

Sisters from almost a dozen congregations gathered in Washington, D.C., in 2013 to advise the Obama administration about human trafficking, an effort that led to the formation of the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking. Pictured are (from left) Mercy Sr. Jeanne Christensen; Charity Sr. Kathleen Bryant; Sylvania Franciscan Sr. Geraldine Nowak; Sister of the Humility of Mary Sr. Anne Victory; Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Ann Oestreich; Ursuline Sr. Michele Morek; St. Joseph of Philadelphia Sr. Kathleen Coll; Sister of St Joseph of Concordia, Kansas, Sr. Margaret Nacke; Charity Sr. Joan Dawber; Felician Sr. Maryann Agnes Mueller; and Holy Family Sr. Mary Greta Jupiter. (Courtesy of U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking)



by Dan Stockman

View Author Profile
dstockman@ncronline.org

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Global Sisters Report's Monday Starter is a feature from GSR staff writers that rounds up news from or about women religious that you may otherwise have missed.

Monday Starter

Catholic sisters in the United States are celebrating 10 years of their nationwide effort to fight human trafficking.

In April 2013, the Obama administration invited a handful of Catholic sisters to Washington, D.C., to help address the epidemic of human trafficking in the United States. Afterward, St. Joseph Sr. Margaret Nacke, who would become one of the founding members of U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, felt inspired to bring together religious congregations from around the nation to combine their anti-human trafficking efforts. The organization has since grown to more than 115 congregations of women religious, individual members, faith-based coalitions and secular organizations.

"I always think we're better together," said School Sisters of Notre Dame Sr. Ann Scholz, another founding board member in a statement celebrating the 10th anniversary of the group. "I think we knew that we could accomplish more if we shared our talent and resources and formed a coalition to multiply efforts to end human trafficking. Combining our education resources, our knowledge gained from accompanying survivors and advocacy efforts would make us a lot more efficient and effective in our ministry to eradicate human trafficking."

Nearly 50 million people are trapped in human trafficking around the world, according to estimates by anti-trafficking organization Walk Free.

U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking president Sr. Ann Oestreich, of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, said 10 years ago there was no public Catholic voice advocating for change and speaking out on human trafficking. The sisters decided to focus on educating people about what it is, promoting prevention strategies to keep it from happening in the first place, and advocating for stricter laws to punish traffickers and assist survivors.

"We thought we could be that voice," Oestreich said in the statement. "Prevention is key to ending human trafficking, and we know how to advocate. We also know that women and men need access to services to help them heal so that became part of our mission."

U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, which has a Survivor Advisory Council, supports survivors by partnering with member houses and providing scholarships, whenever possible, to human trafficking survivors. The organization is gearing up for its second in-person conference, "Breaking Barriers to End Human Trafficking," set for Sept. 28-30 in Chicago.

U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking is also the U.S. member of Talitha Kum, the international network of consecrated religious working to end human trafficking.

Advertisement

Maryknoll Sisters add new mission in Chad

At a time when many congregations of women religious are withdrawing from missions or turning them over to lay partners, the Maryknoll Sisters are adding a new mission in Chad.

Srs. Lourdes Fernandez, Norma Pocasangre, Claudette LaVerdiere and NgocHa Pham left the Maryknoll Residence in California on May 1 to travel to the central African nation.

Chad was chosen because the congregation's 2021 general assembly called for a focus on climate change, migration and discrimination of all forms, and Chad demonstrates the interconnectedness of those three subjects.

"Years ago, the bishop from Chad approached the Maryknoll Sisters asking if any sisters would be able to come serve there, but at the time there were no sisters available," the congregation said in an announcement of the new mission. "Today, the sisters did not want to forget this request … and also wanted to go to a place where they have never been before and accompany people in dire need."

The sisters' mission is largely unknown, but they were welcomed by Moundou Bishop Joachim Kouraleyo Tarounga, who told them to come see the reality there and serve and accompany the people. Chad now hosts thousands of refugees from the war in Sudan, but the sisters do not know if that is where they will be most needed.

"This is the first mission for the sisters in which they really don't know where they will be living or with whom they will be working with and in which part of the country," the announcement says. "All they know is they will be picked up at the airport by somebody and the rest is in God's hands."

These sisters have skills in trauma work and have lived in dangerous places before, the congregation said, so they bring both professional and personal experience to any situation they may encounter.

NgocHa Pham said in the announcement that missionaries used to bring their own ideas and agendas.

"But now it's more of a collaborative effort with a deep listening, the [mission] is focused on collaborating with the locals to discover what their needs are," she said.