



SPRING 2024

# VOICES OF CHARITY

A publication of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth



RELATIONSHIPS

**Interwoven:**  
Exploring Bonds Between People,  
Planet, and Purpose



SISTERS OF CHARITY  
OF LEAVENWORTH

## Chapter 2022 Directional Statement

NOW, WITH GOD'S GRACE, we are called in these days

“...to give freely of ourselves and our goods  
for the sake of the Kingdom...” (*SCL Constitution*, Norm 14)

In the spirit and charism of Vincent, Louise, Xavier, and our founding Sisters, we step into our future with a renewed sense of mission.

Through the lens of integral ecology, we will:

- tend to the care of marginalized people and the fragile earth;
- use spiritual and tangible resources to meet the critical needs of God's people and earth;
- broaden collaboration with local and global groups working to achieve systemic change;
- explore our relationship with sponsored works;
- clarify the structure of our governance model.

As Gospel-centered, ecclesial women rooted in Christ, we are called to love and serve in these times and in these places and to stand and pray with those who suffer, who grieve, who hope.

NOW, WITH GOD'S GRACE.

**ON THE COVER:**

Sister Vickie Perkins (right) and Carol Sue Lewis, a client of Depaul Leavenworth Attainable Housing, at her home in Leavenworth, Kansas.



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Spring 2024

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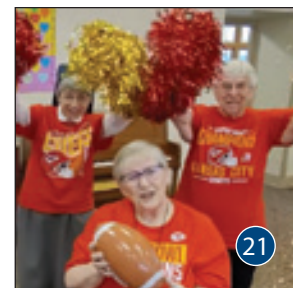
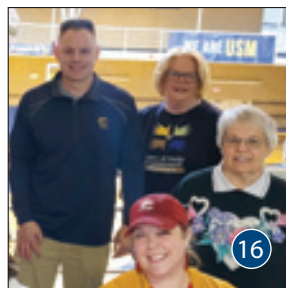
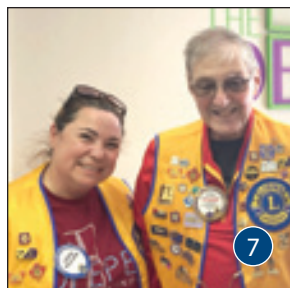
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The Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth trace our roots to the spirit, spirituality, and outreach of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac. Founded in Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1858 by Mother Xavier Ross, the SCL Community continues this Vincentian tradition through ministering to and on behalf of the poor and those on the margins of society.

*Voices of Charity* seeks to remain faithful to the charism of St. Vincent, St. Louise, and Mother Xavier. Looking through the lens of integral ecology, these articles hope to educate, highlight ministries, and inspire readers to continue the mission of charity.

## FROM THE **Community Director**

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Sister Eileen  
Haynes, SCL

“We are a microcosm in which all the expressions of creation are somehow present in each single consciousness and that it is capable of growth beyond anything that we can imagine. Jesus prayed ‘that they may be one even as we are one,’ suggesting a oneness and unity that is virtually unlimited.”

— Fr. Thomas Keating, “God is Love: The Heart of All Creation”

How marvelous is God’s work within us and all of creation. What a profound gift we have been given to not only be loved by our God, but also that Jesus invites us to a unity that is all-inclusive. In some capacity, all cultures understand this need for community and the diversity it provides: relationships of people sharing common values and interests as we care for one another. What are those communities in which you belong? In what ways are you called to build and/or expand existing communities? Are these relationships only of the ‘human type,’ or is God’s creation one of your communities?

Perhaps, just perhaps, we need to ask God for the grace to live with a transformed set of eyes, to see as God sees. I leave you with a reflection provided by Jan Richardson, “This Grace That Scorches Us.” We know through experience the joys and the difficult moments of being in relationship, and that it is the ‘scorching’ moments that are blessings in disguise, strengthening and uniting, building *communion* beyond our imagination.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads “Sister Eileen Haynes, SCL”.

Sister Eileen Haynes  
SCL Community Director

## This Grace That Scorches Us

By Jan Richardson

Here's one thing  
you must understand  
about this blessing:  
it is not  
for you alone.

It is stubborn  
about this;  
do not even try  
to lay hold of it  
if you are by yourself,  
thinking you can carry it  
on your own.

To bear this blessing,  
you must first take yourself  
to a place where everyone  
does not look like you  
or think like you,  
a place where they do not  
believe precisely as you believe,  
where their thoughts  
and ideas and gestures  
are not exact echoes of  
your own.

Bring your sorrow.  
Bring your grief.  
Bring your fear.  
Bring your weariness,  
your pain,  
your disgust at how broken  
the world is,  
how fractured,  
how fragmented  
by its fighting,  
its wars,  
its hungers,  
its penchant for power,  
its ceaseless repetition  
of the history it refuses  
to rise above.

I will not tell you  
this blessing will fix all that.

But in the place  
where you have gathered,  
wait.

Watch.

Listen.

Lay aside your inability  
to be surprised,  
your resistance to what you  
do not understand.  
See then whether this blessing  
turns to flame on your tongue,  
sets you to speaking  
what you cannot fathom

or opens your ear  
to a language  
beyond your imagining  
that comes as a knowing  
in your bones  
a clarity  
in your heart  
that tells you

this is the reason  
we were made,  
for this ache  
that finally opens us,

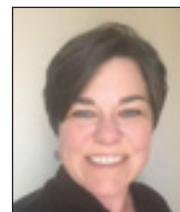
for this struggle,  
this grace  
that scorches us  
toward one another  
and into  
the blazing day.

"This Grace That Scorches Us"

© Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace:  
A Book of Blessings for the Seasons.*

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# The Transformative Role of Relationships in Attainable Housing Solutions



By Margaret Haik,  
SCL Director of Communications

“Explain to me why you are 24 months behind on your mortgage.”

Jen drew a deep breath. She hoped this wouldn’t come up. Jen and Matt had recently toured a rental house for themselves and their daughter. They got a good feeling about the landlord and the house. Although the house was smaller than the one they were leaving, it would work for a few years. Then came the credit check and the call from the landlord.

“Matt is paid on commission. Two years ago, we were living paycheck to paycheck, and his company was slow to pay him one month,” Jen explained. They had enough money in the bank to cover half the mortgage for the month. If the bank had let them split the payment, they could have made it work. But the bank told Matt it wouldn’t split payments. Matt sent a half-payment even with what he was told, but the bank sent the check back.

“After that, we owed not only that month’s payment but also late fees that we couldn’t possibly cover,” explained Jen. “We kept trying to talk to the bank,

but they wouldn’t give us grace, and it snowballed. Matt got a better-paying job, and we kept trying but finally decided it was better to give up than to fight.”

“Well, your credit rating is really low, which doesn’t scare me because I’ve seen that before. Obviously, you feel you can pay the rent; otherwise, you wouldn’t have applied to live here. You seem like good people to me, so I’m going to give you a chance.”

Jen welled up with tears of relief. It had been such a hard two years. She was afraid of what would happen to her, Matt, and their daughter if they couldn’t find a landlord who would rent to them.

This is a true story, although the names have been changed. Jen and Matt went on to rent from their landlord for several years. Through his kindness, they were able to rebuild their credit and turn their situation around. Their landlord was also a real estate agent. They built a relationship with him, and eventually he was able to direct them to a credit union for a new loan and helped them find a house to purchase.

## We’re All One Paycheck Away

In May 2019, the investment company Charles Schwab published the results of their Modern Wealth Survey. What they found was that 59% of all their respondents live paycheck to paycheck, meaning they were one paycheck away from homelessness. This was the case for Jen and Matt.

What if they had expenses from caring for an ill child? What if one of them was sick and couldn’t work?

Jen and Matt were lucky. What if they hadn’t happened upon a landlord who was willing to take a chance on them?

## Leavenworth Attainable Housing

Leavenworth Attainable Housing, a program of Depaul USA (DLAH), is an organization that builds and rehabs homes and then rents to previously homeless tenant clients. Led by Sister Vickie Perkins, SCL, DLAH has been in existence since 2021. The organization is built on a cooperative relationship between several faith communities, including volunteers from the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth.

The tenant clients of Leavenworth Attainable Housing come from many different circumstances, but all can say they were “one paycheck away from homelessness.”



Sister Charlotte White paints the interior of a DLAH house.

Many organizations offer temporary housing to the homeless. Depaul USA Leavenworth Attainable Housing's goal is to give the homeless a path to permanent housing.

Sister Vickie tells the story of one of their first clients, a woman with a 14-year-old daughter with special needs. The mother had an addiction. Sister Vickie said they really wanted the situation to work out: "We got hooked by the daughter, so we didn't want to see the mom's problems and what was really going on." Unfortunately, the mother's situation prevented her from maintaining all that is needed for a stable household, and they had to move out.

#### Four Pillars

What they learned from that situation was the need to offer more support beyond providing low-rent housing.

They developed the following four pillars that all tenant clients must agree to.

- **Financial Education.** The first is financial education. Clients meet with Leavenworth area volunteers who specialize in banking or another financial specialty. They meet one-on-one with clients to set budgets and improve credit scores.

"Most of us learn budgeting by watching our parents. If your parents didn't know how to budget, you're not going to know either," Sister Vickie said.

- **Health Care.** The second pillar is health care. The organization, through the former SCL Health

System, has relationships with Duchesne Clinic in Kansas City, Kansas, and St. Vincent's Health Clinic in Leavenworth. "They are one with people; they really get them good care," she said, regardless of whether clients have insurance, are underinsured, or have no insurance.

Depaul Leavenworth Attainable Housing refers clients to The Guidance Center, a community-based mental health care center. "They have a 24/7 group," said one of the DLAH volunteers. "I don't call the police anymore. If there is a crisis, you call them, and they're there within a half-hour to help with it."

- **Community.** Sister Vickie said the third pillar, community, is the toughest one for their clients. Going through homelessness and reestablishing a household, and life in general, can be isolating. Clients—adults and children—meet for a social gathering once a month so families can get together. The outing could be a cookout or meeting at a splash park for the children. Once a quarter, there is an adults-only gathering with the clients and the organization's council, "so they know there's a community out there that's supporting them," Sister Vickie said.
- **Weekly Meetings.** All clients must meet once a week in their homes with the organization's housing support specialist, Chris Leech. Sister Vickie said his job is to help clients "look at where they are, what they're doing, and whether they are making progress. While he's there, he can monitor whether the client is able to care for the



Sister Vickie Perkins surveys progress on the rehab of a DLAH house.

home. Chris also is a handyman who can fix anything that has popped up at the house during the week.

## Depaul USA

Leavenworth Attainable Housing has grown by leaps and bounds. What began as owning and managing one house jumped to 12, with a series of duplexes currently under construction. As with the expansion of many nonprofit organizations, the tremendous growth created challenges in administration and fundraising.

In January 2024, Leavenworth Attainable Housing joined Depaul USA, a national homeless services nonprofit organization and an affiliate of the international homelessness services organization Depaul International Group ([depaulusa.org/about-us/](http://depaulusa.org/about-us/)). Depaul USA brought 15 years of experience to the Leavenworth organization.

“They provide us with sustainability. They help us with HR, insurance, business items. They also have expertise in grant writing,” Sister Vickie said.

## Improving the Community

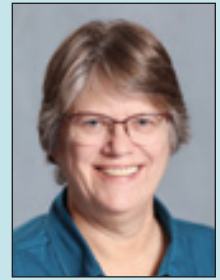
Depaul Leavenworth Attainable Housing is making Leavenworth a better place to be.

Sister Vickie reflects: “It’s [Leavenworth] a great place for people who have the means.” She describes the citizens as generous and open, “but for the people on the margins, it’s hard; very hard.”

Leavenworth Attainable Housing is working to improve the lives of the residents who live in their houses.

“If we can improve the lives of these folks that we’re working with, they become part of the community, and then they can enable other people to become part of the community,” said Sister Vickie, recalling one client who often asks whether the program has a house available because the person knows someone who could benefit. “So, they then become productive members and help

**Sister Amy Willcott** will take over as director of Depaul Leavenworth Attainable Housing upon the retirement of Sister Vickie Perkins on April 11, 2024. After volunteering full-time, Sister Amy was drawn to the mission to help people get a boost to get ahead. She said hearing the volunteers talk to their clients is like listening to the conversations St. Vincent de Paul had with the poor he served—they both have a reverence for the people who seek help.



Helping with the organization’s visioning process is her favorite part of working with DLAH. She enjoys the excitement of the possibilities to grow and invite more people to help, which helps more clients.

Her favorite client story comes from Chris Leech, the housing support specialist. She said he visited the new congregate housing residents. One of the residents was cooking dinner for the other two. They were excited to invite Chris to join them. He said they were so hospitable, welcoming, and generous.

Sister Amy said, “When you give people just a little bit—a home, safety, and warmth—they are able to thrive.”

support the next group that needs the help.”

Sister Vickie notes that they have strong relationships with other agencies and that together, they are trying to make a difference and create real systemic change.

“The city becomes better when the neighborhood is improved,” she said, “because our houses look good. Our clients become good neighbors to the people around them. They then come to a point where they can support other people, and things change. Just because of people working together.” 🐦

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## A Note From a DLAH Client:

“Thank you. I hope everyone knows how thankful I am to be given the opportunity to provide a safe space for my babies, the opportunity to keep going to school, for giving me hope during a difficult time in my life. I can’t tell you all enough how much this has meant to me, and I will be forever grateful to this program and the amazing individuals who helped make it happen. As a mom, having a place for my babies to live and grow is such a gift and this is a very small thank you compared to the house you all allowed us to call home.”



# Hope, Respite, Engagement, and Advocacy

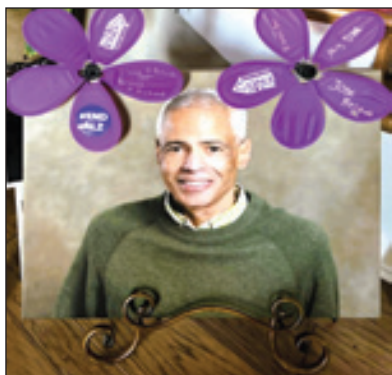
The Deeper Window Association's Journey  
in Building Connections Amid Dementia



By Stephanie Nash, SCLA,  
Graphics and Communications Manager

*“A tsunami of emotions overtakes you and your world is upended just like anybody’s,” Elaine Belardo said of Alzheimer’s Disease. “I needed my children not to crumble because we were facing this adversity. We didn’t pick it, but we could choose how we responded to it... We looked deeper into the window that is dementia and realized that people are still very capable.”<sup>1</sup>*

In autumn 2019, Rear Admiral (Retired) José H. Belardo, MSW, JD, and his wife, Elaine Belardo, BSN, embarked on a mission to create The Deeper Window Association. This nonprofit organization is more than about providing services; it’s dedicated to fostering relationships and offering hope for individuals and families grappling with dementia.



Rear Admiral José H. Belardo, MSW, JD, who died in 2022.

## Courage and Hope

Established following José’s early onset Alzheimer’s diagnosis, The Deeper Window Association aspires to guide families through dementia with proactive resilience, complete compassion, and genuine optimism.

“We came to the realization that we were lamenting a death that would eventually occur but was not impending after a period of intense anguish and sorrow,” Elaine said. “Yes, our lives as we knew them were immediately altered, and there was a plethora of new obstacles. But rather than keeping watch for our own demise, we chose to make the most of living with dementia. We prayed and begged God to show us the way. The Deeper Window Association’s vision was spawned by sincere hope and bravery.”



Jackie Williamson, The Deeper Window Association volunteer, and Gary Colston, The Deeper Window Association participant, are Lions Club members. They attend the lunch meetings together to help him sustain his other connections and valued relationships.

1 DelasBour, L. (2023, June 17). Family holds annual bake sale to honor father who passed from early onset dementia. 41 KSHB Kansas City. <https://www.kshb.com/news/local-news/family-holds-annual-bake-sale-to-honor-father-who-passed-from-early-onset-dementia>



Interior of bus decorated for Valentine's Day keeps Deeper Window participants engaged in calendar events.

### Empathy In Caregiver Relationships

Empathy is crucial in caregiving relationships. The mission of The Deeper Window Association emphasizes the importance of listening, encouraging, and showing kindness to caregivers. By cultivating an empathetic environment, The Deeper Window Association aims to strengthen the relationships that form the core of effective caregiving.

The staff consistently demonstrates a willingness to offer support to family members of people with dementia. In addition to providing caregivers with much-needed respite throughout the week, there is also an opportunity to participate in a bimonthly caregiver support group.

This inclusive approach ensures that caregivers have access to a supportive community where they can share their experiences, seek guidance, and find comfort in understanding others facing similar challenges. The participants also engage in their own support group simultaneously, so the caregiver does not need to worry about finding someone to be with their loved one.

### Volunteerism and Outreach

Crucial to building relationships within The Deeper Window Association are Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth volunteers such as Sister Mary Rachel Flynn, Sister Vicki Lichtenauer, and Sister Lucy Walter. These individuals play integral roles in making an impact through their involvement in programs like Let's Roll with Sister Vicki and the Our Place-Leavenworth Day Program.



One musical highlight includes Connelly & Friends featuring Carol Anne Schmidt, SCLA, and her talented dog Connelly.

The latter initiative offers diverse activities, including lunch, crafts, fellowship, short learning opportunities, and music.

All these activities are designed to address the challenges posed by dementia and encourage the fullest level of participation possible.

One standout aspect is the Let's Roll with Sister Vicki program, which has evolved from using a minivan to operating a bus with its driver, Ryan Markle, a Council on Aging employee. Ryan engages with participants by decorating the bus for holidays and telling jokes or riddles during his "stoplight shenanigans." Sister Vicki Lichtenauer organizes field trips to destinations like the Humane Society, local craft galleries, museums, parks, and libraries during Let's Roll activities.

Sister Vicki emphasizes the significance of viewing participants as valuable citizens with much left to contribute. "Every time we are together, everyone is encouraged and empowered to participate at the highest level possible," she said. "Everyone is different, and we try to stay attentive to their inherent level of interest and dignity."

### Commitment to Community Service

The Let's Roll program extends its reach to the Lansing library, where guests are welcomed each month

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with an engaging activity. The collaboration highlights the importance of community partnerships and the exceptional compassion the volunteers demonstrate. Sister Vicki's affirmation that participants are viewed as viable community contributors reinforces the positive impact of these programs on both the individuals involved and the broader community.

### Caregiving Challenges and Respite Care

The most challenging part of caregiving is the need for meaningful support. The Deeper Window Association recognizes the importance of this for caregivers and provides respite care as an opportunity to build companionship and provide caregivers with needed support.

Shirley Colston intimately understands the profound need for respite as the evolving challenges of dementia have shaped her journey. Approximately six years ago, her husband Gary received an initial diagnosis of dementia.

In 2021, the diagnosis transitioned to Alzheimer's disease.

"Gary has been at The Deeper Window Association for about a year. He had stopped doing most of his activities," Shirley said. "The Deeper Window, or as he would say, 'Sister Vicki's,' has given him an opportunity to have a group of friends where there is no pressure. He looks forward to going and enjoys activities like the Humane Society, singing, fellowship, and the preschool group with all their smiles and enthusiasm. I personally enjoy and truly appreciate the respite time."

The Deeper Window Association's journey is a testament to the power of caring for relationships in the face of dementia. By placing compassion, understanding, and community at the forefront, they provide services and support built on meaningful connections. Through this approach, The Deeper Window Association continues to be a source of hope and empathy for those navigating the complexities of dementia. 🐾

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## Kansas Governor Proclaims March 8-14 Catholic Sisters Week

Ten Sisters from five communities traveled to Topeka on Feb. 20, for a special meeting. Governor Laura Kelly signed a proclamation that March 8-14, 2024 be declared Catholic Sisters Week in the state of Kansas. The communities represented were Adorers of the Blood of Christ in Wichita, the Benedictines in Atchison, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia. The fifth community represented was the Sisters of St. Antoine of Fondwa; three Sisters who were visiting from Haiti.

For several years, the national professional organization Communicators for Women Religious has promoted Catholic Sisters Week, a time set aside to spotlight the ministries, achievements, and contributions of Catholic Sisters in the United States.

This year, the communication professionals from the four Kansas communities decided to collaborate in their Catholic Sisters Week promotions with the blessing of the Catholic Sisters of Kansas organization.

In addition to highlighting Governor Kelly's proclamation, the four communities plan to cross-promote each other's communities through social media posts and engage with the local diocesan papers where possible. 🐾



Governor Laura Kelly (seated) is joined by Sisters Claudette Prevot, SSAF; Melicia Singelus, SSAF; Amy Willcott, SCL; Judith Sutera, OSB; Rejane Cytacki, SCL; Marie Simone Achille, SSAF; Judy Stephens, CSJ; Josie Mendoza, ASC; and Diana Rawlings, ASC.



# The Gift of the Forest



By John Shively, SCLA,  
Executive Director of Mission

“This we know. . . . All things are connected,” wrote Chief Seattle. At the time, Chief Seattle led the Duwamish, Suquamish, and allied Indigenous tribes—and this quote comes directly from a letter to then-U.S. President Franklin Pierce. The U.S. Government at the time wanted to purchase the lands his people lived on. In the letter, he explains, while considering the offer:

“This we know: the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected . . . Man did not weave the web of life: he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.” It seems, perhaps far too late, that we are finally beginning to wake up to this spiritual wisdom.

## **Lessons From a Pecan Grove**

As a young boy growing up in Southeast Kansas, every year on the third weekend of September, I would go camping with friends and family. We would camp on this same patch of land nestled underneath the canopies of a pecan grove. One year when the forest floor was carpeted with hundreds of bright green pecan husks dropped from an early frost, I remember carrying bundles-full in my jacket back to camp. I would set to work shelling them, staining my hands and clothes green, much to my mother’s displeasure.

You see, it was a mast fruiting year for the pecan trees. Pecan trees do this not only for the survival of the tree but also for the survival of the forest. As Robin Wall Kimmerer explains in her book “Braiding Sweetgrass,” “The pecan groves give, and give again. Such communal generosity might seem incompatible with the process of evolution, which invokes the imperative of individual survival. But we make a grave error if we try to separate individual well-being from the health of the whole. The gift of abundance from pecans is also a gift to themselves. . . . Together, the trees survive, and thrive.”

## **If Trees Could Talk**

The scientific story about how trees grow and produce used to look at each individual tree. The consensus was that each tree stood alone. Kimmerer explains, however, that for Indigenous people, “In the old times, our elders say, the trees talked to each other. They’d stand in their own council and craft a plan.”

Science has recently learned that trees do communicate with each other, both above and underground. The mycelium fungi present in the forest roots help trees communicate and distribute water and nutrients, their mutuality and relationship ensuring their survival.



As Peter Wollleben explains in “The Hidden Life of Trees,” when we begin removing trees to reduce supposed competition, the remaining trees are harmed. Even though the remaining trees grow faster, he says, they don’t live for very long: “This is because a tree can be only as strong as the forest that surrounds it.”

The gift of the forest is a reminder that we need one another, to share in each other’s abundance, hardship, joy, and grief. By living in generosity, abundance, and mutuality, we ensure the strength of the community.

### Challenging Individualism

So, what does that have to do with integral ecology? Well, I would argue “everything!” Just as scientists thought trees once lived and grew in isolation, our cultural story continues to focus on individual flourishing and achievement: that people are self-made, succeeding or failing on their own merits; that people, in a sense, “get what they deserve.”

The narrative of the self-made person, who should be concerned only about the self, is a mythos that influences every part of our social imagination. We mainly inherit this narrative from mainstream economics and capitalism, although it is dominant elsewhere in our lives. Integral ecology provides a counternarrative: one that argues we belong to each other, have obligations to each other, and find humans flourishing in mutuality.

Integral ecology challenges us to change the way we see the world, its problems, and potential solutions. At its core, integral ecology is a lens that asks us to see the interconnectedness of all life. Pope Francis repeats many times in his encyclical *Laudato Si’* that everything is connected! In these words, we hear the echoes of Chief Seattle, “This we know. . . . All things are connected.” In light of this, we are called to examine the relationships

between humans and all the systems that make up the wholeness of human existence.

As Pope Francis writes in his book *Let Us Dream*: “...we might remember the truth that God put in our hearts: that we belong to Him and to each other.” Similarly, Fr. Greg Boyle, founder and director of Homeboy Industries, challenges us to “disrupt the notion that it’s possible there are people who are not our own, who don’t belong to us.”

### Nurturing Roots of Change

Given all this, I know some may be asking, “Where are we now in this journey?” Political scientist Max Weber once described politics as “a strong and slow boring of hard boards.” If that’s the case, I would posit that the work of transformation is the strong and slow growing of deep roots. And while we’ve certainly begun to plant, we know that roots take time, patience, and care to grow. I ask for your patience and trust as we allow for God’s providence to guide us in our work and for these roots to grow our individual trees into a deeply interdependent forest.

The vision of integral ecology celebrates mutuality and abundance that continues to grow, deepen, and bear fruit elsewhere through:

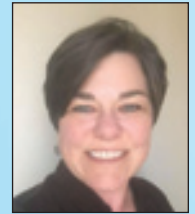
- The work of exploring our commitment to land justice
- An evolving inclusion of employees and Associates into our understanding of community
- Our work for the poor and the marginalized through the systemic change process
- The many individual ministries
- And much more to come!

*The gifts of the forest abound if we take the time to see where our roots have grown.* 🌱

# Witnessing Change: A Perspective on Climate Impact on the SCL Campus



By Margaret Haik,  
SCL Director of Communications



In the narrative of global climate change, individual experiences often illuminate the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. Kenny Davidson, campus manager at the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth campus for the past 31 years, offers a reflection on this relationship through the lens of his daily interactions with the campus grounds.

In the three decades Davidson has cared for the campus grounds, he has witnessed firsthand the gradual shifts in the landscape. His stewardship extends beyond mere maintenance; it is a game of chance and strategy, revealing insights into how climate change is altering our environment.

## Weather Extremes

The periods of extreme weather have increased. For example, on February 27 of this year, we experienced 70-degree temperatures in the middle of the day, and snow fell overnight.

Davidson has watched the Kansas winters become warmer and greener, too. The differences in seasons year to year have also become more extreme. The Kansas winter last year had many days of dangerously frigid temperatures; in contrast, this year, there have been very few snowfalls, with spring and summer-like temperatures.

## Altered Landscapes

Because of the longer warm seasons, Kansas has experienced more drought conditions. As a result, the maple trees on campus have suffered greatly. Often, there is a delay in the effects appearing. When Kansas experiences a drought one year, it may take two or more years for the trees to show signs of decline. These trees,

struggling to adapt, mirror our broader challenges in maintaining a harmonious relationship with our environment.

For the past five years, Davidson has noted that the campus' magnolia trees continue blooming into the fall. He said the warmer temperatures have made it hard to maintain fruit trees, too. The SCL campus currently has apple, pear, and plum trees. "Because it's so warm right now, the trees are confused about their blooming time," he said.

## Campus Ecosystem Changes

Pests, too, have found a foothold in the new climate reality. The Japanese beetle, previously kept at bay by colder winters, now thrives, attacking the campus roses with impunity. This change is a reminder of the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the cascading effects of climate change.

Another example many people are familiar with is the Ash Borer Beetle destroying the ash tree population in the U.S. The beetle came to the U.S. from imported wood. Although, the U.S. has imported wood and goods from overseas forever, the beetle has been able to thrive now because U.S. winters have become so mild.

## Evolving Practices

In response, the grounds crew has evolving adaptive strategies. Davidson said that his department has cut back on watering. "You cannot fight the dryness," he said. He uses K-31 grass seed, which is more drought-resistant than the standard fescue that was favored in the past.

Aside from using a heartier grass seed that requires less watering, Davidson finds that his department has had

to change where flower beds are located to protect them from extreme heat. He said they often must overwater flowers on Friday, because the extreme high temperatures may mean that they won't make it until Monday.

The Sisters are very aware and interested in promoting climate-friendly plantings and processes. Davidson points out that there are two pollinator gardens here. One is maintained by the Sisters' Care of Creation Interest Group. The other is maintained by biology professor Dr. Dan Williams and his students.

### Sustainability Measures

Davidson thinks about the cost benefits and carbon effects of their mowing. Right now, the grounds crew staff has altered their mowing and landscaping schemes. Davidson said that in the long-term, he is interested in exploring the use of electric mowers for the campus. He said that since we have longer warm seasons, his department must mow later into the fall, which means more fuel, continuing a vicious cycle: longer warm seasons result in more mowing; more mowing requires

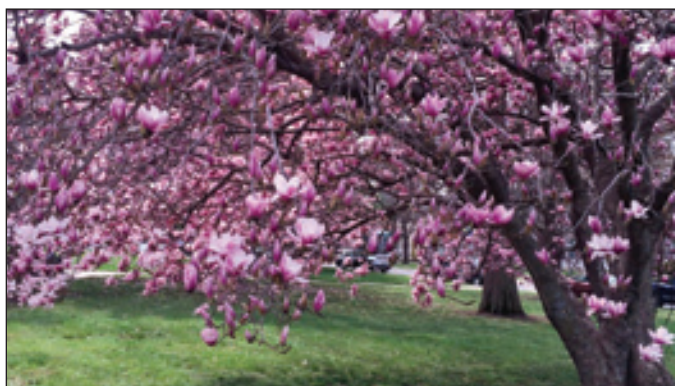
more gas; more gas releases more carbon into the atmosphere; more carbon release potentially leads to even longer warm seasons.

In the grounds department, Davidson said they try to mill the wood from trees when they must be removed. He is also interested in increasing the number of drought-tolerant trees on campus and moving toward using native plantings in the flower beds.

Another sustainability effort Davidson pointed to is the SCL Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Office's efforts to reestablish composting practices on campus. It is led by Community Engagement Coordinator Nick Keehler.

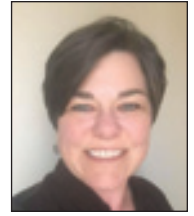
### Challenges and Concerns

Davidson's concerns about the future—the loss of trees and the spread of disease—are rooted in an understanding of the intrinsic value of the natural world. His proactive stance is driven by a sense of responsibility, an acknowledgment that our fate is inextricably linked with that of the Earth.



Beautiful trees bloom seasonally on the SCL campus, the magnolia and dogwood in the spring, and the golden ginkgo in the fall.

# Sister Therese Bangert



By Margaret Haik,  
SCL Director of Communications



Lilac blooms near the prayer labyrinth on the south end of the SCL campus.

## Looking Forward

Looking forward, Davidson's biggest concern is the number of trees the campus will lose due to extreme weather. Grass and small plants are easier to maintain during extreme weather because they do not require the amount of water to remain stable. He is seeing an increase in the decline of the campus' maple trees, and he is on the lookout for the arrival of a new disease called "oak wilt."

This vision for a sustainable campus landscape is a call to action, urging us to consider how our daily lives and choices reverberate through the ecosystems we inhabit.

The commitment of the SCL grounds department to sustainability reflects a growing consciousness of our environmental impact. These initiatives are not just about reducing a carbon footprint; they are acts of reparation, of seeking to restore and nurture our relationship with the Earth. 🌿

## How to Help

**Support and Create Green Spaces:** Actively participate in nurturing environments that foster our connection to the Earth.

**Embrace Sustainable Practices:** Make choices that reflect a commitment to harmony and balance with the natural world.

**Educate and Advocate:** Share knowledge and support initiatives that strengthen our relationship with the Earth, promoting a sustainable and resilient future.

Among the many remarkable women in Wyandotte County, three were singled out and recognized as women making a positive impact on the people of Kansas City, Kansas, and Wyandotte County. Mayor Pro Tem Tom Burroughs recognized Sister of Charity of Leavenworth Therese Bangert, along with Carol F. Newton, a former federal agent for the FAA, and Rose Marie Mendez, founder of the Fine Arts Center at St. Thomas School. The ceremony took place on March 7, 2024, a day ahead of both International Women's Day and the first day of Catholic Sisters Week.

As Burroughs read the list of activities that led to the special recognition of Sister Therese, I thought about the theme of this issue of *Voices of Charity*: relationship. She taught primary school and special needs children. For nine years, she cared for the children at St. Vincent's Home in Topeka who were removed from their homes because of abuse and abandonment. She built relationships with children who sorely needed healthy relationships with adults in their lives. One special relationship continues with Gary Harris, who Sister Therese calls, "son."



Carol F. Newton, Sister Therese Bangert, and Rose Marie Mendez are recognized as women making a positive impact.



# Honored by Unified Government of Wyandotte County

Gayle Townsend, a commissioner for the Unified Government of Wyandotte County, recalled, “I met Sister Bangert during my first term when I was at the pool. She was a constant there and a very supportive individual through the ups and the downs with not only the kids being swimming there but being able to have a place to eat.”

For the past 50 years, Sister Therese has led prayers in prisons and jails. Wanting to understand both sides of the criminal justice system led her to serve as a volunteer police chaplain, serving at the scene of numerous homicides in Kansas City, Kansas, and the deaths of three Wyandotte County law enforcement officers.

Since 1987, Sister has been a lobbyist at the Kansas State Capitol, working with legislators on issues such as immigration, tax policy, and programs that impact low-income families. In working to end the death penalty, she has built relationships with the families of both the victims and perpetrators of violent crime.

Of her work at the state capitol, Commissioner Christian Ramirez said, “I can tell you, she will, in the nicest way, be as candid as she can when she talks to you about big issues.”

When asked what the future holds for her, Sister Therese says that most of her work is long-term because the issues are ongoing. “Our immigration issues are becoming more frightening. Our Attorney General (Kansas) favors some of the heavy-handed policies we’ve seen in Texas.” She anticipates ongoing work with lobbying for policy changes at the state level, as well as working locally; she currently serves on the Board of Community Housing of Wyandotte County.

She wants young people to understand how policymaking happens, and who does that kind of work at each level—local, state, and federal. She recently was invited to speak to University of Saint Mary social work students about policymaking. She will meet them soon at the legislature in Topeka to see policymakers and those who wish to influence them at work.



Sisters Charlotte White, Judith Jackson, Therese Bangert, Vickie Perkins, and Mary Rachel Flynn after the Unified Government’s presentation.

When asked what she would like to do in the future, she said, “The Holy Spirit has brought me to where I am and took me on paths I couldn’t imagine.” She describes herself as a “connector.” She continues to enjoy her connections with the Police chaplains, members of the legislature, and government workers whom she has met along the way.

One connection she made over the years was with former Kansas Representative Ed O’Malley, whom Sister Therese met when he was an aide to former Governor Bill Graves. O’Malley now heads the Kansas Health Foundation. He recently invited Sister to be part of a roundtable to talk about health issues in Kansas and ways that they can be improved.

During the Wyandotte County presentation, Burroughs added a personal note, “She has spent many a time with me at the state capitol, and we’ve sat and prayed many times on some of the tough decisions this community has faced and personal challenges that I have lived through.”

Pointing to another of those special connections, Sister Therese blessed Senator Carolyn McGinn before she chaired the recent hearing on Medicaid expansion in Kansas. Remembering that moment, Sister Therese reflects, “Never underestimate the power of those little moments of connection.” 🌸

# Embracing the Vincentian Charism

A CONVERSATION WITH DON STUBBINGS, DIRECTOR OF SCL ASSOCIATES



By Stephanie Nash, SCLA,  
Graphics and Communications Manager

## Getting to Know Don Stubbings

Don Stubbings, the Director of SCL Associates, brings a wealth of experience and a genuine passion for service to his role. Originally from Connecticut, Don found his way to Kansas in 1992 through the Army, where he served before dedicating 24 years to law enforcement and public safety. His most recent role at the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph highlighted his commitment to community well-being in the Office of Child and Youth Protection.

Don enjoys outdoor activities like cycling, kayaking, fishing, and finding solace in nature when he is not working. Don, his wife Jacquee, and daughters Megan and Emily reside in Leavenworth.

## Connecting with the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth

Don's journey to the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth (SCL) was guided by a shared appreciation of the Vincentian charism. The alignment of values, particularly

the care for those in poverty and for creation, resonated deeply with him. Collaborating with the Sisters brought a sense of belonging, especially when helping others.

## Becoming an SCL Associate

Don's affiliation with the SCL Community began during his employment at the University of Saint Mary, where he met his sponsors, Sisters Mary Rachel Flynn, Judith Jackson, Vickie Perkins, and Kathleen Wood, at the time, known as "The Mead Hall Sisters." Their daily interactions led to an invitation to join the Associate community, an offer Don readily accepted.

"This solidarity was not just limited to my SCL sponsors," Don said. "There are many Sisters who have impacted my life; it's hard not to list them all."

As he delved deeper into the mission and Community, he realized it was a family he wanted to be part of.

## Gathering as Associates

In 2024, the SCL Associates will host spring and summer gatherings. Don will be traveling to visit



Don Stubbings participates regularly in triathlon competitions.



Associates joined Sisters for Bingo Night. Facing the camera, L-R: SCL Associates Jane Liebert, Laura Alexander, and John Alexander.



Associates providing goodies at a recent USM basketball game. Front row: Associates Laura Alexander, Megan Trout, and Stephanie Nash; Back row: Associates John Alexander, Keith Hustings, Ellen Hustings, Margaret Richards, Don Stubbings, Linda Powers, and Kathy Huffman.

Associates and participate in their service projects. A newsletter is also on the horizon for 2024.

Don envisions a future where the work and mission of the SCLs continue to address emerging areas of need. The Vincentian spirit, embodied by dedicated Associates, will play a crucial role in this ongoing mission. Don said it is essential to remember that “as the need for Associates

grows, the growth process must respect the historical guidance set by the SCL Community and adhere to the founding principles of the SCLA.”

### Excitement and Challenges

What excites Don most about the Associate program is the continual learning experience. The impactful ministries that Associates engage in leave a lasting impression. Despite challenges, including the lingering effects of COVID-19, the commitment to serving those in poverty remains unwavering.

The core concepts of charity, love, service, humility, prayer, and simplicity form the foundation of the Associate role, evolving with the emerging needs of the community and the planet.

Don Stubbings’ leadership as the Director of SCL Associates reflects a commitment to the Vincentian charism and the mission of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth. As the Associate program looks toward the future, it stands poised to continue the legacy of compassionate service, embodying the values set forth by historical figures such as St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, and Mother Xavier Ross. 🕊

Photographs were submitted by Don Stubbings.

On Wednesday, March 6, Don Stubbings and three SCL Associates joined four SCLs, and members of the SCL staff in Topeka for a rally to support the expansion of Medicaid in Kansas. Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia were also represented at the rally.

Participants heard Governor Laura Kelly speak passionately about expanding Medicaid in Kansas. April Holman, executive director for Alliance for a Healthy Kansas also addressed the supporters.

According to Stubbings, the rotunda was full of supporters and reverberated as the crowd yelled a chant for the expansion of Medicaid.



L-R: Sister Charlotte White, Don Stubbings, Sister Vickie Perkins, Sister Carm Thibault, CSJ, Rebecca Metz, Sister Judy Stephens, CSJ, John Shively, Sister Amy Willcott, Nick Keehler, Sister Helen Therese Mack, Jeanne Underwood, and John Underwood.



# Right Relationships

By Father Kevin Cullen, S.J.,  
Marillac Center Program Director



**Some lessons take me back a few years, but their messages are not dated.** As we played on the playground at St. Catherine Laboure School, Sister Marcia ensured her students understood right relationships in age-appropriate ways. During our primary school recesses, everyone had their turn at kickball and succeeded—she was the pitcher! While playing soccer in the church’s parking lot during our middle school gym class, we suffered only a few scratched knees and hands—she was the referee!

During our upper grades, when we had “time outside for good behavior,” our junior Olympic athletes enjoyed the “monkey bars” without supervision—Sister Marcia’s voice was there within and among us.

During high school, the success of the class depended on what each of us contributed—a simple Vincentian invitation to share one’s gifts and talents with others.

**Today, we explain these lessons by saying everyone is invited to live in right relationships.** Building healthy relationships can be challenging. Fostering those ongoing relationships that embody change is even more of a challenge. I am fortunate that the Daughters of Charity were my grade school teachers and the Vincentian brothers and priests taught me during my high school years. I learned the curriculum as best as I could.

They taught me a lot more than information. They taught us what to do with what we learned—right ways help us discover how to engage others in what we learned. Whether it was sharing as a young child, acting fairly as an older child, or watching out for one another as teenagers, what we learned was meant to be lived. Without many words or explanations, each experience taught us how to recognize one another’s talents and build upon them.

**Each of us has heard foundational voices that have helped us learn how to be the best of who we are.**

Through the lens of integral ecology, we name those interactions today as right relationships. For children, it is learning to share, to be open, and to trust. For teenagers, it is learning that the world is bigger than me and that others are as valuable as I am. For young adults, it is learning how to allow the works of charity to free me from self-absorption and enter into the good world of the other. Learning simple ways to proceed enables us to examine the structures or models we use daily.

When we have internal freedom, the enormous burdens of our world are not so insurmountable. The injustices and tremendous gaps in our societies are not meant for someone else to address. The mercy and healing that our world desires are found in the grace we live out of. We become the agents of change because of our own personal transformation. We know that we cannot give what we do not have.

But we can offer grace to our world when we live the graces with one another.

**Today, I am fortunate to be a part of the Marillac Retreat and Spirituality Center team of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth.** These women, who live the charism of charity articulated by St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, were welcomed to Leavenworth by Bishop Miege, a Jesuit. They, too, were formed in and benefited from the Ignatian spirituality those frontier Jesuits brought to this region. Much of that sharing in Ignatian spirituality, especially during their formation years, continued for the Sisters until the 1970s.

I have re-learned many of those same lessons since I joined the team last July and have watched and participated in planning and delivering the Marillac

Center's programs. I have listened to the voices of the Sisters of Charity who currently carry the vision and implement the mission of the Center.

I have learned, as the SCL Community celebrates her 165th anniversary of being here in Leavenworth, how the Holy Spirit filled the founders like Mother Ross and her companions with a pioneer spirit. That spirit provided them the energy, steeped in a lived spirituality, to undertake the many requests they received for education, health care and well-being, and pastoral care of the people here in this "First City of Kansas" as well as many frontiers across the Midwest, West, and South America.

Today, I participate in this new frontier of their charism being intentionally instituted into their ministries and structures as they intentionally share it with their Associates, lay colleagues, and employees. Right relationships compel the Community to engage the culture around them and call forth change in heart, mind, and spirit.

**Times for reflection and deepening in prayer allow the charism of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth to be better understood and appropriately lived.** Here, the hybrid of Vincentian charity and trust in God with Ignatian Communal and Personal Discernment is lived in an American pioneering context.

The Word of God has been the voice speaking and is indeed being heard. The Eucharist of Christ Jesus has been the body broken and shared within the Community, and it is healing the broader world. The Holy Spirit has been the life-renewing energy found in St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, Mother Xavier Ross, and all the founding Sisters who helped others step into the future with a renewed sense and hope in mission.

**Right relationship with our God is essential for dreaming of what is yet to grow among us and in our world.**

The particular focus of Marillac Center has been to hold the SCL spirituality so the charism of fostering right relationship with God, supporting right relationship with one another, and actively seeking right relationship with our world is known. Programs have included:

- Let Justice and Peace Flow (in relation to creation)
- Good Conversations (in relating to each other)
- Bread for the Journey (as a Eucharistic Renewal with gratitude)
- Drawn by Sacred Mystery (our relationship with God and others)
- Linger Over Coffee (by sharing a treat and the insights of one another around the Incarnation).

We also include individual personal direction and extended reflections through guided or directed retreats. The SCL charism centers us on our journey and how we can offer right relationships in our world.

Sometimes, we need those women who know how to pitch the ball to each of us so that we can succeed. Or we need women who see how to referee in ways that keep us all safe and out of harm's way when engaging one another. And we appreciate those voices of charity that continue to call us forth to envision some things anew and become those who are transformed and who are transforming. The Vincentian charism with the Ignatian pedagogy helps each of us to become who we are meant to be. These lessons are not dated. Our world still longs for this grace.

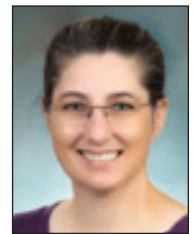
"As Gospel-centered, ecclesial women rooted in Christ," the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth renew themselves and invite others to join them "to love and serve in these times and in these places and to stand and pray with those who suffer, who grieve, who hope."

Now, with God's grace! Amen. 🙏



# Connecting With the World Through Digital Presence

By Sister Réjane Cytacki, SCL



## A Nun's Life: One Sister's Story at a Time

According to findings from the National Religious Vocation Conference/Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life, 34% of new entrants into religious communities have a relationship with someone in a religious community and 66% were invited into religious life by someone they knew. Relationship has long been recognized as key to a person choosing a life within a religious community.

How do those who do not have a relationship with a religious community discern their vocation?

In this digital age, A Nun's Life Ministry is a multifaceted digital ministry that helps people discover and grow in their vocation through engaging questions about God, faith, and religious life. We build relationships between Catholic Sisters and a vibrant online community around finding meaning and joy in everyday life. The ministry holds the space for all the charisms and expressions of women's religious life on our website and social media platforms.

As one current Sister who recently made her first vows told me, "Early on in my discernment, I read everything I could on A Nun's Life, and finally, I knew I just had to take the plunge and get to know some communities in real life."

The podcast is my favorite mode of virtual communication A Nun's Life uses. It is a conversation between the host and the Sister, but we keep in mind that the listener is the third person in the conversation. A podcast offers a powerful public witness by telling the story of religious life, one Sister at a time. When a Sister shares her vocation story and her current ministry, the

joy of her call shines through her voice and words. A Nun's Life has more than two million downloads on its podcast of the same name since 2010 and an audience in 175 countries.

## Public Witness Online

Public witness is embedded in the fabric of religious life. We take our vows publicly in front of a community of witnesses. With the advent of livestreaming events, I have watched several friends make their first and final vows online. If the livestream is also recorded and the public is allowed access via a video platform, those vow ceremonies serve as a continual witness. Discerners may find the ceremony online, and it may encourage them to initiate contact with a vocation director.

In November 2023, I attended the International Union of Superior Generals' first international meeting of women religious communicators. One of the presenters said that if a religious community is not communicating online, it is invisible to the world and the public.

## Digital Discernment

How does virtual communication work when an individual is discerning religious life? In my experience, I have had discerners reach out to me with an email or a message via A Nun's Life Facebook page. After having several exchanges via email or Facebook Messenger, we may continue the conversation on Zoom as the relationship unfolds. Then, I can share more resources with discerners during this process.

Another way A Nun's Life Ministry connects with discerners is through a virtual prayer experience called "Praying with the Sisters." It is offered as a live event on

A Nun's Life's Facebook page. I invite one or two other religious Sisters to pray with me on the screen, and our viewers can interact with us in the comment box in real time. The prayer is 30 minutes in length, centering around a psalm and gospel reading, and viewers are encouraged to offer their comments and prayers of intention.

Usually, participants pray with us but do not volunteer that they are discerning a religious life. One memorable exception came last year when two Sisters of Mercy, Sisters Barbara and Jenny, and I were leading "Praying with the Sisters." Two of our participants shared that they were discerning a religious life.

Our prayer that evening focused on the Gospel story of the women at the well. The conversation had a beautiful depth, especially around women and water throughout our world. Many of our viewers offered their insights and prayers of petition.

After our prayer ended, the two discerners stayed with the three leaders for another 20 minutes to engage in conversation about religious life via the comment box.

One of the discerners asked, "How do you find the right community?"

Sister Barbara, who had recently made her first vows, spoke about how A Nun's Life was helpful for her in her discernment process. During her discernment, she was driving a lot for work and would listen to A Nun's Life podcasts. She learned there were so many questions she didn't know she had. Hearing other people's stories and situations helped her formulate questions she had about the religious life.

For the discerner, a digital communication approach can be a "safer" way to engage. As someone who walks with discerners, it also aids me in the vetting process before face-to-face communication occurs.

### Virtual Communication

Virtual communication goes beyond simple email. It involves many different platforms and modes of communication. It has gained popularity since the advent of Facebook in 2004. Now, there are many, many platforms, but here are a few popular ones: LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp.

These platforms may include a variety of modes of communication, including instant messages, podcasts, videos, Zoom calls, and social media posts. Many people considering a vocation will engage in some form of virtual communication before a phone call or face-to-face meeting.

### Connecting with the World Through Digital Presence

Although virtual communication never replaces face-to-face, it has become a vital form of communication today. 🐾



Front: Sisters Gloria Solomon and Sue Retherford; Back: Sisters Nancy Bauman, Maureen Kehoe, and Kathleen Marie Henscheid.

## Sisters Gain Attention for Super Bowl Video

For the second year, the SCLs have gained significant attention for their Kansas City Chiefs "hype" videos.

This year, University of Saint Mary Communications Intern Bill Mayfield conceptualized the video, and Margaret Haik and Stephanie Nash mapped out each scene in the video. Nash filmed each scene, and after, she and Mayfield edited the video. The result is a sweet video featuring Sisters Nancy Bauman, Kathleen Marie Henscheid, Peg Johnson, Maureen Kehoe, Sue Retherford, and Gloria Solomon.

Fun videos like this are important because they introduce the SCL Community to a (very) broad audience. Through sharing, over 38,000 people on Facebook saw this year's video. Additionally, Good Morning America, ABC World News, CBS, Yahoo UK, several online newspapers in Australia, and the Catholic online newspaper Aetia wrote stories about the Sisters' video, which vastly expands the audience with whom we can share our other posts about the mission and charism of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth. 🐾

*The 2024 SCL Chiefs Super Bowl video can be viewed on the SCL Facebook page, [facebook.com/sistersofcharity](https://facebook.com/sistersofcharity), or on the SCL YouTube channel, [@sistersofcharityks](https://@sistersofcharityks).*



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