

Pathways into Josephite Community and Commitment

Years ago, a young aboriginal boy, overhearing a conversation in our Josephite kitchen asked, “What’s a Chapter?” A Sister replied, ‘It’s a kind of Nun’s Parliament!’ Though we chuckled, his question struck a chord and pushed us to a fuller, more reflective explanation:

A Chapter is about deep listening to the Holy Spirit and to one another, asking questions about our identity, harnessing our energies for God’s Mission and finding new ways to bring our Charism alive.

In our 25th General Chapter, we faced this question:

“What is God doing with the charism at this time in our story?”

The Chapter stressed that we sisters, do not ‘own the charism’. Others are drawn to it very powerfully and long for us to recognize *their* call to live in communion with it. In the light of this, the Chapter called us *‘to release the richness of the charism and together with others to create welcome spaces for new voices to enter the melody’*.

But how?

Congregational Leader, Sr Anne Derwin and her Team set to work to find a way. A group was formed to address how this might happen. It was to explore new and emerging expressions of living the charism including different forms of Consecrated Life.

Congregational Immersion and Discernment of Call (CIDC) was born and has been fully alive and active now for the past decade. Those on the team were empowered by a saying, *“We make a path by walking it!”*

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit was hovering and had preceded the Chapter. Some women in South Australia were already in conversation with us. They felt so drawn to the Josephite Charism that they were prepared to **discern** whether they were **called** to make a formal commitment.

Working together with a group of sisters, they defined that *they were called to live out the charism of Mary MacKillop in communion with the Sisters for God’s Mission.*

This set down the Pathway of the Covenant Josephites. They entered a process of discernment and immersion leading toward affiliate commitment. They understood that the sisters would be discerning too, seeking answers to these questions:

- Does this person seem at home with our Josephite Spirituality?
- Is there a genuine desire to be in communion with us?
- Do they wish to be involved in serving others in the spirit of Mary MacKillop?

As women *and men* from other Regions took their place on this Covenant Pathway, we felt very graced and confident.

Almost simultaneously, a new pathway opened for those who chose to take **Private Vows in affiliation with the Sisters of Saint Joseph**. Like the Covenant Josephites, they would be financially independent and live in their own homes. After their discernment, they prepared a Rule of Life and took their Vows in Affiliation with the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

Some sisters have generously taken on the role of ‘Discernment Guide’ so that each person is accompanied and mentored on the chosen Pathway.

None of this is really new! During the 1980’s a new pathway or Movement emerged. It became known and loved as the **Josephite Associates**. These people dedicate themselves to Prayer, Friendship and Service. The Associates are independent with their own emblem and Handbook.

CIDC also has oversight of another Pathway - around since 1866! – **Vowed Membership**. At the turn of this century, we were aware of the changes occurring as new enquirers came to us. They came from diverse backgrounds and cultures. There were more mature-aged and life-experienced applicants. The formative templates of the past no longer suited these women. Accordingly, CIDC believed that ‘discernment and immersion’ is more respectful language than ‘formation’. We also replaced institutional descriptors like ‘Postulancy’ and ‘Novitiate’, with Scriptural Markers like ‘Enter the Land’ and ‘Emmaus’ because we are so aware of the spiritual transformations that occur as the journey unfolds.

So much has depended on our sisters throughout the Congregation as they have adapted to this new approach, welcomed those who came seeking affiliation, offered hospitality, and community and celebrated each ritual of commitment. *They created welcome spaces for new voices to enter the melody’!*

