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Members of the new congregational leadership team of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. From left: Sr. Amarachi Grace Ezeonu of Nigeria; Sr. Lorraine Connell of Massachusetts; Sr. Evalyne Aseyo of Kenya; Sr. Mary Johnson of Massachusetts, who is team congregational leader; and Sr. Miriam Montero Bereche of Peru.  
(CNS/Courtesy of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur)



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The coronavirus pandemic brought about a near-instant change to the use of videoconferencing to conduct business heretofore done in person. As a result, the word Zoom, with an uppercase "Z," has become both a noun and a verb.

But after two years of the pandemic, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur developed yet another imaginative use of Zoom. The congregation conducted its leadership transition process entirely via Zoom.

"It was all fantastic, I can tell you," said Sr. Anne Stevenson, who handles media relations for the U.S. sisters in the international order from a motherhouse in Ipswich, Massachusetts. "The transition of leadership had never happened like this before. Nobody thought it would ever be done like this."

Sr. Teresita Weind, the sisters' outgoing congregational leader, had convened a virtual general chapter in late September. Participating — also entirely through Zoom — were 39 delegates. Because of their wide geographic dispersal, they were meeting as early as 3 a.m. on North America's West Coast and as late as 8 p.m. in Asia.

"It was quite a good experience for all those 39 delegates and staff members," Stevenson told Catholic News Service in March 31 phone interview.

A second virtual general chapter was conducted Dec. 8 — the feast of the Immaculate Conception — to elect the sisters' new leadership team.

"Even all the voting took place in Rome, and we could see everything, even the counting of the ballots," Stevenson said.

U.S. Sr. Mary Johnson, who hails from Massachusetts, was elected the new congregational leader to succeed Weind. Four other sisters — Evalyne Aseyo from Kenya, Amarachi Grace Ezeonu from Nigeria, Miriam Montero Bereche from Peru, and a second American, Lorraine Connell, another native of the Boston area — were elected to the leadership team.

All five worked in close collaboration with Weind over three months to complete the transition of all responsibilities prior to a ceremony to officially hand over canonical authority to the congregation's new leadership team.

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During the March 25 ceremony, held via Zoom, Weind gave a medal of Our Lady of Guadalupe worn by St. Julie Billiart, the congregation's founder, to Johnson.

"It's been a symbol of the congregational leader," Stevenson said. "The current congregation head takes it from her predecessor and passes it on to her successor" at the end of her term of service.

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were founded in Amiens, France, in 1804 by St. Julie Billiart, who died in 1816. Known for its charism of education, the sisters participate in a variety of ministries in 15 countries on five continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, South America and North America. They also staff offices in Ipswich, Massachusetts; Rome; and Namur, Belgium. There are about 800 sisters in the United States.

General chapters have generally been held in France, with some notable exceptions.

The 1990 general chapter was held in Massachusetts; the 2008 chapter in Belmont, California; and the 2014 chapter in Washington at Trinity Washington University, which was founded by the congregation and is the first women's college in the United States. The 2002 chapter was held at the order's founding in Amiens.