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Transformative Communities Series:
Generative Designers of the Future

*“To live you must choose,
to live you must encounter,
to grow you must suffer.”
--Viktor Frankl¹*

The world is dancing between rapid societal breakthroughs in all sectors and extreme polarization. Society has entered a process of redefining cultural assumptions while simultaneously, issues like environmental catastrophes of all varieties, and economic destabilization are impacting migration within countries and beyond traditional borders. These fluctuations are asking transformative communities to define their role with greater clarity of purpose, leading to action. Thus transformative communities are being asked to engage in creating visions and direction through collaborative ventures that lead to a just and compassionate society.

For these groups, planning is a vehicle to continually identify and decide how they will live a life of discipleship spreading the “good news.” Pope Francis regularly calls us to become a culture of encounter. In the book, *“The Heart of Pope Francis,”* Diego Fares S.J. writes, “to foster encounter, the most useful tool is dialogue to create the capacity for dialogue. When a person enters into an encounter, he begins to dialogue, and dialogue means not simply hearing but listening. One must foster the capacity for listening.”² Transformative Communities thus create a planning process that engages the internal community and stakeholders, including those they wish to impact. This manner establishes a foundation for becoming dialogical activists in solving society's most pressing needs.

Collective planning is a profound, spiritual experience of exploring God's call. It demands an honest assessment of the current direction and seeking to understand how God's movement to share the gospel is evolving in these times. Planning requires opening the collective heart/soul to review one's culture, mental models, and current course in light of emerging realities. It is often not easy because of the various group perspectives and understandings within the community. Thus contemplative prayer and reflection, as well as seeking the common good, are essential in the creation of a shared direction and action.

The word planning is often portrayed as corporate, business-like, while we are about ministry and relationships. Yet, planning is a sacred path that allows the community to choose a visionary direction that aligns with its timeless charism. The process sets the context and character as to how a transformative group desires to impact society's emerging questions. Planning does not have to be the static, rigid framework that many of us have experienced in the past. Instead, it can be an organic and evolving process that invites the group to engage in being open to the divine call as it unfolds in real-time. God's call is about listening and responding to the messages as they evolve on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis.

In these complicated times, the call to discipleship demands the continual process of choosing how to be collectively on a mission. Our often tumultuous times call us to move beyond individualism in all forms to a more interconnected community to solve

¹ Gittins, Anthony J. *A Presence That Disturbs: a Call to Radical Discipleship*. WIPF & STOCK, 2018. Print. xvii

² Fares, Diego. *Heart of Pope Francis: How a New Culture of Encounter Is Changing the Church and the World*. Crossroad, 2015. Print. 45

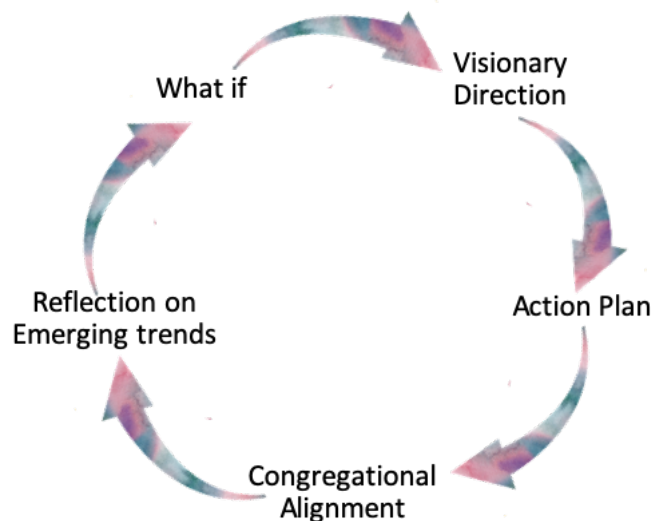
its pressing issues. Thus transformative communities are implored to have a vision and plan of action that allows them to participate in emerging collaborative models to shape this reality.

The process for planning is a spiritual path rooted in the communal discipline of five critical elements.

- *Understanding the emerging trends and reflecting on how they impact the communal direction*
- *Exploring what-if possibilities to envision a shared future*
- *Creating a visionary direction*
- *Establishing bold approaches for action.*
- *Aligning members and various services to the visionary direction*

Transformative Communities recognize, if they are to remain prophetic, they must be rooted in the divine call to seek justice for the most vulnerable. Thus it necessitates a plan of action that guides them.

The graphic below describes the planning cycle that creates the climate for moving meaning-making into action:



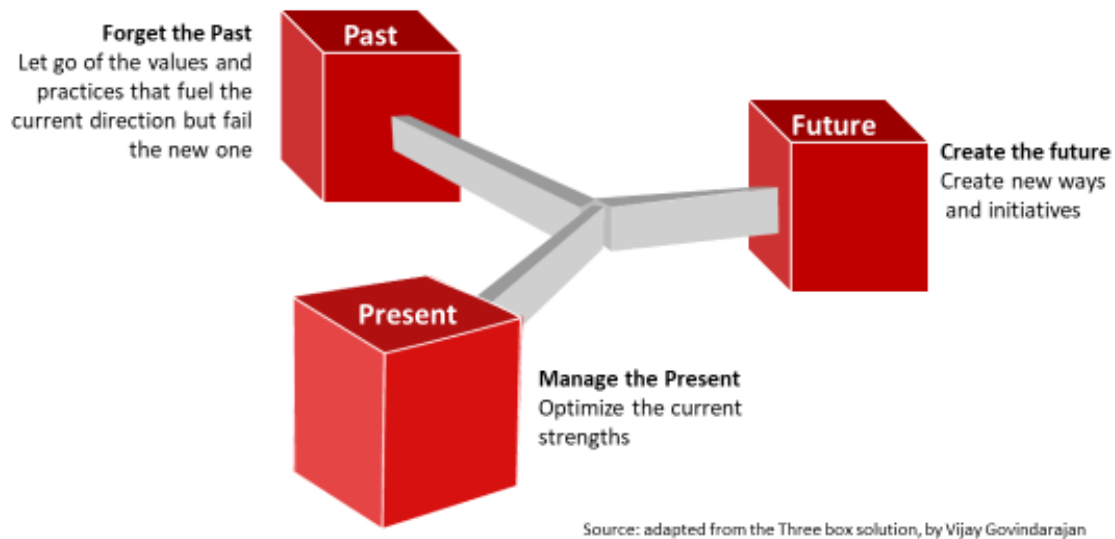
Part One

Trends and Communitarian Assessment:

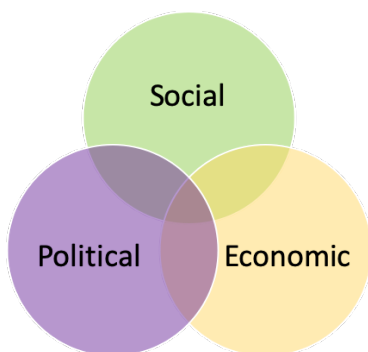
For a community to explore internal and external trends, it needs to enter a contemplative space to understand how the emergent trends are calling the community to reimagine its future. This process invites the group to detach from existing mental frameworks and beliefs. The group asked to embrace through openness the precarious movements within society. Technology is a perfect example. In the past thirty years, we have moved from cell phones to Artificial Intelligence. These new ways of being connected will continue to impact our daily lives in dramatic ways. This one area alone calls us to ask, what is God's invitation for communal transformation both today and into the future.

The exploration of trends is both an internal and external task involving two dimensions looking at trends from multiple levels and fostering an understanding of the past, present, and future or Vijay Govindarajan's concept of the three-box solution.

Govindarajan’s three-box process is a reflection tool to encompass what the congregation needs to let go from the past, to build upon the present in order to move into the future through intentional initiation. The graphic below depicts the progression.



The external reflection is grounded in the elements of the graphic below. The trends embedded in the three elements impact congregations “being on a mission” while simultaneously allowing them to discover their future through affirming current strengths. This reflection and opening the transcendent community to embrace emerging trends will impact the congregation’s future.



All of this demands that a congregation recognize the link between vision and operations. Also, its vital for the congregation to evaluate its fiscal sustainability, human resource capacity, and services.

Determining the implications of the internal and external realities that shape a congregation's future is a rigorous process. Facing the unvarnished truth about the blessing and challenges opens an avenue to minimize the obstacles and expand the benefits.

Engaging the Transformative Communities’ eco-system in this process can offer clarity and multiple perspectives. As well as open the door to future collaboration. This level of engagement, especially with those invested in the charism, builds both investment and commitment in the final direction.

What If:

The internal and external exploration of trends invites the congregation into exploring ‘what if’ questions as they look at their future. This level of work allows the congregation to form options based on a robust dialogue around the pros and cons of the ‘what ifs’ that impact the future.

The ‘what if’ question opens the congregation to explore the unknown by being curious and imaginative about the future. It is a way to energetically create a future instead of being caught in a paralyzed cycle of diminishment. This path creates a balance that recognizes the limitations and assets, leading to the creation of a transcending future. T. S. Eliot states,

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time”³

A ‘what if’ question has the power to disrupt a group’s worn out mental models, frameworks, and directions. Carol Sanford states, “ In order to create disrupting innovations, we have to break our habits of mind-how we make sense of life. To innovate in human work requires us to reframe the way we work, conceive life, and interpret human nature.”⁴

Questions, by their essence, open the door to the collective soul. Opening the group to the motherlode issues and questions can unleash the spiritual energy of the whole. As Daniel Christian Wahl states, “The practice of living the questions together

starts by frequently asking yourself and others are we asking the right questions? Which questions will help us make wiser decisions? What if we did things differently? What informs our current perspective?”⁵ These are the foundational questions to addressing ‘what if.’

A ‘what if’ question allows the group to affirm the known and embrace the unknown. The ‘what if’ question opens the group to pray and discern what about the unknown journey that God is asking them to walk.

Here are a few examples of ‘what if’ questions:

- *What if we established a web-based model of ongoing formation as an integrated approach of continuing formation for members, associates, sponsored ministries, and our extended eco-system?*
- *What if we develop a regional model of collaboration among our and other congregation sponsored ministries to increase social impact and funding for increased service delivery to the underserved?*
- *What if we developed a back-office in collaboration with other nonprofits to explore areas of purchasing, IT, insurance, and other realities to increase resources for mission?*
- *What if we established a web of relationships among the older sisters in the region for mutual support, faith sharing as they walk through their senior years?*

³ Gittins, Anthony J. *Courage and Conviction: Unpretentious Christianity*. Liturgical Press, 2018. Print. 143

⁴ Sanford, Carol. *The Regenerative Business: Redesign Work, Cultivate Human Potential, and Achieve Extraordinary Outcomes*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2017. Print. 14

⁵ Wahl, Daniel Christian. *Designing Regenerative Cultures*. Triarchy Press, 2017. Print. 36

- *What if we were leaders in collaboration with others in ridding society of human trafficking, immigration biases, or environmental degradation?*

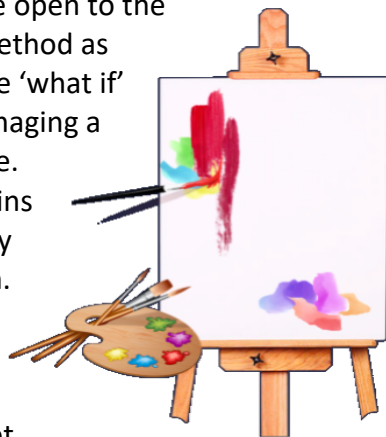
The congregation explores ‘what if’ questions while simultaneously discerning how God is calling them to represent their charism for these times. Both approaches dance together to create the future.

As transformative communities explore the ‘what if’ question, it propels them to seek a visionary direction. This path invites them to decide the future they’re willing to risk their collective energy for the betterment of society.

Part II: Visionary Direction

Antoine de Saint-Exupery states, “If you want to build a ship, don’t gather people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the immensity of the sea.”⁶ Regenerative Leadership.⁶

The creation of a visionary direction requires the active engagement of choosing a future. Transformative Communities see themselves as designers and creators of the future. They are open to the blank canvas method as they explore the ‘what if’ questions for imaging a preferred future. The canvas begins to take shape by choosing a path. As the world continually disrupts, members accept



the call to envision a new future for themselves. The hard reality is that in these times, the status quo will not take a group to an envisioned future. Transformative Communities are rooted in seeing themselves as the disciples of the *Acts of the Apostles*. After the death of Jesus, they recognized through their life-altering experience of his death that they needed to imagine a community grounded in his teaching. As they entered the depth and sorrow of the loss, they dreamed of a new world. Their walking into the pain and embracing the passionate energy, Jesus' mission opened their hearts to a new purpose. This pilgrimage is the journey of every transformative community.

A shared vision focuses on the transformative community's deepest aspiration while aligning all the members and systems in a communal direction. In a time of rapid change and shifting paradigms and society mental frameworks, a shared vision offers stability. Since unforeseen events can disrupt a community, foresight is an indispensable asset. Scripture reminds us, “without vision, the people perish.”⁷ This quest is a profound spiritual path requiring transformation. New or adapted directions by their very nature demand change. Collective adjustments are not easy as a group takes competing beliefs, ideas, and concerns and combines them to form a unified path. This dynamic demands both individual and group, letting go to create a shared vision. It is not a comfortable journey and should be assisted by a contemplative space that is safe and receptive to the many ideas and desires that will develop a unity about the future.

⁶ Sanford. 72

⁷ MEV Proverbs 29:18

This moment in history, with its myriad of transitions, demands that communities create a bold vision. Ilia Delio, in her book, *The Emergent Christ*, speaks to the value of change.

*“Life means change, and the rich diversity of life is based on change. One does not have to be trained in science to realize that change is integral to life. All of life follows the cycle of birth, maturity, deterioration, and death.”*⁸

The quote reminds us that openness to change is necessary, that creating a group vision is not a rigid process rather an organic and energetic one to open to the polarity dance of the known and unknown. A profound spiritual process of radical detachment is needed to embrace the hidden invitation of God. We often tend to create a direction based on security rather than aspiration. The book, *Beyond Performance*, notes “If the vision feels to incremental, cautious, or overly tailored to existing capabilities, it will fail to create momentum or pressure for an organization to push the limits of what is possible and therefore won’t lead to breakthroughs.”⁹

The essential questions a transformative community needs to ask in creating a collective vision are:

- *Who are we called to serve?*
- *What is our prophetic stance?*
- *What is our desired impact and shared commitment to creating a just society?*

When developing a vision, it is critical to envision the direction for a decade. It is critical to realize the vision will be implemented based on incremental steps

that focus on the long term vision. One of the great examples of a visionary direction is John Kennedy’s vision for our space program. The vision was to land a person on the moon by the end of the decade and return them safely to earth. The vast information that authors have written on the moon project demonstrates the aspiration was always in front of these pioneers as they took incremental steps.

For example, the moon shot was a three-phase space program: Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo. Each program focused on essential elements vital to achieving the ultimate goal of landing on the moon. Mercury experimented with all the details needed to send a person in space and return them safely to earth. Gemini explored the critical steps needed to walk in space, rendezvous with another spaceship, and other critical elements. Finally, Apollo would land the person on the moon and bring them safely home. The vision took each of these expansive steps to be successful.

Habakkuk 2:2 states, “Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets so that one can read it readily.”¹⁰ This wisdom is true for transformative communities about the importance of continually having a vision.

Each transformative community is called by God to express clearly their moonshot vision, one that transforms both the individual and collective members and society. This demand for creating a bold plan of action and congregational alignment that implements the dream.

⁸ Delio, Ilia. *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*. Orbis Books, 2013. Print. 34

⁹ Keller, Scott, and Bill Schaninger. *Beyond Performance 2.0: a Proven Approach to Leading Large-Scale Change*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019. Print. 66

¹⁰ NAB Saint Joseph Edition

Part III Action Plan and System Alignment

There is often a tendency to put tremendous energy and due diligence into setting the visionary course. Energy dissipates, however, as the group moves into establishing the action plan. If a group wants to have an impact and participate in the shifting societal process, it is crucial to have energy and passion for developing the action plan. The commitment to this phase of the process aligns the visionary aspiration with a committed implementation plan.

The creation of an action plan is a spiritual discipline that involves choosing appropriate priority actions to achieve a visionary direction. This spiritual path requires learning how to handle conflict and disappointment. The process also requires that difficult, sometimes tricky choices be made. It necessitates detachment from one's own will for a larger common good. Our individualistic society creates a real challenge to this type of commitment. At this point in the process, critical aspects are the prayerful reflection and seeking “oneness” of engagement as the congregation moves into the future.

The action plan defines the key priorities and initiatives crucial to achieving the visionary direction. The first step in creating a plan is assessing the current community assets needed to accomplish the vision as well as its challenges. It involves establishing initiatives, for example, that strengthen the formation, infrastructure, fiscal viability, and human resources to achieve the vision.

In Daniel Christian Wahl’s book, *Designing Regenerative Culture*, he affirms the critical importance of establishing an action plan when he states, “ by exploring the potential

feedback loops, limits, dynamics and key relationships within the system we can move to a deeper questioning in searching of organizing principles and policies that structure the system and drive its behavior.”¹¹

The creation of a bold vision leads to asking four vital questions in the development of an effective action plan.

- *What are aspects of our culture that need affirmation and change to achieve the visionary direction?*
- *What are the key activities, structures, and current initiatives that no longer serve the larger purpose?*
- *What are the current strengths and capacities within the system that are important to continue nurturing and developing to implement the direction?*
- *What are new initiatives, structures, collaborative relationships that are vital to implementing the vision?*

System alignment

The final step is aligning the entire system to the direction and implementation. It is critical to define the vital role of each area and staff member in achieving the visionary course. The alignment of the system builds ownership, investment, and creative imagination in the implementation process.

The alignment of the structure focuses on all aspects of the structures like ongoing formation, advancement, finances, human resources, etc. so that all understand their role concerning the community key priorities.

¹¹ Wahl. 88

Defining the human, financial, and needed the capacity to implement the vision is essential. The following are some important questions to reflect upon in the system alignment stage.

- *What capacities no longer serve our purpose, and what new skills or capabilities do we need to develop within our leadership and staff?*
- *How do we deepen the collaboration and relationships among our departments and partners to achieve the vision?*
- *Do we need to establish new partners if so with whom and for what?*
- *How is our current structure supportive of the vision, and what aspects need to be adapted to strengthen the achievement of the visionary direction?*

System alignment often overlooked, yet it is a vital segment of the planning process. There is a tendency to believe the current structure and capabilities are sufficient for the new plan. Imperative for achieving a bold direction, the current system often needs fresh ideas and adaptation.

Summary:

Carl Jung stated, “Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams, who looks inside awakes.”¹² The transformative community walks a sacred path when it enters into its collective heart space to awaken its visionary aspiration. As a group walks the spiritual journey reflecting on the trends, developing a visionary direction, planning for action, and establishing alignment, they become like gold tested in fire. They create as *Acts of the Apostles* describes, “The community of believers were of one heart and mind...”¹³ The commitment to this process deepens the bonds of relationship and connectivity for achieving the desired future grounded in mutual trust, working through differences, and unfolding spirit within the individuals and groups. As Amelia Earhart stated, “The most difficult thing is the decision to act. The rest is merely tenacity.”¹⁴

¹² Storm, Laura Hutchins Giles. *REGENERATIVE LEADERSHIP: the Dna of Life-Affirming 21st Century Organizations*. Wordzworth Publishing, 2019. Print. 118

¹³ NAB, Acts 4:32

¹⁴ Brinkley, Douglas. *American Moonshot: John F. Kennedy and the Great Space Race*. HarperCollins Canada, Limited, 2019. Preface

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Mark continues to explore key concepts shared in this article. You can access his work through CommunityWorks' website.



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 call 616-550-0083. Additional articles are available on the CommunityWorks, Inc., website: www.cworksindy.com.