



Special Report

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A Profile of the Associate-Religious Relationship in the United States and Canada

MARY L. GAUTIER, PH.D. and JONATHON HOLLAND, M.A.

In summer 2015, the North American Conference of Associates and Religious (NACAR) commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) to produce a longitudinal study of associates and religious in the United States and Canada. The study replicated a 2000–2002 CARA study of the associate relationship with vowed religious. Associates are individuals who seek to live in close association with a religious institute, without joining as vowed members. Association with religious institutes has a long history, but there has been an increased interest in the last several decades, particularly among women's institutes. The first CARA study identified more than 25,000 associates in the United States and the purpose of this current study was to document the growth and potential of the movement into the future. This CARA Special Report provides an overview of the ways that associate leaders, associates, and vowed religious view this relationship and their perceptions about the future of the associate relationship.

Background and Methodology

The 2000–2002 CARA study, which was also commissioned by NACAR, was the first study ever conducted of the associate relationship in the United States. For that study, CARA contacted all 1,100 major superiors in religious institutes that belong to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), or the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) with a questionnaire to be completed by the director/coordinator of associates in their institute. A total of 812 units responded to the survey and 429 (53 percent) reported that they had associates. Another 43 institutes reported that they planned to have associates in the future. A report of the findings from that study was completed in May 2000. In 2002, CARA also surveyed associates and vowed religious in those 429 institutes with associates. A separate report of the associates and vowed religious was completed in September 2002.¹

For the 2015 study, CARA again contacted all of the major superiors that belong to LCWR, CMSWR, and CMSM as well as the Canadian Religious Conference (CRC)—a total of 918 religious superiors. CARA emailed each superior a link to a survey and asked them to distribute it to their director/coordinator of associates to complete. CARA received 588 completed responses and 378 (67 percent) reported that they have associates. CARA also sent each of the

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directors/coordinators an electronic copy of a questionnaire specifically for associates and vowed religious and asked these directors/coordinators to forward the survey to each of the associates and vowed religious in their institute. CARA received responses from 5,667 vowed members, 4,200 associates, and 207 Third Order/Oblates, for a total of 10,074 respondents. This report presents highlights from the 2015 survey of directors/coordinators of associates as well as the survey of associates and vowed religious.²

Demographics of Religious Institutes

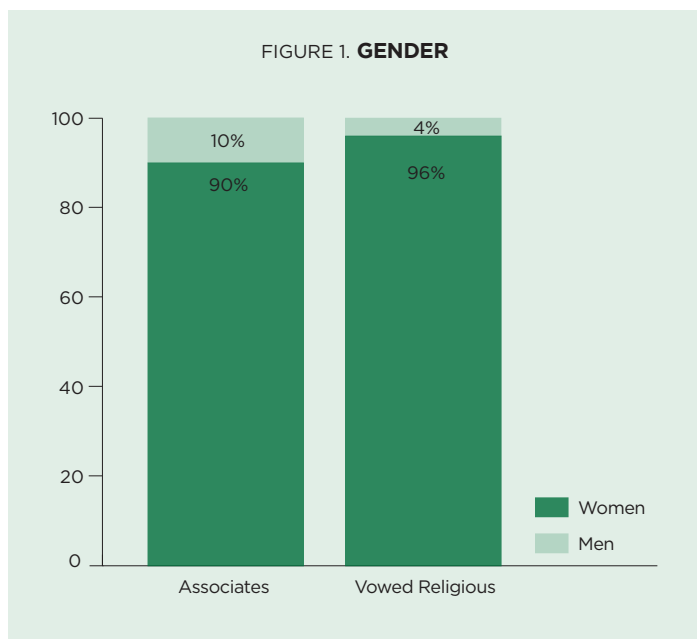
Most of the responding religious institutes, 79 percent, are in the United States. Canadian religious institutes make up the other 21 percent of responses.

Two-thirds of these institutes began to have associates before 1990 and 13 percent first included associates after 2000. In most of these institutes (93 percent) associates make a formal commitment, which is renewable in 94 percent of the institutes. Almost all of the institutes that give associates an option to renew their commitment say that most associates renew their commitment.

Increasingly, associates are being led by an associate. In 2015, 24 percent of directors/coordinators of associates are themselves associates, which is an increase from the 11 percent of directors/coordinators who were identified as associates in 2000.

Demographics of Associates and Vowed Religious

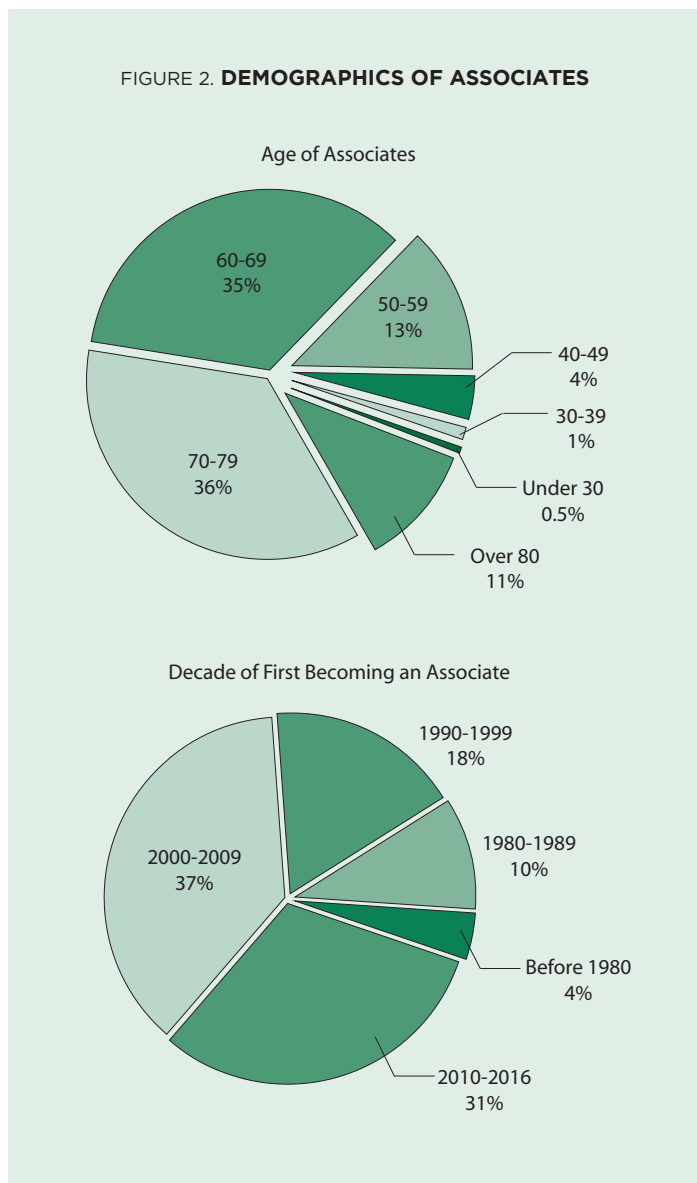
Responding institutes in 2015 report a total of 55,942 associates, more than double the number reported in the earlier study. Among associates that responded to the survey, 90 percent are women and 10 percent men. Responding vowed religious are even more female: 96 percent are women while only 4 percent are men.



The population of associates and vowed religious are also quite homogenous in terms of their race/ethnicity. More than 90 percent of associates and vowed religious are Caucasian/white. The second greatest race/ethnicity is Hispanic/Latino(a), which comprises 4 percent of the associate population and 2 percent of vowed religious population. African Americans/blacks, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans/American Indians comprise less than 2 percent of the population among both associates and vowed religious.

Associates and vowed religious are both older than they were in the earlier study. The average age of associates in 2015 was 68, whereas in 2000 the average age was 61. The substantial growth in associates now is present in the ages between 60 and 80. The relative proportion of all associates under the age of 50 has not increased.

	Total Associates	Age 40	40-49	50-59	60-69	70 or older	Age not reported
2000	25,443	1,149	2,457	4,438	4,315	2,928	10,156
2015	55,942	2,821	3,644	7,799	12,238	10,884	14,735



When asked what they find most challenging about the future of the associate-religious relationship for their religious institute, associates, vowed religious and directors/coordinators of associates are most likely to mention the age of the associates and vowed religious as their greatest concern. Despite the concern that attracting new members will be difficult, the associate population has grown since 2000. Also, two-thirds of the associates report they first became associates since 2000 while 36 percent report they became associates since 2010.

“I am inspired and encouraged to enrich my personal, spiritual life and to strive to inspire others to deepen their baptismal commitment. I see the Associate movement as God’s way of calling more of us to carry out the Gospel message in a special way.” —ASSOCIATE

“As the number of religious has decreased, the associates bring new life, energy, ideas, and enthusiasm to us, and are a sign of hope to me that our spirit and charism will continue through them in new ways. Their thirst for our spirituality make me appreciate more the richness that we have and deepen my love for it.” —VOWED RELIGIOUS

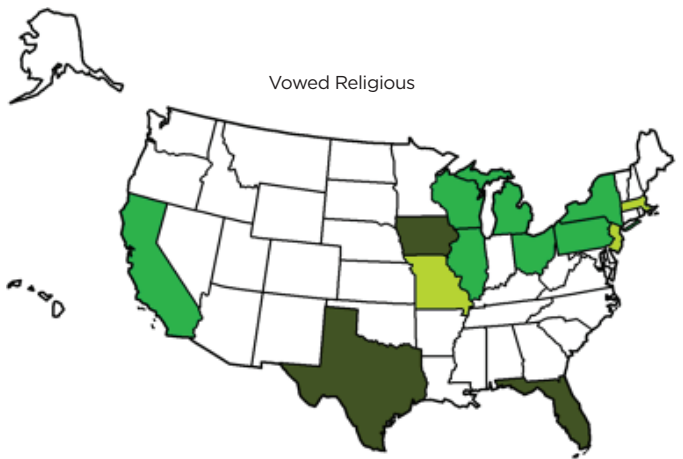
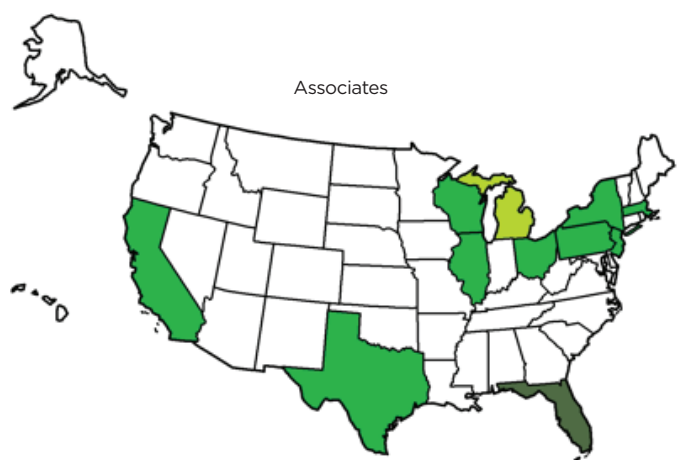
The following maps display the top ten states where associates and vowed religious who responded to the survey reside in 2015, compared to 2002 respondents. Associates and vowed religious are concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest, although they are increasingly found in the South and West, similar to the rest of the Catholic population in the United States.³ Associates are now more likely to live in Florida and less likely to live in Michigan, while vowed religious are now less concentrated in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Missouri and increasingly responding from Florida, Texas, and Iowa.



Responding Canadian associates and vowed religious are both concentrated in the eastern portion of the country in Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia; about two-thirds of responding associates and

religious live in those three provinces. Canadian associates were not included in 2002, which is why there is no comparison to the data in 2002.

One in ten associates and one in ten directors/coordinators list distance as the biggest challenge to sustainability in the community. As one associate articulates, *“I live in another state than the*



- Top ten states in 2002 and 2015
- Top ten states in 2015 only
- Top ten states in 2002 only

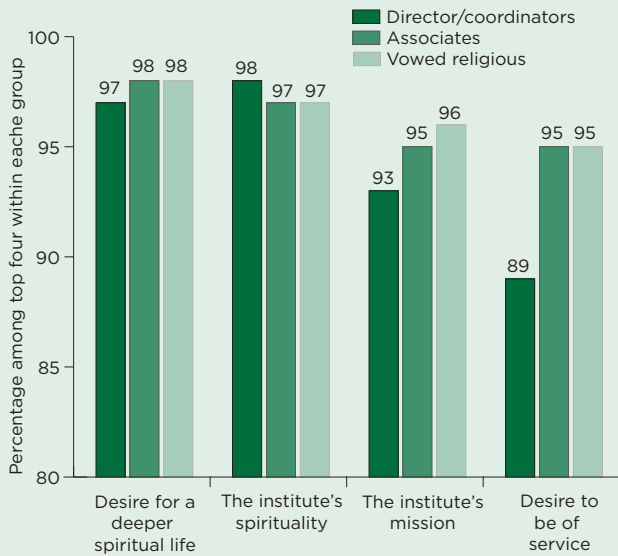
congregation is located. I am in touch via computer, phone, etc. What I find most rewarding is the sense of being connected spiritually and belief in the charism of our foundress. And the reality that we are working together to accomplish and carry out the Gospel message to love and care for one another.”

Vowed religious and associates are also highly educated. Two-thirds of associates have a college degree and 41 percent have gone on to graduate school. Over ninety percent of the vowed religious have a college degree and 82 percent attended graduate school.

Attracting Associates to the Institute

Directors/coordinators of associates, associates, and vowed religious were each presented with a list of items and asked how much each item attracts associates to the institute.

FIGURE 3. WHAT ATTRACTS ASSOCIATES TO THE INSTITUTE?



More than two-thirds of associates say that a desire for a deeper spiritual life, the institute’s spirituality, and the institute’s mission “very much” attract associates to the institute. Younger associates agree, although they are more likely than those who are older to say that a desire for community “very much” attracts associates to the institute. Associates in the United States are also more likely than Canadian associates to say a desire for community attracts associates to the institute.

“Casting a wide net toward more diversity and a willingness to take the time to be actively engaged in good formation will help attract and keep new associates,” commented one vowed member.

One associate said that they were attracted by, “Inspiring commitments/giftedness/stories of our members, strong unique worldwide ministries, spiritual connection, opportunities to grow in faith via various activities, various ways in which to participate and contribute, sense of belonging, life giving relationships, strong positive leadership, sharing the charism, spirituality of the congregation.”

Fostering Relationships among Associates and Vowed Religious

The directors/coordinators of associates were asked what they thought was most important for advancing the identity of the associates. Associates and vowed religious were asked what fostered the relationship between associates and vowed religious.

Two of the items that almost all directors/coordinators agree are important is regular contact of associates with vowed religious and regular contact with their fellow associates. The three groups are largely in agreement with what is important for the relationship to thrive.

IMPORTANT FOR FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ASSOCIATES AND RELIGIOUS

Percentage responding “Somewhat” or “Very” Important

	Directors Coordinators	Associates	Vowed religious
Participation in institute's mission	89%	95%	95%
Participation in institute's prayer	88	94	95
Regular contact with associates	93	94	93
A formal orientation program	93	93	95
Regular contact with vowed religious	92	93	95

At the end of the survey, associates and vowed religious were asked what they find most rewarding about the associate-religious relationship. The category that associates and vowed members both mentioned most commonly is the relationship they have with each other.

The identity of associates is tied to their relationship with the vowed religious of the institute. For many associates and religious that relationship is a rewarding aspect of being an associate. Younger associates and older associates largely agree on what is important to foster this relationship. Younger associates, however, are more likely than older associates to say that participation in ongoing formation is important for fostering this relationship.

As one director/coordinator says, “Involvement and interaction with the sisters and associates on a regular basis contributes significantly to the sustainability of the associates’ community. The leaders composing the associate leadership team, shared prayer, community celebrations, various workshops, and sister/associate retreats create a oneness which aids in the sustainability of our associates.”

“The love of the associates for the charism and mission is contagious. Their living of the charism questions us and calls us to be more fully alive in the spirit of our own Institute. Their relationship to the Founder and how they relate so deeply to his life puts us to shame. Their love for the poor (a dimension of our charism) is lived with real passion. The associates often bring us a new conversation and many of our men appreciate their presence at local community meetings, ongoing formation and retreats. We offer them formation and mission possibilities, but it seems we receive much more than we give,” one vowed member commented.

Interpreting the Charism

Three in four of the directors/coordinators agree that associates have a role in interpreting that charism. Eight in ten associates and vowed religious agree that associates have a role in interpreting the charism of the institute.

One vowed member stated, *“The mindfulness of being a daily witness and representative of the spirituality and charism of the Institute. Living a life committed to faith in action connected to that spirituality and charism. Inclusion and participation in the annual Assembly with the vowed members is also a rich and rewarding experience in terms of maintaining relationships, friendships and sharing time together.”*

An Associate stated, *“Le partage de notre spiritualité et notre responsabilité commune concernant la pérennité du charisme fondateur dans notre monde d’aujourd’hui. (The sharing of our spirituality and our shared responsibility for the continuation of the founding charism in our world today.)”*

“My relationship with this community has been a source of tremendous spiritual growth for me. I could not be who I am today without my shared history with my community. The times when we live most purely our call to love, freely, mutually, without concern for boundaries and roles, have been transformative, and, I believe, hold tremendous power to transform the world,” remarked an associate.

“They (associates) can all carry on the charism of the community in the world and become a valuable asset to the community with their participation at meetings and reflecting the issues of the world to us, as well as assisting in areas of their expertise,” was the comment of another vowed member.

Future of Associate Relationship

Associate directors and coordinators were asked “How well-prepared is your associate community to assume responsibility for these areas?” They indicated the highest confidence (Percentage answering “Somewhat” or “Very Much”) in the following:

- Gatherings and celebrations (89%)
- Communication with associates (84%)
- Inviting others to associate relationship (84%)

To the same question, associate directors and coordinators have the least confidence that the associate community can assume responsibility in the following:

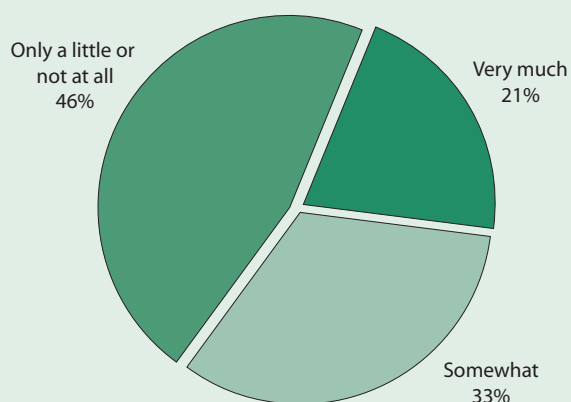
- Associate organizational leadership (69%)
- Planning future of the associate relationship (66%)
- Financial sustainability (42%)

About 94 percent of associates and vowed religious agree that the associate community is sustainable for the next five years.

Sustainability—Maintain the spirituality and mission

When directors/coordinators of associates were asked about the lessons they have learned about the sustainability of the associate community, the greatest proportion responded that it is to maintain the spirituality of the institute. This aspect includes the prayer life and spirituality of the institute, which is reflected in the associates’ responses as well. Four in ten associates say that the most rewarding part of the associate-religious relationship is deepening their spirituality and faith through their association.

FIGURE 4. HOW MUCH DO YOU, [AS AN ASSOCIATE], PARTICIPATE IN INVITING PEOPLE TO BECOME ASSOCIATES?



Associate Organizational Leadership

Nine in ten directors/coordinators agree that the institute’s leadership model for associates is succeeding. Some 73 percent say they have a path for decision-making responsibilities with the associate community and 68 percent say that new models of leadership have emerged in the past five years.

A third of responding directors/coordinators and one in six associates say that the most serious challenge their institute faces concerning the sustainability of associate relationship is a scarcity of associate leadership/commitment.

As one director/coordinator puts it, *“The most serious challenge that we are facing focuses on the level of commitment of the associates to be active participants in the transformation process. Another challenge that we face is the potential pool of future leaders for the associate leadership team.”*

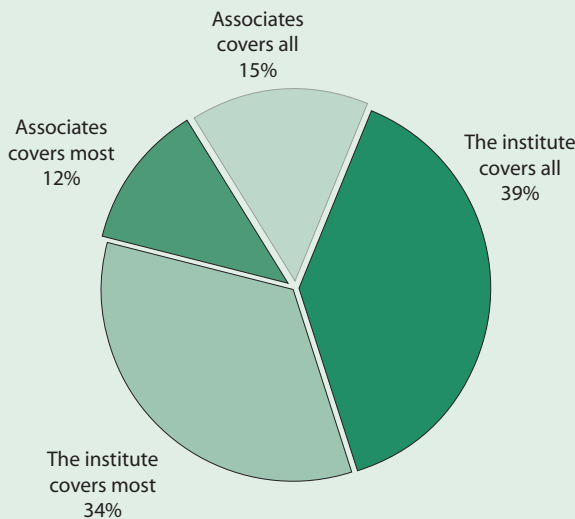
An associate shares: *“My self-confidence has blossomed and I have learned to participate as a co-director on team which is very rewarding.”*

One associate wondered if there could be a disconnect concerning leadership possibilities. *“Inability to participate fully in the process of envisioning the future by being involved in key strategic, financial and governance committees (even as observers) to be able to contribute experience and expertise to the evolution process. Many of our associates are professionals and/or corporate managers and consultants with many years of experience that could be more available to the sisters if they would include us more often as resources in their planning and governance processes.”*

Financial Sustainability

One in seven directors/coordinators of associates says that financial sustainability is the biggest challenge to the future sustainability of the associates. Said one director/coordinator, *“Our community of associates is facing the very difficult task of establishing fiscal stability once the annual budget is no longer provided by the Sisters.”*

FIGURE 5. HOW IS THE ASSOCIATE BUDGET [EXCLUDING SALARY/STIPEND AND BENEFITS] COVERED? PERCENTAGE RESPONDING



In 73 percent of the responding institutes, the institute covers most or all of the associate budget. Associates are responsible for the entire budget in 15 percent of institutes.

“Directors/coordinators of associates in institutes of men and those in Canada are both more likely to say their associate community is financially sustainable.”

When asked if they think the associate community is financially sustainable for the next five years, 68 percent of directors/coordinators of associates at least “somewhat” agree that their associate community is financially stable with institute support. Less than half, 43 percent, at least “somewhat” agree that their associate community is financially sustainable without institute support.

Directors/coordinators of associates in institutes of men and those in Canada are both more likely to say their associate community is financially sustainable.

A tenth of directors/coordinators say one of the lessons they learned about the sustainability of the associates is that financial sustainability requires contributions from the associates. As one director/coordinator says, *“Financial sustainability is key. We are currently being supported by the institute. This needs to change over time. We are working on ways to change this dynamic.”*

When directors/coordinators are asked to measure whether the institute leadership, associate leadership, associates, and vowed members are resistant to or moving toward associate financial sustainability, the average response is that each of these groups is neutral—neither completely resistant nor deliberately moving toward associate financial sustainability.

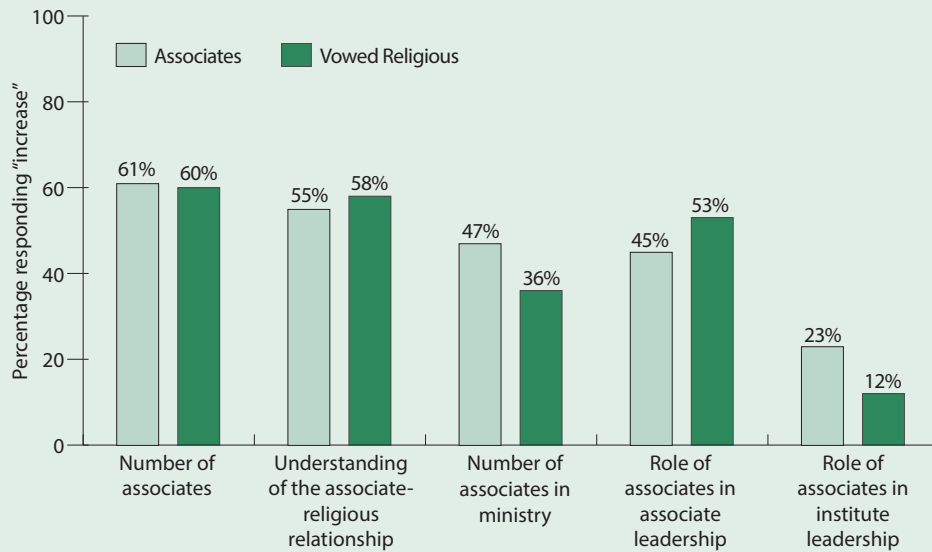
One associate commented, *“The Associate program is not self-sustaining financially. We are unable to make the donations yearly that would make that happen. I wish we could because without contributing more I feel we are a drain on the Congregation’s finances.”*

And one vowed member suggested, *“I think the most challenging is each remaining independent personally and financially, yet having a very special connection with ministry and mission and prayer.”*

Associates and Vowed Religious View of the Future of Associate Relationship

About half of associates and vowed religious agree that the role of associates in associate leadership will increase in the next five years.

FIGURE 6. ASPECTS OF ASSOCIATE LIFE LIKELY TO INCREASE IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS



Older vowed religious are more likely than younger vowed religious to say that the role of associates in associate leadership will increase in the next five years. Younger vowed religious are less likely than older vowed religious to agree that the associate community is sustainable.

As one associate shared: *“My firm belief is that association will continue to grow, as we carry the charism into the future with a firm direction in mind—the mission of our community. But less and less women are entering religious life in North America and those who we have are aging rapidly. That is so sad—tragic—and points us in the direction of making sure each associate knows her/his responsibility as an associate. Our covenants are to be taken very seriously, and to be renewed often as we move into different stages in our lives. Associates are aging, also, but new ones are joining us and adding new spirit to our ranks. Our “call” remains and will not fade away even if the number of sisters drops drastically.”*

As a vowed religious wrote: *“We could be on the threshold of looking at the associate program with fresh eyes and seeing the possibilities of a new way to be associated with the community. Our challenge is to take those initial steps of exploring the possibilities of how this new way could be practically lived out by those individuals and/or families called to serve Jesus Christ associated with our community.”*

Conclusions

The findings from this research suggest that associate leadership, associates, and vowed religious continue to find strong value in the associate-religious relationship for their institutes and for individual associates and vowed religious. Associates and vowed religious grow deeply because of this relationship.

Moving forward, the keys to strong associate communities will be to:

- Continue a strong focus on the institute’s mission and spirituality as a vital element for attracting associates and fostering relationships between associates and vowed religious,
- Be intentional in inviting younger individuals to the associate relationship,
- Empower leadership from within the associate community to ensure sustainable leadership going forward, and
- Plan for a sustainable future in the life of religious institutes and their associate communities.

Acknowledgements

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About CARA

CARA is an independent, national, non-profit, Georgetown University-affiliated research center that has more than 50 years of experience conducting social scientific studies about the Catholic Church. Founded in 1964, CARA has three major dimensions to its mission:

1. to increase the Church's self-understanding
2. to serve the applied research needs of Church decision-makers
3. to advance scholarly research on religion, particularly Catholicism

The CARA staff is composed of professionally trained academic social scientists who have earned graduate degrees. CARA's long-standing policy is to be independent and objective, to let research findings stand on their own, and never take an advocacy position or go into areas outside its social science competence.

Endnotes

- 1 Reports produced from the 2000 and 2002 studies of Associates and Religious are available from NACAR.
- 2 Both reports produced from the 2015 study of Associates and Religious are available from NACAR.
- 3 According to data from the General Social Survey.
- 4 The question asked of directors/coordinators differed from the question asked of associates and vowed religious. Directors/coordinators were asked, "How important are these for advancing the identity of associate relationships?" Associates and vowed religious were asked, "How important do you think the following are for fostering relationships among associates and religious?" Although the question wording differed, the answers from which they could choose were the same, with one exception. Directors/coordinators could respond, "Volunteer service to the institute" while associates and vowed religious were not given that response option.



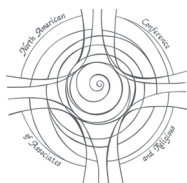
CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States. For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact:

CARA at Georgetown University

2300 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20007

Phone: 202-687-8080 • Fax: 202-687-8083 • CARA@georgetown.edu • <http://cara.georgetown.edu>

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NACAR

5900 Delhi Road, Mt. St. Joseph, OH 45051

Phone: 253-256-2227 • info@nacar.org • <http://www.nacar.org>