

Leadership in a New Lens

Part I: The Big Picture

Video Presentation for FSA Regional Gatherings
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Introduction

Welcome to these Regional Gathering presentations where we will offer a new lens for looking at leadership. We thought it would be important to lay the groundwork for exploring something different regarding leadership before you start surfacing names, sending sisters off to discern, or doing things the way you've always done them. We would like to offer a shift to your current perspectives on leadership, and the processes you might use for electing them, in order to set the stage for a new way forward.

For these presentations, you will need your notes from the homework you were asked to prepare. You will also need the handouts that accompany these presentations for your own notetaking and for sending in your responses to the Chapter Planning Committee.

By the way, this is my personal Avatar speaking. Hopefully the translations will be as close as possible to your own language.

This will be a three-part video presentation. Each part will conclude with some questions for you to reflect upon, share at your tables or breakout groups, and to summarize as feedback to the Chapter Planning Committee. Please use the handouts that accompany each video.

Here is an overview of this three-part presentation. Part I is the Big Picture. Here we will briefly describe the changing landscape of Religious Life and the reasons why the current approaches to leadership, and therefore, the processes used for discerning and electing them, are no longer viable. We want to understand more fully why you see leadership as a critical issue. Building upon your homework, together, we will explore what would prevent or inhibit you from being in leadership as it is today.

Part II will help you look at leadership through a new lens, namely the lens of *transformative partnerships*. Here we will twist the kaleidoscope and offer an entirely new way of looking at leadership. We hope this will increase your curiosity and motivation to experiment with new approaches to leadership, and perhaps a new paradigm for your Congregation. We want to know: Beyond structure, how might you want to transform your relationships as leaders and members, or as members with your partners in mission?

Part III will address some of the difficulties with traditional approaches to discerning and electing leadership and invite you to reflect upon your experiences. Ideally, this will aid in your ongoing exploration of personal and communal transformation. We want to know: What's not working and what you want do about it?

Part I The Big Picture

Let me begin by recalling for you the Big Picture. While this is not new to you, we thought it would be important to keep this context in mind as you explore possibilities. There are a handful of basic premises that provide us with a shared understanding regarding why there is a need for change and an opportunity for transformation. This is the rationale, in other words, for why you might consider a new way forward. Because you've heard us share some of this before, we won't go into these in detail, but let's recall the major headlines.

Our world is going through a Great Turning. We know this from our own personal experiences and from what we see every evening on the news. We also know that Religious Life, as we've known it, is over. You know this, too, from your own personal experiences of countless losses. While vestiges of the past still linger, so much is rapidly changing. You know this from all those who write about the future of Religious Life and from those who speak at religious conferences. Even Rome, finally, has come to recognize this need for change and the possibilities for transformation. Religious Life, like our entire world, is going through a Great Turning and the old ways are passing.

The good news, of course, is that Religious Life is not dying; it is transforming! Amid the chaos of our world, we have encouraged you to listen to heartbeat of the NEW. You are at a crossroads, a "graced crossroads" from our perspective, and you have a choice. You could choose to stay the course, go down the path of least resistance and do what you've always done. Or, you could adapt and change incrementally as needed to live as comfortably as you can for as long as you can. Or, you could choose to walk the ancient path toward deep change and transformation.

The question remains: What are you seeking and which path will you choose? Hopefully, your Cluster or Small group gatherings spent some time exploring this very question.

The system is broken

Several years ago, a futurist named Barbara Marx Hubbard, was the keynote speaker at LCWR. Her first words spoken at the podium were: “The system is broken.” She was speaking not only about the pervasive, hierarchical systems that are crumbling throughout our globe, including Catholic Church, but also the system of leadership within Religious Life itself. This rather blunt pronouncement was one of the first of its kind to a gathering of women religious leaders and, no doubt, was a shock to their system. Since then, the denial among leaders and members has continued to break down. Today, Religious Life, including our wider Church, are trying to search for a new way forward.

Initially, and still to this day, there has been a tremendous focus on the numbers and demographic changes among religious communities. Communities thought, “If only we could get more vocations, we could continue.” Literally, the primary “hope” for the future seemed to rest on this one possibility, a resurgence of new vocations. Sisters’ hopes were kindled when someone came and painfully dashed when someone left. The fear of dying out, and near desperate attempts to recruit new vocations, pushed many communities to accept some women who clearly were not called to Religious Life. Sadly, there has been a heavy cost for these women and the communities who accepted them. If there is to be hope for a future, it must reside in existing members or there is no hope at all.

It is clear to me and many others that this focus on numbers is tunnel vision. It is only the tip of the iceberg. I've shared with you before that there are layers upon layers of challenges indicating that the “system is broken” and that surface changes alone will not transform what Religious Life is to become. The crisis today is not one of numbers. It is not a vocation crisis. It is one of survival, identity, integrity and relevancy that strikes at the very soul of communities. It is a crisis of courage and creativity and one of leadership that exists in a paradigm of Religious Life that is no longer working.

Even the most intransigent patriarchal leaders in Rome are now recognizing this need for deep change and transformation. The Synodal journey initiated by Pope Francis is a major effort to explore the possibilities of transformation. "We are not

living in an era of change," he said, but "a change of era." It is important to recognize that you are part and parcel of this larger systemic change, and you are being invited to join the Church in its Synodal journey of transformation.

What's not working in the approach to leadership

Religious Life obviously encompasses a variety of structures, but one of the most essential structures is Congregational Leadership, our focus here today. The typical structure of leadership for women religious communities is comprised of three to five sisters. It is a hierarchical system. The leader sits at the top, the council beneath her, and beneath the council are various substructures. Your leadership structure, while having unique titles and lines of authority, is similar to every other women's community.

Myths of leadership

Before inviting you to share your homework, we want to just mention a few myths about leadership. There are plenty of myths that perpetuate the current approach to leadership, but let us just name a few of the most common ones we hear:

1. "There is a leader in every chair."
2. "Rome won't let us do it."
3. "We have plenty of sisters."
4. "We are getting small, so we need a smaller leadership team."

The first myth is that "there is a leader in every chair." We appreciate this statement as an effort to affirm the fact that, indeed, everyone has competencies and skills to offer. However, it cannot be taken literally. From our perspective, there is not a leader in every chair any more than there is a social worker, surgeon, or gardener in every chair. Not everyone has the specific competencies and skills needed for leadership, especially at these transitional times.

Second, the idea that Rome won't allow for these changes is a myth. In fact, Rome is encouraging changes and are in consultation with religious leaders around the world. They now recognize the need for change and the possibilities for transformation. The two themes that have emerged from these discussions are a need for "experimentation" (*ad experimentum*) and "communal discernment." More than ever before they are not only permitting experimentation, but encouraging and accompanying communities in these efforts. They are not only listening in private to God, but listening and discerning *together* for what God is calling forth.

As a corollary to this, some communities are under the mistaken belief that their Constitutions and other governing document prohibit them from making any substantive changes. This, too, is a myth. There is plenty of white spaces within these documents and, if need be, these can be suspended for the sake of experimentation. The real limiting factor lies in your imagination, not your documents. You will be limited mostly by default thinking and a fear of challenging the status quo. This is much like the prayer we shared in CARE about the elephants who were once tethered, but now are freer than they realize. Your perceived lack of freedom is a myth.

Third, the fact that you have many sisters, more than most communities, might lull you into complacency. It is a myth to think you have plenty of sisters and plenty of time to continue as you have in the past. Your numbers dwindle quickly when you consider who among you are *willing, able, electable*, and could form solid *team*.

Hypothetically, for example, say you have 100 sisters. And out of generosity, perhaps 20 of them were *willing* to consider elected leadership. Among the 20, perhaps 10 or so might have the *ability*, or competencies needed, to perform the leadership tasks of today. Of those, perhaps 4 or 5 of them might be able to form a viable *team*. And of those, still fewer might have the needed credibility and trust of the community to be voted into leadership.

It is notable that during last year's LCWR assembly only 15% of communities surveyed said that they had more than one cycle left for a viable leadership team. In other words, the vast majority, 85%, needed to make changes NOW and not wait for the next cycle before looking at alternative approaches. It is a myth that you have plenty of sisters and plenty of time to make changes.

The last myth we wish to mention is that smaller communities need fewer sisters in leadership. The reality on the ground belies the logic of this statement. In our travels, Beth and I have noticed that nearly every leadership team carries a great burden upon their shoulders, and the smaller the team, the greater the burden, no matter the size of the community. Leaders are overwhelmed by what is commonly referred to as VACU, an acronym that stands for Volatility, Ambiguity, Complexity, and Uncertainty. It is a description not only of our world, but of Religious Life.

Leaders that we meet are overwhelmed by the amount of work are doing, just to keep things going as is, let alone creating something new. Leaders tell us they often feel alone and unsupported by members. They are frequently triangulated, blamed,

and criticized when things go wrong. Although they loath to say it aloud, many are unsure of what to do, let alone who to be, during this time of transition. By the time their terms end, many leaders leave sick, exhausted, or wounded by the experience. All of this is to say that leadership in its current form and function is not working.

“The system is broken.” That is what we hear and what we observe. However, regardless of what we see and hear, it is more important to hear from you. Six months ago, you identified leadership as among your top three critical issues. What’s so “critical” about leadership? In light of this Big Picture, what’s not working?

As a preface to your homework, we mentioned some of the reasons you gave as to why leadership is a “critical issue.” You said:

1. We are fewer in number and size, and
2. We are aging and no longer have the capacities or energy.

Some of the most common reasons we’ve heard for why you might not want to be elected to leadership were:

1. You don’t want to move to Allegany.
2. You can’t, or don’t want, to travel.
3. You do not speak a second language.
4. You are happy and find meaning in current ministry.
5. You don’t believe you have the needed skills and competencies.

For your homework, we asked you to reflect on two questions. We said, “Regardless of all of these “good reasons,” imagine that you ARE capable, have good energy, and don’t have to move to Allegany:

Question 1: What, now, would prevent you from being willing to serve in elected leadership?

Question 2: What, about the way Leadership in your Congregation has functioned, doesn’t work for you, or isn’t as effective as it could be, or doesn’t offer a ministry that is meaningful, energizing, and life-giving?”

In light of this introductory presentation on the Big Picture, take some time to further reflect on how you initially answered these two questions. Follow the instructions of the facilitator for your reflection and sharing. Thank you.