News
Religious Life



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In three months, the North American Conference of Associates and Religious — the national organization that has grown with the number of associates for 25 years — will end operations.

Board members at their meeting March 4 affirmed the decision to suspend all member services on June 30 and begin dismantling the civil nonprofit corporation. They announced the decision March 22, citing financial strains and a lack of volunteers, including people willing to join the board. The organization will dissolve June 30, 2022.

Jeanne Connolly, board president of the North American Conference of Associates and Religious and an associate of the Wheaton Franciscans, said no one within the organization should be surprised.

"Particularly the last couple of years, we've been upfront about the situation," Connolly told Global Sisters Report. "We named it a little over a year ago, saying it's not just finances, it is finances plus human resources."

She said this is not the first time the organization has had financial trouble, but in previous years it was able to push through. But now, religious communities are struggling to find candidates for leadership positions and have no one to spare for

the North American Conference of Associates and Religious, and their associate communities are facing similar issues. As the number of sisters decreases, more associates are being called on to take over ministries or work within the congregation, making them unavailable.

The pandemic only worsened the situation, Connolly said.

"We discussed the fact that we know the timing isn't good — people have been through a lot in the past year, and we have been through a lot in the past year," she said. "But the conversations surrounding this happened before the pandemic."

The conference supports and promotes associates in the United States and Canada through programs and workshops, networking opportunities, and publications such as The Associate. It has also commissioned studies, created a leadership manual and held workshops focused on the concerns and needs of associates.

Associates are laypeople who have made a public commitment to a religious institute. The requirements and names vary by community: Some allow almost anyone who commits to their charism to join, while others have age, gender or denominational requirements.

A FAQ page on the organization's website says the situation is not a short-term problem, but a long-term inability to support the way it is structured.

"What changed? The concern is that nothing changed," the page says. "The sustainability of the current corporate structure has been a continued source of worry for NACAR for many years. The board has shared these concerns in various Member Update letters and Annual reports, particularly since the fall of 2018."

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The conference has six board members, eight non-board members serving on committees, and a few contract workers, such as an office administrator and a website administrator. The organization will largely cease operations at the end of this fiscal year, June 30; the board will spend the next year going through the process of dissolving the civil corporation, which is involved, and governed by state law.

The website will remain active until June 30, 2022, and areas that had been limited to only conference members will be opened up to a broader audience of religious and associates, the website says.

Connolly said there has been a big reaction to the news, with people offering to try to help, but those offers don't change the foundational problems the group has.

"You can tell people want to be in that savior mode now," she said. "But we, the board, believe something new can emerge out of it, and we want to give it a chance to emerge. Let's see what happens next. Let's let go of the structured way of doing this."

Chanin Wilson, director of associates for the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, said she was shocked, but not surprised by the news.

"They were trying so many things to keep it going, but it just became the reality that the way things had been going and the way we had been doing things — like many things with the sisters and associates — is no longer going to work," Wilson said. "I'm praying for something new, unique and better."

Wilson said the conference just could not attract board members. The FAQ page says the group's bylaws require five members on the board, but when terms end in November there will be only three.

"I was specifically asking associates" to join the board, Wilson said. "But they were like, 'I'd like to stay involved, but no.' "

She said associates — like sisters — are often too elderly or too busy.

Wilson said the regional associate groups are strong and use conference resources, but fears some of those may disappear with the national organization.

A 2016 study found about 35,000 associates in the United States, up from 25,000 in 2000, and officials say the number has grown or at least held steady since then, while the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University reports there were 42,441 sisters in the United States in 2019, down from 79,814 in 2000. The number of associates is expected to surpass the number of sisters in a few years.

Connolly stressed that associates are not going away.

"This is the dissolution of a corporate structure called NACAR. The associate movement is alive and well, and it's important to remember that," she said. "It's a specific corporation, not the associate way of life."