



‘Continue Courageously, For the Love of God’

ONE CONGREGATION’S JOURNEY TO A PJP

SR. ROSE MARY DOWLING, FSM, and RON HAMEL, PhD

We often don’t see the extent of life-transforming changes, and the circumstances and decisions that led to them, until we look back. That’s because in the midst of such a transformation, we are busy taking the next step, and then, based on reflection and evaluation, the step after that. We are deeply involved in being present to the moment, knowing we are being led by something much greater than ourselves and trusting that movement. For 18 years, the Franciscan Sisters of Mary (FSM) have been in such a process. They still are deeply immersed in the next steps.

BRIEF HISTORY

FSM grew out of two congregations, the Sisters of St. Mary (SSM), founded in 1872 by Mary Odilia Berger in St. Louis, and the Sisters of St. Francis of Maryville, Missouri (OSF), founded in 1894 by Mary Augustine Giesen. For reasons lost to history, Giesen and six others had left SSM and formed their own congregation on the other side of the state.

Both congregations engaged in a ministry of healing among the poorest of the poor, beginning with home visits and eventually establishing hospitals in Missouri, Illinois, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Wisconsin. In the years following the Second Vatican Council, both congregations took to heart the call to re-examine their beginnings. Slowly, they opened dialogue about the possibility of reunifying, and, in 1985, they did. The Franciscan Sisters of Mary officially came into being.

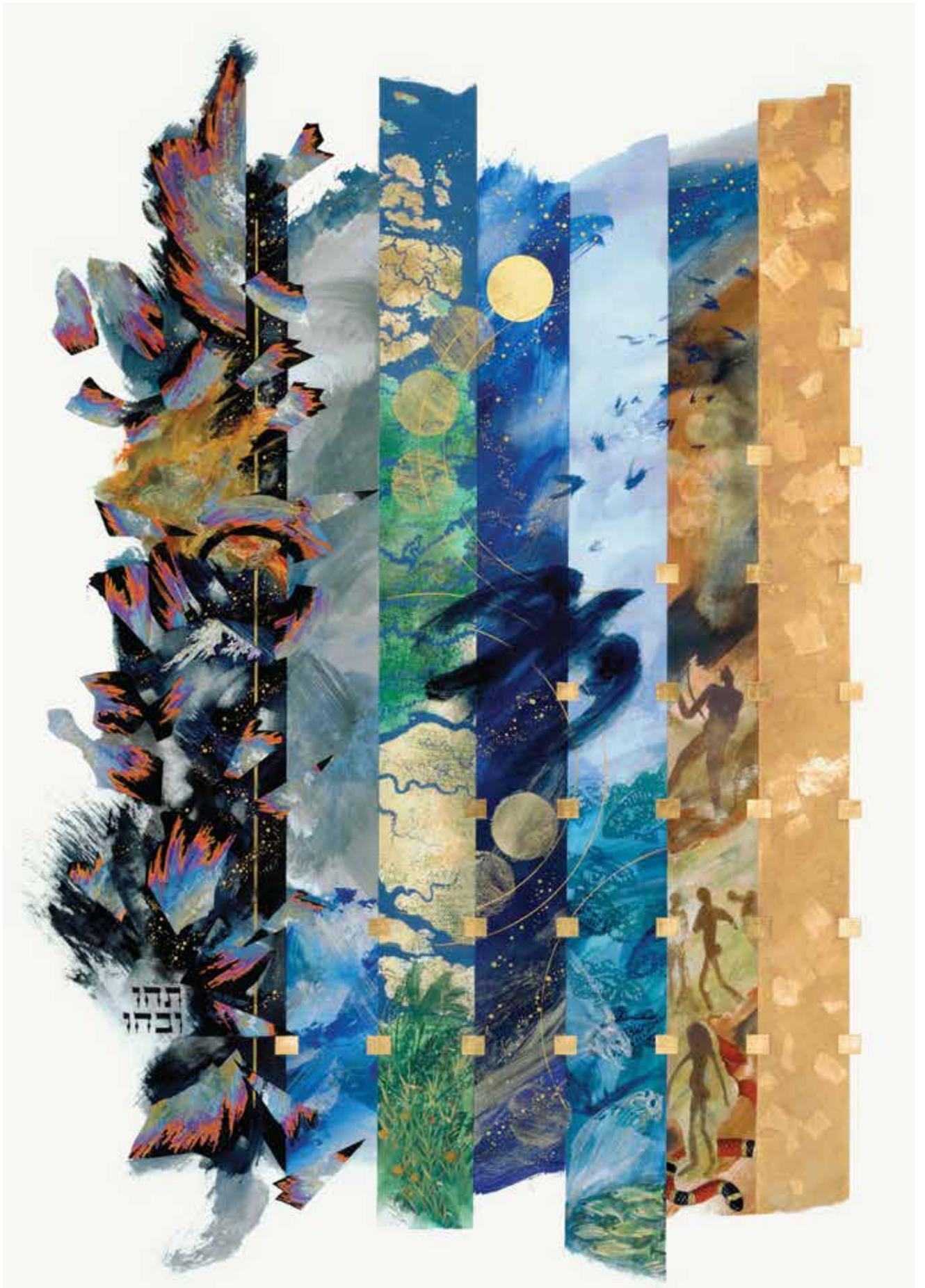
The FSM journey of transformation began in 1999 with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious viability project, “A Critical Juncture: Assessing the Viability of Religious Institutes,” created to assist communities in assessing their “health” in the areas of mission, leadership, mem-

bership, resources, planning and risk-taking. FSM undertook the assessment in 1999, and, in addition to concerns the study identified, the sisters recognized that no one since 1979 had entered the congregation and stayed. At the 2001 chapter meeting, the sisters decided to put energy into revitalizing the FSM congregation, its members and its mission. New members would be welcome, if any came.

New members did not come. Over the years, the numbers have declined from 600 in 1955 to 69 at the beginning of 2017. But in other ways, life has flourished. One way has been in passing along the Gospel presence to those with whom and to whom the sisters have ministered.

MOVING TOWARD A PJP

One massive undertaking, done step by step, was to bring into being a public juridic person for the SSM Health ministry. The process began in 2007 when the chapter members considered — and “blessed” — the idea. In 2009, the FSM leadership team appointed a task force to begin the work of establishing a PJP. Along with members of SSM Health senior management and canon lawyers,



the task force developed statutes, bylaws and prepared the application/petition to go to the Holy See.

A significant point: The task force asked for, and was granted, a PJP “mirror board” model in which the members of the PJP also were mem-

bers of the SSM Health Board of Directors. The task force felt it was vital that the PJP members be fully informed about and involved in the work of the health system board. During this time, they also developed an initial formation program for the new PJP members.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Over the course of the past few years, the PJP has enjoyed several notable achievements. Among them are:

- After a formation session that focused on Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*, the SSM Health Ministries board encouraged the full board of directors to request management to develop a plan for strengthening and advancing SSM Health’s commitment to environmental responsibility. Such an effort was especially important given that care of creation is central to the FSM charism. Michael Panicola, PhD, senior vice-president for mission, developed a plan that was subsequently approved by the system board and implemented, with very positive results.

- The Health Ministries board developed a brief document that explains the connection of SSM Health’s values with its heritage (Gospel, St. Francis and St. Clare, and Mother Odilia). The document is intended for educational and formation programs across the system.

- The system CEO invited the SSM Health Ministries board to present to management its desired and expected outcomes for 2017. At the recommendation of a small subcommittee and with consideration of other possibilities, the PJP unanimously proposed the following:

Assess the mission function across the health system and, in light of findings, ensure that it is adequately resourced in terms of (1) staffing and leadership, (2) training and education, and (3) salaries. The senior vice-president for mission will conduct an assessment and report the

findings back to the SSM Health Ministries board along with a three- to five-year plan for addressing needs.

Employ a discernment process that can be used in SSM Health Ministries board, SSM Health board, and senior management meetings, when appropriate and when making significant decisions. Sr. Rose Mary Dowling, FSM, gave the full board of directors and senior management a presentation on discernment — what it is and how to do it. Subsequently, the senior vice-president for mission revised and disseminated to leadership throughout the system two discernment processes, one for organizational issues and the other for clinical issues. Information about discernment has been incorporated into leadership formation.

Focusing on discernment is an integral part of the FSM way of life. It is grounded in saints Francis and Clare, who took time to reflect and listen to the deeper self within before engaging in action. They would then bring their resulting insights to members of their communities to invite their reflections and responses in order to make the best possible decisions. This process of discernment, individual and communal, has been a gift to the members of the PJP that is increasingly becoming more proficient in making use of it.

Another gift to the SSM Health Ministries board from the FSM is their practice of “presence.” Presence is integral to the mission of SSM Health: “Through our exceptional health care services, we

reveal the healing presence of God.”

Part of the practice of presence is to begin meetings with a sharing of presence — saying who we are and how we are right now in this moment. “Sharing of presence is a way to be transparent with one another, to build trust and form relationship.”¹

As described by the sisters:

Presence is the essence of FSM Mission: “to be the presence of the loving, serving, compassionate, healing Jesus.” We look at mission today not so much from the perspective of the tasks we perform but from an experiential or spiritual perspective of presence — who we are and how we relate to, connect to and make meaning with the whole of life.

Presence also is the fundamental element of Franciscan spirituality:

- Presence is who and how we are regardless of what we are doing.

- Presence is about being Gospel as we go about whatever we are doing.

- Francis’ only desire was to live as Jesus did.²

NOTES

1. Rose Mary Dowling, Irma Kennebeck and Sandy Schwartz, “Transformed into a New Way of Being,” unpublished manuscript, 34.
2. “Transformed into a New Way of Being,” 33-34.

For further reading:

Rose Mary Dowling, “Continue Courageously, for the Love of God,” *Human Development*, 34, no. 1 (Spring 2013).



In December 2010, the President of FSM sent the Archbishop of St. Louis, the archdiocese in which SSM Health and FSM are incorporated, a letter informing him of preparations to move toward a PJP.

The 2011 FSM Chapter assembly agreed to a resolution authorizing the leadership, along with canonists and consultants, to:

- Design the successor PJP
- Involve the local diocesan bishops in the six dioceses in which SSM Health ministers in preparing a petition to the Holy See
- Petition the Holy See for the successor PJP
- Transfer the canonical responsibility for SSM Health from FSM to the new successor PJP based on an implementation plan

As the process moved forward, the sisters had opportunities to ask questions and give their input. The petition went to the Holy See on June 15, 2012, and, as the FSM leadership team waited for the response, it gathered names and resumes of potential PJP members. Later in the year, the PJP, with some modifications for greater clarity and accuracy, gained approval.

CEREMONY

In 2013, SSM Health Ministries was established in a ceremony held on Nov. 16, the Foundation Day of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary. FSM gave each of the new PJP's members — three from FSM's leadership team and three lay members — a small basket, a reminder of the basket that Mother Odilia carried through the streets of St. Louis as she begged for food, medicine and money, and encouraged the members to "continue courageously, for the love of God," Mother Odilia's final recorded words.

A year later, the FSM leadership team appointed three additional laypersons to the SSM Health Ministries board, bringing the PJP to eight members (one original member resigned shortly

after being appointed). According to the canonical statutes for SSM Health Ministries, a majority of the members must be Catholic and, currently, all are.

All members of the PJP are on the corporate board, but not all members of the corporate board are members of the PJP. The FSM leadership team

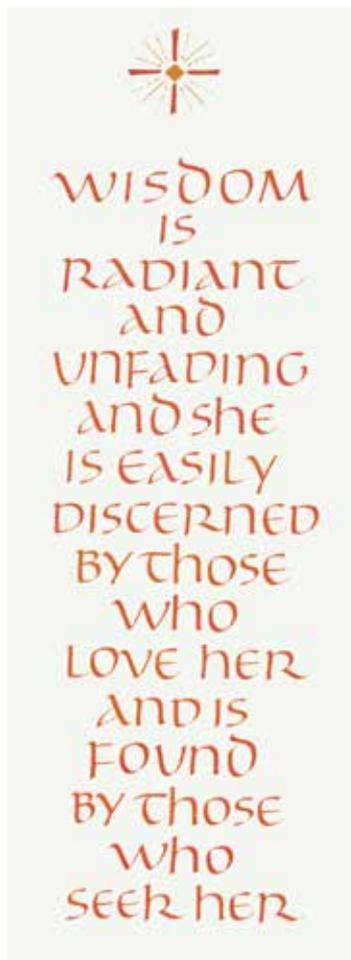
appoints members of the SSM Health Ministries board for a renewable three-year term, but eventually the PJP will become self-perpetuating. The board has four officers — a president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer. Initially, the president of the PJP was the president of the FSM leadership team. In 2015, however, the PJP elected its first lay president, and the vice-president is a layperson, as well. The election of laypersons reflects a deliberate decision to further entrust responsibility for the ministry to laypersons.

The PJP meets four times per year in conjunction with meetings of the SSM Health Board of Directors. The system CEO and the senior vice-president for mission generally participate in the first part of the meeting, which consists of agenda items of relevance to them and the period allotted for formation.

The PJP's stated purpose is to "further the healing ministry of Jesus Christ with special attention to those persons who are poor and vulnerable," and to ensure "that the mission,

vision, values and governance of SSM Health Care Corporation are in conformity with the mission and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and further the spirit and call of St. Francis of Assisi and of Mother Odilia Berger to be the very presence of the loving, serving, compassionate and healing Jesus among his people."¹

At minimum, members are expected to "understand the ecclesiology of the Catholic Church" and "understand and appreciate the obligations



and rights of the public juridic person they are called to direct in the name of the Church,” as well as “be willing to learn and embrace the mission, philosophy and values of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary and SSM Health Care Corporation.”²²

FORMATION

Realizing the purpose of the PJP and deepening what is expected of members of the PJP require ongoing formation. Every new member of the PJP participates in introductory formation, beginning with self-study that encompasses relevant videos and articles accompanied by a series of reflection questions. Then they take part in a two-day formation session consisting of:

- An introduction to the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, including the history of the congregation, Franciscan spirituality and attributes of Franciscan leadership, mission and values, and hopes for the future of SSM Health

- Duties and responsibilities of SSM Health Ministries members

- A “heritage tour” of sites in St. Louis associated with the founding and early work of the sisters

- “Health Care and the Catholic Tradition,” a presentation that includes SSM Health’s relationship to the church, Catholic moral and social teaching relevant to the PJP and its responsibilities, and issues of special ethical concern in Catholic health care

Formation continues beyond the initial introduction. PJP members have participated in the Catholic Health Association’s Sponsor Formation program of four weekends during which speakers give presentations on sponsorship and fundamental theological themes, and attendees interact in large and small groups, pray and reflect.

In 2016, members of the PJP, along with several members of senior management, took part in the system’s first Franciscan pilgrimage to Assisi. The seven-day pilgrimage will be an ongoing formation activity for new PJP and system board members, leadership across the system and select front-line staff. SSM Health Ministries board members also participate in SSM Health’s annual leadership conference, which has prominent formation components.

The SSM Health Ministries board begins quarterly meetings with discussion of a topic important to formation. The board president, along with

the senior vice president for mission and his or her staff, plan the discussion. Board of directors meetings generally begin with a formation session, as well, planned by the same individuals who, every year, develop a formation plan for the PJP and the board of directors. The plan is subsequently approved by the Health Ministries board and the FSM leadership team.

CHALLENGES OF A YOUNG PJP

As a young PJP, now in its fourth year of existence, the SSM Health Ministries Board of Directors is still finding its way. One of the challenges has been to grow into the realization that SSM Health Ministries is not so much intended to “carry on the sisters’ ministry” but, rather, to take ownership of it — to both carry it on and be responsible for it. This concept requires a significant shift in thinking and ongoing reinforcement. It can be easy to slip into the belief that the PJP is a caretaker of someone else’s ministry.

Along similar lines is the critical necessity for the SSM Health Ministries board to develop and strengthen a strong “mission lens” through which it views its own responsibilities as well as the fiduciary responsibilities of the system board. A strong sense of mission is critical in a rapidly changing and challenging health care environment in which the organization’s mission and values could easily get lost in dealing with the pressing issues of the day. SSM Health’s mission and values and FSM’s Franciscan heritage must be brought to bear on all that transpires. In addition, the PJP needs to find concrete ways to hold itself accountable for ensuring fidelity to the mission.

Because all system board members are not members of the PJP, there was a slight sense of “us” and “them.” This atmosphere has diminished over the past year simply by placing the Health Ministries board meeting after the system board meeting. In addition, all members of the system board have continued to bond; the system board chair and the president of the SSM Health Ministries board have developed a close working relationship; and the SSM Health Ministries board invited Sr. Mary Haddad, RSM, CHA’s vice president for mission services, to a system board meeting to address the full board and senior management on the nature and responsibilities of a PJP. This challenge should be further alleviated by the imminent addition of several new mem-



bers to the SSM Health Board of Directors, thus equalizing the number of PJP and non-PJP system board members.

Membership on the PJP is another challenge in two respects. The first is age. Going forward, including a few younger members would be desirable, but it is difficult to find younger members who can devote the time to the two boards as well as to system board committee meetings. Additionally, as the system board expands and seeks directors with particular areas of competence, it is likely to be more difficult to find PJP board members who would be excellent members of the PJP and also fit the needs of the system board. The FSM Leadership Team and the SSM Health Ministries Board remain in the process of addressing these issues.

The SSM Health Ministries board continues to be a work in progress. It is on a journey, learning, adapting and deepening its awareness of what it has been given by the FSM, striving to grow into the mission and values of the FSM and SSM

Health and striving to meet the challenges of the current health care environment in a manner that is faithful to the mission entrusted to it. The path forward is sometimes unclear, but not the words of Mother Odilia: “Continue courageously, for the love of God.”

SR. ROSE MARY DOWLING, FSM, served as president of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary congregation from 2007 until September 2015, during which time FSM transferred canonical responsibility for SSM Health to a successor PJP.

RON HAMEL, PhD, is president, SSM Health Ministries, and member, SSM Health Care Corporation Board of Directors, St. Louis.

NOTES

1. SSM Health Ministries Canonical Statutes, Article II, Purposes.
2. SSM Health Ministries Canonical Statutes, Article III, Members.

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