

Walking at the speed of trust:

The emotional journey of transitioning from a residential care model to family-based care



The experience of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Mexico and Changing the Way We Care

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“Listening is a crucial practice of the mentor because it not only creates space for openness between mentor and the one accompanied but also makes room for an awareness of the presence and action of God.”¹

In May 2021, the Mexican Province of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, a religious community of eighty-three Catholic sisters working in Mexico (henceforth referred to as the “Sisters”), approached the *Changing the Way We Care* initiative (CTWWC). They came with a request for technical assistance to support their transition journey, which included transforming five residential care facilities (also referred to as orphanages) for girls into other models of family and community care.²

Several concurrent factors prompted the Sisters’ journey: 1) the merging of their two religious congregations directly impacted the Sisters in the Province of Mexico and prompting internal reflection; 2) the COVID-19-pandemic and subsequent government requirements and protocols for group care settings to return all children living in residential care back home, as a means of containing the spread of COVID-19; and 3) recognition that over half of their community of Sisters and staff were 70 years or older. The Sisters mentioned that the most important reason for change the way in which they cared for children was based on their congregational guidelines: they have developed policies to safeguard children and have a congregational positioning that includes a rights-based approach. Their charism has been adapted to each era and various circumstances and contexts. This implies search and discernment, from a global context. All of these factors motivated the Sisters to rethink how they were expressing their charism and commitment to their faith through providing residential care for 150 girls.

Children are a gift. Each one is unique and unrepeatable, and at the same time immiscibly linked to its roots.

Pope Francis

Underpinning the transition process was the realization that when COVID-19 pandemic requirements forced the rapid reunification of children away from group settings and back into families, there were parents or relatives who were able to care for the girl's full time. All of the 150 girls in the care of the Sisters had a home to which they returned, illustrating that they were not orphans and there was not necessarily a need for care outside of the family. While the families faced challenges such as poverty, single parenthood or location within high crime areas, most were open, available and willing to take their children back home. The Sisters did take it upon themselves to visit the families as much as possible during the pandemic. These visits sometimes included the provision of food, computers or cell phones to facilitate virtual learning, scholarships and other supplies. The Sisters also wanted to see that the girls were able to continue school virtually, whenever possible, as access to education was one of the main components of the provision of residential care by the Sisters. Ensuring that the girls were able to continue their studies during the pandemic while staying at home was a main concern of the Sisters.

¹ Campbell, C., y Carani, T. (2019). *The art of accompaniment: theological, spiritual and practical elements of the construction of a more relational church*, Catholic Apostolate Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.catholicapostolatecenter.org/blog/top-10-quotes-from-the-art-of-accompaniment>

² Examples could include temporary shelters for migrant families or community social service centers or daycare providers.

At this stage, CTWWC began engaging the Congregation’s leadership team, referred to as the Mission Development Commission in Mexico which is composed of four sisters and the five "animadoras"-- one for each of the five residential care centers-- who serve as their leaders. Weekly Zoom calls with the CTWWC team centered around the process of transition and examples from different contexts of how others have approached the transition processes. Several calls revolved around discussions on how best to bring the rest of the Sisters into the process in a manner that celebrated their charism, but also recognized the need for a new way of expressing their faith.

The group of Sisters leading this process, together with CTWWC, decided the first step would be a series of 90-minute Zoom calls with each of the five small communities of Sisters, each representing one residential care facility. The focus would be to present the evidence base around the benefits of family care and highlight the effects of residential care on children’s development. The idea was to support an increased understanding by the Sisters that transitioning to a new model of care was better for children.

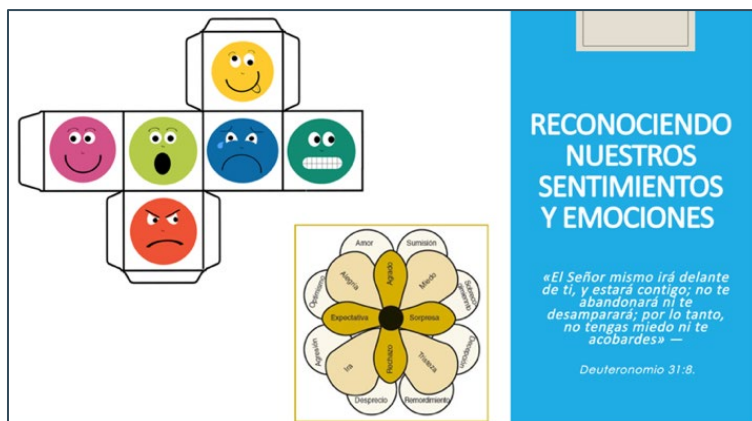


Figure 1: Example of a PowerPoint slide guiding an activity to speak openly about and recognize the emotions the Sisters were feeling about transition

It turns out that the first Zoom call was a lesson in humility and of walking in step with those sharing the path. Within twenty minutes of presenting, it became painfully evident that the given information was ill-timed and not well received by the Sisters. It was clear from the Sisters’ body language and comments that they were not ready to take in new information, but instead needed to grieve the loss of expressing their charism through

children’s residential care ministry. While they understood their current residential model was no longer feasible from an operational point of view, their hearts were still connected to this practice and way of life. As one Sister aptly noted, “for any one of us to fully accept what this new phase entails, we must first be able to grieve what we must leave behind.” The CTWWC team quickly realized that this was not about presenting evidence or convincing others, but rather about meeting the Sisters where they were in their journey and, most importantly, listening and being fully present to them. It was very clear that this journey would not be dictated by the technical needs or pre-planned agenda but would instead proceed at the speed of trust. The CTWWC team realized that letting go of control of the process and instead using the emotional needs of the Sisters to guide the process was best.

“We are taking steps of greater confidence and learning to take risks in the small changes that are taking place. We are grateful for patience and for helping us to be able to continue to shine light on the dreams of the Sisters.”³

³ Sister Teresa Fernández, Animadora Provincial de Congregación Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Buen Pastor-México



Photo credit: Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd

CTWWC quickly changed course and designed virtual sessions for each of the five small religious communities that focused on the spiritual and emotional aspects and experiences of transition. The sessions incorporated a presentation based on Scripture passages and psalms that address the concept of change and encouraged using the Bible to help navigate change.⁴ The role of trust or faith in God throughout that process (see Figure 1). Each small community's conversation began by acknowledging that the change process impacts each Sister and each community differently. While it was important for the Sisters to understand why change was needed from an operational point of view, CTWWC and the Sisters' provincial leadership team also perceived how critical it was to recognize and address the feelings of loss and intense emotions accompanying that grief. Sisters needed both time and space to recognize and process the emotional side of change. The presentation, specifically the religious language and visuals that highlighted the process, encouraged the Sisters to speak openly about the sense of loss they were feeling. The role of CTWWC was to listen, to walk beside them at their speed and to provide the time and space needed so that the Sisters could find their own way to connect their mission and charism with a new way of caring for children.

⁴ Amy Pacanowski, Marzo 2019. Departameto de Desarrollo organizacional y de personas de la American Bible Society. Recuperado de: <https://blog.bible/blog-de-la-biblia/entry/8-versiculos-para-hacer-frente-a-los-cambios>.

Things to consider when initiating a transition process with Catholic Sisters

- Go in with an open mind and heart. Be willing to change course, when needed. Be directed by the needs of those you are supporting rather than trying to direct it yourself.
 - Take time to learn about and understand the Congregation with whom you are collaborating. Read about the Order, their history, their charism. This is an important step in building an environment of trust.
 - Be humble, flexible, patient and willing to put the best-laid plans aside, if needed.
 - Listen. The ability to really hear what others are feeling is not only important but is essential in terms of informing the process.
 - Walk together at the speed of trust. Remember that this is a long process. The time invested in building a foundation of trust will influence the rest of the journey.
 - Utilize psalms, stories and passages from scripture or other religious texts to help explain the process. Use language that is familiar or resonates with those whose faith and charism is at the heart of what they do for children.
 - Remember that transition does include a technical process, however for those you are supporting it is much more about their expression of faith. The onus is on you to meet them where they are in the process and creating the path forward together.
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- Do not enter the process with set expectations about what will be achieved within a specific timeframe.
 - Do not engage with others thinking you know best.
 - Do not enter the process thinking that every journey will be the same. Do not think that because you have worked with one faith-based group that the process will be the same with another faith-based group.
 - Do not think this is a strictly technical exercise that will be guided by tools and timeframes.
 - Do not use technical language, acronyms, and government documents. Instead build capacity for more technical aspects and links with legislation as you go.
 - Do not believe that every member of the group is at the same stage of accepting the transition process.



Changing The Way We CareSM (CTWWC) is implemented by Catholic Relief Services and Maestral International, along with other global, national and local partners working together to change the way we care for children around the world. Our principal global partners are the Better Care Network, Lumos Foundation, and Faith to Action. CTWWC is funded in part by a Global Development Alliance of USAID, the MacArthur Foundation and the GHR Foundation.

Need to know more? Contact *Changing the Way We Care* at info@ctwwc.org or visit changingthewaywecare.org.

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