



## ASSOCIATES - CHARISM PARTNERS

*TOGETHER EXPERIENCING AND CELEBRATING OUR INTERCONNECTEDNESS*

**A reflection on Chapter 2024 from Lethbridge Martha Associate, Kathy Gillis**

My family and friends know that my preferred vacations are, 'an Alberta-stay-close-to-home vacation'. However, I have always held one exception close to my heart – visiting the Sisters of St. Martha's in Antigonish. I was 'over the moon' excited when I was invited, along with Annella Wehlage, to attend Chapter 2024! Truly, a prayer answered! My gratitude runs deep for the blessings and spiritual nourishment I received from attending Chapter and being at Bethany. So from the lens of an Associate, I am honoured to share some of my experiences and gifts from those days.

This was my first trip to Nova Scotia. What a beautiful part of our amazing country! Julia and Allen Townsend treated us like royalty as they chauffeured us on a rainy, site-seeing adventure, fed us abundantly and introduced us to family and friends.



We were blessed to also attend the Sydney Associates faith gathering, meeting fellow associates I had only seen on Zoom or saw as names on a list in an email. The reception

by all was warmly felt and now the miles apart, somehow feel less. A special thank you, to you, our new Cape Breton friends. You made our 3-day stay in Sydney spirited, faith-filled, fun and very special.

Five associates attended Chapter: Julia Townsend, Director of Martha Associates from Sydney; Dale Romeo from Sydney Mines; Gary Rankin from Trenton; Annella Wehlage, and myself from Lethbridge.

When we arrived at Martha Place, the



afternoon of April 15, it was a true homecoming. Sisters seemed to come out of the woodwork when they heard, 'the associates are here'. We were welcomed with abundant joy, love and warmth. Tears and laughter seemed to be an uncontrollable reaction when I embraced those beautiful women who were offering me over-the-top gospel hospitality. It had been almost 5 years since the Martha's left Lethbridge and I had greatly missed sharing time with them. What a start to Chapter, for me!

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Before I speak more directly to the Chapter experience itself, I want to share how meaningful and powerful it was for me to be reunited with the Sisters. Being present, especially during the first mass, brought me to tears. Singing, praying and celebrating Eucharist together offered me the privilege to be back within a familiar community



whom I have so dearly missed. Going to Bethany gave me an opportunity to visit with Sisters who I had worked with at St. Michael's Hospital in Lethbridge; to chat with Sisters who had attended St. Martha's Parish; and to reunite with Sisters who had been anchors for our Lethbridge Martha associates, both at St. Monica's Convent and the Martha Retreat Centre. I also prayed and share memories at the graveside of Sister

Delores Sogz. She was the Martha who invited me to join the associates 27 years ago. May she rest in peace.

New encounters were also gifted to me. I met Sisters who have never been out West, or whose ministry work had taken them back to the East before I came to Lethbridge in 1994. Time chatting with these Sisters gave me an opportunity to explore their experiences with Associates. I learned that not all Sisters had actually had the occasion to engage or journey with Associates. What a wonderful opportunity it gave us to share our thoughts and ideas of how we understand the term 'associate', both as a noun and as a verb. Table discussions and larger group dialogue offered space and place to hold many conversations to unpack the deeper meaning of 'associate', and how Sisters and Associates collectively embrace, live, give and receive the charism of Gospel Hospitality.

The community of Antigonish easily communicated its experience with the Martha's gospel hospitality. When I walked the grounds and trails of Bethany I could feel the spirit of the Marthas who had walked, prayed and meditated, opening their hearts and lives to Jesus. The community members I met on those walks, shared their gratitude for being given an open invitation to enjoy the Centennial Garden, the labyrinth, and trails on the vast grounds of Bethany. When browsing and purchasing souvenirs in the shops uptown, shopkeepers readily shared how they knew the Sisters and expressed their gratitude for the generosity and support they have received. I am sure the smile on my face was wide as I listened to, and heard, the community speak of their respect and

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love for the Sisters. It was a strong reminder of how my community, Lethbridge, was also cared for, shaped and supported by the Sisters for 90 years.

As I mentioned earlier, there were five Associates invited to attend five days of Chapter. This opportunity provided us with dedicated time to get to know each other; to share experiences from our respective associate groups; to explore the deeper meaning of being a Martha Associate; and to share abundant laughter. The conversations motivated me to remember to create and hold space for others; to continue building relationships and friendships; and to be bold and radical while believing and trusting in



the Holy Spirit. Those days offered time to explore and witness what it means to be a committed and engaged Martha Associate. Those encounters inspired my desire and passion to continue to forge forward with fellow associates as we aspire to be *“graced with courage to welcome and shape the emerging future”*.

From April 15 to April 20, we attended and experienced Chapter with the Sisters. Sister Brendalee Boisvert, Congregation Leader, and Sister Mary Rowell, CSJ, Facilitator, generously invited us to pray, listen, and

share alongside the Marthas. I was amazed how the topics discussed could be unpacked from our Associate lens. The Sisters invited dialogue, asked curious and enlightening questions which led us all to a deeper understanding and appreciation for one another. The topics ranged from:

- ◆ the Leadership Team summation of the congregations’ prayerful, intentional and valued presence in the community and global world to their response to the needs and cries from our common home.
- ◆ the invitation to grow ever deeper into understanding and living gospel hospitality at this age and stage to holding space and grace for the diversity brought to their Martha community from within.
- ◆ respectfully and attentively honouring the pioneering Sisters of the past to the realization they are still pioneers in the present. “We have never been here before”, was heard more than once.

And when all was prayed, discerned, voiced and heard, and with genuine gratitude and undaunted hope, the Sisters boldly stated, “and we are not done yet.”

In closing, I want to again express my sincere heartfelt gratitude for being, not only invited, but truly included in those days of Chapter. I know our associate voices were welcomed, requested, respected and heard. Together we, Sisters and Associates, encountered one another and when we all said good-bye, we knew we were changed because of those encounters. May each of us continue to be “graced with courage to welcome and help shape the (our) emerging future”. God bless. With much peace, love and gratitude,

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