



**Building a Future
by Collaboration**

Building a Future by Collaboration



At this moment, religious communities are doing a balancing act between dealing with the challenges of a diminishing population and envisioning a future. Each of these realities creates a tension as enormous as a tsunami. Community leaders are pulled between the limited numbers and aging population while trying to create a direction that fosters the charisma for these times. A critical challenge is finding opportunities to increase capacity while walking a tightrope of loss and direction setting. In a pioneering age, collaboration is a central component to traverse the white waters rafting of change.

As the world becomes more complex, the solutions become more and more dependent on cooperation and collaboration. It becomes vital for religious communities to create a collaborative framework that allows them to participate in solving society's most pressing challenges. Every congregation has the ingredients for creating a strong, collaborative model due to their extensive eco-system. For this to happen, communities must establish a mutual and interdependent relationship with others. This is critical as religious life returns to a

more pioneer existence of continual transformation.

Iliia Delio states in her book ***Making All Things New***, "I propose that open-systems theology begin with the book of nature, that is insights from modern science, as well as culture, economics, music, shopping malls and Wall Street; a theology that begins with learning and experience rather than teaching; with creativity and imagination rather than a fixed set of principles; a theology where people continually expand their capacity to create the world they truly desire; ...and where people are encouraged to see the whole of life together rather than as competing tribes."¹

Collaboration is not an abstract concept. It is a core principle. It is the fundamental stance that undergirds the ability to think of expansion rather than a limiting perspective. There is a vital need to encompass collaboration in its many forms of philanthropy, services, sharing of influential contacts as well as the alternative use of buildings. Too often, collaboration is pursued in a comfortable silo with those who share our charisma or beliefs. Expressing this collaborative framework within this silo creates partnerships that fit within the group's comfort zone but leaves little room for constructive or meaningful change. Collaboration requires us to step outside our comfort zone and risk change.

Today, we are called to go beyond the comfort of who we know and what we believe. We must embrace the thought of partnering with organizations like private business, foundations, non-profits and

¹Iliia Delio, *Making All Things New* Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness, (Orbis Books 2015), Print. 145

governments. Together, we must actively engage with these organizations to solve many of the local, national and global concerns. Social responsibility is the call of all individuals and groups.

Collaboration is a holy and collective pilgrimage of transformative presence in an ever-changing world.



It must be embraced by a radical predisposition that implores the religious congregation to create a vision that has collaboration as one of its core foundations.

The community through having an intentional collaborative framework, opens itself to a range of diverse ideas and activities which generates greater opportunities to accomplish the vision. Simultaneously, cooperation with others will often challenge the group's pre-existing assumptions.

When a congregation enters a planning process, we must ask the question, "With whom can we partner?". Collaboration expands the religious community's relationships and options to participate in solving climate change, immigration, human trafficking and other pressing

societal issues. At a fundamental level, collaboration opens the heart and soul of a community. It enriches relationships through working with different cultures, ideas and exploring more expansive options.

The creation of a collaborative community has three important qualities, which are addressed below. These qualities are:

- Using collaboration to focus on assets rather than diminishment
- Engaging a larger eco-system
- Exploring collaboration as a spiritual practice

Collaboration to Focus on Assets Rather than Diminishment

There is a tendency for a group in crisis to focus on their limitations and problems rather than assets. This dilemma is a common tendency for religious communities, as they are confronted with very real issues of an aging population and consequences for the whole. Khzir Khan in his book, *An American Story*, speaks to focusing on assets. *"Always try to comfort others, even if you are suffering. Offer compassion to your neighbor, to the stranger, to the roiling, boisterous masses of humanity. Share your gifts with the world, no matter how meager those gifts may."*² Kahn recognizes that no matter how difficult the situation, we still have a contribution to offer.

Frans De Wall writes *"Mutual cooperation is marked by working together toward an obvious goal that is advantageous to all and depends on well-coordinated action*

²Khzir Khan, "An American Family" A Memoir of Hope and Sacrifice, (Penguin Random House LLC, 2017), Print.

and shared payoffs.”³ Cooperation is a fundamental building block in creating quality community life. The common good is often diminished in our individualistic culture. Thus, cooperation and collaboration will open our hearts to see our role in creating and enhancing the quality of life for an increasingly interdependent world.

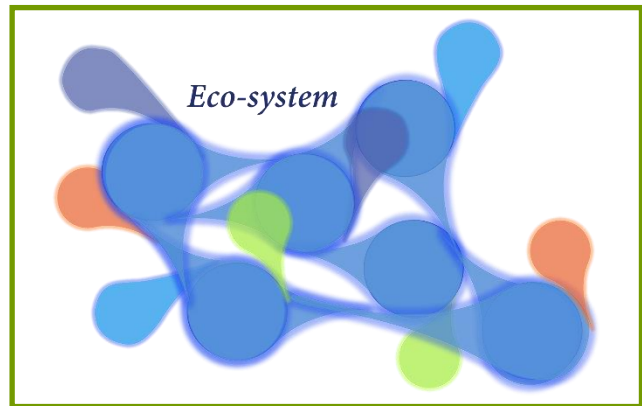
We must ask the question, “What does it mean to be a collaborative group in an evolving society?”. Dave Gray in his book **The Connected Company** describes it as being “made out of people for complexity, for productivity, and for longevity. Most important, a connected company must be able to respond dynamically to change-to learn and adapt in an uncertain, ambiguous and constantly evolving environment. A connected company is a learning company.”⁴ Reread this phrase and change the word *company* to *religious community* or *congregation*. Ponder and ask yourself, “Where is our congregation in relation to this definition?”.

In these times, collaboration is essential to create a more expansive way of sharing the charism in a shifting world.

It is life-changing when a religious congregation explores the world from a stance of being in communion with its eco-system.

The depth, quality, and expansiveness of these relationships are truly impressive. As one uncovers this gift with its new possibilities, ways of being interdependent enhance and enriches the charism.

Far too often, we remain frozen or paralyzed in our current reality of limitations. This paralysis blocks an openness to exploring new ways of collaboration that often holds hidden answers. View these limitations as doorways to working with others to achieve a social good that neither could do alone.

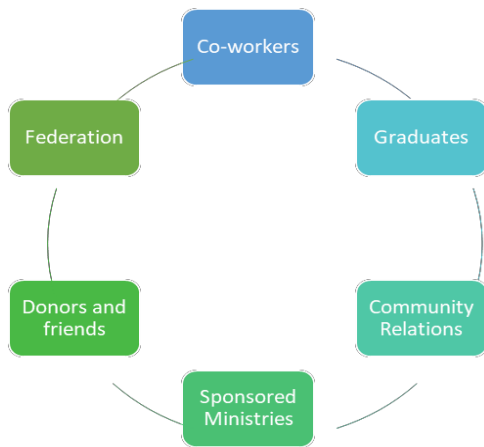


Engaging a Larger Eco-System

A powerful tool used in moving from a diminishment to an expansive model is called “asset mapping”. This process enables an organization to explore its assets. One of the most poignant assets is the long-term relationship with co-workers, alumni, community leaders, donors and friends, etc. In other words, the most powerful asset a community has is the relationship with other people. The simple graphic below begins to name some of these relationships. Religious have powerful connections based on their long-term credibility and commitment to solving the social challenges of their time.

³Delio 52

⁴Dave Gray, *The Connected Company*, (O’Reilly Media Inc. Sebastopol 2017), Print.



When a group explores the vastness and gift of their eco-system, it automatically triggers asking the “what if” question.

For example:

- What if congregations with schools in a similar locale collaborate around new educational models?
- What if we connect with national organizations to expand our outreach to immigrants?
- What if regional congregations leverage their philanthropic contributions to meeting needs of the marginalized?
- What if the congregation collaborates with the local Mosque, Jewish Community or LGBT groups to deal with a pertinent social or discrimination issue?

Where and how do we begin? This is the most often expressed question. The paralysis of this first step is very real. One technique is a human design approach. This model focuses on creating a prototype or experience that allows one to learn and mature with a concept and discover the outcomes. Too often we become trapped by the perceived magnitude of this

challenge. The human design model offers a way based on four steps:

- Research the need
- Create a Prototype
- Test the prototype
- Build and scale

The group exercise below explores this methodology.

Choose one social issue you want to impact.

Select one of the above eco-system example clusters and explore how collaborating with this group could create greater opportunities to address this issue.

After exploring the potential partnership, create an action plan for the next 90-days. Focus on the two first steps of the human design model listed above.

After 90 days, assess what has been learned from these collaboration efforts and create another 90-day plan.

This model creates a framework in which to begin. Keep in mind that in the early stages of this process, the learning and insights that are leveraged are equally as important as the outcome.

Exploring Collaboration as a Spiritual Practice

“As the world grows more complex, time more rapid, and needs more numerous, we have discovered that we can only meet the challenges we face when all the gifts given by our creator God are unleashed to work

*in harmony for the common good.”*⁵ This is one of the most important and essential spiritual calls of our time - to expand our ability to cooperate, collaborate and exist in communion with each other for the common good.

Collaboration is rooted in the fiber and texture of our sacred texts. In Acts: Chapter 5, when the Spirit came upon the people *“each one heard them speaking in his own language.”*⁶ In One Corinthians 12: 4-6: *“There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit there are different form of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.”*⁷ These passages call us to contemplate the abundant riches God offers in solving today’s challenges.

The call to increased collaboration opens us to new opportunities, while at the same time triggers our collective biases, prejudices, and tribal nature. This tension calls us to share our gifts and reconciles the ways our shadow blocks us from engaging others. Collaborative relationships by their very essence call us into the spiritual journey. It is an invitation to embrace communion with others through cooperation that forms a healthier world.

Collaboration is a providential means to explore cooperative solutions to social

issues like immigration, environment, and poverty. Through being more collaborative, congregations and communities alike will encounter a deep sense of connection. This deeper participation will enrich and expand the charism in our world. As a congregation experiences this gift, it will lead to a process of collective transformation. This quote from by an Aboriginal Activist Group, in Queensland, speaks to the spiritual journey of collaboration. *“If you come to help me you are wasting your time. If you come because your liberation is bound up with mine let us work together.”*⁸

These three qualities are a discipline and spiritual practice. It is not a checklist. As an old medieval story goes: *A traveler came across three stonecutters. “What are you doing?” the stonecutter asked the first woman “I am making a living,” the woman said. “And what are you doing?” The traveler asked the second woman and the woman said, “I am practicing becoming the best stonecutter in Europe.” Then the traveler asked the third laborer. And the woman answered, “I am building a cathedral.”*⁹ In today’s world, organizations and religious congregations cannot journey alone. We must have cooperation and collaboration to create the cathedrals of our time.

⁵ Loughlan Sofield, ST and Carroll Juliano, SHCJ Collaboration, *Uniting Our Gifts in Ministry*, (Ave Maria Press Inc 2000), Print. Foreword

⁶ NAB

⁷ NAB

⁸ A fierce Heart, *Finding Strength, Courage and Wisdom in Any Moment*, (Spring Washam 2017) Print. 76

⁹ Joan Chittister, *Following the Path, The search for a Life of Passion, Purpose, and Joy*, (Crown Publishing Group 2012), Print. 161

Building a Future on Collaboration



Author and consultant, Mark Clarke, is a Senior Consultant for CommunityWorks, Inc. He is available for consultation and welcomes a conversation to discuss your thoughts and questions about his writings.

For more information about using his article and concepts, please contact him at mark_5777@msn.com or calling at 616-550-0083. Additional articles are available on the CommunityWorks, Inc., website: www.cworksindy.com.