

IHMs in Action



Nancy Sylvester, IHM, has spent her life working for justice.

Her ministries over the last 30 years as teacher, lobbyist, vice president of the IHM Sisters and president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious led her to believe that in order to affect change, people must be open to new ways of being and acting through communal contemplation.

Based on that belief, Sister Nancy founded the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue in 2002. She serves as its president.

"The major project of the institute is called 'Engaging Impasse: Circles of Contemplation and Dialogue,'" reports Sister Nancy, who is also the project's executive director. "The project brings together leaders whose work for justice has brought them to an impasse.

"It's an invitation to face our own powerlessness, to enter 'the dark night,' to quote St. John of the Cross," she notes. "Through the Circles of Contemplation and Dialogue, we engage the impasse, not solve it. What happens is a personal transformation of consciousness within a communal setting."

Circle participants gather three times over the course of a year. Between gatherings, each commits to a personal contemplative practice and shares reflections and insights on the project's Web site.

Participants have been predominantly leaders of women's religious congregations. They take the insights gained back to their communities, bringing additional people into ever-widening circles of contemplation and dialogue.

"Since 2003, we've had 170 people complete the process, and 100 more will participate in the January 2007-January 2008 sessions," Sister Nancy says. "Through communal contemplation and dialogue, participants free themselves from the stories that keep them in impasse."

Sister Nancy was greatly influenced by Constance FitzGerald, a cloistered Carmelite.

"Sister Connie wrote, 'Everything is just too complex, too beyond our reach. Yet it is only in the process of bringing the impasse to prayer, to the perspective of the God who loves us, that our society will be freed, healed, changed, brought to paradoxical new visions,'" says Sister Nancy. "That's what engaging impasse is all about."

Sister Nancy is also co-editor of the book, *Crucible for Change: Engaging Impasse through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue*. For more information, go to www.engagingimpasse.org.