



Engaging Aging

On Right-Sizing and Transformation

By Sister Michelle Marie Stachowiak, CSSF and Sister Janet Marie Adamczyk, CSSF

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Jeremiah 29:11

When the Felician Sisters of Our Lady of Hope Province participated in our Provincial Chapter in the summer of 2017, we recognized that we were experiencing challenges caused by abundance. The Chapter body identified properties as one of our critical issues, formulating the statement: *As Franciscan women of the Gospel, we desire to live in this world as pilgrims and strangers (1 P 2:1) “who neither appropriate nor defend anything as their own,” (TOR VI. 22) while working to right-size or re-purpose our properties and to divest ourselves of unnecessary possessions.* While serving as members of the second leadership team (2015-2021) of a geographically diverse North American Province formed only a few years prior from eight former provinces, we heard this Chapter directive loud and clear. But how to begin? The first provincial leadership team (2009-2015) had already set the table for right-sizing by creating and approving guiding principles that could be applied to any related endeavor anywhere in the province.

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Sister Michelle Marie Stachowiak, CSSF

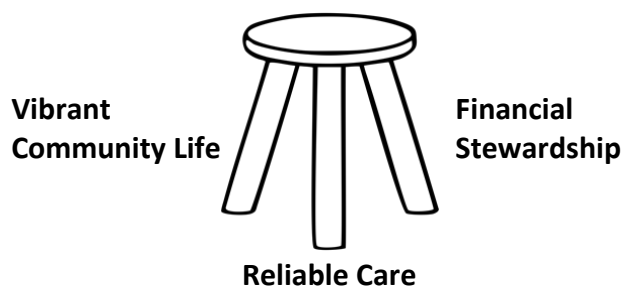
2018, they have been entrusted with their province’s right-sizing project. Sister Michelle Marie previously served in the fields of education, healthcare, and a ministry of presence among the homeless. She holds a Master of Physical Therapy degree from D’Youville College, NY. Sister Janet Marie has served for 42 years in both clinical and administrative areas of health care. She holds a Master of Business Administration degree from Madonna University, MI.



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What became clear to us was how frequently we grappled with orchestrating a balance among vibrant community life, good fiscal stewardship, and the increasing healthcare needs of our members. Statistics, demographics, current realities, and projections about future trends were already key components of provincial gatherings. To these we added the image of a three-legged stool, explaining that if any one leg is weak, the whole chair collapses. In our discussions about *why* to right-size, the three-legged stool took on a life of its own.



A strong Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) kept the current realities before the leadership team. The provincial budget, already exceeding set parameters, was steadily increasing. We were engaged in assessments seeking alternative ways to continue providing reliable healthcare for our members in unlicensed facilities located in former provincial houses. (Because our care centers are unlicensed, the province is their only source of funding.)

However, it is community life that tells the story of why we chose the term “right-sizing” instead of “down-sizing.” We saw that sisters were isolating themselves in our convents, spreading out across vast buildings. For example, only 50 sisters were occupying space that 200 or more sisters would have occupied in the past! The provincial leadership team noticed how the three key variables of communal life, care, and financial stewardship were interacting to create a perfect storm instead of the future filled with

hope that Felician Sisters were seeking.

Committee Formed

Once you recognize a situation for what it is, it’s much more difficult to ignore. The provincial minister appointed a core right-sizing committee tasked with intentionally promoting the actual right-sizing of the province. This committee was comprised of the CAO of the Felician Sisters of North America, two provincial councilors responsible for community life and healthcare of the members, and the regional councilor–liaison to sisters of a specific geographic region. If right-sizing involved adjustments affecting healthcare centers, the Director of Health Services was also included in core committee discussions and presentations. This core right-sizing committee remained constant throughout the right-sizing process, minus the variations already noted. It was tasked to interact with the sisters in each of the province’s geographic areas to learn about and suggest locally appropriate ways to balance the three-legged stool. In most areas, a local right-sizing committee was created, comprised of sisters who would meet with local sisters to assess their needs, ideas, and preferences. The local committee then worked closely with the provincial core committee to devise a plan for the “convent of the future”. In areas where local committees had not succeeded in the past, all interested sisters were invited to be involved at every local right-sizing meeting.

Relevant Provincial Guidelines

The most relevant provincial guidelines applied in every area of the province are as follows:

- Define a set range in size based on the appropriate amount of living space per sister
- The most recently renovated areas of the convent (and hence best living space) were to be utilized when creating a new convent footprint.

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- Certain types of specific functional spaces were to be present in the new convent footprint (for example, one gathering space large enough to accommodate all local sisters).
- The new convent footprint was to be scalable, to accommodate future incremental adjustments.
- The new convent footprint would be defined locally and affirmed by provincial leadership before any repurposing would take place.

Challenging Decision to Change Healthcare

The actual right-sizing was an incredibly challenging process to initiate. It began with the painful decision of the provincial leadership team to cease provision of 24-hour healthcare in two former provincial houses, one with six and the other with 14 sisters receiving it. Various attempts in the past to improve efficiency and economics had failed to adequately address the increasing costs of providing appropriate healthcare to the small populations of sisters in these two locations. In addition, it was nearly impossible to consistently engage reliable staffing in one of the locations.

Once the decision was made, it took on an unexpected level of urgency. Intending to make sure that the sisters and affected staff were informed in proper order required: (a) immediately initiating relocation plans for the sisters requiring 24-hour healthcare; (b) addressing human resource concerns; (c) caring for staff who were like extended family; and (d) taking into account how this decision affected other religious living with us.

Provincial leadership believed that background information such as finances and other barriers to providing appropriate healthcare had been clearly and frequently shared with the sisters of the province. However, this decision to cease 24-hour healthcare in these two locations broke

the hearts of the sisters. Certainly, it most impacted the sisters residing in these two homes. However, for sisters across the province, this was a decision unlike any other. It signaled the end of a way of life that everyone had assumed would continue indefinitely. The shock and pain of the decision rippled through the sisters of the province.

The work of closure unfolded with what felt like compassion. Each sister was interviewed individually so that personal needs could continue to be met and she could make an informed decision about where she preferred to relocate. While sisters residing in Pennsylvania had options as close as 90 minutes to 3.5 hours away, all options for the sisters of the southwest necessitated relocating to a new area of the country. Ultimately, they chose to do this together. Still, there are sisters of Our Lady of Hope Province who would likely describe these particular days of right-sizing, experienced as profound loss, as more difficult to bear than even the COVID-19 pandemic.



Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Convent, Rio Rancho, NM, was one of the convents closed by the Felician Sisters. It is now part of Catholic Charities in New Mexico. The rectory on the property is being used for social services. (Photo used with permission)

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Continued Changes for Smaller Properties

While change was unfolding for some of the larger convents, other smaller properties demanded a long, loving look too. The cradle of the Felician Sisters, located in a remote area in Wisconsin, had witnessed the failure of several attempts to reinvent it. Another property, a respite site for sisters, became increasingly underutilized because sisters could no longer safely climb stairs, carry heavy bags to it, or provide the manual labor necessary to adequately maintain it over time. Yet another convent building in Pennsylvania, historically connected to an original pioneer Felician Sister in North America, stood nearly empty. Large capital expenditures were looming for these sites. In addition, attempts to repurpose a former orphanage in Delaware were being met with furious neighborhood resistance. Where was the future filled with hope during these times?

Beginning Signs of Transformation

And yet, slowly, transformation happened. Local right-sizing committees began to gain traction and took seriously the 2017 Chapter call to divest and repurpose. Learnings in one area of the province better informed processes used in another. Generally, in developing a new convent footprint, the provincial leadership team observed the following:

- Current realities, demographics, and finance were reviewed frequently, both provincially and locally. We all seemed to need time to absorb the information and understand the ramifications of doing nothing.
- Local right-sizing committees and sisters at large reviewed and came to understand the role of the general guidelines established for use across the province.
- In ongoing conversation among sisters, committees, the core right-sizing committee, and provincial leadership, local convent footprints that satisfied the provincial guidelines were created locally, adjusted communally, and eventually affirmed by all. Often sisters were polled using green/red cards to signify agreement/disagreement, allowing every voice a chance to be heard. One could look around the room to witness the leanings of the local group. Often, sisters holding red cards thought of details that others did not, leading to adjustments in the plan. Typically, a sea of green was achieved locally before a plan was submitted to provincial leadership.
- Once the sisters actually occupied the new convent footprint, opportunities for repurposing buildings and/or large spaces for ministry became a reality.



Felician Sisters gathered in Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Convent, Livonia, MI, (left) to address changes that would impact the convents in the province. In meetings such as this, care was taken to give the sisters an opportunity to voice their thoughts and feelings, and to offer thorough information about process and plans for change. (Photo used with permission)

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St. Francis Residence, Buffalo, NY, became home to the Catholic Health Programs of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE), serving the residents of Buffalo while also allowing the sisters to receive health care without leaving home. (Photo used with permission)

Examples of Repurposing

It was made clear early in the right-sizing process that repurposing was the responsibility of the provincial leadership team, in dialogue with local sisters and others.

In New York, vacated building spaces offered a college much needed room for expansion, welcomed a Catholic Health day-program that serves the city and allows sisters to access health services without leaving home, and will soon provide mixed senior housing for the area.

Remember the sisters in Pennsylvania who sacrificed 24-hour healthcare? The independent sisters now reside in a right-sized convent footprint inside the original building. The vacated building space of these sisters welcomed a well-established program that cares for unaccompanied migrant children in a safe and home-like environment until they can be placed with their families in the United States.

The Felician Sisters of the southwest, who relocated due to the inability to maintain reliable 24-hour healthcare onsite, joined a large Felician convent in Illinois. This particular convent in Illinois has also become home to sisters of at least four other religious communities, creating a more diverse local Felician community now

living in a multi-congregational home where many charisms are embraced and celebrated. The large vacated convent in the southwest became part of Catholic Charities in New Mexico when three remaining sisters chose to move into a regular house nearby. The former rectory on this property offers a supervised and safe living environment for pregnant teens.

At this point, almost all the former provincial houses in the United States are now appropriately sized and scalable to accommodate fluctuations in sister populations. Both the CAO of Felician Sisters of North America and Felician Services Inc, the ministry arm of Our lady of Hope Province, have been assisting in creatively repurposing vacated building spaces for ministry uses. Repurposing buildings for mission has been an “all hands on deck” kind of experience and has challenged us all to think outside the box.

More Positive Outcomes

More opportunities, some we would never have imagined ourselves, are arising every day. The remote property in Wisconsin where Felician Sisters were originally established in North America has become the North American foundation for another community of

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women religious. The empty historical convent in Pennsylvania will soon be engaged for a secular project incredibly aligned with Felician mission and values. One of the most challenging projects – the conversion of the former orphanage in Delaware – now boasts a neighborhood of homes with affordable housing options and “forever green” space allowing all in the area to enjoy the natural beauty of the property. Children once more run and play on the lawns. A Felician Sister resides in an apartment on the premises to offer pastoral care to interested residents.

Expanding and Deepening our Potential

Shifting the way we view, value, and utilize our space and divesting ourselves of properties we can no longer justify keeping has yielded hoped for results from the right-sizing and divesting. In just two years, the provincial budget was realigned within established parameters and remains so today. This has freed resources and allowed Felician Sisters to risk new endeavors, such as partnering with Catholic Charities in supporting rent protection during the COVID-19 pandemic and donating to institutions and organizations across the province that have been addressing food scarcity. It has allowed us to bear the financial consequences of missioning

three lively sisters to a poor urban area to serve in a ministry of presence among people who are disadvantaged and kept so by unfair systems.

After the two small Felician care centers were closed, provision of 24-hour healthcare was strengthened across the province and became more secure in the five convents that still provide it. In addition, the province has been engaged in adopting the Eden Alternative, a way of shaping healthcare that can move sisters from a medical to a ministry model of aging. Sisters are learning how to stay independent longer and, perhaps, enjoy a little more fullness of life. We are paying better attention to the reality that every sister has something to contribute to the common good and has a right to make personal choices regarding her health.

Community living has perhaps experienced the biggest transformation of all. We have learned that previous vast physical distances across our homes allowed other types of distances to develop too. There are some locations where ageism and ableism were unspoken and un-addressed aspects of daily convent life. We did not recognize this at the time. Now we are growing capacity to function more like a family where every sister belongs. One experiment to help nurture these relationships has been movement



The former Our Lady of Grace Home for Children in Delaware is now Our Lady of Grace Village, a neighborhood of homes with affordable housing options for families. (Photo used with permission)

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toward the concept of “One Convent for All”. This is simply an intentionally more collaborative manner of providing leadership where every sister residing in the building belongs to a single household and all sisters are cherished for what they *can* offer rather than separated for what they *cannot*.

Releasing and Rediscovering

Often, sisters did not initially support the right-sizing process. It’s not easy to vacate spaces that have been so sacred to our cherished past. Some sisters saw the wisdom in the right-sizing endeavor, recalling how they had done this for their aging parents in their original homes when those homes no longer served their parents’ needs. Others demonstrated resistance to right-sizing, as if manifesting an unconscious form of loyalty to a well-lived past. In every geographic area, sisters complained that the allotted space guidelines would be too tight, not enough for the sisters to perform daily tasks. For most, though not all, this has not actually been the case. We have challenged one another to reimagine our convent footprints by embracing multipurpose spaces where, once upon a time, every room served only one function.

Sometimes, sisters also did not initially want to participate in divesting themselves of personal and communal items that were no longer needed. In recent years, Our Lady of Hope Province has been using Otto Scharmer’s Theory U as a means of processing together. For annual reports each year and during dialogue at community meetings, sisters are invited to consider what they are ready and willing to release as well as what they hope to embrace relative to community living. Like the Paschal Mystery where death leads to resurrection, we have been exploring together how releasing what no longer serves can create space for

what God wills us to embrace.

For example, sisters of the province have witnessed how freeing vacated building spaces no longer needed by the community has literally created room for new ministries to emerge. Sisters divesting of unnecessary personal possessions are finding that there seems to be more time available for enriching activities with others. There is a saying that encourages us to be careful that what we own does not begin to own us. As a province no longer burdened with huge, mostly unoccupied households, we have made space to rediscover something else that never ceased being of value to us: Mission.

Some Felician Sisters, among both leadership and membership, have been scarred by the right-sizing process. However, for many of us, releasing property and possessions has made us a lighter, leaner, more responsive community of religious women. Right-sizing has invited us to be in more intimate, intentional relationship with one another. It has offered a renewed energy and interest in mission. It brings excitement for a hope-filled future that does not look as expected. There is a transformed focus, in a less distracted manner, on the Gospel mission. Our right-sizing journey is far from over. We will continue to celebrate signs of transformation!

Resources:

We’d like to use this space in a different way, for there are some experiences that nothing and everything prepare us for. Right-sizing was like that. So, we can’t offer any general resources. But we want to acknowledge and express profound gratitude to those who were special resources for us: Provincial Minister Sister Mary Christopher Moore and the Provincial Council; CAO Mark Schafale; CFO Sean Bannon; Christine Lynd and Sister Noel Marie Gabriel of Health Services; Terry Schweizer and Felician Services, Inc.; dedicated facilitators, speakers, consultants and ministry partners; local right-sizing committees; and all Felician Sisters of Our Lady of Hope Province. It takes a village!

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