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To merge or not to merge

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Franciscan Sr. Margaret Mary Sullivan plays with children from the Clare Court Apartments in Baltimore.

On one level, the story of the changing Catholic church in the United States is contained in the numbers: decreasing numbers of priests, nuns, parishes and even religious congregations. That cold reality began to dawn on the church as early as the 1970s, and it eventually surfaced a new word for the Catholic vocabulary: merger. Parishes merged; so did Catholic hospitals, elementary schools, high schools and religious orders.

It continues today, but some in religious life who have been through the wrenching face-off with the inevitable will tell you that grim-looking numbers might point the way to new possibilities. Often the impetus to merge is born of economic necessity and a certain economy of scale that comes with membership in a larger group.

At least one group, however, facing the same inevitable numbers, decided against merging, opting instead to stay small, digging deeper into their ministry of peacemaking.

During the 20 years that the National Religious Retirement Office has been keeping data, 169 religious institutes have been involved in some form of merger, said Sr. Janice Bader of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood.

Bader, executive director of the retirement office, said the figure includes some 120 to 130 female institutes that now are operating as 42 institutes, and 39 male orders that now are 14.

The numbers, she cautions, are imprecise because of the way some religious houses are listed, but they are accurate enough to paint a picture of a trend that has been underway for more than 20 years.

Today, she said, there is less interest than there once was in exploring mergers among ?unrelated groups,? but ?there still is some movement among religious of the same family -- for example Franciscans or Dominicans -- to merge provinces or communities.?

One fairly recent exception to that observation, she said, was when the Sisters of Sts. Cyril and Methodius in Danville, Pa., opened their property to members of two other orders. A group of Carmelites, who were aging

and finding upkeep of their property increasingly difficult, sold their monastery and moved into a portion of the motherhouse of the Sts. Cyril and Methodius sisters.

About the same time, Dominican Sisters of Elkins Park, Pa., facing a familiar problem of caring for elderly sisters and huge old buildings that no longer served a purpose, moved some of their retired sisters to the Sts. Cyril and Methodius facility. ?All three communities are living on that campus,? said Bader.

It is the hard choices that most often push orders of nuns to consider dramatically new arrangements. When the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore voted to merge in 2001 with the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in Milwaukee, the number of the group in Baltimore had already dropped to 43. The Milwaukee Franciscans numbered 326 at the time. Since then, 14 from the Baltimore group have died. Achieving merger was a long process. Lots of other communities were considered. In the end, a serendipitous meeting during a luncheon at a conference led to an unlikely matchup between two groups from the same Franciscan ?family? with similar ministries.

But the initial decision to seek a merger became inevitable, as it has for many small communities. In this case, it worked out to be a win-win situation, with the much smaller Baltimore group eventually building on earlier ministries to reach out to the wider community in a way that has drawn wide attention in that region. Some members of the Baltimore group had skills and interests that fit well in Milwaukee, and they moved north. A sister from Milwaukee is currently a superior of the Baltimore community.

The Baltimore group traditionally had a strong ministry to people in the city, especially the poor and the homeless, said Sr. Ellen Carr in a recent phone interview. Carr was deeply involved in the merger process.

At the time of the merger, the Baltimore group owned two connected buildings, one with 50,000 square feet, the other with 8,000 square feet, each in need of major repair and remodeling.

The larger building had served earlier as an orphanage for African-American children and later as a school for the special-needs children. The same day they voted to merge, the Baltimore group also voted to move forward with a daring merger of another sort -- a partnership with Homes for America, a nonprofit organization that builds low-income housing. Homes for America agreed to renovate 67 percent of the large building, the portion it would own, into the Clare Court Apartments. Some are rented by the sisters, allowing the order to maintain a long-held practice of ?intergenerational living,? in which older and younger sisters remain in the same place. The rest of the apartments are rented to low-income residents, most African-American, from the Baltimore area.

The remaining 33 percent of the larger building is maintained by the order, which raised funds to renovate it and now uses it as a residence, called Clare Court Convent, for its frail, elderly sisters.

The order rents the smaller building on the property to Homes for America to use as a community center. The sisters also continue to run a nearby school for middle and high school students with special needs.

The matchup with the Milwaukee Franciscans occurred, said Carr, primarily in the area of ministry. The Milwaukee order founded that city?s first school for special-needs pupils in the early 1900s, and Cardinal Stritch University, which the order founded, has a strong background in training teachers for special-needs children.

In Carr?s assessment, the merger has enlarged the family. Of the Baltimore group, she said, ?We now know bratwurst and custard. And we know we have to have beer in the house when the sisters come from Milwaukee.?

Not all small groups facing decline come to the same conclusions. Sr. Jan Cebula, president of the Sisters of St. Francis of Clinton, Iowa, said the order?s 72 vowed members decided, following several years of discernment, that they would not seek a merger with another order. ?This is a transformative time in history,? she said. ?We

think it is also a transformative time for religious life. Everyone is saying it is going to look different in the future from today.

?We want to spend our energy intensifying our mission and finding out, ?What is the new?? and ?How can we bring about that new?? ?

Cebula said the order also includes 77 associates, non-vowed people, mostly women but including men, who have a connection with the charism of the order, as well as three women termed ?sojourners,? who live with the sisters and want a closer relationship with the order than as associates, but who have not taken vows.

Rather than spend the time it would take to fashion new relationships with another order or province and commit leadership to the structural tasks of forming a merger, ?we decided to get on with the mission and whatever this ?new? is going to look like.?

The order originally was involved in education and hospital ministry, but it has been years since those areas have been the work of the order. Cebula, for instance, is a lawyer and was involved in legal-aid work before being elected head of the order for the first time in 2004. She was elected to a second term last year.

The order?s membership went through a disciplined process, she said, to discern whether to seek a merger, and also studied the Franciscan charism deeply to determine the order?s current mission -- active nonviolence.

?We?ve decided to study it, practice as a way of life, promote it in society,? said Cebula. ?We said this really is our corporate mission, active nonviolence and peacemaking.? In an immediate sense, the decision has meant teaching and participating in peacemaking activities and demonstrations. In the long term, Cebula said, the question is how the mission of active nonviolence and peacemaking is to be carried on within the order and in the wider culture.

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