



Engaging Aging

Planning for the Future: A Story of Personal and Communal Transformation

By Sister Renita Brummer, OSF

“I am ready. All I need is my Bible and an alarm clock.”

These words from one of our stalwart 90-year-old members during a community meeting in 1996 candidly summed up a five-year journey of personal and congregational discernment, study, companioning, and faithfulness.

In 1990, we had sought to answer the questions, “How shall we be for each other?” and “How shall we use our resources in fidelity to our mission of being a transforming presence of hope and joy in the spirit of St. Francis?”

In response to these questions, we embarked on a five-year journey full of surprises, reimagining, letting go, and re-engaging our mission—not borne out of necessity or crises, but out of a call to discern how to invest ourselves more freely and fully in mission for the sake of the Gospel. The journey led us deep into transformation, culminating in a collaborative venture with Catholic Charities of the St. Louis Archdiocese and divesting of our Motherhouse.

Today our Motherhouse site is the home of a large public high school in the heart of Ferguson, MO. Our central offices are a welcoming presence in

“The future enters into us in order to transform itself in us long before it happens.”

Rainer Maria Rilke



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Kirkwood, MO. Our senior sisters are living their mission and being a transforming presence at assisted living, memory care, and skilled care units at the Cardinal Ritter Senior Services Campus in Shrewsbury. These communities are all part of St. Louis County, MO. How did this happen? We ourselves sometimes wonder.

Since our founding in St. Louis in 1901, conversion and pilgrimage have been key elements of our journey. Not only were these deep themes for St. Francis, but they are also part of the legacy left to us by our three Foundresses, Mothers Solana Leczna, Hilaria Matz, and Ernestine Matz. Mother Ernestine summed it all up saying, “No place too far. No service too humble. No person too lowly.”

As we trace our journey through renewal and General Chapter directives, Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) initiatives, geographic ministry history, and stories of our wise elders, we recognize how the Spirit of the Lord has continually called us to discernment, itinerancy, and mission. Our model of being in mission has been to respond to needs wherever they might be and create community with God’s people. We did not found institutions. We went among people as a Gospel presence ever nimble and ready to discern the next call, always transforming and “being transformed.” This commitment to being a transforming presence is why, since 1901, our Motherhouse has existed in four different locations within the St. Louis area. Our Leaders always saw the next invitation to discern, let go and let God. Each move gave birth to new relationships, greater presence, and a deeper understanding of mission.

Choosing Discernment and Imagination

The General Chapter of 1990 led us to places of challenge and hope that we could not have

imagined. After extensive prayer, study, and discussion, we committed to discernment as our way of life. We also embarked on a Motherhouse Futures Project to assess our current and future retirement needs, and to determine how we could better use the resource of our Motherhouse for mission.

Choosing to be women of discernment created the HOW we would move forward. The Motherhouse Futures Study was the WHY. At the heart of the Motherhouse Futures Project was the commitment to guarantee sustainable, long-term, quality care for our dear aging sisters. Additionally, we would commit the resource of our Motherhouse to meet the emerging critical needs of North St. Louis County.

Experts were engaged, studies completed, and proposals considered. Through it all, we remained steadfast to four “non-negotiables:”

- transparency, communication, and engagement with all our sisters;
- collaboration with others as the way to use our resources for mission;
- faith in the discernment process;
- and finally, we would never shrink from “difficult decisions.”

Our Motherhouse Futures Study made it quite clear that, given our size and our Franciscan value of being in relationship, our desire to provide for our senior members would need to be collaborative. We realized it was not feasible or fiscally responsible to expand or renovate our Motherhouse space. It also became clear that a licensed continuum of care was essential.

In November 1994, along with consultants, legal counsel, and a consulting nurse, we invited ten congregations in St. Louis to a meeting to determine interest in developing an inter-

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congregational facility with ambitious standards of care. We could structure the facility to sustain itself and outlive the needs of the participating congregations. Each congregation could rest assured that eldercare for their members would include spiritual and communal needs.

At that time, the congregations did not express interest in pursuing such a possibility on our Motherhouse property, so we then considered forty acres of rural scenic property that we owned just outside St. Louis County. Initially this seemed an idyllic location for a continuum of

Retired Franciscan Sisters (below, counterclockwise from left) Madonna, Olivia, Juanita, Lucia and Marcia, pose in the lobby of Mother of Perpetual Help Assisted Living on Carberry Campus. Lay persons and sisters from other communities live in the facility that features spiritual heritage art from the Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.



care retirement facility. Upon further study, the location was too far from healthcare services and our sisters in active ministry, and it did not have enough population to attract personnel or potential facility residents.

We also learned that Cardinal Ritter Institute of the Archdiocese of St. Louis was looking to develop a residential care facility to complete its continuum of care services. Through discernment and negotiation, we decided to collaborate with the Archdiocese. Our participation consisted of a contractual agreement which mutually guaranteed a designated number of rooms for our sisters, a voting-member position on the corporate board, and full participation in the planning and design of the new facility at Cardinal Carberry Campus. The space would include elements which the sisters considered important: a chapel, a large room for gathering, and recreational space. With our congregation in mind, the new assisted living facility name would be Mother of Perpetual Help.

Opening Minds & Preparing Hearts

Though challenging, preparing the physical space and negotiating the relationship with the Archdiocese did not prove as much of a challenge as preparing the hearts of our sisters.

Leadership designated a Pilgrim Committee to work with the Director of Aging and Retirement to create a plan to transition the sisters, psychologically and spiritually, to the new retirement facility. For more than six months the Pilgrim Committee, Leadership Team members, and consulting clinical psychologists met with sisters individually and in listening sessions.

We challenged senior sisters to reflect on questions including: What do you need from the Community to help you in this move? If you are carrying hurt, sadness, anger, or fear, what can help bring about healing? What would give you

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Sister Dolores (left) visits with Sister Gayle on Foundation Day at Mother of Perpetual Help Assisted Living. The entire Community gathers several times a year for Masses and celebration meals at Mother of Perpetual Help Assisted Living.

a sense of home? To remain connected to the community, what do you need and what do you want?

The sisters identified concerns such as: living with other people; not being in “control” of the facility; not having familiar spiritual symbols and rituals; losing a degree of independence; losing favored tasks and hobbies; and, of “being forgotten.”

At the end of one of the sessions, one of the sisters said, “This was a beautiful time together. I think we are beginning to see our moving more in the sense of being sent to a new mission. There are many things we can do together to build and create community in the new place.”

Our Director of Aging and Retirement, along with the Director of Nursing from Cardinal Ritter Senior Services at the new facility, met with each sister to determine the best level of care for her and to explain licensing policies.

The Pilgrim Committee arranged for each senior sister to have a companion sister with whom she could share joys and concerns. They would pray a special “Pilgrim Prayer” together, would shop together for room essentials (which proved

to be quite a thrill since many had never had the opportunity to shop for a bedspread or towels!), and the companion sister would assist with packing. The entire community prayed the “Pilgrim Prayer” daily in communion with the senior sisters. This was a journey we were all making.

Approximately 30 sisters attended the groundbreaking for the new Cardinal Ritter Senior Services Mother of Perpetual Help facility, at which time Archbishop Rigali expressed his “delight that the Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help are participating in this project and will live in the new residence. Your presence will be a blessing for the whole Cardinal Carberry Campus.”

As construction progressed, our elder sisters were able to tour the site, see rooms, visit the chapel, and view future locations of our spiritual heritage artwork. One sister said, “These rooms are big, and there is a walk-in closet... and look at the size of my bathroom. I am ready to move.”

It was on this occasion that our dear, wise sister who is now deceased, proudly stood, and said, “I’m ready. All I need is my Bible and an alarm clock.” To this day, we cherish her Bible as a symbol of being itinerant pilgrim people.

An Invitation To Transformation

Following construction, the Leadership Team visited each sister individually with prayer, a personalized “Call to Mission” card indicating her new place of residence, and a formal invitation from Mother of Perpetual Help Assisted Living to attend an open house event. The open house was a time for the sister to choose her room and to determine if she wanted a private phone. Each sister also received a copy of the letter mailed to her family members explaining “the why” of the transition with an invi-

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tation to visit, along with a personalized calling card listing her new address and phone number.

Fourteen sisters moved into skilled care. Eighteen sisters moved into assisted living, and seven sisters moved into independent living. Initially, the sisters occupied a private wing at each level of care. Time and preference changed that. The sisters discovered they really liked living next to others; liked praying and eating with others. Each sister found her own way to share her gifts. Sisters volunteered in the gift shop, played the organ for Mass, collected soda cans, led prayer services, and joined activity groups.

In so many ways, this move thirty years ago transformed us and provided new avenues of being a transforming presence with and for others, but there is more to this story. The Spirit had only just begun to invite us to transformation. What about our precious Motherhouse? How could it serve the mission entrusted to us?

Motherhouse as Serving Mission

Our home, Villa St. Joseph, was in North St. Louis County on forty spacious acres. Our property included not only the buildings, but also an orchard, vineyard, large vegetable garden, beautiful shrines created by the sisters, mature trees, and our own cemetery. Initially purchased from the Brothers of Mary in 1922 to serve as our Novitiate, by 1957 the property had transitioned into our Motherhouse, and had transformed us in so many ways.

This incredibly special space was our home. It was there we tended the grounds, were Novices, and professed vows in our beautiful chapel. It was there we began our renewal after Vatican II, buried our beloved sisters, and preserved our treasured spiritual art. It was from there that we “were sent forth to be a transforming presence.”

Throughout the 77 years the property was home to our community, there were building expansions to accommodate needs and to serve mission. The most recent addition had been in 1974 to create small group living units, larger dining and gathering spaces, and a large pool and gym with the belief that this investment would provide wholistic health for the sisters. The gym and pool were also part of the dream of creating a high school.

The Motherhouse, a place of peace and evangelization, became home and inspired creation of diverse ministries including: an Early Child Care Education Center, transitional housing for Bosnian refugees, food service preparation and distribution for a Council on Aging program, tutoring for immigrants, retreat services, a Secular Franciscan fraternity, and partner programs with an adjacent parish. With our senior sisters gone, it was now feeling hollow.

As a first step to determine how our Motherhouse resources could continue serving our mission, a fact-finding committee worked under the leadership of a consulting firm. The group assessed the unmet needs of North St. Louis County; analyzed our Community’s strengths, skills, and space; investigated zoning regulations; and given the proximity to St. Louis Lambert International Airport, delved into the impact of the airport expansion plans.

The initial four “non-negotiables” that guided our original process continued to call us to new dreams, to greater conversion, to a clearer articulation of our Franciscan charism, and to a deeper relationship with one other.

Reality and Surprising Voice of the Spirit

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The Spirit entered us. While we had a deep desire to keep our Motherhouse and use it for mission, something became clear as we gathered in discernment, as in the upper room. We were “being called” to a new way to be a transforming presence—to let go of our Motherhouse and to live among God’s people. This would free our assets to fulfill our mission without the responsibility and time commitment of sponsorship.

A great shift occurred. Now we were hiring a company to help us sell our property, relocate our congregational offices and archives, and find a home for our active sisters who were still living at the Motherhouse.

We soon learned that, due to airport expansion, the Ferguson Florissant school district was looking for property on which to build a new high school. They purchased our Motherhouse in February of 1999, establishing McCluer South-Berkeley High School, where minority enrollment is 97%. Of the students, 99% are below the poverty level. We’ve been told that programs there played a positive transforming role in the Ferguson racial riots of 2014-2015.

While we had been focusing on “what next,” the deep loss of leaving our Motherhouse had not yet surfaced. Moving out was about far more than making decisions about “things.” Memories and stories of hundreds of us permeated every space. Leadership decided what to keep as part of our legacy, what to share with others, and what to sell. We kept essential sacred art pieces; others we gifted to mission churches. Eventually, we realized that it matters not what physical items we preserve, but that we pass along the stories.

Invitations encouraged all of our sisters to gather for a celebration of ritual, prayer and remembering as we said goodbye to our Motherhouse. There were tears, laughter, gratitude, and most

importantly, peace knowing we had been faithful to discernment. There was also an unspoken realization that we had no idea of how letting go of a building would change us, of how we would have to re-create rituals and recommit to one another.

The few sisters who had been living at the Motherhouse relocated to local parish convents or clustered in apartment complexes. One of the sisters who had lived at the Motherhouse for twenty years realized, “This gives us the opportunity to go out and be with the people. It is a Franciscan way of life—to be God’s presence in the world.”

It was not an easy transition, but it enlarged our understanding of our mission to be a transforming presence. We learned that to transform, you must be willing to “be transformed.” And we were.

Collaboration and Surprising Fruits

Initially, we did not include our cemetery in the sale of the Motherhouse property. We soon realized the wisdom of relocating our deceased sisters to a St. Louis Archdiocesan cemetery. Even our deceased sisters could not rest in peace. Relocating them was another layer of loss, heartache, and pain. Today, all of our sisters are laid to rest in a special section of Resurrection Cemetery, which is near other congregations of women religious and many of God’s people. It is another way we have come to understand collaboration.

In August 1998, through God’s providence and a good realtor, we signed a formal contract for a piece of property in Kirkwood, Missouri, a property on which we were able to “design build.” At the groundbreaking ceremony on September 17, 1998, we added dirt from each of our previous Motherhouses to the soil. Tau Center, as

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we chose to call our new space, would focus on our mission to be a transforming presence of Gospel hope and joy.

Today our Tau Center congregational offices are in the heart of Kirkwood, an established St. Louis neighborhood. We are close to a child-care center, post office, Starbucks, bank, physical rehab center, historic train station, and a Children's Museum. Other congregations and groups use our center for meetings. We host our Franciscans for Earth events. We are home to an emerging Secular Franciscan Fraternity. Neighbors recognize us as a place of peace and prayer. Each person who walks through our doors is offered inspiration through the treasured spiritual heritage we brought with us: a stained-glass window of our Mother of Perpetual Help saved from our first Motherhouse; the large Tau cross that had hung above the altar and beautiful Emil Frei stained-glass windows of St. Francis from the chapel in our Motherhouse in Ferguson; and a large commemorative original wood sculpture depicting Francis and our mission.

Since divesting of our Motherhouse more than thirty years ago, we have each experienced

Tau Center in Kirkwood, Missouri, houses the Franciscan Sisters' archives, their congregational offices, and various small and large gathering spaces. It was designed without a chapel or residential space, inviting the sisters to live and worship with the people.



Above from left, Sisters Mary Jane and Rebecca greet Sister Stephanie at the front desk of Tau Center. The stained-glass window behind the lobby desk is from the sisters' original Motherhouse and the Tau cross pictured previously hung above the altar in their Ferguson Motherhouse Chapel.

transformation, personally and communally. We know our mission is a living, emerging mission that will continue to call us into new spaces and relationships. We know the cost and freedom of being itinerant Franciscans. We know the grace and risk of being women of discernment.

Our dear sister was right. All we really needed, then and now, is the Bible and an alarm clock as we trust the living Word of God and remain awake to the Spirit.



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