Blog
Spirituality



Approximately 800 sister leaders from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious gather Aug. 10, 2018, on the steps of the Old Courthouse in downtown St. Louis after reaffirming a 2016 resolution against racism as part of their annual assembly. This courthouse was the site of the first two trials of the Dred Scott case. (GSR file photo)



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At last week's virtual Leadership Conference of Women Religious annual assembly, congregational leaders shared the feelings of loss, grief and vulnerability they have experienced since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March. Yet they also spoke of summoning creativity and spiritual strength to deal with myriad challenges in the pandemic and the raw protests against racial injustice that rippled through our nation and the world in the wake of the death of George Floyd in May.

The opening reflection of the session "Grief as a Catalyst for Transformation and Hope" in particular caught my attention. Sr. Maureen Geary, a member of the leadership team of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids, Michigan, shared how she was being forced to confront the "now" of these times.

She drew upon a memory of the 2016 LCWR assembly and a presentation by Shannen Dee Williams, an assistant professor of history at Villanova University, about the racism and rejection Black women encountered by predominantly white congregations.

At that assembly, "where we faced the racism of our congregations, our church, ourselves," she said, Williams "called us to own our history. To own the now."

Geary said she also drew on the 2017 LCWR keynote address by theologian Christopher Pramuk, who "moved me to tears with amazing renditions of Black spirituals and deep insight into the meaning of the songs."



Shannen Dee Williams addresses the 2016 Leadership Conference of Women Religious annual assembly in Atlanta. (CNS/Georgia Bulletin/Michael Alexander)

Her reflections matched my own. Leading up this year's virtual assembly, I'd been thinking a lot about past LCWR assemblies and previous presentations that now seem prescient. Since 2016, I've heard the wisdom of keynote speakers, presidential addresses, special panels and resolutions. Knitted together, these LCWR assemblies have held remarkably predictive messages for these turbulent, troubled times.

No, none foretold a global pandemic. But each contained both warnings and witness to the various crises the pandemic has brought into sharp relief: the gross inequities, inadequacies and often racist disparities in health care, housing, economic distribution, migration and effects of climate change.

I suppose this shouldn't be much of a surprise, as women religious have often been referred to — and refer to themselves collectively — as prophetic witnesses and leaders in our time.

As the pandemic's death toll in the United States mounted and the tensions against systemic racism rose, I found myself recalling the 2016 keynote address from leadership consultant and author Margaret Wheatley, whose words sent a chill down my spine. Wheatley was recounting a conversation with her spiritual counselor:

> I was very depressed about the state of the world. ... And I was talking to her about my despair for the state of the world, and she said very quietly, "You know, Meg, it's going to get a lot worse." I found that to be the most cheerful statement she's ever given me, because I know it's true.
>
> I know that what we're experiencing now, what we've experienced the past several decades, is part of the pattern of human history, which is that we go through cycles, and we are in the cycle of collapse. There will be more suffering, there will be more terrorism, there will be more uncertainty and people will grasp for certainty; they will terrorize one another. This is what humans always do at the end of a vibrant civilization — whatever one it was. We go into this pattern. When [the counselor] said, "You know it's going to get a lot worse and we're going to look back at these as the good old days," I realized she was right. We can still be

> together, we can still take comfort in one another, we can still communicate easily, we can still move freely, we still have clean water and air and food. We are not refugees; we are not the 65.5 million people who are without country and without home right now. So we can use this opportunity, which I think is why we are here together, we can use this opportunity to strengthen our inner capacity so that we can stay present for people as the suffering increases.

Little did those of us who heard Wheatley's words realize that the need to strengthen our inner capacity to be present would be so great in these times of such profound suffering.

Throughout the 2020 assembly, the need to address systemic racism was cited. It was present in reflections, prayers and resolutions, including a five-year commitment to work on dismantling racism, an invitation by LCWR officers to members to "participate in LCWR's efforts to name and eradicate racism within themselves, their congregations, their ministries, and LCWR as an organization." The commitment had been announced to members in June, and details are being developed.



Jan Richardson, left, and Chris Pramuk, center, were the keynote speakers at the 2017 annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Sr. Joseph

Sr. Liz Sweeney, right, facilitated the Aug. 10 conversation. (GSR file photo)

This commitment builds from the impact on LCWR members of the research Williams presented at the 2016 assembly about the systemic racism within religious congregations. The powerful presentation prompted several congregations to invite Williams to address their own communities and to reach out to some of those wronged, which Sr. Mary Pellegrino recounted in her presidential address in 2017 and in later interviews. The litany of lost vocations made me weep for the women rejected.

The effort to address the sin of racism continued to be evident in the silent march and witness the sisters at the 2018 annual assembly made to the Old Courthouse in St. Louis, Missouri, and the statement of recommitment to the assembly's 2016 resolution "to go deeper into the critical work of creating communion, examining the root causes of injustice and our own complicity, and purging ourselves, our communities, and our country of the sin of racism and its destructive effects."

Seeing this new commitment — or recommitment — in 2020 as a continuation of efforts begun in the previous assemblies provides resonance and depth.

This year's assembly also provided messages of hope amid the recognition of deep grief. I trust the leaders found solidarity and shared sorrow in the small-group discussions as well as the reflections offered by sisters. It brings me back to the 2017 LCWR assembly in which Jan Richardson, an artist, author and ordained United Methodist minister, and Pramuk spoke individually and then together about grief and grace.

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It also recalls the messages of Pellegrino's presidential address that year, in which she acknowledged that sisters had already sat vigil at too many deathbeds, hosted too many wakes of friends and mentors. Her words about the "bone-crushing weight of layers and layers of accumulated sorrow, sadness and grief" of the deaths of peers and the loss of cherished ministries, motherhouses and lands echo through to today.

But so does another key part of her message.

"Our own grief is a gateway to grace, not only for ourselves, but for our world," she said. "The grace that will come from embracing this paschal narrative of communion will be costly, but it will not diminish us. It will take our best energy and will not consume us. It will open us to the vitality that lies deep at the heart of communion with God, with another and with the wider world. It will help us to speak new languages and apprehend new images and tell new stories.

"It will remake us. And while it is remaking us, we will remake the world."

Prophetic words in the midst of a pandemic. I pray that LCWR members continue to draw comfort, strength and resolve from the time spent together last week and from past assemblies. And when the time comes for the 2021 annual assembly, I pray sisters will be able to gather in person to be blessed by the grace of shared presence.



Sisters watch St. Joseph Sr. Mary Pellegrino give the president's address Aug. 10, 2017, at the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in Orlando, Florida. (GSR file photo)

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