

Different Paths, Same Mountain

For 20 years, a group of women known as the SSJ Collaborators have continued working in the spirit and graced life of the Sisters of Saint Joseph. As they celebrate this milestone, we take a closer look at who these women are, how they came together, and how their faith and action have continued to help further the SSJ mission of “uniting neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God.”

In 1991, the General Chapter of the Sisters of Saint Joseph resulted in a Value Statement calling the Congregation to work in collaboration with others to be a transforming presence in our world. Collaboration was looked at from every level, including its Latin Derivative “cum Laborao” to labor/birth with/together: to birth new life together.

As the Congregation was preparing for the 1999 General Chapter, it was clear that old patterns of “working with” could not meet the needs of the 21st Century world which called for a system of working together that would be relational; a freely chosen commitment among equals who would share resources and work together toward goals set of held in common.

In preparation for that chapter, members of the Congregation joined working groups focused around specific goals and the group called “Goal 1” was specifically looking at forms of collaboration. While working in this group, Sisters Beth LeValley and Diana Dolce shared the same idea that one group of people with whom we could “birth new life together” was women who had shared life with us, carried the Charism of the Sisters of Saint Joseph within them, but were led by God to “different paths up the same mountain” and were now former members of the Congregation.

Sisters Beth and Diana met with Judy Reger, Donna Provenzano-Warner, Janet McNally and Sister Karen Dietz to get their perspective on whether former members would be willing to reflect on, discuss, and explore new forms of collaboration with the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

On May 8, 1999 a group of about 35 former members met in the front reception room of the old Motherhouse. The topics discussed included:

- a) What forms of collaboration do you see as essential for our world?
- b) What new forms of collaboration are needed, including the possibility of new forms of “connectedness” to the Sisters of Saint Joseph?
- c) What ways do you, as former members, see the Sisters of Saint Joseph collaborating with others, and others collaborating with the Sisters in our mission and ministry?
- d) What ways do you see the Sisters of Saint Joseph collaborating with you in your personal life and ministry?
- e) Where might we go together from here?

The 35 women who gathered clearly loved the Sisters of Saint Joseph, and the discussion was joyful, faith-filled, spirited, and clearly permeated by God’s spirit. At the end of the discussion, several of the women asked if they could continue to meet to work in collaboration with the Sisters on this important topic. Thus, “the Collaborators” came to be. The original members of this group were: Sister Kathleen Burns, Pat Cushing, Anne DeMare, Nancy DeRycke, Sister Karen Dietz, Sister Diana Dolce, Doreen Driscoll, Maggie Frank, Pam Gabryel, Sister Judy Green, Gloria Hamm, Sister Beth LeValley, Kathy McCusker, Janet McNally, Kathy Schuler, Eleanor Volpe, and Donna Warner.

The Collaborators, with the help of other Sisters, organized a reunion held at the Motherhouse in 2000. There was a remarkable turnout of both former and present members for this event which included small group gatherings, personal sharing, experiences of prayer, and a beautiful Mass. Old friendships were renewed and healing was able to take place for many people.

A survey taken by the Collaborators after this reunion showed a strong interest on the part of former members for more opportunities for prayer experiences. It also led to opportunities to tour some of the SSJ ministries, ongoing information about the building of the new Motherhouse, and receiving mailings that would help them to stay connected with the Sisters.

In response to this interest, Eleanor Volpe, Kathy McCusker, and Anne DeMare gave a presentation to the Congregation at the fall 2000 Assembly. Pat Cushing co-chaired the garage sale to help benefit the funding of building of the new Motherhouse, and many of the other Collaborators worked on this sale. Maggie Frank worked on the planning committee which organized the ministry fair that took place in 2002 at Marketplace Mall, and the other Collaborators worked at the fair.

Most of the Collaborators became companions to the Sisters moving from the old to the new motherhouse, supporting them before, during, and long after the move.

A small sub-committee of Collaborators met regularly to publish a quarterly newsletter for former members. This newsletter, called *Keeping Connections*, contained articles written by both current and former members. The newsletter focused on ways in which the charism of the Sisters of Saint Joseph was alive, strong, and active among the former members as well as current members. The charism of reconciliation, and union, being a healing presence, and serving all without distinction, was a gift planted in the hearts of the women who shared life with us for many years. Those gifts of the charism were carried with them as they followed the different path to which God called them.

Other sub-committees of the Collaborators planned at least one, and sometimes two, prayer services for Prayer for Our Times since it started in 2001.

The Collaborators have met as a group every month since they began in 1999. Each meeting consists of supper together (every other month it is with the Sisters at the Motherhouse), prayer and state of the heart faith sharing, and planning. During the planning part of the meeting, the Collaborators organized another reunion that involved saying “goodbye” to the old Motherhouse, and “hello” to the new. The planning times also involved actively participating in the “refounding” efforts of the Congregation.

The Collaborators are women who have the love of the Congregation and an understanding of the SSJ charism in their hearts. They also bring a unique objectivity and can provide different perspectives on how the charism is needed in today’s society. Discussion around “refounding” helped the Collaborators themselves look at who they are within the Congregation, and how they can continue to help meet un-met needs.

The Collaborators are all a bit older now. Some of the original members have left for a variety of reasons, and new members have joined, but the group still meets faithfully every month, eating dinner, praying, faith-sharing, and planning, always with the focus of “What new life can we birth together with the Sisters of Saint Joseph?”

The current Collaborators are: Anne DeMare, Nancy DeRycke, Sister Diana Dolce, Doreen Driscoll, Pamela Gabryel, Theresa Gall, Arlene Helget, Kathleen Knope, Sister Beth LeValley,

Kathleen McCusker, Janet McNally, Lois Miller, Judith Reger, Kathleen Schuler, and Eleanor Volpe. We meet on the second Thursday of every month from 5:30 to 7:30 pm. If you would like more information about this group, please contact Anne DeMare at anneliz482@aol.com.