****

**CONFERENCE OF RELIGIOUS**

**STRATEGIC PLAN**

**2019 – 2022**

**CONTENTS**

1. COR: The Journey Continues
2. Some Theological Aspects of Religious Life in England and Wales
3. The Identity of COR
4. Vision, Mission and Values
5. Our Aims and Objectives
6. CoR Structure
7. Executive Board
8. Action Plan
9. **COR: The Journey Continues**

At the 2013 AGM, the then President of the Conference, Fr. Ronald McAinsh CSsR, strongly invited the members to have a radical re-think about the *rasion d’etre* of COR and its functioning. For 50 years the Conferences of Religious under various names have existed to assist the many Religious communities and their leaders in England and Wales to work more effectively together for the good of the Church. However, as with the Church herself, every now and then there is a need to stop, reflect and renew. We are not strangers to this, through the effect of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent extraordinary changes in the lived experience of Religious.

Back in 2013, it was recognised that although the business of COR was being managed by the Executive and a dedicated team in the office led by the General Secretary, there was a general lack of a cutting edge. It had been observed that the Executive, COR has ‘lacked teeth' and has been unable to speak out on some of the major issues facing our society, our Church and our Religious Life.

It was felt that COR could be a much more effective and relevant body in the Church if it were radically restructured. A desire was expressed for an attempt to be made to re-design the whole structure to provide an effective way of operation for our Conference. The

membership and executive were convinced of the need for something new and fresh and incisive in COR; and a working document which we call our Strategic Plan was created.

The planning process led by Sr Ellen attempted to help CoR face the emerging reality which has formed the context of our work in recent years.

During the Summer of 2017 the CoR executive in preparation for its meeting in September commissioned a review of the strategic plan that had been developed in 2013. The outcome of the review was that the vision and Mission statement contained within the strategic plan remained true for our present reality and that the failure to achieve the objectives that had been contained within the document had been due to a weakness in the structures that had been relied upon. While tremendous work had been done by the Secretariat staff in serving the internal needs of religious life, the dynamic cutting-edge vision that had been desired, had failed to materialise.

So, it was that the Executive set out on a journey to review the secretariat structure in the light of the skills and gifts that the strategic plan required to identify which roles would best serve the vision that emerged. In January 2018 the executive identified the need for three roles the General Secretary, the Communications and Development Lead and the Office Administrator. As the process unfolded for recruiting the development lead and the office administrator, Br. James Boner OFM who served as General Secretary between 2014 and 2018 resigned after being re-elected as provincial of his own congregation. With the appointment of Valerie Nazareth to the role of General Secretary in December 2018 there was a complete revision of the Secretariat staff.

This strategic plan modified by the experience of the present executive and is offered to the membership as a map to help us continue on the journey as we move forward with the new secretariat. For it to produce fruits however will require the support and participation of religious as the CoR secretariat under the direction of the executive strive to support religious life in England and Wales while facilitating religious to share their limited resources to ensure we engage with society today as effectively and efficiently as possible.

**Paul Smyth, CMF.**

President – COR

1st March 2018

1. **Some Theological Aspects of Religious Life in England and Wales**

**A Less Travelled Road**

*Religious Life in England and Wales Today*

Religious Life in England and Wales has had its highs and lows and goes back more than 1500 years. The monks of Rievaulx at the time of Aelred could never have foreseen that in the future their beautiful Abbey would be a ruin visited by tourists. Religious Life flourished during the Middle Ages. It was dissolved at the time of the Reformation when, paradoxically, new Orders and Societies of Apostolic Life were springing up in Europe following Trent and the Counter-Reformation. After Catholic Emancipation in the early 19th Century, and the anticlerical suppression on the Continent at around the same time, Religious communities returned and were re-established in England and Wales. Alongside these were the new Apostolic congregations founded in response to the social needs of the nineteenth century, and the call to bring the Gospel to new Mission territories.

Since Vatican II there has been a movement away from the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model which characterised Religious Life from the Council of Trent until the mid-60s, the model, perhaps applied more stringently to women than to men, which prescribed a quasi-monastic routine. Religious prayed most of the Divine Office (or at least the Little Office of Our Lady), observed silence, ate together while listening to spiritual reading, spent time in common recreation. Their apostolate fitted around this. They were conspicuous in impractical and sometimes outlandish Habits modelled on peasant costumes not seen elsewhere for a couple of centuries. Nevertheless, those who entered Religious Life before the Second Vatican Council or in the euphoria which followed it joined communities which were vibrant and flourishing, immersed in the work of education, health care, social justice, and bringing the Gospel to the margins of society.

As the Council documents were disseminated, specially *Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes,* and *Perfectae Caritatis*,Religious, faithful to the Church’s call to *aggiornamento* and the new sense of urgency to bring the Reign of God to all, rediscovered the unique charisms their Founders had been given for the Church. They were called upon to renew and adapt their lives in the light of the original charism, and in relation to the ‘joy and hope, griefs and anguish’ of the world in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Some were disillusioned with the pace of change (too fast for some, too slow for others) and left. The Second Vatican Council brought a renewed understanding of Baptismal vocation and alternative ways of responding. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and the rise of feminism changed irrevocably women’s role in society and in the Church. It has constituted a challenge to the role of men. The context of a post-Christian, post-Modern world has influenced attitudes of secular as well as Religious men and women towards the world and the Church.

Those called to Religious Life are invited to follow Christ radically, to be totally committed to living the Gospel and free to proclaim the Good News of the imminence and immanence of the Reign of God. Religious, as *Lumen Gentium* VI states, reflect the many aspects of Christ: ‘in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all, always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him.’

The vocation of enclosed nuns and monks will always be a challenge to society, while at the same time never losing its appeal as the ideal for those who wish to dedicate themselves totally to God. It is a different story for apostolic Sisters and Brothers. What are they doing that is different from other committed lay people? Can what they do not be done just as well or better by people who are married, who have their own income and independence? Or by men and women (frequently very young, always very idealistic) who give months or years working radically to bring the Reign of God to the poor and oppressed, before returning to ‘the real world’?The essence of religious Life is in *being* rather than *doing.* It is not a question of ‘plugging the holes’, of providing an efficient (and cheap) workforce for the Church. It is about ‘the sign we give’ of total lifelong dedication, consecration, to Christ through a life vowed to Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience, in whatever way these might be expressed by specific Congregations, whether enclosed or active.

As Pope Francis has reminded us, Religious Life is at the heart of the Church. Individual Congregations come and go; if necessary, God will raise new Congregations ‘from the very stones’ in response to a specific need. We see this already in the emergence of the New Orders, and the revival of the Eremitical life and the Order of Consecrated Virgins. Those which have fulfilled their purpose can celebrate their achievement and know their legacy continues in the education they have delivered, the networks they have initiated, even (as with Rievaulx) the structures they have left. The role they once fulfilled as an efficient workforce within the Church is now the task of the laity.

For many, individuals as well as communities, it is a time of diminishment, of letting go. The pessimists say Religious Life, or at least the Apostolic form of it, is dying out. Religious Life in England and Wales may be at a time of crisis – in terms of both challenge and opportunity. There are ‘green shoots’ emerging, but most of the growth is in the developing world and Eastern Europe. We do not know how many religious there will be in future or what their role will be. The way forward is not in numbers but in accepting this change and in courageously continuing to live it, continuing to witness by perseverance and faithfulness.

Such is the less travelled road of Religious Life in England and Wales today. It will surely be here in 1,000 years’ time, because the life of consecration by means of the evangelical counsels is a gift of God to the Church and world which of its nature is permanent, and ‘God is always faithful.’

1. **The Identity of COR**

Conferences of Religious Superiors date from the 1950’s, and the Second Vatican Council said, in its Decree on the Renewal of the Religious Life, “This synod favours conferences or councils of major superiors, established by the Holy See. These can contribute very much to achieve the purpose of each institute; to encourage more effective cooperation for the welfare of the Church; to ensure a more just distribution of ministers of the Gospel in a given area; and finally, to conduct affairs of interest to all religious. Suitable co-ordination and co-operation with episcopal conferences should be established with regard to the exercise of the apostolate.” (*Perfectæ caritatis*, n.23).

The Code of Canon Law of 1983 gives more precise directives: “Major superiors can usefully be associated in conferences or councils so that by common efforts they work to achieve more fully the purpose of the individual institutes, always without prejudice to their autonomy, character, and proper spirit, or to transact common affairs, or to establish appropriate coordination and cooperation with the conferences of bishops and also with individual bishops. Conferences of major superiors are to have their own statutes approved by the Holy See, by which alone they can be erected even as a juridic person and under whose supreme direction they remain.” (Canons 708-709).

The purpose of COR, as defined in its Statutes, reflects these Roman documents, though they state that one of COR’s goals is to represent religious to civil authorities as well as to the bishops.

In England and Wales, two conferences had been established before the Council, one for men religious and one for women religious, and these have been united since 1959. The Conference of Religious is, therefore, an organisation set up by the Holy See and its Statutes are approved by the Holy See. Anglican Religious institutes are associated with COR and there is a member of one of these Institutes on the Executive Committee. While all institutes of apostolic religious and societies of apostolic life, both of men and women, are all eligible for membership of COR, as are monastic institutes of men, autonomous monasteries of nuns are not eligible. COR is associated with the Association of British Contemplatives and with the Union of Monastic Superiors, and has links with other Conferences, in particular the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI), the Conference of Religious in Scotland (CRS), the Conference of Leaders of Anglican Religious Communities (CLARC) and the Union of European Conferences of Major Superiors (UCESM).

COR has also been recognised under civil law in England and Wales as a charitable trust, which facilitates its financial operations and gives it legal status at civil law.

The inspiration behind the activities of COR is the teaching of Jesus, and the ways in which this is put into practice will respond to the needs of the Church and of society in any given moment of history, and will always be guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; the engagement of individual Congregations in the different activities and initiatives of COR will be determined on their particular charisms.

There are different ways of looking at COR. Four may be summarised here:-

* + in Church law, the members of the Conference are the major superiors, while the Executive Committee and the General Secretariat serve the Conference.
	+ in Civil law, the Trustees (who are the members of the Executive Committee) are entrusted with ensuring that the aims of the Conference (as defined in the Trust deed) are respected and they are responsible for the administration of the Conference’s assets.
	+ the Conference has described itself as “a membership group of Religious leaders or leadership teams – bringing together the strengths, insights, commitments and charisms of the various religious congregations, and offering support, challenge and co-ordination as needed so as to witness effectively to God’s loving and creative presence in the world.”
	+ the common understanding of the Catholic Church in England and Wales is that the members of COR are the congregations of religious and societies of apostolic life themselves.

These different perspectives complement each other in forging the identity of COR.

1. **Vision, Mission and Values**

**Vision statement**

The Conference of Religious seeks to be a dynamic and proactive presence in the Church and the world today.

**Mission statement**

The Mission of COR is to:

* enable the prophetic voice of Religious Congregations to be heard making Religious Life better known
* unite its membership in collaborative initiatives translating Gospel vision into reality
* offer support to its membership and particularly those in positions of leadership

**Values**

Our activities are inspired by Gospel values. The hallmarks of COR are:

* unity in diversity
* justice
* integrity
* hope
1. **Our Aims and Objectives**
2. ***To create a Prophetic Voice that gives witness to the values of the Gospel***
* to be a prophetic, corporate, pro-active voice in the Church and in Society
* in particular, to speak on behalf of people who live on the margins, promoting justice
* to promote visible witness of the Good News of Jesus Christ, and Gospel values in reality today
* to witness to the gift of community living
* to witness to unity in diversity
1. ***To generate and participate in Networks that promote Collaboration***
* to actively promote collaboration amongst members
* to find ways of improving communication between members
* to promote greater links with Vicars for Religious
* to seek greater dialogue with the Church and its agencies at national and local level
* to foster coordinated liaison with the Bishops, nationally and in local dioceses
* to build deeper ecumenical relationships
* to liaise with other Conferences of Religious internationally
1. ***To serve and support Religious in England and Wales***
* to provide easy access via COR’s office to enquiries and to respond to members’ needs
* to develop structures of mutual support
* to maintain a database and informal group mailing systems
* to find ways of sharing gifts, skills and resources, ideas, books etc.
* to be active participants in Safeguarding initiatives in the Church in England and Wales
* to participate in the work of Vocations and to support the National Office of Vocations
* to encourage and support the formation of new Religious Life initiatives

1. **Cor Structure**

The Secretariat staff are paid.

One of the responsibilities of the Secretariat staff will be to facilitate groups of Religious with interest and relevant skills around areas of importance for the ongoing life and mission of Religious in England and Wales. Groups that arise will keep the CoR Executive informed of developments by regular reports and updates via the General Secretary.

1. **Executive Board**

**The Board and its responsibilities**

The role of the Executive Board of CoR is to offer

* A clear vision for the future
* Clear measurable aims and objectives for the Secretariat
* A support structure for the General Secretary, with robust line management, underpinned by good job descriptions.

To enable these to be met, the Board meetings need to be clearly focused around its four main priorities relating to governance

* To provide strategic leadership & set structure
* To hold the General Secretary and the Secretariat to account
* To ensure compliance with relevant laws, governing documents and policies
* To ensure responsible management of resources

**Board Objectives**

1. **Provide strategic leadership & set structure**
2. Clarify the priorities and services that the Secretariat should be working on providing to its membership
3. Clarify the working structure of the Secretariat
4. Review how the strategic plan will be implemented and updated
5. Ensure that CoR representation on church committees etc. are covered
6. **Holding the General Secretary and the Secretariat to account**
7. Clarify the line management structure.
8. Consider the structure of the Agenda for Board meetings.

The General Secretary should provide a report to Board before the meeting about what has been happening in the different areas so that Board members are informed. At meetings this report will be taken as read, with the opportunity for clarifications. The focus of meetings will be on the four governance dimensions: Strategic leadership, accountability, compliance and management of resources, rather than on the detail of the report

1. **Ensure compliance with relevant laws, governing documents and policies**
2. The requirements of CoR’s statutes and other constitutional documents will be taken into account.
3. Consideration will be given to what system is in place for keeping abreast of legal changes that can impact on religious congregations
4. **Ensure responsible management of resources**
5. Financial reporting and planning processes should offer the opportunity for informed reflection and not just reactive decisions.
6. Review the matter of where best we should locate our offices.

**Board Subcommittees:**

To enable Board meetings to be effective and efficient, in addition to clear reporting on what the Secretariat is doing, a mechanism to help the Board reflect well on its areas of responsibility, would be beneficial. To achieve this work, it may be helpful to establish the following Board Subcommittees

1. **Finance:** an ongoing group responsible for matters relating to the responsible management of resources
2. **Governance issues**: Initially a temporary group responsible for working on the Statutes of CoR and helping the Board identify the priorities that will guide the work of the Secretariat
3. Other temporary subcommittees can be established as required.

1. **Action Plan**

The following activities have been identified as some of the areas that COR will focus on developing during the next few years. Each year some specific measurable goals will be identified as a priority for the year which will provide the focus for the work of the Secretariat and which will be reported on at Executive meetings. In creating a plan of action for activity, attention will be given to ensure clarity about who is responsible, the measurable goals of the activity, the resources required, the time frame and how the activity will be monitored and evaluated to ensure the successful completion of the goals.

**To create a Prophetic Voice that gives witness to the values of the Gospel**

* Re-organise and maintain the website as an instrument that provides information about how religious are living the Gospel.
* Provide training to religious to impart the skills and confidence for dealing with the media and social networks.
* Identify Religious who can be prepared to be able to speak on behalf of Religious on topics of interest to the media.

**To generate and participate in networks that promote collaboration**

* To work with the Conference of Bishops and other agencies that share our values.
* To create spaces for religious to meet and explore how we can. more effectively and efficiently, use our limited resources to be a force for positive change in society e.g. Health and Care for the Elderly, Education, Safeguarding, Justice and Peace, Social and Ethical issues, human slavery, etc.
* To develop a directory or a database of the skills and services that are available among religious
* Promotion of inter-congregational projects; links amongst congregations.

**To serve and support Religious in England and Wales**

* To maintain the Secretariat as a source of information about where support might be found for issues such as safeguarding, visa applications, health care etc.
* To monitor areas of new legislation that might impact religious life
* To support religious leaders; facilitating good practice in leadership
* To encourage Regional meetings of CoR members
* To assist with formation opportunities - spirituality of Religious Life – initial formation, on-going formation, spirituality of ageing, provision of workshops and training