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September 2015



Spiritual Leadership for the Pioneer Community

**Spiritual Leadership for a Pioneer Community:
“Knowing This Dying and Rising”
-- Goethe**

One of the fundamental roles of religious leaders is to help their members embrace their religious life journey in faith and trust, and with a profound belief in a good and provident God. The call to being a spiritual leader in these turbulent times is not for the faint of heart. Yet, with trust and belief in a provident God, the leaders' moves forward will allow those whom they serve to find a future that cannot be imagined by staying in the comfort of the known. As Carl Jung wrote, “Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your heart. Who looks outside dreams; who looks inside awakes.” Leaders are called to spiritually walk with their members and the congregation's extended web of relationship in order to unleash a vision of the heart that awakens the charism in this connected and global world.

This unique call necessitates living in the spirit of the incarnation while fully embracing the paschal mystery. The ability to give birth while simultaneously experiencing certain dying aspects of religious life is a real challenge. Truly religious are living both Good Friday and Holy Saturday as they grieve multiple losses and walk in an unfamiliar darkness. And, true to their faith, they are open and waiting in the void for the new to resurrect into a 21st century pioneer community.

We must acknowledge this formidable path to each other and the difficult challenge of creating a vision based on our charism in these changing times. It demands a level of spiritual maturity both individually and collectively to hold in tension both our losses and the gifts of the past while entertaining the new. The radical call to change and to birth needs to be supported by faith sharing, contemplative presence and owning both the individual and collective losses. This will become known by sitting in the collective stillness and believing and waiting for the unfolding of an unknown future.

One of the critical roles of leadership at this time is to name the truth of the moment as scriptures say “the truth shall set you free.” The leader's call is to help the members enter the spiritual path of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. It is allowing us to be the new pilgrims who recognize the end of one historical reality in order to be open and embrace the emerging future. The path is not easy for leaders or members because it demands leaving the comfort of the present for the tension and anxiety of seeking God in the new.

An important aspect for leaders is not to fall into the traps common in change processes such as “we can keep everyone happy” or wait for consensus with the challenges being too great and often imminent. With each passing year, valuable time, energy and opportunity to create the future is lost. Leaders cling to statements like, “Will the sisters be open to this, or will they all go with us?” While asking these questions, congregations continue to age in place, more demands are placed on fewer sisters, and circumstances squander the younger sisters' talent all for the sake of propping up an old model of religious life.

The process of death and dying is never easy. It demands a deep entrance into the mystery of contemplative prayer and searching for God's call in the mystery of the unknown. Like the early followers of Jesus and founding pioneer sisters, today's leaders are called to be surprised by the resurrection. What is most needed today is the deep faith and commitment of the first members who left the comfort of the known to journey across the expansive ocean to an unknown land to embrace the truth of the new.

What is the 21st century pioneer community that is being birthed out of this death and rising? What characterizes it?

- Smaller communities committed to living and sharing the spirit of the charism
- Communities that are intergenerational and intercultural in composition
- Commitment to people on the margins, especially women and children
- Simpler and more intentional views about living a community life enriched by faith sharing and contemplation
- Interconnection by a network of relationships that are passionate and committed to the congregational charism and the gospel message
- Technological savvy

This means the Pioneer Leader/Leadership Team needs to embrace a spiritual stance as it walks with the congregation that creates a vision based on these three disciplines:

1. **Being rooted in the mission/charism from a contemplative stance:** How can we be mission/charism focused in an evolving global, technological world with increasing cultural diversity?
2. **Developing an Emergent Strategy:** How do we create an emergent strategy that is adaptive and flexible given these complex times?
3. **Creating a Congregational Story that integrates the extensive web of relationships:** How do we engage others/stakeholders in our evolving story using the various evolving technological tools such as social media?

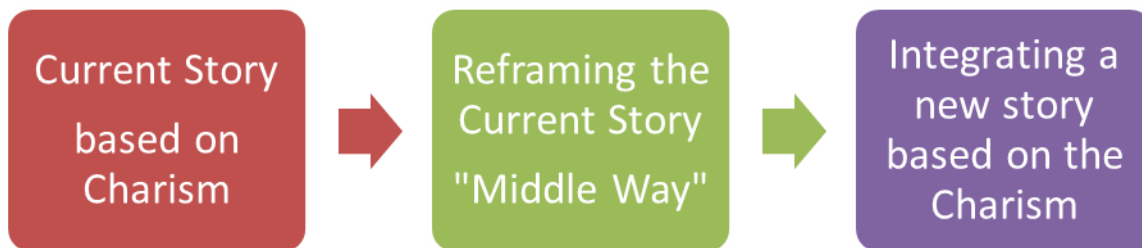


Leaders in this era are being called to walk with the congregation as they create an integrated direction based on these fundamental disciplines. As Joseph Campbell often stated, “Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived,” or, paraphrased, religious are not being called to solve this challenge but rather to embrace the mystery rooted in a rich commitment of spirituality and service to the world.

This article will focus on the first discipline of being a spiritual leader that calls the congregation to remain deeply **rooted in the mission/charism from a contemplative stance**. It will explore what it means to be a pioneer spiritual leader in furthering the mission and charism based on discernment from a contemplative stance.

Being rooted in the mission/charism from a contemplative stance:

The core of any congregation is its mission and charism. If the congregation loses this identity, then it loses its fundamental purpose. In a world changing at warp speed, the critical question for a congregation is how to create new ways of sharing its charism with fewer members while maintaining its core identity. This heroic journey calls leaders to focus on three critical historical spiritual disciplines: contemplation, discernment and faith sharing. The collective pilgrimage will not be easy. It calls for entering and drinking deeply of the mystery of the “middle way.” In entering the middle way it invites the collective to walk in darkness while trusting the light will unfold a vision over time. As Joseph Campbell stated, “The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure.” The path has three dances: owning the current story/myth; reframing the current story; and integrating it for these times.



The living “middle way” pilgrimage is the recognition that the current story, myths and behaviors are no longer relevant in a newly emerging reality. Even though the charism is timeless, it shifts and gets remolded as the times evolve and change. This reframed current story of being connected, an awareness of being a global citizen, and a redefining of spiritual connection based on being more mindful clearly is challenging the current institutional frameworks. We now live in a world where the majority of people have grown up in an open system of being globally connected. This systemic shift of understanding is causing us to reframe how we ask questions around connectivity, serving others and relating to the Divine.

This transformative shift is inviting leaders to call members to enter the mystery of the “middle way.” This journey of change and transformation is a radical call to reframe our historical charism story and approach to community and mission for these times. The entering of this journey demands deepening one’s spiritual presence to each other: engaging in discernment that asks new questions and recognizes that faith sharing is critical both within our members and with others seeking for God’s “truth.”

- **Contemplative Presence:** There are two foundational questions about which leaders need to dialogue with their communities.
 - How do we live the richness of the contemplative tradition that is incarnational and calls us to bring forth new life?

- How do we enter into the paschal mystery that calls us to die to oneself through letting go and grieving our losses while at the same time being filled with hope; in being renewed and reborn?

The answering of these timeless questions demands entering into the mystery of silence. Leaders must create opportunities and moments for the collective to enter into experiencing the rich emotions of the “middle way” through silence. This allows God to affirm ways the congregation is living its charism while embracing the radical ways it is being invited to seek renewal and collective transformation.

This call to stillness invites the members to sit and be with each other from a rich contemplative presence of acceptance, reverence and respect. These important values ask the group to be still with the range of emotions and insights that surface. This awareness of the other will demand acceptance of differences, areas that lead to conflict and grief while being centered in one’s own emotional reality. The role of leadership is to create a safe contemplative container to hold the moments of darkness, naming the seedling of lights and sharing the unfolding story.

- **Discernment:** The leader has four important roles in leading the community in discernment: staying focused; making meaning of current reality; unleashing hidden curiosity and creative potential to create a vision for these times and engaging with the congregation’s larger web of relationships.
- One of the important calls of leadership is to have the community make meaning from the unvarnished truth of current reality. At times, given the reality of the trends, this meaning-making has the potential to move the collective into despair, denial and blaming as they explore the limitations of being an aging community with fewer new members. The intent is *to face current reality and not to become paralyzed or to feel powerless*. As Maya Angelou states, “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.” For example, rather than longing for the day of self-sufficiency where we controlled all of the variables a community needs, to enter into a place of vulnerability, fear and at times helplessness. These emotions, although scary, offer a rich and powerful opening to new questions and exploration of the charism. It is important for leaders to allow the community to dance between moments of intense insight and times of heart-wrenching pain so God can speak. This holding of the container allows new seedlings to emerge by engaging one’s fear around the unknown and allowing the seedling of hope to emerge.
- Leaders holding the emotional safety of the container allows for God’s call to break forth with an emerging vision. The development of a vision will call forth curiosity and imagination to explore new paths and means for sharing our charism. In Marty Sklar’s new book, **One Little Spark**, Richard M. and Richard B. Sherman in a stanza from their song with the same title states

Imagination
Imagination
A dream can be a dream come true
With just that spark
From me and you!

The discernment of a bold vision will demand formation and education around new concepts often foreign to the congregation's current mental model and experience. For example, society is finding through social media, collaboration and integrating one's web of relationship new ways of addressing society's most pressing needs like poverty, immigration and human trafficking. One of the discerning questions could be, how do we engage with individuals and organizations that share similar concerns around social issues important to us?

This level of discernment will demand that leaders create a safe setting of trust and respect for contemplation to unleash the members' curiosity and imagination. This will demand a contemplative listening to each other as the range of diverse insights and potential paths emerge without judgment, name-calling, or rigidly holding on to previous methods. The leaders will need to facilitate the collective being transparent and open to the emerging vision while holding to the core of the charism.

- One of the most powerful gifts that any congregation has is its rich and diverse web of relationships established over decades of walking with donors, co-workers, alumnae and other influential leaders who have shared the pathway of being on mission. Leaders need to recognize and call forth this valuable resource to create a visionary purpose for these changing times. So often we look at trends and see the limitations of numbers and an aging community and fail to embrace the tens of thousands of lives who have shared our charism over decades. The leader's responsibility is to challenge the members to explore and entertain this wealth of talent and capacity in creating a vision for these times

For example, the emerging leadership of the millennial generation is focusing on community, spirituality and service. Again as part of the discernment process one of the questions could be, how do we truly engage with this generation who have our shared values around spirituality, community and service? This may mean that we need to understand social media, globalization and social networks to understand this new generation. In doing so, it may ask us to move from our comfort zone and explore other ways of being in relationship and of service. Leaders have a critical responsibility to invite these questions and share the importance of engaging in them for embracing one's charism and creating a vision for complexed historical moment.

This model of discernment will demand leaders to call the members to entertain new questions for discernment while modeling being vulnerable through challenging our areas of safe comfortableness and in re-founding and renewing the charism story for these times. As Steve Jobs said, "You cannot connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future."

- **Faith-Sharing:** Leadership is called to create a safe context for faith sharing within the local, regional and larger community setting to foster and enrich personal and communal transformation. The rich spiritual tradition of the Catholic Church offers a variety of prayer, reflection and worship methods. Community faith sharing offer moments of encounter with God and each other that are essential to the spiritual life of the individual and the community. As Ilia Delio states in her new book, **Making All things New**, "Catholicity is not about religion per se, but it is complementary to religion because it is about whole making." Leaders are called to invite each member to continually seek the call to holiness through individual and communal reflection.

Faith-Sharing among the members has a critical role in both collective discernment and contemplation as members seek a shared future based on the charism. Without this level of spiritual sustenance, the momentum to move forward often gets lost in an array of individual discernments (what is best for me) rather than a collective guiding wisdom. Members often are steeped in the fear of what is lost that blinds them to the unfolding call. This can lead to holding onto the security of the known, resistance and forestalling moving forward at the expense of the whole.

When these normal realities emerge, it is important for leaders to call the spiritual question and enter into the darkness and often insecurity of the unknown in order for God's light to break through. As stated in the prologue of a recent document of the Leadership Conference for Women Religious, "Our foremothers and founders stepped into the chaos and the unknown of their day, trusting in God's good guidance and providence. In our time, we are called to do the same. Inspired by the radical call of the gospel, led by God's spirit and companioned by one another, we embrace our time as holy, our leadership as gift, and our challenges as blessings."

Summary:

In summary, we need to see contemplative presence, discernment and faith sharing as an interwoven foundation to being a spiritual leader. An awareness of how true leadership is rooted in vulnerable trust of one another's ability to envision a future not yet seen. Spiritual Leadership at core is a radical gift. This blessing is to be shared through inviting the members to holiness through creation of a passionate dream which unleashes the imagination of both the congregation and the web of congregational relationships to model the gospel message of love to a globally connected world.

Footnotes:

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CommunityWorks, Inc. 2015.*

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