With this issue of Voices we begin the first of four summer issues dedicated to the Commitments we made as a Congregation during our 2010 General Chapter. The focus of this issue is on our Commitment “to open our hearts to the other and deepen our understanding of diverse cultures and beliefs.”

Our merger in November 2011 with the Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of Remedies of Pampanga, Philippines, helps to underscore a reality that has long been present in our community and is evident in the contributions submitted in response to a call for articles. There is no monolithic “we” making this commitment, nor any single “other.” Within our community and planet, we are “we” and “other” to one another in the richness of our diversity as human beings—and as one member of an immensely diverse community of life, revelatory of God.

How do we undergo conversions of the heart that enable us to honor and appreciate the differences among us while also growing in understanding of our utter interconnectedness and interdependence, our oneness in Christ? The stories shared in this issue point to the struggles, complexity, and beauty of efforts to live this Commitment. The first and longest contribution, by Sister Evangelina Fernandez, OP, chronicles the call of the Spirit that brought U.S. and Filipina women together in a cross-cultural journey that gave birth to the Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of Remedies and, fifty years later, to merger with the Dominican Sisters of Adrian. Like the story Sister Vangie tells, all of the other articles, in snippets or essays, share critical moments when, through encounters with people of other nationalities, races, spiritualities, and political beliefs, we are called to conversion.

Ultimately, our General Chapter Commitment is a call to enter into the mystery of God’s extraordinarily diverse creation, which, as science now tells us, emerged from a “singularity”—an unfathomable oneness that flared forth billions of years ago. It calls to mind the words and praise of the Psalmist, who cried, “How varied are your works, Lord! In wisdom you have wrought them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Psalm 104).

We also recognize in this issue 74 Dominican Sisters of Adrian who are celebrating their Double Diamond, Diamond, Golden, and Silver Jubilees this year. Together, they mark 4,020 years of fidelity and dedication as women religious in service to God’s people throughout the Earth. We give them thanks and praise!

Attracta Kelly, OP
Prioress
Adrian Dominican Sisters
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AdriAn dominicAn mission
In the mission of Jesus we Adrian Dominican Sisters discover and identify ourselves as women called together to share faith and life with one another and sent into our world to be with others, bearers and recipients of his love co-creators of his justice and peace.

Adrian Dominican Constitutions and Statutes, 1.6
I was born 80 years ago and grew up very simply as the middle child in a family of six in the agricultural town of Talavera, a rice granary in the province of Nueva Ecija in central Luzon in the Philippines. It was my parents’ dream that I, like my older sister and brother, would finish my studies. But after World War II it was very hard; there was no money. The only way I could continue was by traveling away from home to a state college in Manila.

I made the journey and was able to finish a two-year program, earning my teacher certification. I was then called to teach in a public school. It was a very rich experience. I completed my bachelor’s degree and became involved in many activities with the church. But after nine years, I felt restless. I wanted to do more than teach. I was searching for more meaning in my life and, in my late twenties, began seriously to consider religious life.

I did not know of any congregation where I might be accepted as a Sister when I heard that the bishop of the Diocese of Pampanga was calling for women to establish a Filipino foundation that would assist in implementing Vatican II through catechism. The bishop had been in touch with Mother Mary Gerald Barry, OP, the major superior of the Adrian Dominican Sisters, to ask if the American Sisters would establish a mission in the Philippines. Mother Gerald said they could not do that, but if the bishop sent young women as candidates, the Adrian Dominicans would be willing to give them formation in religious life, further education, and help in establishing the foundation. So, from the very beginning, the Adrian Dominican Sisters and the bishop were co-founders of our Congregation. After receiving formation, the Filipina candidates would come back to the Philippines and serve the diocese. It would be a purely Philippine foundation.

I had no desire to go to the United States to be trained. But being a provincial woman, I found the idea of going around trying to find a community that would accept me very daunting. So, assured that I would be coming back home, I accepted the bishop’s invitation.

On September 11, 1962, Digna San Vicente, another candidate, and I arrived in Adrian, joining two other candidates, Esperanza Bonifacio and Milagros Garcia, who had arrived a year earlier with a third companion who returned home soon after. Everything was different, very different, and there were many difficult adjustments to make — to the culture, the weather, the food. I remember saying to myself that no matter how difficult this situation is for me, I have to persevere because this is my choice.

The biggest cultural challenge in many ways was entering religious life — a cultural challenge that the American postulants and novices were also experiencing. The women in formation with whom I lived were very understanding and considerate of our special situation, being from another culture. When I couldn’t finish one of my obediences because I was afraid to climb the marble steps, another postulant pitched in to help. This happened in the novitiate, too. We were given more allowances than the American novices. Once, I was asked to put pies in the oven. Some of them
were chiffon, but I didn’t know the difference so I put them all in the oven. Of course, they melted! But others got the blame instead of me because they hadn’t “explained things properly.”

I also felt cultural differences when I attended Siena Heights College, where both men and women were my classmates. I would just observe and say, “Ah, that’s the way they do it here.”

In May of 1965, my father died. I was given the choice of going home right away or waiting until I finished my studies. When I learned that my father was already buried, I decided to wait until the end of May so I could finish my papers. Esperanza, Digna, and Milagros followed in August, and Sisters Mary Philip Ryan, OP, and Ellen Vincent McClain, OP, joined us on October 2, 1965, which we consider to be the date of our foundation.

Our abode was on the top floor of the marketplace, on the main plaza in San Fernando next to the Cathedral. Although I had been away from home for more than three years, I was more concerned about the American Sisters’ adjustment than my own. We knew it was not a place where American Sisters could live easily because of the noise, the heat, the food, and, at Sister Mary Phil’s age, the need to go up and down four flights of stairs for daily Mass.

We were embarrassed by the greeting of the children, who would shout, “Hi Joe!” — as in “GI Joe.” The only other Americans in the area were connected to Clark Air Force Base. The two Sisters were very gracious, telling the children to come; they would hug them. They made many friends in the marketplace with beggars and vendors. Everyone knew them.

In February and March of 1966, we moved into a new dwelling at Assumption College while parts of the building were still under construction. During this time, one of the construction workers asked to use our washroom. That was all right for us Filipinos. But for the American Sisters, it was not proper to share a washroom with men. I thought I would melt when I had to say to them, “Mr. So and So, would you tell your companions to use the washrooms in other parts of the building?”

In 1969, Sister Mary Phil returned home to Adrian and was replaced by Sister Marcine Klemm, OP. A year later, Sister Rosemary Marson, OP, came and took the place of Sister Ellen Vincent. At this time, the Marcos regime was establishing martial law and tightening its grip on everything in the country, including schools. Under a decree called the “Filipinization of Schools,” institutions run by foreigners...
had to conform to policies they mandated. This brought about clashes between foreign administrators and the government.

At the same time, there was growing student unrest against the Marcos regime and an infiltration of the schools by local Communists. Imagine the chaos! Assumption College was not spared because the whole complex was thought to be the Sisters’ school. All six of us were there from Monday through Friday, influencing it from head to foot. Everyone knew that. The school had made a name for itself through the quality of education it provided.

During this time of unrest, Assumption College and the elementary and high schools were targeted by infiltrators; they even got some of our own high school students involved. Students and outsiders would come into classrooms, cover the walls with graffiti, and commit other acts of vandalism. It got to the point where from morning until night, loudspeakers would blast messages saying, “Americans go home.”

Marcine had taken Mary Phil’s place as principal of the high school. My heart broke for her; Marcine got the spears. We told her to stay in her room while we asked the students, “Why are you doing this? Who told you to say these bad words?” I finally convinced Marcine and Rosemary to spend some time with friends at Clark Air Force Base. “We’ll update you,” I said.

This difficult situation and another one — our challenging relationship with the bishop — contributed to our separation from Adrian. We had a problem in school related to finances that led to growing tensions, which eventually brought us closer together as a community but added to the stresses that all of us were experiencing.

It was very difficult for us when our American Sisters left. I remember at the time thinking that it was an untimely separation. I cried whenever I talked to Sister Rosemary Ferguson, OP, the Prioress of the Congregation, saying, “Sister, we are not yet ready to be on our own.” When Sister Rosemary came in December of 1972 to make the separation official, I was still pouring out my heart to her, saying we were not prepared. Sister Rosemary said, “Don’t you remember that from the very beginning, you were meant to be on your own as Filipina Sisters? The communication between Mother Gerald and the bishop was very clear that the American Sisters would stay only until you are able to stand on your own.” I insisted that we were not yet ready to stand on our own. “You know, Vangie,” Sister Rosemary said, “it is only when our human props are taken away that we turn to the divine for the support we need. It is time. You are going to be able to stand on your own,” she said.

What felt like an untimely separation actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We Filipina Sisters realized that we would stick together, no matter what, to serve God. And we have for the past forty years. Now I think God is again sending us a message about how to continue the mission of Christ — through merger with the Adrian Dominican Sisters.
Like the idea of separation, the idea of merger was very hard for me to accept at the beginning. There were nights I could not sleep. What does this mean? I don’t understand. I was concerned about what the Mission Group structure would mean to our sense of community, of living in community. Filipinos are by nature happy to be together. Family life and friendship are very important, including the experience of family life within religious life. The spirit and bonds of family and friendship make community life very important to us. My fear and that of others when we were shown the Mission Group structure was, “Where is community?”

But now some of my questions have been clarified with the explanation of the governance structure and the relationship of authority to individual Sisters, the sense of responsibility and accountability in the Mission Group, and its role in deepening the Mission. Also, I had an insight that came to me during the Holy Week retreat we started just before Sister Attracta Kelly, OP, came with the other Adrian Dominican Sisters in April 2012. The merger issue was on my mind.

“Lord,” I prayed, “please let us know, assure us how this merger is going to work. I do not understand many of the implications.”

During the retreat, one of the topics was the rosary. I was struck by the second mystery, the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary thought she could be of help to Elizabeth. When the women met, Elizabeth said, “The moment I heard your voice, the baby in my womb leapt with joy.” How did Elizabeth know this young woman was going to be the mother of our Lord?

I thought about how God uses women for his own designs, for his plan of salvation. Elizabeth and Mary. Anna. Judith. Esther. Ruth and Naomi. God has carried out his work of salvation using all these women, including Mother Camilla, Mother Gerald, Mother Genevieve, Sister Rosemary, up to the present moment. God is using us, calling us like he called all the women of the Bible. We are like Elizabeth and Mary coming together to be of help to each other in carrying out the work of God.

This could be the meaning of the merger, I thought. Being a Sister is a call. A second call is to make a choice like this. You have to give up something important, maybe even your treasure, in exchange for this blessing.

In the late 1990s, we were invited to live with the Aetas, the indigenous people of the Philippines. I was with the Aetas for six years. We had many ideas when we went there of what to teach them. They called us, “Unat,” meaning people with straight hair, and themselves, “Culotte,” or curly-haired people.

We believed that we could help the Aetas, but it was in terms of what we ourselves thought; what was important to us. Only later did I realize that they taught me more lessons about life and values than anything I thought I would be able to give them. My being with them and living with them and trying my best to be one with them is what opened my eyes and heart to see the truth.
In 1974, I was sent to Mexico City by the pastor of a Mexican National Parish to learn Spanish so I could return to open a Social Action Office for recent immigrants. I lived with an extended Mexican family who helped me daily with Spanish. After a month and a half of listening and studying for hours, I began to hear a Spanish conversation, understanding the Mexican culture in an entirely different and more enriching way.

From this experience I gained empathy for people who struggle to learn English, especially those who never learned to read or write in their native language. When I returned from Mexico, I was taken aback by the myriad problems of immigrants. The experience challenged my first-world lifestyle to the core. How could I go home to a safe place with sufficient food while others were eking out a daily existence?

This experience has always stayed with me. We hold much in common, including our stereotypes and prejudices. I began to think about the function of stereotypes. They allow us to put the other down and maintain the status quo. I began to realize that I do have racist attitudes, thoughts and feelings; that I will have to work very hard to eradicate them; and that this is a life long process.

From this experience I gained empathy for those who struggle to learn English...
Sisters Kathryn Cliatt, Maurine Barzantni, Renee Richie, and I arrived in Meru, Kenya, a town nestled in lush green growth on the east side of Mt. Kenya in East Africa, on October 15, 2010, after a period of discernment with our Sisters and Father Francis Limo Riwa, the director and founder of St. Clare Girls’ Centre. Located in the neighboring village of Nchiru, the center is home to young girls who were orphaned by the AIDS epidemic or the violence among tribes, or whose parents are so poverty-stricken they were unable to feed, clothe, or educate them.

The four of us came after many years of service in a variety of ministries simply to offer a grandmotherly presence, as we accompany the staff and the girls on their journey in life. In the beginning we were an anomaly to both our girls and staff. As masungu (white people), we were definitely the “other” and remain so today. In our rural area, we are a spectacle to people who have never seen a white person. We now feel an integral part of St. Clare’s, even as there remains much for us to understand cross culturally.

Most intriguing to me is the Kenyan concept of time. As an American woman and Adrian Dominican, I am used to a punctual and “efficient” use of time. Here, however, an event scheduled for 4:00 p.m. could begin anywhere from 4:00 to 4:59 p.m. That can be annoying to me, but I am learning that it does not bother the Kenyans. When everyone arrives, the event begins. I am beginning to accept this.

Macrina Wiederkehr’s reflection on the beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the Reign of God belongs to you,” speaks of the empty ones who have nothing to call their own but their poverty and who always have time for waiting. “Being poor in this way/frees you from the prison/of having to have everything/planned and structured/as though there were no tomorrow.”

The poverty here is so evident. Most folks eat from the small gardens (shambas) they plant and if the rainy season is minimal the plants do not grow and produce. They live for the immediate day and can only deal with this moment. But even better off, educated adults do not always plan ahead. Often, events suddenly come up, and they deal with the consequences later.

“When everyone arrives, the event begins. I am beginning to accept this.”

Our staff and older students are beginning to realize the value of looking ahead, but their perception of time is still so much a part of their culture — as is ours. A Kenyan priest who is studying and ministering in the Archdiocese of Detroit recently visited us. He longs for camaraderie with the local Detroit clergy but they can only give him 10 or 15 minutes because they have to “leave for a meeting.” Kenyan people have time to linger and converse, and our girls truly evidence this way of being.
When I moved to Kentucky in 1981, I encountered three new cultures: the Bible belt, Appalachia, and poverty. All of them, as well as the experience of living alone, were firsts in my life. It was a very transformative time, filled with questioning, loneliness, stress, challenges, and learnings.

In my own experience as a Hispanic woman, integrating into the dominant “American” culture, I am happy to share that as a result of my life experiences I have a sense of belonging wherever and with whomever I encounter. This did not, however, come about without a struggle to cope with the words and behaviors of some who were unable to accept cultural, social and economic diversity.

Working at a school with children from a dozen different countries and backgrounds, I am constantly exposed to other cultures. The children see each other as equals and have a great respect for each others’ customs and beliefs. Through them, I see the positive results of immigration rather than the negative stories that often circulate. One example stands out — the resilience and courage of my doctor, Huong Duong. She came as a little girl and eventually was sponsored in her studies by one of the parents at our school. Her sister and brothers also found ways of completing their studies in medicine. All are now successful doctors.

I pray that in situations where ethic differences have caused pain and hurt that there will be healing as we enter as fully as possible into the mystery of God’s love for each and every person, all members of one human family with our inexhaustible, God-given array of characteristics and attributes.
“Your face is black! Your face is black!” These alarmed words greeted me at 6:00 a.m. as I entered a resident’s room in the Dominican Life Center at the Adrian Dominican Motherhouse. A registered nurse, I was passing out morning medications before ending my shift. The 87-year-old Sister had Alzheimer’s disease. Before I could respond to explain why my face was black, I smiled. It just came naturally. As soon as the Sister (of happy memory) saw the smile, she cried, “You have a beautiful smile! You have a beautiful smile!” We had connected.

Coming from Kenya, where I belong to one of 42 tribes, and transferring to the Adrian Dominicans from a Kenyan congregation in which more than 10 tribes were represented, I can honestly say that meeting “the other” is not new for me. In fact, my grandmother — in my opinion, the wisest woman who ever lived — used to tell me that, even though we all are from different tribes, we all are the same because we all become hungry and eat! So, from an early age, I learned to see “the other” as somebody who is a human being like me, only with a different need.

My mother further reinforced this perception. She, too, had a generous heart. Many times she would share the little food we had with whoever did not have anything to eat. She would tell us that when we have, even when it is little, we share. I learned that “the other” is somebody who doesn’t have what I have.

As novice director for the Assumption Sisters of Eldoret, I interacted with young members of the Congregation. Because some came from tribes that clashed with the tribes of other novices, we spent many hours in classes on peace building and conflict resolution. I remember so well one quote from Pope John XXIII’s encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, which we used often with our newer novices: “Our true nature is as one human family, children of God; any borders are artificial, created by humans, not by God. Therefore, our responsibility is to ‘break through the barriers that divide [us], to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done [us] wrong.’” When I came to the United States, I soon learned that there was always “the other” in our midst because of racial, cultural or ethnic differences. I interacted so much with the Adrian Dominican Sisters with a sisterly love, however, that I did not see myself as other when I desired to join the Congregation. I felt welcomed, included — and very amazed by the love, care and energy that abounded whenever we gathered, irrespective of our differences in skin color, age, etc.

My experience over the years is that when we first encounter one another, we tend to see difference and then, another human being like ourselves. Was the 87-year-old Sister who saw my face as black “the other” to me, or was I “the other” to her? What changed after the smile? We each encountered another human being like ourselves. Someone who gets hungry and needs to eat.
Many people might think that I have understandable reasons to dislike — or at least distrust — Americans. As a young girl, I lived in the Tokyo area at the time of massive Allied bombings. The experience, especially in 1945, was terrible. From March on, the bombs were dropping on us. We had to go outside to a hut in my family’s garden every time an air raid siren went off. Once, a bomb fell 10 feet from our house but didn’t explode.

In July and August of 1945, school was closed and the classrooms were transformed into weapons factories. When I was about 14, I worked in the factory. I didn’t always take the work seriously. One of the Sisters said I helped Japan to lose the war because I wasn’t serious enough and made defective weapons.

The war brought many other hardships in our daily lives. The government rationed sugar and milk. Sometimes we’d get sweet potatoes all month. We’d go into the garden and pick salad leaves to put in the rice and stretch it out. We surrendered in August 1945. It was terrible.

Still, I never hated Americans. My family always had connections with the United States, beginning with my grandfather, Ezoe Renzo, who had studied in the first English-speaking school in Nagasaki. Equipped with his English skills, he traveled to the United States in 1876 to serve as the interpreter for a Japanese porcelain company taking part in the Philadelphia Expo. When he returned to the States two years later to study commerce in New York, he brought back cigarettes and opened his own tobacco shop in Japan. Years later, in about 1908, he sent my father, then a teenager, to a military school in Manlius, New York, near Syracuse.

As a child, I attended Catholic school, where Australian and Irish Sisters taught me in English. I lived near the army base and always spoke English. When I was 20 years old, I arrived at Barry College (now University) in Miami Shores, Florida. My first visit to the United States was easy. I had high expectations and good feelings about Americans and was never scared. It was like an adventure. I didn’t find it difficult to live in America. People always ask if I was lonesome, but in college I just focused on my studies.

A year later, I took the next step in my adventure and entered the Adrian Dominican Congregation. I settled easily into this new life, too. Although I was far from home, I realized that the other postulants were also away from their homes and families and experiencing loneliness. We were all in the same boat.
My real encounter with “the other” was not with Americans. While I was teaching music at Siena Heights University, I faced my long-standing prejudice against the Chinese people. We were occupying parts of China when I was growing up. We had been at war with China in the Second Sino-Japanese War, so I didn’t have high expectations about the Chinese. Then I taught Chinese students at Siena Heights and was impressed by them. They were highly cultured and had a sense of humor. That wasn’t what I saw in them as I was growing up.

One of my Chinese students played the viola. His viola teacher lived in Ann Arbor and didn’t want to drive to Adrian all the way from Ann Arbor, so my student had to do the traveling. I loaned him my car. One snowy day, he crashed it and he felt that he was forever in my debt, so he invited me to go to China for 10 days.

We went in 2008, shortly after the Olympics, so they still had all the stadium and athletic fields. I didn’t know what to expect. I had only known about the Great Wall, but China was quite modern and had been fixed up for the Olympics. Even their tollbooths were decorated in yellow, red and green. In the United States, toll booths are just boxes, but in China they’re artistic.

I didn’t respect the Chinese when I was growing up, but after getting to know the students and visiting the country, I came to respect them and their ideas, philosophy, and theology. I experienced a change in my whole attitude toward them — a conversion. It was a real eye-opener.

Several years ago, while I was teaching at All Hallows in La Jolla, California, one of our parishioners, Gary, a young bachelor, offered his four-bedroom home to a refugee family from Kosovo, Yugoslavia. The Muslim family — mother, father, four boys, and two girls — arrived with the clothes on their back. They knew very little English. The children found school very difficult, so I agreed to tutor them. Christian Serbs had hunted them in Kosovo, so I was unsure how they would accept me, a Catholic Sister. They welcomed me, and I tutored the children after school in Gary’s home.

Then something surprising happened. The mother asked me to babysit her children while she and her husband went to English classes. This woman, who had been driven from her home by Christians, was asking me, a Sister, to care for her children! I was thrilled and humbled by her trust in me. Later, one of the oldest boys gave me a copy of the Koran so that I could read about their beliefs. I have seen the children many times since. Trust and openness have formed a bond that holds us together.
Congratulations and many blessings to the 2012 Double Diamond, Diamond, Golden, and Silver Jubilarians. Together they represent 4,020 years of dedicated service to the Adrian Dominican Mission. May these Sisters know the heartfelt gratitude of the Congregation and of all the people whose lives they have touched.

Silver Jubilarians

- Romina C. Bautista, OP
- Sharon Bossier, OP
- Diane Burgermeister, OP
- Emmy Choge, OP
- Liza B. David, OP
- Maria Yolanda G. Manapsal, OP
- Ines Evangelista S. Manuel, OP
- Ma. Filomena M. Manuel, OP

Golden Jubilarians

- Linda Bevlacqua, OP
- Lenore Boivin, OP
- Marie Breitenbeck, OP
- Luisa Campos, OP
- Mary Ann Dardy, OP
- Carol Ann Elya, OP
- Evangelina G. Fernandez, OP
- Ma. Alice Hoff, OP
- Mary Alice Hrovat, OP
- Mary Anne McElmury, OP
- Kathleen McGrail, OP
- Sharon McGuire, OP
- Lorraine Morin, OP
- Bonnie Motto, OP
- Cecilia Nguyen, OP
- Christine Ostrowski, OP
- Mary Lisa Rieman, OP
- Janet Schaeffer, OP
- Marie Michaella Siplak, OP
- Marianne Supan, OP
- Mary Rae Waller, OP
- Sharon Weber, OP
- Mary Ellen Youngblood, OP

Congratulations Jubilarians

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At a regional interfaith summit I recently attended, focused on the economy, I spoke with people I normally do not interact and/or agree with. Participants were Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish, and just as diverse politically, including conservatives, progressives, libertarians, independents — yes, and tea party patriots.

My challenge was to really listen without letting my own agenda get in the way — a practice I developed over the years as a certified chaplain. I became keenly aware that we are not all that different despite our diversity. I was pleased by the ready acceptance of my Catholic perspective. Despite our differences, we soon recognized that our faith compels us to create a free and fair economy with opportunity for everyone. It felt like we were friends of long standing, without judgment of our differences. This came as a surprise, for I do not experience this nonjudgmental attitude in other settings.

I often think of the words of Brazilian theologian and Sister of Our Lady Ivone Gebara, who wrote about the “salvation we offer one another when our hearts open up in tenderness and mercy.” Schizophrenic, white, gay, transgendered, black, Cuban, prisoner, undocumented, substance user, Puerto Rican, Latino, street people, and the many others who come into my life each day have offered me the opportunity to change and grow. Diversity is part of my everyday life. It’s the gift of learning about and from each other how to share the gifts of the world we all live in. Diversity makes the world colorful, interesting, and challenging. It makes me who I am.

My first immersion into cultural diversity came when I was a young nun preparing for final profession as a Sister of Mary Reparatrix. I was one of 20 young Sisters who spent a year of tertianship in Rome. We came from the United States, Canada, Mexico, Uganda, Madagascar, Spain, and the Netherlands. Our common language was French and our customs were those of the Order.

The two Sisters from Africa moved me across our differences. I felt a real sisterhood with them in their response to the needs of the people, especially those who were struggling to integrate Christianity with their African tribal roots. It was the time of Vatican II and they, like us in the States, were striving to bring the language, the expression, the art and music of the people into their worship. I felt a kinship in that struggle. My desire to serve in Africa arose from the experience.
When I was 22, I had a very intense immersion into another culture during a four-month placement in Fiji. Everything was different. I came from a city of several million to an isolated village with no electricity, accessible only by a four-hour boat ride. I was the happiest I had ever been and lived the simplest I have ever lived.

I went to Fiji as an agnostic, bordering on atheist. There, I saw the Gospel lived in a very literal way. Someone who had two shirts would give one away to the person who had none. One evening I walked a friend to the path back to the village and forgot to bring a flashlight for my return. It was pitch black as I turned around. I waited a moment and a light appeared in the darkness. I followed it and found a woman from my home, who said, “I knew you wouldn’t be able to see your way back, so I brought this light.”

I encountered in the Fijians a joyful and earthy faith. After a month there, I began to believe in God again, and that faith has remained and grown since those special months. My two overseas immersions, in Fiji and Bolivia, say to me very palpably, “There is always another way of seeing things; there is always another way of doing things.”

All my life I had wanted to go to Africa. I could never articulate the reasons for this deep desire, but my three visits to Kenya — ranging from two weeks to three months — were a dream come true. I stayed with the Assumption Sisters of Eldoret.

I made the common mistakes of a North American visiting a country without knowing the stages of enculturation. First, I was enthralled with those I met, seeing multiple similarities between their culture and my own. Then, I was profoundly disappointed, feeling that I wasn’t seen as a person, but as a source of funding. I still have an overwhelming gratitude for my experience and a respect for the struggles of daily life — especially among women.

Back home, I realized that, even living in Detroit, I had deprived myself of interaction with the African-American community in my own city. I began to take classes with African Americans and attend worship services in Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal communities. Those experiences changed my perception of “the other” and freed me to relate authentically to people of color and others different from me.

Sister Mary Ann and her cousin’s daughter, Margaret, visit the Assumption Sisters of Eldoret in 2004.
About four years ago, 10 secondary teachers from Saudi Arabia visited Cathedral Catholic High School, where I teach, to observe our educational practices. I was teaching a class on faith when they came into my classroom. One of the Saudi teachers looked very angry, as though it was a dreadful experience for him to be there. After my lesson, I invited questions. Through their interpreter, the teacher asked if I ever presented information about other faith traditions besides Catholic. I responded that the course included teaching about the great world religions. “Your faith tradition and ours come from the same father, Abraham,” I said. “We are connected in our heritage of faith.” My students proceeded to tell the story they had learned of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.

Listening to the interpreter, the “angry” teacher began to smile broadly and then clapped, as did all 10 of the visiting teachers. My students and I finally relaxed and thanked them for visiting our class. It was a wonderful moment of learning for the 10 teachers from Saudi Arabia, as well as for my class and me.

The experience broadened my perception of how to move from an attitude of exclusion (my perceived notion was that this teacher was not happy to be visiting a Catholic school religious studies class) to facilitating an attitude of inclusion that acknowledged our common beliefs and values. Our perceptions can lead to negative reactions that further exclusivity. I have learned to take time to respond, rather than to react, and to look for common ground in dialogue.

Growing up in a German and Bohemian household on the south side of Chicago provided little exposure to diversity among my family members and neighbors. We shared a similarity in thinking, worshiping, voting, and working. No one questioned. Everybody stayed “in their place.” There was also a common attitude about “others.” We were not allowed to like them, welcome them, play with them, or talk to them.

That all changed for me six weeks after entering the convent. I was 18 years old, away from my roots, adjusting to convent life, and placed in a third-grade classroom as a substitute teacher in an urban Detroit Catholic school. There were 48 children, some black, some white, and some from the Middle East (Chaldean Catholics). The challenge for me was to see these children as third graders, eager to learn how to read. I learned that the goal was not to like or dislike, judge or decide anything about these students, but to stay on task. We came together for a common purpose: to teach and learn.

They taught me to accept them as they were and I taught them to read!
A third-generation U.S. citizen, I was born in Albert, New Mexico, and raised by an aunt and uncle in a predominantly Hispanic culture, speaking Spanish at home. I have had long years of experience meeting “the other”: first in the largely Anglo culture of the Adrian Dominican Sisters, and then in other ethnic groups that I ministered with as an Adrian Dominican. For me, it has always been about accepting all as people of God.

After high school, I held down various jobs. A priest I worked with at the post office suggested that I explore religious life. After looking into several orders, I eventually wrote to Mother Gerald Barry, OP, of the Adrian Dominican Sisters. On Christmas Day, when I was putting up the mail at the post office, I discovered Mother Gerald’s invitation to come to Adrian. It was like a Christmas present! I was very excited.

I entered on February 2, 1959, after a long series of train and bus rides, beginning in Springer, New Mexico. I came to a place with a lifestyle very different from the one I was used to, but when I saw the nuns in the chapel, it made a real impression on me. “I really want to be here,” I thought.

Numerous ministries exposed me to other “others,” as a cook at the House of Studies in Washington, DC, and as a teacher at several schools in Arizona and New Mexico. I came to admire the spirituality, simple life, and stories of hard times of the Native Americans; the friendliness and joyful singing of African-American families; and the spirit of celebration of people from Mexico. I learned from their ways, and became a better person. I suppose seeing the way I live also taught them. We’re all people of God.

It didn’t take long to discover differences. A key one was the way the nuns rushed around as if they were catching a train. At meal times we ate so fast. They would start washing dishes before I was finished eating. When our Postulant Mistress, Sister Margaret Philip, heard of my comment to another postulant that our life was a rat race, she was very kind, telling me to do my best. Even today, I don’t like to rush.

Sister Marie Carmen (back, left) with the “Hummingbirds,” a culturally diverse class of three-year-olds at Risen Savior Daily Preschool in 1998-1999.
A year of study usually involves immersion in a college campus, attending classes and writing papers. My year of study in Java and Bali — two of the more than 17,500 islands that make up the Southeast Asian nation of Indonesia — involved an immersion of a different sort as I explored a sense of the sacred among the Indonesian people.

The seeds for this life-changing year were planted by the insights of my oldest brother, Francis Kennedy, a priest; the writings of Benedictine Bede Griffiths on the sacred traditions of the East; and Sister Grace de Chantal, OP, who modeled for me on Friday nights, after convent cleaning, the quiet sitting in the chapel bringing the day to a close in the presence of God.

Suffering was the catalyst. Eight years of ministry to patients who were living and dying with cancer drew me to explore Buddhist teachings on suffering. This, in turn, awakened in me a desire to explore and delve into spiritual teachings that seemed totally “other” to me, teachings with which I had no touchstones.

I left for Indonesia in May of 1994 with no planned program other than the initial weeks, when I was part of a small group that made pilgrimages to various sacred sites and visited a meditation center, Shanti Loka, or “Place of Peace,” in Yogyakarta, Java. Exposed to various paths of experiencing the divine in Java — the ancient Javanese religion, Islam, Balinese Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity — I was opened to a new sense of mystery. For the Hindu, the starting point is the immanence of God. God is immanent in all creation and in this understanding a fine distinction is made between pantheism and panentheism. Panentheism is the understanding that all creation is imbued with the presence of God. This is also a deeply Christian view, yet we have tended to emphasize the transcendence of God.

After studying meditation for four months with Pak Ananda Suyono, my teacher at Shanti Loka where I would later return for another two months, I traveled to Bali for a less structured period of study. There I experienced the different manifestations of the One God, expressed with great joy, ceremony, and celebration. In Bali, I attended temple ceremonies, participated in the making of offerings for temple celebrations, walked the streets, and drank tea and coffee. I spoke little, for language was difficult, but saw a great deal, walking alone and experiencing great solitude. I studied dance, music, and woodcarving. Traveling by rented bike or bemo, a van used as the local public transportation, I visited temples and other sacred sites that the villagers told me about.

Religion in Bali is a dominating force, permeating every aspect of life. Few people live in such close contact with nature, or create such a feeling of...
harmony between themselves and their surroundings. In ritual and dance, the Balinese celebrate their ancestors, the planting and harvesting of rice, and other key events. People leave daily offerings of flowers or rice at altars within the family compound and at every threshold, at highway intersections, and on the dashboards of bemos, to ask for blessings of protection and safety. The Balinese raise daily life to an art.

Experiencing the people and cultures of Indonesia had a profound effect on my life. I began to see that I had been putting limitations on God, that God has so many manifestations yet is beyond all form. I began to allow myself to live in the fullness of what I am called to be, with integrity, genuine joy, gratitude, and deepening inner freedom.

The year endeared the people of Indonesia to me. I wrote in my journal, “How strange to be in this land, where scenery, language, is uniquely different, yet at a deep level I am connected to these people. We share one planet, we release one energy, we give birth to one life continually unfolding.”

Nearly 20 years later, I am still uncovering the fruits of that extraordinary year of immersion into an entirely different way of living, praying, and being in this complex world — our shared home. Among other things, it has opened my heart to celebrating each year, with the hundreds of individuals who seek spiritual renewal at Spirit Mountain Retreat in Idyllwild, California, the richly diverse ways that we encounter and name this Holy Mystery, Divine Oneness, God.

Sister Esther studied in the city of Yogyakarta in Central Java and on the island of Bali in the Southeast Asian nation of Indonesia.
In 1984 I visited Nicaragua for two weeks as a member of a Witness for Peace team. We lived in the war zone and could hear the guns go at night. I was amazed by the joy and hope of the people.

I returned to Nicaragua in 1986 to begin full-time ministry at Acahualinca, a poor barrio of Managua. I assisted in a sewing co-op founded by the women of the barrio with the help of Adrian Dominican Sisters Rose Ann Schlitt, Marie Michael, and Andrea Balconis. I helped the women to become self-sufficient.

Our community of Sisters shared in the simple lives of the people. We lived mostly on rice and beans. We had indoor water only four days a week that had to be boiled and filtered. We also shared in the tragedies and joys of the people. Many of the women had family members who were killed in the war. They also had babies die from malnutrition or polluted water. In one tragic incident, many women who had traveled by bus to visit their loved ones in the military were killed when their bus overturned while coming down the mountain pass.

The people had such tremendous faith and hope. Once the coordinator of the co-op and I had to run some errands; we spent hours waiting for a bus. I remember asking, “How can you continue to have faith when so many things keep getting worse and worse?” She looked at me like I was crazy. “How can you ever think we could not have faith? It’s the most important thing we have. We can never lose it.” They knew how to celebrate and have fiestas.

When I first got back to the United States, I hated to go into big grocery stores. There was so much of everything. In the supermarkets in Nicaragua, 90 percent of the time the shelves were empty. When I came home, I saw a hundred different kinds of cereal on the shelves. I almost cried every time I went to one of the big stores; I still don’t like to go to them.

I was profoundly moved and changed by the people of Nicaragua. Above all, by their goodness, joy, and faith, which endured in the midst of hardships. I learned that you cannot find truth in our newspapers but have to listen to the stories of real people. As Dominicans, we are seekers of truth and that is often difficult. By walking with others in their joy and pain, we see God.
After living with adults for 35 years, I accepted a child in my life — and my life changed forever.

In 1991, while I was serving as Director of the Office of Worship for the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University asked if I could offer housing to a family from Russia. Rufat Babaev needed a home so that he could pursue his studies as a graduate student at the university. Because the Sister I had been living with had moved out, I had the space and said yes to the request. Rufat, his wife Yelena, and their one-year-old daughter Alyssa (now Alice) came to live with me. They had flown in from Moscow six days after the take-over by President Boris Yeltsin.

Arriving home at midnight from a weekend meeting, I found the outer screen door locked and was unable to use my key. Pounding brought Rufat to the door; my life with a new culture, language, religious outlook, and so many other aspects of life began. We struggled with language, adapted to sharing food (sometimes hesitantly, as when Yelena picked and cooked mushrooms she was sure were safe), and I reverted back to family life after so many years.

Though advised to keep my private space, I soon realized that my home had no off limits. We shared a common bathroom and living space. Meals were a combination of Russian and American tastes. Their English improved rapidly, but my Russian never got beyond a dozen polite phrases. I took care of Alyssa when I had time, and she loved to have me read to her. By the end of the year and her second birthday, Alyssa was bilingual and learning fast.

I was impressed by the family’s complete trust in coming to a foreign land and their open sharing of heart-talk, values, art, poetry, family, history, and politics. They truly opened their hearts to their new surroundings, celebrating their first Christmas and becoming part of our monthly peace community potluck and dialogue.

My understanding of our common humanity developed, as did a desire to integrate with other peoples and cultures. Before sharing my home with the Babaev family, I had helped resettle several Vietnamese families and worked with Hmong people, even being accepted as part of their families at weddings. But I know my real change began by living as family with “the other.”
Rev. Eric H.F. Law, an Episcopal priest, is the founder and executive director of the Kaleidoscope Institute for Competent Leadership in a Diverse, Changing World. For more than 20 years, he has been serving as a consultant and trainer, helping churches of a variety of denominations throughout the world to build inclusive communities. He addressed the 2011 Fall Assembly of the Dominican West Mission Chapter of the Adrian Dominican Sisters. Staff Writer Barbara Kelley, OP, subsequently spoke with him to gain his perspective on building an inclusive community. The following is an excerpt from the interview.

How did you come to start the Kaleidoscope Institute?

In 1984 I was the campus minister at the University of Southern California and realized that very little was being done in terms of bringing people of diverse backgrounds together. I felt the need to start doing something. I hung a sign on my door, “Multicultural Conversation: Building Inclusive Community,” and people started coming. Before I knew it, I was being called an expert. After awhile I got all kinds of requests from people to do this work. I took a sabbatical and did research, resulting in my first book, The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb, which came out in 1992. That spurred on another round of ministry, helping people to understand intercultural conflict and how to address it faithfully, theologically, as well as practically.

What is the first step for an organization that wants to form an inclusive community?

The first step is for people in an organization to know themselves, individually and as an organization: its purpose, its history, its assumptions, its charism (for a religious community), its strengths and weaknesses, gifts and shortfalls, and its struggles. That’s the first step, because the more you know about yourself, the less threatened you are when you encounter others who are different. To build an inclusive community you have to encounter people who are not like you, who are different. And they might challenge you. How do you react to that? Now, if you don’t know who you are, your core values and your strengths and your struggles, all of that, you get really threatened by that. If I welcome this person who’s different and I don’t know who I am, I might lose who I am. But if we know who we are, we’re free to negotiate: “Isn’t this interesting, that you want to join this organization? So let’s talk more about this. This is who we are. Tell me who you are.” And this is a fair way of being inclusive.

Do you think the divisiveness in the United States today makes it more difficult to form inclusive communities?

Yes — people are less exposed to constructive conversation these days. Congress, the reality TV shows, and the kind of interviews that they call “news” these days are all very polarizing. They put people into camps, right/wrong, good/bad. People might get the idea that this kind of putting down of the other or of claiming that you’re always right is actually something good, but what it does in effect is create more fear. A lot of people are not going to enter into this kind of conversation. Why should I go into a situation where people will tell me that I’m wrong or yell at me, and I’m expected to yell back?

In my last book, Finding Intimacy in a World of Fear, I talk about how fear is being used by marketers to manipulate us for financial and political gain. By polarizing our differences, they create mistrust and mutual fear among the different groups. The more fearful we are of each other, the less likely that we’ll be able to be one community. Without community, we cannot act together to challenge the system, so the system continues to be in control and continues to market these substitutes for security. In the world that we live in now, which is so polarized and so full of fear, it is really much harder to bring people together, to enter into what I call a gracious space and engage in meaningful, inclusive conversation.

How do you overcome polarization and fear?

I think leaders need to learn skills to create what I call the grace margin,
or a gracious climate in which people are invited in, with the assurance that they are safe, both emotionally and physically — and charged to explore a deeper part of themselves and to listen to others, so that they can consider new ideas or other people’s ideas without fear. With this environment, people are more likely to engage in a respectful manner and there’s a greater possibility that communities can be built.

Can you describe any success stories of communities that came together?

I work with a lot of churches, but the one that comes to mind is a medium-sized church with three communities: Korean-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and English-speaking. There was a financial shortfall and the issue was whether to sell the property. This created tension. The English-speaking group said, “We have to sell because we have to be fiscally responsible.” The Korean group, which was growing very quickly, said, “Don’t do that because eventually, very soon, we’re going to need that space because we are growing.” And the Spanish-speaking group was left out because of the perception that they didn’t have the money.

I developed a series of dialogue processes, which use the skills that I teach, creating this grace margin in which people can speak their own truth, speak from their own perspective, and engage with others to truly listen. It took about six gatherings, each around two to three hours. Over the stretch of time they began to trust each other, sharing what was truly in their hearts and minds as opposed to what the other people wanted to hear.

They began to learn more about the Spanish-speaking community, which basically said, “Don’t count us out. We can offer support. We’re part of the church. We can contribute.” The Spanish-speaking community began to mobilize, exploring ways to contribute. They made tamales to sell and raised a lot of money. The community also came to understand the fear of the English-speaking community, who felt that they were losing the church because the Korean group was growing so fast. The Koreans felt that the others were not respecting them even though they were contributing a lot. With this deeper understanding of each group, the community began to work together, and in a year they were back on their feet without selling their property. They’re growing, and in fact they’re exploring new ministries together.

Was that a typical response when you work with diverse communities?

Yes, if they are willing to invest the time to do the hard work. Very often, churches will say, “Oh, yes, we want to do this,” and then by the time I show up, they only give me an hour. What can you do in an hour? This community took six evenings, and it was really hard to get, but they made the commitment. One of the first things we do when we engage a community is say, “How much time do you have? Can you give us a day-long retreat?” Some groups actually give us a whole weekend for a staff or leadership retreat.

Why form this kind of inclusive community?

A diverse community that speaks the truth across our differences always moves toward wellness. I’m talking, first, about social wellness, that is, we are well in our relationships with each other. The second benefit is economic wellness. Financially, the communities are well because they work together. And third, the groups develop spiritual wellness. They understand that what they’re doing — speaking the truth in respectful conversation and achieving understanding — is really God’s work. With spiritual wellness, we can do anything. We can start any new ministry we want, we can reach out to any group that we’re called to engage.

Books by Eric Law

The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community (1992)

Inclusion: Making Room for Grace (2000)


Finding Intimacy in the World of Fear (2007)
Can you recall a life-changing encounter that opened your heart to a person or group of persons that you had previously seen as “other”? How would you describe the conversion process you underwent? Is it impacting you still?

When you read the General Chapter Commitments, “We commit to…,” whom do you envision as that “we”?

Eric Law describes the “grace margin” as “a gracious climate in which people are invited in, with the assurance that they are safe … charged to explore a deeper part of themselves and to listen to others, so that they can consider new ideas or other people’s ideas without fear.” Have you ever participated in such a grace margin? Or worked to create one?

Whose story in this issue do you relate to most? Is there any story that makes you anxious or raises questions? With which author would you most like to converse about her journey?
We Dominican Preachers of Adrian

impelled by the Gospel
and outraged by the injustices of our day
seek truth, make peace, reverence life.
Stirred by the Wisdom of God and rooted
in our contemplative prayer, communal study
and life in community, we challenge heresies of
local and global domination, exploitation, and
greed that privilege some, dehumanize others,
and ravage Earth.
We confront our racist attitudes and root out
racist practices in our lives and systems.
We confront systems where women are
denied freedom, equality, and full personhood.
We walk in solidarity with people who are poor
and challenge structures that impoverish them.
We practice non-violent peacemaking.
We promote lay leadership and shared
decision-making for a renewed Church.
We live right relationships with
Earth community.
We claim the communal authority
and responsibility of our
Dominican heritage.

We commit ourselves
to live this vision.

General Chapter 2004

Our vision continues to impel us...

As contemplative ecclesial women,
global citizens, and humans in
God’s unfolding universe:
We commit to live
simply and sustainably
for the sake of the whole
Earth community.
We commit to study worldviews
and emerging theologies
informed by science
and our suffering world.
We commit to open our hearts to the other
and deepen our understanding of
diverse cultures and beliefs.
We commit to claim our moral authority
to speak truth in Church and society
in the spirit of Catherine of Siena.

We call one another
to mutual accountability
and transformation.

General Chapter 2010
As we strive to live out our Commitment to “deepen our understanding of diverse cultures and beliefs,” cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall’s iceberg analogy might prove helpful. Dr. Hall compares perceptible aspects of one’s culture — like language, behavior, and attire — to the tip of an iceberg. Beneath the surface is a much larger reservoir of beliefs, underlying values, thought patterns, and myths that are implicitly understood by people who share the same culture but are often unknown to others.

To avoid colliding catastrophically with these hidden aspects of another’s culture or beliefs requires an investment of time in study and engagement. At the same time, it is important to recognize, both in oneself and others, that while external aspects of one’s cultural or religious expression may change, internal below-the-surface features are very difficult to shift.