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February 2016



Discerning a future based on a smaller Community

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We live in a time and era of unparalleled change both in society and in religious life. This means that leaders of religious Congregations face a unique call to create a shared direction amidst the back drop, internally, of an aging community and fewer new members, and externally, of an interconnected, and a diverse technological and global age. At the same time, statistically, newer members are becoming more ethnically diverse and search for an ever-deepening spirituality and a sense of community. The ministry focus of these members tends to be more about being on mission with those on the margins than stepping into traditional sponsored ministries. These newer members come with a new set of dreams and different questions that both complement and challenge traditional religious life.

These demographic changes contribute to a significant paradigm shift that is even more extensive if you include the influence of the millennial generation. Previously, religious life was shaped and framed by congregations comprised of larger numbers. With greater numbers, members were able to form bonds of connection and peer groups primarily within the congregations. Congregational resources were adequate to facilitate a future stemming from a wealth of contacts, financial resources, property and membership. With this capacity, both mental models and world views were shaped primarily by the congregation. Because of this functional independence, there was less need to forge a relationship across the larger world of religious or with the laity.

In contrast to this, in the current paradigm being forged, newer members are often formed within a model of inter-province and sometimes inter-congregational communities. This very different formational experience leads them to be more comfortable and open to collaboration with the larger congregation or among congregations . This is a part of a new mental model as identities are being shaped across the congregations rather than predominately in an individual congregation. Among these newer members, there is often a greater openness to explore and capacity to recognize that many of the solutions for both community life and ministry will happen in collaboration across the spectrum of religious life and outside entities.

In many ways, this reality is one of two “competing” mental models and world views. Each framework has its own set of assumptions and perception of religious life. These differences create tension around how to solve the critical issues facing the congregation. The desire of younger members to be on mission is often challenged by the overwhelming administrative needs, commitment to sponsored ministries and health care needs of the congregation.

This means congregations, of necessity, are being called by God to remain rooted in their charism while at the same time create a courageous vision based on these complex, emerging realities. Although we have realized the impact of the demographics for decades, we have now

reached a tipping point that calls for action. In coming together to create a courageous vision, it is significant to note that the newer members remain a minority and will continue to for at least the next decade. Most members entered and have been formed during a time when communities were still much larger. This difference creates a unique tension within the discernment process for creating a future. The tension of those who were formed in one worldview and those formed in another is augmented. Decisions and choices will be made using the current mental models often held by a majority that given age and health will not feel the impact of their decisions around community life and what it means to be on mission in a smaller community.

The challenge:

Many congregations have addressed their property, healthcare and sponsored ministry issues from the lens of diminishment. Yet, the questions remain, what does it mean to live quality community life and what does it mean to be on mission as a smaller community? This is the courageous visionary question of our time.

The reality has continued to unfold over the past decades and has now reached its tipping point. This calls for a discernment process grounded in three essential elements:

- Creation of a safe container for generative and contemplative dialogue
- Transformative discernment that implores the creation of a “Courageous Shared Vision” based on being a smaller community
- Emergent and strategic framework that is adaptable in these changing times

This is not a new invitation from God. Rather it calls the congregation to embrace what many know to be their own foundational story many of which are based on risk-taking, sacrifice and immergence in the mystery of the unknown. The majority of congregations began with a few sisters filled with passion and missionary zeal leaving their homeland with limited resources to come to the wilderness of the United States. These courageous first members through radical detachment created a new vision and dream while remaining rooted in their charism.

In the book **Clay Water Brick**, the author, Jessica Jackley speaks about the ability to be an entrepreneur. She shared a quote from Howard Stevenson, a business professor at Harvard, who stated, “Entrepreneurship is the pursuit of opportunity without regard to resources currently controlled.” She went on to say, “In other words, entrepreneurship is the ability to pursue opportunity without money, or permission, or pedigree or most other means that make the pursuit easier” (2015, p. xxiv). This leads one to think of the many risk-taking women who have lived this call in the founding of the religious communities that are spread throughout the landscape of the United States and the world.

Another powerful image is the parable of the mustard seed. The gospel of Mark states, “It is like a mustard seed that when it is sown in the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds in the air can dwell in the shade” (4:30-32). The early communities dreamed of and with limited resources planted many seeds of faith. They were called hospitals, schools and social service agencies. The results have been astounding. For example, the current expanse of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, the sisters would be amazed if they saw the fruit of their healthcare vision and the scope of services on the campus impacting wellness globally.

A Pivotal Question:

The question must be asked, what is the invitation by God today as congregations move toward being smaller communities? Perhaps it is to envision a dream that future generations will be able to take for granted. This pilgrimage of discovery will demand a deepened spirituality and the creation of a safe container that allows the members to enter into transformative dialogue in order to explore difficult issues. This dialogue is the foundation for creating a courageous vision and establishing an adaptable framework to embrace God’s radical call to act in the name of the gospel.

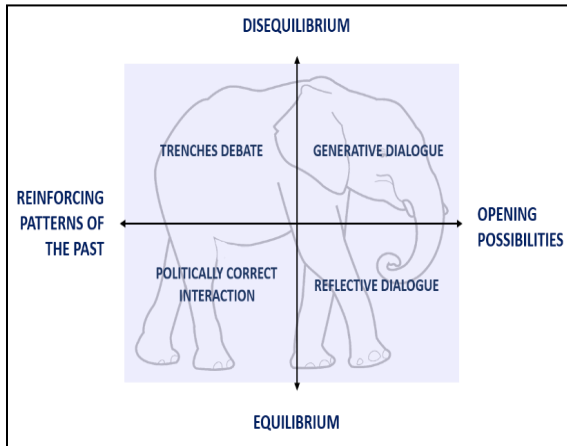
Creation of a Safe Container:

The ability for leaders and religious congregations to create a safe container is essential for generative and reflective dialogue. With the generational shift in society and religious congregations, we have a range of cultures and experiences that increase the diversity of opinions and insights. These will need to be blended and sorted out in order to create a bold shared future.

This means at the center of the transformative discernment process there is a need to focus on three essential elements: a deepening of the collective communal spirituality; establishing a generative and reflective dialogue practice; and recognizing the call to embrace a courageous vision that will mean a deeper sense of resurrection in the life of the community.

When we enter into dialogue about challenging topics with no easy solutions, it is important to recognize this invites us into a transformative process. These types of conversations will ask each of us individually and collectively to be aware of our entrenched beliefs. At the same time, we are invited to be open to the reshaping of individual community beliefs through compassionate and transparent dialogue. Many of our beliefs or thought patterns have become so habitual that the words fly out of our mouths without conscious thought. In dialogue, one of the important elements of establishing a safe container is the ability to become aware of these thoughts in ourselves and others in a non-judgmental manner. This awareness takes prayer and inner work both on the individual and communal level. Being present to resistive elements with compassion and kindness heals past hurts in a way that allows the entire membership to effectively seek common ground.

In the book **Adaptive Capacity** author Juan Carlos Eichholz speaks to the challenge of creating generative and reflective dialogue. The graphic below depicts the tendency to reinforce the past while in the same moment being open to new possibilities. The challenge facing communities is to enter into the mystery of recognizing both the gifts and shadow of our current story and through dialogue create a daring vision. Often there is a deep desire for a different future while at the same time being engrained and stuck in our old mental model. These patterns can block us from entering the resurrection process of dying and rising to an often hidden and mysterious future.

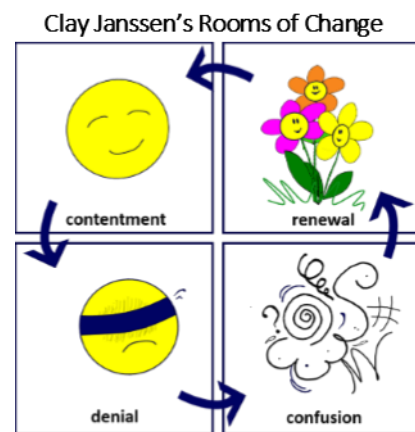


Graphic adapted (Eichholz, 2014 p. 108)

It has been stated that we avoid elephants in the room. Yet, these elephants when opened can offer the seeds of individual and collective change. They are the kernels of the underlying truth. They are most often avoided at all cost; yet in the exploration of these emotional realities we are invited into the truth of the resurrection, new life and the ongoing revelation of God’s call. The more the elephants remain buried or negated, the more we continue to live in Good Friday or the grief of Holy Saturday blocking the new life of resurrection.

Change Process

In his model, *Four Rooms of Change*, Clay Janssen explores the change process as moving from contentment to denial to confusion to renewal. It is important for the community to take all of the critical issues and explore where there is contentment, denial, confusion and to explore the possibility of doors opening to renewal. This is a profound spiritual path, not for the faint of heart. The challenge is to enter into and drink deeply of the Paschal Mystery to experience the dying and grieving and to be surprised by the joy of resurrection. All of this demands a powerful sense of “kenosis” letting go of previous constructs, habitual patterns and practices that no longer work. This often dark, murky path is the very foundation for the light of Christ to open hearts to renewal and transformation that fosters a passionate shared direction.



Graphic adapted (Weisbord and Janoff, 2015, P. 34)

Transformative Discernment:

Transformative Discernment is steeped in the scriptures and foundational to the spiritual journey. It is accepting God's open invitation to enter into the mystery of this moment in our collective history. In the process of exploring God's call, it means being vulnerable and detached from the outcome as we enter uncharted waters leaving the comfortable and familiar.

Henri Nouwen defines the purpose of discernment as "to know God's will, that is to find, accept and affirm the unique way in which God's love is manifest in our life. To know God's will is to actively claim an intimate relationship with God, in the context of which we discover our deepest vocation and the desire to live it to the fullest" (2013, P.8). What Nouwen describes is not a passive submission, rather a profound penetrating of God's mystery intersecting with each historical moment of community life.

As we discern the movement to a smaller community, it calls for entering into the discovery of a new paradigm for religious life. The transformative discernment process asks us to reflect and discern three important questions:

- What does it mean to have quality community life as we continually become a smaller community?
- What does it mean to live our charism and be on mission as we have fewer and fewer active members?
- How does our charism continue with a charism family and partnerships that may or may not include vowed religious?

As the congregation ponders these three questions, it will be challenged to transform the very systems that previously created a profound sense of purpose and identity. This is a difficult path given the majority of current members have been formed and shaped in this religious identity. The voyage is to treasure the gifts of an ending era while taking intentional and timely steps that allow for the unfolding of a new call. It is important to recognize that these questions need to be addressed from a new framework while at the same time remaining historically rooted in one's charism.

The discernment should reimagine the congregation's story and its myths as it establishes a shared direction for a new era in religious life. The discernment process invites us to hold this emotional path in tension while continually making the choice to move forward. The respecting of both the emotions and need for action is not easy and will require entering even more deeply into contemplative prayer, detachment and action.

Thus, discerning the congregation's future requires being grounded in compassion and empathy to unleash the passionate energy needed for a shared direction. This sense of connection allows the above questions to be unwrapped from a listening heart guided by the

spirit to make choices and act. The collective opportunity to act means entering into a mixture of fear and anticipation as the divine opens to us what it means to be a vibrant smaller community. We must live the African Proverb, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together” (Braun and Adler, 2014, p. 218).

Courageous vision:

The development of a courageous vision means answering this scripture passage from Matthew 20:22 “Can you drink the cup?” In creating such a gutsy vision, the collective body must seek to enter the mystery of change and conversion.

The development of such a vision is a call to action by entering deeply into the collective heart space and choosing a radical yet rooted sense of purpose. In the book, **Promise of a Pencil**, Adam Braun shared this statement from Roy Chambers that speaks to the profound gift of creating such a vision. “Think how the world will change in the next ten years and how you and your resources and networks will change within it, use that as a compass to determine how you can affect as many people as possible” (2014, p. 218). It will mean acting long before the group has total agreement. This will be uncomfortable for communities used to making decisions by consensus. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female elected head of state in Africa said, “If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough” (Braun and Adler, 2014, p. 244).

In order to create such a bold vision, it will mean risking and acting even though the path is not clear. This allows each action to become a learning that offers guidance to the next steps. It will mean having the courage to test pilot thus allowing the vision to emerge. This emergent model will ask the group to let go quickly of prototypes that have no possibility of working and rapidly building upon those seedling that show promise. The road will not be easy because the tendency is to wait for everyone to be ready and on board. Waiting for each member to come to a moment of readiness, can at times leads to paralysis, not making decisions, and missing opportunities that can enhance the congregation's future. There is a delicate balance between being sensitive to the needs of the whole, and letting the congregation become mired in endless conversations and inaction.

Adaptable Future:

As the community continues to become smaller, it is part of an interconnected global and technological world with porous boundaries that opens us to disruptive change at warp speed. This rapidity of change means that we need to have a discernment and implementation process that remains adaptable. The idea of creating a visionary direction for three to five years is no longer a reality in this world environment. As a congregation, in order to participate and share our charism in this climate, we need to create plans that can readily adapt, that is, be held lightly and modified as needed. Furthermore, it means inviting our extended charism family into this process for broader, more relevant thinking.

The world we live in today is exploring the increased use of robots in schools, cars that self-drive, and space exploration for ordinary citizens. These inventions will continue to transform our worldview, our spiritual understanding, and will redefine what it means to be in relationship.

Yet, the majority of the sister's roots were not grounded in the technological age. This in itself will present challenges as they engage with Generation X, Millennials and their children who are technologically natives. We are already experiencing the generational differences in how to solve critical societal issues. Generation X and Millennials are bringing fresh perspectives to solving social issues such as the environment. In addition, they are exploring nontraditional collaborative models between business, government, church and nonprofits to address the issues of poverty. Finally, they are seeking new philanthropic models such as the Zuckerberg's, millennials and founders of Facebook, who created an LLC rather than a traditional foundation so they can fund nonprofits, invest the money, and be part of policy debates. This is one example how they have grown up and are comfortable in an adaptable and changing world. At the same time, these younger generations are moving to have dialogue that transcends gender, faith, sexuality and culture. They are redefining themselves as global citizens.

This is where the extended Charism Family can have a vital role. They offer the smaller community resources and connections while being grounded in the charism. These connections can open doors for potential partnership and resources as they deepen their spiritual connections through walking more closely in prayer and mission with the community. An important part of any discernment and shaping of a courageous vision is answering how to engage this web of relationships both on the spiritual and mission level.

In many ways, the pioneer story offers insight into this question. The dependency of the early sisters on others created a deep sense of mutuality, creation of a gutsy direction and spiritual companionship. These relationships will need to be redefined for this era as we move to smaller, vibrant congregations.

Pope Francis is calling all people to walk with their brother and sisters globally as people who exemplify gospel love and compassion. The Pope stated in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "If we allow doubts and fears to dampen our courage, instead of being creative we will remain comfortable and make no progress what so ever. In this case we will not take an active part in historical processes, but become mere onlookers as the church gradually stagnates" (129). So in order to have a vibrant charism it means being adaptable and flexible as the world evolves through increased partnership and connection with the Charism Family.

Summary:

At this time, we are increasingly called to become visionary believers in an unseen future and to step forward with openness to the path in faith. This pilgrimage will demand a well-formed safe container that allows honest and trusting dialogue. This allows us to enter fully into the mystery of God's call in the wake of these changing times by taking bold action in collaborative participation with others.

This level of discernment and reflection by its very essence means deepening contemplative prayer, intellectual rigor, commitment and detachment. The early pioneer sisters are a model for entering into the unknown to find seedlings of truth and visions that over time have been taken for granted. This radical summons invites each generation into renewing the meaning of religious life for its time. Again, God is asking us to envision a future that will, in truth, be shaped by a smaller, pioneer community and by a new generation who is bringing new insights for these times. This invites us to respond with courage, hope and a creativity born of faith and holding deeply to charism of the congregation. This path will demand a radical placement of trust in Christ and trust in each other.

As Lin YuTang, Chinese writer and inventor states, "Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence" (Jackley, 2015, p. 184).

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