

Do the American nuns have a future?

by [David Gibson](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service ST. LOUIS (RNS) Catholic sisters gathered here for their annual assembly on Thursday (Aug. 9) intensified discussions aimed at thwarting a Vatican takeover of their group, but hanging over the meeting was an even larger existential question: Do the nuns have a future?

The viability issue is central to the dispute between Rome and the nuns that has riveted Catholics and dominated this year's meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The steering group represents most of the 56,000 nuns in religious orders in the United States.

The Vatican announced in April that a team of bishops would take control of the LCWR in order to make the nuns hew more closely and publicly to orthodox teachings on sexuality and theology. The sisters are expected to deliver their first formal reply to the takeover on Friday.

A key justification for Rome's action was the argument that vocations to more progressive women's religious communities are in free fall: In 1965 there were 180,000 sisters in religious life, more than three times today's number. The decline is especially acute in orders that belong to the LCWR.

Critics peg this decline to the increasing liberalism of the sisters since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s opened the door to reforms. They argue that orders that embrace a more traditional way of life -- wearing the habit, attending communal prayer throughout the day, endorsing rather than challenging church teachings and Vatican pronouncements -- are flourishing.

"The LCWR orders are dying, while several religious orders that disaffiliated from the LCWR are growing," George Weigel, a conservative Catholic pundit, wrote recently in a blistering critique of the group.

But defenders of the LCWR communities argue that it is not just the quantity but also the quality of vocations that matters. Moreover, they argue that women's orders

are going through the kind of transformation that is critical to helping the church evangelize in the fast-changing world and to fostering comity in a deeply divided church.

"We are united in the desire to surrender that which no longer serves so that something new can be born in and through us," Sister Pat Farrell, president of the LCWR, said in opening the assembly.

Farrell and other speakers were making reference to a passage from Isaiah that has guided the LCWR in recent years, in which God tells the Israelites, "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Meanwhile, studies show that despite conservative claims, traditional orders are not doing that much better than the liberal communities.

In 1992 the Vatican set up a rival organization to the LCWR, called the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, or CMSWR, to serve as a home for more old-fashioned religious communities. The CMSWR umbrella now comprises convents with about 10,000 nuns, or about 20 percent of women religious in the U.S. as opposed to the 80 percent under the LCWR's aegis.

An analysis of vocations data to be published in the Aug. 13 edition of America magazine, a national Catholic weekly run by the Jesuits, shows that both traditional CMSWR and progressive LCWR communities are drawing the same number of vocations: Each has about 500 women in various stages of becoming vowed sisters.

Moreover, other research shows that the retention rate in both types of orders is only about 50 percent.

"These data ... show that simplistic generalizations mask complex realities," write the authors, Sister Mary Johnson and Sister Patricia Wittberg, both sociologists. "We are just beginning to explore some of the key factors about what attracts women to and dissuades them from religious life today."

The LCWR delegates meeting here this week have been discussing these issues even as they grapple with developing a response to the Vatican, and they openly acknowledge that they have no definitive answers to the vocations conundrum.

But they also say that the history of religious life has been marked by change as much as it has by continuity, and so openness to change is itself being faithful to

tradition. That fidelity, they say, is as important to their survival as recruiting new members.

At a panel on Thursday titled "Religious Life in the Future: What Might It Look Like?," Sister Jennifer Gordon, a nun from Kansas who is one of the younger LCWR delegates by a couple of decades, said that the nuns had to move forward.

"In times as unsettling as these it is tempting to take a step back, to retreat into the comfortable, or at least the familiar," Gordon told the 900 nuns filling a huge hotel ballroom. She then showed them an image of a man standing confidently in the water at the edge of Victoria Falls in Africa.

"As a relatively new and relatively young sister, I am frequently asked what I think the future of religious life will look like," Gordon said. "And each time I respond that I really don't know. But I think it will look a lot like the view from the top of Victoria Falls. It looks like standing at the edge."