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Ministry
Religious Life



In this screenshot, Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, gives a virtual address Aug. 13 before a virtual audience of 1,000 sisters and guests. (GSR photo)



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If religious life was once a cruise ship — imposing, steady, populated — that transported sisters in one uniform trip, today the vocation calls for smaller vessels fit for the uncharted waters each community must navigate, still eyeing the same horizon, said Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The destinations that beckon each sister or community will determine the vessel they choose for their voyage, said the Sister of St. Joseph of Orange in her presidential address before a virtual audience of 1,000 sisters and guests. She spoke on the second day of the annual assembly, hosted virtually, Aug. 13. (Technical difficulties barred her from speaking on the first day as originally scheduled.)

Just as some may need to figure out how to land their large ships in shallow waters, she said, others might need diving equipment to reach the most vulnerable "who are invisible and lost beneath the waves of capitalism, infrastructures of exclusion, and power systems that deny entry."

Representing 80% of women religious in the United States, congregational leaders in LCWR have spent the last several years discerning the role of sisters in a modern society, one that's increasingly secular, diverse and interconnected.

Now, that context includes a "pandemic within a pandemic," as Helmlinger called it, referring to both the global coronavirus still claiming almost 1,000 lives a day in the U.S., and the issue of systemic racism brought to the center of national discourse following Black Lives Matter protests.

Her address was her final task as president of LCWR before transitioning to past-president. As of Aug. 14, she will be joined in the triumvirate presidency with Adrian Dominican Sr. Elise García as president, and Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Jane Herb as president-elect. (Helmlinger will replace Holy Cross Sr. Sharlet Wagner as past-president.)

Related: Sr. Elise García is a bridge for sisters, younger and older, as she assumes LCWR presidency

The assembly's theme, "God's Infinite Vision: Our Journey to the Borders and Beyond," prompted Helmlinger to reflect on borders surrounding racism, religious life today, emerging orientations, and the future as women religious — and the vulnerability that accompanies the hard looks each dimension requires.

Leading by example, Helmlinger put her vulnerability on full display.

Eradicating racism

What was once "holy disquietude" for Helmlinger — a sensation in her soul that arose as the pandemic began to shift realities earlier this year — has now transformed into "holy anger," she said, after watching the May 25 footage of George Floyd dying at the hands of Minneapolis police.

"This part of God's vision is infinitely clear to me: We have work to do, sisters, in our complicity in enabling the insidiousness of racism to flourish within and around us," she said.

Inspired by the biblical story of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, Helmlinger said that watching the video of Floyd's death she felt that the "scales covering my eyes were peeled away" regarding systemic racism and white privilege.

Then the vulnerable work began, her journey to Damascus.

> "I cannot be, live or lead authentically if I'm not willing to do the inner work required in naming and eradicating the racism that dwells within."
>
> —Sr. Jayne Helmlinger
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She remembered playing basketball at 13 and watching in horror as her Black teammate received racial slurs on the court, effectively bursting her childhood bubble that blocked out racism.

She remembered being a novice bound for the Mexican border, feeling a vague tinge of dread and anxiety that she later uncovered to be "an embedded fear within me about Mexico," the result of a narrow worldview of being born and raised in a small

town in Ohio.

"I cannot be, live or lead authentically if I'm not willing to do the inner work required in naming and eradicating the racism that dwells within," she said.

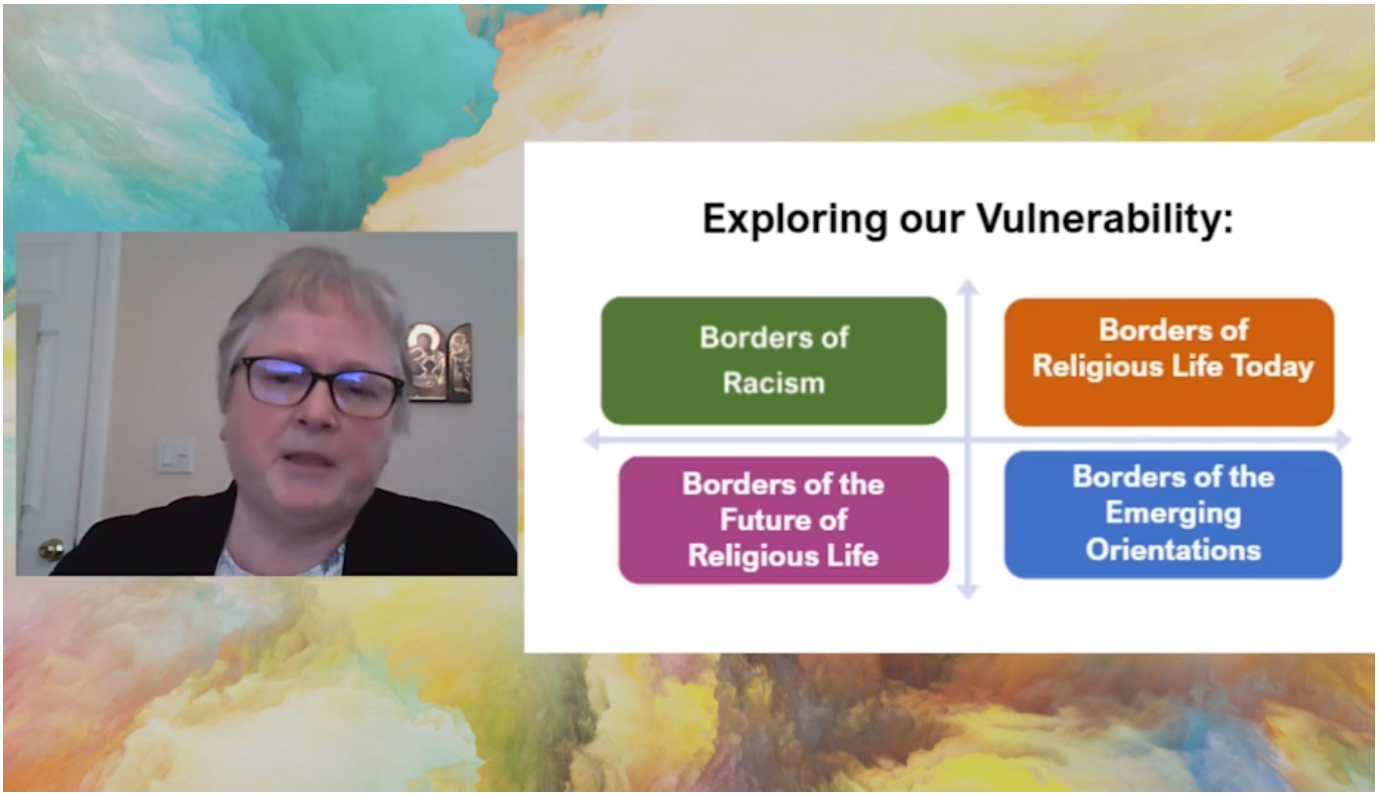
In the small reflection groups following Helmlinger's address, Grey Nun of the Sacred Heart Sr. Eileen White said they reflected on Helmlinger's focus on vulnerability, how for them that manifests in their not knowing "how to be a leader in this time," while still needing to confront the church's and their congregation's complicity in racism. White is also chair of LCWR's Region 3, which includes Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Still, as one sister said in the group-sharing, "Vulnerability painfully frees me from over-responsibility, needing to know it all, that it's all up to me."

In her address, Helmlinger continued to expand on the inner work she's been doing regarding racism and privilege, wondering if, "at times, we become too uncomfortable in our own skin when we pilgrimage into this terrain of racism, leaving too quickly, crossing back over to a place of comfort and protection," she said, calling it a "false protection" since divisive borders remain intact.

Only when one chooses to "venture into the depths of our being" will they be filled with "God's transformative grace" to love one another, she said.

"It is a journey across the immense divide that societal structures and systems work so unceasingly and insidiously to uphold. This is our Damascus journey, our Emmaus journey, where we find God in our midst."



Screenshot of Sr. Jayne Helmlinger's presidential address Aug. 13 (GSR photo)

Religious life today, emerging orientations

Though the average age of a sister keeps climbing — now approaching 80 — Hemlinger said that the narrative need not be one of diminishment and scarcity, but opportunity and imagination, "a time to harness our collective creativity for religious life itself."

Sisters who listened to her address, later sharing their reflections in small groups, clung to Helmlinger's analogy of cruises and small boats, finding it to be a helpful image for the varying needs of older and younger sisters.

As someone in Sr. Theresa Sandok's reflection group said after the address, "there's a lot of empty rooms on that cruise ship, and it's falling apart," Sandok told Global Sisters Report. Getting off and finding new vessels that respond to the needs of the world is the challenge before them, said Sandok, president of the Servants of Mary and member of the LCWR board of directors.

The freedom to choose a new vessel from one day to the next, said Marianite of Holy Cross Sr. Renee Daigle after her reflection group, is "wonderful to think about."

As her group discussed vulnerability, she said there was a sense of peace in remembering that "on any given day, we have what we need to handle today," buoyed by the knowledge that God has and will continue to take care of them every day, she said.

"We don't need to have today what we'll need two years from now. Who we are and what we can do and how we can envision today is what we need for today," said Daigle, chair of Region 5, which includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Puerto Rico and Virginia.

When the LCWR board recognized the conference's evolving needs as it moves into the future, it identified five "emerging orientations" that Helmlinger considers to be movements occurring in the world, but particularly within religious life: global consciousness, porous borders, integrative partnerships, mission in the public square, and [the need to be] technologically astute.



Screenshot of graphic from Sr. Jayne Helmlinger's presidential address (GSR photo)

With those emerging needs came a new analogy, inspired by last year's keynote address from Loreto Sr. Pat Murray, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General. Each need, or orientation, is itself a "long note" playing out in the daily life of sisters: joy, inclusivity, relationships, courage, and explorers in the virtual world, respectively.

Reflecting on global consciousness, Helmlinger points to her own congregation, what she believes to be a foreshadowing of what's to come for LCWR. Their younger sisters grew up in Hong Kong, China, Mexico, South Korea, Germany, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines, and the U.S.

"These sisters are inviting all of us to an evolving understanding and global consciousness that we are all one," she said. "As leaders, how are we accepting this invitation to the frontiers of intercultural encounter? As members of congregations and those within organizations supporting religious life, how are you being influenced by these women so full of hope, joy, opportunity, imagination? Part of our makeup as women religious is being life-long learners."

"It is essential for us to embrace this movement of transnational, transcharism, and transcultural religious life if we are to flourish in the years ahead," she said.

To treat one's home congregation "as if we are islands unto ourselves" is a disservice to religious life, Helmlinger said, emphasizing the emerging need for porous borders. Part of that work includes the LCWR board and various committees exploring how to include into their regional meetings the younger and more ethnically diverse sisters and leaders who are not members of LCWR.

"As religious life evolves in the United States and beyond, so too must our structures and focus as an organization assisting elected leaders in their ministry of leadership," she said.

In any of the conference's conversations, Helmlinger said, "you will hear us speak to anticipatory leadership," related to the emerging need of integrative partnerships, and how religious life today is equipping leaders for their ministerial demands of the future.

Properly anticipating the future is only possible if sisters are "actively engaged in the present, sleeves rolled up and all in," she said.

"The question of what religious life will be like in 10 years is not a question whose answer we will discover on our own. We need one another."

Being a vocal and visible presence — fulfilling the emerging orientation for mission in the public square — is that much more necessary after the spiritual, ecological, psychological, social and economic devastation that the pandemic has galvanized, she said. And the need to be technologically astute (the final emerging orientation),

which was necessary before the pandemic, has become even more important given the restrictions on social gatherings, travel and lockdowns affecting congregations.

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Future of religious life

Taking the virtual audience back to their imagined sea vessels, their gaze on the uncharted waters of religious life, Helmlinger described the temptation to see a grim horizon, where the impact of the pandemic — economic, moral, social, and spiritual — meets the country's "ruthless politics" in an election year.

"We can stay small as women religious if we default to numbers, ages and focus on limitations," she said. "While these are part of our reality, they are not the full picture," as the history of sisters is one of boldness, scarcity and a surrender to the Spirit.

Their founders accepted their vulnerability, tapped into their faith, wisdom and creativity, and forged new communities and ministries in rugged frontiers, Helmlinger said, venturing "beyond the borders" of their congregations' birthplaces as they followed the Spirit.

And now is the time for sisters to follow their example, to take the "next leap of faith waiting at the borders of our imaginations," she said, as "women of faith, co-creators, contemplative and apostolic, discerners and risktakers."

Imagining each sister or congregation on their own vessels, Hemlinger said she sees a "freeing of our newer and younger members to set sail," following the Spirit's invitation, sometimes with older sisters, their young peers, or like-hearted men and women. "Do we, will we, provide the types of crafts they need to reach these distant shores?"

"Let us board our vessels and know that where one of us is present, we are all present," Helmlinger said. "The holy wind of the Spirit is blowing**;** will we sail with or against?"

Following the presidential address in the reflection groups, White thought of her own Grey Nun community throughout the extended analogy on ships. They are in

"completion mode," said White, a member of its leadership council.

"We know that Grey Nuns won't last forever, but religious life will; it will just have a new look that we need to be open to finding."

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