Our Journey

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Franciscan Sisters
of Little Falls, Minnesota
After Easter, I took a walk to our campus greenhouse and greeted my new plantings: tomatoes, basil, parsley, rosemary, sweet peppers, cosmos, snapdragons and more. I passed the colorful tulips on the east side of Mary Hall. That did it! I felt new life within my spirit. Just this morning I read an excerpt from Matthew Fox, contemporary theologian, who wrote, “We are Resurrection people. Be resurrection. Be born again. And again. And again. Rise up and be counted. Rise up and imbibe the good news deeply – that death does not conquer, that life, not death has the last word . . .”

Though spring is giving way to summer, we sisters are still holding on to a bit of Christmas. As our donors know, the annual Christmas Appeal for the care of our elderly sisters includes a prayer card that can be returned along with a donation. The cards are distributed among the sisters who pray for each donor and the intentions offered. I keep my nine prayer cards in my daily prayer book. Often in the mornings, I go through each one, read the intention and let my prayers “rise up.” These special donors are my “prayer family” for 12 months.

Recently, a donor called to talk about her husband who died a few days earlier. During our phone conversation she said, “Be sure to tell Sister Nancy deMattos about Joe. She has been praying for us for a long time.” Later, when I shared the news with Sister Nancy, she commented, “I have kept track of my prayer recipients since 2011. I keep their names and requests right in front of me. It is my prayer ministry.”

One more story to share: Sister Ardis Cloutier, 92 years young, received a prayer card from a great grandson of Rita O’Brien Smith, a 1949 St. Francis High School graduate. Rita was a friend, two years younger than Sister Ardis. She remembers Rita fondly and is delighted to connect with her family in prayer throughout the year.

Thank you, Sister Nancy, Sister Ardis and all our sisters who strengthen the bonds of friendship through prayer. Be assured, we pray for you, knowing you pray for us.
What’s next for them?

Elizabeth Rydeen, Director of Community Relations

Asking certain groups of sisters a particular question has become my habit, a means of helping me fill the pages of Our Journey—and feature a variety of sisters and sometimes associates. As we prepare for a new Leadership team to take office, it seems only fitting to pose a few questions to the outgoing team. These four sisters—Carol Schmit, Grace Skwira, Char Grossman and Carolyn Law—have served their Franciscan community with care, compassion and creativity, with thoughtfulness, diligence and minds for the future. I am grateful.

In my tenure, I’ve seen my share of Leadership teams come and go, each with their own characteristics and strengths. Their ministry experience, education and credentials may vary, but one thing they have in common is a willingness to serve their community, to care and nurture their sisters, to lead.

In the pages that follow, Sisters Carol, Grace, Char and Carolyn look back at their time in office, their accomplishments, surprises, realities and what might be next for them. Enjoy these reflections. Sisters, I wish you Godspeed!

Sister Carol Schmit

Because God loved us, we should love each other

Years ago, a group of us traveled home from Venezuela to Minnesota by way of Central America. In Guatemala, we received hospitality from Maryknoll Sisters who brought us to visit the local bishop. Every day at 6 p.m. he opened his door and visited with whomever came along—dogs included. Five years ago, when I was elected to Leadership, I thought, that is a kind of minister I would like to be.

So, how did that turn out? Here in Little Falls, my office is not on the street, but in the bowels of a large brick building. Covid put blazing stop signs on our doors. Visitors not welcome. Certainly, no dogs. So much for that leadership model.

On a brighter note, it was meaningful to meet with Bishop Donald Kettler and other religious leaders in the St. Cloud Diocese to share plans and problems and always a special lunch. The installation of Bishop Patrick Neary has brought new energy to our diocese and its mission statement: “Together let us be a Heart of Mercy, a Voice of Hope and Hands of Justice.”

-Sister Carol visiting with a friendly dog at the 2022 Blessing of Animals.
We met in solidarity with hundreds of women at the National Leadership Conference of Women Religious and in our own Region XI. We brought home a commitment to the assembly’s justice resolution on racism, migration and the climate and how they impact each other. From this resolution, work groups, made up of nearly every sister and many associates, initiated study that continued virtually throughout the years burdened by Covid. New Zoom technology allowed us to keep in touch with each other, here in the States and in Latin America in ways never before possible.

We Franciscans smiled when, in 2013, the newly elected pope took the name of Francis. Two years later he named his very important encyclical Laudato Si, with Saint Francis’s Canticle of the Creatures in mind. We joined with persons around the world, all of us committed to help heal our common home. From this effort, a dream for restoring our campus and property at Umbria has been born.

It was hard to smile as Covid forced us to change many plans. We faced the heartbreaking reality of the death of 28 sisters, nearly as many associates and several staff. Sisters who died in 2020 were taken un-embalmed and un-waked to their graves. Months later we were able to invite family and friends to join us in a memorial service for each one.

With stumbling words, we acknowledged that their modest burial plots as well as the property we live on, celebrate on, support each other on, is ancestral land of the Dakota, Ojibwe peoples and indigenous nations dating back centuries.

I look back six decades to my time as a novice. We prayed the Office in Latin, a challenge for us teenagers. Very soon we received new prayer books, in English! In rapid succession we changed our names, our habits, our ministries. We are again facing major changes in our community. Of this we can be sure.

Through it all, we became less motivated by setting firm goals and carefully articulated plans. It has been more practical to live each day, open to what may be emerging—to let go of some plans, be motivated by new possibilities. Our Holy Rule remains Saint Francis’s guide for us. I have tried my best to be faithful to this model of being sister, of being leader. “Because God loves us, the sisters should love each other for the Lord says, ‘This is my precept that you love one another as I have loved you.’ (Jn 15:12) Let them manifest their love for each other in deeds.” (The Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis. #23)

Donating to the Franciscan Sisters

Please, feel free to express any wishes you may have for your gift. However, be advised that in order to ensure that donors will be entitled to a federal income tax deduction, Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota (FSLF), is required by Internal Revenue Service rulings to retain full authority over the assets granted to it and cannot accept gifts that are required by the donor to be paid, or to be used, only to further the work of a specific individual or that are required to be used in another country by FSLF or a foreign charity or religious institute.
Sister Grace Skwira

To be a servant leader

When my sisters elected me to serve as one of their leaders, I heard this as a call to be a servant leader. Chapter VIII of our Third Order Franciscan Rule by which we promise to live, says it clearly: “Ministers are to be servants of all.” For me it meant to offer my service with humility, love, patience and kindness.

I had many opportunities to do just that as part of my role was to minister to our sisters whose lives were in transition, which included frailty, ill health, and physical and cognitive disabilities. I had so many occasions to listen and care, but also to learn. These times were not just me giving; I was also receiving. As sisters shared their personal and spiritual journeys with me, I was blessed in ways that brought joy to my heart and surged in me a deep gratitude for each sister. It was “in giving that I received so much more.” Being of service to my community has been one of the greatest privileges of my life.

It would be difficult to put into words what a job description for a leader would entail. Though, as elected religious leaders, I felt that bringing hope was surely one of our tasks. We were challenged with administrative details and major decisions we had to make. I prayed for the gift of wisdom to consider all the extenuating circumstances in order to make good judgments together as a team. Some of our work and planning was stalled during the long pandemic. There were disappointments beyond our control. It took courage, but I tried to exude hope during that time.

But without a doubt, the Spirit of God was always at work within us. Now, as I complete my ministry on the Leadership team, I have the assurance that the Spirit of God will continue its work in me, as I look forward to the many blessings that await me.

"I was blessed in ways that brought joy to my heart & surged in me a deep gratitude for each sister."
Sister Char Grossman

It was an honor and a privilege

I wanted to be a servant leader and be present with and to the sisters. I believe I accomplished that; at least I tried to do my very best. Much is expected when in Leadership. It’s like living in a fishbowl, constantly being seen and observed! Issues and situations arise, and one is expected to have answers and responses for many things. There were many times I felt inadequate, however, you are a team and work together as best as you can. What I would consider a challenge and an accomplishment was to work through the entire process of de-constructing Hurle Hall in 2022. The committee began the process in 2020 and even amid Covid, we pushed forward with emails, Zoom meetings, phone calls and meeting in person. Hopefully, with the memorial in place, everyone can find some peace.

A joy for me was to work directly with Sister Julien, Allen Riedeman, Amy Scholl and Jennifer Archambault. I learned so much from each of them, and they hold a special place in my heart.

An accomplishment, not only for me but also for Amy as well, was when we hired (by Zoom) Jennifer to be our director of Technology. What a blessing she is to our Franciscan family. I had our FSLF staff in mind often and was aware of their needs, difficulties, what they might be experiencing. I tried to reach out to our staff as much as possible.

Reality for me as the five years come to completion is that Covid completely changed us; brought many things to a halt; challenged us to face reality like never before. Some want to ignore it now and say it’s over! I say, let’s be patient with its existence and deal with it appropriately and carefully.

What’s next for me? I plan to take plenty of time to visit family, which includes a brother and a sister, two sisters-in-law, many nieces and nephews and their families, other relatives, such as cousins. I have friends near and far that I haven’t seen for five years! I plan to take time to visit them and get reconnected! My dear friend, Theresa, is looking forward to our having more time together and taking some road trips! I look forward to less meetings for sure. After that, I will be open to the Spirit and be led where I hope I can do some good.

It was an honor and privilege to serve as an assistant minister for five years! Thank you for your patience and kindness with me.
Looking back, we desired to respond to the emerging future. “Emerging” has become a new “buzz word” among religious leaders. It means responding to what is on the horizon as needs and opportunities arise. The world and our life are changing so rapidly that we need to stay flexible and nimble to respond accordingly. Who could have predicted a radical change in plans and life with the pandemic?

Looking back, I see that the community has grown greatly in our awareness of the earth and her cry for healing. Our Earth Jubilee committee led the way in engaging Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si*: *Our Common Home*. For me the message of *Laudato Si* has given us an integrated way of seeing our varied ways of responding to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. We have also grown in our contemplative prayer and in accepting one another with our imperfections.

I was surprised that I was not allowed to do more hands-on service. I would volunteer to help out and our staff, lay and sisters, would say, “We have it covered.” I am very grateful to our wonderful employees and sister staff members who so competently and lovingly serve.

I didn’t have specific hopes and dreams. I just wanted to do my best in following the Spirit’s inspirations and call. I feel satisfaction in having contributed my various gifts to our life and ministry together.

I look forward to visiting my siblings, to more leisure time, while continuing my practice of energy healing and participation in music endeavors on campus.

Sister Carolyn plays mandolin at the 2018 Green Fair.
A visit to San Rafael

Sister Carolyn Law

I had the enjoyable opportunity to attend the annual meeting of our Mexico Civil Association in March. This nonprofit corporation was started in 2008 to enable the Franciscan Sisters to do business in Mexico. I have been a member from the beginning. It was lovely to attend and so much easier to follow the discussion and to contribute than by Zoom—all in Spanish! We recognized that the Franciscans Sisters arrived in 2003. Thus, a 20th anniversary celebration will be in the making.

This year Casa Franciscana, home to the students in residence program, hosted eight students, who kept Sister Aurora Tovar and assistant director Dennis (pronounced Denise) busy. Six of the students are in their first year of high school. One student comes from a little village over an hour away and stays at the Casa on weekends while other students are able to return home. Imagine the homesickness! They have struggled to catch up after being out of the classroom for nearly two years. Thus, they receive extra tutoring in math and reading.

We also received an update on Casa Maria in Saltillo, a residence for post high school students, established in the summer of 2022. The house is provided rent-free by the Diocese of Saltillo. This new ministry has been a dream of Sister Isabel Berrones Morales who looked high and low during the last two years for an appropriate place. When the time was right, this house became available. Before the diocese acquired the building, it was owned by a family that ran a sewing business there. So, there are larger rooms fitting for dormitories. For the diocese, it was meant to be a home for unwed mothers, but that project never launched due to lack of personnel. Since the house was unused for some time, a lot of work has gone into transforming it: cleaning, repairing, acquiring adequate furniture. In the first year there were three young women benefiting from the support offered by Sister Isabel and her team of volunteers. Plans are to have 10 students in the fall semester. Helping young women advance in their education is invaluable!

In other news, Sister Aurora Tovar finished her master’s degree in Integral Family Systems Therapy in December 2022. She loves working with the women in the rural area of San Rafael. Women and families seek her out for counseling and therapy. With a special donation, Sister Aurora held two empowerment training groups, each with several women from the villages. The donation helped pay the fees for professional trainers and food for the workshops. Topics in the training included self-esteem, self-knowledge, communication skills, awareness of domestic violence. One group continues meeting monthly for mutual support. Sister Aurora is a treasure for the women who would otherwise not have any access to such services.

I thank all of our collaborators both in Mexico and in the United States for supporting this important ministry.
Adios,  
Sister Janice!  
’Til we meet again . . .

Sister Janice Wiechman, after serving in Mexico for 18 years, was elected to the new Leadership team. This necessitated her leaving her ministry in San Rafael where she mentored the students and helped them with English and math. She served the parish as pastoral minister and provided sacramental preparation. Her reflection . . .

Living here in San Rafael has been an experience of seeing things through other’s eyes and language. There are customs that are different like the “Levantamiento” or raising up of Jesus at Christmas time. This custom is so strong that even men who I don’t see in church accept being the godfather, kneeling for the rosary and reverently helping their wives dress Jesus.

I have been challenged to live more simply, and then I go to a village and realize that they live even more simply yet. I wonder how I am one who has most everything I need, and they do not.

I have learned more about hospitality—receiving the one at the door whether coming to visit or coming to beg. If I do not think that giving money is a good idea, I give food so that he or she can eat. It is respecting the person and looking to see how to share something with them.

I think that my time living with Sister Aurora Tovar has made me more flexible and other events have called forth flexibility, too. Some mornings, Aurora comes out of her room with an unexpected need for the day and turns my plans on end. Also, people do not die on a schedule; and if someone dies, the family will want a prayer service within 24 to 36 hours. Then, I move my priorities around because it is a really important time to be with the families.

Lastly, a great gift to me was visiting the sick and the homebound when I went up in the Sierra Mountains with Father Edgard Neri Cerda. These 18 years have truly been the frosting on my cake of gratitude.
Sister Patrice Kiefer celebrates 100 years!

Sister Elise Saggau

Sister Patrice Kiefer was born July 4, 1923, in a small hospital in Lidgerwood, N. Dak. Named Leona, she was the youngest of nine children in the Charles and Clara Kiefer family. Leona loved helping her father and brothers with the outside farm work, especially caring for the animals. She has especially fond memories of harvest time, when her father, together with a crew of men, did the threshing for farmers in the area. On pay day, little Leona delighted in helping her father write the checks and distribute them. Even as a child she showed exceptional administrative ability!

She attended a small country school in Marboe District #3. She spent her first two high school years in Winona, where she lived with her married sister, Gert. Her final two years, however, were as a resident student at St. Francis High School in Little Falls. By the middle of her senior year, she had made up her mind to join the sisterhood there.

She entered the Franciscan convent on January 5, 1941. On August 12 she received the habit and the religious name Sister Mary Patrice. After making her first vows, she was sent briefly to the College of St. Benedict in St. Joseph, where she earned credits in sociology and health care administration. She then began her ministry at the St. Cloud Children’s Home as office manager/secretary/receptionist. Ten years later, she entered health care work as office manager/assistant administrator at St. Anthony’s Hospital in Milwaukee. Appointed administrator at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital in Alexandria in 1960, she served there until 1970, when Mercy merged with the local Douglas County Hospital. She then became assistant administrator at Douglas County and, three years later, was appointed director of Human Resources, Social Services, Volunteers, and Security. She held this position with distinction until her retirement in 2013.

While serving in these various capacities, Sister Patrice managed to continue her education. She attended courses at Marquette University and St. Cloud State University, adding to her administrative credentials. In 1972, she completed independent studies for a bachelor of science degree in hospital administration at the University of Minnesota. During this period, she also served for five years as the first human resources director for her religious congregation and managed to hold several governing board positions: St. Gabriel’s Hospital, St. Ansgar Hospital, St. Francis Medical Center, and Franciscan Sisters Health Care, Inc., the sisterhood’s health care corporation.

In 2013, Sister Patrice retired from Douglas County Hospital, but continued to live in Alexandria with Sister Sharon Fyle for another five years. During these years, she enjoyed volunteering at St. Mary’s Parish where she held positions on the parish council and liturgy, long-range planning and personnel committees. She also chaired a task force that established a parish nurse program. She kept her hand in at the hospital as a volunteer and, together with Sister Sharon, met regularly with

New X-ray equipment for Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, Alexandria, 1962

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Franciscan Associates in the area and with a number of homebound. The two sisters considered themselves engaged in a ministry of presence in the Alexandria community, which they had come to love.

But life for Sister Patrice was not all work and volunteerism. She especially enjoyed crafts, creating cards, and doing home decorating. To this day, she loves spending time with members of her family, who visit her and call her frequently. She is a long-time baseball fan, listening to games on the radio or watching them on television.

Sister Patrice is a story-teller and often regales her listeners with interesting anecdotes from her life. One of her favorites is about meeting Bishop Fulton Sheen while participating in the annual Catholic Hospital Association conference in St. Louis. She not only attended his Mass but shared dinner with him. An even more thrilling experience was meeting the legendary Atlanta Braves right fielder, Hank Aaron, at St. Benedict’s Church in Milwaukee. The occasion was his being baptized there together with his children.

In 2018, Sister Patrice moved to the Motherhouse in Little Falls, where she is able to enjoy greater support. On July 4, she turns 100 years old. Here is a woman who really knows how to celebrate life! Happy birthday, dear Sister Patrice!

Planned Giving—Please let us know if you would like more information on remembering the Franciscan Sisters in your will and estate planning.

Contact: Sister Bernice Ebner
(320)632-0699 • bebner@fslf.org
This issue of *Our Journey* honors three Franciscan Sisters celebrating their 60th Jubilee. Sisters Patricia Forster, Shirley Mueller and Grace Skwira grew up in families steeped in the Catholic faith. Their parents and families provided a foundation that fostered a vocation for generous Gospel living. All three were nurses and spent decades caring for the sick, the elderly and those on the margins in countries around the world and throughout the United States. Thank you, sisters, for your years in ministry! God bless you!
God saved my life!

Sister Shirley Mueller wanted to give her life to God in prayer when she joined the Franciscan Sisters. She is eternally grateful for their support and direction through all these 60 years. Born in Los Angeles, Calif., to her loving parents, Phyllis and Leo Mueller, she says the Catholic Church has been her home, containing a supportive community for her wherever she has been, all over the world. She has lived and worked in many places—Minnesota, South and North Dakota, Wisconsin, Montana, Texas and Tanzania—in a variety of nursing positions, hospital chaplain, pastoral minister, clerk, African missionary, massage therapist, gardener, home health aide, assisted living night cook and pharmacy technician.

Sister Shirley started a gratitude journal where she writes three things every day that she is grateful for. Highlights include gratitude for the four times she feels God saved her life. When she was about 4 years old, she drowned at West Battle Lake. Her uncle, Mark, had been fishing not far from where she and three other children had been sitting on the dock. Something told him to look over at them and, when he only counted three little kids, he came over and saw little Shirley’s blond hair floating in the water. He picked her up and she “was gone.” He worked to save her and was never so glad to hear a cry as she came around. Shirley feels God had saved her life that day through her uncle Mark.

God saved her life another time when she and her dad and brother, Butch, went ice fishing. A fish house had been moved and the hole was covered with snow. She didn’t see it, stepped into the hole and went down into the freezing water. Her dad and Butch pulled her out and took her to the nearest farmhouse, where Mrs. Cass Benkowski put Shirley’s feet and legs into the oven to warm her up. She thinks it must be why she still gets so cold today and likes the warm South to live in.

In Africa, her life was saved when she was very sick with typhoid fever and was mistakenly being treated for amoebas. Sister Maristell Schanen sent Shirley to a doctor she knew in Arusha, Tanzania, and he started her on medication right away in the waiting room after five weeks of being terribly ill. She said she had picked out a burial site on the top of the WaPare Mountains near Kilimanjaro because she felt she was so close to death.

When Shirley lived in Duluth, she would ride her bike to work all year round. She wrapped zippers around the wheels for traction in the winter, and one time when she crossed the street, she was hit by an oncoming car. As her bike flew, she bounced on the car’s hood and window and landed on the pavement. She said it felt like an angel had lifted her up and protected her; she did not get hurt. Once more, God saved her life!

Sister Shirley says, “For the gift of life, I am most grateful; for the gifts of family, I am indebted; for the gift of community, I owe my life; and for the abundance of friends throughout my life, I owe so much too. Praise and thank God with me.”
Sister Patricia Forster began her childhood on a 364-acre farm in Belle River Township that was full of family, freedom, closeness to the earth and animals. The seventh of 11 children born to Florence and Tony Forster, she knew the world of siblings, farming and the freedom of faith and formation in their fullest. The family moved to the outskirts of Alexandria when Pat was 10, and she began babysitting, joined 4-H and enjoyed many wonderful disciplines and creative activities. Tragedy triggered the deepest faith learning for Pat when her 19- and 24-year-old brothers died in accidents. Death became a deep and integral part of life, and deep down this conversion time taught her that she belongs to the Lord. Time spent in silence, prayer, sitting alone in a tree or at the lake allowed the Holy Spirit to guide her toward her future path.

When Pat entered St. Francis Convent, her ever-constant conversion came from St. Clare College and the Franciscan Sisters who taught there. All were models of spirituality, especially Sister Rose Mae Rausch. As she learned about mission, she learned about serving the poor. As a nurse in Moorhead, Minn., she discovered that there were very poor families, some of whom were migrants. Building on her parents’ example of reaching out to those in need with generosity and hospitality, Sister Pat’s work included health care and social services. Her mission became that of being one with the poor.

Her extra time was filled with reading, learning and consuming new understandings, advocacy and solidarity with global issues. She grew in Franciscan charism and spirituality. As time went on, she received both a master’s and doctorate degree in theology and ministry. This afforded her many ministry opportunities to serve in Chicago, Venezuela, Guatemala, Mexico, and now in Texas.

Even though she has had many administrative responsibilities—in Public Health, long-range planning in parishes, building the Franciscan Sisters’ mission in San Rafael, Mexico—she continues to treasure listening to and being with the marginated. Sister Pat said, “The depth of my ‘not knowing’ and being humble, being the learner while serving with ready tools is exhilarating. Over the years, I learned the culture, the language, the relationships, the international domination, the financial effect, and especially, I have learned contemplative prayer; just being. I treasure living simply. The Spirit is my guide. I am so grateful. If there is one word about my life of conversion, it is gratitude. I am especially thankful for my faith. It is counting on the Spirit to lead me, guide me.”

Sister Pat: “Each Holy Week our teens led the Holy Week Services in 8-12 mountain villages of San Rafael, Parish. The ritual, proclamation, sharing of consecrated bread and community guided by teens was for the Glory of God. In 2014 some 64 teens and nine or 10 trucks of supplies were shared, lifting the spirit and lives of others in celebration of the Resurrection.”

Being one with the poor
Sister Grace Skwira was born into a large family—the tenth of 16 children of Mathilda and Felix Skwira. Sister Grace feels blessed with good, faith-filled, generous and grateful parents who gave her a happy childhood on their family farm near Opole. Life was always guided by their Catholic faith and filled with fun, hard work and simple living in the wonders of creation.

After graduating from high school, she rented a room at a disabled widow’s home near the St. Cloud Hospital where she worked as a nurse aide. During that time, she made the decision to become a sister. She had been thinking about it since childhood, when she first experienced the peace and joy of the Franciscan Sisters who taught summer religion classes at her home parish. The Franciscan values resonated with her because they were the same values her family lived daily. Grace’s desire was to show her love for God by serving others and felt that being a sister would be the best way to do this.

The desire to live simply and to be with the poor, sick and vulnerable brought her to “live the Gospel” in various capacities, in places near and far. She served by caring for the sisters in the convent infirmary, with the elderly at St. Otto’s and St. Francis Nursing Homes and attending the sick at hospitals in Breckenridge and Onamia. Accompanying the sick and doing midwifery in Peru and Bolivia showed Sister Grace a different reality, as did Hispanic ministry in Alabama. Her eyes and heart were opened ever wider when she cared for suffering, emaciated Cambodian refugees in a refugee camp in Thailand and during two mission trips to Nicaragua. Spending one week cleaning up after Hurricane Katrina with the people of New Orleans reinforced to her that even when people endure unimaginable suffering, they still are able to offer some depth of gratitude. In addition to these ministries, she served as congregational secretary for eight years, vocation minister for nine and assistant minister on two Leadership teams.

Sister Grace said that in every place she found herself, she knew that it was where she was meant to be at the time. Her initial desire to show her love for God by serving others was there for her in all her ministries. Each served as a vehicle for spiritual and personal growth, lasting friendships, valuable learnings as well as challenges and a deeper invitation to live a Franciscan Gospel life. She shared, “God’s goodness and faithfulness has come to me through my Franciscan Sisters, my family and the people with whom I ministered. I feel a deep happiness and peace in my heart for having said ‘yes’ to the call to be a Franciscan Sister 60 years ago and am grateful for the blessings this way of life has been for me.”
For six months, the new project, Proper Management of Garbage and Promotion of the Care of the Earth, has been operating in the community of San Diego, Nicaragua. This project consists of providing education on caring for the environment and creating designated places for garbage in specific areas of the town. These actions are being carried out with the leadership of Associate Karen Zamora, thanks to funding from the One Planet Fund,* sponsored by the Franciscan Sisters.

The first stage of this project consisted of providing training to the people; children and adults were informed about the proper management of garbage. The next stage will consist of installing garbage deposits at specific points in the community, so that people can fill them with non-degradable waste to be collected every month. People are expected to refrain from throwing garbage into the streets or gutters or burning it. The goal is to keep garbage from accumulating for extended periods of time and create a cleaner, healthier community for everyone.

We dream that the day will come when the community achieves better levels of health, that waste will be separated more efficiently from organic matter used for composting, and that the project’s formation and structure provides monthly income from the program.

*A One Planet Fund applications are due July 1, November 1 and February 1. Contact Elizabeth Rydeen, erydeen@fslf.org.

Associate Arlen Casco lives in Managua, Nicaragua, and is a member of the Latin America team. She promotes relationships among associates and applicants in rural and urban areas. Arlen leads the effort to edit Engaging Franciscan Wisdom podcasts in Spanish. She also supports ministry to young adults and the One Planet Fund project in San Diego.

Green Fair Folk Festival
Wednesday, August 2, 2023 4-8p.m.
Listening to Sister Maurita Bernet’s spiritual journey is like listening to the arching rhythm of one of her favorite Gregorian chants.

Her life began on a farm near Long Prairie. Born on a Monday and baptized on her first Sunday of life, she remembers climbing trees, laying twine for straight rows of veggies and loving the nature surrounding her. Nature and music remain central themes.

When she was young, a new neighbor told her father of a high school for girls run by Franciscan sisters in Little Falls. Soon, the two oldest girls were signed up and grew to love the place. All six girls graduated from St. Francis High School.

At Christmas break her senior year, she and a cousin decided to join the sisterhood when they returned after Christmas vacation. It was quite a shock to the family. Her brother’s response: “Oh, you are not! You are not!” The family knew there were strict rules about “being a sister” that meant they wouldn’t be seeing much of her for a good while. The timing was no Christmas gift!

Sister Maurita equates music with baptism. “Both are like breathing,” she said. All the siblings took piano lessons and used the same books. She remarked, “By the time I came out of the womb, I probably had those melodies memorized.” When she was about 10, she started playing organ for her parish church. In those days, all the church singing was in Latin. “After mass, more than once, the Benedictine sisters, who staffed the local Catholic school and were my teachers, were sure to let me know when I’d missed a response or two!” she recalls.

At the end of the two years of preparation for life in community, she named nursing, music and elementary education as possible ministries. She was sent to study music at St. Catherine’s College in St. Paul. After two years of study, she was sent to a parish “for the summer” and stayed for four years. Later, she returned to St. Catherine’s to finish her degree.

Sharing her music and ministry gifts has taken her many places. In Minnesota, she taught music at St. Mary’s School in Morris, St. Clare College in Little Falls and an experimental school in Duluth. She served an ecumenical cluster of parishes near Zimmerman, the Hispanic community in Spokane, Wash., and her sister’s Montessori school in Arizona. She was a missionary in Venezuela, with its rich treasure of rhythms and culture, and in Mexico. Today, the sisters in Little Falls and beyond are regularly blessed with her piano, organ and guitar music. To hear Sister Maurita tell her full story and share items that have meant a great deal to her, check out the YouTube link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVWUXaDbP-o.
Grateful for Franciscan companions

Elizabeth Rydeen

As Denis and Karen Dolan begin their 80th year, they are gratified and humbled to remember those individuals and events that shaped their lives.

They grew up in large German/Irish Catholic families and were taught to reverence their faith, to be strict in practice and have great respect for sisters and clergy. They received their education from the Franciscan Sisters of Dubuque, Iowa (1949-1961). These dedicated sisters and the influence of their parents formed the solid foundation that guided their lives.

They married in 1963 in Dubuque. Karen worked as a nurse at Mercy Hospital; Denis was a junior at Loras College. They continued to encounter faith-based individuals, lay and religious, who enriched them.

Settling into careers and family life, their yearning to "leave the familiar and experience the unknown" led them to Little Falls in 1971. They were at home at the Franciscan convent and Catholic school and parish, as well as the faith-based hospital community. Again, in the presence of Franciscans, their three children had the opportunity to repeat the Franciscan formation in their lives—and Karen and Denis could continue theirs.

While raising their family, Karen continued her nursing career, culminating her last 10 years in hospice care. Denis was a school social worker for Mid-State Education District. After 34 years, they both retired in 2005.

As their family matured, they served in leadership roles—parish council, school board, confirmation, school health screenings, scouting, youth athletics, as well as community organizations and various volunteer opportunities. “We were influenced by our parents and teachers ‘to always give back.’ Now our children follow the same in their communities,” they said. “Through the years, we have witnessed the Franciscan Sisters’ unwavering compassion and acceptance for all creation as teachers, colleagues, hospice volunteers, mentors, supervisors, head nurse, even tennis partner. Now, however, we mainly see them as friends.”

We can see clearly now . . .

The long-awaited LED (light-emitting diodes) retrofit project has been completed! Electricians from Jim’s Electric, Brainerd, replaced over 5,000 florescent and incandescent light bulbs throughout campus. The new bulbs are brighter yet use 90% less electricity. The $150,000 project is expected to pay for itself in about three years, saving up to 30% on our electricity bill. That is good news for us and Mother Earth!
Music Center students honored

St. Francis Music Center awards several scholarships annually that recognize the achievements of its students. This year’s recipient of the highest honor, the Sister Justina Bieganek Award, is Mason Ellingson from Long Prairie, who studies both piano and saxophone. Sister Justina was a part of the Music Center from its beginnings in 1979 until retirement in 2011 at the age of 99. Mason’s sister, Adeline Ellingson, was among 10 students to win a Laura Jane Musser Merit Scholarship. Musser was a local philanthropist and champion for the arts who died in 1989. Congratulations to eight more students who were awarded scholarships: Guy Clemons-Virnig (Hillman), Isobel Christensen (Little Falls), Marley Hamilton (Brainerd), Lenora Mrosla (Bowlus), Anton Surma (Little Falls), Everett Rudolph (Little Falls), Bailey Stalmer (Little Falls) and Ava Schiffert (Little Falls). St. Francis Music Center, a community school for the arts, offers lessons to all ages on most musical instruments. Let music change your life! All are welcome.

On Monday, May 8, work began on a long overdue project: repaving our parking lot at the home of the Franciscan Sisters in Little Falls. By 8 a.m., Knife River Construction Company was busy clearing, blading and preparing the area for an upgraded look. Allen Riedeman, operations coordinator for the Franciscan Sisters commented, “We can’t thank everyone enough for helping with this project. The repairs were much needed and long overdue.” Thanks to our many donors who contributed nearly $100,000 to assist in the project. We do not miss the many bumps, crevices and potholes. The Franciscan Sisters, staff members and visitors are now sailing over smooth pavement throughout our campus.

AUGUST 7 – 11, 2023

Let Mystery Guide You:
JUMP AND THE NET WILL APPEAR

Join us in this week-long retreat as Angela Guadalupe, Religious Studies chair at St. Francis High School in La Cañada, Calif., helps us soak in the ways mystery walks with us in everyday life.

Sessions: Monday-Thursday 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; Friday 9:30 a.m. – noon.

Cost of the retreat: $350, includes all meals and lodging.
Also available on Zoom (suggested donation: $99).

Register by July 28.
Contact: fpminfo@fslf.org.
Congratulations to our new Leadership

The 2023-2028 Leadership team: Assistant Minister Michelle L’Allier, Community Minister Beatrice Eichten, Assistant Minister Janice Wiechman, Assistant Minister Mary Pat Burger, Assistant Minister Gertrude Brixius.

During Delegate Assembly in March, the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota, elected a new Leadership team that will be responsible for the spiritual and ministerial life and mission of the community. On June 4, transfer of Leadership took place in a special Mass in Sacred Heart Chapel.

These five Franciscan Sisters bring energy, wisdom and experience as they prepare for their new leadership roles. “As a community, we are being called forth by God to respond faithfully and creatively to the needs of our world today and into the future,” Sister Bea said. They all agree it is a privilege and honor to serve their sisters in community in this important way.