News



Sister Mary Paula, one of the elderly community members of the Little Sisters of St. Francis in Nkokonjeru in Jinja, Uganda, expresses her joy in song and dance. The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation provided he six-month COVID-19 emergency project to assist 61 religious congregations through the Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa. (Courtesy of Little Sisters of St. Francis)



by Gail DeGeorge

View Author Profile
gdegeorge@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

September 28, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Planning early, ensuring sisters get paid for parish work, collaborating with other congregations and thinking more holistically were the key messages at a recent webinar originating in Nairobi about caring for elderly sisters.

The session on Sept. 26 drew on two studies and provided ample opportunities for questions by the more than 115 participants. The importance of caring for aging sisters has been a focus of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters Initiative for over the past two years. (The Hilton Foundation is also the major funder of Global Sisters Report.) The foundation has funded studies, webinars and programs designed to raise awareness of the need, highlight best practices and provide training across congregations and countries.

The effort aims "to ensure the quality of life for women religious who have dedicated their lives to serving God while operating various ministries that have transformed individuals and communities worldwide," said Sr. Jane Wakahiu, associate vice president of program operations and head of the Catholic Sisters Initiative at the Hilton Foundation and a member of the Little Sisters of St. Francis in Kenya.

"As individuals age, they become more susceptible to fragility and vulnerability," she said. "Safeguarding and caring for them is not just a moral imperative but also a fundamental human right. Thoughtful planning is critical in ensuring an enhanced quality of life and overall well-being for our aging sisters."

Advertisement

The results of a study completed in June by the Center of Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), which focused on 21 religious congregations in the U.S. that had successfully planned for care for their elder members, was reviewed by research associate Sr. Thu T. Do, a member of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hanoi, and Fr. Thomas Gaunt, executive director at CARA.

The study noted that the National Religious Retirement Office in 2022 had reported that only 7%, or 26 of 390 responding women's religious institutes had adequate funds to provide for elderly and infirm sisters, and more than half had just 20% or less of the needed funding.

The CARA study of the 21 congregations that had prepared successfully found that while details of the congregations' arrangements varied, one common denominator stood out. "Again and again we heard the importance of planning early — and the earlier the better," Gaunt said.

Even a small assessment on stipends might be a first step for a retirement health care fund, Gaunt said. Some congregations had set up charitable trusts from the sales of property — even a small amount of money in the trust, added to year after year, became an important tool for health care and retirement planning, he said.

Looking to school alumni and other donors for contributions is also an important source of funding. "Don't underestimate the generosity and desire of others to support sisters in their retirement," Gaunt said.

The importance of maintaining the connection of elderly sisters to their communities, and of pastoral and spiritual support was another important finding of the study. Elderly sisters are always living out their mission and charisms, Gaunt noted. "It costs a lot to ensure there is adequate spiritual and pastoral care," he said. "They need that care as much as the other."

Planning early for members' health care needs and retirement is an important message for congregations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. While they may not currently have the proportion of elderly sisters, they nonetheless need to start preparing for a shift in demographics and the aging of their members, participants in the webinar noted. The number of women religious in the U.S. fell by more than half, to 36,321 in 2021 from 74,162 in 2001, according to the study. This trend of fewer women entering religious life is also evident in other countries, participants noted.

"Begin the planning now — I can't underline that more," said Sr. Pat Murray, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG). Even in countries where government programs for the elderly, such as Medicare and Social Security, don't exist, communities need to put resources aside for the welfare of aging sisters, she said.

Continuity is also vital so that leadership teams that make progress in planning for elderly care don't have their efforts dropped by subsequent leadership teams.

Related: Proactive care, healthy aging mark Avila Institute pilot program with global reach

> "As individuals age, they become more susceptible to fragility and vulnerability. Safeguarding and caring for them is not just a moral imperative but also a fundamental human right."
>
> — Sr. Jane Wakahiu
>
> Tweet this

Collaboration among congregations can also be key, she said. In Europe, she said, some congregations are recognizing they may have to combine because their own congregation doesn't have the facilities to support them. In France, older and stronger congregations are offering their facilities to smaller congregations who don't have the resources to care for elderly sisters.

UISG is also communicating with bishops to have them understand that sisters working in parishes need adequate pay. Several participants from African countries noted in the "chat" feature of the webinar the challenge of having parishes pay sisters regular salaries for their work, and presenters acknowledged this issue as well.

The importance of strengthening the concept of the "common good" was also noted by Murray, so that members aren't valued based on what they earn.

Congregations also need to explain and build a relationship with the public so the true state of need is known, she said. Congregations may appear to be thriving to the outside world but may be struggling.

The results of a study completed in August by the Centre for Research in Religious Life and Apostolate (CERRA-AFRICA) of care for elderly sisters in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda and Zambia were also presented during the webinar. The study found that most congregations in Africa had younger members in formation as well as mature sisters with the average age falling between 41 and 50.

Congregations had adopted the African way of caring for the elderly by having them live with them in community and very few had taken them to homes for the elderly, the study found. While congregations made accommodations for dietary needs of aging members, most congregations had no specific plans to care for their elderly sisters.

That is a reality that the Hilton Foundation is trying to change, Wakahiu said. The foundation has funded studies to understand key aspects of early planning efforts and actionable steps that other communities can take to initiate early planning for elderly care. Partnerships have been forged in countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, Mexico, Zambia and Chile, she said, where dedicated research on elderly care has been conducted, and substantial investments have been made in establishing networks for elderly care and to help congregations plan.

"Equally important is how individual members prepare for this inevitable transition in life," she said. "As women of faith, we understand that hope alone is not enough; the future belongs to those who actively prepare for it."

This story appears in the **Caring for Aging Sisters** feature series. View the full series.