

LCWR 2023 Annual Assembly Breakout Session
Enlarging the Tent: Collaboration and Expansion of Charism
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We entered into the second full day of the LCWR Conference, having been immersed in the understanding that we live in relationships. Relationships form the web of life from the smallest of molecular life to the most complex of our human existence. It is within these relationships that life comes forth and within which hope is cultivated and found. With this as our background, the Cotton Bowl breakout room was filled to capacity as we chose to explore Enlarging the Tent: Collaboration and Expansion of Mission. Our guiding question was: What relationships are essential as we seek our preferred futures?

As leaders, often focused, and rightfully so, on our internal relationships, this time was to draw us outward and imagine what can we create together for the sake of mission beyond our congregational boundaries. Who are we invited to become for the sake of mission and with whom are we invited to walk? It soon became clear that to speak of Enlarging the Tent is not merely doing the same thing in a new way or with new people. It is genuine transformation of expression of self while remaining true to self and identity. It is indeed holy mystery at work as we listen to the spirit at work within.

We had the amazing opportunity to listen to the words and wisdom of five women pathfinders. In our morning session, we heard three stories of community transformation. These stories cannot be told in full in this short piece, however, you are invited to visit the links for a deeper dive into what came forth. What we are able to convey is that within each of these stories transformation occurred as space was made for new life to come forth.

Our morning speakers were:

[Land as Sponsorship, Watertown, SD](#) – Barbara Younger, OSB
[Gerard Place, Buffalo, NY](#) – Teresa Miklitsch, OSF
[Core el Centro, Milwaukee, WI](#) – Madeline Gianforte, CSA

Barbara shared her community openness to be led into a discernment process that first and foremost made way for grief and loss to be embraced, held and released. They were accompanied on this journey by Dr. Beth Lipsmeyer and Dr. Ted Dunn. This opening of space then led to a shift in consciousness and changed perspective that could welcome change and listen with new ears. Such listening led the community to expand their world/their system beyond self and reclaim the inner voice and soul of the community. They entered a time of experimentation and learning leading to various thresholds of new ways of being. It was a Transformative Visioning not a strategic plan. The land which once primarily supported and gave life to this community of women is now the home and legacy of the sisters, offering life in abundance for multi-use purposes and opportunities as an intergenerational community is brought forth.

Teresa spoke next of the desire and dream of twelve congregations to make a difference and break the cycle of poverty, homelessness and hopelessness experienced by people in the city of Buffalo. It began with a dream, a seed, and the vision of three sisters empowered by their communities. A building came forth from the grounds of a former parish center. And from that

seed life emerged. The founding congregations moved to a sponsorship of *influence* not as the doers but as the ones who could give credibility as the community sought out loans, and gifts to support the transformation and creation of programs that would transform the lives of those most in need. We heard the wisdom to follow the vision no matter from where it arises and listen to your dreams.

Our final sharing of the morning session came from Sr. Madeline Goanforte, CSA who spoke of an innovative collaboration of unlikely partners in the area of health and wellness. All partners came from the universal mission of health and wellness to create a place offering integrative natural health services in a neighborhood that lacked access to basic health services let alone the services that can lead to self-empowerment. Many of the partners were young lay leaders bringing their talents in various health modalities, their vision, and their dreams to the collaborative in a spirit of mutuality in relationship. The gift of the religious was again the gift no longer of taking the lead but of influencers. What some bystanders viewed as a spa was in essence a place of empowerment, healing, health navigation, nutrition, children's wellness, and more. Re-education of what is needed to shape and change lives is an essential aspect of the work.

At the conclusion of our morning time, small groups shared and asked: what did we hear; where have we noticed/experienced movement from obstacle to opportunity; and how might we collaborate more for the sake of mission? The sharing was rich as was experienced by the noise level of the room. We noted that collaboration happens in many ways: within the organization: with our lay co-workers; as a process of transformation; as a path to serving in places beyond ourselves. Collaboration happens best when we are open and inviting to others who want to join with us.

We came back in the afternoon to reflect upon who are we becoming for the sake of mission; who are we invited to be, Drawn by Sacred Mystery; how are we including and inviting others to engage with us for mission?

Sara Marks, executive director of the [Franciscan Federation](#), joined us. Sara immediately caught our attention by asking "What happens when you collaborate from different spaces with different destinations?" As she unpacked this question, she touched upon the many emergent groups that are forming. The federation, a work in progress, is seen as a hub to provide a place where relational connections are made between and among these groups. It invites and provides space for building different relationships beyond the traditional congregation relationships. The federation serves as a network of intentional communities. The challenge is the continual process to remain relevant. To succeed in collaboration one must welcome, give voice, invite people to stay and give space. Laity and religious who share a charism have similar goals but different destinations.

Sara left us with these questions:

- Do we know who is in our boat?
- Who is in our fleet?
- Can we collaborate across the boats?
- Can we embrace difference?

She reminded us The Water is Wide.

Brittany Koteles from the Nuns & Nones Land Justice Project was our final presenter. The hopes of the Nuns & Nones, described as a modern religious community, is to live otherwise, that is counterculturally. Brittany leads the offshoot project of Land Justice which asks the question how can religious lands support the decision to live otherwise? She continues by saying that land is the place where racial and ecological justice can and must take place.

Brittany shared with us the story of the [Shinnecock Community](#) on Long Island. This is an example of solidarity between the Shinnecock Community and the Sisters of St. Joseph. It is an act of land justice. The work of Nuns & Nones Land Justice Project is and has been to build a learning community that explores with women religious the issue of land justice and seeks to make a change in the land paradigm in which we live. She urges us to consider how might the moment of land divestment be a moment of justice? She reminds us that we are a leader in the constituency of the largest landowner in the world and invites us to consider making a path and setting a direction in land justice. Brittany wonders if we can not only expand our tent but step outside the tent.

Having had such a rich sharing of ideas, we took some time in our small groups to express our thoughts and how we were experiencing Holy Mystery moving among us. Time did not allow for extensive large group feedback. However, a few ideas and questions that surfaced were:

- How do we leverage and use our resources to bridge the gap between young people and the church?
- How do we build on the current collaborations already in place? For instance, the collaborations with our sisters in the various countries of Africa.
- There are emerging movements within congregations from which we can learn to expand the tent through shared charism and values. Covenant companions, secular groups aligned with religious vowed women, and associate life are a few. How might we stay informed of these internal movements?
- How can we stay informed of the emerging ideas and relationships that are coming forth for the sake of external mission?

As the group dispersed to return to the general session, the energy and conversations continued. Gratitude was expressed to our five women who opened pathways for us and invited us to create our own pathways as wisdom directs us.