

Wisdom Ways

Continuing A Legacy of Spirituality and Social Justice

History

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Paul (CSJs) have a long and rich history of community impact. Spiritually grounded in feminist theological philosophy and focused on social justice, the CSJs have improved the lives of many people who are underserved in our communities by providing healthcare, education, housing and other life-support, and hope by actively working for justice. The CSJs built hospitals, clinics and schools and providing education and housing for those with little or no other options and founded the College of St. Catherine (now St. Catherine University) in 1905. They continue to live and model their lives through their commitment: *Moving Always Toward The Profound Love of God And Love of Neighbor Without Distinction.*

Protecting and continuing their visionary work is paramount to the CSJs. Recognizing that their membership continues to decline, the CSJs sought to continue their spiritually based, social justice impact-focused work and legacy. To achieve this goal, the CSJs provided for the formation of Accola, a non-profit 501c3 organization, and transformed their current ministries into Accola programs. Accola adopted three programs: Learning In Style, Sarah's Oasis, Wisdom Ways, and managing a foundation-portfolio and related philanthropy.

With a focus on supporting immigrant populations, the programmatic direction and impact of Learning in Style and Sarah's Oasis seem clear and highly relevant, especially given current political conditions. There is less clarity and consensus regarding Wisdom Ways, including its purpose, impact, and fit within Accola and the community it serves.

Today

Today, **the stated purpose** of Wisdom Ways is to advance spiritual growth for all and to provide a spirituality-guided pathway for social justice action within the community. By providing a safe and supportive environment to question, reflect, and explore spirituality with the framework of life's complexities, Wisdom Ways seeks to build participants' spiritual strength for the work ahead.

Underpinning this purpose is **a vision** of moving people from inner listening into courageous action to co-create a better world.

In August 2024, the Accola Board of Directors' Programs and Opportunities Committee determined that while Wisdom Ways has a long and rich history, much more needed to be clarified about its future and potential.

As part of its inquiry, the Committee sought insights from key persons associated with the program. This list included program participants, CSJs, donors, subject matter experts, and staff. Additionally, the Committee sought to understand the role of spirituality in today's world, including how individuals think about it and use their spirituality to ground and activate an engaged life. Finally, the Committee wanted a clearer picture of spiritually based and social justice efforts already available in the greater Minneapolis-St Paul area. While the Committee sought to understand what Wisdom Ways could be, they also wanted clarification on what Wisdom Ways was not.

Research

Key Person Insights:

Throughout October 2024, 12 formal interviews were conducted with Key Persons holding 16 roles: 2 program participants, 6 subject matter experts, 3 donors, 2 CSJs, and 3 staff members. A structured interview guide was developed, asking a series of questions related to Wisdom Ways' alignment with the community and with Accola's spiritually based, social justice mission. The guide also addressed the purpose of Wisdom Ways, related indicators of impact, ideas about how the program could be more impactful, and left space for additional comments.

Additionally, Committee Chair Anne Weyandt and Accola President Matt Halley conducted multiple open listening sessions and 1-1 meetings, inviting members of the CSJ community and other interested individuals to share their views.

Findings -

Five key findings in the compiled interview data were consistent across the Key Persons groups.

1. *Wisdom Ways must continue the social justice action legacy of the Sisters of St. Joseph.* This is a critical component of the program's identity and core purpose. Understanding and addressing the community's social justice needs is essential spiritual work. At the same time, the community's needs will evolve, and the program must evolve with them. The current purpose and vision of Wisdom Ways align with this legacy.
2. *Strengthening the spiritual aspect of the programming* includes developing a more ecumenical and interfaith program and recognizing that Wisdom Ways is not solely about self-improvement or leadership development. While these may be secondary outcomes of the program, the focus must be on spiritual development and growth.
3. *Increase the diversity of program presenters and participants.* Diversity includes age, race, religious and secular affiliation, sexual and gender identity, and economic status. While Wisdom Ways's proud legacy is Roman Catholic, there is recognition that to increase diversity, the program will need to welcome other faiths and those who identify as spiritual and non-religious.

4. *Expand the breadth and depth of community partnerships.* Today, Wisdom Ways has a basic understanding and some insight into other religious and social justice community organizations. Still, these relationships need to be more formally structured to be most effective with specific social justice goals and outcomes identified. The challenge is to create bilateral relationships with other organizations to increase mutual impact. These partnerships can serve as a source of program contributors and presenters, increase awareness of Wisdom Ways, and be a resource for engagement in social justice action.
5. *Wisdom Ways must serve as Accola's spiritual center.* It has moved from a ministry of the Sisters of St. Joseph to a program of Accola. While this transition provides many benefits and opportunities for growth, it is equally essential that Accola retain a spiritual centeredness across all its programs and services, and Wisdom Ways should serve Accola in this way.

While the learnings from the listening sessions and one-on-one meetings helped participants understand the feminist theology basis and history of Wisdom Ways and its legacy of social justice impact, they did not generate a consensus among participants regarding its future.

Spiritual Identity:

To gain insight into how and why individuals identify as spiritual, the Committee reviewed the research findings in the December 7, 2023, Pew Research Center study *Spirituality Among Americans*. For this study, 11,201 respondents were surveyed from July 31 to August 6, 2023. Respondents were recruited through a national random sampling of residential addresses, which gave nearly all US adults a chance of selection.

Findings -

While Pew Research Center surveys have documented a decline since 2007 in the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian, researchers wanted to understand if “religion” was being replaced by “spirituality”. The survey found that 70% of participants describe themselves as spiritual, including 22% who are spiritual but not religious. They think of themselves as spiritual people or say spirituality is very important. 83% of participants believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body. There were 81% who say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it, while 74% say there are some things that science cannot possibly explain. Finally, 45% say they have suddenly connected with something from beyond.

Of those Americans who identified as spiritual, 74% say being connected with ‘something bigger than myself’ is essential to being spiritual.

Community Organizations:

To understand how best to position Wisdom Ways for the future, the Committee conducted a market scan to understand better what organizations were already providing spiritual growth programming that led to direct social justice impact- organizations who are focused on spirituality **and** social justice impact. Based on initial scans ten organizations were identified for further review: St Catherine Center for Spirituality & Social Justice, Hamline Wesley Center, MN Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Alliance, Westminster Presbyterian, Plymouth Congregational, MN Multifaith Network, Interfaith Action of Greater St Paul, Beacon Interfaith Housing, Leadership Center for Social Justice, and Christine Center (WI).

Findings -

The ten organizations selected fell into one of four categories: university-based (2), church-based (3), network convening (3), or stand-alone (2). While all ten of these organizations had elements of spirituality and/or social justice, none had both a spiritual (with no religious affiliation) and a social justice focus.

Recommendation Development

The Committee developed a framework for the future of Wisdom Ways that guided three work sessions. The committee strongly recommends that future leaders of Wisdom Ways further develop concepts and ideas within this framework. Audience-specific communications (e.g., participant recruitment, board education, presentations to the CSJ community, grantmakers, etc.) will emphasize different elements of the framework.

Conclusions

Given the research findings and the framework, the Committee considered three options for Wisdom Ways's future: closing the program, reinvigorating the current model, or redesigning it.

In considering its recommendation to the Board, the Committee focused on many Americans identifying as spiritual, a growing need for social justice in the community, and a lack of secular organizations focused on spirituality and social justice impact. The Committee expressed an obligation and an urgency to address the community's spiritual and social justice needs. Thus, the option to close the program was set aside. They also recognized that strengthening the spiritual component of the program, increasing its diversity, and directly impacting social justice would require more than reinvigorating the current program; therefore, a redesign was not only necessary but also exuberantly embraced.

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A Vision for Wisdom Ways

Accola's mission is to welcome neighbors, cultivate community, and foster justice through programs that contribute to more equitable communities. Wisdom Ways invites spiritual seekers from all backgrounds to gather, exchange stories, and make meaning. These activities build community, embody justice, and inspire bold action.

CURRENT PURPOSE

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Recommendations

After a comprehensive review grounded in data collection and analysis, the Programs & Opportunities Committee recommends redesigning the Wisdom Ways program. An evolving vision includes the following key components:

1. Convening “neighbors” and building community through exploration of diverse spiritual content, deep listening, and exchange of stories and ideas;
2. Activating and nurturing partnerships with social justice organizations throughout the Twin Cities community;
3. Challenging systems, institutions, and individuals that undermine the spiritual principles of fairness, equity, and love of all people.

Program Offerings

The Committee discussed potential Wisdom Ways programming and shares this insight to guide future design efforts.

- A program curriculum focused on spiritual growth and connection.
- Participants may complete the entire curriculum as a cohort and potentially earn a Wisdom Ways “certification”. A cohort provides for connection and belonging during the program and beyond, and the certification offers a sense of completion and a way to increase awareness of the program.

- Program participants would volunteer at a partner organization of their choosing, thus directly impacting social justice, including volunteering at Accola programs.
- Other possibilities might include:
 - Courses will be offered a la carte for those not interested in completing the entire program.
 - Accola staff and volunteers would complete a series of onboarding courses. This would help position Wisdom Ways as Accola's spiritual center and provide a shared experience and understanding among them.

Next Steps

1. Accola Board approval
2. Hire a Director for Wisdom Ways
3. Develop a detailed operational plan, including a timeline, milestones, and deliverables include:
 - Program design and options
 - Curriculum development
 - Community partner identification and engagement
 - Marketing Plan
 - Budget and financial projections
 - Develop a case for support, including the identification of a volunteer community champion (donor-sponsor)

Programs & Opportunities Committee

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