

Mark Clarke  
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*Culture*  
*An essential element*  
*impacting congregational transformation*



# Culture

## An essential element impacting congregational transformation

*“Today and millennia ago, belongingness consists of a combination of a sense of identity (how we distinguish ourselves from others) a sense of security (the opposite of powerlessness) and a sense of order (structure and predictability).”<sup>1</sup>*

Communities and organizations spend significant time exploring their vision and the necessary action steps to achieve that dream. Yet, there is limited time spent on discerning the changes needed to the collective culture. There is a hidden assumption that the culture does not need to adjust. The group lives under the guise they can maintain its current cultural behavior, beliefs and values without questioning how some aspects could be detrimental to achieving the dream.

Society is currently in a dramatic cultural shift. This intense evolution of today’s society is simultaneously happening at all levels. Whether it be individual, civic, or institutional, new questions, beliefs and behavioral norms are reframing and reshaping relationships. What is distinctive about this voyage is individually and institutionally proceeding on local, regional and global levels. We experience this reality up front and personal as we discuss guns, immigration, climate change, gender, etc. These exchanges are an emotional drama of hope and anticipation as well as anger, rage and name-calling. Society is in the middle of an emerging paradigm. We are not able to

return to the past, yet we live in the present with a combination of hopefulness and fear as this new culture unfolds.

The simple chart below outlines some of the realities at play while redefining culture, and what it means to be in relationship.

Area	Current Culture	Emerging Cultural Shift
Relationships	Face to face	Social Media Networks
Ethnic shifts	Homogenous	Intercultural
Religious Exposure	One Dominant Religion	Multiple Traditions
Work	Silos	Networks and Collaborations

There are significant ethnic cultural shifts. In her book, ***Political Tribes***, Amy Chua points out, *“between 1965 and 2015, the Asian population in America grew exponentially from 1.3 million to 18 million, as did the Hispanic population from 8 million to almost 57 million. As a result, the complexion of America is “browning”.*<sup>2</sup>

The emerging adaptation from cultural and technological perspectives places increasing pressure on accepted cultural norms - both personally and institutionally.

***We have entered a historical cultural change and are fumbling to understand the outcome with clarity.***

This development places society into a profound, spiritual path of radical detachment, discernment, and walking in the mystery of the unknown. Religious

<sup>1</sup> Ori Brafman and Martin Dempsey, *Radical Inclusion: What the Post-9/11 World Should Have Taught Us About Leadership*, (Missionday, 2018), Print. 68

<sup>2</sup> Chau, Amy, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, (Penguin 2018), Print. 166-67

communities are called upon to resurrect their culture in a historical framework that will risk forgoing the known and fumbling in the desert. This will mean letting go of the security of the familiar. It will demand balancing their experience of growing as life evolves, while simultaneously experiencing how to transform the congregation's current culture.

For religious communities many of the current frameworks and models are based upon silos or individual charism.

*This cultural, paradigmatic passage calls religious communities and their ministries to balance being rooted in the richness of their culture while simultaneously renewing its essence for these times.*

Thus, one of the fundamental elements of discernment is exploring the collective culture.

The cultural journey is transversed by exploring three intersecting perspectives: identity, the link between mission and strategy, and the collective soul work. All three perspectives are necessary for the change process.



### Identity

*“No one is born with culture, but everyone acquires culture. There are no mature human beings without culture. Culture is what human groups do to their environment, for good or ill. It is the form of social life, a meaning making system, and a way of human contextually.”<sup>3</sup>*

In his book, **Organizational Culture and Leadership**, Edgar Schein talks about the essence of culture. He states, *“Though the essence of a group’s culture is its pattern of shared, basic taken-for-granted assumptions, the culture will manifest itself at the levels of observable artifacts and shared espoused values, norms and rules of behavior.”<sup>4</sup>* This is especially true of religious communities whose identity is steeped in myth and story, and a rich sense of identity called charism that has been molded and reshaped throughout evolving historical times. This enculturation begins with the individual’s initial formation and continues to be manifested through a mission-centered approach to community and ministerial life.

Culture is both present and futuristic. Each generation is grounded in a set of shared assumptions, values and shared beliefs. For each age group, there are flash points that bring them to question the accepted cultural realities. An example of this is the reaction of the students to the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. In February of 2018. This tragic event moved these students to question our culture’s fundamental assumptions about guns. The heartbreaking loss of friends, security and innocence, brought about by a person with a serious mental illness easily

<sup>3</sup> Anthony J. Gittins, *Courage and Conviction: Unpretentious Christianity*, (Liturgical Press 2018), Print. ix

<sup>4</sup> Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, (Jossey-Bass 1992), Print. 26

purchasing a gun, catapulted these students to seek a solution to this tragic event and others like it. Their passion for holding society accountable compelled them to use social media networks to establish a national dialogue and a new movement. This behavior is not unique to Parkland school. Every organization faces triggering events that will challenge their core assumptions, values and symbols. The unfortunate reality is that with beliefs and values are so ingrained, a shocking set of events can shake a group's fundamental essence.

The Parkland school experience was instantaneously redefined by the students' ability to utilize technology, which is second nature to this generation. The students interact and communicate through social media on a daily basis allowing them to leverage and maximize the impact of their efforts for change. These technological templates allowed them to create a national protest in weeks rather than months. They amplified these instruments to foster ongoing communication, create a system, and build an effective, unified network for reimagining the gun issue. Their ability to instantly access information, networks, and communicate with one another transformed a traditional conversation about guns to a call for action with consequences. The students quickly and effectively took an event that historically would have been local, transforming it into a national and international conversation and movement.

Religious communities are not immune from this paradigmatic shift. The changes goes beyond aging, fewer members and vocations. They are participating in a world that is fundamentally challenging the meaning of how we relate, work together and build community. In addition, the

concept of being spiritual and not religious is fundamentally rewriting the rules of church participation.

Society is experiencing the same shift in the new, emerging spirituality movements. They are changing the cultural language from "*I am spiritual*" to "*I'm not religious.*" They are utilizing tradition and new technology to open doors to increase participation and feel connected to a community. For example, *Sounds True*, an organization that focuses on spiritual growth is offering a yearlong mindfulness meditation seminar through the use of webinars, journaling and Facebook that has thousands of participants. In a similar manner, Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey are hosting a 21-day meditation on the topic of *Shedding the Weight - Mind, Body and Spirit* with 171,839 comments after only 11 days. Both of these programs are redefining how people engage with spirituality. In faith-based communities, we see people and organizations like Richard Rohr and *Dynamic Catholic* utilizing the same tools to reach tens of thousands.

Another reality is the number of people exposed to different cultures and worldviews. This is transpiring because of extensive travel, media exposure, service projects and diverse living situations. These experiences reframe mental models from local to a more regional and global sense of connection. This trend is especially true for people in Generation X and Millennial generations.

Given these trends, an important question for religious communities is how will they adapt to this emerging paradigm? Newer members and other interested people will come with a different set of assumptions, beliefs and experiences that have been

shaped by this emerging reality. They will not understand the 60's, Vatican II or the Cold War. Their lives have been shaped as technological natives with more travel and multi-cultural experiences. These newer members bring a freshness and personal experience to the conversation that previous generations have not had.

Today, religious communities are asked to entertain and create a direction based on this new reality. The question is how do we remain rooted in our charism yet adapt to the new mediums of connectivity, understanding of spirituality, and pressing societal issues?

This question, if answered honestly will challenge the existing models and demand moving beyond the community's cultural comfort zone into new and challenging waters.

### *Culture: the thread that unites mission and strategy*

The second critical element is recognizing the profound connection between culture, mission and strategy. Organizations continually plan and choose what they believe is an innovative and transforming direction. Yet, far too often they fail to recognize the power of the culture to impede achieving their dream destination. The vision is greeted with enthusiasm yet the behaviors, customs and affirmation have not adapted to fit the new aspiration. For organizations especially, religious communities, there is a need to explore how to reframe the interior culture to accommodate their shared direction.

This graphic shows the importance of threading together these critical aspects of collective discernment in order to allow a religious community to effectively share their charism and shape the future.



In any discernment process the cultural trends need to be front and center. This is especially critical in a historical period that is going through its own fine-tuning process. An important question for reflection is how are the vacillating cultural trends impacting the future of the congregation? This is particularly important since new members will be called to live religious life in the emerging new paradigm. The assumptions, beliefs and norms of previous generations will need to be reimagined as religious communities continue the trend of becoming smaller.

An essential element for discovery is how to nurture existing social networks while creating new ones. This is critical, as Martin Dempsey shared in his book, **Radical Inclusion**, "Simply by participating in a social media network, an individual has the ability to start a movement, become a leader, and gain a following."<sup>5</sup> This reality can be said for any organization. In the process of discernment, it is vital to recognize that traditional models are being integrated into and superseded by collaborative and social networks. Thus,

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<sup>5</sup> Brafman and Dempsey 73

religious communities must discover how this will impact their individual and collective understanding of culture. For new members, the social network environment is a natural fit to their life.

*Simultaneously, cultural shifts create a profound tension in any discernment or planning process. This is especially true when different generations have various interpretations and experiences of the cultural trends.*

The tension can be palatable and be lived creatively or avoided and locked in the current cultural framework. An important capacity is developing the ability to have honest, open and compassionate dialogue with others who hold different experiences and beliefs. When a group engages in this type of interchange, it is both affirming and thought provoking to one's culture. This style of enriching conversation opens the door to explore where the current culture is being called to transform.

At this moment religious communities are invited to discern from a different perspective. What are the cultural realities we need to embrace while remaining faithful to our charism that continues to foster a community on mission?

### ***Collective Soul***

A religious community's culture is the heartbeat of the organization. It pulsates and offers a sense of identity and purpose. At the same time, it forms the style of relationships between one another and with the outside world. From formation, to the jubilees, and to vow celebrations, these

rituals bond and shape the community's identity. So many of the richest stories of the community are around these powerful moments of celebrating together. These experiences create a soul bonding and identity for the religious community.

In his book, ***Make Me One with Everything***, Lama Surya Das shares, "When I hear my Christian friends talk about the communion of the Holy Spirit, I remember that the Greek word for communion, 'koinonia', may just as easily be rendered as "transformation" or "communication" or "companionship"<sup>6</sup>. These words speak to the cultural collective soul. When lived decade after decade and adapted over time, it creates a sense of communion within and beyond the congregation. This is why in any discernment process the reflection on the culture is really a dialogue with the collective soul.

The collective soul is about creating "defining moments". Chip and Dan Heath reflect in their book, ***The Power of Defining Moments***,<sup>7</sup> on four important elements:

- Elevation: Defining moments rise above the everyday
- Insight: Rewire our understanding of ourselves and the world
- Pride: Capture us at our best – moments of achievement, moments of courage
- Connection: Defining moments are social

These moments become part of the cultural myth that is passed down from generation to generation. It is a way of fostering a

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<sup>6</sup> Lama Surya Das, *Make Me One with Everything - Buddhist Meditations to Awaken from the Illus*, (Sounds True Inc 2015), Print. 5

<sup>7</sup> Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact*, (Simon and Schuster 2017), Print. 12-14

sense of identity, security and order. One's culture becomes a sense of communion around a shared direction that enlivens both the community and its sense of mission.

This is why any transformative discernment process needs to take into consideration the culture. Culture is the powerful link between interconnected relationships and a shared common good.

### ***Final Thoughts***

In summary, it is vital to respect a culture's historical perspective. Reinhold Niebuhr once said, *"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing, which is true or beautiful or good, makes complete*

*sense in any immediate context of history. This is why transforming one culture is a constant process."*<sup>8</sup>

A religious community's culture is passed down from generation to generation as a sacred trust. This powerful connection to one's lineage is passed from one historical peer group to another. They are invited to affirm and reshape the culture, then reverently pass the torch to future members. It is a spiritual journey of embracing one's historical moment, then to become radically detached in order for the next generation of religious members to embody the charism and collective soul journey in their time - in their own unique way.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Reich, *The Common Good*, (Alfred A. Knopf 2018) Print. 184

## ***Culture: An essential element impacting congregational transformation***



*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](mailto:mark_5777@msn.com) or calling at 616-550-0083. Additional articles are available on the CommunityWorks, Inc., website: [www.cworksindy.com](http://www.cworksindy.com).*