

# on the road (in an electric car) with Sister Kari

“Hey!” the voice booms, surprising Sister Kari Pohl as she guides the nearly silent Nissan Leaf - the Congregation’s first electric car - along the Northern Tier of Ohio on Route 2. The startling shout comes from a car full of young men who excitedly gesture for her to roll down the window.

“Oh no,” Sister Kari thinks, “did I leave something on the roof?”

“Is that car all electric?” they ask exuberantly.

“Yeah!” she replies, shouting over the noisy highway.

“Do you like it?” they continue.

“Yeah, it’s great!” she answers, as wind and golden sunlight fill the car.

“Awesome!” they shout, giving a thumbs up before speeding away.

“That was the highlight of the trip right there for me,” Sister Kari says laughing, returning her attention to the road ahead. She’s about a third of the way along the 360-mile trip from her parents’



Sister Kari with her parents, Evie and Leo



Sister Kari educates attendees at car show about why ‘driving electric’ is Earth-friendly.

home in Westphalia, Michigan, to the Motherhouse in Baden. Attending the town’s annual car show, which draws thousands of people to the rural community in middle Michigan, is a Pohl family tradition as it is for most families in the area.

Joining the 1,136 gas-powered vehicles on display this year is the Sisters’ 100 percent electric car that is part of the Congregation’s fleet. The addition of this pre-owned electric vehicle is inspired by the Sisters’ commitment and desire to care for creation through Earth-friendly practices that will lessen pollution and contribute to

a healthier environment for future generations.

While the Sisters have slowly added hybrid vehicles, the addition of a fully electric vehicle is an exciting leap forward. Sister Sandy Yost, Coordinator of Congregational Vehicles, says it “will save us money in the long run, and honor our commitment to reducing our carbon footprint.”

“Greater demand for fuel-efficient vehicles coupled with economies of scale

and mass production have brought down the cost of electric cars into the same ballpark as those that operate by burning fossil fuels,” Sister Sandy explains.

There are long-term savings, too, with electricity being much less expensive than gasoline. Additionally, there are fewer

Sister Kari stops at a grocery store in Ohio to charge the car.





Charging the electric car battery in the Pohl family garage

moving parts and less required maintenance like oil changes and transmission repairs over the vehicle's lifespan.

But for Sister Sandy, the imperative for us to adapt our behavior and protect the planet we share is moral, not financial. "In some parts of the world, it's already too late," she laments, citing extreme weather events like droughts and natural disasters that force people - sometimes referred to as climate refugees - to leave their communities to survive.

"You get to a point where you can't reverse the damage of climate change. I hope we're not at that point," Sister Sandy says.

So does Sister Kari, who serves as the Congregational Coordinator for Justice and Peace. She set out for the Westphalia Cruise-In with

a desire to have conversations about why Sisters see electric cars as an important piece of a much broader picture of taking better care of our common home through both individual choices and collective action.

"A lot of people are excited to see it," Sister Kari's dad Leo says, referring to the car as it charges in the family's garage. With mom Evie, the trio polishes the freshly washed car the night before the Cruise-In. They would have to be up early the next morning to secure prime spots for the show, which filled the one-stoplight town's Main Street corridor and the parking lot of St. Mary Parish.

As Sister Kari backs the electric car into position, tucked in between her dad's convertible and the Volkswagen Beetle he and her

brother Garrett rebuilt, engines fire as cars of all colors, makes, shapes, and eras roll in, gleaming under bright blue skies. Families stream into the streets, making their way from car to car, taking photos, sharing laughs, and talking shop.

Sister Kari pops open the hood and waits. "We drove this all the way from Pennsylvania!" she says cheerfully as one couple stops to talk. Surprised and curious, they ask about the trip logistics: "How long does it take to charge? How far will it go? Did you get stuck anywhere? What does it cost?"

Sister Kari pulls out her cell phone and shares about all of it,

from planning a driving route around the locations of charging stations to the car's handling to unexpected challenges like stations that are out-of-order, or require a smartphone app or credit card to access, and faster-than-expected battery drain when driving in extreme heat.

"It's so quiet!" she says, admitting that she did not expect the car would be so fun to drive. "It has great pickup." But she acknowledges, given the relative lack of public infrastructure to support electric vehicle charging stations, it may not be a viable option for everyone - right now.

She listens as General Motors workers describe their experiences in the industry and their optimism that electric cars and trucks - like the popular Ford F-150 - are "the future." Many of those who stop to talk are intrigued by the possibilities and environmental benefits but are unsure about cost, reliability and ease of use compared to the gas-powered vehicles they're used to. They appreciate hearing Sister Kari's road trip experiences. In turn, Sister Kari appreciates their willingness to engage and ponders what kinds of changes and investments might bring about a greater uptake in electric vehicle use in communities across the country.

Back in Baden, Sister Sandy shares that the Congregation is exploring the possibility of installing charging stations on the Motherhouse grounds - likely near the State Street entrance. While it's early in the process, she's hopeful that it could become a reality within the next couple years.

An electrical engineer by trade who spent the early part of her career designing test equipment for automotive sound and climate control systems, Sister Sandy says she "always thought it would be a matter of time" before the industry figured out how to mass-produce affordable electric cars. Now that they have, the next urgent step, she says, is public infrastructure to support them. "We can't expect that humanity is never going to be a species that won't be endangered," she says. "But if we don't change, we'll be the first species that brought about our own demise."

Sister Kari's time at the car show left her feeling hopeful about people's openness to such change. "I think we planted some seeds today," she says, reflecting on the day's conversations. "It will be interesting to come back in five years and see how many more electric cars are here, and how many more charging stations we find along the way."



Excited to learn more? Join Sisters Kari Pohl and Sandy Yost for an interactive conversation about electric vehicles and eco-friendly practices on Wednesday, September 28, at 1:00pm (Motherhouse) or 6:30pm (Zoom).

