



Engaging Aging

Our Employees, Mission, and Legacy

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The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic left long-term care facilities in a very difficult position. There was a loss of residents in large numbers due to COVID-19 deaths, and a loss of workers due to illness and family difficulties. Maria Joseph Continuing Care Community in Danville, Pennsylvania, was no exception to all of those issues. Our Congregation, the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius, has sponsored this multi-level continuum of care facility for over 55 years. The continuum of care includes The Meadows Independent Living, Maria Joseph Manor Personal Care, Emmanuel Center Rehabilitation and Skilled Care, Nazareth Memory Care, and Hospice Care. Recognizing the urgent need to help our staff understand everything that had happened during and after COVID-19 and to find a way to move forward, our Congregation applied for and received a grant from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Our consultants offered a grant-based program to our Maria Joseph staff on all levels and all shifts. The hope was to have staff members take another look at their identity and the importance of the work they do, helping them to make decisions to continue to serve in the mission of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius.

The program developed by our consultants, Dayna Larson-Hurst, RN, BA, MSOD, and Clifford "Cliff" Hurst, PhD, had three primary objectives:

- To develop and implement a process that would help reduce stress and increase retention
- To increase and rebuild strong connections between leadership and staff
- To create a path to a sustainable future for the ministry and legacy of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius

Dayna and Cliff recognized that a successful program required a collaborative approach involving leadership and all employees. The Leadership Team of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius and the Maria Joseph Leadership Team demonstrated their commitment to staff development.



Sr. Michael Ann Orlik, SSCM, is the Assistant to the General Superior and serves as Vice President of Operations for Maria Joseph Continuing Care Community.

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They met with the consultants regularly and actively participated in all aspects of the program. They also played a crucial role in facilitating opportunities for all staff to engage in the program. This inclusive approach ensured that all employees, almost 150 staff members, could benefit from the program if they chose to do so.

The program was based on four steps to a successful life, as designated by Dr. Robert S. Hartman, the late American-German philosopher who developed a theory of human values. The four steps are

- Know yourself
- Choose yourself
- Grow yourself
- Give yourself to something greater than yourself

The sessions for both leadership and staff were one hour long and could include up to 25 people. To have fruitful conversations, the members of leadership and staff were asked to complete the DiSC personal assessment tool to enhance our communications as we navigated the four steps to a successful life.

Know Yourself

All participants were given a small gift box. When they opened the box, there was a mirror at the bottom.

Upon looking inside, each person saw the gift of themselves. In this first session, they spent time learning about themselves, asking questions such as, “What is important to me?” and “What are my gifts?” or “How well do I communicate with others, and how do others see me?” As they moved through the discussions and learned more about themselves, leadership also learned that there was a desire and



a need for more communication between staff and leadership on all levels. You can see the difference between the two word clouds presented below. The size of the word as depicted in the graphic correlates with the number of times it was mentioned in conversations. This was an awakening for the leadership team who thought that they were communicating very well.



Choose Yourself

We knew that the loss of many residents and the extra care required by frail residents took a toll on our staff. This is the “cost of caring” that we heard so much about, and our staff cared greatly for our residents. Therefore, staff members were encouraged to take time to choose themselves, including their physical, social, mental, emotional, and, of course, spiritual well-being. The staff members were given time to get to know each other better, to tell their stories, and to understand how choosing themselves impacts the care they give to others. This is true for everyone!

Grow Yourself

These sessions dealt with team building and group decision-making. The participants were split into small groups and had to put puzzles and gadgets together. Some groups were missing parts and others had too many parts. Could they learn to work together and share the extra pieces? These activities clearly spoke about collaboration, building trust, and sharing resources. It wasn't as much about who finished first as it was about everyone completing the task. During these activities, the participants saw some of the root causes of conflict in the workplace and how

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to deal with this conflict. After this experience, the facilitators found the conversations to be very rich and the participants had a better understanding of how communication styles can often alleviate conflict.

Give Yourself to Something Greater than Yourself

This session focused on mission integration. It brought out the history of the sisters, their mission and ministry, and the role of the staff in continuing the ministry and carrying the sisters' legacy forward. For this session, we ensured that the leadership and staff had a strong knowledge of the mission and core values of Maria Joseph Continuing Care Community and that all our employees had at least a bird's eye view of our ministries in education, evangelization, and ecumenism.

We believe that it is essential for our staff to know our background, where we've come from, and even our patron saints on whom we have modeled our life in ministry. We also believe that it is essential for our employees to understand our passion for the mission. This grant program enabled us to help our staff see us in a new light. During this opportune time, we learned much about our employees and they were eager to learn about us, even if they had never experienced any other contact with women religious.

The Buy-In to the Mission

Serving others with compassionate care has always been the mission of the sisters. Our long-term workers knew this but after the pandemic, when we were short on staff and long on hours, it was important that they felt we cared about them as well as the residents being served. When we offered this unique program to our employees, they felt valued and heard. The gift



that the sisters gave to our staff was the opportunity to get to know us again, to sit down and talk with us, and to pray together for each other.

When we opened Maria Joseph Manor in 1962, we had a lengthy mission statement. Even subsequent revisions were overlong. We needed to print it out on our business cards because, though it made a lot of sense, it was hard to remember. At one time, our residents shortened it by calling it "The Home with the Heart." While this seemed to fit, we decided that we needed to expand it a bit. Today, our new mission statement is "Serving Others with a Compassionate Heart."

At this time of re-envisioning, we also focused on core values with the staff, addressing one value per day. We found it essential to have continual reminders and rewards for living out the values. The values star was posted in all facilities to highlight our core values to residents, workers, and families. Also, we wanted to honor those who emphasized these values in their work. We are confident that the staff will also



The values star depicts Maria Joseph's core values of love, respect, service, hospitality, and compassionate care.

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continue to find new ways to impart our values among themselves, the residents, and their families.

Sustainable Change

Our staff was excited, but our next question was how to bring about sustainable change. We realized that we needed to

- Form a strong leadership team since change begins from the top down
- Begin listening in a new way as we grow and change
- Be open to the movement of the Spirit always at work in us
- Not give up

Even in difficult times, the team will keep going if leaders strongly believe in the mission and are willing to accept change for the good of the mission, think outside the box, and allow staff to do the same.

Now, it may be that some of our staff's new ideas seem a little over the top, but one goal is to bring a sense of joy to the facility for both resi-

dents and staff. Sometimes, it may even mean being a clown or becoming the captain of a cruise ship! Many residents were smiling when they saw the ship. Employees, as well as residents, wanted their picture taken with the captain of the cruise ship! It was a time of joy and a time of healing for the soul.

We also made a concerted effort to support the spiritual well-being of all the residents across the campus. Therefore, we were very happy to have our chaplain, Fr. Charles Ocul, AJ, return to celebrate Mass six days a week at Maria Joseph Manor Personal Care and three days a week at Emmanuel Center. Additionally, he was



Ms. Jody Vanhorn, activities director, acted as a clown for residents in the Manor.



also able to provide the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick for our residents. We also increased the number of our SSCM sisters serving in the facilities. Sr. Joanne Marie Schutz serves as sacristan and pastoral visitor at Maria Joseph Manor; Sr. Gloria Marie is sacristan at Emmanuel Center; and Sr. Sara Swayze provides music for both facilities on Feast days and Sundays. Also, at Emmanuel Center,

Ms. Kristen Williams, activities director at Emmanuel Center, posed as captain of the cruise ship used to lift spirits during Nursing Home Week.

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Sr. Paracleta Amrich serves as chaplain, and Sr. Mary Kate Mensch works in activities. Sr. Jana Polokova serves as a pastoral visitor to the residents at The Meadows, and Sr. Christopher Godlewski serves as director of The Meadows. Sr. Seton Marie Connolly is a chaplain at our new Sunset Hospice Unit at Emmanuel Center. Going forward, we hope that our employees will put into practice the spirit and goals of the founding Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius at Maria Joseph Manor.

Education for Mission

We want all our employees to continue taking a close look at who they are and the importance of their work as it relates to our mission. They will be the ones to make the decision to continue to serve in the mission of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius. To that end, we believe that it is essential for our employees to know the story of our founding, and our mission, charism, and values to better realize who we are, what we stand for, and how that touches everyone who works with us.

We have added an expanded section on the history and mission of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius to the orientation of all Maria Joseph Continuing Care Community employees. We now include education on the lives of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Although Saints Cyril and Methodius belong to the ninth century, their outlook and achievements are as modern as ours. They recognized the importance of speaking to others in their language. Today, that might include the many forms of social media. The saintly brothers saw the importance of acknowledging and training local leaders, as we try to do. They taught and ministered using the accepted local customs and culture of the people. They were risk-takers. The Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius recognize all these achievements as equally crucial for today.



Information about the community's emblem worn by Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius was a part of the mission education program for employees.

In addition to the history of our patron saints, we also share information regarding the community pin that all of our sisters wear as our community's emblem. Both during the presentation and afterwards, many employees have commented that they had no idea that every aspect of the design on the pin had a specific meaning.

Ritual

The blessing of hands was an essential part of the final session of the grant program. Our employees were reminded that when they reach out their hands to provide care or service, doing their work as part of the care of others, they say, "You are important to us, and you are cared for by many who value you and your needs." During the service, employees were invited to extend their hands and observe their appearance, to stop for a moment to think of all they do with their hands each day, reaching out

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to the needs of our residents physically, spiritually, and emotionally. This is an essential part of our legacy of compassionate care.

The sisters then prayed the following prayer for all those present:

BLESSED be the works of your hands that comfort those in need.

BLESSED be your hands that provide hope and strength to those who are suffering.

BLESSED be your hands that give peace to those in fear and pain.

BLESSED be your hands that nurture and care for the lonely.

BLESSED be your hands that wipe away tears.

BLESSED be your hands that have reached out to those in need.

BLESSED be your hands that comfort those who mourn.

BLESSED be your hands that carry out tasks as part of caring for each other, your family, and the community.

BLESSED be the works of your hands through God who will BLESS you and equip you to fulfill His purpose for your life.

Employees were reminded that by joining the ministry of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius at Maria Joseph Manor, Emmanuel, Nazareth, and The Meadows, they have chosen to bless others with their hearts, minds, and hands in the work they do. They were invited to come forward and extend their hands to receive a blessing with oil in the sign of the cross, recognizing the holiness of what they do every day as they share in our mission and help to maintain our legacy.

Person after person reported that this blessing of hands was one of the most powerful aspects of the program and something that they repeatedly return to as an important memory in their lives. Hearing this, we plan to repeat this blessing of hands with all employees every year during Nursing Home Week.

Sisters and staff participated in the blessing of hands as the final session of the grant program. Employees continue to remark on the significance of the ritual in their lives. (All photos are used with permission of the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius)



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Outcomes

As the weeks passed, we felt a positive change in the atmosphere on campus. Even our more seasoned staff felt the same sense of joy. One long-term employee said the staff was “deeply touched by the process of getting to know yourself and the change in leadership (the right people in the right places). There's more listening, no pushing people aside. Staff members feel heard even if some things can't change quickly. I feel like there is more teamwork.”

Another employee stated, “I think there is a huge change in the atmosphere, and I think it is because we are now really putting the mission in the forefront of everything. The staff here are now dedicated to doing that. Our executive director embraces it along with our whole leadership team.” She also noted that employees “have their eyes on the sisters and try to model what they do. And what they do, what they helped us learn about ourselves, the blessing of the hands, that really changes the way we think and the way we go about our jobs. Our whole campus has become so much more united and able to work with one another. It is a beautiful change in scenery, and it's just a beginning.”

Fifty-five years ago, when the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius opened Maria Joseph Manor, one building provided service to residents needing all levels of care. Twenty-five Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius served as nurses and administrators and worked in food service. Today, the facility has grown to include separate facilities for specific levels of care. As the facility has grown, the number of sisters serving at the facilities has decreased. At the same time, the need for both residents and families to be able to interact with sisters has increased. We began to wonder how our legacy at Maria Joseph will be preserved given that fewer sisters will serve there. We have found

that even though some of the sisters serve in part-time or volunteer positions as musicians, sacristans, or regular visitors, the simple presence of the sisters has provided a positive effect on residents, staff, and families and has helped to maintain the spirit and legacy of our congregation at Maria Joseph Continuing Care Community. The presence of the sisters reminds everyone not only of the history of the institution and the founding sisters but also that this ministry is still firmly connected to the Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius. All staff are invited to share in the mission-driven ministry that is Maria Joseph Continuing Care Community.

As we continue to re-imagine our presence at Maria Joseph Manor, we have learned that by encouraging employees to engage in various methods of self-knowledge, self-care, self-compassion, and professional growth, the result is employees who are more effective and happier in their work. By giving themselves to something more splendid, they become greater themselves. Overall, we count this as a win for everyone.

Reminder: Stay Connected

Please help NRRO keep our records and mailing lists up to date so that we can share “Engaging Aging” with the widest possible audience. If you have had changes in congregational leadership, personal contact information, or would like to be added to our mailing list, please send your new information to NRRO program associate Karen Canas (kcanas@usccb.org), or call 202-541-3215. Thank you!

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