



Special Report

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Evolution of Leadership in Religious Institutes in the United States

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Summer 2021

Throughout their history in the United States, religious institutes had to deal with challenges arising from cultural differences in their membership and leadership. During the nineteenth century, differences arose when the expectations of superiors in France, Germany, or Poland clashed with the American culture of the sisters entering the institute in this country. Americanizing adaptations such as relaxation of cloister, elimination of the inferior class of lay sisters, or praying in English rather than in French, German, or Polish often led to the American branch splitting from its European foundation and becoming a separate institute.

Nowadays, a number of religious institutes founded in the United States have international missions or provinces whose non-U.S. members outnumber the U.S. membership. In consequence, religious institutes in the United States increasingly face new challenges related to governance and collaboration in ministry. One of those challenges is that institutes founded in the United States may need to reassess where the motherhouse should ultimately be located, and what the implications are of the evolution of the institute's leadership from older, mostly white, U.S.-born sisters to younger, foreign-born, culturally and ethnically diverse sisters. Longstanding international institutes with motherhouses in Europe and leadership traditionally exercised by European or North American sisters may now have to consider whether different cultural expectations might affect how leadership will be exercised by leaders drawn from other parts of the world. This report explores how religious institutes are dealing with these challenges today.

The findings presented here come from a study on "Forming a New Generation of Leadership for Religious Institutes" conducted by CARA in 2018-2019. This study included a national survey of religious institutes, as well as a series of four focus groups of superiors of international religious institutes with provinces in various areas around the world, and three individual interviews with the major superiors of the U.S. regions of international institutes.

The Geographic Spread of Religious Institutes

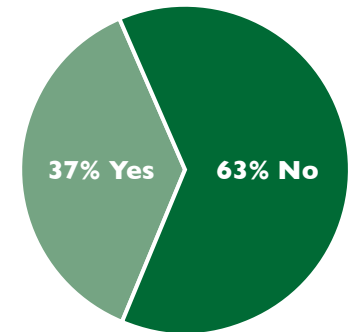
Among major superiors of U.S.-based religious institutes, three in five (63%) oversee communities that are solely living and ministering in the United States. The remaining two in five (37%) have geographical jurisdiction over an area both within and outside the United States, which means that they govern provinces or missions in other countries.

Significantly, those who report accepting new members are 12 percentage points (41% as compared to 29%) more likely than all the others to be in charge of a unit covering area both within and outside the United States.

Institutes located solely in the United States are more likely *not* to be accepting new members.

Of the 418 responding major superiors, one in five (19%) have houses or provinces in Central America with a total number of 236 members living there. One in eight (13%) have houses or provinces in Canada and Mexico, one in ten (12%) in South America, one in ten in Europe and Asia (10% each). It is less common for U.S.-based religious institutes to have houses or provinces in Africa (5%) and Oceania (2%). In terms of specific countries, U.S.-based religious institutes are most likely to have houses or provinces in Mexico (26 institutes), Canada (25), Brazil (16), Peru (16), Italy (13), Philippines (12), and Guatemala (10).

Does your unit's geographical jurisdiction cover area both within and outside the United States?
Percentage of all valid responses



Please List the Top Three Countries in Which Your Unit Has Jurisdiction And the Total Number of Members Living in Each Country
All valid responses

	Respondents		Total Members
	%	#	#
Central America	19.0	42	236
North America	12.7	53	632
South America	11.5	48	533
Europe	10.5	44	568
Asia	10.3	43	1,001
Africa	5.3	22	341
Oceania	1.9	8	107

While the largest percentage of religious institutes participating in the study have houses or provinces in Central America, the largest number of members (1,001) reside in Asia. The countries with most members include Brazil (342), Canada (313), Mexico (303), Philippines (204), South Korea (202), Poland (188), India (152), Vietnam (114), and Taiwan (100).

According to the focus group members and the interviews, a primary purpose in establishing a mission in a

new country was often to attract vocations from that country. This was true of the European institutes which had established missions in North America during previous centuries, and it is true of the current European and North American institutes which have established missions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America more recently. Once members in the mission country begin to outnumber those in the United States, congregations may need to consider a new governance structure. One of the focus group participants described this process in the following way:

So we grew together over time and eventually recognized that we can't keep [saying] "the [American] congregation and [Asian country mission]," that we need to be the [Sisters of X]. And so that's when we made the second province in the United States and kept the Generalate. But the very last general chapter we had was in [Asian country], because every other chapter alternates. At that chapter one of the big questions was, "[Asian country] is growing; they are almost 200 strong." Your median age then was in the late 40's and the United States was getting smaller, our median age was in the 70's. We didn't have as many missions. They were opening missions and we were closing missions. They were having vow days and we were having funerals. And so how do we continue, and there was a big question about should we separate and become two congregations.

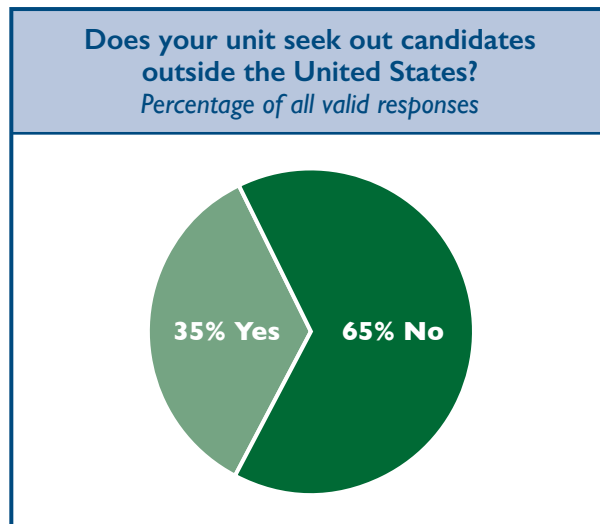
The sisters decided to remain one congregation, and even made provision for the establishment of future provinces should the occasion arrive:

Our constitutions defined, when we restructured, that whichever province – and it does not say "[Asian country] and American" because someday there may be an Ecuadorian province. But whatever province the general superior is from, the first councilor must be from a different province.



The Origin of New Members

Nine in ten major superiors (87%) accept new members to their unit (i.e., congregation, province, monastery) while the remaining 13% said that they do not. Approximately one-third of the superiors reported that their unit seeks out candidates outside the United States (35%). Such recruitment had been common as recently as the 1940s, when U.S.-based institutes made frequent trips to Ireland and other European countries specifically to invite young women to travel to America and become religious sisters. Overseas recruitment is less common today, but still occurs.



In contrast with earlier periods, it is primarily institutes with houses or provinces outside the United States which are more likely to say that they recruit candidates from other countries: 70% do so, as compared to only 15% of the institutes which are located solely in the U.S.

Among these latter institutes, the entrance of candidates from outside the United States is more *ad hoc*, as exemplified by one of the focus groups' participants:

So, we have a guy who just made vows from Nigeria. We are not present in Nigeria, but he went to school here and found us online.

Recruitment from overseas, whether currently or in the past, affects the membership composition of an institute. Respondents reported that, on average, 13 out of 85 *perpetually professed members* residing in their institute, province, or autonomous monastery entered religious life outside the United States. However, on average, three out five members in initial formation were born outside the United States.

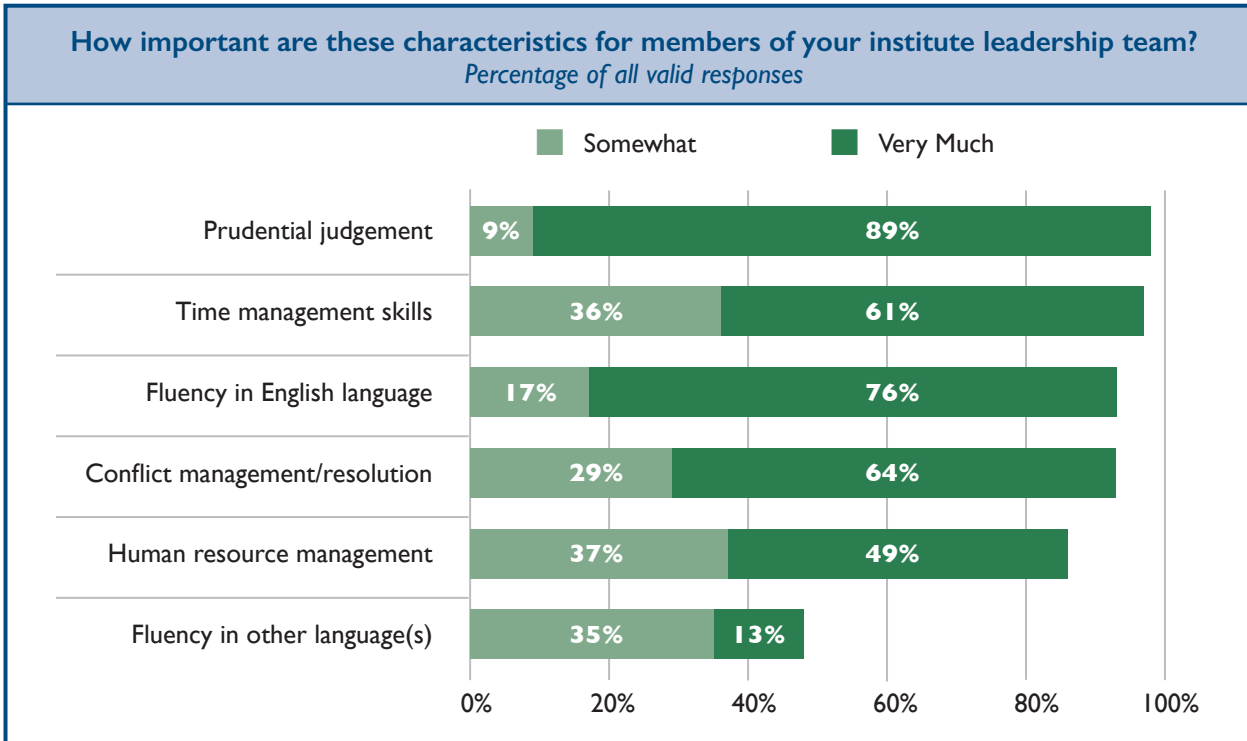
Furthermore, several of the leaders of institutes located in the United States reported having members who, although born in this country themselves, had parents who had immigrated here. Others had come to this country as small children and considered themselves as belonging to both cultures:

Some of them are born in Vietnam: the second year novice right now was born in Vietnam, came to the States at age 15, and basically has lived here the rest of her life, educated here. Our vocation minister born in Vietnam, came here – I am not exactly sure how old she was when she arrived – studied here, but the women who are attracted to us now, we have a fair number of Vietnamese sisters that are attracted. And they may or may not come directly from Vietnam or just be first generation themselves.

Number of Members All valid responses		
	Mean #	Median #
Total number of perpetually professed members	85	48
Of the above, total who entered religious life outside the United States	13	1
Of the above, total number who are age 65 or younger	6	0
Total number currently in initial formation	5	1
Of the above, total number who were born outside the United States	3	0
Of the above, total number who are age 65 or younger	3	0

Qualities of Leaders

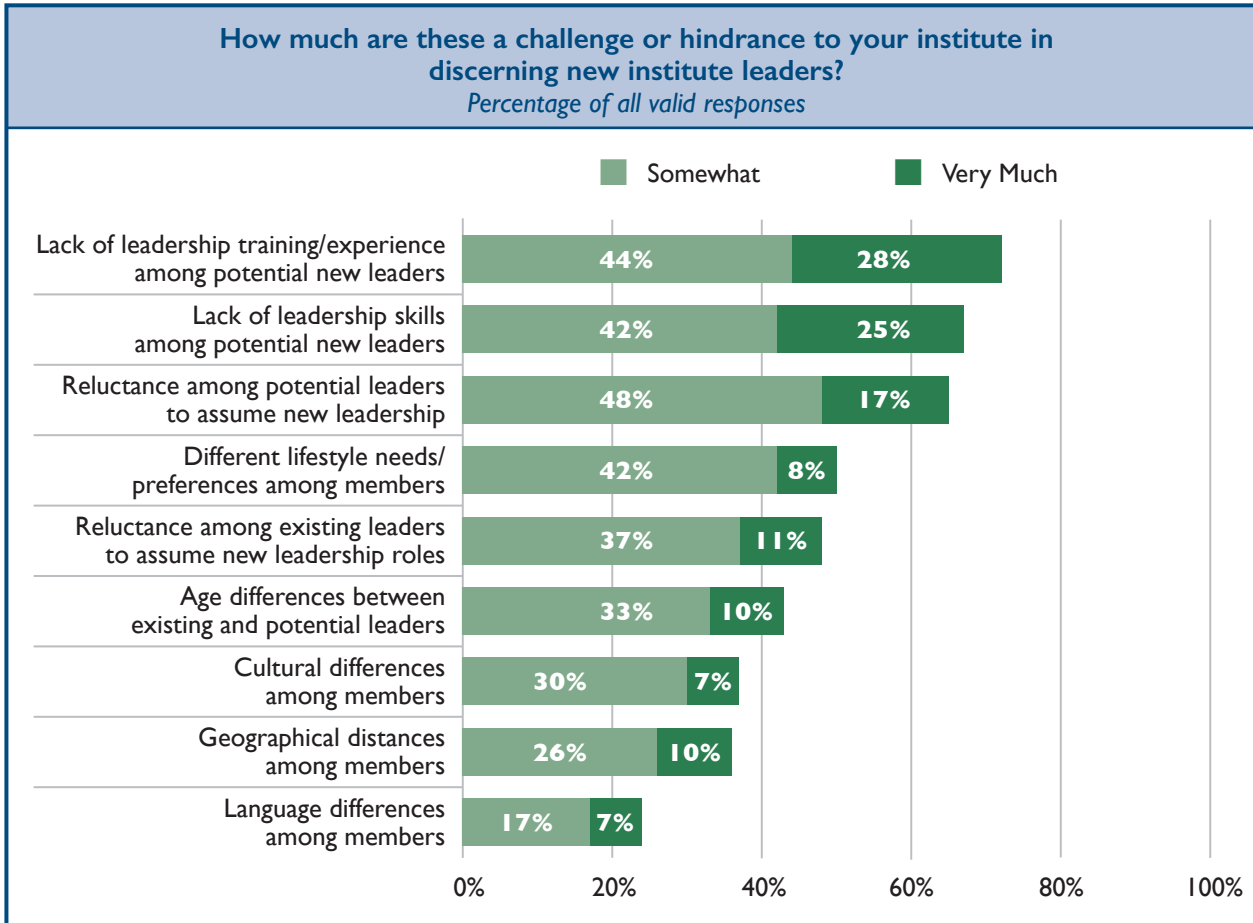
Virtually all responding superiors believe that prudential judgement and time management skills are important for the leaders of their institute to have (98% and 97% respectively). Nine in ten of them believe that fluency in English language (93%), conflict management/resolution (93%), and human resource management (86%) are important. Half of major superiors (48%) believe that fluency in other language(s) is at least "somewhat" important for the members of their leadership team.



While the expectation of fluency in other languages is relatively low now, knowledge of Spanish, Korean, or Igbo, for example, may rise in importance if the majority of the members begins to come from an institute’s formerly peripheral provinces or missions.

Challenges or Hindrances

In terms of challenges or hindrances in discerning and calling members to leadership, the responding superiors were most likely to be concerned about the lack of leadership training/experience among potential new leaders (72% of the responding superiors), the lack of leadership skills among potential new leaders (67%), and reluctance among potential leaders to assume new leadership (65%).



Several of the focus group participants confirmed the importance of these challenges. The provincial leader of one of the men’s orders noted the lack of training or experience as a problem. His order had begun to address this issue with a one-week program in the summers:

For us, you know, I think, we talk about this all the time in our provincial council and it’s a crisis of leadership at all levels. We have a lot of associate pastors but we don’t have a lot of pastor material. So, we have developed a program called the [name], and after your first year of ministry as an ordained or solemnly professed brother the next three years, it’s a three-year cycle, this leadership round table they call it. And it’s geared toward [order] and so for three years you have to go to this in the summer, it’s only a week. But it teaches you the practical side of the leadership skills. Some people have it naturally and they can just figure it out. Other people don’t, you know.

Another leader’s institute had set up a mentoring program:

We have a liaison from the general leadership that mentors or is a link between the provincial and the Generalate. So, they have no power, but they are just a communication kind of person and also for us a mentoring kind of person because the leadership in these other countries is younger and they don’t have as much experience. So, if they have a question, “How do you do this?” they can call somebody here who is not the superior general and get some advice and answers.

One of the leaders interviewed separately mentioned deliberately calling forth the strengths of the newer members:

Part of that is how we go about forming committees, that we make sure that we invite, nudge, encourage the new people to serve on committees, different people. And challenge them if they don't step forward, to challenge them.

The focus group participants also agreed that there was a reluctance among their non-U.S. members to assume leadership roles in the institute. For the leader of the sisters in a family of priests', sisters', and brothers' religious institutes, this reluctance was tied to the demands of leadership in the institute's local ministries:

It's a feeling that if they are old enough and have the experience, they need them more in the countries where they are. So anybody who could have those kinds of positions, is in a major position in their country so they are either the provincial or they are the head of schools that are the major institutions in those countries and it's very difficult to get them to keep their names in. ... It's like, if they are pulled out of there that could put that institution in jeopardy. So it is very hard. And again we talk about that, like, "The world is more important than your area." However, [laughter] that is very hard for people to do.

A leader in another focus group cited a strong distaste among younger members, both in the United States and other countries, at the prospect of managing their institute's schools or hospitals:

One of the things that was helpful to me in going through [the international leadership program] were the number of women who were from other cultures. All over really, Columbia, Guam. I was in a group with a sister from Guam. I have learned so much from those sisters in terms of how differently they see their congregations and how differently they see leadership and how differently they understand religious life going forward. It has no big corporate footprint at all connected to it. And that is something that they see is almost repellent to their desire to be in leadership.

Another leader suggested ways of dealing with this reluctance:

So, it's a matter, then, of learning from one another, and seeing how it develops in some people that are in leadership as well as how it developing within the individual person. As far as anything specific on leadership, I think we do it more subtly, so we don't scare people off and not have anybody want to come.

Implications and Recommendations

The interviewees and focus group participants had several practical suggestions, drawn from their own experience, for other institutes who anticipate having leaders and members from other cultures:

Inclusion: Several focus groups recommended formalizing structures of inclusion for both governance and members. *"Like the steering committee, that is half and half. On [planning] the 150th anniversary, it's half and half. So, I think we have made deliberate decisions together." "So, we passed legislation that said that whatever the percentage of North Americans that are going to come to the chapter, the same percentage of [Africans] have to come."*

Transparency: *"To the degree that you can be transparent about what you are doing, why you are doing it, how you are doing it, that's how others learn. And that doesn't mean that they have to imitate, but they begin to understand that there was a process involved which led to this."*

Get to Know Each Other's Culture: *"I think the thing that breaks down the walls most quickly is to get to know them. Because if there are just times for them to get together, then that begins to break down because then they begin to see them not as 'them' but as people, 'They are my friends.'" "The four American sisters, when they came to our country, they tried to learn [our] food, culture and respect us. That means that they rooted this charism in our field, acculturation."*

Mentor for Cross-Cultural Awareness: *"I would hope that there would be a relationship where you mentor the person because – think of all the different forms of legalities that we have in this country that anybody coming from [another country] would have no clue about."*

Mentor for the Practical Aspects of Leadership: *"[X] is a good program, but one of the things they have to incorporate better in that program is a much clearer sense of the practical nature of leadership. There is not much training in that program, that has a thing to do with how you cope with that. Or how you become creative with it."*



The Catholic Church is currently undergoing a profound demographic change: the number of adherents in North America and Europe is shrinking, while numbers are increasing in the Global South. Religious institutes, increasingly, are reflecting these changes. To quote the leader of the international congregation of sisters which is part of the religious family of priests, brothers, and sisters:



I think the sisters here are very excited about the fact that the international novitiate is here because it gives them the balance, saying “We might be diminishing here but we are growing in other places.” It’s more that the importance is [the charism], the importance is not in this place.

Because of the multi-cultural backgrounds of us, they expand our charism. So, we become richer.

Note About Methodology

The findings presented here come from the study about *Forming a New Generation of Leadership for Religious Institutes* conducted by CARA, with generous funding from Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. The study is based on a national survey of all major superiors of religious institutes in the United States which was administered between December 2018 and January 2019, and which concluded with the final response rate of 58% (418 respondents). The study is also based on four focus groups and three individual interviews with the leaders of men’s and women’s religious institutes at several locations throughout the Midwestern United States during the summer and fall of 2019. These focus groups and interviews were chosen to obtain the views of leaders of institutes whose international presence and leadership has taken a variety of different forms. For more detailed information, see the following report: Patricia A. Wittberg, Michal J. Kramarek, Mary L. Gautier, Thu T. Do, Felice M. Goodwin. 2019. “Forming a New Generation of Leadership for Religious Institutes.” Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.



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