The Congregational Communications and Technology Coordinators Report

Pamela O'Brien and Patricia Stortz

Background

The seeds

Unity. Collaboration. Interdependence.

These three congregational values have been planted in the soil of the 21st century with its particular challenges and opportunities. [Hold up the Plan]

Do you remember this quote from Sister Mary Maher in her State of the Congregation report at the last General Chapter?

> *"We need to bring to fruition a congregational communication plan that will support new ways of thinking and acting together as one congregation."* *(24 September 2012)*

Do you hear these congregational values in this quote? The need for the Congregational Communication Plan was recognized; the seeds were planted.

Preparing the soil

[SLIDE 2-3] In fact, we can go back farther than the last General Chapter, to the 9th Extended General Council (EGC), which met in the fall of 2010 in Wilton. Even then the EGC members articulated the need for a communication plan within the congregation.

[SLIDE 4-5] The General Council set to work. They brought together a Think Tank of 40 sisters and lay colleagues from around the congregation to meet in August 2011 in St. Louis. They gathered **hopes** and **dreams**.

[SLIDE 6] Building on the outcomes of the Think Tank, the General Council formed a Congregational Communication Committee. The committee members gathered **information** and created an **outline** for a communication plan.

[SLIDE 7] As part of their information gathering they surveyed the congregation using 10 languages. Here are some results.

The soil was ready.

Planting the seeds

The work of the committee was brought to the 23rd General Chapter.

[SLIDE 8] The General Chapter mandated the General Council to move forward with the development and implementation of the Congregational Communication Plan. They did this in two Acts:

[SLIDE 9] In the Act "Holding All in Common" one of the commitments called for was to

> *"… support the development and implementation of a congregational communication plan which takes into consideration language issues, use of technology, and networking among us, our ministries, and other persons as appropriate. …"* (Approved October 23, 2012)

[SLIDE 10] And then the Act that deals specifically with Congregational Communication, in the second point, reads:

> *"We, the members of the 23rd General Chapter, recommend that the next general council work with unit leadership to develop a congregational communication plan that builds on the work of the Congregational Communications Committee."* (Approved October 10, 2012)

The seeds were planted.

Bringing to fruition

The development and implementation of the plan has been a significant part of the working vision of this General Council.

[SLIDE 11] They brought together people from various parts of the congregation, sisters and lay colleagues, to form a **Commission** for Congregational Communication. The Commission met both in person and electronically to develop a comprehensive communication plan.

[SLIDE 12] On December 20, 2014 they presented the finished Congregational Communication Plan to the General Council. Here you see the committee members putting together printed copies of the Plan to give to the general council.

Bringing the Plan to fruition involved the whole congregation, head, heart, and hands.

[SLIDE 13] We have the good fruit, and now is the time to let it nourish and strengthen the life of the congregation, to strengthen unity, collaboration and interdependence.

Implementation

The plan called for the creation of two structures: A Communication Team and a Technology Team each with a coordinator at the congregational level and contacts at the province level.

By January 1, 2016, the Technology Coordinator for the Congregation, Pamela O'Brien, was appointed. The Communications Coordinator for the Congregation, Patricia Stortz, was already in place. Provinces had also appointed contacts for communications and technology.

[SLIDE 14] In February 2016, province contacts and congregational coordinators met in Rome for the first time and together they formed the Congregational Communication and Technology Teams, also known as the CCTT. We were 10 lay colleagues and 10 School Sisters. It was the first congregational meeting of its kind.

[SLIDE 15] The Congregational Communications and Technology Teams (CCTT)

How does the CCTT work? There is a schema at the back of the Congregational Communication Plan that illustrates the working relationships of the two teams.

[SLIDE 16] This is it here.

[SLIDE 17-18] I can now put faces on the circles.

You will probably recognize a few. Notice that some faces were not at the February meeting in Rome. This illustrates a reality we will continue to face: changes in team membership. The blue and orange diamond in the background indicates the collaboration of the two teams, and the blue oval indicates the congregation, the context of our work.

Now I add a little movement to indicate our activity and interaction.

[SLIDE 19] We do not always work as big teams. We have also formed smaller work groups to work on specific projects such as website content, website design, common visual identity, infrastructure barriers, language translation, and training. Smaller groups can work faster and meetings can be more effective. The work of the workgroups comes back to the rest of the CCTT who then take it to their provincial council liaisons for information and input; and then it moves to the general council as a recommendation. This movement indicates our activity and interaction.

[SLIDE 20] Province contacts are important and vital contributors to the work of the CCTT. They connect their province to the communication and technology efforts of the congregation as a whole.

Each province contact is responsible directly to her provincial council liaison. In addition, since these are working teams, each member is also responsible to the team for providing input and implementing team projects.

[SLIDE 21] Since our initial February 2016 meeting, CCTT members have been meeting by video conference, group texting, or phone. Here is an image of a Blue Jeans call that Pam is leading. The person in the upper left is S. Mary from Nigeria; she is calling into the meeting by telephone.

[SLIDE 22] This is the communications team meeting on Zoom. I told them to smile for you.

[SLIDE 23] We share information on platforms like Trello, WhatsApp, OneDrive, Yammer and even email.

You will hear more about some of the projects we have been working on as we proceed through the report.

Visits of Pam and Pat to the provinces

[SLIDE 24] As you may know, we visited each province between April 2016 and February 2017.

[SLIDE 25] The purpose of our visits was twofold:

1. learn more about the province reality from the perspective of Communications and Technology.
2. explore ways that we might help the province in its implementation of the Congregational Communication Plan.

Our hosts decided on the places and people we would visit to best represent their reality. It was also a good opportunity to meet people with whom we work or might work in the future: translators, sisters who work on the webpage, people who help sisters with their technology, and others.

[SLIDE 26] We also visited places that have historical or cultural significance to the sisters of the country, such as a Shinto Shrine in Kyoto, Japan, the Marian shrine in Brezje, Slovenia, the Warsaw Uprising Museum in Poland, and Foz do Iguazu in Brazil. We will share other photos in a few minutes. This helped us understand the culture of the place a little better. Cultural understanding and sensitivity help improve communication.

[SLIDE 27] After each visit we wrote an initial reflection using these focus questions from the General Council:

1. What did we learn?
2. What needs did we identify?
3. What happened inside of each of us during the visit?
4. What do we see as next steps regarding language, networking, and technology?

We then shared our reflections with the General Council, the provincial council for that province, and the province contacts.

In February 2017, we met over two days with the General Council to share an assessment of the congregation concerning communication and technology, and to recommend next steps. We dealt with infrastructure barriers, access and usage of communication technologies, and best practices regarding good communication. You will hear more about these as we proceed through this report.

How has the plan become
part of the life of the congregation?

[SLIDE 28] In this part of our presentation, we would like to discuss how implementing the Plan has had some positive effects across the Congregation. We'll begin first with insights from members of our Congregational Communications and Technology Teams.

When we asked our local CCTT contacts if they have noticed any changes in their life and work resulting from the Communication Plan, they said:

[SLIDE 29] "…I find us thinking more globally during discussions and decisions."

[SLIDE 30] "I have also broadened my network. I think and act differently by considering the impact of province decisions on the congregation."

[SLIDE 31] "Knowing each other makes it easier to work together."

[SLIDE 32] "I am less worried about working in non-native languages, knowing the supportive, accepting atmosphere."

Networking

[SLIDE 33] Networking Objective 4 calls us to "support opportunities for sisters, associates and colleagues to connect both individually and through common interests and ministries". The first action step for that is to "encourage and create virtual communities and programs for connecting around the world based on common ministries, shared concerns, and language and cultural learning". *(Networking 4a)*

One of the ways that we in CCTT approached this was to find ways to deepen the sense of community among ourselves. If we could not overcome issues of long distances, time zone, language and culture, we would not be able to help the Congregation to do it.

[SLIDE 34] The Plan's Networking goal to "support new ways of thinking and acting collaboratively as one congregation" is being realized in several ways. There is now a refreshed symbol for the congregation, which is a key part of Objective 2, common visual identity. We have also begun work on a congregation-wide external publication in multiple languages. This will be published early in 2018. CCTT members across the congregation are working together on various aspects of online presence, including the new congregational website, and linking to and promotion of each other's Facebook pages.

[SLIDE 35] The international Facebook page was created in 2016 to serve as a hub and resource for SSND-related Facebook sites across the congregation to link to and find others. Many schools and ministries, as well provinces and sisters, already had accounts, so this became a quick way to share photos of events and celebrations. There is a simple language translator built-in that is sometimes helpful.

[SLIDE 36] The Networking goal of thinking and acting as one congregation challenges us to provide ways to reach people who do not have reliable access to the internet. While we work on emerging technologies to reduce the barriers of cost, unstable power, and limited infrastructure, those who have reliable broadband might consider including low-bandwidth, mobile-based technologies in their communications. For example, during our province visits, we noted that WhatsApp, a low-impact messaging service, was used widely by sisters in areas where internet and power was limited. We began using it ourselves to augment email if we needed to get time-sensitive information to team members.

[SLIDE 37] In our province visit listening sessions, we heard sisters, associates, and colleagues express interest in communicating with those around the congregation in similar ministries to share ideas and discuss common concerns. At the very least, there was a wish to easily identify where their counterparts were. We are researching an intranet platform to provide a secure, private area for those in common ministries or with shared interests to interact with each other. The current intranet may meet our needs. We will know better in the future.

[SLIDE 38] Beginning with our in-person meeting in Rome in 2016, we shared ideas with each other about online project planning tools, such as Trello, and video conferencing systems such as Blue Jeans, Skype, and Zoom. As we evaluated each, we looked for those that could accommodate all the languages of the congregation as well as participants with low bandwidth. For example, all three of the video conferencing systems used in the congregation can be accessed via app on mobile devices, but Skype has an added automatic translation chat feature for one-on-one meetings. This, and the fact that it was already familiar to many sisters across the congregation, were reasons why it was chosen for the language-tutoring partnership initiative.

Language

[SLIDE 39] The Plan's language goal encourages us to understand the diversity and depth of meaning that language and culture bring to the congregation. The English tutoring initiative via Skype is one way of increasing understanding and minimizing barriers caused by language and cultural difference.

The idea for the tutoring partnerships arose during a province visit. It was noted that even fluent speakers need a few days to adjust to a non-native language at international meetings, especially if they do not have much opportunity to practice beforehand. We remembered hearing about an informal partnership years ago between sisters practicing English via Skype. When a similar need for practice was voiced in other provinces, we brought it to the attention of the General Council. A tutoring partnership initiative was launched immediately and enthusiastically embraced across the congregation.

[SLIDE 40] We have since conducted a survey to see if it was helpful in creating partnerships for language learning. Sixty-five of 86 sisters responded to our survey request; 82% rated it excellent or very good.

While 82% rated it excellent or very good, only about 34% (22 respondents) said it had improved their language skills so far. One person said it had not helped, but most preferred to offer clarifying comments rather than answer yes or no.

[SLIDE 41] A few suggested a more structured curriculum; just as many commented favorably on letting the partners decide how to design their sessions. Time zone differences and busy schedules were mentioned as difficulties almost as often as the occasional technical connection problem. The benefit most often given was the building of relationships among sisters from other cultures and provinces.

One sister commented, "This was a great idea for tutoring, but could be replicated for connecting us overall."

[SLIDE 42] Sisters expressed a variety of reasons why they liked being involved in the tutoring partnership program. In addition to learning more about language and making friends, they liked: "Getting to know situations similar yet different from those of my province. Sharing experiences on the field of ministry."

[SLIDE 43] A sister who was a tutor said, "… even though I live in an assisted living situation I can still be helpful, and am thrilled to have the experience of working with a Sister from Poland."

[SLIDE 44] Another sister said, "Our conversation is much deeper than only the language and grammar. It helps me to understand living style and way of thinking."

[SLIDE 45] Many tutors remarked that they liked learning about their partner's province, culture and language. Language learning initiatives in the congregation have often centered on sisters learning English, but as Language Objective 1B in the Plan states "For all sisters, as feasible, encourage:

- The study of English if they do not already speak or read English
- The study of one of the languages used in the congregation if they already are fluent in English."

An unexpected benefit of the tutoring program is that it may encourage English-speaking sisters to study other languages of the congregation.

[SLIDE 46] CCTT has a workgroup of both communications and technology members who have been evaluating tools for learning languages, and for increasing practice opportunities if teachers or native speakers are not readily available. Online or app-based programs like Duolingo or Rosetta Stone are being used across the congregation. Duolingo is free, but fully automated. Rosetta Stone is fee-based, but includes remote tutoring by real instructors.

[SLIDE 47] Another focus of the CCTT Language Translation workgroup is to evaluate and make recommendations about automatic translation tools. We compared several popular apps and plugins such as Google Translate, Microsoft Translator (used by Skype and Bing), and Facebook's automatic translator. We found that apps for languages that are similar in grammatical structure, and those that are widely spoken among online users, were

generally more accurate and understandable, though none yet were better than a good human translator. The best translation apps are ones with the greatest number of users who are willing to provide correction and better phrasing.

For languages with smaller user bases, apps developed by local, native speakers often are more accurate.

Having a language translation app is useful, even if fluency isn't a goal. It teaches the speaker to slow down a little and enunciate without sounding stilted. It also helps one learn when to pause in preparation for having real interpreters at international meetings: for example, not in mid-phrase since sentence structures are different.

Both Google Translate and Microsoft Translator are free apps for computers and mobile devices; both are improving rapidly with advances in machine learning and artificial intelligence.

Technology

[SLIDE 48] Speaking of Technology, most sisters and colleagues have some access to communication technologies, particularly if necessary to their ministry or province needs. The level of access varies widely, and is influenced by a variety of factors.

Areas that are underserved in terms of power supply, clean water, and adequate sewerage also tend to have limited options for communication access, though this is changing rapidly with the growth of mobile technologies. Large urban areas with a strong consumer base have several reliable options, but there are still occasional outages, as rapidly growing demand puts pressure on older systems.

[SLIDE 49] In addition to surveys and conversations with sisters, associates, and colleagues, there are tools for measuring trends in communication technologies. Most online services such as websites, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook will give statistics about those visiting their sites in terms of country, language, what type of device was used for viewing and how the visitor found their way to the site. This picture came from the Today in the Congregation site and lets us know that in July 2017, most visitors came from the US, used a Windows computer, but were more likely to use Chrome or Firefox instead of Internet Explorer or Edge.

Since we also have statistics for 2015 and 2016, we can see that the number of people using mobile phones or tablets to view the site has increased. We can also see that the number of visitors from Germany, Brazil, and Poland increased dramatically since CCTT members began working together.

As we continue to work to broaden access across the congregation, and build more virtual communities and partnerships, we expect to see some indication in SSND sites like this and other forms of online presence. If there is a downward trend in visitors, we will know that we need to discover why before it gets serious.

[SLIDE 50] A CCTT workgroup is addressing barriers within the Congregation that are making it difficult to:

- Fully participate in province or international workgroups and discussions
- Access information from the province or Congregation in a timely manner and be able to respond.
- Join SSND-related virtual communities (see Communication Plan: Networking 4a)

[SLIDE 51] Costs for communication technology in underserved areas are often more than sisters or their ministries could reasonably afford. This is because:

- it is expensive for companies to establish services in remote or rugged areas, particularly if there is no easy access to reliable power, parts, and maintenance.
- there is not a large enough consumer base to share the burden of the higher investment costs.

It is our goal to reduce these barriers until all members are able to fully participate in the life of the congregation. With the rapid development of mobile communications, it could be that funding, and not technical limitations, is what is most needed to reach this goal.

This is how the Plan is nourishing the life of the congregation to this point as we see it.

Moving forward

[SLIDE 52] Here are some next steps as we continue our implementation of the Plan.

Language skills and cross-cultural understanding

[SLIDE 53] The English-tutoring initiative is doing well. The majority of sisters who are involved appreciate it. Some even volunteered to help take it a step further. And that is what we recommend, offering more structure to those who wish it and phasing in other languages.

[SLIDE 54] As we work more and more across the congregation, we may encounter cultural differences that may not be recognized and understood. This could cause friction and frustration. We recommend increasing opportunities for cultural exchange and learning.

[SLIDE 55] During our visits we heard many suggestions for improving meeting participation. The Congregational Communication Plan contains action steps to improve meeting participation when language is an issue. (Language, Objective 3) It did not look specifically at meetings across distances, nor at the challenges faced by older sisters such as visual and hearing impairments. We recommend that a list of best practices be made available for all sisters and province contacts so that they can take them into account when organizing meetings.

Networking

Objective 3: Communications Tools

[SLIDE 56] On more than one occasion, we heard a request to develop an app containing the words of Mother Theresa, in different languages, for each day. It could also include the names of those who died on that day, significant dates and congregational events, as well as a daily reflection.

Sisters, associates, and lay colleagues want to learn more about each other. There are fewer sisters now in some ministries to share publications and information. Given that we want to educate our associates and lay colleagues about the charism and mission of the congregation, appropriate resources in various formats should be made available to them if they wish it.

Objective 4: Interpersonal Connections

[SLIDE 57] We recommend that we standardize file storage and cloud-based sharing options for international committees who do not have a common method already. We recommend OneDrive for this, which is available in all congregation languages and can be integrated with Skype. Those committees and workgroups that already have another method in place (e.g. Dropbox or GoogleDocs) can continue to use them.

Website members section

[SLIDE 58] We have the new congregational website. It needs more work, especially to include all the translations and then to maintain it. However, this year we will increase opportunities for sisters, associates and colleagues to interact. We spoke about this earlier. This space will be something like the current members' login section but with more potential for interaction and sharing of resources. It will include:

- A secure and easily accessible method of searching for SSND locations and resources with appropriate levels of access, so that those with common ministries or interests can find each other, build relationships, and network together.

- Calendars to share province events and significant dates with one calendar specifically for congregational leadership.

- Formation opportunities for interested lay staff.

Technology

Objective 1: Infrastructure

[SLIDE 59] In order to evaluate the progress and usage of the Congregation's communication technologies, we recommend that each year:

- We measure the ability of those on international committees and workgroups to successfully connect and fully participate in meetings. We have initiated an ongoing survey to this end.

- We standardize elements in online audience reports to measure trends in language, device type, location, search terms, and referral source.

Objective 2: Access

[SLIDE 60] Because technological costs are a barrier in some areas, there needs to be discussion on a broader level to work toward equitable access for communicating with each other, and how to approach the costs of providing it. In addition, we remind you that at the congregational level there is an application process to request funds from the Gerhardinger Fund.

[SLIDE 61] The CCTT is forming a workgroup for security which address ongoing end-user cyber safety training in each of the congregation's languages. We are also exploring having an opt-in Congregation-wide license available for Malwarebytes or something similar. This would make it easier for techs to assist sisters who travel across provinces despite language differences. We do have some licenses available already for those sisters without access to regular tech support.

[SLIDE 62] We encourage local CCTT contacts to offer to visit local communities to answer questions, hear concerns, and share ideas regarding technology and communications.

Objective 3: Online Presence

[SLIDE 63] We need to continue work on our congregational online presence plan. We will further develop the congregational social media presence by identifying appropriate social media platforms, developing a guide for social media opportunities, and promoting the congregation's social media presence.

Conclusion

[SLIDE 64] The Congregational Communication Plan is being incorporated into the life of the congregation and it is nourishing and strengthening our unity, interdependence and collaborative efforts. We are moving forward.

In conclusion, we stress that we are grateful for the cooperation we have experienced over the past months as we have been doing our part to implement the Congregational Communication Plan. We are here throughout the general chapter. Please feel free to approach either of us with any questions, concerns, and ideas.