News



LCWR President Elect Sr. Vicky Larson (center), presents the organization's Outstanding Leadership Award to Sr. Nancy Schreck (left) at the 2024 Assembly. Looking on is Past President Sr. Maureen Geary. Larson will become president of LCWR Aug. 15. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



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Growing up on her family's Minnesota farm, Sr. Vicky Larson absorbed its many humbling lessons: the responsibility, patience, care and concern required to tend to animals — or four younger siblings.

All those lessons helped make her a better nurse and a better professor of nursing. They also helped prepare her for her next challenge of leading Catholic sisters in the United States.

On Aug. 15, Larson, of the Presentation Sisters of South Dakota, will become president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about two-thirds of the nearly 35,000 sisters in the U.S.

LCWR has a three-person presidency: School Sisters of Notre Dame Sr. Debra Sciano will become president-elect; Larson will move from president-elect to president; and current president; and Sr. Kathy Brazda, a Sister of St. Joseph, will become past-president. Past-president Sr. Maureen Geary, a Grand Rapids Dominican, will finish her three year term.

The leadership changes will take place at LCWR's annual assembly, held Aug. 12-15 in Atlanta, where more than 570 members and 280 guests are expected.

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> —Sr. Vicky Larson
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Larson told Global Sisters Report she appreciates LCWR's triumvirate approach to the presidency. "That person [serving as president] does have a little more responsibility being the public face and putting together the agendas, but we really, truly do operate as a team."

Eleven years ago, Larson was asked to consider joining her congregation's leadership team, and she said no — she loved being a nurse and a professor and

had no interest in leadership. Four years later, she had the opportunity to serve in leadership on a part-time basis and continue her teaching career. She loved it. By 2020 she was on LCWR's national board, and in 2024 was voted president-elect.

"I enjoy visioning and planning for the future," Larson said. But farming and nursing have also taught her how to handle the details.

"She's a nurse, so she's good at knowing what needs to happen," said Sr. Mary Thomas, president of Larson's congregation. "And she's a team person — she's invaluable when it comes to complex situations."

A lifelong student

Larson, 52, grew up in Madison, Minnesota, a tiny town just 12 miles from the South Dakota border. Her parents were truck drivers, mostly serving local farmers, and her mother kept about 30 sows. Larson is the oldest of five children, with two brothers and two sisters. She now has five nieces and five nephews she adores.



Sr. Vicky Larson in her first-grade school photo (Courtesy of Vicky Larson)

"My parents were both raised Catholic, and we went to Mass every Sunday" where, since age 13, she'd play the piano and eventually the organ, she said. "But I went to public school all my life, so maybe that's a difference between me and a lot of sisters."

Larson's first job off the farm was as a nursing assistant at the Lutheran nursing home in Madison, where she learned quickly that you have to be at your best when people are experiencing the worst. "You have to appreciate that you're with people at a particularly vulnerable point," she said.

Studying for her bachelor's degree in nursing at South Dakota State and getting to know Presentation Sr. Joan Marie Brandner, she saw religious life was nothing like what she had seen in the movie "Sister Act."

"I really appreciated her common-sense approach to faith," Larson said of Brandner, the first sister she'd have ever met. "She was ordinary and down home, and didn't have to spout a lot of religiosity to anyone, but you would still know she was strong in her faith."



Sr. Vicky Larson, right, entered the Presentation Sisters of South Dakota in 1999. (Courtesy of Vicky Larson)

Soon, Brandner was inviting Larson to visit the sisters to see what the community was like, and Larson felt at home there. But there were distractions in her life.

"At South Dakota State there were a lot of good-looking cowboys, and let me tell you I was distracted," she said. "I kind of knew in my heart where I was headed, but I put it off."

She visited several religious communities, but kept coming back to the Presentation sisters. She graduated from SDU in 1996, and in 1999 she entered religious life.

By 1999, the days of large entrance classes and formation cohorts were long gone: For more than a decade the Presentation sisters had been sending new sisters to an intercongregational novitiate; Larson's formation was with men and women from congregations across the region.

"What better way to learn the history of religious life than to have a whole group of people from different traditions?" Larson said. "It was really a great learning experience for me."

She hadn't planned on teaching, but when she was sent to minister on the Cheyanne Reservation in South Dakota, they were short a teacher at the Presentation College's Lakota Campus, and Larson became an adjunct nursing instructor.



Sr. Vicky Larson (left) poses during a hike with fellow Presentation Sisters leadership team members Sr. Mary Thomas, president (center), and Sr. Peggy Boehm, councillor. (Courtesy of Vicky Larson)

She got a master's degree in nursing from SDU in 2005, and in 2013 she got her PhD in nursing from Barry University in Miami.

"In Miami I was a racial minority, and it was a really important life lesson to know what that was like," Larson said. "When I taught at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, the student body was quite diverse — I became convinced early on that I had to learn how to welcome people, set aside my white privilege, and learn other ways of doing things."



The road to the family farm Sr. Vicky Larson grew up on, shown here during a bleak Minnesota winter (Courtesy of Vicky Larson)

A lifelong student — she is currently learning to play the harp — Larson's humility and willingness to learn from others made an impression on Brooke Grote, a Presentation associate and the congregation's mission development director.

Larson and Grote had traveled to Sydney, Australia, in 2017 for a gathering of Presentation Sisters from around the world. Partway through the event, Larson asked Grote what she thought of it.

"I said I loved it, but I was struggling because the nametags didn't say 'Sister' in front of their name, and she said that's what she loved about the gathering, because sisters shouldn't be elevated," Grote said.

"She said, 'Your experience as a mother is something I don't have, you're going to say something I may not have thought about.' She was so genuine in wanting to know my view."



Sr. Vicky Larson (right) receives a community blessing in 2024 celebrating her 25th jubilee. (Courtesy of Vicky Larson)

Presentation Sr. Mary Jaeger, who has been friends with Larson since Larson joined the community, is more than three decades older than her. Still, she said they were "instant friends."

"When we don't agree on something or we're upset about something one way or another, we stay connected because we talk it through. We come out on the other side and we're closer friends than we were before because we don't let things build up, "Jaeger said. "That's a skill — I learned that from her. You can have disagreements, you can even be upset with one another, but what's so very important is not letting it stay there."

Thomas said that is part of Larson's practicality.

"She lives an honest life that way," she said. "When you take care of a rub with another person, it's a way of investing in a relationship, and she does that."

'Things are not falling apart'

Larson is becoming LCWR president at a time when congregations across the United States are growing smaller and older, and the Presentation Sisters in South Dakota are no exception: Presentation College closed in 2023, the congregation's motherhouse is being deconstructed, and in four or five years they won't have enough sisters to hold a Chapter.



Sr. Vicky Larson behind the wheel of her first car (Courtesy of Vicky Larson)

"To some it feels unsettling to have that much in flux," Larson said. "For me, I've always known this is going to evolve, that this is going to change. So transformation has been part and parcel for all of my religious life. It's the sisters that are at the heart of the mission, not the buildings. It's not about the numbers. There's a bigger picture."

That bigger picture is the whole of religious life, she said.

"If we live our lives now as if we're connected to that bigger picture of religious life, I don't worry about the unknown, because there is this pervasive, solid, deeper call or love that … whatever our ministry is, whatever our location is, is beautiful."

Jaeger said Larson has helped her see what's important.

"Things are not falling apart," she said. "It's going to grow into something that's helpful for the wider community for years to come."

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Larson said it's also a matter of what's practical. The sisters in the congregation must be cared for, but beyond that all that matters is the mission — to serve whoever they are called to minister to.

"I think it's about being with people and being with people where they're at. That's why sisters are trusted; we're not afraid to roll up our sleeves. I grew up cleaning out the pig barn," Larson said. "There aren't jobs that are below my education grade."

And love is what you do for others when they are most vulnerable.

"The care of a person's body, part of being with them and accompanying them, part of that is helping clean up when they need [to be] cleaned up, and holding them when they're sick," she said. "There's great compassion in doing simple things. In the daily routines you can really bring compassion to people, and people are touched by that."

This story appears in the **LCWR 2025** feature series. View the full series.