

# REFLECTIONS & *Connections*

MAY 2021



## STORIES OF MISSION & MINISTRY



### CSA

Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes  
Promoting Justice, Building Community

# Dear Friends,



Back in 1972, in the message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, Pope Paul VI gave voice to this seminal message of Catholic Social Teaching: “If you want Peace, work for Justice.” The phrase calls us to extend our reach beyond works of charity for alleviating such social problems as hunger and homelessness to also understanding and eradicating the very causes of these problems.

During this past pandemic year, the cracks in the social fabric of our nation have grown more prominent and noticeable. This exposure has led individuals and groups to respond more visibly, more publicly to others in need. On the nightly news, there are often stories of heroic courage and sacrifice in response to situations of need and distress. These presentations bring a hopeful counterpoint to other narratives of racism, hunger, and mayhem that also fill the news. The pandemic calls upon each of us to be our best selves – to respond to the neighbor and the stranger in need. Recognizing our need to acknowledge our complicity in the knotty problems facing our society and culture, the Sisters of St. Agnes issued a public statement about current social ills and committed ourselves to use our voice and our energy to build God’s beloved community.

Peace does not come upon us and our society without effort on our part. In the 1972 statement, Paul VI notes that peace that is not the result of true respect for others is not true peace. He asks what we call this respect, this sincere feeling for humanity. It is called justice. In working toward a more inclusive society, we cannot separate peace from justice or justice from peace. Peace and justice are an interlocking dynamic in the way forward.

We have the gifts we need to create communities of peace and justice, and the Beatitudes are a starting point. We have each other as we start and stop, and then start over again as often as needed on this precious journey of life. Let our desire for peace push our work for justice, knowing that God is always on our side.

In the peace and love of our God,  
Sister Jean Steffes, CSA  
General Superior

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**Editorial Board Members:**  
Sister Jeremy Quinn, Sister Jean Perry,  
Sister Patricia Hayes, Sister Cyndi  
Nienhaus, Dusty Krikau,  
and Suzanne Flood.

**On the cover:** On April 1, 2021, the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes joined the Leadership Conference of Women Religious by issuing a statement condemning racism and sexism in all their harmful forms. The full statement is available at [www.csasisters.org](http://www.csasisters.org).

# Sister Sharon

## Offers a Helping Hand

Sister Sharon Pollnow has been ministering in Ohio for more than half of her life. With a Master's in Education, she was initially a teacher and principal and later became a certified spiritual director, offering workshops and retreats. She earned her Master's in Clinical Social Work, became a licensed clinical social worker, and taught at Lourdes University in the Psychology and Education Departments.

With the blessing of CSA, Sharon collaborated with Sister Rachel Nijakowski, OSF, PhD, in opening a Counseling Center in 1993. Together they chose the name "Sophia Center" to reflect the feminine wisdom of God. Sophia Center is a faith-based counseling center focused on holistic healing, open to persons of all faiths and backgrounds. It provides counseling for sheltered abused women and children and also initiated "Step Up," a violence intervention program for adolescents and their families.

The pandemic compelled Sharon and Sophia's staff to quickly learn new technology skills, including professional encrypted "Zooming" with clients and transferring to digitized record systems. Sharon counsels 25-30 clients a week using teletherapy and eagerly awaits the day when staff and clients will be able to return to in-person counseling at Sophia.

As one of 13 therapists at Sophia Center, Sharon's clinical practice includes assessments, diagnoses, counseling, psychotherapy, and cognitive therapy for depression/anxiety. She also counsels married couples looking for a faith-based counseling approach and is a grief and trauma specialist. This past year she has also been on-call 24/7 for any woman in a domestic abuse crisis in Sylvania.

Sharon is passionate about assisting clients through difficult times in their lives. Her ministry has been especially challenging this year as she journeyed with many through grief, loss, depression, anxiety, confusion, and fear. When she noticed

her own "compassion fatigue," Sharon turned to prayer, music, her spiritual director, and her sisters, family, friends.

"I miss the hugs terribly... I don't know what I would do without prayer... One day what helped was I imagined all of CSA and the people across the world just reaching out and holding each other's hands and getting through this pandemic together, with each other and the Divine."



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"I miss the hugs terribly...  
I don't know what I would do  
without prayer."

— Sister Sharon Pollnow

A photo from BCHS Facebook group showing the "Class of 1956" and including Sister Remigia Neder, CSA.



Do you have a story to share? Visit [www.csasisters.org/share\\_a\\_story](http://www.csasisters.org/share_a_story) to let us know how a sister impacted your life!

# Alumni

## Share Stories of Sisters

The Sisters of St. Agnes served in many high schools throughout Wisconsin, including Beloit Catholic High School (BCHS) in Beloit, Wisconsin, from 1950 to 1994. A Facebook group of BCHS alumni began as a simple tool for planning reunions and sharing memories. In late 2020, Tim McKearn, former student, teacher, and principal at BCHS, began using it to share updates on the sisters who used to teach there. Tim reached out to CSA Archivist Jenny Lukomski with the names of several sisters who had been mentioned on the page and Jenny provided him with photos and a brief update on each sister.

In addition to getting accurate histories of the sister's ministries from the archives, Tim has also shared some of his favorite memories of the sisters that shaped his life and his tales have motivated other alumni to share stories as well.

- Sister Lucida Vorndran inspired Tim's senior basketball team by giving each of them a medallion of St. Joseph of Cupertino, because their high jumps reminded her of the Saint's ability to levitate.
- One alumnus credits Sister Philip Neri Saller's exceptional teaching skills for her career as a nurse.
- As principal of the school, Sister Mary Dennis McMahan would introduce herself at the podium and

then add that, although she had never been married, she still thought of herself as having 230 children (the population of the school at the time).

- Sister Catherine Dolan helped a small group of senior girls fundraise and arrange for a secretarial class trip to New York and Washington, DC, during their Easter break.
- Another student was convinced by Sister Christi Ann Laudolf to become the first male cheerleader at BCHS.
- Sister Michaela O'Brien was remembered for her supportive teaching style and her dedication to bringing excellent stage productions like *The Music Man* and *Fiddler on the Roof* to the high school theater program.
- An alumnus who became a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) described Sister Germaine Lichtle as the reason for his career choice.

Despite the school's closing in 2000, former students are still in touch with many of the sisters who continue to inspire and educate them. As Tim said, "I am so grateful for the education I received from the good sisters and the lay teachers at Beloit Catholic High. I consider that education the greatest gift my parents ever gave me."

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a smartphone, overlaid with a white network diagram consisting of dots and connecting lines. The background is a soft-focus image of people in a meeting.

# Human Dignity

## at the Digital Divide

As part of CSA's work with UNANIMA International, Sister Susan Seeby virtually attended the United Nation's 59th Session of the Commission for Social Development. This year's focus was on a socially just transition towards sustainable development and explored the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all.

While there were more than 100 events and presentations offered, they primarily fell into the three categories discussed in the Civil Society Declaration

- 1) Digital Inclusion in Education and Social Protections for All
- 2) Digital Technology and Financing for Development: Eradication of Poverty and Promotion of Equality at Global and National Levels
- 3) Digital Technology and Good Governance: Creating a Legal Environment that Protects Human Rights, Respects Privacy, and Prevents Abuses

Attending the sessions virtually highlighted the need to bridge the digital divide and showed the many ways that the pandemic has accelerated the pace of technology development and innovations.

The commission issued, and CSA endorsed, a "Civil Society Declaration." The declaration includes calls to

action for UN Member States to guarantee, among other things, "internet connection as a fundamental right and provide appropriate funding to extend broadband internet and digital access to all, in rural and urban areas, for women and girls, elderly population, indigenous, people experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities and people living in poverty." With young people throughout the world attending school remotely for the past year, the need for this action item and the others was readily apparent.

On first review, many of the action items seem beyond the reach of one single individual; upon further reflection, it becomes clear that individual actions can have a global impact. For example, providing digital literacy training at local service organizations, ensuring the use of closed captions during virtual meetings, and supporting community-funded broadband efforts are all the first steps in creating inclusive digital environments.

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To read the full Civil Society  
Declaration, visit:  
[tinyurl.com/yeeoypr3](https://tinyurl.com/yeeoypr3)

To watch presentations from the event, visit:  
[ngosocdev.org](https://ngosocdev.org)



Watch the full video  
of the breakfast at  
[csasisters.org/breakfast](https://csasisters.org/breakfast)

# Women's

## Leadership Breakfast

On March 11, 2021, CSA hosted the 17th annual Women's Leadership Breakfast. As has been common in this most unusual of years, the event was celebrated virtually. The event featured the "courageous initiatives" of Mother Agnes as manifested in the ministries of a 6-person panel engaged in the fields of social services, education, and health care.

The presenters all spoke in terms of "pre-Covid" and "during Covid" and outlined the challenges they and their programs faced in moving from face-to-face experiences to mostly virtual ones. The loss of socialization and peer support were identified as significant losses that began a year ago last March and, in many cases, persist to this day. Emotions like fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and sadness were identified as strongly present within their organizations and among their co-workers. However, they also identified creativity, resiliency, and flexibility as "gifts" the Covid experience called forth. The presenters expressed their hope that these gifts would continue to be valued and deepened.

The phrase "new normal" was used to express how they and their programs were evolving. One presenter spoke to the organic, changing nature of normal through use of the phrase "normal-ish," a term that resonated with many as a reflection of the fluid nature of our current experience.

Attendees were able to engage in question-and-answer sessions with each pair of panelists to deepen their understanding, and many expressed feeling empowered and enlightened by the presentations. Each presenting pair shared opportunities for action, and attendees shared intentions to volunteer in the organizations that were represented, to research volunteering with other community-based programs, to share information about relief programs with those in need, to support women-owned businesses more intentionally, or even just to find joy and focus on moving forward. As one participant noted: "Working together we can do great things!"

# *In Memoriam...* Walking with God



## **Sister Mary Christopher Esler, C.S.A.**

Sister Mary Christopher Esler, CSA, (Carol Gertrude), was born on February 14, 1927, in Kaukauna, WI, the third child of Nicholas and Alfa Esler. At an early age Carol knew that she wanted to become a nurse and a sister. After graduation from

high school, she enrolled at St. Agnes School of Nursing in Fond du Lac, WI, and received her RN in 1948.

That same year Carol entered the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes where she made profession of vows on August 15, 1951, as Sister Mary Christopher and began a lifetime of service in the health care field. She ministered as a staff nurse and Registered Occupational Therapist at St. Agnes Hospital, pastoral care minister at St. Clare Hospital, Monroe, WI, and home visit nurse for Hospice Hope. Returning to community service in 1985, Sister Mary Christopher provided therapeutic care and transportation service to the sisters at Nazareth Heights until 2008 when she moved to the new motherhouse and offered foot care to the sisters there as well as at Nazareth Court and Center. She was often seen enjoying nature, especially bird-watching, and crocheting baby caps for newborn babies at St. Agnes Hospital. In 2019, Sister Mary Christopher became a resident at Nazareth Court and Center where she nurtured her contemplative spirit through poetry and storytelling. No longer able to participate in the Bread of Life Charismatic Prayer Group or enjoy being in nature, she maintained her quiet, gentle manner among the sisters until her death on January 31, 2021.



## **Sister Ruth Ann Baudry, C.S.A.**

Sister Ruth Ann Baudry, CSA, baptized Bereneice, was born to George and Ruth Allain Baudry on April 14, 1933, in Fond du Lac, WI. She grew up on a farm near Eden with her two sisters and two brothers. Her education began in a one-room schoolhouse

in Marblehead and continued at St. Joseph's 9th Grade and St. Mary's Springs Academy in Fond du Lac. Bereneice entered St. Agnes Convent in 1950 and made her first profession of vows in the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes on August 15, 1954, receiving the name Sister Ruth Ann. She earned a BS in Education from Marian College and began a long career as a gifted educator. Sister was honored with many awards for excellence, creativity, and love for children in East Harlem, NY; Defiance, OH; Two Rivers, Wauwatosa, and Hortonville, WI. For thirty years, she taught in the Fond du Lac Catholic Education System (FACES) where she also served

as a cooperating teacher and supervisor of student teachers. Her love for teaching extended beyond the daily classroom to include coordination of religious education programs, especially for children with special needs. She is lovingly remembered by the Fond du Lac Hmong Community for her assistance with housing, legal aid, and health services, while also delivering food, clothing, and furniture to families in need. After retiring from full-time teaching in 2009, Sister Ruth Ann worked half-days at the Christian Parents for Kids Daycare located in Peebles, WI. In November 2017, she received the Vatican II Award for Service in Education from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. After moving to Nazareth Court and Center, she was a volunteer at St. Agnes Hospital and continued to serve the Hmong community and special needs children. When her health became frail, she was cared for at St. Francis Home, Fond du Lac, where she died peacefully on March 13, 2021.



## **Sister Bertha Ann Miller, C.S.A.**

Sister Bertha Ann Miller, CSA, baptized Mary Agnes, was born in Decatur, IN, on January 21, 1926, to Peter C. and Anna Bertha (Gase) Miller. She grew up on the family farm with her three brothers and three sisters. After graduating from Decatur Catholic High School in 1944, Mary Agnes

entered the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du Lac, WI, and made her first profession of vows as Sister Bertha Ann on August 15, 1947. She received a BS in Education from Marian College of Fond du Lac and enjoyed twenty-nine years as a primary teacher in WI, KS, and IL. In 1971, Sister earned a certificate in Theological Studies and continued to enrich herself and her ministerial skills by attending courses in both education and theology. Further ministry opportunities included two years as librarian at St. Mary School, Oshkosh, WI, eight years in the business office at St. Mary Springs High School, and twenty years as bookkeeper for The Leo House in New York City, where her dedicated service and precise accounting are still remembered by The Leo House staff. In 2006, Sister Bertha Ann retired from full-time ministry and joined the community of sisters living at Nazareth Court and Center. Throughout her life in community and in her places of ministry, she was beloved for her gentle, patient spirit and her attention to detail—not resting until the day's work was done well. She died as peacefully as she lived on March 27, 2021, at St. Francis Home in Fond du Lac.

*For full obituaries go to [www.csasisters.org](http://www.csasisters.org). Memorials can be sent to the CSA Mission Advancement Office or through the website.*



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# Welcoming New Associates

On Sunday, April 11, 2021, four new associates entered into Associate Relationship with CSA.



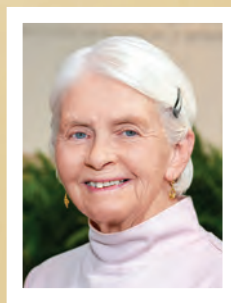
**Tracy Ablner**

*"I want to connect more closely, more intently to CSA's mission, to continue to learn, to be supported, and also to serve alongside them; to be in a mutual relationship of love and support, direction and collaboration."*



**Joyce Gau**

*"To become an associate of the Sisters of St. Agnes is a true spiritual blessing and calling; continuing to champion social justice and commit to community service with a stronger spiritual understanding is a tremendous gift."*



**Shannon Meagher**

*"I have a new awareness of my baptismal call and am eager to join with other CSA associates to carry out, with the charism, the spirit and mission of the Sisters of St. Agnes."*



**Christine Schiek**

*"Community allows the give and take of mutual support to visibly live out the charism and mission with awareness and courage. I am dedicated to support the Sisters of CSA and my fellow associates in every way Spirit calls."*