

Alive

WITH THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL

Committed to
Caring for Creation

Associates Celebrate
50 Years

2021–2022
Gratitude Report



Our God is a God of Surprise

By Sister Rose Paul Chakkiath

My journey towards weaving a new heart for intercultural life and mission began in Tanzania, where I had been working as a schoolteacher since 2014. When we started our formation program in 2018, I was appointed as the formator for our first new candidates from Tanzania. Since that time, I have had a significant impact on the community, which has been an enriching experience.

At the same time, I faced health challenges, a lack of resources, and cultural barriers in my mission work. I almost gave up hope when I was diagnosed with a severe malaria infection within the first month of my stay in Africa. Hardships were plenty and one did not have to look for them; they came your way unexpectedly.

But our God is a God of surprise and reveals Himself in a thousand ways to those open to His presence and action in the world. I soon realized that until and unless I became a part of the people and their culture, my mission would be incomplete. I could weave a new heart with the threads of openness and a vivid vision to live my mission with real joy and freedom of heart to overcome all the challenges.

Intercultural living within the community is really a great challenge in our mission and community as well as in our spiritual life. But the love I received from people during weekly visits to their homes was so fulfilling. We never returned empty-handed; the families would offer us baskets full of vegetables as a token of their



love. This was a channel through which we could bring them close to Jesus.

My sisterhood journey in Africa will always be cherished and I strongly believe that intercultural living is only possible when we create a constructive platform for open sharing and wide acceptance despite our own cultural prejudice. Intercultural mission is a sure blessing to our spiritual, communal, and missionary life. All glory and praise to God for all the forming experiences of this intercultural life and mission!

Sister Rose Paul ministers at the Assisi Province formation house in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This reflection is adapted from a meditation she shared with delegates at the 2022 General Assembly.

From Our Leadership

ALIVE | Fall 2022
VOLUME 13, ISSUE 1
ALIVE is published
by the School Sisters of St. Francis
an international congregation of
Franciscan women religious
headquartered in
Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
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FRONT COVER
Sister Albertina Paz, the senior most sister
in our ULAF (Latin America) Region, enjoys
the beauty of creation at Santa Clara Mission
in Guatemala City, Guatemala. Your generous
support enables us to ensure loving caring
for our retired sisters who have devoted
themselves to lifetimes of faithful ministry.

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The inspiration of the General Assembly in June and July has led our newly elected International Leadership Team to the significant work of team building. Sister Tresa Abraham Kizhakeparambil and I currently reside in Milwaukee, and Sisters Matilde Maraví and Jincy Vilayappilly traveled back to Peru and India, respectively, after the assembly so they could complete their visas and return to work in our central office in Milwaukee. Together, we will strive to support our congregation's presence in whatever ways are possible within our provinces and regions around the world.

I learned so much by actively listening at our assembly, including how intensely our sisters around the world desire to connect with one other. Becoming more unified requires deeper and more frequent conversations across our provinces and regions, as well as within them: sister to sister, person to person.

We will explore how to converse more genuinely, with greater meaning and clarity, and with greater cultural humility.

The importance of sharing our stories was evident throughout our assembly, and it originates with the Franciscan provenance that values forgiveness and love, compassion and healing, joy and liberation, and caring for all creation. Care of creation is an essential charism of Franciscan life, so there is great energy around it. For nearly 150 years, we have celebrated the beauty of creation through our rich traditions in music, art, and poetry, as well as in our ministries of education, health care, social work, law, administration, and especially prayer and presence in retirement. Our challenge today is to develop more consciousness about the web of life, and become more focused on the relationships between integrity of creation and our own actions.

Through your prayers and generous support of our congregation, you enable our sisters around the world to continue, and expand, our mission to share God's love with the world. With much gratitude, I invite you to continue on this journey of partnership with all our sisters!

Sister Deborah Fumagalli
President, International Leadership Team
School Sisters of St. Francis



High-Energy Solutions Shine Bright

Indian sisters conserve resources and model Franciscan values

The Indian state of Kerala, home to the sisters of our congregation's Assisi Province, faces numerous challenges to meet the energy requirements of its residents. The biggest one is that this southern state of 33 million people is mainly dependent upon hydroelectric power, so without sufficient rainfall, it cannot produce enough electricity to meet growing consumer demand.

The sisters of our St. Francis Province, who serve in northern India, face similar challenges to meet their energy requirements. In the city of Raisen, St. Francis Convent Higher Secondary School now includes 12 grades and serves nearly 3,000 students. The costs of providing electricity for a school of this size are enormous.

The Indian government incentivizes the adoption of localized power generation through renewable technologies, like the use of solar power, by deploying net metering systems. This helps to cut down the country's per capita energy footprint, but there's a catch.

"The government encourages the use of solar energy as the best solution to this problem," said Sister Rosebell Ponthakkan, a member of the leadership team of Assisi Province, "but it reserves financial support for domestic purposes only." Government grants are available only to individuals, not institutions, so funding was not available for our sisters' solar energy plans.

But thanks to the generous financial support of our community's faithful donors, the sisters in both our Indian provinces have been able to install solar panel arrays at their facilities that

have yielded enormous benefits. The sisters now have reliable, sustainable sources of energy and have been able to dramatically reduce their electric bills.

"Solar energy has been a significant help in reducing electricity and maintenance costs," said Sister Navya, a member of the leadership team of St. Francis Province. "The solar panels have helped supply electrical power to support our work with light, cooling, and powering computers. Solar panels give us access to electricity without any power failure."

Sister Rosebell explained that solar projects have an added community benefit that goes beyond the school and convent. Using solar panels reduces energy congestion and stress on the overall grid infrastructure, so it improves grid voltage to consumers.

"The project helps the people we serve, and it also helps the public," she said. "With net metering systems, we only pay for the difference between the power consumed by the school from the grid and the solar power generated from the panels. Any excess electricity we generate is exported to the state electricity grid, and our owner's account is credited accordingly."

"This arrangement has credited us for the electricity we deliver back to the grid at the same retail price that we pay for the electricity we use from the grid," Sister Navya explained. "As a result, our monthly electricity bills are 75 percent less than before we installed the panels, which has been a great help for the financial stability of the school."



Clockwise from top: Students at St. Francis Convent Higher Secondary School benefit from the facility's new solar power; sisters from St. Francis Province have been able to realize significant cost savings thanks to the new solar array; Assisi Province sisters have reduced electrical fees by 75 percent thanks to their solar installation.

“The money saved on electricity enables us to invest in ways that benefit the students directly,” she continued. “The reduced cost of electricity has enabled us to help pay the fees of poorer students or assist families who are in need of food or medication.”

This partnership between our sisters and the government has helped the wider community as well as the students and others that our sisters serve at their facilities, Sister Rosebell noted.

“Our aim is to plug the loopholes of the power sector by tapping the renewable energy for the benefit of many, thus helping us to be the face of true Franciscan spirituality,” she said. It has also presented the sisters with teachable moments as they make their students and communities

more aware of the benefits of renewable solar energy. “They recognize that the solar panels are pollution free because no greenhouse gases are emitted after installation,” she said.

All this has been made possible by the vision and generosity of our congregation’s supporters. “We thank all the donors for going the extra mile for all of us who depend on your generosity,” Sister Navya said. “We recognize your support and appreciate you, and assure you of our prayers.”

“Gifts from our generous partners provide the financial and moral support we need to continue our mission,” Sister Rosebell agreed. “We want to express our gratitude for your loyalty and generosity. Thank you so much for your help with this special project.”

Dreams Within Reach

Academic scholarships help disadvantaged students continue their education

Education has been a focus of the School Sisters of St. Francis' ministry since our congregation's founding in 1874. Mother Alexia, Mother Alfons, and Sister Clara arrived in the United States as educators – immigrants committed to educating the children of immigrants.

A century and a half later, our sisters are still teaching in classrooms across this country and around the world, touching tens of thousands of lives each year. Scholarships are an important way our supporters are partnering with us in educational ministry.

For more than a decade, St. Patrick Parish in Hudson, Wisconsin, has been working with the School Sisters of St. Francis to provide scholarships to students from their sister parish, San Jose el Tesoro (St. Joseph the Worker) Parish in Yalpemech, Guatemala. The awards help young people pursue secondary and vocational studies after free public education ends with sixth grade.

“To receive assistance, students need to enroll in secondary or vocational education – both of which require tuition payments – and then Sister Elena Josefina Felipe identifies a student needing sponsorship,” explained St. Patrick parishioner Rick Huebsch. “The sponsor from St. Patrick Parish and the student’s family each pay half of the tuition, which is currently \$360 a year for both the sponsor and the student’s family. If the family cannot afford their half, the student can earn it through service projects at the school, convent, church, or village.”

Huebsch said that nearly all the parishioners who fund the 25-30 scholarships each year continue to sponsor children year after year, and the parish recently expanded the program to assist adults

teaching English to Yalpemech students, so that these adults can pay for English lessons for themselves.

“Many parishioners have been sponsoring students for eight to ten consecutive years,” Huebsch said. “They love receiving handwritten letters from the students they sponsor, along with pictures from the students and their families.”

The impetus for starting the scholarship program came from Sister Bernadette Kalscheur, who for many years served as pastoral minister at St. Patrick. She had encouraged parishioners to support the mission work of Sister Joannes Klas, who accompanied Guatemalan villagers from 1982 throughout their time as refugees in Honduras. After the Guatemalan civil war ended in 1991, “Sister Jo” returned with them to settle in a new village. Parishioners chose to honor her lifelong vocation as an educator with this program.



Sister Joannes Klas (head of table) attends a 2019 sponsor appreciation event in Yalpemech with student recipients, their parents, and donors from St. Patrick Parish, Hudson, Wisconsin.

Sister Kathy Chuston, special appeals administrator for the Office of Mission Advancement, said the program's impact has been immense, with parishioners donating more than \$76,000 since the scholarship program began.

"The dedication and long-term commitment of St. Patrick parishioners to provide educational opportunities highlights in a profound way the difference that just one person or group of people can make in the lives of others," she said. "Our Mission Advancement Office is very grateful to everyone at St. Patrick for the witness of their faith-filled commitment to improve the lives of others, and build relationships with their sister parish."

Funds Help Schools Survive Lockdown

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, families with children who were already struggling faced many additional financial hardships. Families' inability to pay school fees would have caused a ripple effect that would have left teachers without a salary. Fortunately a generous scholarship donation paid the school fees of 350 children, which also benefited 158 educators employed at six schools.

"Assisi English Medium Higher Secondary School in Kanjikode is one school where this fund had a very positive impact," said Sister Rosebell Ponthakkan, principal. "There are 2,200 students at the school and most of their parents are day laborers. When the COVID-19 lockdown began, they could not go to work or earn any wages."

To save money, most of the parents would have transferred to a government school where they do not have to pay fees, Sister Rosebell said.



Scholarship funds enabled students to continue attending Assisi English Medium Higher Secondary School in Kanjikode despite financial hardships during the pandemic.

"The scholarship funds we received enabled us to help the families pay the fees, so they continued to send their children to our school," she said. "Without this funding, the effects would have been felt for at least another decade in terms of the smooth functioning of the school. We are lucky to have such kind-hearted people, who extended a helping hand when we were in need."

The timely scholarship funding from donors made a tremendous difference. "We wholeheartedly appreciate your support for our mission," Sister Rosebell said. "We are thankful for your kind and compassionate hearts and generous contributions. We sisters, teachers, and students keep you in our prayers."

A Lifeline for Teachers

Scholarship funds also helped students attending schools in our St. Francis Province in North India. Sister Jyothi Porathur, who ministers at St. Francis Convent Provincial House, said that the scholarships enabled students to continue attending four schools throughout the province, paying the salaries of 214 teachers and staff.

Sister Archana Akkarapattiekkal, the principal of St. Francis Convent Higher Secondary School in Raisen, said the donation of the scholarship funds had a very positive impact at her school. “The staff felt very happy and content with the management because in a time of great need, we could help them a lot,” she said.

Sister Grace Arrangassery, principal of St. Francis Convent School in Budni, agreed that the scholarships were a lifeline for teachers.

“Our teachers were so grateful,” Sister Grace said. “One of them said, ‘It is God’s providence that I work in a missionary school. When there is any difficulty, the sisters will never abandon us.’ Many others joined with her to affirm that statement. My experience is that the kindness of this gesture has developed in the teachers a feeling of safety to work with us.”

Mrs. Merlin, a teacher at St. Francis Convent Co-Ed School in Patel Nagar, shared her family’s gratitude for the generous donations that kept staff employed at such a difficult time.

“Since my husband and I both were working in the private sector during the pandemic, we both lost our salaries, and it was impossible for us to carry out daily tasks,” she said. “My father-in-law was infected with coronaviruses, and it was difficult for us to raise money to take better care of him. We made do by borrowing money from my friends.

“When the school paid my salary, it was a blessing for me and my family,” she continued. “I sincerely thank our donors for granting scholarship funds to our students. May the Lord reward you for your charitable work!”

Sister Jyothi said that the province’s sisters, teachers, and student families appreciated the “donors willingness to help us, even though you were also facing the same tragedy in your own land. By your gifts, you share in the fruits of our life and apostolate, and we are able to fulfill our vocation of prayer and service in the Church as consecrated women. In gratitude, we offer our most precious gift: our prayers.”

Sisters, staff, and students at St. Francis Co-Ed School, Patel Nagar, Bhopal, India, express their gratitude for the generosity of our scholarship donors.



Spring and Summer Success Stories!

Our sisters' spring and summer fundraisers both surpassed their goals and together, they raised nearly \$100,000 in support of our retired sisters and ministries in the United States and around the world.

It was the second year for the Movin' 4 Missions step challenge, held throughout the month of May.

In total, steppers walked a total of 7,772 miles in one month. "As impressive as that is, we were even more thrilled to have so many U.S. Province sisters taking part in this event, as well as a sister from India," said event organizer Kelly Nowakowski.

Many sisters, associates, staff, and friends of the community reached out to family, friends, and former students through social media and email, including 104-year-old Sister Rose Mack (below). As a result, we nearly doubled our stretch goal by raising \$73,331 in donations!

"We are very thankful to the 198 sponsors who supported Movin' 4 Missions, including many first-time donors," Kelly said. "Their generosity will fund our sisters' work in education, social justice, the care of our retired sisters, and other ministries. So many people will benefit from this initiative, and we couldn't be more grateful."



Sisters, associates, staff, and friends of the community were brimming with excitement for the return of the Sister Water Beer Garden on June 18, the first in-person event on the St. Joseph Center grounds since 2019. More than 350 guests of all ages enjoyed a beautiful summer evening filled with live music, delicious food, refreshing "Ale Mary" and "Our Lager" beers, and outdoor games.



Thanks to enthusiastic participants and generous sponsors, more than \$25,500 was raised, which is now funding ministries that help our sisters to care for the earth while they are caring for others. These include much-needed projects like solar energy installations, borewells and filtration systems for clean water, and biogas generators.

"It was exciting to welcome people back in our garden," Kelly said. "It was great seeing the smiles on the sisters' faces as they got to visit with new and old friends."

The sisters look forward to more special opportunities to connect with our donors, sponsors, and friends in 2023. Please watch our website and follow our Facebook page for announcements and updates.



From the Convent to the Front Lines of COVID-19

Inspired by St. Francis, Sister and Doctor Alphy Thaikadan ministers with India's most vulnerable

Sister Alphy Thaikadan, MD, spent a harrowing two and a half years on the frontline of COVID-19 treatment in India. She recently took time to reflect upon and share some of her experiences.

Alive: Many of us remember when and how we became aware of the pandemic. What do you remember about it?

Sister Alphy: I remember a sudden announcement by Sukh Sagar Hospital, where I was working, at noon on March 21, 2020. The hospital was going to become a government-run COVID care center. The administration said the new coronavirus disease was very dangerous, and that I should not risk my life by continuing to work there. The next day curfew was announced by the central government, and this was followed by a nationwide lockdown.

Did you follow their advice and stay home?

I did at first. I spent more time in prayer, did more housework, and delivered groceries and essentials to poor villagers. I also did some medical teleconsultations with patients.

As the days went by, though, I came to realize the COVID pandemic would not end anytime soon. I grew distressed at the thought that while I stayed home, many healthcare workers were combating COVID-19 and risking their lives. So when I was asked to join the COVID combat team at Sukh Sagar COVID Care Centre, I said I was happy to do it, provided my provincial superiors permitted it. As I expected, they worried about my health and life, but allowed me to take up the challenge because of my insistence.

Did you move out of the convent while serving?

I did, to keep my community safe. I stayed in a facility for doctors provided by the government. When I left the convent to go there, I stopped near the gate and looked back. Tears rolled down my face, as I was not sure if I would return to it alive.

It must have been very frightening, walking into the unknown.

Two things inspired me: St. Francis boldly ministering to lepers, and our foundress Mother Alexia's words that "the need of the time is the will of God."

Also, people were so kind and gracious. The reverend fathers and sisters from neighboring parishes, institutions, and convents visited me and brought me snacks. And it was my great joy to see the recovered patients leave the care center with smiles on their faces.

You had to start treating COVID before anyone knew what to do. How did you handle that?

I was very fortunate to attend and complete an online course on COVID-19, offered by the University of Melbourne, Australia, sometime in the middle of the first wave. This course gave me more confidence in treating COVID patients. Also, from my experience with the patients I learned that their fear was more dangerous than the coronavirus itself, so I made it an important element of the treatment to create confidence in patients. Recent research shows psychological well-being can increase a body's immune response.

Do you think of your medical care as a ministry?

Yes, a sister/doctor sees her work as a mission, and not merely a profession. Hers is a mission

of witnessing to the merciful and healing love of God. My presence and service were highly appreciated by patients and fellow health workers. COVID duty was exhausting, especially during the months of September and October, when active cases surged. But this burden was light compared with the heavier burden of the virus the patients had to carry.

What are some of the most memorable experiences from COVID times for you?

The second wave of COVID started hitting people even harder than the first. Many priests, sisters, and brothers contracted severe COVID. The diocese decided to convert one section of the bishop's house to serve as a care facility for them. We treated moderate to severe cases there and shifted only very severe cases to hospitals.

We all struggled, and are still struggling, through the pandemic. Many of us have lost loved ones. I was spared getting it, but probably because of continuous overexertion, my immune system weakened over time, and finally in the middle of August 2021, I was hospitalized for a week with a severe idiopathic infection.

To my joy, no patient I treated for COVID died. The members of my congregation and the priests, religious, and lay people of Jabalpur diocese always supported me and kept me in their constant prayers. It was a common mission we accomplished together!

What wisdom have you gained from your time on the COVID frontline?

I have realized all the more the fragility of human life. Every day, especially at times of epidemic and pandemic, people are on the frontier between health and disease, life and death. Our mission is to protect people's health and life to the best of our ability. There can be moments of being burned out. But our resolve to continue the healing mission of Jesus keeps us going.

Happy Endings, and New Beginnings

Books from The Albert Whitman Trust help sisters make connections

For more than four decades, the Albert Whitman Trust has provided funds that have enabled our sisters to purchase classroom and library books from Albert Whitman & Co., a century-old publisher of award-winning children's books.

The trust's terms also allow our sisters to use the funds to purchase books of similar quantity from outside the Whitman catalog if those books are most appropriate for a student's age, language, or special needs. In recent years, our sisters have received nearly \$40,000 in funds from the trust to purchase books for use in their school or other ministry settings.

Sister Margaret Sue Broker said Sacred Heart School in Walls, Mississippi, began to receive funds as far back as the 1980s. "Our school has children from 21 different countries," Sister Margaret Sue said. "The books we select

represent the diversity of our student population. I remember that the first set we got were about dealing with divorce, drug addiction, jailed family members, and deaths in the family."

Sister Sylvia Leonardi, who teaches at St. Joseph Catholic Academy in Kenosha, Wisconsin, said she looked for books "that speak to the current issues in our country."

"Books by Peter Reynolds, such as *Be You*; *I Am Human*, *I Am Peace*, *I Am Love*, *Happy Dreamer*, and *Say Something*, have been placed in our elementary library and classrooms," Sister Sylvia said. "I use meditation to help the children understand themselves and their God, and the books are an excellent source for teaching the Church's standards on social justice and human rights," she said. Recalling local civil unrest in 2020, Sister Sylvia noted that "even though our

Kelsey Randle, Jaylen Berry, Principal Tunis Sangster, and Ja'Mirah Williams of Holy Family School in Holly Springs enjoy books from the Albert Whitman catalog.



children are from diverse religious backgrounds, they were able to listen and ponder the major issues they felt at the time of the rioting that occurred in our city.”

“When a new set of books arrives in the library at Holy Family School, the students rush to help unpack them,” said Sister Julene Stromberg from Holly Springs, Mississippi. “The children quickly choose a book that excites them and begin to read it immediately. *The Boxcar Children* series, which provides an intercultural approach to working together, is one of their favorites.”

Sister Mary Ann Meyer, who teaches theology at Resurrection High School in Chicago, appreciates that “the funds have enabled our librarian to expand the selection of books for our students. I am now able to expose my students to a greater variety of prayer options.”

Caring for Immigrant Children

Sister Margaret Sue said immigrant children at her school are joyful when they see themselves reflected in a book’s characters. “When they read a story about deportation, or about a little girl who was able to keep her own ethnic name as opposed to her Anglicized name, the children feel comfortable and are able to speak with confidence about their experiences,” she recalled. “One day a little Chinese boy and I were reading about the Vietnamese New Year celebration. The little boy got very excited when he saw the pictures, exclaiming, ‘We do that too! Look at the red envelopes. They have money in them. Our Chinese New Year is just like that!’”

At Maryville Academy in Des Plaines, Illinois, Sister Maureen Jerkowski works closely with unaccompanied immigrant children. “Our ministry is to provide trauma-informed care while working to place the children in a safe and welcoming home environment,” Sister Maureen said. “There is a special need to prepare these newcomers to our country with the self-



With Sister Mary Ann Meyer’s help, students at Resurrection High School have benefitted from prayer books from the Albert Whitman Trust.

confidence and motivation they need to be immersed into the community.”

These children were often deprived of schooling opportunities in their home countries, “but the children have responded very positively to the opportunity to improve their reading literacy and their ability to speak English,” Sister Maureen said. “One of our teachers shared with us the clarity of vision of a girl from Honduras whose goal is to help herself and others by becoming an attorney.

“It is so good to see students engrossed in a book while sitting in comfortable chairs in the library,” said Sister Patricia Hoffman, who recently retired after teaching 50 years at Pope John XXIII Central High School in Elgin, Nebraska. “I’ve noticed an increase in the number of students who carry a book with them, and it’s a joy to see how they encourage others to read the books they have enjoyed and found interesting.”

Our community is grateful for the generosity of the Albert Whitman Trust in providing our sisters and their places of ministry with the resources that instill Franciscan values like compassion, kindness, and respect for all of God’s creation.

A Half-Century Celebration

Associates and sisters celebrate 50 years of shared mission

The 50th anniversary celebration of Associate Relationship began on Friday, July 22, with an evening social for sisters and associates. “Led by our host, Sister Therese Thoenen, we played games, including a trivia quiz about the history of Associate Relationship, received prizes, and had many smiles and laughs,” said Associate Relationship Team member Catherine Alexander.

The following morning, Associate Cherie Esposito provided a presentation for all associates on “The Art of Listening.” Her presentation began with a scientific explanation of the inner workings of the ear and moved to how we can better listen to each other and to God.

That afternoon, following the conclusion of the U.S. Provincial Assembly, the Associate Relationship Team hosted the afternoon session for sisters and associates, “Making Our Way into the 21st Century – Our World Today.” After an overview of our 50 years of history, the team asked participants to discuss and offer suggestions on the present and future of Associate Relationship and how we can stay together and support each other. At the end of the afternoon, each table recorded and submitted their collective wisdom, and these comments will serve as a guide for the Associate Relationship team as we move forward into our second half-century.

The day culminated with a Eucharistic liturgy followed by a festive dinner – a fitting conclusion to a weekend of sharing memories, offering insights, and looking forward with faith.





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Sisters Elect New International Leadership Team

In July, delegates to the School Sisters of St. Francis' 2022 General Assembly elected a new International Leadership Team that will guide our congregation for the next four years. The election took place near the culmination of the 14-day assembly in Milwaukee.

Delegates from every province and region of our international community participated in setting the congregation's direction and choosing the new team, who began their term of office on September 1.

Pictured above: the General Assembly delegates bless the newly elected team (from left) Sister Tresa Abraham, Sister Jincy, Sister Deborah, and Sister Matilde.

The new International Leadership Team members are:

- Sister Deborah Fumagalli, President (United States Province)
- Sister Tresa Abraham Kizhakeparambil, First Vice President (St. Francis Province, North India)
- Sister Matilde Maraví, Vice President (Unión Latinoamericana de Franciscanas, Latin American Region)
- Sister Jincy Vilayappilly, Vice President (St. Francis Province, North India)