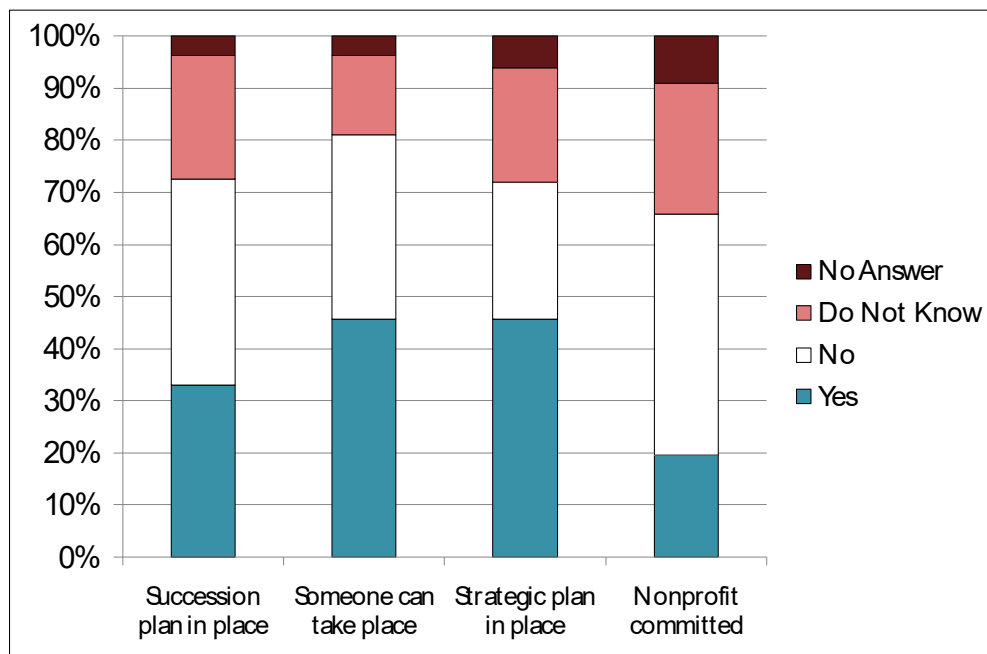
Benefit Type	Percent Seeing as a Benefit
Serve clients better	66
Participate in advocacy, awareness, and education	54
Develop and operate joint programming	53
Assess community needs	40
Access new funding sources	38
Receive and make service referrals	36
Leverage resources	34
Recruit volunteers	33
Access complementary skills/knowledge	30
Engage in peer learning	28
Obtain in-kind donations	21

One third or fewer Sisters reported seeing benefits from collaboration in the areas of leveraging resources, recruiting volunteers, accessing complementary skills or knowledge, peer learning, and obtaining in-kind donations.

Long-Term Ministry Planning

Sisters were asked about plans for sustaining their primary ministry and their own personal ministry plans. Although fewer than one third reported having a succession plan in place, nearly half reported that there was someone to take the Sister's place should she be absent from the ministry (see Figure 3). In addition, nearly one half reported having a strategic plan for the ministry. Approximately 20 percent reported having a nonprofit in the community that was committed to sustaining the ministry, though many of these were specific funders that were willing to fund the activities. The future sustainability of the ministry is, in part, dependent on the willingness of other institutional partners to take on the ministerial work after the Sister has transitioned from her role.

Figure 3: Ministries with Succession/Strategic Plans



Individual Concerns and Plans for the Future

When asked whether they were worried about the future of their primary ministry, more than one third of respondents were “not at all worried” (38 percent), almost half were “somewhat worried” (46 percent), 13 percent were “very worried,” and 3 percent did not respond. The Sisters who reported not being worried were

disproportionately in ministries located at sites operated by religious orders or health care facilities. Sisters who were most worried were located at parish, church, or school sites. In regard to their own ministry plans, one third of Sisters reported that they planned to continue for up to three years in their current ministry, 25 percent reported planning to continue for four to six years, and 37 percent were planning to continue for seven years or longer. One Sister's sentiments reflected those of many respondents: "as long as able, healthy, God permits." Asked what they would do if they were to leave their current ministry, nearly one half of respondents (46 percent) said that they would seek another ministry in the region, 18 percent would not, and 34 percent were unsure.

Ministries Need Resources

A clear tension is evident in the necessity to balance the desire to serve people who are in need with the financial requirements of the ministry (and the order), given that the income of Sisters supports the overall needs of the order. The primary identified requirements related to financial stability and to the tension and time associated with the process of seeking and securing funding. As was mentioned above, fewer than 40 percent of respondents' ministries had sought new funding, though the majority of those that did seek new funding received it. A significant number of Sisters (60 of 122) saw funding as the primary challenge. The tension was noted by one Sister, who described it as "balancing the need to bring in income as a member of a congregation with call to work with low income folks who cannot afford to pay full fee for service." In addition to funding, respondents suggested that networking and connecting with other funding sources, including corporations, individuals, and foundations would be helpful (twenty-eight respondents indicated that this type of training and assistance was important).

Managing in a Shifting Environment

Looking to the future, respondents indicated a continuing commitment to neighborhood or community unity, service, and social justice; however, an almost equal number of respondents indicated that they envisioned substantive changes in their particular ministry arenas (i.e., liturgical, pastoral, parish, or vocational ministries). The shifting environment was of great concern to respondents, second only to funding in importance. Naturally, those with concerns for their ministries (close to 59 percent) were more commonly in parish and school sites, where the greatest changes were expected because of the parish reconfiguration in the diocese. Furthermore, 64 percent of respondents were between 60 and 74 years old, and many respondents had been active in ministry for over forty years. Long-term

planning related to staff transitions to ensure the stability of current ministries is appropriate. This is particularly challenging in the context of declining vocations to religious life, which suggests that laypeople may need to transition into roles formerly held by Sisters. However, the respondents' comments suggest that Sisters are still very future-oriented, as conveyed in one Sister's reminder that "the harvest will be great, though the laborers are few." Approximately 45 percent of respondents indicated that there would be someone in line to take their place if they were absent from their primary ministry, but fewer than one third of Sisters reported that a formal succession plan was in place for their ministry.

SUPPORTING THE WORK OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

Sisters shared a range of ideas about how their work could be enhanced as well as specific challenges that they encountered.

Collaboration as a Vehicle to Enhance Ministries

Over 118 survey respondents (72 percent) indicated that their primary ministry engaged in joint programming or some other type of collaboration. Collaboration was noted to be a valuable resource for ministry, with 100 respondents indicating that it leads to better services. While the majority of respondents already embraced collaboration, the high value placed on collaboration indicates that more work could be done. Such efforts could be directed especially to areas of shared organizational needs among ministries (e.g., fundraising, communications) and to connecting ministries in a particular neighborhood.

Support for Specific Groups or Ministry Types

Throughout the survey, several groupings of primary ministries surfaced as perhaps warranting special attention. These ministries are highlighted either because of their predominance (such as education) or because of an elevated level of need: seniors (especially the homebound), young adults, individuals who have lost faith during the process of parish reconfiguration, families with school-age children, and immigrants. One Sister called for "[g]reater training and outreach programs for the parishes, especially since most cluster plans have a commitment to greater outreach to the poor. More events, activities that address systemic change."

Education, both inside and outside the classroom, emerged as an important substantive domain; specifically, at least sixty-nine respondents reported a primary ministry in K-12, postsecondary, or out-of-school-time education fields. Additionally, seven respondents indicated that they worked primarily with day care, early childhood, or early intervention initiatives. Also, when respondents

were asked to select their ministry's target groups, the categories of families, infants/toddlers/preschoolers, youth K–8, youth 9–12, and youth college age were selected 193 times. Many of these groups are found in areas hit hardest by the diocesan reconfiguration. Collaborative efforts could address specific at-risk groups (homebound seniors, immigrants, young adults, etc.) or at-risk ministries in the education field (i.e., schools in or near clustered parishes).

The Challenge of the Smaller Ministry

Small ministries, those with nineteen or fewer full-time employees, accounted for almost 63 percent of respondents (83 of 132 individuals responding). Furthermore, 38 percent of respondents with knowledge of budgets and operating costs indicated that their primary ministry's budget was under \$250,000; interestingly, this was almost equal to number of respondents who indicated an annual budget of \$1 million or more. The small ministries are more likely to need development in many areas, such as succession, strategic planning, and funding. However, they also enable Sisters to work with the clients in a special way: holistically, present, and with time for listening and reflection. As Sisters are drawn to smaller-scale ministries, some efforts aimed at increasing organizational capacity could be specifically geared to the needs of the smaller organization.

The Geography of Need

Ministries identified in our survey heavily targeted poor neighborhoods, and nine of the top fifteen client ZIP Codes served by ministries were located in the City of Cleveland, where poverty rates are highest and most concentrated. Sisters have considerable experience and commitment to neighborhoods in the City of Cleveland. Sisters expressed interest in receiving technical assistance in the area of monitoring and sharing changes in community demographics and needs, particularly in neighborhoods where many Sisters are working in different though related fields (e.g., education and social services). Similarly, Sisters saw benefit in conferences and meetings that assist in connecting women religious to other nonprofits, stakeholders, and neighborhood representatives in these neighborhoods. Services and supports such as these, though available to nonprofits and human service providers, are often not well suited to the particular needs of Sisters and their ministries.

Faith as the Core of Ministry

Ninety percent of the Sisters who responded to the survey believed that faith plays a significant role in the effectiveness of their work. One Sister put it simply:

“Faith is at the core of what we do.” The few who did not indicate that faith plays a significant role generally cited legal restrictions on the expression of faith in their work as the reason. Their comments reveal different ways in which faith played a role in the effectiveness of their programming. For most, their life choice to serve as a religious woman made self-evident the role of faith in their work. One Sister commented, “For most of my clients, God is with them by the mere fact that ‘Sister’ is there.” Other Sisters distinguished between their personal ministry and the program ministry in which they had a role. In this case, though faith may be at the core of all they do, Sisters saw a less overt role of faith in some service settings. Sisters’ ministries are clearly infused with faith. How does that affect their approach to service in education, health, social service, or other areas? How does it affect their adaptability to change, or personal sustainability in a given ministry? How is funding secured for spiritually based ministries? The role of faith in service deserves further attention.

CONCLUSION

The ministries of women religious have served untold numbers of individuals and families in the United States for almost 300 years, yet there has been little systematic collection of data on the nature and scope of these ministries. Efforts to extend and support the work of women religious can be effectively informed not only by a better understanding of these ministries, but also through the insights that women religious can offer from their years of experience. Our study has shown that nearly all the Sisters are engaged in multiple ministries and that the majority of Sisters work nearly full-time or more than full-time in their ministry efforts. The ministries of women religious, regardless of the identified primary target populations, tend to serve populations with greater levels of disadvantage. Sisters serve in communities of great need and believe that their presence in these communities is central to their effectiveness in ministry. Sisters’ ministries tend to rely heavily on a limited number of funding streams, often only a single source. In terms of sustainability, one half to two thirds of these ministries are reported not to have an articulated plan for carrying forward the work beyond the tenure of the current Sister. Collectively, these characteristics depict an array of human services that often operate with very limited capacity and could well be in jeopardy when the Sister moves on from her current role. Strategies to address this situation include success and transition planning, fund development, and the effective use of collaboration to sustain ministries.

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