

**LCWR 2023 Annual Assembly Breakout Session**  
**International Congregations: The Unique Challenges of Our Emerging Future**  
**Submitted by Sally Hodgdon, CSJ**

We had about 85 participants who were enthusiastic and engaged with one another very easily. They were so appreciative of having the time together to share on life as leaders of an international congregation. One thing we, the planning committee, missed was to arrange for a translator for our sessions. This resource is critical when dealing with international congregations. A sister from the United States who often translates for us on the international level, informed us of this need when we gathered for the first session and she was able to be the translator. We created a bi-lingual group of Spanish/English and the sister translated in this group.

In the morning session, we shared blessings and challenges of being international congregations. All of us were immersed in the blessings of being international, as we listened in the small circles and then in the larger group. Our awareness of the blessings grew, and these blessings are key to how religious life will evolve in the future.

Some of the **blessings**: enrichment in many areas; value different cultural perspectives; greater awareness as a global community and being a part of it; presence in and support of ministries in many countries; diversity stretches us and we enjoy international celebrations; learning different ways of approaching issues; world communion through our charism; to see how zeal is expressed in different countries; sense of feeling welcomed everywhere; broader understanding of church; multiplicity of languages makes us listen more deeply, suspend quick judgment and engage differently.

The same was true for us as we listened to the **challenges**, in that we developed a greater awareness of them, as well as how we have grown and will continue to grow through these challenges.

The main **challenges** are: Domination by one country over others, the United States is/was at times the dominant culture, and how do we foster leadership without dominating; initial formation with so many cultures is difficult; general leadership often does not understand the US lifestyle, way of governance or prayer styles; different styles of leadership in countries: hierarchical versus circular; understanding of power, authority, accountability, synodality and collegiality is different; challenge of resources not available in all countries and the equity of how we share resources; prejudice and racism, sometimes poor treatment of sisters from third world countries; clarity of what living interculturality means; to understand reality in other cultures and deal with mis-perceptions and other languages - how to build/maintain unity in this complex setting; impact of having a commissary in one province/region within the international congregation; living into new governmental structures; to build trust within the many countries/cultures; to understand the varied thought processes of different cultures; move from "provincial thinking" to thinking of the whole congregation; dealing with our wounded histories in Europe and other countries; and encourage newer/younger sisters to assume leadership.

**Bridges or Tools:** Some of the practical learnings that we received surfaced during the afternoon session when we shared the bridges or tools we have developed to navigate the cultural issues. Many of them are listed below:

## **Experiences That Have Helped Bridge Diversity:**

### Governance

- having intercultural leadership team; elect sisters from each continent to general government: training in interculturality for general leadership
- excellent outside facilitator for General Chapter: small group discussion before plenary, zoom with translation, speakers repeat what previous speaker has said, begin days with faith sharing in mixed language group
- study groups across the congregation in preparation for General Chapter; zoom meetings for same purpose
- process for writing new constitutions is international and dialogical

### Gatherings

- multi-cultural meetings at every level possible: leadership, formation personnel, tertianship, workshops on charism, renewal programs, etc. Use professional translators.
- cross-congregational committees to plan for restructuring/formation/justice; maintain momentum for restructuring while meeting needs of now and future planning
- inter-provincial programs that engage members from all provinces/regions each year; reunions

### Living

- elder sisters giving spiritual direction to younger; elders learning of mission from younger
- “helpers” from Africa came to take roles in administration, medical help, leadership member
- exchange “immersion” experiences for 1, 2, 3 months, 1 year
- intentional intercultural living: food, art, music, celebration of significant days in other cultures, incorporate diverse customs into worship
- intentional community—international, intercultural to serve homeless in Rome; another in multicultural LA

### Technology

- Zoom of various kinds across cultures: prayer services, entertainment, language learning, “sharing of the heart,” simply social; sharing personal videos to get to know one another
- simultaneous translation
- connectivity via What’s App, Messenger, Facebook; one-on-one meetings across languages, using Deepl translator through internet to communicate in writing

### Attitudinal

- respect the time/speed of each culture and attention to the nuance of words
- never stop listening to each—admitting vulnerability, encourage language learning;
- encourage US sisters to educate themselves on diversity & equity

### Formation

- continental novitiate; congregational novitiate; language learning in novitiate
- 1 year intercultural tertianship, inter-congregational formation,
- intercultural preparation for final vows; speakers on interculturality all ages; USIG interculturality workshops

- Wisdom Leader Experience - a 2<sup>nd</sup> novitiate for sisters from different countries
- integration program: how to live in different cultural contexts
- educational program in administration and management for younger members; faith and praxis skills for leadership program across cultures

### **Other**

- “Global Fund” to support institute programs, initiatives, so all can participate
- involvement of lay associates from around the world
- sisters under 70 share via zoom, then in person every two years
- creating age cohorts across congregations in the global south

### **Further Exploration with Members of International Congregations**

Possible topics:

- How to deal with transitioning from having been the dominant province or congregation leaders to being “wisdom” leaders and mentors as other countries assume the responsibility for congregational leadership.
- How to be more equitable in sharing resources while encouraging countries to be good fiscal stewards and to try to increase their resources.
- Best practices for formation and training of international leaders.
- Building trust and acceptance of cultural differences at all levels of leadership.
- Exposure and a candid dealing with our own prejudices, misperceptions and lack of trust of other cultures in our congregations.
- Interculturality is important but there are other sources for this topic.

### **Emergence of Religious Life in the Future**

It is clear for international congregations that the strength of intercultural support, understanding of one another’s reality and sharing of human and financial resources must be a core value and reality as religious life moves into its future.

Thank you for all you did to make the 2023 LCWR assembly a great and helpful experience.

[Sisters Sally Hodgdon, Mary Anne Foley, Eileen Burns, and Vicki Bergkamp \(absent\)](#)