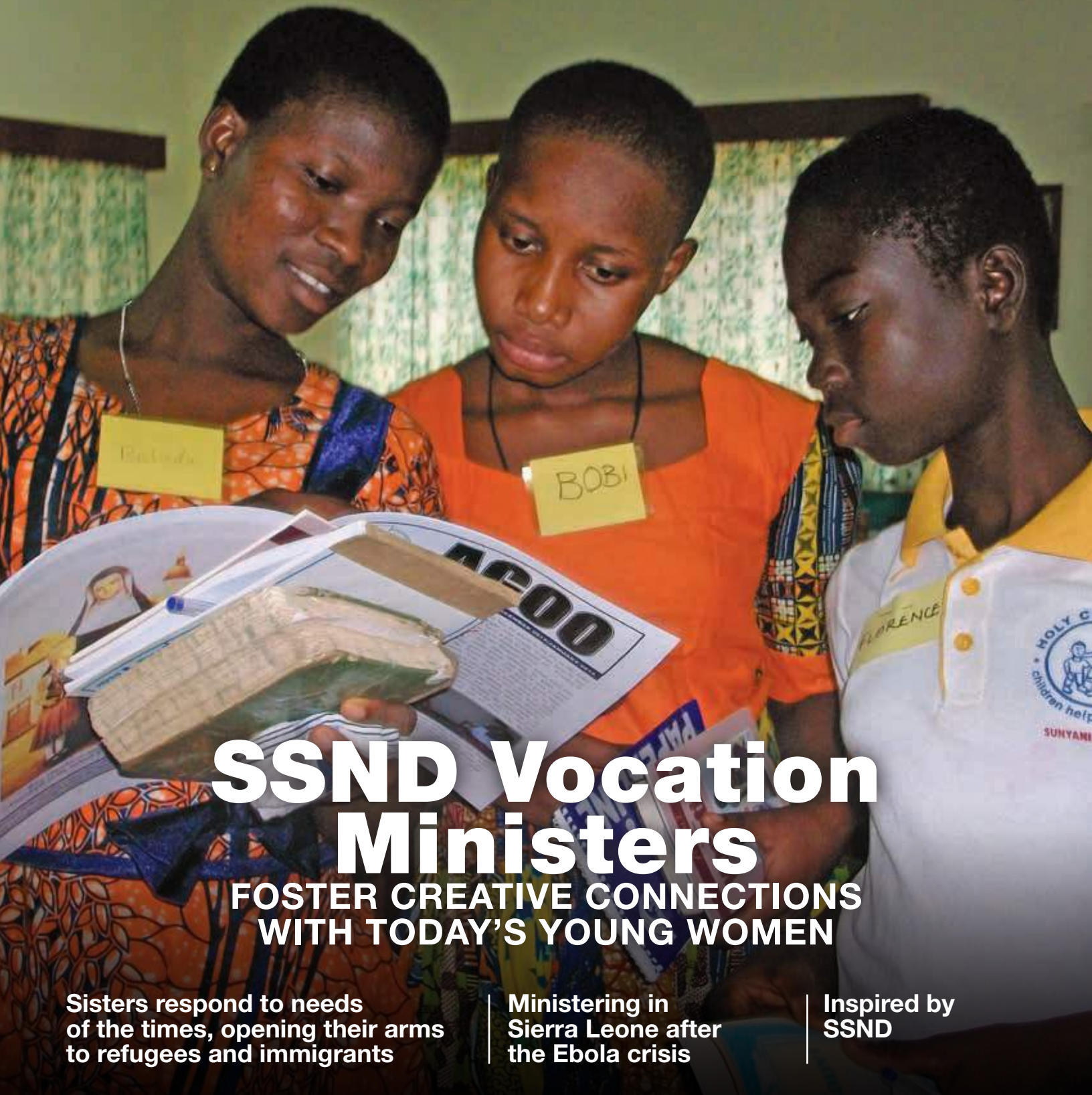




School Sisters  
of Notre Dame

# Trust & Dare

2017



## SSND Vocation Ministers

FOSTER CREATIVE CONNECTIONS  
WITH TODAY'S YOUNG WOMEN

Sisters respond to needs  
of the times, opening their arms  
to refugees and immigrants

Ministering in  
Sierra Leone after  
the Ebola crisis

Inspired by  
SSND

Transforming the world through education

# Trust & Dare

is a publication for family, friends and benefactors of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Africa, Asia and North America and is coordinated by the SSND Collaborative Communications Committee.

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School Sisters  
of Notre Dame

# Dear Friends,

This year is a very special time in the history of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It is the Year of the General Chapter. For the sisters, this is a time of deep reflection and dialogue at all levels. At the heart of this major anticipated event is our mission.

In his homily on Feb. 2, 2017, Pope Francis reflects on mission as the call to be “leaven in the dough.” The Lord invites consecrated persons to be leaven here and now. Pope Francis’ reflection, to a large extent, implies that mission is about “putting Jesus in the midst of his people” through the contemplative heart, one that is capable of discerning how God is walking in their midst and one that is wanting to touch Jesus’ wounds in the wounds of a world in pain, a world longing and crying for healing.

This year has presented the world with such complex political and socio-economic twists. The world is experiencing something different: political events that have left many asking questions. Yet, many of these questions have not received answers. In Europe, North America and Africa, the same questions and the same fears are expressed.

In Africa, poverty, disease and insecurity are issues affecting millions in several countries. We see the rich in these countries becoming richer by the day, while the poor continue to languish in poverty and insecurity. Migration appears to be a last option for these people. Two challenging questions I always ask myself are, “How are these poor and voiceless coping in all this mess? Whose moral responsibility is it to be the voice of these vulnerable people in the face of such a chaotic tide?”

We recognize that humanity and all creation is at a critical turning point in history, and there is a need to dare to respond to the cry of our world today. We do trust that the unity of all God’s people as desired by Christ can truly foster love, and bring to birth a transformation: forgiveness and healing of wounds wherever we live and minister.

It is our hope that you will enjoy reading this issue. Thank you for the support you have always given to us, both spiritual and material. Through your support, we are empowered to reach out in mission wherever we are.

Sister Joyce Kwamboka Nyakwama, SSND  
*Provincial Leader, Province of Africa*

## Our Mission

is to proclaim the Good News as School Sisters of Notre Dame, directing our entire lives toward that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent. As he was sent to show the Father’s love to the world, we are sent to make Christ visible by our very being, by sharing our love, faith, and hope.

*You Are Sent*

Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame





## Partnering to enable persons to reach their potential

As partners in SSND mission, each of us is called to enable “persons to reach the fullness of their potential as individuals created in God’s image” and assist “them to direct their gifts toward building the earth.” *You Are Sent*, SSND Constitution

With the generosity of many families and friends, Blessed Theresa Gerhardinger’s vision to make Christ visible by our very being – by sharing love, faith and hope – continues. Today, your prayers and support enable our sisters and colleagues to serve throughout the world, in schools and other areas of urgent need, giving special emphasis to women, young people and those who are marginalized.

Together, we are confronting human trafficking, instructing immigrants in English, supporting access to clean water in impoverished countries and offering educational opportunities throughout the world. We provide job training for women who are unemployed or underemployed. We reach out to those who are recovering from substance abuse, and we provide after-school tutoring to enable students to reach the fullness of their potential.

Why, you might ask? Because the need is still great and love cannot wait.

You can help support SSND ministries in a number of ways, including cash and gifts of stock and appreciated assets. A number of our donors include SSND in their estate plans by creating a legacy gift on behalf of their family and the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Like other gifts, a legacy gift can be used to support our sisters in retirement and in active ministry. Legacy gifts include bequests, life insurance and retirement plan gifts, and trusts of various kinds.

If you have any questions about making a gift or would like additional information, please contact one of the development directors listed at right.

Commending your kindness and interest in our ministries, our sisters gratefully remember you in prayer each day.

*As this well shows, benefactors have supported the School Sisters of Notre Dame since the 1800s. The historic well is on the sacred grounds of the first SSND convent in Neunburg Vorn Wald, Bavaria, and is inscribed with benefactor family name, Ringseis 1836.*

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*Manal and her son share a happy moment with Sister Mary O'Connor at Villa Notre Dame in Wilton, Connecticut.*

*The Syrian refugee family living in the house at Villa Notre Dame includes a widowed mother and her five children.*

# ‘For I was ... a stranger and you welcomed me.’

*Sisters respond to needs of the times, opening their arms to refugees, immigrants*

From the very beginning, School Sisters of Notre Dame have responded to the urgent signs of the times, risking innovative responses to address the pressing needs of the world. When they traveled to North America 170 years ago, they endured hunger and extreme hardship but never wavered in their commitment to teach the children of German immigrants who were arriving in rapidly increasing numbers.

Today, the sisters continue to respond to the plight of immigrants and refugees. Their educational mission is demonstrated in tutoring programs for children and adults from other countries so that they can learn the language of their new homes.

But the sisters’ outreach has taken on a new dimension as they respond to critical, present-day needs, assisting in providing refuge to those seeking shelter and security. SSNDs around the world, including the United States, Canada and Italy, are welcoming refugees by providing housing on their properties or partnering with local agencies that provide housing and resources.

## **A home in Wilton, Connecticut**

This past year, SSNDs in Wilton, Connecticut, have been able to hear and respond to the very human needs of a Syrian family

– a widowed mother, Manal, and her five young children. The sisters were blessed to find a unique way to welcome them by offering transitional housing in a home that was available on their Villa Notre Dame campus.

Partnering with the Wilton Interfaith Action Committee (WI-ACT), they offer basic and essential services, such as being a supportive presence at all school meetings; transportation for shopping, children’s sports activities and religious services; and guidance with financial matters.

The sisters also volunteer their time to babysit for the children when Manal must attend a meeting or work late at her full-time job. Both WI-ACT and SSND volunteers have worked with Manal on her acquisition of spoken and written English.

Having the family live so close has blessed the sisters with the opportunity to continue serving through their education ministry. Because of the circumstances in which the family lived for four years before coming to Wilton, the children’s education was sporadic and constantly interrupted. Now they are trying to catch up and also learn a new language. Two sisters living at Villa Notre Dame have heeded the call to that need, and they welcome the children for after-school classes in English language and reading.

That each one of the six family members continues to make progress in adapting to a new language and to a new culture is evident on a daily basis. However, the fact that challenges still remain is also evident. For example, with little public transportation available in Wilton, Manal has had to diligently study to pass the test to acquire a learner's permit so that one day in the near future, she will be able to take over as chauffeur for her children.

In addition, she uses her spare hours to develop her new role as an entrepreneur who designs and creates decorative pillows that are sold in a shop in town, and she also is accepting contracts to make curtains and drapes.

The major goal shared by the SSNDs and members of the WI-ACT committee is to foster the independence of Manal and her children. At the same time, they want the family to be confident that their commitment to caring about them has no expiration date.

### Resettlement in Ontario, Canada

In Canada, the government has resettled more than 40,000 Syrian refugees since November 2015 as it continues its commitment to assist those who are displaced due to conflict in their home country. At Notre Dame Convent in Waterdown, Ontario, SSNDs also wanted to be a part of welcoming Syrian refugees to Canada.

Realizing that they did not have the personnel available to coordinate a resettlement process, the sisters formed a committee in 2015 to search out how they might possibly partner with a group to sponsor a Syrian refugee family. They found such a highly motivated group already in operation in St. Raphael's Parish, Burlington, Ontario.

When the Hamilton Diocesan Refugee Office asked if they would consider responding to an urgent, special needs family of three, the St. Raphael Refugee Committee voted unanimously to extend an opportunity for new life to this family.

Originally, the family lived near Aleppo, Syria. When this became too dangerous, they moved to Lebanon, hoping to find employment. This proved to be difficult. After a year, they returned to Syria, where their son was born. Because of a lack of oxygen during a difficult delivery, he is partially paralyzed on the right side. To seek help for their newborn and for safety, the family joined relatives in Turkey, where they applied for refugee status in Canada.

In October 2016, the family arrived in Burlington, Ontario, and the various resettlement committees – housing, health, finance, food, furnishing and education – were ready to receive them. The parents arrived in Canada with only elementary school educations and speaking only Arabic. The baby was now 2 years old and beginning to walk. Within two days of their arrival, the family moved into an apartment furnished by the parishioners of St. Raphael.

Sister Rose Mary Sander, SSND, is part of the Education Committee and works directly with the family. Sisters Betty Lackenbauer and Harriet Schnurr, SSND, represent Notre Dame Convent at the monthly meetings, and they keep the sisters at the convent informed about the progress of the refugee family.

"This ministry opens our hearts and minds to enter into the world of persons struggling for just the basic necessities of life – food, shelter, safety, freedom," Sister Rose Mary said. "It reminds us to live simply and gratefully. Personally, teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) has allowed me to be a small part of this family's journey in adapting to a whole new way of life with courage, determination, and dignity."

### A safer life in Rome, Italy

On the SSND Generalate property in Rome, the small, red house known as La Casetta has served a number of purposes over the years – including as a kindergarten and, more recently, as



*The sisters at Lourdes Health Care Center at Villa Notre Dame in Wilton, Connecticut, enjoy visits with Manal and her children.*

**"Migrants are our brothers and sisters in search of a better life, far away from poverty, hunger, exploitation and the unjust distribution of the planet's resources which are meant to be equitably shared by all. Don't we all want a better, more decent and prosperous life to share with our loved ones?"**

*– Pope Francis' Message of the Holy Father for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, January 17, 2016*



*Continued from page 5*

the home to the leaders of an ecclesial lay movement. For about a year it had been empty, and during that time, the SSND General Council looked into the best way to offer the house for use by refugees seeking to build a safer life in Italy.



*La Casetta, on the Generalate property in Rome, is home to a young family from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.*

After much research, the council decided to collaborate with Centro Astalli, the Jesuit refugee program in Rome, associated with Jesuit Relief Services.

It was agreed that the house would be offered to refugees with legal status and employment in Italy. It would be a place for them to live for a year while they work and save money so that eventually they can be independent. This also gives them a safe environment and extra time to integrate into Italian society and culture.

Earlier this year, a couple from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and their 4-month-old son moved into La Casetta. He is a journalist who was forced to flee for his life after he wrote articles that were critical of the government. She works in the computer-field and is currently studying in this area.

“We are very happy to do this small act of solidarity in the face of the enormous challenges to assist migrants and refugees who are coming to Italy in search of safety and opportunity,” Sister Mary Maher, SSND general superior, said in a memo to SSND provincial leaders. “Please pray for blessing on our guests and on all who must flee their homeland.”

## *Sisters tutor, provide services to help refugees assimilate to new homes around the world*

**“We are educators in all that we are and do. We continually choose ways of living and serving that call to growth. Responding to varying needs, we engage in a diversity of ministries, specific services through which we work for the enablement of persons.”**

*– You Are Sent, Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame*

As School Sisters of Notre Dame strive to address the pressing needs of today’s world, the educational vision of their foundress continues to shape their responses. From North America to Europe, SSNDs are present in a variety of ministries, tutoring and providing other services so that refugees and immigrants can become fluent in a new language and understand the culture of their new homes.

### **English Tutoring Project, Missouri**

Begun in 1998 as a collaborative effort among the Office of the Mayor in the City of St. Louis, the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the English Tutoring Project (ETP) helps immigrant students in Catholic schools learn English.



*Sister Kathleen Koenen, administrator for the English Tutoring Project, reads “Little Night” to kindergarten students at St. Francis Cabrini Academy in south St. Louis.*

“When students have a better command of the English language, they have a greater chance of graduating from high school and attending a university or technical school,” said Sister Kathleen Koenen, SSND, administrator of ETP. “Giving them English language skills opens doors and begins to break the cycle of poverty among immigrant populations.”

ETP helps students’ families, as well. Sister Kathleen explained that it is important to respect the children’s culture, and tutors have discovered dual language books that allow students to practice their English at home

with assistance from their parents. These books bridge the language gap that can arise when children begin learning English, but their parents lack the opportunity to do the same.

The majority of students are from Hispanic descent, but others come from Asia or Africa. In a survey conducted by the ETP for the 2015-16 school year, their 156 students spoke 22 different languages and represented 20 different countries of origin.



*Sister Cathryn O'Donnell and Samira Musse practice reading at Good Counsel Learning Center in Mankato, Minnesota.*

### **Refugee Outreach Program, Minnesota**

Over the past 50 years, Good Counsel Learning Center in Mankato, Minnesota, has continued to evolve to meet changing needs and now includes the Refugee Outreach Program, which was launched in 2012 to address the needs of refugee women who lacked transportation or childcare.

The Good Counsel Learning Center provides one-to-one tutoring sessions for children, youth and adults in reading, language arts and math. Volunteers also tutor adult men and women who are English language learners.

Sister Richarde Marie Wolf, SSND, who serves as the Refugee Outreach Program coordinator, makes connections between those seeking education and tutors, who volunteer to go into the home to teach one hour a day, twice a week.

"Recently, one of the tutors within the Refugee Outreach Program took the family out for ice cream," said Sister Richarde Marie. "This illustrates why this program is so important. It's not just tutoring. We also place a strong emphasis on building relationships, which is another reason why the Good Counsel Learning Center has been so successful."

### **Willkommen Mensch - Austria**

Sisters Jean Greenwald and Helen Plum, SSND, traveled to Eggenburg, Austria, last year to teach immigrant and refugee children English and German in the *Willkommen Mensch* program for refugee children and teenagers from Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea. The two SSNDs from North America live and minister with Sister Martha Bertsch from the SSND Province of Austria-Italy.

"Bringing out the best in those sitting before us and encouraging them to do the same for others around them is so important," Sister Jean said. "Because of past experiences, many of the refugees need much support and encouragement in learning to trust others."

When Sister Helen answered the call to go to Eggenburg, she said that she expected to be teaching English to refugees from Afghanistan and Syria. But a need arose to also teach two teenage boys from Afghanistan who had never gone to school.

"It is a daily challenge to draw upon my past early experiences as a primary teacher and adapt these skills suitable for teens – and all this in German," Sister Helen said. "The day Abdullah came to class and immediately arranged the small and capital letters of the alphabet correctly and then spoke a full sentence in German was a day of real joy. This quiet, almost 7-foot, gentle giant who usually walked with his head down looked up with a beautiful smile and said, 'Danke' as I praised him.

"Sometimes there may be five, and sometimes only one may come for class. But the one who comes may need to talk about his fears and experiences – being in a crowded lifeboat, walking for days hiding from patrols, the pain of separation from family, the murder of a mother, father or brother by the Taliban. Our boys are afraid of deportation and struggle to remain hopeful for a new future."

Blessed Theresa Gerhardinger's feast day on May 9 provided a unique and unforgettable experience for the three SSNDs. As they prepared to enjoy their evening together, the Syrian family living in their apartment building came to the door. A picture of Blessed Theresa was on the table, and they immediately asked who she was.

"For the next two hours, we sisters shared Blessed Theresa and our congregation history with them in a mix of Arabic, German and English," Sister Helen said. "Questions, laughter and gratitude filled the air as this Muslim family met our Blessed Mother Theresa for the first time. May she continue to guide us in our ministry among the refugees of today!"



*Sisters Martha Bertsch, Helen Plum and Jean Greenwald stop for a selfie on the way to the train in Vienna, Austria.*





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# Faces of School Sisters of Notre Dame in Prayer, Ministry and Community

1. Sisters Eileen Reilly and Kathy Schmittgens await the start of a session at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. The School Sisters of Notre Dame, which is a registered non-governmental organization, sends a delegation to the meeting each year to advocate on social justice issues.

2. Sister Mary Fitzgerald talks with graduating seniors at Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore. Photo courtesy of NDMU.

3. Sister Mary Catherine Dundon receives a 20-year award of recognition for her long-term service to Milwaukee Achiever Literary Services in Wisconsin. The program provides adult education and workforce development skills.

4. Bishop Joseph Obanyi visits with School Sisters of Notre Dame after leading a Eucharistic celebration for the opening of their new community in Likuyani, Kenya. Hundreds of St. John the Baptist parishioners turned out to welcome the first congregation of sisters to their parish.

5. Sister Ruth Emke pins a corsage on Diamond Jubilarian Sister Geraldine Neier at the Theresa Center Jubilee celebration at Sancta Maria in Ripa in St. Louis, Missouri.

6. School Sisters of Notre Dame at our Lady of Good Counsel in Mankato, Minnesota, participated in the "Dancing with the Mankato Stars" annual American Red Cross fundraiser and brought home this year's Judges Award. Front row: Sisters Therese Marie Merth, Cerella Baumgartner, Mary Kay Gosch, Sylvia Borgmeier, Rose Mary Snaza, Helen Jane Jaeb. Second row: Sisters Joanne O'Connor, Marie Russell (band in front of face), Mary Kay Ash (hand in front of face) and Carolyn Fasnacht. Other dancers not visible: Sisters Rose Anthony Krebs, Rita Wollschlager, Rosae Brown, Pat Frost, Mary Jo Welter, Ann Marie Merth, Joyce Kolbet, Kathryn Schoolmeesters, Ann Carol Kaufenberg and Sue Von Bank. Photo courtesy of the Mankato Free Press.

7. Sisters Lucy Nigh and Judy Bourg were among the 60 participants on the 75-mile Migrant Trail Walk along the U.S.-Mexico border in June, bearing witness to the death of 7,000 known brothers and sisters whose bodies were recovered on this side of the border since 1999. They walked to say that every death matters and for just and humane reform of U.S. immigration policies.





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**8.** Sister Nentaweh Wakger (far right) conducts a home economics class at Notre Dame Secondary School in Urua Edet Obo, Nigeria. The class integrates basic knowledge and skills and exposes students to numerous opportunities and practical values, such as working together cooperatively, laughing at each other's mistakes, cleaning up after themselves and keeping the environment tidy.

**9.** Sisters at Sancta Maria in Ripa in St. Louis participate in a special Earth Day celebration, which included praying, singing, hanging bird feeders and planting a tree.

**10.** Sister Rose Ngacha touches the water flowing from the new bore hole being built in her community in Kenya.

**11.** Sister Stephanie Spandl was one of about 14 School Sisters of Notre Dame and an equal number of students from Mount Mary University who enjoyed a fun afternoon of bowling and conversation at the Bowlero Lanes in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. The bowling party was one of the creative ways that SSND Vocation Team members connect with young women for fun interactions, deep conversation and relationship building.

Sister Rita Schwalbe visits with her third grade pen pal from Loyola Catholic School in Mankato. Students and teachers visited the sisters at Our Lady of Good Counsel in May to meet their pen pals.

**12.** Notre Dame of Maryland University President Marylou Yam (right) presents Sister Eileen O'Dea with a framed print at the annual Partners in Mission celebration. Sister Eileen was honored for demonstrating, in an outstanding manner, the mission and core values of Notre Dame of Maryland University. Photo courtesy of NDMU.

**13.** Sister Kathleen Feeley talks to students and parents during an admissions scholarship dinner at Notre Dame of Maryland University. Photo courtesy of NDMU.

**14.** Sister Jane Wand hands out SSND materials at the Diocesan Catholic Youth Conference in Amarillo, Texas. The conference included praise and worship with music; testimonies from young adults; keynote addresses; workshops, games and activities for youth and adult involvement; and Mass. More than 600 youth directors and youth from the Diocese of Amarillo attended the rally.

**15.** Sister Ann Schoch participates in a rally at the capitol in Helena, Montana.



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## Making religious life visible

### *SSND vocation ministers foster creative connections with today's young women*

Earlier this year, 26 Catholic sisters from three communities, including the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND), boarded a trolley in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and embarked on a tour through the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to share conversation and song and collect donations for a local overnight, emergency shelter.

They stopped at churches and universities, where they were embraced by parishioners, greeted with standing ovations and thanked for their service. For many whom they encountered, it had been a long time since they had seen a sister. For others, it was the first time. The outreach, organized by the SSND North American Vocation Ministry Team, served as a creative way to increase the visibility of Catholic sisters in the community.

"At Mickey's Diner in St. Paul, we went inside and serenaded the customers and staff – to their surprise and, I hope, delight," said Sister Mary Kay Brooks, SSND, one of the organizers. "We got a thundering round of applause and many smiles. The energy and enthusiasm of the group seemed to explode as they interacted with the customers and staff."

More and more, congregations are turning to innovative events and activities like the trolley tour to foster connections with young women and their communities. Being present and

being seen is an important element of vocation work and is critical to increasing vocations to religious life.

A 2015 study commissioned by the Hilton Foundation on Perceptions towards Catholic Sisters in the United States found that a strong majority (72 percent) of Americans view Catholic sisters and nuns favorably. Yet only half feel knowledgeable about Catholic sisters, and only 39 percent of millennials feel knowledgeable.

Positively, the research also showed that one-in-four Catholic women has considered becoming a Catholic sister at some point in her life.

Fifty years ago, women entered religious life because it was a way to live out their faith and to serve. There often were no other options available. But today, a woman can become a lay missionary or open a soup kitchen on her own.

"Today, it is the aspect of community living that invites women to religious life," said Sister Nancy Gilchrist, SSND. "It is how we do it rather than what we do. They want to do it in a faith community rather than just as a volunteer."

Today's new members enter when they are older. They have completed more formal education and have had full- or part-time jobs. Often, they already have experienced working with the poor in North America or abroad, said Sister

Rebecca Tayag, SSND. Sister Rebecca is connecting with young women like that through the *Spirit, Spirits N' Dialogue* group that she organized for young adult alumnae of The Epiphany School in New York City to come together for conversation about life awareness.

"Their interest in religious life stems from a desire to deepen their prayer and love of God and to be in community to share that life, joy and faith," Sister Rebecca said. "I am both humbled by the invitation to be in relationship with them and to help them discern a response to God's amazing love."

The challenge, as surveys show, is being visible, and that is where creativity abounds. Fifty years ago, there were many more sisters in classrooms and parish ministries. Young women often connected with and were inspired by the sisters with whom they came in contact daily. Today, the Hilton survey shows, millennials receive almost as much information about Catholic sisters from mainstream media (14 percent) as they do from Catholic sisters themselves. When asked where they would most likely go to find out about Catholic sisters, Americans said they would turn to the Internet first (50 percent), then their church (37 percent) for more information, according to the survey.

Providing authentic experiences for young women to interact with and work





*Photos, left to right: Speaking on the topic, “Music That Matters,” Sister Bridget Waldorf (center) gathered with University of Texas at Dallas students for the group’s Sunday Night Speaker Series.*

*Sisters Stephanie Spandl (second from left) and Bridget Waldorf (far right) with other vocation directors at the Life Awareness Retreat in San Antonio, Texas. The spirit-filled weekend provides an opportunity for young women and men to discern God’s call in their lives and the possibility of a religious vocation.*

*Sister Stephanie Spandl (fourth from left) makes rosaries with Sister Katherine Mullin, VHM, and students at the Vocation Fair at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls.*

*Sister Bridget Waldorf takes a selfie with Sister Mary Kay Brooks (center) and students at Cristo Rey High School in Dallas, Texas, during a National Catholic Sisters Week Sweets with the Sisters event.*

alongside Catholic sisters is critical because it is those personal connections and encouragement that influence a woman’s decision to consider religious life, according to a study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

In CARA’s nationwide survey of men and women religious who professed vows in 2014, nearly all (89 percent) in the study participated in some type of vocation program or experience prior to entering their religious institute. The most popular activities are “Come and See” programs, experienced by almost 56 of the women surveyed, and vocation retreats, experienced by 45 percent of the women surveyed. Forty percent became acquainted with their religious institute through print or online promotional material published by the institute prior to entering their religious institute.

“I think our scope has to be one of building on and continuing to develop relationships with all people – not discerners alone,” said Sister Bridget Waldorf, SSND. “The more people we can reach to share a positive, joy-filled, collaborative experience of religious life, the easier our ministry will be. That being said, we do need to be intentional in our desire and daily focus to reach women who we imagine as ‘potential’ sisters – those who could live into the precepts of You Are Sent (the SSND constitution), see themselves as desiring service to the church and the world, and are open to growing in faith and community.”

This past year, SSND Vocation Ministry Team members have been regular visitors to many Catholic schools, parishes, universities, retreats and

youth conferences. Sister Bridget has crisscrossed the country, talking with college students at the University of Texas at Dallas and Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore and visiting high school students at Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson, Maryland, and Institute of Notre Dame in Baltimore, as well as Cristo Rey High School in Dallas and Totino-Grace High School in Fridley, Minnesota. She also joined with students and chaperones from St. John’s Preparatory School in Collegeville, Minnesota, and Forest Lake High School in Forest Lake, Minnesota, for a week-long service immersion trip to the San Lucas Mission in San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala.

For Sister Stephanie Spandl, SSND, her outreach has included bowling with Mount Mary University students in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; conducting Advent and Lenten retreats for young women in St. Paul, Minnesota; taking part in a vocation jamboree at the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota; and participating in college and youth retreats in San Antonio, Texas; Collegeville, Minnesota; and the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.

She also spent time with First Communion and Confirmation parents at Sacred Heart Parish in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she discussed the role of the family in encouraging vocations and then joined the community for Mass and a meal celebrating *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). In Elm Grove, Wisconsin, she gathered with Latino SSND Associates, inviting reflection on the importance of both religious and lay vocations in the church.

Vocation ministry today needs to reflect the increasing diversity of the North American church, Sister Stephanie said. In addition to their typical outreach, the vocation team also makes it a point to connect with diverse Catholic communities.

“Because relationships are key to the vocation process, we need our sisters connected to these communities,” said Sister Stephanie. “Quite a number of sisters minister among immigrants and refugees and African-American, Native American and First Nations communities. We need to make sure that the women of these communities know they are welcome to join us.

“We understand that we cannot expect women from other cultures and different generations to just fit

*Continued on page 12*



*SSNDs joined with sisters from two other religious communities in St. Paul, Minnesota, for a trolley tour around the Twin Cities to bring awareness to religious life in the community.*

into our way of doing things. We, too, must adapt to who they are and the worldview and gifts they bring. Together, we create something new. This is both our challenge and our hope.”

For the School Sisters of Notre Dame, vocation ministry is considered everyone’s ministry. Support comes in the form of prayer, accompanying vocation team members to events, hosting separate activities in their own communities or representing SSND in their parishes or schools. For instance, SSNDs at Sancta Maria in Ripa in St. Louis, Missouri, hosted participants in a Convent Crawl for lunch. The young women had the opportunity to visit with Catholic sisters from

several congregations in their houses and convents for prayer and to learn firsthand how their communities and ministries are making a positive impact in the world today.

In Canada, the sisters have participated in annual vocation fairs and Masses in Hamilton, Ontario, which provides an opportunity for them to share information about the congregation and talk with parishioners.

As they make these connections and share their experiences with other sisters in the congregation, the Vocation Team is uplifted by the responses they receive. Sister Nancy quotes the *Magnificat* prayer of the Blessed Mother as a

reminder of the sacredness of a vocation: “My soul proclaims the glory of God, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.”

As Elizabeth and Mary were companions on the journey more than 2,000 years ago, those discerning a religious vocation need the same supportive relationship that she and Sisters Mary Kay, Rebecca, Bridget and Stephanie provide as vocation ministers.

“And Mary’s generous response is a model for all of us in that God-quest, to offer our lives in making God visible in all we say and do,” Sister Nancy said. “In short, 21st century vocation ministry to me is two-fold: making Christ visible and showing religious life to be viable.”

## *SSND vocations in Africa reflect continental trend*

In the Province of Africa, School Sisters of Notre Dame find that their most enduring vocation connections come through the direct contact they have with young people in their various ministries and at religious and church functions.

Africa is experiencing a surge in Catholicism, according to The Pontifical Yearbook 2017 and the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* 2015 published by the Vatican. That increase also is reflected in the number of vocations to religious life. While women religious have decreased in number at the global level, Africa, on the other hand, has registered the highest increase of women religious – 7.8 percent from 2010 to 2015.

Those trends are reflected in the congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Three young women professed first vows, and six sisters professed their perpetual vows last year in the Province of Africa. Currently, there are two novices and 12 postulants in formation programs.

“Listening to some of the young women who are considering religious life, they feel that their reasons for considering religious life include the ultimate desire to dedicate their life to God through service to humanity, particularly the poor and the marginalized,” said Sister Grace Okon, SSND provincial councilor in the Province of Africa. “They are interested in living the community life as religious through sharing and embracing simplicity.

“They admire and are interested in SSND life because of their experiences with us, including our effort to witness to unity in



*Interested women from various areas of Ghana gathered with SSNDs for a seminar to learn about the congregation, discernment, identifying individual gifts and talents, service, prayer, and the different vocational calls.*

the world, our hospitality, our openness to embrace different cultures, hard work, respect for all irrespective of age, community living that embraces all, our effort to live joyfully our vocation and our commitment to service according to our charism.”

Sisters connect with young women in a variety of activities, including vocation seminars, during which sisters share stories about their call to religious life and discuss how the participants can discern their own vocations. The sisters also extend invitations to young women to join them for community celebrations, experience SSND community life for “live-in” periods and share in their ministries when there are vacancies.

“The vocation work in our province has yielded us the opportunity to get to know many more young people and to discover that God is still calling many more people into the different vocations in life,” Sister Grace said. “It has offered us the opportunity to be connected in a broader way to the church and society. We have been able to accompany young people through discernment to discover their true vocation in life. It has helped in the continuous integration in our own vocation.”



# Ministering in Sierra Leone

## *Supporting the journey toward healing after Ebola crisis*

Three years after the Ebola epidemic forced the School Sisters of Notre Dame to leave their ministries in Sierra Leone, the sisters have returned to a country and people in need of healing economically, politically and emotionally.

“As SSNDs ministering in Sierra Leone after the Ebola epidemic, we find ourselves involved in the building up of livelihoods through the accompaniment of persons and families in their personal and communal journeys toward healing and moving on with their lives,” said Sister Norah Oyagi, SSND. “We have learned that we cannot minister the same way we did before the epidemic. Active listening has become an essential skill for us.”

It was in July 2014 when the council for the SSND Province of Africa informed the sisters in Sierra Leone that the epidemic, which was rampant in Guinea and Liberia, was infiltrating their country. Borders were being closed, and the sisters made the difficult decision to relocate to other African countries until it was safe to return, said Sister Antoinette Naumann, SSND.

In September 2015, Sisters Antoinette and Norah were among an SSND delegation who returned to Sierra Leone to meet and discuss the situation with the bishop, church leaders and doctors.

“I was anxious to return and let the people know we did not leave them forever,” Sister Antoinette said. “The countryside looked the same, but there were different check points where we were made to get out of the vehicle, have our temperatures taken and wash our hands with disinfectant.

“When we arrived, people who would ordinarily shake your hand or embrace you just smiled and kept their distance. This was strange, for Sierra Leoneans are warm people. Because the country

was still under scrutiny, touching was not to be done. However, people were happy to see us.”

As an effort toward recovery, the president and his government unveiled a detailed Agenda for Prosperity manifesto to accelerate socio-economic development, which incorporates the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, said Sister Norah, a nurse at Holy Spirit Hospital in Makeni.

“There have been steady strides made in healthcare and also in attitudinal changes in the population with regards to seeking appropriate medical care and trusting that health facilities will provide the care needed,” Sister Norah said. “We see this trust growing steadily but we know that it will be a gradual one.”

Schools had been closed for a year, and no formal or informal gatherings could be held, including sporting events and dances, said Sister Antoinette, a teacher at St. Joseph Primary School in Bumbuna. When schools reopened, so much make-up work was needed that holidays were shortened or eliminated.

At Mass, they could not share the sign of peace except by the nod of a head, and often it was not included in the

liturgy. At banks, soap and water were available for customers to wash their hands before conducting business. Gradually, markets were reopened with great care, usually for necessary items like food.

“Everyone tried to move on and make a new future,” Sister Antoinette said. “I feel that I did not do anything extraordinary, but I feel I helped with the healing process by being there, ministering in the school and in the outstations. Today, life in Bumbuna has returned to its usual pattern, but the past can never be forgotten. We thank God for the healing. We pray Blessed Theresa Gerhardinger’s words that ‘God in His wisdom and mercy can and will direct all for our best.’”

*Sisters Antoinette Naumann, Ruth Nyanchama Mose and Sarah Unwaunyin Tanjo are members of the SSND Bumbuna Community in Sierra Leone. Sisters Antoinette and Ruth teach at St. Joseph Primary School, and Sister Sarah teaches at St. Matthew Secondary School.*



# Inspired by SSND

**“For us, education means enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential as individuals created in God’s image and assisting them to direct their gifts toward building the earth.”**

- *You Are Sent*, Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame



*Judith Otero has dedicated her life to educating students in Kenya.*

**A high school scholarship from the SSNDs started a ripple effect that continues today.**

## *Judith Otero*

Unable to cover the expense of her last two years at St. Theresa’s Gekano Girls School in Kisii, Kenya, Judith Otero knew her options were limited. Anxious about her future, she reached out to the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1997 for a scholarship to finish her high school studies.

“I feared dropping out of school because I could easily become a victim of early marriage and not realize my dream of becoming a teacher,” Judith said. “Most girls who did not attend school in my village were married off to fetch a bride-price.”

Judith received that scholarship, and it started a ripple effect that continues today. After finishing high school, she volunteered in Mathare, one of the largest slums in Nairobi, Kenya. There, she experienced firsthand the danger and hopelessness of the area. With limited educational resources and survival a daily reality, families placed little emphasis on education.

“I was always affected seeing children of school-going age loitering around,” Judith said. “I’d see them playing in the dirty trenches full of water emanating from burst sewers. ... I feel their struggle. I know they have the potential and interest to learn but no support.”

Touched by her experience in the slum and propelled by a deep sense of service instilled by the SSND school motto “Enter to learn, learn to serve,” Judith went on to receive her degree in teaching from Migori Teachers Training College in western Kenya. She then returned to Mathare to start a preschool. From its humble beginnings, with little more than a small, donated room and a few teaching materials, the school now serves nearly 400 students, offering studies through the eighth grade. A single gift of education planted into one heart and mind, now blooms in opportunity and hope for many.

*Reprinted with permission from GlobalSistersReport.org  
Picture by Rose Achiego*



## Bob Paff

Bob Paff travels the world - from Baltimore to Dubai and back – motivating audiences and inspiring others to succeed. That drive and desire “to give more than you receive” is the result of the loving encouragement and influence of the School Sisters of Notre Dame who taught him at St. Wenceslaus Catholic School in Baltimore more than 40 years ago.

“They created a nurturing environment where kids could thrive,” Bob said. “I think what the sisters instilled and inspired in me was my ability to lead. That foundation provided the inspiration that I could be anything that I wanted to be. That is something that never left me.”

A motivational speaker and author, Bob also has worked in the insurance industry, hosted his own radio show and served as the voice of National Geographic’s 2015 campaign to help educate and advocate for the environment.

**“Because of my connections with the sisters and the Catholic faith, I wanted to give back.”**

– Bob Paff

He reconnected with the SSNDs when a friend mentioned a fundraising event that the sisters in Baltimore were planning. Before he knew it, he was volunteering for the fundraiser and then as its master of ceremonies.

“Because of my connections with the sisters and the Catholic faith, I wanted to give back,” Bob said. “I like being part of the solution. I want to be part of awareness.

“One thing I have discovered is that no matter if you are speaking to someone in Spanish, French, Portuguese, no matter where you are from in the world, we all want the same three basic things. We all want to be seen. We all want to be heard. We all want to be valued. I hope that sharing my faith and struggles will motivate others and that I will have made a difference in the world. Aren’t we put on this earth to make a difference in other people’s lives?”

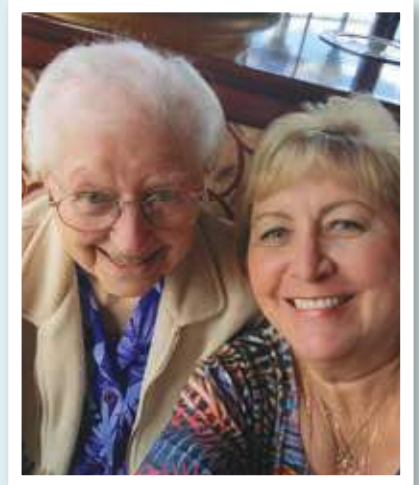


Bob Paff has authored books and articles to help others to succeed.

## Carol Hardy

Carol Hardy first met Sister Rose Helene (Rosie) Miller, SSND, more than 60 years ago at St. Joseph’s in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She did not realize it then, but it was the beginning of an enduring friendship.

“She loved to be outdoors. Even in the middle of winter, she was one of the only teachers who would go out at recess with us,” Carol said. “She would jump rope with the girls and play soccer with the boys. And that was even while wearing her habit!”



*It was more than 60 years ago when Sister Rose Helene (Rosie) Miller (left) first inspired Carol Hardy.*

Carol’s family moved, and she transferred schools, but her parents continued to keep in touch with Sister Rosie. The first contact Carol remembers having on her own with Sister Rosie was in high school when they began exchanging letters.

As Carol left Milwaukee for opportunities in Chicago, Phoenix and Florida, she continued to write to Sister Rosie, who moved around Wisconsin and to Indiana. With email and Facebook, the two friends were able to stay in touch more easily. Carol also made regular trips to Milwaukee and would take Sister Rosie to lunch or dinner each visit.

Sister Rosie was well-known for her tomato plants, as she grew bushels of tomatoes and would give them away to soup kitchens and poorer members of the community. When the work became “too backbreaking,” Sister Rosie turned over the garden to another sister. Carol called more frequently as Sister Rosie’s health declined, and she spoke to her nurse a few hours before she passed in January 2017.

“I think of her whenever I see anything really pretty and lovely in nature, but she was partial to butterflies,” Carol said. “I think of her when I see one, and wonder if maybe that is her reincarnated to watch over me.”

**“I think of her whenever I see anything really pretty and lovely in nature.”**

– Carol Hardy

**“A particular concern in all our ministries is the establishment of a just society. We call ourselves and others to embody gospel values and to live the social teachings of the church. Working toward the enablement of persons and the promotion of human dignity, we contribute to positive systemic change in society.”**

– *You Are Sent*, Constitution of the School Sisters of Notre Dame

## Advocating on critical social justice concerns

Have you tried out the School Sisters of Notre Dame’s new Voter Voice e-advocacy tool? Our Shalom – Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation contacts unveiled this new platform last year for advocating on issues of concern to the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Since we launched the tool on the [ssnd.org](http://ssnd.org) website, nearly 5,000 messages have been sent to elected officials about critical social justice issues, including health care reform, climate change and the environment, and refugees and immigration.

This e-advocacy tool allows SSNDs and our friends in the United States, as well as those from Guam and Puerto Rico, to contact their members of Congress, the president and other government officials in Washington, D.C.

The value of having our own e-advocacy tool is that it allows us to tailor the messaging to fit our SSND values and language, plus it enables us to track usage, including numbers and location, which helps us with evaluation of our efforts.

Joining the School Sisters of Notre Dame in advocating on these social justice concerns is simple. We provide a sample letter that you can simply click and send as is. However, we do encourage our advocates to consider



taking a minute to modify the sample message or create one of their own. Research tells us that individualizing your email significantly improves the impact of your communication.

Both the web tool and phone app are for SSNDs, associates, friends and anyone who wants to let his or her voice be heard on these important social justice issues. There is no additional cost to us to have more folks make use of these resources.

Give it a try! Just go to [ssnd.org/ministries/shalom/called-act/advocacy](http://ssnd.org/ministries/shalom/called-act/advocacy), choose an issue you find compelling, and follow the on-screen prompts.

You also can download the Voter Voice app for your phone in the Google Play or iTunes app store. Search for “votervoice” (one word). After you install the app, you can search for “School Sisters of Notre Dame” to access all of our current advocacy campaigns, as well as an option to look up your elected officials.

“Shalom takes a prophetic stance by joining its voice with those who cry for justice and by providing a voice for those who are voiceless in their struggle for justice. It is action oriented.”

– *SSND Shalom Document*



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