

LCWR leaders meet with Midwest bishops

Cheryl Wittenauer | May. 11, 2010



St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn.

Leaders of 17 women's religious communities in the upper Midwest have met with six of their bishops, igniting a conversation about shared leadership in the church amid a Vatican probe into the women's leadership conference.

Six bishops met with 35 women's congregational leaders at a regional meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious last month at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn. They plan to stay in touch through a quarterly bulletin and meet again in 2012.

The bishops of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota were invited by LCWR's Region 11 congregations in April 2009 in the wake of a Vatican doctrinal investigation of the largest U.S. women's religious leadership organization. A separate Vatican study announced in December 2008 is assessing the quality of life in apostolic women's religious communities in the United States.

The Vatican investigation was not part of the conversation at the April 22 meeting in Collegeville, nor was it intended to be, Sr. Tierney Trueman, Region 11 chair of LCWR, and leader of the Sisters of Saint Francis of Rochester, Minn., said in a phone interview Tuesday from Rome.

Trueman said the women religious' invitation to bishops "comes out of assuming our responsibility as we see our own call to ministry."

"We invited them. We took a pro-active stance and decided not to wait for them to invite us," Trueman said. "We took the initiative.

"We simply believe in dialogue. It's important to begin to find ways to discuss shared responsibility for leadership in our church."

Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck, president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration La Crosse, Wis., and president of the LCWR, was encouraged by the meeting of bishops and women religious.

"This is a real model, a real model for us to go forward. We don't have anything and they [the bishops] don't have anything to lose," Weisenbeck told *NCR* in Rome.

Weisenbeck and Trueman are in Rome for a meeting of the International Union of Superiors General. About 800 women religious are attending from Europe, Asia; Africa, the Americas and Oceania.

Susan Sink, spokeswoman for the Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn., said the meeting was seen as very successful, but that there was some anxiety leading up to it, given the investigations.

While it is standard for individual religious communities to meet regularly with their bishop, a meeting with all of a region's bishops is less common. Trueman said each of the bishops responded to the invitation; some couldn't come because of illness or previous engagements.

Bishop Samuel Aquila of Fargo, N.D. declined to be interviewed. Archbishop John Nienstedt and Bishop Lee Piche of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minn., and Bishop John Kinney of St. Cloud, Minn., were unavailable for comment. Neither of the other two bishops who attended responded immediately to *NCR*'s request for comment. They are Bishop John Quinn of Winona, Minn., and Bishop Paul Zipfel of Bismarck, N.D.

Thirty-five congregational leaders from 17 women's religious communities in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota attended.

A statement from LCWR Region 11 said the meeting was a chance for participants to reflect and share their experience of leadership in the church, gain a greater understanding of each other's roles, and look for ways to collaborate.

They also acknowledged the church's growing ethnic diversity and that they might invite people of many cultures to a future meeting to hear their needs in the church and world today.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious consists of leaders of Catholic women religious congregations in the U.S. Its 1,500 members represent most of the tens of thousands of women religious in the U.S.

Read more stories about the apostolic visitations of U.S. women religious: [NCROnline.org/apostolicvisitation](http://ncronline.org/apostolicvisitation)
[1]

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