



# Engaging Aging

## Journey to Collaborative Governance

### Sister Janice Bader, CPPS and Sister Judith Bell, FSM



*Sister Janice Bader, CPPS, currently serves as President of her congregation, the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, O'Fallon, Missouri.*

**At the invitation of the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO), Sister Janice Bader, CPPS, and Sister Judith Bell, FSM, agreed to share their congregational stories of creating a new governance structure to support and sustain the life of their members, mission, and charisma. Both sisters were instrumental in the development and implementation of this new model.**

**NRRO: What was happening in your congregations when you first recognized the need for significant change?**

**Sr. Janice:** When we came to our 2010 General Chapter, our community, which once was 600 members strong, was approximately 150 members. The last “class” or “band” to profess vows together made their profession in 1976. The latest member to enter our community professed her vows in 2000.

As the 2010 Chapter Members assembled, they were aware that there was unease within our community regarding the question of membership. This unease was impacting our communal and ministerial life. Emotions ranged from guilt to blame. If only more sisters were in the classroom, or were still in habit... If only...

So, trusting the guidance of the Spirit, the members of the 2010 Chapter directed that the leadership team lead the community in facing the membership issue directly. The Chapter committed us to honest dialogue about new membership and our polarization around this issue.

After two years of prayer, dialogue, and discernment, we came to the realization that our circumstances made it extremely difficult to successfully incorporate new members. Not only would there be a large age gap between new and existing members, but we also had few local communities with the capacity to welcome new members. So, in 2012 we formally decided that we would no longer actively recruit.



*Sister Judith Bell, FSM, currently serves as President of her congregation, the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, Bridgeton, Missouri.*

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I believe this 2012 “decision” was not so much a decision as it was an acknowledgement of our reality. We took an honest look at ourselves and it did not seem likely that new members would find what they were seeking within our midst. We recognized that God had worked and still was working through our community in many marvelous ways, but our energy level and demographics were not adequate to support and offer a vibrant future to younger seekers.

**Sr. Judith:** Our FSM journey began already back in 1999 with participation in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) Viability Study which acknowledged our declining membership, a future need to sell the Motherhouse, and the importance of deepening relationships among ourselves as sisters. Our Chapters, held every four years, addressed those issues we were facing and changes were incorporated. However, it was our Leadership Team in 2011 that began to seriously study and address the viability of our future, well aware of our dwindling membership and the possibility of sisters who might be willing and/or capable of serving in future leadership roles. We were 107 sisters in 2011. Today, we are thirty-seven sisters with a median age of 83.2 years.

**NRRO:** *It sounds as though each reality you faced led to an even more expansive awareness of the need for change.*

**Sr. Janice:** The acknowledgement of our CPPS reality was a crucial step that made it possible for us to move forward. The decision to no longer recruit new members brought with it many practical realities, not the least of which was the need to address the questions of future leadership, management, and governance. Our pool for future leadership was limited to current membership. Similar questions were facing the Franciscan Sisters of Mary who, a few years

earlier, made a decision comparable to ours.

**Sr. Judith:** In 2013, our FSM Leadership Team engaged with members of the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood of O’Fallon, Missouri Leadership Team having learned they, as well, were looking at their future viability.

**NRRO:** *Did you consider the option of adopting the governance model of a Covenant that was prominent at the time?*

**Sr. Judith:** After meetings of study and reviewing options, it did not seem appropriate for our congregations to pursue a covenant relationship.

**Sr. Janice:** While some area congregations were larger than our two congregations, the reality of their demographics seemed only a few years behind ours and covenant didn’t appear to be a long-term solution.

**NRRO:** *What alternative did you pursue?*

**Sr. Judith:** After hiring and meeting with a canon lawyer and in conjunction with continued dialogue and discernment, there was agreement to develop a new canonical governance structure with management support. This structure is known as Collaborative Governance. A special set of Statutes and By-laws were drafted by our canon lawyer and reviewed and approved by civil legal counsel. A new civil corporation was incorporated in 2017.

**Sr. Janice:** While these last two sentences may make this sound simple, there was much work involved. To name just a few of the major tasks:

- Employees of both congregations became employees of Collaborative Governance;
- A new employee benefit plan was devised incorporating the best elements of the previous plans;

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Collaborative Governance Member Board, seated, from left, Sisters Kathy Buchheit, FSM, Ginny Jaskiewicz, CPPS; Lenita Moore, FSM; Back row, from left, FSM Leadership Team Sisters Sandra Schwartz, Sherri Coleman, Judith Bell; CPPS Leadership Team Sisters Janice Bader, Susan Borgel, Marie Fennwald.

(All photographs are used with permission of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood and Franciscan Sisters of Mary.)

- A new employee policy manual was developed;
- Job descriptions were updated, and organizational charts were developed for shared staff positions;
- The positions of Executive Director, Finance Director, Health Care Director, Spiritual Care and Community Life Directors, and Communications Director were hired;
- A discernment process was undertaken to identify a woman religious to serve as Chairperson for Collaborative Governance; each congregation will request to have the Chairperson appointed as its Commissary at the appropriate time;
- Space was identified for the Collaborative Governance offices;
- Agreements were developed for sharing costs.

The list above includes only the major tasks; there were many others too numerous to mention here. The collaborative work continues,

and our two leadership teams meet monthly as the structure continues to evolve.

### ***NRRO: Did you create criteria for your two congregations and those who might join as members of the Collaborative Governance?***

**Sr. Judith:** We want to maintain and honor our congregational cultures, ministries, and charisms.

The openness to collaboration and integrity with and among both leadership teams was, is and will continue to be paramount. We have agreed to abide by the following criteria, to name just a few:

- Self-funded and able to assume financial responsibility for the last member;
- Former sponsored ministries are autonomous;
- Debt free;
- Guidelines established for distribution of any assets not needed for care of the sisters;



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- Existing personnel of the congregations transitioned into being part of Collaborative Governance staff;
- Relinquishment of properties.

### **NRRO:** *What are some of the tasks that your congregations needed to address to prepare for Collaborative Governance?*

**Sr. Janice:** Those tasks for our CPPS congregation include the following, to name but a few:

- Divesting ourselves of buildings and properties;
- Entrusting sponsored ministries to others;
- Updating our congregational policies and procedures;
- Reviewing and updating our corporate documents;
- Legacy planning.

**Sr. Judith:** Our FSM congregation has met all the criteria that were agreed upon to be a member of Collaborative Governance. Meeting those criteria are essential for requesting from Rome the appointment of the Commissary.

### **NRRO:** *What factor have communications played throughout the process?*

**Sr. Judith:** Both leadership teams have found it important to be in communication with the local Archbishop to maintain an open relationship regarding the changes affecting both congregations.

**Sr. Janice:** Open and honest communication between our two congregations has been key to the success of Collaborative Governance. It is a long journey to truly become a new “we.” While our two congregations have much in common, our cultures, ministries, and charisms are unique. The staff of Collaborative Governance has the challenge of learning the history and spirit of two congregations and respecting both the commonalities and the differences as they go about their responsibilities.

### **NRRO:** *How have the sisters been involved throughout the changes?*

**Sr. Judith:** Needless to say, we’ve held many meetings to not only provide information, but to listen intently about their feelings, to engage in small group and large group processes acknowledging their anger, hurts, and lack of



Members of the current Leadership Team of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood of O’Fallon. *From left*, Sister Marie Fennewald, Council Member; Sister Janice Bader, President; Sister Susan Borgel, Council Member. They will serve until 2025.

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Members of the current Leadership Team of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary gather to honor and bless the Spiritual Care/Community Life Director (*pictured holding basket*) for FSM during a prayer ritual on January 31, 2023. *From left*, Sister Judith Bell, President; Sister Susan Scholl, Councilor; Ms. Cathy Modde, Community Life Director; Sister Sandy Schwartz, Councilor; and Sister Sherri Coleman, Councilor.

understanding, as well as working to provide clarification. It has also been important to provide those who felt uncomfortable speaking in a group the opportunity to meet one on one with a member of the Leadership Team, or for them to be able to submit their concerns in writing, always following up with them as needed. Leadership also did “check-ins” with a few sisters who seemed to need more support during some of these years. It cannot be stressed enough the importance of keeping congregational members involved and informed to the fullest extent possible at all times.

**Sr. Janice:** All along the way, each leadership team has been involving the members of its own congregation. This includes educational sessions regarding the structure of Collaborative Governance, occasions for sisters and staff to meet and learn about each other, as well as opportunities to continue integrating the spiritual and communal dimensions of this journey.

Our elders have been models for us of trust in letting go. They remain deeply interested in each new development; their questions encourage the careful second or third look at plans;

and their lived experience of letting go gracefully inspires the rest of us to do the same.

**Sr. Judith:** As staff for Collaborative Governance was hired, opportunities to meet them were planned for members of both congregations. This also provided the sisters a venue to be with one another in a social setting. At the time for interviewing potential candidates for the Chair of Collaborative Governance and eventual Commissary to be appointed by the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, sisters were included in the small group interview processes and invited to provide feedback to the Leadership Teams.

**Sr. Janice:** A certain sadness still touches us periodically. We continue to experience grief and loss as our numbers decline (currently we are seventy-two sisters), as we divest ourselves of our properties, and as we entrust our ministries to others. Yet, as we celebrated the 175th anniversary of our foundation in 2020, we experienced deeply the truth of that celebration’s theme, “All is Gift.” This summer we will engage in reflection days to process our individual and communal sense of loss with the



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hope of opening ourselves to a deepened sense of new life and resurrection, to the Paschal Mystery which is integral to our Precious Blood Spirituality.

**NRRO:** *Do you have any final comments you'd like to share with our readers about the journey of transition and transformation?*

**Sr. Judith:** This brief article can in no way do justice to the many years of this journey. I hope that those who read this issue of *Engaging Aging* will realize the time that it takes to even begin such a process as well as stay with it. We are now in our 10th year of this journey, and we realize that taking that beginning step in trust provides many learnings, blessings and a future of living religious life to the fullness that God asks of each one of us. At this time, we are waiting for a response from Rome to our letter

of request for the appointment of our Commissary. We believe our charism of presence and mission of compassionate care of creation in collaboration with others remains our ongoing legacy. Our journey invites us to "Continue Courageously for the Love of God." These last words of grace and wisdom from our Foundress, Mother Mary Odilia Berger, are recalled frequently by our sisters.

**Sr. Janice:** I encourage any congregation that feels it may need to ask similar questions to face those questions directly and with courage. Looking lovingly and honestly at reality is so much healthier than avoiding the issues. It is never too early to start planning. We have been on the road for ten years, and there still is much to be done. Seek out companions to journey with you, and trust that God is walking with you. We do not know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future.

Franciscan Sisters of Mary gather in Bridgeton, Missouri for celebration with arms outstretched in blessing.





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Sisters of the Most Precious Blood of O'Fallon, Missouri gathered for Eucharistic Liturgy in 2020 as they celebrated the 175th anniversary of their foundation in Switzerland and their 150th year in the United States.



**LOGO SYMBOLISM:** The circle is an ancient symbol of unity since it has no beginning or ending, though a point on a circle can be both a beginning and an ending. It can be a representation of eternity, perfection, and God. The Collaborative Governance logo circle holds the cross and butterfly which symbolize opposites: suffering/death, and transformation/resurrection.

**VISION:** The Vision of Collaborative Governance is to provide canonical governance and civil administration for religious communities coming to completion so that they can live out their own particular charism and mission, while maintaining their autonomy and identity.

**MISSION:** The Mission of Collaborative Governance is to be responsible for the canonical governance and civil administration of itself and each Participating Entity.

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