

Ex-nun offers tips for supporting Catholic sisters

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 11, 2012](#) issue

A national official for the United Church of Christ says she applauds the courage of the large group of U.S. Catholic nuns under heavy criticism from the Vatican. “I pray for their wisdom, eloquence and continued confidence in working toward change which must come,” wrote Susan A. Blain, a UCC minister who was a sister for 11 years before deciding not to take final vows.

Blain eventually followed a call to be ordained in the Protestant body and serves at the Cleveland headquarters as the UCC’s minister for worship, liturgy and spiritual formation. “It is painful to witness all that is transpiring” for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which was faulted for progressive leanings in doctrine and current social issues, she said.

“But if I am pained, I often find my Protestant sisters and brothers quite bewildered at how to respond,” said Blain. She made suggestions in an article posted June 12 on the UCC’s website:

- Forget generalizations about nuns in the news; engage the sisters you do know from ecumenical ministries. Ask about changes since the Second Vatican Council and how sisters have experimented with democratic and consensus models of governance. “Note to UCC: sisters who have succeeded in this have generally not gotten stuck on Robert’s Rules.”
- Recognize the complexity in Catholic institutions. “Media attention, which may depict the sisters as hapless victims of church authority, doesn’t do the sisters justice.” Many religious orders do not answer directly to bishops. “Our American Protestant popular-democracy-steeped responses to a deep Catholic conflict may not be the most helpful.”

Protestants may split off from the old structure whereas Catholics at an impasse may make every effort to stay, going deeper into the tradition to find a way to stay

in communion “and effect transformation however long it takes.”

- Offer solidarity where it counts. “Historically, sisters have lived among, cared for, given voice to and fought for justice for those people whom social systems and ‘safety nets’ leave behind.” Write letters of support to sisters, to local dioceses, the LCWR and Network, a social justice lobby in Washington founded by sisters.
- Read and quote the theological writings of sisters, including those who have been recently reprimanded or silenced by the Vatican, including Margaret Farley, Yale professor emerita, Elizabeth A. Johnson of Fordham University and Ivone Gebara of Recife, Brazil. Read the works of those who have not had the “Vatican Bump” in publicity and sales and “anything” by Joan Chittister, OSB.