

# Nuns and Nones Organizer Toolkit

*Experiments in Building Community*



## Nuns & Nones groups...

are more than events. They are places for relationship, dialogue, spiritual practice, and social action.

are joyful, spirit-led, and held by the capable hands of committed organizers.

are rooted in mutual learning – not the persuasion of belief.

aim to bring forth a more just and loving world, no longer dependent on systems of extraction and oppression.

are pluralistic, welcoming of all identities, and are LGBTQ affirming.

at their best, grow into committed community.

## Great Nuns & Nones organizers tend to be people who...

live at the intersection of spirituality, community, and justice.

can commit their time and would be energized by working on a small hosting team.

have a sweet spot for creativity and mischief.

can help the voices and perspectives of all be heard.

can help ensure the safety and agency of all in the group, especially people whose identities have been marginalized by white and/or Christian supremacy.

can help invite an unhurried, contemplative pace.

are energized by emergence – and can set aside even the best-laid plans for something surprising and new.



# Welcome.

If you are reading this, you are probably driven by the same curiosity as we are—what happens when Catholic sisters and spiritually diverse millennials come together in shared conversation and action? This toolkit is a small offering in response to that question, and an invitation to dive into this growing movement yourself.

Through these stories and models, we hope you find inspiration and practical tools to help you with your own experiments in community building. In the spirit of the unfinished work of community within which we find ourselves, this living document will grow and evolve as we do.

In the following pages, you'll find ideas, case studies, and language to help you imagine the potential of Nuns and Nones or similar collaborations in your own context. By sharing and exploring what has occurred in Nuns and Nones' gatherings to date, we hope to support the deepening and widening of this emergent movement.

We represent diverse collaborations among women religious, millennials, and allies that manifest in unique ways based on local contexts. There's no central committee who will tell you exactly how to start gathering. Rather, we are here to support the locally-rooted connections you are tending. What we hope to share is a commitment to being part of a spirit-driven and contemplative social movement. We engage in dialogue, relationship building, and deep listening. When we listen—to each other, to our communities, to our planet, and to our charisms\*—we gather clues about how we are being called forward. Now, you and your communities are a part of this emergence, too. ●

*\* A charism is the unique gift or spark that a community is given as a way of acting or being in the world, on behalf of the holy spirit. According to Leonardo Boff in his book Church: Charism & Power: "A charism is a manifestation of the Spirit's presence in the members of the community, causing everything that they are and do to be done and ordered for the good of all."*



“Sisters and Seekers is unlike anything else I’ve experienced... it’s interfaith and intergenerational. [We all] have a lot to learn from one another.”

*Natalie Smith*

*“It seems that God’s doing something really extraordinary right now, however you understand the divine, there’s something happening.”*

**Sr Kathy McCluskey, CSJ**





# Putting Together a Gathering

Getting Started

Holding Space

Structures and practices

Topics and Conversation Starters

Lessons Learned

Common Challenges

Continuing and Iterating





# Getting Started

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While there is no roadmap or model of gathering, there are a few things that we have found to be helpful along the way.

## Entering with Patience

We've found that it's essential to move at the speed of trust as we build relationships across different traditions and generations. Cultivating trust takes time, intention, and often shared meals! It might take some work to find the right people and places to work with, but since this is the foundation of all collaboration to come, it is worth-while to move slowly and intentionally.

It's also important, as we enter into relationship, to be conscious of the labels that we use as shorthand in our collaboration. We often use "Nuns and Nones" or "Sisters and millennials," but recognize that within each group, there is a diversity of traditions, ages, and backgrounds represented. Some of our most committed partners are actually religious-nones and millennial-sisters! We hope these words are mere entry points into breaking down assumptions and achieving a deeper knowing of one another's stories and communities.

## Finding Your Co-Organizers

Nuns and Nones begins with authentic, mutual relationship. Relationship is the starting point and instills a spirit of co-creation in determining who we

are, how we want to be, and what we do together.

But how do we find each other?

Sisters tend to be easier to find. They have websites and congregations through which people can visit, explore, and connect with them. While sisters with an array of interests are involved in Nuns and Nones, there are a few specific groups that keep showing up, including vocation directors, spiritual directors, retreat center directors, and those committed to service and justice ministries. We encourage you to look up the communities of women religious in your area and find the sisters that might be aligned with your interests and passions.

Millennials, particularly so-called "Nones," might be trickier to locate. Despite the "none" label, many of the younger participants in our gatherings do identify with religious or spiritual traditions in some way. Consider where these millennial seekers might be showing up in your community, such as: mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative groups; protests and community organizing efforts; social justice movements; interfaith events; and book clubs and discussion groups that explore relevant topics such as meaning, morality, and faith. Go to those places and see who you find—perhaps they're





LEFT Sticky notes from an activity to brainstorm the next gatherings | PHOTO CREDIT: KATIE GORDON

young people seeking spiritual depth and belonging.

Once you find aligned partners across affiliation and tradition, ask what it is that you're each hungry for. What types of gatherings and actions might you create together? What needs and desires might you be able to meet for one another? What questions might you be able to share with one another, and hold together? Start planning something, so you can invite more people in.

### Making the Invitation

If you want to speak to both sisters and millennials, your invitation needs to come from both sisters and millennials. Inclusive language and cultural awareness matter. Think of the words and images that resonate for you and your community, and find something that matches the space you are seeking to create.

### Preparing Attendees

Ahead of your first gathering, a nicely-worded invitation can provide clarity

and set expectations to prepare attendees to step into something new. Some groups have sent out pre-readings, including informative articles about women religious or articles about millennials. Some have used articles about Nuns and Nones to spark local conversations, like the series in Global Sisters Report. It might be helpful to have a series of conversations with those interested beforehand in order to learn more about each other and your passions. This all helps model and shape the spirit of dialogue and listening to come. ●

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*“It all starts with relationships. I’ve learned that we must focusing on knowing each other and building trust first.”*

**Milicent Johnson**

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# Holding Space

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If you are one of the facilitators of the space, tap into your existing knowledge of **bringing people together**. How do you host a dinner conversation, or gather friends for other occasions in your life? Use those skills, and also remember what is unique about Nuns and Nones. Consider how you might draw these communities together. Many useful conversation guidelines exist for you to lean on, if needed. We have included a few of them in the Appendix.

Consider how to **create a space where everyone can feel seen and heard**. We have found the practice of sitting in a circle to be conducive to the types of conversations we hope to have—conversations that are open, flowing, and allow for a balance of voices. We have also found moving into and out of small groups (2-4 people, with a mix of sisters and seekers) to draw out participation from those who are quieter in the full group.



*“What does this space feel like? Let me offer an image: two hands, holding a thing, without gripping.”*

**A sister’s reflection during the closing of the first Boston gathering**







LEFT Sisters and Seekers in Grand Rapids gathered at the Dominican Center | PHOTO CREDIT: EMILY MCFARLAN MILLER

## Structure and Practices

Nuns and Nones gatherings are often loosely structured, encouraging experimentation and spontaneity. Several groups, however, have found the following components to be conducive to creating a meaningful gathering:

- **Eating, singing and/or reading poetry together**—we’ve found that everything we do together that isn’t talking is just as important as what we say to each other.
- **Meditation or another contemplative practice**, offered by sisters and/or seekers
- **Conversation guidelines or shared commitments**, particularly to honor cultural differences within your group and anticipate ways in which those might show up.
- Beginning the gathering with **an introduction to the discussion topic**, if there is one, and offering **an opening thought, question, or prompt** to spur conversation.
- **Beginning and/or ending “in circle,”** with each person responding to the same question.
- **Splitting into pairs** (ideally with

one Sister and one non-Sister) to connect and discuss a specific topic. This is especially helpful when a group of 12 or more people gather, as it allows for intimate, one-on-one connection and provides everyone the opportunity to actively participate.

## Topics and Conversation Starters

Nuns and Nones gatherings have explored a variety of topics, but some that attendees have found particularly engaging include:

- **Contemplative traditions and practices**
- **Intentional community, religious vows, and commitment**
- **Grounding and sustaining lives of social action**
- **Gender, sexuality, and queer theologies**
- **Capitalism and living in right relationship**
- **Climate crisis and what the earth is asking of us**
- **Migration crises and “welcoming the stranger”**

*Please see the Appendix for an example of a gathering format.*

## Lessons Learned

1. **It's all about mutuality.** At the heart of Nuns and Nones is a spirit of mutuality, relationality, and co-creation. There is an understanding that we all have something to learn from one another, and something unique to share. With a strong relational foundation, this mutual mentoring and collective learning is key to unlocking the possibilities of what we might co-imagine, co-create, and usher into being together. And part of the beauty of this spirit of mutuality is that when there's a strong organizing team of sisters and millennials, a strong community of sisters and millennials follows.
2. **Strong networks help deepen community.** Sisters are well-networked and have pre-existing relationships with one another—social ties that can be leaned on to spread the word about Nuns and Nones and invite sisters to gatherings. Additionally, Nuns and Nones often generates the most energy in places where millennial participants have existing relationships and community with one another. This allows for bridging between the

**"I know that conversations and friendships across religious difference takes time...The point of Nuns and Nones is to have challenging conversations about being human with unlikely friends."**

*Jenny Kinne*



ABOVE Sister Jeanmarie Gribaudo, CSJ and Jayati Doshi at a Boston gathering | PHOTO CREDIT: DARLENE ROGERS

two communities to happen more quickly, for conversations to go deeper, and for greater participation overall. That said, there's also a lot of value in reaching beyond your immediate communities!

3. **Remember the big picture and play around with the details.** This movement doesn't have a roadmap. While this can be liberating, it can also foster uncertainty. At times, you may ask yourself: how do we move forward? In times of difficulty or ambiguity, remember what first brought the group together—the why behind it all—and trust in that. Then, when it comes to planning the what and the how of gathering, have fun! Nuns and Nones groups have found it helpful to structure gatherings loosely—with a specific discussion topic and a question or two prepared to guide conversation, yet allowing the conversation to flow naturally. Groups have also enjoyed hosting a variety of gatherings and events and trying new things, such as engaging in contemplative practice, playing improv games, or gathering outside.



## Common Challenges

### 1. Finding an inclusive gathering space.

In bringing together women religious and millennials from different religious and spiritual backgrounds, it can be challenging to find a space that feels natural and welcoming to everyone. Sometimes, religious buildings and institutions can be triggering spaces for those who have left or been hurt by religion. At the same time, millennials often don't have their own community spaces. When planning a gathering, it is essential to look for spaces that can be accessible and feel welcoming to all participants.

One option is retreat centers run by Catholic Sisters, where the space is designed to be a spiritual home for both women religious and for seekers of many or no faith traditions. Another option is to meet at community centers connected to the ministries or work of the participants, or in each other's homes.

### 2. Facilitating dialogue across difference.

As with any group that is gathering across identities—whether across gender and sexuality, age, race and ethnicity, ability, or tradition—we have to think about how to create a space that supports all participants to bring themselves. Organizers and facilitators need to ask themselves how they are holding a container that anyone can authentically step into and co-create within. Having an organizing team that represents the diversity of your collaboration is essential. Additionally, setting conditions for dialogue (see “Holding Space” on page 8 and conversation guidelines on page 29) can set up the right environment for co-creation. There are many learning resources to help organizers be care-takers of such spaces, like Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun's resource on the characteristics of white supremacy culture.

### 3. Learning how to work interculturally.

Many Nuns & Nones gatherings tend to be in-

*“Growth doesn't come through perfect facilitation, it comes from having the room and grace to make mistakes, and from being with people who will give you that grace.”*

**Kendra Avila**

tergenerational, and while there are incredible gifts that come from this, there can also be logistical and cultural barriers. Recognizing that it varies from group to group, we have noticed some patterns arise from different communities. For instance, when planning gatherings, sisters tend to be more committal and prefer concrete plans scheduled in advance, while millennials have a more flexible and emergent planning style. This can be a challenge to work through as organizers get to know one another's styles and methods.

Once communities start to gather, there's also a difference in language that arises—words that millennials commonly use, sisters might not, and vice versa. This is part of the ongoing translation work that needs to happen; organizers and participants must work together to learn how to effectively plan and communicate together. While it takes time, we've found that a shared way of being and common language emerges through relationship and by continuously extending grace and understanding to one another. This is the work! ●



# Continuing and Iterating

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As a movement that is both **emerging and emergent**, guided by a spirit of **experimentation and curiosity**, Nuns and Nones is constantly evolving and growing over time and through relationship. In your own experiments, **keep listening for what else wants to emerge**, and for what the next right question might be.

To encourage this process, it's helpful to have feedback loops and frequent opportunities for participants and organizers to share input and ideas. This could be achieved by sending out a periodic survey or dedicating a portion of each gathering to sharing feedback and ideas. ●

*“This project is evolving. We can’t predict how it will unfold.”*

**Sister Judy Cannon, RSM**



# Case Studies

Grand Rapids

Highlight: The Unique Need for This Space

Boston

Highlight: Contemplative Silence

National Gatherings

Highlight: Conducting Resonance

Bay Area

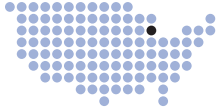
Highlight: The Vow Series



# GRAND RAPIDS

Bi-weekly meetings as sanctuary for those on the margins

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## DATES

April 2017 - ongoing

## FREQUENCY

Every other week on Sunday evenings

## WAY WE GATHER

1.5 hour discussions on specific topics

Potlucks

Poetry gatherings

Silent retreats

One-on-one coffee dates

Film screenings

Friday morning breakfasts

## GROUP SIZE

On average, 8-14 regulars attend the gatherings

## SISTER GROUPS INVOLVED

Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids

## Overview and Origin Story

Sisters and Seekers, a local manifestation of the national Nuns and Nones movement, brings together Dominican Sisters with non-religious and spiritually diverse young people in Grand Rapids, MI. In a woman-led and centered space, Sisters and Seekers builds intergenerational relationships and engages in dialogue on topics related to faith, spirituality, justice, current events, what it means to be human, and how to respond to the needs of the world today.

Sisters and Seekers was first convened in April of 2017 by Sister Barbara Hansen, OP, and millennial Katie Gordon, who met through mutual involvement with interfaith organizing and community media work. Sister Barbara invited a few dozen sisters who she thought would be interested in connecting with millennials. Meanwhile, Katie, an involved community organizer, invited a handful of her peers who—like herself—were seeking community. An instant connection was experienced at that first gathering, which prompted the community to begin meeting regularly. When Katie moved to Boston in August of 2017, Ellie Hutchison Cervantes continued co-facilitating along with Sister Barbara.

## The Unique Need for This Space

Like many places in the Midwest, faith and family are highly valued in Grand Rapids. This is further underscored in Grand Rapids by the city's strong Dutch and Christian Reformed heritage. Social networks run tight and deep—at least for those who grew up in Grand Rapids. However, for those who move to this small city, it can be difficult to break into its tightly-woven social fabric. This is even more so the case for those who are religiously disaffiliated. Given the city's Christian and more conservative environment, assumptions are often made about

*“There are deep sharings that take place and there is a heartfelt listening to one another.”*

**Sister Lucille Janowiak, OP**

**“I felt some cracks in my soul begin to heal during this gathering. Some of my cynicism melted away.”**

**Jenny Kinne**



LEFT Millennials and sisters in Grand Rapids during an advocacy postcard writing event | PHOTO CREDIT: ELLIE HUTCHISON CERVANTES

what others believe. A common question asked when getting to know someone is: “Where do you go to church?”

In this context, it is vital to have an alternative space where those who find themselves on the social and religious margins can experience connection and belonging. Sisters and Seekers has become this welcoming sanctuary for many. For the community members, but especially the young people, the friendships and community found through Sisters and Seekers has been the most meaningful aspect of participating. These are friendships that have resulted from being faithfully present with one another week to week, month to month, and year to year; friendships that have grown out of being rooted in a place—chiefly, the Dominican Center, the home of the Dominican Sisters of Grand Rapids—and sharing that space together. In this way, Sisters and Seekers is making a home on the margins for Grand Rapids’ transplants, seekers, religiously-ambiguous doubters, and all who hold a more expansive curiosity in their heart.

### Visions for the Future

There is an overwhelming consensus that Sisters and Seekers is a unique, rich, and meaningful community for all who are involved. The main hope for the future is simply that Sisters and Seekers continues in some capacity. As young people continue to move away from Grand Rapids, there is some concern that the community will fade out. Thus, there is a desire to see more young people attend the gatherings, and there is a need to continue spreading the word and inviting more people to enter the space.



## Structure and Practices

- **Utilizing conversation guidelines.** Sisters and Seekers developed conversation guidelines (in appendix) to help create a generous, open, and hospitable space where honest conversations can flourish. The guidelines also help cultivate self-awareness amongst members so that all are able to equally share and feel they are heard and that their voices are valued.
- **Meeting bi-weekly for an hour and a half.** While meeting every other week requires more commitment from community members, it has allowed for an intimate and close-knit community to develop. This meeting frequency was especially helpful while the community was forming and members were first getting to know one another. Members have also found meeting for an hour and a half to be an ideal amount of time to connect, catch up with one another, and delve into a conversation topic.
- **Gatherings of 8-14 people work well.** Sisters and Seekers has found that gatherings of around 12 people maintain a level of intimacy while still representing a diversity of experiences and perspectives. When groups are larger than this, it can be difficult for everyone to actively participate in the dialogue. ●



ABOVE LEFT Kendra Avila and Sister Barbara Hansen, OP, enjoy a cup of coffee while planning future gatherings | PHOTO CREDIT: ELLIE HUTCHISON CERVANTES ABOVE RIGHT Sisters and seekers attend a Cosecha-led protest in Grand Rapids, MI

# BOSTON

*Co-ownership arising out of organizer relationships nurtured over time*

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## Overview and Origin Story

In 2018, millennials and sisters in Boston started hosting Nuns and Nones events with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston (CSJs) at their motherhouse in Brighton, MA. After Katie Gordon spoke at the CSJs chapter meeting in the fall of 2017, a small group of sisters and millennials continued to talk about mutual needs and desires of their two respective communities. Both sisters and millennials expressed desire for intergenerational relationships to grow in, and spaces to gather together. This set the stage for future conversations with the community that ultimately led Nuns and Nones gatherings to take place.

In spring 2018, the organizing team behind the Boston gatherings came together as: Katie Gordon and Rachel Plattus as millennial organizers, and Sr. Maryann Enright, Sr. Kathy McCluskey, and Sr. Rosemary Mulvihill from the Sisters of St. Joseph. In 2018, there were three gatherings hosted at their motherhouse in Brighton, MA.

Through building relationships over those months, a model of co-ownership emerged between the sisters and millennials in the planning. The magic is in the formula, one organizer reflected, where **if co-creation is embodied as a planning group, then the gatherings are more meaningful** and the process of planning itself is a part of the gift of the community.

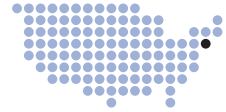
## Structure and Practices

Each gathering has welcomed a different group of attendees and has held a slightly different structure. As such, each gathering has needed to start with generous



**“The reason it all works is because we’re all seekers.”**

Sr Kathy McCluskey, CSJ



## DATES

June 2018 - present

## FREQUENCY

Every few months

## WAYS WE GATHER

Day-long shared practice

2-hour discussion gatherings

## GROUP SIZE

Between 20 and 25

## SISTER GROUPS INVOLVED

Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston (main host)

Since the first few gatherings, many additional congregations have joined the conversation.

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LEFT *Nora Sullivan during the day of contemplative silence with the Boston group |*

PHOTO CREDIT:

DARLENE ROGERS





## PRACTICE HIGHLIGHT Contemplative Silence

Wanting deeper time together and a chance for shared practice, the group got together for a day-long gathering and explored contemplative silence. After the initial opening circle, to enter into the practice, a facilitator crowdsourced wisdom by asking: What is your way into silence? Participants answered with ideas like:

*“The main thing is to sit down and shut up.”*

*“Start with the wisdom of the breath.”*

Then for an hour, the entire building and grounds were open for participants to enter into their own contemplative silence, either individually or alongside others. After the practice, everyone was asked: “What did the silence teach us?” Answers included:

*“The gust of wind helped me land.”*

*“The warm sun and the water held me.”*

*“8000 galaxies away, someone is doing the same as me.”*



ABOVE Boston-area sisters and millennials engage with one another over a break | PHOTO CREDIT: DARLENE ROGERS





introductions, bringing each voice and story into the space. Longer gatherings have allowed for these deeper connections.

- **Stories, questions, and practice** are the key elements of each gathering. Since there are some new attendees at each gathering, there should always be a chance to share individual stories in the space, voice questions, and engage in shared spiritual practice. As one Sister said at the first gathering in Boston, “so many of your stories have found a home in me.”
- **Embrace the gathering as an opportunity to catch a breath in the rush of life.** If those interested are a hard bunch to wrangle up, due to the busyness of life, take the time you can get together and use it as a space to provide pause and renewal.
- **Listen for the needs and desires of those gathered,** and create space to respond to those hungers.
- As one sister said, “**The reason it all works is because we’re all seekers.**” As much as this movement calls itself Nuns and Nones, look for what transcends labels, and lean into that.

ABOVE *Nuns and Nones gathering at the CSJ Motherhouse in Brighton, MA*  
| PHOTO CREDIT:  
DARLENE ROGERS

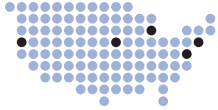
## Visions for the Future

After a number of gatherings, many beautiful relationships have grown from time together that have resulted in connections in and outside of the Nuns and Nones gatherings. The organizers are now focused on developing shared leadership to support the continued thriving of the local group. They are also interested in exploring, beyond shared contemplative practice and conversation, how they might move into collective action together. Some possibilities include: longer retreats for deeper relationship building, practice, and strategic conversations; group learning circles oriented toward creating a shared foundation for actions or campaigns; convenings focused on specific topics with special guests from outside the Nuns and Nones community. ●

# NATIONAL GATHERINGS

Weekend retreats to listen into “what’s next”

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## DATES

December 2016 –  
December 2017

## FREQUENCY

Five one-time  
gatherings over one  
year

## WAYS WE GATHER

Two-day retreat style  
gatherings

## GROUP SIZE

Approximately 20  
total – half sisters and  
half millennials

## SISTER GROUPS INVOLVED

Sisters of Mercy,  
Sisters of St. Joseph,  
Dominican Sisters,  
and more than a  
dozen other orders  
and congregations

## Overview and Origin Story

In 2016, Adam Horowitz and Wayne Muller began wondering what would happen if Catholic women religious and socially-engaged millennials—two groups who seem different, but shared similar questions and interests—got into the same room with one another.

The first experiment of such a gathering happened in December 2016 in Cambridge, MA, and then four more followed across the country in the Bay Area, Kalamazoo, Philadelphia, and St. Louis throughout 2017. Over these two-day gatherings, about ten sisters and ten millennials gathered in a circle to share their stories, ask questions, and invite one another to consider, “What’s next?” Each of these gatherings surfaced just how much these two groups had in common and unleashed a profound sense of connection and possibility, planting seeds for imaginative new projects, relationships, and communities.

At each gathering, the agenda was simple. Four questions were asked, with plenty of dialogue within each question:

1. Introductions: What is a question or wondering that’s especially alive within you?
2. Who are the sisters?
3. Who are the millennials?
4. Where might we go from here?

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*“[The Nuns and Nones] gathering was sustenance for my spirit. At a time when it is easy to feel disconnected and divided from others, our time together created and strengthened essential and vital relationships to the community and collective movement towards peace and justice.”*

**Carrie Drake**

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LEFT Nuns and Nones gathering at Cranaleith Spirituality Center in Philadelphia, PA, fall 2017

By coming together for two days at a time, the groups were able to go deep, sharing both structured and unstructured time together. In order to provide general introductions to the other group before gathering in person, each group was provided some pre-reading about the other, to get a feel for who they were stepping into the room with. Once they came together, they went deep quickly. The gatherings felt immediately like soul-connections, many remarked.

After these weekend-retreats were over, a wide-range of follow-up activities emerged organically. In some cities, the groups continued to gather and grow. In other cities, the millennials and sisters began to invite one another into their own communities. And finally, many one-on-one relationships were formed, allowing millennials and sisters to still go deeper yet on their own.

### Structure and Practices

- **Including time to pause and to play** allowed for a generative and energizing rhythm to the gatherings. While the conversation was endlessly expansive, taking generous moments of pause was essential as well. There was always a contemplative spirit infused, taking breaks for gently facilitated meditation, spontaneous singing, contemplative walking, and movement together. The purpose of gathering was not only to talk for two days, but to be together — to sing, play, dance, sit, walk, eat, drink tea, and discover together.
- The first question — **“What is the question or wondering within you?”** — not only brought everyone’s voices into the room, but also a sense of the yearnings, dreams, grief, and possibilities present within the group. The question is intentionally open-ended, to allow



## PRACTICE HIGHLIGHT Conducting Resonance

At many of these gatherings, Adam led the group as a chorus of voices echoing one another's words and dreams. By taking quotes from each participant throughout the gathering and writing them down onto notecards, he handed them out randomly to each person in the circle. Adam then "conducted" from the middle to allow this chorus of ideas to grow alongside one another, finding resonance in one another's recitations. The phrases sung into the group were poetic stanzas like:

*"the beautiful not yet"*

*"a fiercely loving honest kindness"*

*"emerge and see"*

*"the power of spirit is indeed at work"*

*"being present to the world"*

*"the grace in and among us"*

*"who can I invite to this field of love?"*

people to go as deeply as they wanted or felt comfortable doing so with their answer.

- These gatherings worked best with **meaningfully engaged local stakeholders** — including a local host-site who could accommodate the hospitality required for a group retreat. Each gathering was organized by a few sisters, millennials, and allies, and thus invited sisters, millennials, and allies from the city or region. Sisters often had networks in which to invite one another, and millennials were found through a series of either personal networks or research into local aligned groups, like movement organizations, interfaith collaborations, or contemplative spiritual communities.

## Visions for the Future

These gatherings were initially meant to be learning and listening experiments to get a sense for where the spirit might be taking this collaboration. After that first year, those involved began another series of experiments based on the questions that arose in those gatherings. Since then, Nuns and Nones has been exploring ways of nurturing new forms of prophetic community, stewarding the legacy of spiritual and physical assets of religious life, and encouraging the many ways that relationships between sisters and millennials can respond to the needs of the time. ●

**"At the end of the gathering the world was more closely knit together. An energy had gone out that made community among diverse groups more possible than ever before."**

*Sr. Pat Bergen, CSJ*



# BAY AREA

*Intergenerational community leading into and coming out of a pilot residency*

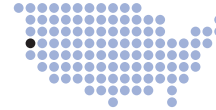
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## Overview and Origin Story

Nuns and Nones in the San Francisco Bay Area convenes local millennials and sisters to co-create intergenerational community. What began as periodic gatherings evolved to include a pilot residency, with five millennials living with the Sisters of Mercy in Burlingame for a six-month period.

In May of 2017, Wayne Muller and Adam Horowitz convened a two-day meeting at the Mercy Center as part of the initial national Nuns and Nones gatherings held across the country. Around 25 local sisters and millennials attended, and through exploring the question of what their hearts were longing for, discovered surprising commonalities and a kindred spirit amongst themselves. They began to organize gatherings to continue these connections.

As relationships developed and trust grew, the opportunity to engage on a deeper level emerged. So, when the national Nuns and Nones movement put out a call to religious orders asking for communities to host a pilot residency, the Sisters of Mercy responded. Sr. Judy Carle, Sr. Judy Cannon, Sr. Patsy Harney, and Sr. Joan Marie O'Donnell—along with the Mercy Center Director Suzanne Buckley—spearheaded the initiative. After extensive consultation with their leadership team and the rest of their community, the sisters invited five millennials to live with them from November 2018 to May 2019.



### DATES

April 2016 - ongoing

### INITIAL FREQUENCY

At the beginning: seasonal two-day, or single-day gatherings and intermittent get-togethers, followed by the pilot residency with more immersive programming and events

### NEW FREQUENCY

Meeting weekly for shared spiritual practice and discussion and once every season for a Friday shabbat and Saturday learning / being day.

### GROUP SIZE

Anywhere from 5-40 people, depending on the type of gathering

### SISTER GROUPS INVOLVED

Dominican Sisters  
Sisters of Mercy  
Sisters of Notre Dame

### WAYS WE GATHER

Potlucks  
Two-day retreats  
Day-long field trips, learning, or shared practice  
Informal dinners with haiku writing sessions  
Six-month pilot residency program  
Salon discussion series  
Shabbat dinners and religious festivals  
Public actions, like interfaith vigils, homeless census, and ICE protests  
Multi-day workshops with visiting teachers, rabbis  
“Book Club” style discussions and workshop teach-ins

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LEFT *A human sculpture at the Bay Area gathering*



## PRACTICE HIGHLIGHT

### The Vow Series

Some of the most engaging conversations Nuns and Nones has delved into have been about the vows that sisters take when entering religious life. During the pilot residency, three conversations were co-facilitated by a Sister and resident millennial on each, specifically the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The conversations explored what the vow originally meant, how the sisters have experienced it, if and how it shifted following Vatican II, and how the sisters understand it now.

The conversations have brought together between 20-40 people each, half sisters and half millennials, with the millennial co-hosts intentionally inviting young people who may be interested in the topic. For example, millennials who are involved with economic justice and shared co-op work were invited to the gathering about the vow of poverty.

These conversations have been incredibly generative and engaging, and have helped expand both the Sister's and the millennial's understanding of the topics related to the vows. They have also prompted the millennials to consider what vows they might want to take in their lives. Even amidst differences of opinion at times, the conversations have drawn these unlikely groups together in a nuanced and mutually-enriching way.

*RIGHT Sisters and millennials engage about the Vow of Poverty at the Mercy Center in Burlingame, CA*  
| PHOTO CREDIT:  
BRITTANY KOTELES



*“It’s not one group mentoring, fixing, or saving the other. It’s more about what can we co-create together.”*

**Milicent Johnson**

**“Expect surprises.”**

**Sister Judy Cannon, RSM**

### Structures and Practices

The Nuns and Nones community in the Bay Area has learned that it is essential to have **communal buy-in and local champions** when hosting a residency. The pilot residency was driven by a core group of sisters who worked extensively with the rest of their community to garner buy-in and support. It also required a logistical champion on-site—in this case, Suzanne Buckley, the Director of the Mercy Center—to provide the necessary administrative and operational support.

### Vision for the Future

The pilot residency at the Mercy Center wrapped up in May of 2019 and the community is currently discerning what the next chapter of Nuns and Nones in the Bay Area will look like. Above all, they hope for continued engagement and deepening of relationships and are open to what form that could take. One desire is to make aspects of the residency, such as the vow series and weekly Shabbat dinners, accessible to more people on a regular basis. This could take the form of an inter-generational monthly gathering and weekly or bi-weekly gatherings for millennials. There is also a desire for a shared space for community life, ritual, prayer, study, and collective action on social issues.

Given the economic pressures and intensity of the Bay Area, it is an extremely difficult place to choose a non-traditional path for one’s life. Yet young people are hungry for alternative spaces, spiritual community, and examples of living in alignment with one’s values. The Nuns and Nones movement in the Bay Area has the opportunity to continue meeting these needs and co-creating spaces where sacred relationships can flourish. ●



# Closing Invitation

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We know that the sign of the spirit is that it is always new. What we know about Nuns and Nones is to “expect surprises!” We are excited to continue to explore the unexpected and the new within this growing, deepening, and expanding Nuns and Nones community.

With this toolkit, we hoped to capture learnings and stories from these first two years of this movement. We also intend for this resource to be a living document that changes as we do. The digital home for this ongoing collective learning can be found on our website, where you can let us know how you are using this resource.

Feel free to reach out to [hello@nunsandnones.org](mailto:hello@nunsandnones.org) to let us know how these ideas are moving in your community, and follow the links below to explore additional possibilities. ●

## Ways of Connecting and Deepening

### Follow us on social media:

“Nuns and Nones” on Facebook  
@NunsandNones on Instagram and Twitter

### Sign up for our newsletter:

<https://nunsandnones.salsalabs.org/join>

### Explore the facets of our growing community:

<https://www.nunsandnones.org/community>

### Find others in your area to connect with:

<https://nunsandnones.salsalabs.org/local>

*“I was amazed at the similarities of vision and values. I felt energized by the conversation and the level of connection that happened among us. I am eager to move this dream forward and heartened by what we can learn from each other and the mutual support we can give one another.”*

**Sr. Kathleen Sherman**



# Appendix & & Resources

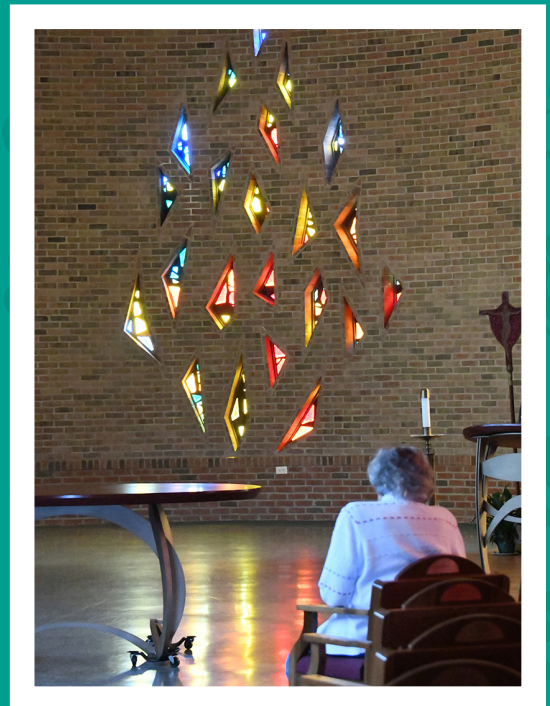
An Example Structure for a Dialogue-Centered Gathering

Conversation Guidelines

Recommended Reading

About Nuns and Nones

About This Toolkit



# AN EXAMPLE STRUCTURE FOR A DIALOGUE-CENTERED GATHERING

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## Centering

- 1-3 minutes of silence

## Opening

- A few attendees share with the group a poem, a meditation, a piece of artwork, or another offering they've brought along.
- The group reads aloud their conversation guidelines.
- Each person shares their name and answers a question, such as:
  - How is your heart?
  - What is a question you're holding right now?
  - What was a highlight of this past week for you? When did you experience the divine, witness beauty, or feel joy?
  - What is a word or phrase that reflects how you are feeling right now and how you are entering this space?

## Dialogue

- The bulk of the gathering time is spent in conversation, most often discussing an article, podcast episode, or another form of media reviewed in advance.

## Closing

- There is a second opportunity for attendees to share poetry or another offering with the group.
- Going around the circle again, each person is invited to answer a final question, such as:
  - What word represents how you are feeling right now?
  - What is a phrase or mantra you'd like to carry with you as you leave this space?
  - What is one thing you've learned during our time together

# CONVERSATION GUIDELINES

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## Sisters and Seekers Conversation Guidelines

These conversation guidelines were developed collaboratively by Sisters and Seekers in Grand Rapids, MI, and seek to create a generous, open, and hospitable space where honest conversations can flourish.

**Listen generously.**

Listening is about more than being quiet while others speak. Genuine listening is powered by curiosity and an authentic desire to know the other. When others speak, honor their vulnerability and focus on what they are saying instead of thinking of what we might say next.

**Be aware of yourself and others.**

Be aware of yourself—knowing when to speak up and when to step back. If you are comfortable speaking up, consider pausing and allowing others space to share. If you are less likely to speak up, challenge yourself to share more often.

Also be aware of the power dynamics—As a majority white, and majority Catholic or Christian-affiliated group, it is vital to be aware of the privileges we hold and how they shape our presence with others in order to ensure that all voices and perspectives are being heard.

**Extend grace.**

Trust that no one in our community would cause harm intentionally. However, we all make mistakes. If offended, please acknowledge what was said, explain your perspective, and extend grace. If you unintentionally offend, please seek forgiveness.

**Maintain an unhurried and reflective pace.**

Allow for a brief pause between comments and hold space for moments of silent reflection throughout the conversation. This creates a restful pace for the conversation and allows all participants the time they need to process what has been shared before considering responding.

**Lastly, speak from your own experience and avoid generalizations.**

Acknowledge the difference between your truth, other’s truths, and “The Truth.” One way to practice this is by using “I” statements, such as “I feel...” or “In my experience...”

**OTHER CONVERSATION GUIDELINES**

“An Invitation to Brave Space”  
Mickey ScottBey Jones and Peoples Supper

“Circle of Trust Touchstones”  
Parker Palmer and the Center for Courage & Renewal

# RECOMMENDED READING

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## Recommended Reading

- *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* by Sr. Joan Chittister
- *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir* by Sr. Joan Chittister
- *Poverty Celibacy & Obedience : A Radical Option for Life* by Diarmuid O'Murchu
- *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* by Priya Parker
- *The New Better Off: Reinventing the American Dream* by Courtney E. Martin
- *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* by Krista Tippett
- *To Bless the Space Between Us* by John O'Donahue

## Recommended Films

Nuns and Nones communities have found the following films to be meaningful to view and discuss together:

- *Radical Grace* – a documentary film about three irrepressible nuns. View the Nuns and Nones discussion guide at <https://radicalgracefilm.com/discussion-guides>.
- *Nuns on the Bus*
- *Band of Sisters*
- *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*
- *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*



# ABOUT NUNS AND NONES

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Nuns and Nones is a network of women religious, spiritually diverse millennials, and allied thought partners who are creating new pathways to share the wisdom and legacy of sisters; steward sacred spaces; and meet the needs of our times. We strive to connect our generations through new forms of community, exploring spiritual practices and collaborating in justice work.

To grow in community to meet the needs of these times demands spiritual practice and resilience, courage and creativity, mutual support, and shared values for social action. Communities of women religious have modeled these qualities for centuries, and millennials have begun to experiment with them in new forms today. Through relationship, in community, imagining and innovating together, Nuns and Nones hopes to be a part of this larger movement to carry prophetic traditions into the 21st century.

# ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

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This resource was written in 2019 by Ellie Hutchison Cervantes and Katie Gordon, edited by Stina Kielsmeier-Cook, and designed by Christina Tran.

Beyond us, this represents the collective imagination of dozens of organizers and participants from Nuns and Nones communities across the United States, with special thanks to the folks we interviewed for the case studies: Kendra Avila; Sarah Jane Bradley; Judy Cannon, RSM; Maryann Enright, CSJ; Barbara Hansen, OP; Adam Horowitz; Mary Lucille Janowiak, OP; Milicent Johnson; Brittany Koteles; Kathy McCluskey, CSJ; Wayne Muller; Joan Marie O'Donnell, RSM; Rachel Plattus; Natalie Smith.\*

Additionally, thank you to the Louisville Institute Pastoral Study Project for providing funds to support the development of this resource, and to the GHR Foundation for funding the growing efforts of Nuns and Nones as a national movement.

*\*OP: Order of Preachers (also referred to as Dominican Sisters)*

*RSM: Religious Sisters of Mercy (also referred to as Sisters of Mercy)*

*CSJ: Congregation of St. Joseph (also referred to as Sisters of St. Joseph)*

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FRONT COVER PHOTO *A conversation continues fireside at a national Nuns & Nones gathering at the Fetzer Institute. | PHOTO CREDIT: RHINO MEDIA*

nunsandnones.org

*fall 2019*