Introduction

The National Office for Vocations UK (NOV) recently reported a 300% rise in vocational enquiries among women in the UK. This news was almost universally carried in the British and Irish media, irrespective of emerging simultaneously with a royal birth and a UK general election. This shows that religious life in Britain and Ireland continues to have a symbolic resonance despite the widespread public ignorance about its reality.

There is a perception that apostolic women religious in these isles are at a collective 'Rachel' moment, mourning for their children, because they are no more (Jer. 31:15). The Religious Life Vitality Project, generously supported by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, suggests that if religious life has changed it is far from dead. Women religious are living a critical moment of paschal mystery, a radical encounter with corporate and institutional death and resurrection. The project finds religious women moving from action to a ministry of presence, witness and relationship, perceiving their presence, even in old age, as prophetic faithfulness. If this 'middle space' between past and future is experienced as messy and sometimes bewildering it is also seen as a move from the socially and ecclesially respectable centre of church and society to the margins, both in terms of status and of apostolic focus. The report shows many shifts in the aftermath of Vatican II and of the social revolutions of the twentieth century. This is part of the contemporary 'turn to the subject', and rejects both the collective institutionalisations of the past and today’s cult of individualism in favour of union with God and others.

If the magisterium has been concerned to define consecrated life within the structure of the church and in doing so has tended to instrumentalise both religious life and religious themselves, the 'charism paradigm', reflects the lived experience of religious and their interpretation of their place in the church. The report points to tensions and sensitivities between charism and hierarchy. It finds religious women seeing themselves and their ministry within a sacramental framework of interpretation, viewing the church and their place within it as a mystery of faith. The shifts seen overall within the report are:

A turn towards the unitive/ mystical
A turn towards the ordinary
A turn towards the communal
A turn towards the transformative

Religious life today, despite its many diminishments, is seen as a sign not only of the harmony between individuals and their Creator, but a recovery of the lost unity between human beings and one another, resulting in a renewal of charity in community and a collaborative, unitive, socially transformative spirituality shared with those beyond the confines of vowed religious life.

The Religious Life Vitality Project finds the apostolic women religious of Britain and Ireland standing, like Mary Magdalene, at the entrance to the empty tomb. Much of what was known and familiar has died, but at this moment of challenge they are hearing the voice of the Master, inviting them not to cling to the past but to follow into a future full of hope.

Dr. Gemma Simmonds CJ,
Director, Religious Life Institute, Heythrop College, University of London
Background to the Project

In response to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s initiative the Religious Life Vitality Project Team undertook a collaborative project of research into signs of vitality in apostolic women’s religious life. We decided on the criterion of vitality as a way of engaging in positive reflection on where the energy remains within religious life, trusting that this would also bring up areas of concern about its diminishment.

From the outset we wanted a methodology which allowed the questions and themes to emerge from the data provided by the project participants themselves. For this reason we did not set the criteria for vitality ourselves, but decided on an open-ended question which would touch directly into the sisters’ lived reality. This enabled the articulation of religious life lived in particular and concrete contexts. This also influenced our decision to ask for a statement about each congregation’s charism.

The project methodology offers a voice to the sisters’ own narrative, reflected upon by external commentators with an expertise in religious life, who thus helped to co-create the final narrative. In relation to that, we recognise the contribution to the data of both the sisters and the ‘outsiders’ i.e. the research team at various stages during the Project.

The Project’s Two Voices: Insider and Outsider Contributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Insider voice: women religious participating</th>
<th>The Outsider voice: Project Team &amp; Guest Theologians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offered their signs of vitality</td>
<td>Offered the initial opening question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided statistics</td>
<td>Data analysis (1): grouped responses in 6 themes &amp; presented these back to congregations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritised their themes and signs</td>
<td>Guidance for semi-structured reflection groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deepened these through reflection groups</td>
<td>Data analysis (2): transcript analysis to identify priorities and deepening of themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitated and shaped their own discussions</td>
<td>Data analysis (3): theological reflection on transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set the pace of the Project</td>
<td>Data analysis (4): final reflection and reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their internal response - transformational conversations?</td>
<td>Reporting back and further conversation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Project Initiation Phase

Selection of participants: We decided upon a sample group by self-selection based on an open invitation to women’s religious congregations through the Conference of Religious of England and Wales (CoREW). Twenty-eight responded positively, with two deciding immediately not to proceed any further. After conversation with the Project Team and understanding what would be required of their participation, a further eight congregations decided for internal reasons, such as pressure of time or lack of personnel that it was not feasible for them to take part.

Participant profile: We arrived at a self-selecting group of participants with the interest and energy to engage with vitality and those able to see the project’s relevance. It was a relatively homogenous group of apostolic congregations and included one Society of Apostolic Life and two missionary congregations. Initial contact was made through Provincial Superiors who either engaged directly or appointed a key contact person through whom we liaised with project participants.

The internal process of selection for participation differed within each congregation, some sending the invitation to participate to all congregation members, others selecting a small representative group. Contact with the Project Team was made either by individual sisters or via a contact sister. We made no stipulation about the type of participant required. In some congregations only younger sisters participated; conversely, in another congregation, almost none of the ‘younger’ sisters participated.

Initial process: A letter was sent to each Provincial Superior or Contact Person explaining the Project background and approach for all participants. This included seeking participants’ consent to the use of questionnaire data and an assurance of anonymity and the freedom to withdraw from the project at any time. Ethical approval for the Project was obtained from Heythrop College and from Durham University. Participants were sent a Survey Monkey questionnaire which collected their signs of vitality. These were collected only by congregation without individual names. Congregations were assigned letters – Congregation A to N, by chronological engagement. Only these letters were used internally until the stage of sending out final reports. Some Provincials asked for something less ‘academic’ as a report for internal use by congregation members. This resulted in a brochure about the Project for distribution within the congregations.

A copy of the introductory letter to project participants can be found in Appendix A

RELIGIOUS LIFE VITALITY PROJECT TEAM:

Researchers (Support Team):

Dr. Gemma Simmonds [GS] is a sister of the Congregation of Jesus. She is a Senior Lecturer in pastoral theology at Heythrop College, University of London & Director of the Religious Life Institute (RLI).

Catherine Sexton [CS] is a laywoman undertaking a PhD at the Margaret Beaufort Institute in Cambridge. A former CEO, she has 25 years’ experience working in international development, with a particular interest in leadership development and organisational and cultural change.

Theological Consultant and Executive Director:

Prof. Paul D. Murray [PDM] is a lay Roman Catholic systematic theologian working in Durham University. He is Dean and Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS) at Durham.
A letter was sent to all participant congregations outlining the stages of the project.

**Stage 1:** A Survey Monkey questionnaire eliciting basic empirical data about the congregation and identifying participants' recognised signs of vitality. This survey was an enabling process for each congregation's own discernment process. Collated material from the questions was returned to participants. A paragraph articulating the charism of each individual congregation was also requested.

**Stage 2:** Identification of which particular aspects of 'signs of vitality' each congregation wished to pursue for further discussion. The definitions were expected to come from the participating congregations themselves, based on collated Survey Monkey responses from their congregation. The individual congregation team or contact person meeting the researchers to review the process, but identifying their own research questions. Discussion to identify the congregation’s preferred 'signs' produced the first level of data.

**Stage 3:** Theological reflection on the transcripts produced by the meetings internal to each congregation by an overall Theological Reflection Group, drawn from theologians working with the RLI. All material gathered to be treated according to established university criteria concerning confidentiality and sensitive handling of data, with the given consent of those congregations involved. Proposal to hold a day conference to share correlated information from across the congregations and enable a second stage of reflection which would also become part of the material for the reflected output.

**Stage 4:** Material emerging from this project to serve as a resource for other congregations.

An example of ethics approval from Heythrop College, University London can be found in Appendix B. Ethics approval was also obtained from Durham University. Survey Monkey Questionnaires for congregation leaders & members can be found in Appendix C & D. The Consent Form can be found in Appendix E.

**Stage 1: Survey Monkey Questionnaire:**

*Member’s survey,* asking for up to 5 signs of vitality in religious life as lived now in respondents' present contexts.

*Leader’s survey,* asking for the above and a statement regarding their congregation’s charism and provision of some basic statistics (numbers of sisters in the world, in this province/region, age breakdown, new members, numbers joining, numbers leaving and dying).

- The surveys were sent out to recipients as an electronic link to members and /or the provincial leader with the consent form attached.
- Some sisters preferred to work with a Word document or by hand. When asked for guidance about the recommended number of participants, we suggested at least 5 – 8 sisters, enough to then constitute a small reflection group at Stage 2. Several congregations had so many sisters interested that they needed to constitute more than one discussion group. This generated considerable amounts of data, e.g. five reflection groups in one congregation.
- Sisters participating per congregation numbered from 3 to 45, giving a total of 204 sisters who offered 840 signs of vitality. Comparative analysis across the congregations is not possible since some are missionary congregations who categorise their numbers differently.
- Number of members dying and leaving were also categorized differently by individual congregations.
- Each congregation worked at its own pace, some not beginning the process until nearly the end of Year 2. We recognized the importance of their working at a pace which suited them – especially in congregations with low membership whose workload is significant – many juggling care issues, closing houses, General Chapters etc.
RELIGIOUS LIFE VITALITY PROJECT: THE LIFE STORY OF THE DATA

**Stage 1: Survey Monkey:**
*Member’s Survey:* five signs of vitality as lived in your congregation now
*Leader’s Survey:* charism and statistics

**Stage 2: Data analysis (1) - identifying six themes:** Ministry; Community and Formative Growth; How we are Ageing; Collaborative Working; Prayer and Spirituality; New Forms of Membership

**Stage 3: Semi-structured internal reflection groups in each congregation**

**Stage 4: Data analysis (2) on reflection group transcripts produced two reports per transcript:**
- an analytical summary
- a narrative summary

**Stage 5: Data analysis (3): theological reflection with guest theologians; production of final reports**
Stage 2 – First round of data analysis: axial coding of the Survey Monkey responses by congregation and grouping of the responses by six categories or themes

The project’s methodology for collating and identifying themes.

Coding process
The individual Survey Monkey responses for each congregation were downloaded chronologically, in the order of completion, named accordingly (e.g. the first set was named Congregation A, etc.) and gathered into one document. The larger Research Team had earlier agreed that the comparison of data across congregations would best be served by having no more than six overall categories or themes.

Working independently initially and using a ‘grounded theory’ approach to letting themes emerge from the data, each project researcher read through the initial set of Survey Monkey responses, crafting a category for each individual sign of vitality, until all were categorised. We used a system of axial coding, creating themes or categories by grouping and giving labels to words and phrases rather than open coding whereby the codes are words and phrases found in the text of the transcript.

Some individual signs at first seemed not to fit any emerging category, or were unclear in meaning. These were put aside for further discussion. Both researchers exchanged tentative lists of categories so that discussion could produce an agreed common set of categories. Few adjustments proved necessary, GS arguing for a category of Community and Formative Growth, in recognition of what was a clear shift emerging and CS arguing for a category of How we are Ageing, so that specific contributions relating to age could be recognised, particularly in light of participants’ demographic profile.

Having decided on an initial set of themes, the researchers sought to apply the same categories or themes to the subsequent groups of responses. There was discussion throughout the process concerning the continuing suitability of the categories, but since they fitted all the delivered data no further categories were felt to be necessary. It was recognised that there was considerable crossover and interplay in meaning and reference between the signs, and a case could be argued for moving a sign from one category to another.

There now follow several examples from across the participant congregations to show the nature and breadth of the individual signs of vitality offered by the sisters. These come from Survey Monkey responses from congregations grouped by theme, in a report format returned to congregations for further group discussion.

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1 A research methodology by which a theory is constructed through the analysis of data.
Example no 1 – Congregation D:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congregation D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of individual responses received: 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of individual signs of vitality: 69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Themes emerging:

**New forms of membership – 14 signs of vitality**

- Desire to engage with co-workers in a new way - to look at new ways of working and to share our foundress’ charism
- Working together with our lay associates
- Lay people are energised when they open themselves to living the life of the charism of our foundress
- Growth in membership in Africa, India, S.E.Asia
- Huge growth of the order in the East and in Africa
- Growth in Africa and India
- Numbers of fine women joining or have joined in Africa and Asia.
- Many vocations to our Institute in different parts of the world, e.g. India, Thailand, plus a new urge to work for vocations in this Province
- The desire within our Institute for our charism to be passed on to new members of the order, including those who have yet to join
- Refocusing renewed emphasis on vocation groups/networks
- [Place name], / poorest country in Europe /the energy / the involvement with co-workers/ and sheer width of ministry to the very poorest is extraordinary
- New shoots in [Place name], & UK

**Ministry – 13 signs**

- The X initiative - a call from General Leadership to move beyond the boundaries of our own Provinces and establish new missions
- The desire to be on mission - especially to the marginalised working with refugees/trafficked women/elderly
- The focus on mission as a key motivator
- Seeking to read the signs of the times in re-evaluating ministry
- Strong sense of mission in the members worldwide
- ‘Mission’ - sharing our gifts appreciating the gifts in others is life-giving
- As a congregation we had a millennium project for each province to go outside its boundaries and bring the charism to a needy place […] sheer width of ministry to the very poorest is extraordinary
- Religious at the forefront of justice issues
- Movements toward multi-cultural/faith ministries and with ‘unchurched’
- Desire to be involved in adult formation and catechesis
- The work of one of our sisters who got a job in a factory shows a deeper grasp at our charism of Seeking God/ finding God in all things
Example 2: Prayer and Spirituality 'signs' from Congregation L

**Prayer & Spirituality – 30 signs**

- A genuine return to sources – to the experience of scripture, the dynamism of the charism and a response to the 'signs of the times' as the locus of God’s revelation
- More concern for parish losses etc. and more prayer around these issues
- We put more effort into the way we pray together, realising it is celebratory rather than a task to be done, perhaps this is the overflow from our new freedoms and our growing sense of personhood
- Recent developments in ecology/cosmology awareness i.e. 'Be the Change You Want to Be’ project has expanded our vision and has brought new life into the congregation
- Return to the scriptures
- The quality of our daily Evening Prayer - creative, reflective, well-prepared
- I see signs of vitality when sisters lead a group of lay people in sharing Scripture and empower others to continue this practice
- I see signs of vitality when we as Sisters of [X] are exploring the richness of the Universe Story and the deep spirituality which is meaningful in our culture today
- I quote from the sister I live with ‘our vitality is in our being caught up in the love of the Lord we cannot see.’
- Prayer together and support for each other and for our neighbours
- Dance/meditation: offering this experience i.e. meditation, using movement and music seems to be very meaningful for people who participate
- Hunger for contemplative life
- Willingness to face the truth of our own brokenness.
- A greater interest in scripture
- ‘Care of the Earth’, ‘Be the Change’ programs. emergence of Cosmology Group
- Cosmology - expanding our spirituality
- Contemplation group
- The new spirituality that is developing, coming from a growing awareness and understanding of the Universe Story - interconnectedness, unity and interiority. This all leading us into a spirituality that sees in a new way the presence of God in everything that is and how everything is in God. This has great wonder of our relationship with God and our place in this whole journey - to be explored personally and together.
- Rediscovery of contemplation as our prayer form is also happening among us as we reflect more and more on our place in God’s scheme of things and the Universe’s way of existing
- My own prayer life and relationship with Christ
- Religious life gives me a freedom to do things and to avail of so many spiritual and inspirational programmes
- ‘God is love’. This is the motto I choose for religious profession. I continually ask God to help me realise what love is. I believe that being in relationship is the basis of what this is about. God becoming one of us in the person of Jesus who desired to be in relationship with all he encountered throughout the Gospels is testament to me of what Love is. I am fortunate to encounter people in all sorts of circumstances and being a religious has afforded me the opportunity to be in people's lives in a very sacred way. This is a blessing that I don’t take for granted and thank God for on a regular basis
- I am aware of the call to contemplation that is being responded to in our province by a group who have committed themselves to engage daily in a minimum of one hour of contemplative prayer. An individual member came up with the idea and she sends a monthly thought/encouragement/reminder with practical support from the Provincial office. In this I see an individual taking personal responsibility for the life of our province
- The community I live in prays together daily. I find this thirst for the contemplative aspect of life hopeful
- Recognising that Gospel values are our blue-print for life
- By exploring the charism of our foundress, we will live by her values
- Leadership of Pope Francis who advocates a church/a people who live by mercy and compassion rather than by rules and regulations
- Ability to stay the course
- The faith dimension expressed in new and novel ways which are more appealing than the institutional church is offering
Example 3: Congregation N

**Community and formative growth – 14 signs**

- I see sisters embrace the challenge/struggle to have the role of women recognised in church
- I experience the challenge to live our charism more fully in daily life with all the people that I meet
- When we gather together in large or small groups to explore issues, reflect and pray together, discern about the future, there is an energy there which gives vitality
- Sharing faith with each other in groups to take courage to live life to the full
- The development and use of participative governance at local level - teams, shared leadership and co-leadership models
- Chapters/meetings that are truly discerning ones
- The acceptance of a spiritual governance mode that is no longer just words in the Constitutions
- The way in which our engagement with the world has been forced due to circumstances like the abuse reports and the call of Pope Francis and fidelity to the call of the Gospel - all pushing us to look at the reality of who we are and what we are really about, getting to the essence, in today’s world - the vitality is evident in what is emerging from that and engagement with the deep questions
- A desire to listen and talk with each other at a deeper level
- A growing freedom to look at different ways of being community
- My connectedness to my religious family - especially through bonds of deep friendship
- Ability to live a less structured, more realistic and meaningful way of life
- For me, living alone and at some distance from other [members] keeping contact with friends, supporting others and allowing oneself to be supported, enjoying each other’s company is a sign of vitality
- I find a greater sense of ownership and shared leadership, in the face a very uncertain future, brings new energy and vitality

Example 4: Congregation K

**How we are ageing - 12 signs**

- Seeking and engaging in ministries appropriate to age/health etc.
- Older sisters being positive about their years of service
- In Ireland - where the age profile is high - there is a spirit of hope. Sisters live our charism - compassionate caring, hospitality and healing, without depression about few numbers, age and uncertainty
- Genuine care for the sick, infirm and elderly sisters – this is truly prophetic
- Almost all of our retired sisters at the Motherhouse are engaged in some way in our ministry
- The fact that elderly sisters still wish to contribute to the well-being of others, have a high civic sense of duty and are globally aware
- Acceptance of our limitations and our stage in life with huge appreciation of friendship
- The witness and contemplative stance of many of our older sisters
- I find that so many of our sisters are ‘young at heart’ and not caught up in themselves but trying to care for each other
- Sisters remaining in active ministry in developing countries in their 70s
- Elderly sisters in the Motherhouse continue to keep in touch with and support in small ways their former mission
Example 5: Signs of vitality in the theme of collaborative working (Congregation E)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborative Working – 20 signs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Engagement in new types of building parish community - some continuity with focus on wider cultural world and its needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The leadership team in Rome is conducting a Congregation-wide planning consultation to focus the sisters and prevent us from 'drifting'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Growing 'Internationality Awareness' and the development of ways to promote and maintain this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Our internationality and our willingness to think beyond the status quo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The fact that the congregation's Leadership Team are focusing and planning on a one-congregation basis worldwide and not just in a Western European context, planning for growth in this world context rather than just focusing on diminishment in one area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lively participation in congregation-wide planning for the future currently in progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cross-province communication and interest by all ages across Europe, USA and Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The very positive response to the congregation's strategic planning process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The willingness of the leadership to mission sisters to ministry outside the congregation, despite the shortage of sisters to serve in provincial and general administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The readiness of many members to contribute to congregation meetings on planning, Vatican II reflections, JPIC workshops and retreats etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The congregation-wide planning process introduced by our general chapter and society leaders, seeking to ensure that all members of the Society can remain involved — including the European and American provinces, with significantly older average age and diminishing numbers. It represents an attempt to share resources, the Western provinces having greater financial resources and the African province more and younger people, so that all can feel they have a stake in any new initiatives undertaken anywhere in the congregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This desire to act as one congregation, rather than each province just looking after its own interests, also reflects the aim to overcome prejudices, value differences and move power and resources from Western more established provinces to less developed countries. This feels like religious life living out values which are important in future world development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collaboration of men and women religious with others in the church to promote adult Christian formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Development and collaboration with lay Associates in the areas of spirituality, education and various ministries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sharing our charism with Associates, with both those who make a formal commitment and those who are in a more informal relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We are in works where we are badly needed and mostly work alongside other religious and seculars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• That the management, staff and above all the elderly residents at our care home in [place name] are so open to welcoming non-members into their community life, when the &quot;newcomers&quot; want it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A number of schools in Europe, which we used to own and work in, have gradually been relinquished as state provision increased and the number of sisters diminished. However several of them still wish to be linked with us and share our foundress's charism and heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• With diminishing numbers and fewer 'active' sisters, need for consolidation and closure of some flourishing ministries e.g. [Place name], but has led to development of some new ministries, but also greater collaboration with other religious and also seculars — men &amp; women — team membership, not necessarily leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A desire to pass on the charism to others, whether members or not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The letter sent to all participant congregations explaining Stage 3 and offering a guided structure for reflection groups can be found in Appendix F

Stage 3: Semi-structured and internal reflection groups were held in each congregation

- 21 reflection/discussion groups were held across 13 congregations.
- Not all followed the suggested structure; three groups had a free-flowing discussion. This renders the findings as to the themes prioritised in the groups less robust than we hoped.
- Some 50% of the 204 sisters who completed the Survey Monkey questionnaire took part in the Stage 3 reflection groups – this is approximately 135 sisters but numbers are imprecise since participants do not always introduce themselves and not all participants in Stage 3 had taken part in Stage 1.
- The topic of charism was mentioned 39 times in Stage 1. We recognize that our introduction at this stage of the question to what extent the key priorities affirm or challenge the group’s charism may have given the topic more prominence than would otherwise have been the case.

Excerpts from four of the discussion group transcripts

Example 1: Congregation E

- Good morning and to those of you who are listening welcome to the care home of [X], a very large care home of the Sisters of [Congregation E] in [Place name A].
  - A small group of us has continued the discussion arising from the questionnaire in the summer and we are gathered here this morning. We are [Name 1], [Name 2], [Name 3], [Name 4], [Name 5] and [Name 6].
  - Before saying what themes and signs we have selected we would like to say that although the guidelines for discussion 3 and 4 centre on charism we would like to say at the very beginning that it is our charism that guided us in the first place to make the selection of the themes and signs that we have chosen. So what is our charism? First of all it is rooted in incarnation and as we said in our discussion yesterday it is not written down but imbibed from the words and writings of our foundress expanded and re-expressed in language of our own time, however, at root it is a spirit of simplicity, humility, obedience, charity and zeal as seen in the child Jesus and expressed in the words of [Foundress’s name] herself. Today incarnation, for example, extends to the entirety of creation, humility (literally of the earth), extends to being ourselves as God meant us to be, knowing that God lives in us and in others who are therefore worthy of dignity and respect and we want to help everyone to know just that about themselves. So, the themes that we selected are Ministry and Apostolates, How we age, Prayer and spirituality and we will take each of these separately. So going back to ministry and apostolates the three signs ‘being collectively adaptable in ministries - circumstances, needs and personalities’, ‘continued interest in justice issues’, and thirdly ‘loyal dissenters especially in regard to Church hierarchy’. So now we will try and explain why we selected these themes. Is it possible for us to say why we choose being collectively adaptable? How does that apply to us or express our charism?
  - Well I suppose it’s very, very broad it talks about simplicity it has a sense of straightforwardness and practicality so being collectively adaptable, being adaptable in ministries has been for certainly the last 40 years very important to us.
• And another sign elsewhere that we didn’t actually select but it was on the, arose from the original questionnaire is the fact that we left large institutions to allow for smaller projects. We used to have very large schools and a college. We for various reasons have been happy to let those go except for [School name] and we have moved more to individual ministries.

• Yes I would say that released an enormous amount of energy, people following their own gifts and vocation which felt really the Holy Spirit was guiding us all through all these different ways in which we developed each one, didn’t we.

• I think there was a real sense of life, you know, amounting to suddenly there was a burgeoning of, of huge life and you could feel everybody, we all got, do you remember we all got involved in the different, what did we call them, well we had to ... and duplicate things and send them in, we were all part of this discussion and which I think enabled us all to move forward together and in different ways.

• So the examples of how individual ministries, or some examples of the individual ministries that, that developed. People who had spent the first years of their religious life teaching moved out into clinical psychology.

• Well I am an example of that because I know that when I was a child I said to my mother that I wanted to be a nurse and my mother just thought that Oh its, just you know, emptying bed pans and scrubbing floors and um so I kind of being me I just kind of stepped back from that and joined [Congregation E] which was right for me, you know, the example I had had but then when this came along and I was, you know, I knew that I was not teaching, I wasn’t doing well there and that desire came back again to be a nurse and I was allowed to do that and develop it in the way that, you know, I had no idea of how it was going to work out because I saw it as an education so how was nursing part of that but I was given that freedom.

• Yes.

• The word is freedom.

• It’s freedom.

• Yes.

• And I have found personally that since I retired from teaching I seem to have had more chances and possibilities of ever so many different things which I count more as my real life in [the Congregation] than the teaching part [agreement follows]

• I am not sure we had a general retirement but...

• I think that it was the experience, certainly my experience in working in Central America that became a very real community for me and I felt when I came back to the [Congregation E] community, you know, after a visit I came back to an environment which wasn’t entirely in touch with what I was doing. They didn’t have the pegs on which to hang the information that I was given, I feel that about Africa today, not so much we are getting much more out of Africa but you know we have moved out into a new horizon if you like which is very, very life giving but it takes a lot of getting used to.
Example 2 - Congregation G:

- Are we okay then to move onto number four ‘What do you see in the signs of vitality that seems to affirm the beliefs and values set out in your Congregation’s charism? Is there anything that seems to challenge the beliefs and values of your charism?’

- [...] It just struck me that what we have chosen Community and Formative Growth as point one, I mean I might be wrong but that is more, more or less straight from the Constitutions isn’t it, so that absolutely expresses who we are, and what we are, so when I read that, that was good I remembered that that was straight from the constitution and I think that, you know, one of the things, one of the things that has happened to me over the past few years is I have begun to actually rely on the constitutions much more whenever I am doing a piece of work as source of inspiration rather than as maybe the last resource that I would use, I see them as the first resource for things.

- [...] The only thing I can think of there is the lack of vocation might seem to, in fact I don’t think it does but it might seem to that we are not getting new people, you know people coming into the Order, I don’t think it does really challenge our beliefs and our values, I really don’t think it does.

- [Speaker 2] I see the constant referring to the re-visioning of our work as actually something which is reiterating the values of our charism because [Founder’s name] always asked us to look for the most needy and we are constantly not just looking but trying to have, me sitting here fairly deaf at the minute, but trying to tune our ears to the cries that we hear around us in our modern world, you know and sometimes they can be hidden by a smiling face, they can be hidden by, you know, so much and yet we are trying to hear them and to respond now you can’t respond to something if you are dead, you can only respond if you are alive and the way that we are responding, you know we are actually stripping ourselves, forgive me but we are. You know I often feel that we are like Christ at the foot of the cross, you know, we are stripping ourselves of houses, we are stripping ourselves of other, of places that we have been in for a very long time, of work that we are familiar with and easy with and what are we doing we are re-clothing ourselves anew. We are re-clothing ourselves with reaching out to trafficked people, we are re-clothing ourselves by looking, looking to the refugees and asylum seekers and quite honestly that is mounting the cross and I just think that that to me is a sure sign that we are alive to the way Christ acts in our world and we are participating in that wonderful mission of Christ so that’s, I think a really, for me a strong sign of vitality.

- [...] I think one of the things that I thought of around, you know, what would affirm you was the fact that like [Founder’s name] asked us to always read the signs of the times whatever they were and throughout our history that’s what has been happening and I think that the re-visioning in our own Province although it was like somebody in our house described it as, you know, walking the crucified way and feeling like it was a living death because of the pain that it held but because of our faith and our willingness and acceptance of the fact we are engaged in this process and we were well into halfway through it when we didn’t like it stop that we had to go the whole way and that it’s that drive I suppose for, that’s what, you know, the charity of crucified Christ urges us and that’s what keeps urging us to go on even with the pain that it carries and I suppose it’s another place that, like I was thinking, there wasn’t the support of the Province behind it and the faith of the Province, it wouldn’t be able to continue...

- People wouldn’t be saying ‘Yes’.
Example 3 - Group K:

- There was a lady who came here yesterday as a counselling client and I have a counselling relationship with her so, you know, it’s me and it’s her but she said yesterday that although this was counselling and not spiritual direction she wanted a counsellor like me because she knew that I had a faith and that I lived in a religious community and that the counselling room was on the premises and although we weren’t even necessarily speaking specifically about God it was somehow that, in my presence she it sort of represented a way of life even if I, even if I was representing it very badly nevertheless, you know I was standing for something some way of living life that was, that was deeper, that was shared, that was prayerful, where God was present and so I think, you know, our ministries, our individual ministries are often referred to like as individual ministries they, they are not, they are never individual they always carry with them some, something of community. I don’t think we always recognise that, I think we sort of see it as, you know, one person going out and doing something.

- I must ask in a way, maybe that was what we were trying to look at the Chapter when we were saying we needed a programme of renewal for our communities I, I think this is going to be quite difficult to actually enact or to put out there but this is something that we are going to look at and we would probably struggle with but I think if we can do something like that it could make a great difference to us as communities how we live that life, how that life can be more sort of beneficial for everybody and life giving and I think should then hopefully impact on our, our mission.

- And yes in one sense I see that we are probably no different from anybody else out there who really have their daily horrendous struggles with finance and job security and family issues and breakdowns and everything like that they really are in a struggle. We have a different way of life that doesn’t necessarily mean that we don’t understand the struggles that are going on, we have our own troubles and how are we dealing with, with our own and I think also in this thing [Name 1] I think renewal is probably also in the doing of it, you know, rather than just talking about it how are we really going to grasp the living of that in our daily lives and it also gets me to think about mercy and again I would say the Pope speaks an awful lot about mercy.

- And mercy is, mercy is our charism which is powerful but, but God is mercy, Jesus is mercy, and that mercy to me is not just for our little group, we should be living it very deeply and really trying to grasp what it really is to be [Congregation B] but not just for each other which it should be and not just for people but for the whole earth, the whole cosmos because it is all interrelated, interconnected and I think the more we can, the more we can expand our minds and hearts to grasp that the more we will see that God is huge and I think then we would be, have a lot more compassion for each other because we will know we are all on this extraordinary journey together with everything that is, with all that is, with all people, with all, with everything that is nourishing us and I saw something there about, you know a Eucharistic community but it all comes from, you know, the Lord himself was nourished from the earth so it’s the whole of that, the whole mix of that I see as being where we are called to be in the twenty-first century to have bigger, a bigger picture to be able to grasp the bigger picture.
Stage 4: Data analysis (2): production of two reports per transcript:

i. An analytical report covering key prioritised themes: identification of key words, signs of life, issues the group want to take forward, concerns

ii. A reflective narrative piece, summarising and following the key parts of the discussion

Example of the type 1 analytical report on the congregational reflection group transcript

Congregation N – Analysis of transcript

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community and Formative Growth</th>
<th>Ability to change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institute Formation Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That we continue to seek what the Lord is asking of us and to be challenged by it; we don’t think we have it all sorted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Keeping ministry alive in the Province and trying to be more creative in our response...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embracing new ministries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Commonwealth – being a receiving Province</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Prayer and Spirituality       | Stillness, silence, a sense of energy from prayer, growing into God, we have a beautiful spiritual and need to share it |

This group’s methodology differed from others. There were not many people in the discussion group who had originally completed the Survey Monkey questionnaire and they disagreed with some of the groupings. They did not, as a group, go through a prioritisation exercise, but took turns talking through their top 3 themes, and then the key signs. I have counted their expressed preferences.

Key words: (line numbers are given in brackets)

Stillness (172, 215, 265, 498); silence (493, 497); inner freedom (208, 265, 396, 1041); embrace change (278); young people (278, 298 – 12 mentions); young woman/women; outreach to young people (518/9); new mission and outreach (352, 355, 378, 380/1); diminishing/diminishment (health, numbers) (230, 264, 311, 488, 803); energy (9 mentions); a sense of energy from prayer; a life of prayer...growing into God (557 – 558); welcome (345, 386, 604); communities cultivating an open door approach (339); sent (sent out; sending; being sent; sent there) (29 matches); a great sense of mission, of being sent (956); you are not ‘going home’, you are ‘being sent’ home (968); joy (514, 624, 626, 630); enjoyment of giving (624); passion (625, 629, 632, 984, 1044); we have a beautiful spirituality and we need to share it (688); charism (331, 703, 831, 854, 875, 879, 888, 903, 1058); fullness of life (864); we were preparing for that mission out there and we have never really prepared for this mission back here (924/5); share (11 mentions); share the goodness of God’s love (956/7); collaboration (18 mentions); ecumenical (4 mentions); presence (1183, 1191); the poor (1149, 1166, 1176, 1212, 1216).
Key Themes:

Within the overarching theme of ‘Community and Formative Growth’, some key ‘signs’ were identified: ‘Seeking the Lord’s will’ – their willingness to go beyond themselves (191 – 92) and be a community for mission (280 - 81). ‘Enthusiasm’ was chosen by several sisters and particularly noted among older sisters, who continue to be missionary in spite of their age and diminishment. Several sisters saw the ability to change (168) as a key and greatly needed sign of vitality. Now the sisters are mostly over 70 years of age, and are still looking for new ways to live and carry out their mission.

Institute formation Programme: this programme is a formation for and throughout life (184) and not just for new sisters. Sisters see this commitment to ongoing formation as demonstrating a need and a desire for increased vitality (221). It’s an important programme and an example of their collaborative working as it is open to lay people and those outside the congregation.

Community life: The sisters expressed an appreciation for the renewed focus, within community, on the quality of community life and commented on the shift towards prioritizing the development of personal relationships with each other. One sister described community as being about “very, very deep relationships” (427/8). Their communities are places of welcome (340/41). Many of them have moved towards a stance of ‘the door is always open’ as an approach towards hospitality.

Collaborative Working in ministry:

Most of their sisters are working collaboratively, and many are working ecumenically. They noted the importance of networking and collaborating with other religious, lay groups and organisations (529-530) and felt that this would bring them greater visibility. Specific reference was made to several recently established ministries, particularly a new ministry for young people, established jointly with a male congregation and felt to be a good experience of genuine collaboration.

Adapting to a new experience and understanding of being missionary:

Traditionally and historically they have been a missionary ‘sending’ Province – sending sisters out to the missions. Now ageing and diminishment have rendered them a ‘Receiving Province’ (204). There was much discussion of what they call this ‘Reverse Mission’ (1026/27), finding that the experience of receiving and welcoming younger sisters from other Provinces gives them a new, more youthful and energetic spirit as a result. However, they also note the challenge of now being the “minor…the lesser”, as this experience offers them the chance to learn to receive, “to really enter into my own nothingness” (1026-7). This mutuality (887-891) also demands humility of them (899).

Reflection on this experience led the sisters into a discussion of their theology of mission – of ‘being sent’ which became a key theme for them – both how to adapt to mission here, in this Province – and how to understand their work and lives back at home as still being on mission – not as having come home, but as having been sent home. In order for this to fit into their theology of mission, they talk of “symbolic sendings” (979 – 981) to help reinforce their sense of being on mission.

The nature of their mission in this Province

There is clear concern about how to revitalise themselves and their sense of being ‘on mission’. Some of this involves adaptation. For example, they are uncertain how to develop involvement with and find their place within the local church (931/31). This is a challenge since historically they have had no direct involvement with the local church and thus have few contacts. There is further concern that as women they face the challenge of clericalism and finding a way to work collaboratively with priests (1029-1055). As a missionary congregation, they have significant experience of working with communities of other faiths, especially Islam; they are wondering how to draw on and maximise this experience and apply it to the mission in this Province (1012 – 1016).
Ways forward

One of the sisters expresses a succinct (570 – 572) understanding of their core mission: “we all have one mission...to spread the gospel and to bring God’s love to people” (570-572). Whilst expressing great support for the three new collaborative ministries and noting that all are embracing new ministries, there is a real desire in the Province to try to seek new mission for the future (377/78). A popular ‘sign’ under the theme of ‘Mission’ was that of ‘Constancy’: keeping mission and ministry alive in this Province (255 – 258), described as, “eyes wide open and ears to the ground not missing a trick” (290), understanding particularly the lives, needs and challenges with which the younger generation has to cope. There is a strong feeling that they have much to contribute to today’s secularised society and that as a result, “we are more missionary today” (985). Developing a new ministry of ‘presence’ and ‘insertion’ into a poor area could be a way forward.

Prayer and Spirituality as they age

The group considered prayer to be “the bedrock of who we are” (387) and noted that “Our prayer more and more is our mission”; they have a real mission through their lives of prayer (394/95). This partly answers the concern of how they see themselves on ‘mission’ in this Province. They address prayer specifically in the context of ageing sisters, noting that through their prayer of union (208) they develop inner freedom and wisdom. A greater appreciation of this is still developing throughout the Province (264-267).

Sisters note that despite their diminishing, they are still involved in apostolates (489 – 493) and that a sense of energy in their housebound communities comes from a life of prayer (555-558). Two specific examples given of the attitudes of elderly sisters towards their prayer quote one as saying, “I am in bed and have to wait to get a drink of water but this is my prayer (582 – 585)” and another, having come to the realisation that she is too weak now even to continue with her domestic work, responding, “Now...I am free to live my mission of prayer and suffering” (597 – 598).

Areas they felt had been omitted:

One sister was surprised that the issue of vocations had not been more prominent: (644 – 679) she feels that what they have to offer, through their charism, is attractive to young people. Their experience is that young people want to be part of them and therefore they should be enthused and hopeful. Another was surprised that there had not been more mention of collaborative working, as all sisters are involved in it. Similarly, others felt that the topics of ‘leadership’ and ‘the vows’ should have featured more prominently both in the responses and the discussion.

Challenged by:

They are challenged by their very way of life (857 – 866) and challenged to live more fully the consecrated life to which they are called.
Example of a reflective/narrative type report on the reflection group transcript for Congregation E – Group 1

Charism: Sisters’ consciousness of their charism guiding them in the selection of the themes and signs chosen: rooted in incarnation, imbued from the words and writings of their foundress, expanded and re-expressed in language of our own time. At root a spirit of simplicity, humility, obedience, charity and zeal as seen in the child Jesus.

Further exploration of the meaning of charism - the idea of incarnation extending to the entirety of creation, humility, literally ‘of the earth’ extending to being themselves as God meant them to be, knowing that God lives in them and in others who are therefore worthy of dignity and respect.

The 3 major signs were Ministry and Apostolates, How we age, Prayer and Spirituality.

Sisters interpreted these as: ‘being collectively adaptable in ministries, circumstances, needs and personalities’ through continued interest in justice issues and being ‘loyal dissenters especially in regard to Church hierarchy’. Being ‘collectively adaptable’ seen as: being adaptable in ministries – sisters left large institutions to allow for smaller projects. This is seen not as loss but as releasing enormous energy, with people following their own gifts and vocation which feels like the Holy Spirit guiding them through all the different ways in which they have developed, bringing ‘a burgeoning of huge life’. Sisters gave examples of the individual ministries that developed, flowing from and giving permission for the growth of freedom in individuals, & flowing out from them to the wider group. Some reflection on the difference between their ‘main’ or ‘institutional’ ministry and the emergence of different chances and possibilities which count more as a person’s ‘real’ life in the Congregation than the previous ‘official’ ministry. Discussion of new opportunities and ministries, even outside the country of original entrance, moving individuals and, through them, the group, ‘out into a new horizon’, enabling them to seek out what God wanted and free them to do it. Examples cited of sisters helping Big Issue sellers, working with AIDS, in prison work, a former head teacher who became a psychiatric social worker. They acknowledge that a sister in a job which takes all her energy would find it difficult to reach out elsewhere, but see that as a group they have ‘stretched out’.

Justice Issues

Moving out of sheltered institutions led to a greater awareness of the poverty and suffering in the world. Sisters became more directly involved in issues of poverty in their changed lifestyle after Vatican II. This connected with the reflections on charism, in which they recalled the foundress saying that she wanted members to be the mercy of God in the world. Even elderly & disabled sisters are involved in justice issues through continued interest, human trafficking etc. An extension of this into matters of ecclesiology & membership of the church, termed as being ‘loyal dissenters, especially in regard to church hierarchy’. This is seen as a significant sign, getting the laity to see sisters dissenting with loyalty. Recognition that they can’t work as lone rangers but need to fill a space like that of the devil’s advocate, naming when a good person or body (the church) is in the wrong. This is part of a ‘balance’ in obedience, connected with their patrimony in terms of the foundress’ emphasis on purity of intention and generosity of heart. They see Pope Francis expressing ‘loyal dissent’ in Evangelii Gaudium.
How We Age

The group sees the elderly women religious they know as ‘alive, spirited, interested in continuing to
grow as Christians and engaged with the concerns of other people’ and speak of an ‘honest realism in
coping with reasons for diminishment in religious life’. Their positive view includes an understanding
of the need to see how their ageing as a province can be a ministerial gift to the society in which
they live. This is detected in the continued interest of retired members in what is going on and in ‘a
lifetime’s awareness still very alive in them’. While their circumstances limit and restrict this, it is seen
as still present in the welcome given by the retirement community to newcomers, particularly now
that non-Congregation members are living with them and, insofar as they want it, sharing the life of
the community. Retired sisters are perceived as ministering to the rest of the Society, through their
prayers, interest, encouragement, building up hospitality, opening the doors in all the communities. The
lay staff considered as feeling very much part of the place.

A perception that elderly sisters ‘have to be willing to let other people minister to us’. Some sisters
resist this, but as they get older have to learn to be willing to be wheeled around, to wait for people to
come back because they are busy dealing with somebody else. Accepting people as they are, ‘there is
a whole lot of learning going on in this place’. The ideal for ageing seen as having ‘an open heart and
mind, listening to God in prayer in one another and across the Society and in our world so that we
don’t become closed in on ourselves but respond as best we can to the signs of our times’.

There is no real sense of depression or sadness at the possibility that this Province will die out in the
not too distant future. Sisters express the ideal of ‘carrying on doing what we can as long as we can
and then we have done our work’. A sense of other Province members doing outreach work which
hands on the charism to others, e.g. meetings to help young people discover their own vocation, not to
the Congregation itself but in general. This is more than just a survival technique. The sharing of the
charism, particularly with the associates, is seen as part of that realism. The vowed members, may fade
off the scene but their charism has been shared to a great extent with associates.

Prayer and spirituality:

Ecclesiology: Pope Francis seen as giving hope for a new way of being church and this, if achieved, ‘can
only give a new impetus to our way of being Religious more simple, more humble and more open to
being alongside the poor’. Value for ‘realness or reality and straightforward common sense and just
being oneself and this new way of being church’ as the vitality shared with so many other people in the
world who are responding, looking for a new way of being church, the ‘Francis effect’.

Eco-spirituality: how theology and theological awareness is expressed is seen as being deepened and
‘stretched’ via the new science, new cosmology. The respect for others including the respect for
creation, rooted in the gospel. In UK and USA many sisters are showing keen interest in eco-spirituality,
in new science and how it can have a bearing on theology. A perceived link with their constitutions in
a strong commitment to care for creation.

Importance of prayer - not so much in itself but ‘what your prayer drives you into and what comes
from our prayer and spirituality’ - an open heart and mind, God heard in prayer, in one another and in
internationality as an expression of listening. Prayer as transformative of the way sisters see others,
consciously fighting against the devaluation of the human person: trafficking and objectification,
persons as goods bought, consumed & thrown away, materialism.
Sisters living and keeping an eye on the gospel, with doctrines and dogmas very much second place, the gospel ‘a driving, an energy’, being religious in the light of the gospel, more simple, more humble, more open, living their charism in simplicity, humility, openness, joy. The foundress ‘dug into suffering and she found jubilee of heart’.

Stage 5: Final round of data analysis: theological reflection with guest theologians on the reports of the transcripts; further deepening and identifying of the overarching themes; producing final written reports for each congregation and final meetings with each congregation to present key findings.

- Each guest theologian was allocated four or five anonymised transcripts each to review and reflect upon theologically.
- Due to time constraints theologians were not asked to review the original transcripts, but instead to read both reports written on each of their allocated transcripts and provide some written theological reflection in advance of a meeting held on September 18th 2014.
- The conversation during the meeting was recorded and a full transcript subsequently produced and analysed. From that discussion and the written notes provided by each theologian we have: identified overarching themes and key priorities in terms of signs of vitality which have emerged both across the Project and within each congregation.
- Written feedback is being provided to each separate participant congregation comprising of 1) the generic overarching themes, specific feedback from the theologian(s) who reviewed their transcripts and feedback from the project on their transcripts.
- At the stage of individual feedback, congregations no longer remained anonymous, though individual anonymity remains.

A copy of the briefing letter to guest theologians, which accompanied the copies of reports on individual transcripts assigned to them for theological reflection, can be found in Appendix G.

The theologians’ feedback team consisted of:

Dr. Alana Harris (Lincoln College, Oxford)
Dr. Damian Howard SJ, (Religious Life Institute, Heythrop College, University of London)
Dr. Martin Poulson SDB, (Religious Life Institute, Heythrop College, University of London)
Dr. James Sweeney CP, (Action Research – Church and Society, Heythrop College, University of London)

Also participating were:

Prof. Paul D. Murray
Ms. Catherine Sexton
Dr. Gemma Simmonds CJ
In the second paragraph of *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), on the adaptation and renewal of religious life, the Conciliar Fathers reflected:

> It redounds to the good of the Church that institutes have their own particular characteristics and work. Therefore let their founders’ spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions – all of which make up the patrimony of each institute – be faithfully held in honour. (§2.b)

This conciliar statement pithily encapsulates my overarching impressions upon reading the five congregational conversations allocated to me. Within each of these dialogues there is a clear sense of vocational distinctiveness, as well as a diversity of apostolic ministry (even within a single Institute), which are gifts of untold richness in the life of the contemporary church. The post-conciliar focus on the ‘founding charism’ is rhetorically pervasive throughout – but is mobilised for different purposes in many of these discussions, illustrating a tension within and across the congregations in the emphasis placed on tradition and adaptation, patrimony and pragmatism.

**Group A**

Group A’s discussion was perhaps the most anguished and open-ended of those I read, wrestling with how to fulfil their charism of ‘compassion and community’ in a context of a dispersed, non-conventual lifestyle and some pessimism about corporate energy levels. This group also varied from others in being comprised of four sisters who have intentionally formed a group to read collectively *A Future Full of Hope* and therefore self-identify as a sort of ‘task group’ within their congregation – raising difficult questions, on which they reflect, about exclusionism and elitism. The operative theology throughout these discussions – and the repeated questioning of what ‘community’ and mutuality might mean for them today - tends towards a ‘high’ and ‘strong’ ecclesiology. Hence there is a nostalgia – recognised as such – for a past way of life and its clear sense of purpose. Such an understanding also emerges in the congregations’ implicit understanding of their vows – illuminated through the distinction drawn by one sister between the religious and their Associates as ‘a group of older people who like some sort of spirituality’. The congregation articulated its own apostolate as like that of Mary at the foot of the cross, centred on companionship and witness - ‘we are not there to relieve the poor, relieve poverty or relieve suffering or go on a mission, just to stand with people’. Yet there was also a frank acknowledgement that there were no corporate expressions of this apostolate in any of their current living situations.

Many of the signs of life identified by the group relate to practical, organisational and institutional reforms (working together with other parts of the order across the world, more democratic decision-making processes etc.). Yet the most interesting (and potentially ‘life-giving’ to use terminology that permeates the conversation) is the spread and popularity of ‘faith sharing’. This form of witness (indeed doxology) is contrasted with ‘saying office [when] you are merely reading the words’ as it requires intentional preparation, creativity and a ‘review of their feelings and not their thoughts’. Enhancing the opportunities for this mode of (re)building and nurturing ‘community’, and linking it to the other element of the congregation’s charism, could provide a revitalised sense of ‘purpose’ and ‘clarity’ (to pick up other ‘key words’ from the conversation).
This ‘faith sharing’ methodology – assuming that traditionally held, hierarchical distinctions could be overcome – might also have a further natural expression in intentional cultivation of the congregation’s Associates. In a broader contemporary sociological context in which there is a premium placed upon ‘spiritual searching’, ‘experience’ and ‘authenticity’, as well as expressions of ‘church’ beyond rites and rubrics, an apostolate of witness or ‘faith accompaniment’ which is orientated towards theological growth and discernment of the apostolate of the laity could allow for a renewed (and transformed) sense of community (linking to insights articulated in Groups F and L).

**Group L**

‘Transition’ is identified as a critical term from the discussion, and indeed describes an ecclesiological re-orientation evident in this congregation in its move from a ‘high’ and ‘strong’ ecclesiology (with a corporate institutional ministry in schools and hospitals) to a diversity of ministries (homelessness, trafficked women, addiction and mental illness) and experimentation with different models of prayer – from structured contemplative prayer to yoga retreats.

In view of this historical, hierarchical understanding of religious life, there is a concern in the conversation with the need to move to an understanding of an equality of ministry – ‘the priesthood of the cook’ – but also (resonating with Group A) a need to find ways in which community and mutual support can be sustained across individual ministries and diverse living arrangements. The experience of one sister ‘living singly’ is of a new configuration of community through her neighbours, the parish, and the people with whom she works. This also extends to a redefined notion of ministry as not necessarily organising and leading, but working with others (especially outside agencies) who are ‘pushing in the same direction we are pushing in and we can add our bit of energy’.

In common with some of the other congregations’ conversations, there is an articulated interest in a spirituality of the cosmos and ecology – indicative of the search for a new way of understanding the founding charism (and ministry to people in pain). The language of vulnerability, brokenness and an acknowledgement of making a ‘mess of things’ (metanoia) - which the congregation applies to itself following the Ryan report - could also be extended to their affective appreciation of a wider need for atonement in the context of humanity’s relationship with and treatment of our environment.

**Some concluding thoughts**

A central theme throughout the transcripts is the theological concept of koinonia, and the ways in which communion, community, and a shared common life should be understood within the conditions of our times. Technology, the internet and social media are invoked in almost all of the transcripts as mechanisms to foster community within the congregation (at a transnational level - Group A), but also in a local context in the move from non-conventual living and towards diverse houses and ministries. Technology has also been identified as a powerful means to forge links between women religious and wider society – whether through information communication (‘share the good news of what is going on’ – Group L and their use of Facebook and Twitter), as a form of (online) activism available to older sisters (Group F), but also as a mode of connection and ministry that some vulnerable people find familiar and less challenging. (Group F). There are clearly new and dynamic possibilities opened up through the virtual, alongside the recognition that ‘contact is not the same as everyday interaction’ (Group F).

A commitment to the incarnational (and the sacramental) – which is expressed in embodied relationships and collective prayer/worship – must remain the central precept of our religious life as Christians, which the virtual and the technological can do much to augment but cannot supplant.
What is also striking within these discussions is a powerful shift in an understanding of the religious life beyond the vowed (and professions of poverty, chastity and obedience) to encompass the communication and inculcation of the charism in Associates and fellow travelers. While on one hand this might seem like a ‘diminishment’ of religious life, through the lens of the long durée it is represents an adaptation and right response to the signs of the times (just as the foundation of a myriad of orders and institutions in the nineteenth century spoke to a particular historical need). Moreover, this recalibration of the religious life could prove to be a profoundly vital and life-giving movement of the Spirit if it resulted in a renewed theology of the apostolate of laity (witness the Synod on the Family next month) and the vocational call of all Christians to sacrificial care of each other and stewardship of the planet. There are indeed many emerging (and some actualised) signs of vitality within these religious communities, and I have found it immensely moving and encouraging to discover more about the efforts of these women religious to respond to the challenges of the gospel now and the call to Christ-like witness in contemporary society.

(Dr Alana Harris, Lincoln College, Oxford)
APPENDIX A  Introductory letter to participant congregations

Dear Sr

New year’s greetings from the RLI and the Religious Life Vitality Project. I am writing to you and your sisters as one of the religious congregations that have signalled interest in being part of the Religious Life Vitality Project which was presented via last year’s CoR meetings and at the RLI study day with Archbishop Tobin held at Heythrop in September. I am sorry that there has been some practical delay in getting news to you about the project, but am very happy now to be able to send you detailed information that will help you as a group to see what the project entails.

You will remember from the presentations that this is financed by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (USA) who are strongly supportive of the role of apostolic women religious in the church. They want to help us to reflect on what signs of vitality there may be within our life and how these might help us with planning for the future and assessment of where we are now. The most important thing about this project is that it aims to be one undertaken by women religious for women religious. The three academic partners in this exercise (the RLI at Heythrop, the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, and the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge) are not seeking to impose any notion of vitality in this project. We expect that it will be by participating in the project that religious will define this for themselves. We see a potential outcome of the project as some well-grounded theological reflection on the signs of vitality in women’s apostolic religious life that can be used as a resource by others. Any empirical information gathering basic statistics re: membership, demography, etc., as well as congregations’ reflections, would be linked to this output and would be used only while maintaining full confidentiality with regard to any identifying details, and with the full consent of the participants.

Our methodology will be adapted from the Theological Action Research adopted by the ARCS project at Heythrop (see http://oldwww.heythrop.ac.uk/research/heythrop-institute-religion-and-society/arcs-project.html), which operates on a basis of partnership between researchers (us) and practitioners (you). The congregations who are engaging with the project are self-selecting by opting into it. They are a cross-section of congregations with a variety of spiritualities and apostolates, varying in size (including one or more with experience of amalgamating internally) and from a possible range of ecclesiologies. The main criterion for engagement is the desire to work with the project. We are hoping that you will experience this not as a burden imposed from outside but as something that can work organically with your own internal processes e.g. strategic planning, internal change processes etc. At the same time Catherine Sexton of the MBIT and I who are going to be the researchers on this project, will need to work to a reasonable timetable. For this reason, while the theological reflection has to take place internally within each congregation, we suggest that you may wish to identify a small ‘insider’ team who will lead on participation in this project from within your congregation. Catherine and I are willing to come to meet you, either personally or with your Council or with a named delegate, in order to provide further information.

Attached to this letter is an outline of the stages of the project for you to consider. We hope that, once you have looked it all through, you will be happy to take part. Please don’t hesitate to get back to me (email is the most reliable but I’m also happy to take phone calls on 0207 7954216).

With all good wishes for the new year and for the successful outcome of this project,

Dr Gemma Simmonds CJ, Director, Religious Life Institute
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of researcher:</th>
<th>Gemma Simmonds</th>
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**Purpose of the research (i.e. end-of-year essay, dissertation, or other):** Funded Research Project for Religious Life Institute

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start date:</th>
<th>January 2013</th>
<th>End date:</th>
<th>September 2014</th>
</tr>
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</table>

| Staff | X | Department: (to be completed by staff) Religious Life Institute, Pastoral & Social Studies |
| Research student | □ | Programme: (to be completed by students) N/A |
| MA student | □ |
| UG student | □ |

**Email:** g.simmonds@heythrop.ac.uk  
**Phone:** 0207 795 4216

**Title of project:** RELIGIOUS LIFE VITALITY PROJECT
Brief outline of project (100-500 words) To reflect on what signs of vitality there may be within apostolic women’s religious life and how these might help with forward planning for the future and assessment of where religious are now.

The three academic partners (The RLI, Heythrop; the Centre for Catholic Studies, University of Durham; Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology) expect that, through participating in the project, religious will define these signs of vitality for themselves. Another potential outcome will be well-grounded theological reflection on the signs of vitality in women’s apostolic religious life that can be used as a resource by others. The project will employ both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection to achieve this output.

STAGE 1: the project will send out two Survey Monkey questionnaires: the Leader’s Survey, eliciting basic empirical data about each congregation e.g. age profiles, numbers of members, to be sent to the lead person named by the congregation. The statistical information will be collated anonymously and analysed at the Centre for Catholic Studies in strict accordance with their own ethics procedures. All quantitative data will be used only while maintaining full confidentiality with regard to any identifying details, and with the full consent of the participants. Returned questionnaires will be kept in locked filing cabinets or in electronic form controlled by security passwords. The second survey (Members Survey) will be sent to each participating member. It will ask participants to outline up to 5 signs of vitality that they see or experience in how religious life is being lived. We expect to send these to up to 20 participating congregations and to an average of 8 – 10 respondents in each congregation. While we have offered some guidelines as to the kinds of area they might consider, we have emphasized that they are free to write what they wish.

STAGE 2: these signs of vitality will be collated into the three most commonly cited areas for further reflection in groups either by religious congregation or by geographical area. We anticipate that some of those who filled in the Survey Monkey questionnaire may be unwilling or unable to participate further into this stage. The reflection groups will comprise only those members of each congregation who have chosen to be part of the full project, or regionally across several congregations, where individual congregations have too few members. This discussion will produce the first level of data. No project staff will be present. The reflection groups will be open-ended and participant led, but the precise format will evolve depending on the number of those who agree to participate. These groups will be set up according to size and mobility of group. If there are two or three small groups in reasonable geographical proximity we will try to bring them together on one day to do this work together. Other groups have asked to amalgamate this project into their own provincial or regional gatherings, or into meetings they are having as part of preparation for their own chapters, so we have said we will try to accommodate their needs. We would not see any of this taking longer than one day at a time.

Each congregation will be allocated to one contact person within the project team. The participants themselves will record the discussions digitally, and send the recorded data to their congregation’s allocated contact person in the project team who will be the only person in the project team aware of the identity of the congregation. The recording will be saved in electronic form controlled by security passwords. The data will be anonymised, allocated a code number/letter, and sent for transcription. The data will focus on signs of vitality in the way apostolic religious life is being lived in that congregation, and is not expected to contain any significant personal or confidential information. No use will be made of any specific software in the analysis of the qualitative data. The recordings will be saved until they have been made use of in the writing up and incorporation into the Research Paper and then destroyed.

STAGE 3: the project will undertake theological reflection on the anonymised data produced by each congregation. In order to have a range of theological voices, in dialogue with each other, we may establish an overall Theological Reflection Group drawn from people working with the RLI of theologians who can reflect on the transcripts for feedback to each congregation. Our intention is to hold a day conference in which information collected from the meetings on the signs of vitality explored in depth can be correlated from across the congregations and shared back, to enable a second stage of reflection. This would also become part of the material for the reflected output. Our hope is that the material that emerges from this project may serve not only for the reflection of the congregations concerned but also as a resource for other congregations. This is a 2 year project with a completion date by September 2014.
**What is the purpose of the project and what are its intended outcomes?**

To gain insight into signs of vitality in apostolic women’s religious life in the UK and Ireland as perceived by the project participants and analysed by theological partners. This will subsequently be turned into a resource (printed or electronic) for consideration and reflection by a wider audience of religious.

**What forms of research will be used (e.g. observations, questionnaires)?**

Questionnaire and reflection groups, drawing on the Theological Action Research methodology used in the Action Research – Church and Society project (see opposite).

The initial survey will consist of 2 separate parts. The first is the Project Leaders Survey, to be sent only to the leader of each participating congregation (likely to be between 15 and 20 congregations, but exact total is as yet unclear. This asks for statistical information about the demographic profile of each congregation. The second questionnaire (the Project Members Survey) consists of one open-ended question, and will be sent to all project participants. Both documents are attached.

Subsequent reflection groups will discuss the collated signs of vitality identified in the Member Surveys from each congregation. The participants will meet together once to undertake reflection upon the signs of vitality they themselves have identified for discussion. We would expect there to be one reflection group per congregation and one meeting, with between 5 and 8 participants, all of whom have chosen to be present. The discussion could be expected to last for approximately 2 hours, but may be longer, depending on the participants. The project will provide guidance on the way the meeting can be facilitated nearer the time. There may be a further symposium, as indicated in the next section.

**What procedures will the participants undergo?**

Participating in preliminary questionnaire and subsequent reflection groups meeting once to discuss the collated signs of vitality and possibly once in a regional or national symposium, drawing on the Theological Action Research methodology used in the Action Research – Church and Society project:

Action Research in Church and Society project ARCS was established in September 2006 as an agency within the Pastoral and Social Studies Department at Heythrop College, University of London. It now forms part of the Heythrop Institute: Religion & Society. Its purpose is to support church and community groups mainly in the London area to undertake theologically oriented research on issues relating to answering theological questions about faithful practice in order to renew both theology and practice in the service of God’s mission. ARCS has developed a process called theological action research which offers an effective and mutually constructive way of engaging practitioners and ‘academics’ in authentic research partnerships, contributing to the rootedness of theological scholarship, and to capacity building among practitioners for self-led research, reflection, and theologising.

http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/outreach/arcs-project.html

**Are any procedures likely to cause distress for participants? Please explain how this will be minimised.**

No. It has been made clear to participants that they are free to participate to the extent that they feel willing and able and may withdraw at any time.

**Will any participants be vulnerable (e.g. children, the elderly, those with special needs etc.)? If so please specify:**

Some may be over 65 but their participation will be self-selected and entirely voluntary.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>If participants are deemed to be vulnerable, how will the proposer meet legal requirements (e.g. CRB check)?</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will participants be recruited? (e.g. appeal to institutions, public notices)</td>
<td>Participation has been elicited through the Conference of Religious of England &amp; Wales, the Conference of Religious of Ireland and through individuals who have heard of the project and asked to be part of it. The project was initially presented to the Conference of Religious England and Wales at their annual meeting (April 2012) when each attendee was given a letter about the project. The project was again then presented at a further meeting in September 2012, when the leaders of each individual congregation were invited to contact project staff to express their interest. At this stage, a formal letter introducing the project, and setting out what it would involve was sent to all province/group leaders outlining the project. We have attained the agreement of the leaders of 17 congregations to take part in the project. Once they consented to be part of the project and clarified who the likely participants would be a brochure outlining it in simpler terms was sent to all participants either electronically or in hard copy in order to ensure all are fully informed of the project’s aims and procedures. Each participant will be thoroughly informed about the project, its methodology and its confidentiality procedures and her consent obtained. A copy of the questionnaire is being sent to all participants. There is one questionnaire requiring data such as age profiles, etc., being sent to the province secretary or whoever holds this information. We have made it clear that such information will be treated confidentially and that no identifying information will be made public at any time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are other professionals required to be in attendance when interviews are taking place (if so, please specify)?</td>
<td>No, but other participating theological consultants will be invited to participate in reflection on the material gathered with the consent of the participants involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will payment or other incentive be offer to the participant, and if so what kind?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If payment is involved how will it be funded?</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the research require approval by another ethical body?</td>
<td>If so, please specify: University of Durham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that any documents/electronic files holding personal information of any description must be securely stored whilst in my possession, either in locked storage or in a password-protected computer, and securely destroyed once the project is completed and the data is no longer required (requirement of Data Protection Act, 1998. If in doubt please consult your supervisor/Head of Department):</td>
<td>Yes X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following questions need only be answered by ONE member of your province/group delegated to do so (the province leader, secretary, project group leader or any other dealing with such matters).

The purpose of this survey is to enable the wider reflection questions about signs of vitality to be read within the context of some factual data. The numbers and other information requested here will not be identified specifically with your province/group in anything that is made public. They are to enable the research team to understand the general context of the congregations involved in the project. In the final resource, numbers and data will be used in general, compiled form, but without identification.

1. How does your Province/group describe its charism? (this can be your official mission statement or something from your congregation’s official documentation)

2. How many members are currently in your congregation worldwide?

3. How many members are currently in your province/group?

4. Are you a single province/group?

5. If so, what is the name of your province/group?

6. Are you amalgamated with another country/region?

7. If so, which country/region?

8. What is the name of your amalgamated group?

9. How many members in your province/group are currently
   • aged 90+       aged 80-90
   • aged 70-80     aged 60-70
   • aged 50-60     aged 40-50
   • aged 30-40     aged 20-30
   • aged under 20

10. How many people entered your province/group in:
    • 2000 –

11. How many people died/left your province/group in:
    • 2000 –

12. How many people have made final vows in your province/group in:
    • 1960-1970
    • 1970-1980
    • 1980-1990
    • 1990-200
    • 2000 –
The purpose of this survey is to find points for your personal and communal reflection on the signs of vitality that you detect within religious life as you live and observe it. Different individuals and groups will see different signs. Our aim is to collate these signs into two or three principal areas which we will then ask you to reflect on and discuss. Without ignoring realities like numbers, age profiles, etc., we are looking for signs of vitality that go beyond these facts.

You may find signs of vitality in the spiritual or community life of your congregation, in some project you are involved in, or one happening elsewhere, in some initiative at home or overseas. The only restriction on what you consider is that they must be particular to your congregation, not general thoughts about global religious life. You may find signs of vitality in the way that individuals or communities in your congregation have chosen to cope with diminishment of numbers, strength and ministries. You may find them in new vocations initiatives or ways of sharing your charism. Whatever your response, it is entirely up to you what signs of vitality you put down (we ask you to name up to 5). Please feel free to be both honest and creative – there is no ‘right’ answer!

- Full Name
- Religious Congregation
- Year in which you entered religious life
- Please describe briefly signs of vitality that you currently see or experience in your own congregation (no more than 150 words per sign).
  1.
  2.
  3.
  4.
  5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant:</th>
<th>Address:</th>
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**Title of project:**  
RELIGIOUS LIFE VITALITY PROJECT

**Brief outline of project, including its purpose and the activities for participants:**  
The project will help religious to reflect on what signs of vitality there may be within apostolic women’s religious life and how these might help with forward planning for the future and assessment of where religious are now. Religious participating will define these signs of vitality for themselves, and we hope that the theological reflection on the signs of vitality in women’s apostolic religious life that ensues can be used as a resource by others.

**STAGE 1:** The project will send out two Survey Monkey questionnaires: the Leader’s Survey, eliciting basic data about each congregation (e.g. age profiles, numbers of members), to be sent to the lead person named by the congregation. Statistical information will be collated anonymously and analysed in strict accordance with ethics procedures. All data will be used only while maintaining full confidentiality with regard to any identifying details, and with the full consent of the participants. The Members Survey will be sent to each participating member. It will ask participants to outline up to 5 signs of vitality that they see or experience in how religious life is being lived within their congregation. Participants are free to write what they wish.

**STAGE 2:** these signs of vitality will be collated into the three most commonly cited areas for further reflection in groups organized either by religious congregation or by geographical area. The reflection groups will comprise only those members of each congregation who have chosen to be part of the full project. Groups may be organized regionally across several congregations, where individual congregations have too few members. This discussion will produce the first level of data. No project staff will be present.

Each congregation will be allocated to one contact person within the project team. The participants themselves will record the discussions digitally, and send the recorded data to their congregation’s allocated contact person who will be the only person in the project team aware of the identity of the congregation. The data will focus on signs of vitality in the way apostolic religious life is being lived in that congregation, and is not expected to contain any significant personal or confidential information. The recordings will be saved, identified by code only, written up and incorporated into the Research Paper and then destroyed.

**STAGE 3:** the project will undertake theological reflection on the anonymised data produced by each congregation. In order to have a range of theological voices, in dialogue with each other we hope to establish an overall Theological Reflection Group drawn from people working with the RLI of theologians who can reflect on the transcripts for feedback to each congregation. We plan to hold a day conference for sharing back correlated information collected from the meetings to enable a second stage of reflection. This would also become part of the material for the reflected output. This is a 2 year project with a completion date by September 2014.

**Position of researcher:**  DIRECTOR, RELIGIOUS LIFE INSTITUTE

**Contact address for researcher:**  Heythrop College, University of London, Kensington Square, London, W8 5HN
**Contact number for researcher:** 0207 795 4216  

**Email for researcher:** g.simmonds@heythrop.ac.uk  

**Address and telephone number of the College:**  
Heythrop College, University of London, Kensington Square, London, W8 5HN, 020 7795 6600  

**Signature of researcher (this must be an actual or scanned signature, not a typed name):**  

**Date:** 19.3.2013  

**Statement to be signed by the participant:**  
I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated [ ] for the above study, have had the opportunity to ask questions about this project and have had these answered satisfactorily.  

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time during the project, without having to give a reason.  

I agree to take part in this project.  

I consent to the sound recording of the following activity:  
- a reflection group consisting only of members of my own congregation  

I agree that my observations/comments/contributions may be anonymised and quoted in any report (private or published) arising from this research.  

It has been explained to me that if I return this form by email, with my name entered below, this will be equivalent to my signing the form and will be understood as signifying my consent to participate.  

**Signature, electronic signature or typed name of participant:**  

**Date:**  

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Dear Sr

Our warmest thanks to you and your sisters for making the time and effort to respond to the Religious Life Vitality Project’s initial Survey Monkey questionnaire. The response we have received from you all has been remarkable, and contains many real indications that the Spirit is at work in women’s apostolic religious life in Britain and Ireland. We can only express our appreciation both for the numbers who have chosen to participate to date, and for the depth of insight into the richness of religious life and the way it is being lived that your responses contain.

Your responses will help the project gain an insight both into the relative emphasis on instances of vitality within your own congregation and into the emphasis overall across all the participating congregations. This in turn will lead to some small insight into how the life is being lived across women’s apostolic congregations more broadly.

Enclosed/attached is a document which gathers together all of the responses received from you and your sisters. It shows the total number of sisters who responded, together with the total number of individual ‘signs’ identified. This shows something of what we are hearing from you. Now we would like both to check with you your reactions to what we think we are hearing and also to invite you into a deeper dialogue about some aspects of what appears to be emerging.

As you will see, we have collected together all of the individual signs of vitality received from your congregation’s members and arranged them by themes. We have then arranged the themes in order of the numbers of 'signs' which we felt were best covered in that category or theme. We have not attempted to prioritise them in any other way.

We also recognise that these themes or categories may not necessarily capture your own thinking or response to the signs collected, and that you may have a different approach to organising the responses. If you wish to re-order them, or draw up completely new categories, could we ask you please to do this in discussion with a member of the project team?

What we are now asking you to do:

Arrange a small reflection group – of perhaps no more than 8 sisters, but with at least 3, from among those who responded to the Survey Monkey survey.

We are not asking you to take notes of the conversation, but to record it using the small electronic recorder which will be sent to you at a later date. It may be worth reminding participants that they signed a consent form agreeing to being recorded in this way and which guaranteed that the data will be treated anonymously by the Project.

It may also be a good idea to do a small test-recording before beginning the reflection group, so that you are sure the recorder is working properly and that you are capturing the conversation. Please note that if you are unfamiliar with using such recorders, we can talk you through using it nearer the time.

We would now ask you to consider the themes and choose three to which you respond most strongly and which you feel best represent or capture vitality in religious life as it is currently lived in your congregation.

Within those three themes which you choose, we would also then ask you to choose 3 specific examples/signs which you feel are good expressions of the overall theme. For example, if you have chosen ‘Ministry’ as one of the three priority themes for you, then choose 3 specific signs from within that category to express how vitality is being experienced: e.g. a new mission, or a particular ministry.

For some congregations participating in the Project, this process may have involved discerning signs of vitality in what feels like a context of diminishment or death. We would encourage you not to ignore or overlook these more challenging yet also hope-filled signs in the work you have done so far but to try to identify where you see God in these.
Within the reflection group, we would ask you to use the following questions to guide your conversation:

1. In relation to the three themes that you have prioritised, consider what in turn guided you in choosing the top three signs of vitality for each theme?

2. Is there anything that surprises/strikes you about the ‘signs of vitality’ produced by your congregation (Anything missing? Anything given more prominence than you expected?)

3. What do you see in the signs of vitality that seems to affirm the beliefs and values set out in your congregation’s charism?

4. Is there anything that seems to challenge the beliefs and values of your charism?

5. If these are the signs of vitality on which you are agreeing, how will you now aim to nurture these within your congregation? What actions are you keen to take forward now?

After you have had your group conversation, we ask that you return the recorder (in the envelope to be provided) to:

Mrs Theresa Phillips
Centre for Catholic Studies
Department of Theology and Religion
University of Durham
Abbey House
Palace Green
DURHAM DH1 3RS

Either Sr Gemma Simmonds or Catherine Sexton will contact you shortly after you receive this letter, to arrange a phone call or a meeting so that we can talk through this next stage in more detail and answer any questions/concerns you or your sisters may have.

Once again, in gratitude for your participation and cooperation in this work with us.

Warmest wishes

Sr Gemma Simmonds CJ, Ms. Catherine Sexton, and Prof. Paul D. Murray
APPENDIX G: Briefing letter to guest theologians

Dear colleagues,  

Greetings from the Religious Life Vitality project team. Thank you, first of all, for agreeing to share your expertise with us at the stage of the theological reflection on the data collated and analysed so far.

We are sending you the material for reflection towards our meeting together on September 18th in Heythrop. Instructions on the day’s agenda & timetable will follow shortly. What Catherine & I have been working through has been the transcripts of conversations had by representative groups from the participants in the light of the questionnaires that were previously responded to by larger groups of participants within the congregations. The raw conversation transcripts are mostly very long, sometimes rambling and stream of consciousness thoughts & comments, though often very touching & insightful. To save you from excessive amounts of work Catherine & I have made shorter collated versions of these conversations (Catherine’s an analysis, mine a summary to give a flavour of the tone of narrative) which we are sending you (some of mine, congregations J, K, L, M & N, are yet to be completed; I will send these to you by the end of this week). You will see that these documents have been anonymised. In addition to this, in order to help you to situate the work, we are sending you:

1. A copy of the ‘synthesis’ document
2. A copy of the Guidance letter to congregations re: the reflection groups
3. A flow chart of the life story of the data

What we hope is that in advance of the meeting of the 18th you can read your data documents (if you want to see the raw data documents please contact Theresa Philips who will be pleased to send them to you – see below for contact details) and produce a report of what theological, practical and organizational themes and undercurrents you can find within the material. What seems to be the operative theology (including ecclesiology, understanding of the vows, apostolate, religious life itself)? Where does the life of this congregation seem to be going? How might we be able to help them to see a way forward, in light of what they see as the signs of vitality? Do you see any significant gaps?

Your report does not need to be a final, polished version at this stage, as there will be time for us to tweak things in light of our conversations on the 18th, but it would be most helpful if you could let us have an outline report/set of comments & questions or issues arising, in advance of the 18th, so that we can send them out to one another. Could I ask that these be sent to Theresa by September 14th?

Many thanks, & we look forward very much to seeing you in Heythrop on the 18th

Dr. Gemma Simmonds CJ, Ms. Catherine Sexton, Prof. Paul D. Murray

Religious Life Vitality Project team