



Sisters of
St. Francis™

CLINTON, IOWA

Celebrating 160 Years of Mission & Ministry

1866 — 2026

*“Our congregation’s journey is best captured by the
corporal and spiritual works of mercy.”*

- Sr. Jan Cebula



Anamosa, Iowa - 1891

Our Kentucky Beginnings

Our history began in the shadow of the Trappist Monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky. The local farmers assisted in building the monastery, and in exchange, they were promised free education for their children.

In 1863, Mrs. Caroline Warren, a young Civil War widow, was recommended to head a girls' school.

Miss Lizzie Lillis was hired as a teacher; Sally Walker, Caroline's niece, assisted them at the school.

On January 21, 1866, the bishop of Louisville, KY, declared that the congregation of the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was established with his approbation. The three founding members were Caroline (Sister Elizabeth), Lizzie (Sister Angela), and Sally (Sister Mary Frances).



Mount Olivet

In 1868, a motherhouse and new boarding school, Mount Olivet, was established. Fifty boarders in addition to our sisters could live there.

In 1873, after much contention and at the request of a bishop, our sisters left Gethsemani for Shelbyville, KY. Our sisters started ministering at mission schools in neighboring towns. These were hard years as the schools did not prosper, our sisters experienced extreme poverty, and the area suffered a severe epidemic of typhoid fever.

“Our sisters remained faithful in spite of difficult and challenging times.”

- Sr. Joan Theiss

Moving to Iowa

Two Jesuit priests who visited Shelbyville in 1889 were intrigued with our history and appalled at our living conditions. They urged our sisters to apply for acceptance into the Diocese of Dubuque, Iowa.

In September 1890, the first twelve sisters arrived in Dubuque. Then, in December, twenty nuns, a girl, and a dog arrived — the girl was a 16-year-old postulant and the dog was Carlos, a Saint Bernard.



Sr. M. Frances Walker

“From the very beginning, our sisters chose ministries to those who have less rather than the wealthier. Shortly after they came to Iowa from Kentucky, some of the sisters went to the small towns of Vail and Petersville. Later to Denison, Varina, and Fonda. All in Iowa and not in big cities. Some of these places gave them a simple place to live and food, but no salary.” - Sr. Maria Zeimen

Upon arrival, most of our sisters traveled by train to western Iowa and served as educators in schools. The ministry of healthcare also began.

Our motherhouse, a one-story cottage nicknamed “The Beehive,” was established in Anamosa in 1891. That same year, a priest of the newly-organized St. Patrick Parish in Clinton invited our sisters to staff its new parish school. Five sisters were first assigned to Clinton before the rest followed in 1893.

A three-story brick building was purchased on August 12 (the Feast of St. Clare) and became our motherhouse, Mount St. Clare. When the building became too small to accommodate the growing number of sisters and boarders, a new structure was built nearby in 1911. This five-story building housed the motherhouse, the novitiate, and Mount St. Clare Academy.

The former building became a school for boys until 1914 when it became Mount Alverno, the first home for the aged and infirmed in Clinton county. Mount Alverno operated until 1971 when a new facility was built along 13th Avenue North in Clinton and became The Alverno. It remains in operation today.



Mount St. Clare, 1911

Expanding Ministries

Our congregation acquired St. Francis Hospital in Macomb, IL, in 1903; a nursing school was added in 1913.

Mount St. Clare College in Clinton was chartered in 1918 and our ministry of higher education began.

St. Francis Hospital, a new thirty-five bed facility, was dedicated in Grinnell, IA, in 1920.

Mercy Hospital in Burlington, IA, was acquired in 1922 and a school of nursing was added in 1944.

In 1943, the St. Michael Speech and Hearing, later known as Mount St. Clare Speech and Hearing Center, was started and served Iowa and Illinois residents.

At the request of a bishop of Nassau, Bahamas, the sisters opened a hospital clinic and elementary school on the island, serving from 1960 to 1999.

Right: Srs. Pauline Logsdon and Phyllis Morris in Peru. Bottom: Srs. Eleanor Dunning, Francis Burke, Mary Paul Hummer, and Jeanine Bradford in the Bahamas.



St. Francis Hospital



In 1965, four sisters opened the mission in the Diocese of Chulucanas, Peru, South America, and sisters served in schools, parishes, and chancery office until 2018.

Our sisters founded three L'Arche communities: Clinton in 1974; Chicago, IL, in 2000; and St. Louis, MO, in 2011.

“Our foundresses would be impressed with our great variety of ministries - the sisters brought the Franciscan influence to each of their ministries and thus spread the spirit of St. Francis and the Clinton Franciscans.”

- Sr. Martinelle Bonnell

“From the beginning, our mission has been to be Franciscan educators. During the years following our founding in Gethsemani, our mission called us to teach in schools, care for the sick and the elderly, help those in need, and be good stewards of our environment. As followers of St. Francis and St. Clare, we are called to both contemplation and action, prayer and service. Today, we continue to be called to give our lives and our energy to promote peace, active nonviolence, and the well-being of all God’s creation.”

- Sr. Marilyn Shea

What has remained constant in our congregation’s mission over time?

“Hospitality and education.” - Sr. Eileen Golby

“Peacemaking and nonviolence.” - Sr. Kathy Sadler

“Hospitality and joy. It is what drew me to the Sisters of St. Francis. My decision was made when remembering how inviting, warm, and joyful the sisters were when I visited.”

- Sr. Donna Burke

A Sign of the Times

Following Vatican II, our congregation began new ministries with the desire of bringing the church into the modern world. Advocacy for change was occurring throughout our congregation, one sister at a time.

In December 1971, Clinton Franciscans were part of a group of Catholic sisters who created a nationwide “network” of women religious who would engage in political activism at the federal level for social justice.

One sister co-founded the Franciscan Non-Governmental Organization at the United Nations in 1982, now known as Franciscans International.

One sister co-founded the AIDS Ministry of Illinois; another served as an attorney with Legal Aid. Several sisters served at Catholic Worker houses in Missouri and Iowa.

Additionally, our sisters ministered to the Hispanic communities in Illinois and Iowa, served as campus ministers, and assisted with other organizations that walked with people who lived on the margins.

The Associate partnership started in 1986 with lay people partnering with the sisters in following the Franciscan way of life. The Sojourner relationship, living a covenant relationship with the sisters, began in 2003.



Associate Ceremony, 1986

“Our responses to human dignity of all and options for those who are poor and vulnerable continue to broaden. When I entered, we focused on direct services to others, especially in education and healthcare. Over the years, we recognized that laws needed to be changed, hence advocacy. Next came involvement with systemic change. We have added another layer in joining others by focusing on the Gospel of active nonviolence and justice as a way of life. The call to serve others is the same.”

- Sr. Marilyn Huegerich

A New Corporate Mission

In the late 1980s, one sister participated in a Faith and Resistance Retreat and civil disobedience. Many sisters participated in retreats and actions at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site in the 1990s. Our sisters continued to attend workshops on nonviolence.

In 1992, our communal journey led us to deepen our understanding of active nonviolence, and each Chapter since then we have committed ourselves to this corporate mission, allocating resources and integrating Franciscan spirituality with our mission of active nonviolence and peacemaking.



In 1997, our sisters moved from the Mount St. Clare Convent to our current motherhouse, The Canticle.

A “Center” for Active Nonviolence was established in 2000. The “Center” was a catalyst for education, training, planning, and involving the community and laity at a critical time of systemic injustice. Staff was hired in 2009, and the name was changed to the Franciscan Peace Center in 2014.

Starting in 2003, corporate stands were a communal action affirming our congregation’s beliefs in nonviolence as we advocated for those who had no voice. Corporate stands have been taken on the death penalty, nuclear weapons, immigration reform, human trafficking, care of creation, and basic human rights and income inequality.

“I believe that our foundresses would be astonished to see us in this whole new time and place. They would be happy to learn that so many sisters have continued in the spirit of our founders. Those early sisters were teachers and caregivers in a time of upheaval following the Civil War. They would see that we continue to serve in a time when wars are still being fought around the world. I believe they would be particularly happy to know that our mission has evolved into practicing and promoting active nonviolence and peacemaking.”

- Sr. Anne Martin Phelan

“St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi continue to inspire and challenge us as vowed women religious to be instruments of peace. Regardless of the ministry we are doing or where we are living, concern for the people who are poor and/or on the margins of society call us to be with and for them in our daily activities. Francis and Clare call us to a lifelong journey of conversion. Though limitations come to us as we age, there is no retirement from our commitment to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

- Sr. Gael Genster

“If a foundress could see our community today, she’d say, ‘Wow! Thank you, sisters, for doing what I’d hope you would do. 160 years of feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, giving hope to the hopeless, caring for the sick, teaching all those little munchkins. I am so proud that I just gave you that little push to get going. I know it must be hard for you right now that you are so few, but so were we when we started. Just keep going — let God show you the way!’”

- Sr. Ruth E. Westmoreland

“I think our foundresses would say with St. Francis, ‘We have done what was ours to do. May God help you discern and do what is yours to do.’ We can hardly do better than that! I may be retired, but I’m not dead yet. I can still pray and protest, as we are all called to do. We can all help, in small but persistent ways, change this violent, hate-infected society into the Kingdom of God that Jesus lived for.”

- Sr. Phyllis Morris

Unfolding the Future

What does the future hold? That is a question being discerned by congregations of women religious all over the world. As current members age, and the number of women entering religious life declines, congregations are exploring how to collaborate to find new ways of supporting religious life as demographics rapidly shift.

At our 2021 Chapter, our congregation authorized the Leadership Team to explore and recommend possible governance and leadership options, in consultation with community members, to enable making decisions together for our future. A consultant was engaged to help with strategic planning.

Three lay employees (our Canticle Administrator, Director of Finance, and Director of Communications and Development) were named in 2022 as the Operational Team to assist with the day-to-day operations of the congregation.

In 2023, we partnered with four other Franciscan congregations of the Upper Mississippi River Valley to begin exploring together some form of collaborative governance, such as forming an association. With each congregation retaining its own identity, statutes and directives were written. In 2025, our sisters held a leaning vote to affirm joining the Upper Mississippi Canonical Association.



Leadership Team Srs. Ruth E. Westmoreland, Jan Cebula, and Marilyn Huegerich with consultant Mark Clarke

“Our future mission will be enlisted with the four religious that will be collaborating with us. The future will develop as all our religious missions work together.” - Sr. Marjorie Wisor

To preserve our history, our congregation joined the Women Religious Archive Collaborative (WRAC) based out of Cleveland, OH. In 2023, WRAC was working to establish a heritage center, which will be a permanent home for our archives as well as the archives of other religious communities. A groundbreaking was held in July of 2025, and construction is slated to be completed in the Spring of 2027.

In 2024, our Franciscan Peace Center began preparations for exploring the future of justice work. The staff spent time in conversation with justice leaders with local, national, and international reach.



At the beginning of 2025, the Franciscan Peace Center called together social justice promoters from multiple women religious congregations to discuss the formation of a collaborative justice center. This conversation is still ongoing.

At our 2025 Chapter in June, we reaffirmed our charism of ongoing conversion and our mission of living and promoting active nonviolence and peacemaking. Grounded in contemplative engagement, open communication, and shared decision-making, we committed to unfolding the future by:

- ◆ Developing our understanding of and strengthening our witness to our corporate stands.
- ◆ Working to eradicate systemic racism; acknowledging our complicity and white privilege.
- ◆ Supporting the continuation of our strong commitment to social justice, active nonviolence, and peacemaking through collaborative efforts.
- ◆ Embracing the expression of our Clinton Franciscan culture and values.
- ◆ Strengthening relationships and collaboration with Sisters, Sojourners, Associates, Employees, and others aligned with our mission. We commit ourselves to recognizing individual responsibility and the common good.
- ◆ Practicing reconciliation, healing, and repair of harm.
- ◆ Adapting our way of living the mission to accommodate our aging population and changing needs.
- ◆ Authorizing the current Leadership Team to make necessary provisions for future leadership. We commit ourselves to working with and supporting the Appointed Leader.

Leadership Team members Sister Jan Cebula, President (center); Sister Marilyn Huegerich, Vice President (right); and Sister Ruth E. Westmoreland, Councilor (left), had their term extended for up to two years.



By The Numbers

As of November 1, 2025, there are **37** sisters in the congregation.

37
Sisters

20 sisters reside at our motherhouse, The Canticle. **6** sisters reside at The Alverno. **1** sister resides in Oregon, **1** in California, and **6** in Illinois. In Iowa, **2** sisters live in Clinton and **1** in Fort Dodge.

29 sisters are retired from active ministry. **8** sisters are in active ministry serving in congregational leadership and in positions as a Pastoral Associate, Recovery Support Specialist, Religious Education Coordinator, and Restorative Justice Practitioner.

29
Retired

The average age of our sisters is **84**. Of our sisters, **28** are 80+. There is a **52** year gap between our eldest sister and youngest sister.

84
Average

“The Scripture that, for me, best captures the spirit of our Order is St. John’s story of the washing of the feet (John 13:13-14).



St. Francis loved this story and lived it out in his care for the lepers, for his brothers and sisters, and all creatures. He said that we should ‘Follow in the Footprints of Jesus Christ.’”

- Sr. Carmel Jacobs

“Life is all about change and our responses to this reality. It appears that from the beginning 160 years ago, we have responded to needs present in our reality, by word, action, help. There is lived and living truth in our mission statement.”

- Sr. Judy McKenna

What hopes or dreams do you have for the next generation of sisters?

“I hope the next generation of sisters—whatever they may be called—will be bold collaborators, not only within their own communities, but also across congregations and with all people of goodwill. I envision them working in close partnership with one another and with lay colleagues who share their mission and values. This spirit of unity is essential to fostering vibrant, faith-filled communities in today’s evolving world. May they continue journeying to the margins of society — where suffering, exclusion, and vulnerability are most deeply felt.”

- Sr. Kathleen Holland

As you have read throughout this booklet, our sisters’ commitment to faith and mission persists, demonstrating that ministry is not bound by age, but by an enduring passion for service.

During this season of giving thanks, we ask you to consider a gift to the sisters’ retirement fund. Your support of our retired sisters helps us maintain the quality services we are committed to providing them, women who have done so much for countless people!



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