

Visioning for the Mission: The Province of St. Louise, USA

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This article reflects the background, process, challenges, and benefits of reconfiguration itself and the first two and a half years since the establishment of the Province of St. Louise, USA. It has been a faith-filled, Providential journey filled with moments of transformation for all Sisters of the Province.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The idea for reconfiguration of five provinces of the Daughter of Charity in the United States¹ began as early as 1973, just four years after the two United States Provinces² had divided into five. A proposal at the Evansville Province Provincial Assembly stated: "That in view of changing times and circumstances, the Community should consolidate staff and resources by combining provinces wherever it will increase our efficiency in caring for the poor". Although the proposal was not passed, the possibility of interchanging personnel among the English-speaking provinces did pass in June, 1984. When the feasibility of merging provinces was introduced again in June of 1990, it was approved in the St. Louis Province, met with a tie vote in the Evansville Province, and was defeated in the Albany Province. However, in July 1996, the same proposal passed by two votes in Evansville.

In August 2002, the Evansville and St. Louis Provincial Assemblies supported provincial reconfiguration by an overwhelming majority, while the Emmitsburg Province passed three propositions dealing with reconfiguration and collaboration among the provinces. The leadership teams of four of the five provinces met in March, 2003 to discuss this possibility. Visitatrixes of the provinces dialogued about the possibility of reconfiguration at their annual meetings. Discernment and dialogue took place with membership of each of the five provinces, followed by further reflection and discussion among Visitatrixes and their Councils.

¹ Albany, Emmitsburg, Evansville, Los Altos Hills, St. Louis.

² The Province of Emmitsburg was composed of 1213 Sisters while the Province of St. Louis numbered 1225 Sisters. The Superioress General and her Council believed that dividing into smaller numbers would allow the Visitatrix and her Council to have greater opportunities to know each Sister.

The Province of Los Altos Hills, California decided not to move forward as a part of the reconfiguration process.

However, it was not until the four Provincial Leadership Teams of Albany, Emmitsburg, Evansville, and St. Louis met in Albany, New York in August, 2006 that the impetus for moving forward became a reality. With fewer Daughters to serve and a median age over 70, it became apparent that the expertise of Sisters could be used better across province lines. Having fewer Sisters serving in provincial leadership would allow for additional Sisters to minister directly to those living in poverty. The Visitatrixes and Councils of the four provinces concluded that the future mission of the Daughters of Charity would be enhanced by further "communion, collaboration, and sharing among the Provinces"³ up to and including the unification of these Provinces in a form not yet determined. Leadership requested and received from the Superioress General and her Council permission to initiate the process of working toward unification of the Provinces by 2011. A Steering Committee composed of two Sisters from each of the four Provinces was named⁴, and given a mandate on October 7, 2006 to: "Develop a process, create a timeline and present recommendations that move us toward unification of the Provinces of Albany, Emmitsburg, Evansville, and St. Louis".

THE PROCESS

The mandate described a process that would be co-responsible, collaborative, and comprehensive. Involving all Sisters through constant communication, consultation, prayer, committee work, and regional and national meetings would be a priority. Through attentive listening, reflective thinking, flexibility and compromise, the Steering Committee would address the following crucial areas: mission and ministry, structure, culture, leadership models, legal and financial issues, use of properties, and care of sick and elderly Sisters. The committee's work would be spread over the next four years. Before the actual process began, Visitatrixes and their Councils determined that all the provincial retirement residences would for the present time as homes for our senior Sisters.

³ Constitution 6: *The Company is international. The charism is incarnated and made visible in various cultures and countries throughout the world: by its life, by its membership, by its organization and representation, by communion, collaboration, and sharing among the Provinces. In the words of Saint Vincent it is God "who desired this Company of young women from various regions and wanted all of them to be of one heart!"*.

⁴ Sisters Rosalie Digenan, Jane Graves, Sharon Haskins, Mary Ann Azar (replaced by Joan Keating), Helen Marie Kling, Rose Logan (replaced by Nora Gatto), Theresa Peck, Joanne Vasa.

The Steering Committee met for the first time in Evansville, Indiana, on January 17-18, 2007. Brother Steve Glodek, SM agreed to be the facilitator of the Steering Committee, which soon became known as the Visioning for the Mission Committee. The UFM Committee chose a chairperson⁵ who would be responsible for monthly reports to the Visitatrixes and periodic meetings with them. *Compass Points* was the communication vehicle developed to keep all of the Sisters informed of the progress of the process.

The Visioning for the Mission Committee met in person seven times in 2007 and had two conference calls. The meeting format included quiet prayer, reflection, and sharing at the start of each meeting. This helped committee members to get to know one another as well as a prayerful, reflective atmosphere in which decisions could be made. After listening to a presentation in February by a congregational leader involved in a seven community reconfiguration, the VFM Committee moved forward to approve a budget, logo, and a develop a Visioning for the Mission prayer to be used weekly in local communities. Once a communication plan was approved, a list of "publics" was developed in order to advise significant groups of the VFM process.

In May, the first four committees; Communication, Finance, Formation, and Gathering began their work. For the next several months, tasks centered on planning a national gathering in Buffalo, New York, set for the end of July. More than 450 Sisters participated in the meeting which allowed for presentations, reflection, and small and large group sharing and for opportunities to get to know one another. Following this meeting, a question about moving forward was sent to each Sister. Ninety-seven percent of Sisters favored moving forward for further communion, collaboration, and sharing among the Provinces. Several months later, a second survey was sent asking for the approval for the working these that the plan would be to create one province. Ninety-one percent of Sisters approved this. By November, a website began, providing information for the Sisters, and opportunities for communication and clarification.

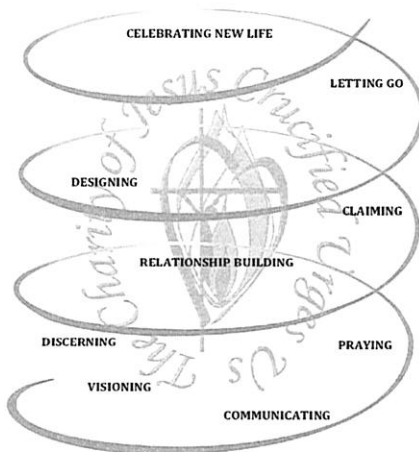
The final VFM Committee work for 2007 included developing a visual presentation of the process to be used going forward (**graphic 1**). Included with this was a written explanation of the process. Right before Christmas, each local community received the name of a prayer partner community located in another province. In addition to praying for each other regularly, the Sisters sent photos, mementos from their local area, and cards and letters for various occasions. This provided a simple way of forming relationships across provincial boundaries⁶.

⁵ Sister Theresa Peck.

⁶ 2007 Annual Review compiled by Sister Theresa Peck, D.C., Chairperson of the Visioning for the Mission Steering Committee.

GRAPHIC 1

VISIONING for the MISSION PROCESS



As the VFM Committee continued making plans for the fall, 2008 Regional Gatherings in Albany, St. Louis, Evansville, and Emmitsburg, they asked the Sisters to select a location outside their own provinces in order to get to know new Sisters. The VFM requested Visitatrixes and Councils ask the Sisters of the four provinces to respond to the following questions as part of their domestic assemblies:

- What are your hopes and dreams for a new Province of Daughters of Charity?
- What do you believe needs to happen to make these hopes and dreams a reality?
- What are the values you want to see preserved and enhanced in the new Province?

The synthesis of these questions revealed that the Sisters were very united in their purpose. A decision was made that the topic for the Regional Meetings would revolve around Governance and Structure of the new province⁷.

The Finance/Legal, Gathering, and Formation Committees met often during 2008. Each group attended to important tasks at hand: unifying house and provincial accounting practices and software, obtaining legal and financial council for assistance; preparing transportation

⁷ *Compass Points*, April, 2008.

forms and room assignments for the regional meetings; and creating monthly prayers, apostolic reflections, and dialogues for the local communities. It became clear that some new task forces would be needed to assist with the work at hand. Governance and Location Task Forces were formed after Sisters gave input regarding membership⁸. After input from the Sisters through the Location Task Force, Fr. Tom McKenna, C.M. facilitated a discernment session with the VFM Steering Committee to determine the geographic location for the new provincial headquarters.

The Fall Regional Meetings received outstanding evaluations, with (ninety-eight) percent of the Sisters who attended voting to form one province. The VFM Committee perceived the necessity of forming two additional task forces. The Mission Snapshot Task Force would create a booklet containing a snapshot of each existing local community; the Common Policies Task Force would find similarities and differences of policies in current provinces to create a new common policy book. The VFM made the decision to plan a September 2009 meeting in St. Louis with the theme "Living in Hope, Called to Prophecy"⁹. Some discussion began about the norm for selecting a Visitatrix.

In January 2009, the VFM Committee met with the Visitatrices and English-speaking General Councillor from Paris to consider the draft of the norm for selecting a Visitatrix. The VFM also formulated a Council Sheet to be sent to the General Council for the formation of one Province. The many Sisters assigned to committees and task force groups met regularly during the months that followed. An Archives Committee was named to begin the work of determining record retention and destruction, policies and procedures, and the location of unified archives. The work of more than 105 sisters and about 15 associates who served on committees and task force groups began to define the structure for the new Province.

The September 24-27, 2009 Gathering of 400 Daughters in St. Louis included time for sharing and dialogue in small groups to consider governance, location, and leadership qualities desired in the new Visitatrix and Council. The group identified 12 leadership qualities they desired in the Visitatrix and her Council: approachability, building effective teams, composure, conflict management, dealing with ambiguity, decision quality, delegation, managing vision and purpose, motivating others, priority setting, and strategic agility¹⁰. It became clear at this meeting that involving the total community at every step of the process was most beneficial. In December 8, 2009, the Visita-

⁸ *Compass Points*, June, August, 2008.

⁹ *Compass Points*, October, 2008.

¹⁰ Leadership Discernment Reflection Sheet.

trixes announced the location of the new provincial house: St. Louis, Missouri.

In 2010, the work of the Committees and Task Force Groups was extremely important. The Finance and Legal Committee continued to meet to gather materials related to Due Diligence and develop retention letters and severance policies, explore insurance options and benefits, search for a Chief Financial Officer, establish a Finance Office, and start to plan for Information Technology needs. The Policy Committee submitted a group of sixty-two Provincial Policies for the new Province, which were then forwarded to local communities for their input. The Communication Committee provided a job description for the Director of Communication, so the new Visitatrix could begin interviewing for this position. The Formation Committee began a long-range plan for ongoing formation in the new Province, and continued to develop prayer experiences to assist the Sisters with the transformation process.

The Transition Committee developed a timeline for action and made plans to visit the four provincial campuses to determine the best site for the Provincial Offices and House. The Vocation Directors also suggested a plan for the future of their ministry which was reviewed by the Steering Committee¹¹. On July 8-11, 2010, each of the four provinces had its final Provincial Meeting as a celebration of its history since 1969. On December 8, 2010, Sister Louise Gallahue, D.C. was named Visitatrix for the new province. Consultation from the Sisters determined the new Province would be called the Province of St. Louise. Later that month, Fr. Tom McKenna was appointed as the new Provincial Director of this new province.

The Visioning for the Mission Committee had its last formal face-to-face meeting in January, 2011. After thirty-two in-person sessions, the group believed that their task of planning the "United for the Mission" meeting in Baltimore (July 29 to August 1, 2011) could be done through conference call. The VFM Committee had already put in place a process for the consultation of an eight member Provincial Council; these Sisters were named on March 25, 2011. In April, Sister Louise Gallahue and the new Council gathered in St. Louis with the Sister Servants of all the local communities in the Province. In April, a Provincial Secretary and Treasurer were named. The Visitatrix continued to communicate with the Council members and requested input on their areas of expertise. In June, each Councillor reviewed her assignments and prepared a short introductory speech to be given at the Baltimore gathering. Graphic artists worked on a new logo for the Province; and the Transition Team Task Force identified artifacts from

¹¹ *Compass Points*, March, April, 2010.

each of the four former provinces that would be displayed in the Province of St. Louise Offices.

More than 400 Sisters arrived in Baltimore on Friday, July 29, to participate in the "United for the Mission" meeting. After presentations by Sister Evelynne Franc, D.C., Superioress General, and General Councillor Sister Kathleen Appler, D.C., the Sisters of the Province met in table groups to determine the priorities for the new Visitatrix and Council. Later a tally was completed of the priorities that emerged: get to know each Sister and ministry of the Province; study our present ministries and plan for ministries of the future; emphasize community life; communicate with the Sisters of the Province on a consistent basis; determine ways to continue to pass on our charism¹². During the afternoon, the Sisters experienced a "Ministry Showcase" in which they had time to learn about all of the ministries in the new province.

On Sunday, July 31, 2011, Sister Evelynne Franc installed the new Visitatrix and eight Provincial Councillors¹³ at a Mass celebrated by the Rev. Gregory Gay, C.M., Superior General in the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, Maryland. Fr. Gay presided over the installation of Rev. Thomas McKenna, C.M., and Sr. Louise Gallahue installed the Secretary and Treasurer¹⁴. That evening provided time for celebration of the beginning of the Province of St. Louise. On Sunday, Sr. Louise gave a brief introduction, followed by short biographical presentations by Fr. McKenna on each Councillor, the Treasurer, and the Secretary. After celebrating the Eucharist, all were sent forth to their local communities, united in the mission. The VFM Committee met one final time to evaluate the process and procedures that moved the Sisters to uniting as one province. Their work was finished; the work of the new leadership team had begun.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

The overarching challenge of the reconfiguration process was creating a new culture for the new Province of St. Louise. In the four former provinces, the Sisters were known and understood by their leadership teams as well as by one another. Creating a "sense of belonging" became a top priority for the Visitatrix and Council. Most of the Council members were assigned to local communities outside their provinces of origin; this allowed them to get to know Sisters in different geographic areas. During the first year of the new province, the Council, and Pro-

¹² Notes from Cape May Planning, September 2011.

¹³ Sisters Rose Ann Aguilar, Nora Gatto, Janet Keim, Mary Beth Kubera, Jean Rhoads, Joanne Vasa, Mary Walz, Mary Catherine Warehime.

¹⁴ Sisters Maureen Schmalzried and Jane Graves.

vincial Director visited each house. They dialogued with each Sister and went to each Sister's ministry. They met with the local community as a group. Most houses also received a second visit later in the year. These personal visits gave the Visitatrix, Director, and Council a realistic view of each local community and each ministry. It became apparent during these visits that the mandate the Sisters had given the Visitatrix and Council at the Baltimore meeting was imperative. Yes, the province was larger with over 500 Sisters, but the same fact existed: there were still fewer Sisters to serve in the many ministries across the province.

During the second year, *Transforming for the Mission* began with the naming of a task force to design a process to assist the Visitatrix and Council in moving forward on this path. Again, the input of each Sister was valued highly, and the first part of the process included an individual survey, dialogue within each local community, and sharing among houses in different geographic regions of the province. In July 2012, the Sisters again gathered as a group in Indianapolis, Indiana to listen to an initial report from the task force. In the months that followed, each Sister met with her House Councillor and dialogued with her local community about her ministry and her community life. The Visitatrix and Council met numerous times to discern which houses and ministries would continue and grow, which houses would remain for a time, and which houses would close within a year's time. In September 2013, over 300 Sisters gathered in St. Louis to hear the leanings of the Council. The Sisters supported the facts presented and the province moved forward with a sense of solidarity.

Additionally, the intentional missioning of 55 Sisters (11 percent) across former provincial lines during the first two and one-half years began the process of helping Sisters to create something new. Sisters were challenged and stretched to warmly welcome other Sisters from a former province, to listen to her history and to share their own journeys, and to talk together to build a new way of doing things that were no longer *your* way or *my* way but *our* way! Common experiences were important. Besides the provincial gatherings, regional Formation Days on Community Life and Vocations were scheduled, and Sisters were encouraged to travel to a region outside their former province. The opportunity to choose to attend an annual retreat in a different region of the province was also an option.

Technology was a part in building the new culture. Weekly communication was provided through *The Link*, *The Prayer Link*, and the *Social Justice Link*. A new quarterly magazine, *Faith Afire*, was created; and a new website was constructed. DVDs prepared on the Word of God, the Eucharist, and our Community Saints allowed for discussion around common themes.

Of course, there were challenges. Working out new policies that honored the procedures of the former provinces was not always an easy

task. What Sisters did for holidays, how they took care of house book-keeping, the way they organized common prayer, for example, did not seem to be major issues; but, as one larger province was formed, some Sisters felt that life was more “corporate”. There was some resistance to doing things in a new or different way; and, patience was required, along with adaptability. It became clear that it would require time to put common, acceptable procedures and practices into place. Some Sisters resisted being missioned across former provincial lines or accepting Sisters into their local communities from a former province. Yet, in all this, there was great opportunity to experience in some small way the change and uncertainty those living in poverty face every single day.

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE HOPES

The challenge of transitioning into a new province is still apparent. Trust, dialogue, and courage in decision-making will assist all in moving forward not just to “merge” former cultures but to create a new one. The Domestic, Provincial, and General Assemblies that lie ahead will give the Sisters of the Province some common ground on which to stand and vision. Hopefully, the practice of “being sent” will impel us to discover the needs of the most abandoned and underserved and to respond to those needs. During our “Transforming for the Mission” process, new local communities will form. Working through resistance with patience and sensitivity will be key as we embrace the future with hope and zeal for our ministries. The aging of our community and the decline in numbers will continue to challenge us because there will be fewer numbers and less energy to serve.

Yet, the willingness of the Sisters to be sent where the need is greatest, the opportunity to know one another’s giftedness and a deepening of our faith and trust in God, give great hope to the Sisters of the Province of St. Louise. It is apparent that God has been with the Province of St. Louise on every step of this journey. God’s Providence will continue to guide us as we go forward. In the words of St. Vincent de Paul: “Since Our Lord is the author of this work, you must often entreat Him to fill the persons who enter the Company with the Spirit He wants all of you to have, so that, by this means, you may continue the good that has been started”¹⁵.

¹⁵ St. Vincent de Paul, September 29, 1655, “Explanation of the Common Rules”, X Conference 70.