



Engaging Aging

“My first year of retirement has been about learning different rhythms and dances... I loved not having to set an alarm... my prayer ends when it ends, not when the clock runs out...”

Retirement + One New Rhythms and Dances *by Sister Amy Hoey, RSM*

Our Constitutions have a wonderful phrase about “the rhythm of action and contemplation [which] is at the heart of our vocation to Mercy.” And Catherine McAuley’s letters are replete with references to dances and the different steps that are required. My first year of “retirement” has been about learning different rhythms and dances.

That first year started in January 2006 when, at 75, I completed the last phase of my full-time ministry - ten years at the USCCB staffing the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry which prepared the document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. Blessed with good health and energy, I was very grateful for my community’s encouragement to “stay in place” in regard to my living situation. They agreed that, although it was some distance from most of our regional community, it had been very life-giving for me. The local parish, the intercongregational apartment house where I live, the many Sisters of Mercy in the area, the low-budget cultural opportunities that abound in the Washington area had all been – and continue to be - sources of life.

The most noticeable change in rhythm was in the mornings. I loved not having to set an alarm and having morning prayer time that was not cut short by having to get on the way to the office. I remember telling a friend, “My prayer ends when it ends, not when the clock runs out.” I discovered that I could walk to noon Mass – and to the library, grocery store, downtown shops, and restaurants because I had the time to do so. There is also time for more leisurely walks in the nearby park. I enjoy the freedom of having long lunches with friends and savor occasional mid-afternoon breaks with some of the Sisters who live in the house. Because I was at home, I sometimes took on the task of coordinating theater or movie tickets or holiday and vacation plans and became known as the social secretary. I also became a regular volunteer at our parish food pantry and earned



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Retirement + One: New Rhythms and Dances

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certification as a literacy tutor with the county. I was able to join our archdiocesan legislative lobby for a day with our congressional delegation and to participate in a weekday demonstration on the national mall advocating comprehensive immigration reform.

When I left the USCCB, I had already accepted two invitations to speak in different dioceses about *Co-Workers*, but I remember moments of panic when I looked at a fairly empty calendar. (I had also, with the approval of my community, declined two invitations to consider part-time ministry; one because it required more travel than I was ready to commit to and the other because it seemed too routine.) The opportunity to work on *Co-Workers* had been a blessing in my life and I try to live out the encouragement to “give as a gift what you have received as a gift.”

The invitations to speak, write, edit, or consult on lay ecclesial ministry have increased over the months, leading me to ask that my ministry description in our directory be changed from “In Transition” to



“Consultant,” a designation that has always sounded a little pretentious to me but much more accurately reflects how I spend the majority of my time. I know my situation is unique; but without my planning it, I realize that I have learned a new dance. It still has its challenges, e.g. telling those who invite me that I expect compensation for travel expenses as well as a stipend.

(The first time I did that, the person involved asked immediately “how much is your stipend?” I was unprepared for that response and realized subsequently that I had undersold my service.) I have to make my own travel arrangements for the most part, and oh! do I miss the support of the Information Technology Department at USCCB. On more than one occasion when my computer has been misbehaving I have had to restrain myself from shooting it!

I realize that this dance, like all dances, will come to an end. There are, after all, a finite number of folks who want to learn about lay ecclesial ministry. At that point, I hope to give more time to literacy work. Retirement + ??? will hold ever new challenges and opportunities. I pray that I will respond, as Catherine did, “with courage and love.”

From the editor's desk...

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA

When I first begin to work with a community, I speak to them about the “dance of first encounters.” It is about the rituals we all engage in when we confront something new, be that a person, place or process. Effectively, we are maneuvering about in time and space, trying to determine how we might best utilize the gifts and graces at hand. We watch from the sidelines, studying reactions, anticipating personalities, gauging difficulties, and noting potential blessings. Finally, we step forth to engage each other, to begin the dance of relationship that will be ours for the length of the retreat, workshop, chapter, or process at hand.

In life, I think, it is no different. It matters not whether we have the proverbial “two left feet,” or the agility of trained performers. What matters is that we step forth, take hold, and move to the rhythms of life’s music. May this edition of *Engaging Aging* invite you to dance to the unfinished symphony that is your life.





A Reluctant Retiree

by Sister Fran Mlocek, IHM

I was not unique in experiencing emotional resistance to the transition from an active ministerial life to one much less so. However, personal reality demanded it. My pondering (and fearful) heart was asking – what next? And why? And how?

I knew I needed to be in a fresh physical setting. I preferred a well-defined program provided by experienced resource persons. And I hoped for like-minded travelers as companions. It was time for an honest look at my life. I felt a need for intellectual stimulation and growth without academic stress and for a true and lasting change in my life style.

I had heard about the Sarah Sabbatical program at Manna House of Prayer out in Kansas, so I called an IHM who had participated in the 2005 program. It was a challenge to get in my “thank you, you’ve convinced me” closing to our conversation. I made up my mind to go to Concordia!

I found the program’s attention to life experiences, past and present, was extensive and exceedingly revealing. A review of certain “tools” like the Myers-Briggs and Enneagram spoke worlds to me about how I have been and now was acting and why. We were introduced into and engaged in various techniques of journaling. Dream analysis opened a creative inner world that I had not truly engaged in the past. We had plenty of time for personal prayer and guidance for Centering Prayer if we wished. We gained new insights into Christian mysticism that responded to an innate hunger that I had too long ignored for “lack of time.”

We enjoyed beautiful rituals and liturgies throughout the two month sabbatical. A rich variety of creative activities such as quilting, calligraphy, water color and haiku brought a balance to the right brain. We were encouraged to attend to the body as well with various opportunities for exercise and wholesome meals.

Rich presentations on the new cosmology, the challenges of religious life in the context of faith, tradition and culture challenged us and opened up new understandings of the vows. Three days of silent retreat and a festive brunch brought the program to a close.

In the end, did I have a specific map for the future? No – but I did have new pathways suitable to this new time in my life, and definite values to guide me in my search for a reasonable ministry. And I had found a new beginning for my next and very real end-life time. I had a sense of a new threshold that before I could not have imagined were mine. My pause in time was the birth of my new life.

Sarah Sabbatical is a two-month sabbatical for women religious from age 60 through 80’s who are transitioning out of remunerative or full-time ministries into a more age and/or health-appropriate way of life. Developed at ***Manna House of Prayer in Concordia, Kansas***, the program has just completed its 17th season. The 8-week experience, held every autumn, has hosted women from around the world, including returning missionaries, who seek a way to deeply live their last decades of life in fruitful fulfillment of their religious commitment. It is an opportunity for women religious to focus on their transitions into elderhood or end-of-life with a deepening sense of purpose and holiness. For further information, on the internet, see **mannahouse.org**



Retirement Policy & Procedures

Carondelet Sisters of St. Joseph, Province of Albany, New York

THIRD AGE

Third Age is a term used to describe a latter period of the life span, i.e., age 60 plus. During this developmental stage, one has the opportunity to assess her giftedness and explore new roles, new relationships, new skills so as to be involved in activities that support and enhance personal and communal growth.



Policy: Each sister enters into the Third Age in a way that recognizes the rich opportunities for growth in a holistic manner. To facilitate a positive and healthy approach to this developmental period and to assist in her planning for the future, each sister (either individually or in a group) discusses, with support persons and appropriate province personnel, issues relative to the Third Age. This dialogue may be initiated by the individual sister, a support person or other appropriate province personnel.

Procedures:

1. Ordinarily, between the ages of fifty-five and sixty, a sister, using the materials provided by the province, reflects upon her mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being as well as her attitudes toward aging. She considers the implications of these factors for her ministry and her eventual planning for partial or full retirement.
2. Throughout the Third Age, a sister is encouraged to participate in educational programs, workshops or other activities that will tap into her creative energy and develop and foster her potential for on-going service in the Church and society.
3. A sister is encouraged to engage in on-going dialogue with her local community, other support persons or appropriate province personnel relative to her level of energy and health.
4. To assist in this process of reflection, the designated member of the Province Executive Committee (PEC) provides materials to each sister by her 56th birthday. The sister responds to the designated member of the PEC concerning her plans for the *Third Age* by her 60th birthday.

You're invited...

to send a copy of your community's policies and procedures regarding retirement to the offices of NRRO. We would like to begin compiling a resource file for those seeking help with policy development. What do your preparations for the dance of retirement look like?

Contact jbader@uscgb.org



Thanks to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet for sharing their policy!

From the offices of NRRO....

By Sister Janice Bader, CPPS.
Project Director of Retirement Services, NRRO



I recently had the privilege of assisting a contemplative monastery with their financial planning. The treasurer, at age 84, was torn between her deep desire to continue her service to her community and the cries of her aging body. Getting the bills paid and the bank statements reconciled, once child's play for her, now are tasks that require Herculean effort.

In response to an earlier issue of *Engaging Aging*, a sister wrote, "I stewed about retiring for six years. Over the last year and a half, I've had several surgeries on my dominant hand, making my work as a secretary so difficult that I had to quit. I dread attending our next province gathering and facing those who will be asking me, 'What work will you be doing now?' I am 67, but in terms of religious, that is too young to retire."

Do these quandaries sound familiar? Whether active or contemplative, monastic, apostolic or evangelical, religious usually want to maintain a full schedule of prayer and ministry for as long as possible. It can be difficult to discern when it is time to cut back on work.

A survey conducted by NRRO in 2004 found that the average age for retirement from full-time compensated ministry during the prior three year period was 74 for men religious and 75 for women religious. Mathematicians remind us that the dispersion of numbers that underlie an average can be wide or narrow. In our survey, there were, indeed, variances on both sides of the

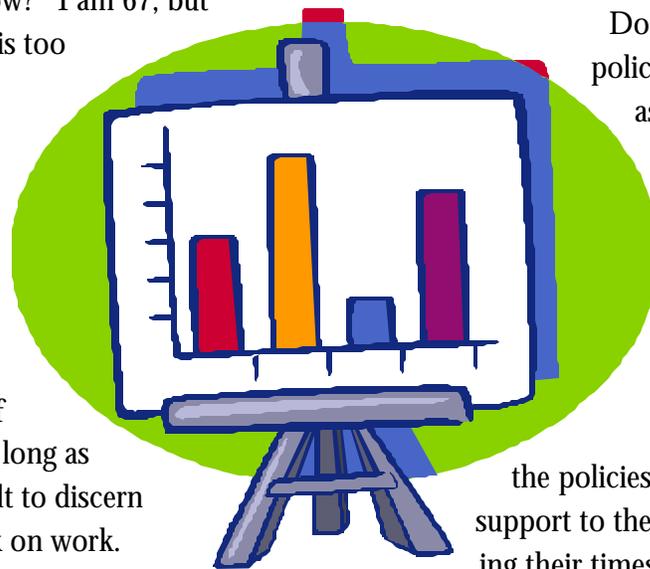
average. So it is important to resist the temptation to let the average become normative. Targeting numbers can complicate what is already a difficult discernment regarding retirement for those outside the "norm."

The Best Practices Study conducted by NRRO found that "both leaders and members report that it is helpful when the institute has policies and processes in place regarding retirement and pre-retirement" (*Planning for Retirement and Mission, A Best Practices Study*). Still, such policies and processes must walk a tightrope between clarity of expectations and allowance for individual differences.

Does your religious institute have policies or procedures in place to assist in these times of transition? Do your Sisters or Brothers know when it is acceptable for them to reduce their workload? Are there persons available to assist them as they grapple with this decision?

We encourage you to share the policies or processes that have been a support to the members of your institute during their times of transition. You may do that via the NRRO Listserv or by sending the information to our office to be shared with those institutes that request sample policies. Thank you in advance for sharing your wisdom.

Email mglover@usccb.org to be placed on NRRO's Listserv.



Companioning the Retirement Journey

By Sister Dolores Montini, CSJ, Minister of Community Life, Baden PA

My community is beginning to set forth some direction in order to grapple with the fact that we never really retire....we just seem to wear out. We're beginning a process in which the Director of Health Resources will interview every sister in the congregation to obtain a current health care assessment and to encourage life planning for wellness. It is a part of helping us to be proactive in living holistically; to help us individually and collectively to gain a sense of our needs and to wisely plan for our future. And retirement is a part of that future!

I like to believe that retirement is a phase in life that looks toward a re-creation of energies. It embodies a movement where space is created to live the contemplative moment with deep appreciation. It holds forth a quiet in which we can integrate our experiences with the present moment. It still holds invitation for life.



Presently, the majority of our sisters come to our Motherhouse to retire. Some come with great affection for the place of their formation, while others seem to just resign themselves to be brought back home to wait. Some are ready to integrate contemplation and action, while others, because of poor health, are moving toward the stage of acceptance on the next step of life's journey.

Somewhere in between, I think, is a period when the present moment can be lived with new meaning. Facilitating that is a central part of my ministry as Minister of Community Life for our congregation. But I think it must also be the personal choice of

each sister to make her "wisdom years" a time of life long learning; to integrate youth and old age as a seamless picture of now.



For good and for ill, the retirement behaviors of society don't seem to be ours. Seniors are the new market for our agencies; but religious seem to grow more restricted in their travel as they age. Relocation to senior living communities puts folks in the middle of golf courses, bridge clubs, birding lectures and service jaunts. Religious, on the other hand, often seem to move to antiquated buildings with part-time activities directors who struggle with limited resources and low-end budgets. Are we too "worn out" by the time we retire? Do we have renewed energies that can keep us forever young? Will the motherhouse be the preferred place of retirement for upcoming generations?

As I reflect on my experiences of welcoming sisters into our Motherhouse community, I find encouragement in the desire that unveils itself in each conversation: the desire to live our mission. Our constitutions speak to us of continual engagement... "The entire life of our sisters takes on apostolic value, and every condition of health or sickness, success or failure, weakness, old age or death becomes an occasion of grace."

These are the moments that I invite our sisters to share, that give us meaning and purpose: transformative invitations to grace, mission, community, and life. It's never too late to plan for mission. That's our retirement.

Mark your calendars...

- Legal Resource Center for Religious Annual Seminar (St. Louis)..... March 8-11, 2007
- 2007 Basic Grant Eligibility Forms due..... March 31, 2007
- Special Assistance Grant Applications for June 2007 cycle due*..... March 31, 2007
- Retirement Fund for Religious Collection money due from Arch/dioceses..... March 31, 2007
- Supplemental Grant Applications for December 2007 cycle due* April 15, 2007

Supplemental Identified Need Grant (SING) applications are accepted at any time.

Contact Sister Janice Bader for an application form



*Application forms available on website, www.usccb.org/nrro

Reading Room Recommendation...

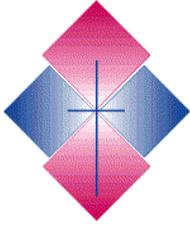
The Best Is Yet to Be, Life’s Meaning in the Aging Years by Eugene S. Geissler
(1998, Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press)

In this short, easy-to-read book Eugene Geissler shares his reflections on the early years after his retirement from his position as an editor for Ave Maria Press. He conveys his lived experience of both the blessings and the challenges of aging. Here’s a brief excerpt to whet your appetite.



I remember and cherish the first work-week that wasn’t, Monday through Friday. There they were upon me, five warm, breezy and mostly sunny spring days – all mine – without having to account for them to anybody but God. I remember very clearly that Friday morning. I had already spent four beautiful days almost completely outside. As I was standing in the yard that morning looking to the northwest with the wind in my face and the sun on my back, the Lord blessed me with a grace-filled moment. My heart overflowed with thanksgiving, and I said aloud for all God’s creatures, great and small, around me to hear: “Thank you, God, for having brought me this far.” It was such a short prayer of thanksgiving that the last word tumbled out before the first one had fallen to the ground! I would

have to write it down at least seven times to give a hint as to how much it meant and how much it meant to me – coming first from the Lord and my giving it back to him: “Thank you, God, for having brought me this far!”



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Fax: (202) 541-3053
Website: www.usccb.org/nrro

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these monies in grants to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs.

The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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