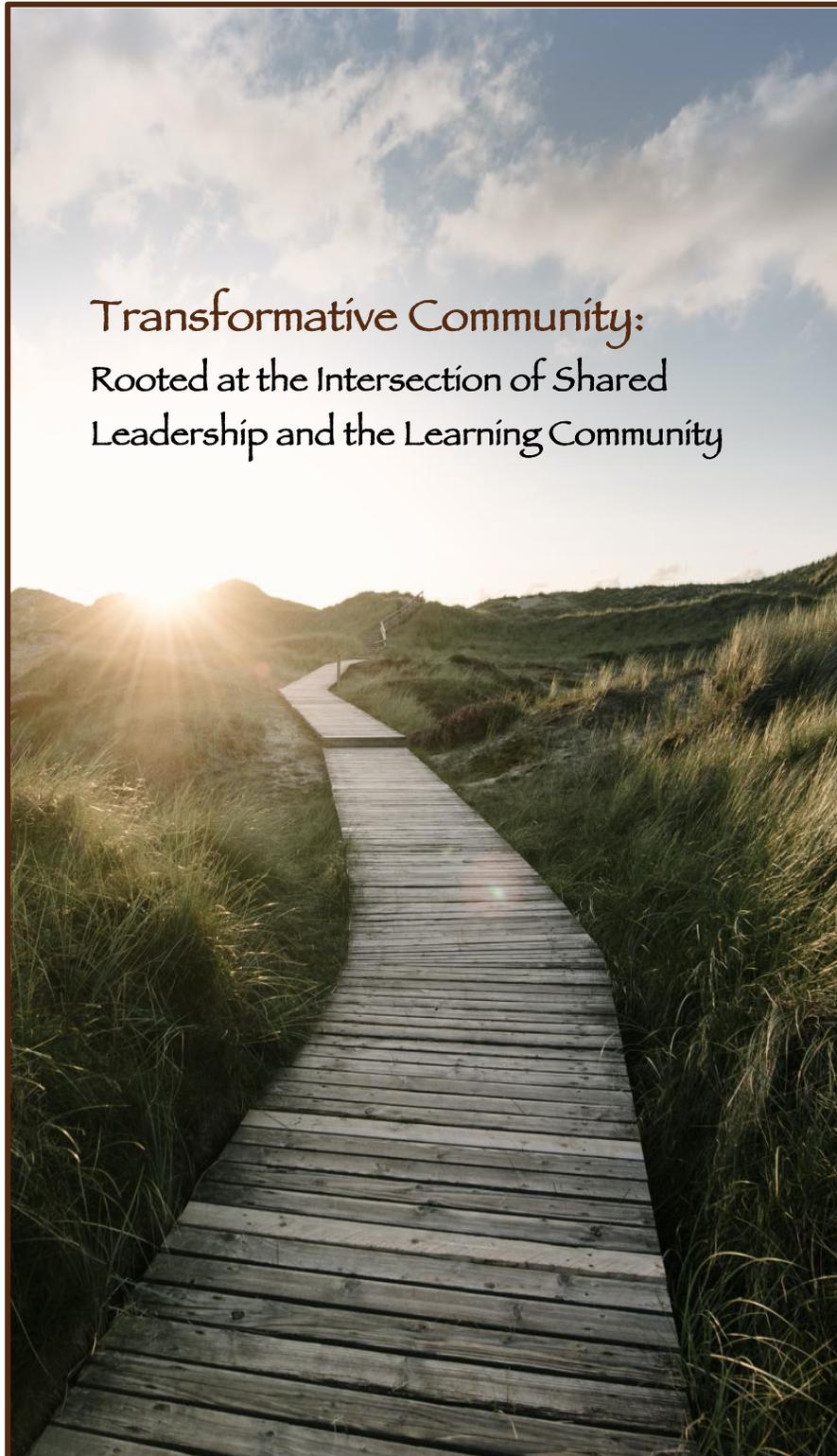


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*Transformative Community:  
Rooted at the Intersection of Shared  
Leadership and the Learning Community*

In recent articles, I have explored the relationship between a Learning Community and a Transformative Community. "Learning Community" is a term used in both academic and professional organizational contexts to describe the ongoing process of development necessary for growth. Richard DuFour lists the three basic principles of an educational Learning Community as "a commitment to ensuring that students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results." These principles are used in other circumstances as well.

I have applied these principles to the concept of Transformative Community in the context of religious communities. Transformative Communities co-create with God by providing a safe emotional container for engaging in dialogue, envisioning the future, and creating collective capacity for growth and development. Many contemporary religious communities experience this concept as a transformative process in pursuit of their charism and mission. These entities establish their internal cultures in a Shared Leadership and Learning Community framework and engage in ongoing discernment.

As an active Learning Community, the group explores emerging questions and growth areas that open the window to developing the next steps.

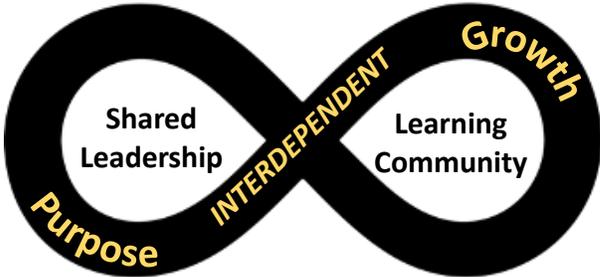
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*Shared Leadership in the context of a Learning Community fosters shared purpose, interdependence, and growth. These traits establish the backbone and fiber of the organizational culture.*

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The Learning Community and Shared Leadership model allows the community to become co-creators with God in offering its gift to society.

Shared Leadership is a structural concept that fosters the members' commitment to achieving a bold vision. The dynamic of group ownership through Shared Leadership unleashes the community's creativity to innovate approaches that benefit society's welfare. This energetic force maximizes both individual and collective contributions. The graphic below depicts the ongoing dynamic tension between Shared Leadership and the Learning Community.



Transformative Communities experience Shared Leadership not as a role or position, but rather as a response to critical concerns. An individual or group recognizes the need for a different or new solution and takes the initiative to uncover a resolution. The current pandemic has been an excellent example of the power of shared leadership. News reports have consistently shared testimony to this reality as nurses, front-line workers, and many others without positional leadership roles saw a challenge and responded. They committed to risking, experimenting, and exploring new innovative remedies or solution within their own areas of influence.

In the gospel of Mark 4:37-39, Jesus and his disciples were in a boat crossing the lake. "A violent squall came up, and waves were breaking over the boat so that it was already filling up." The disciples panicked, but Jesus "...rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Hush! Be still!'. "Our societal boat is experiencing hurricane-force waves that challenge existing mental models, systems, and societal norms. The pandemic has created a laser-focused on longstanding societal afflictions simmering under the surface of the lake. Like lightning in a violent storm, the pandemic illuminated such issues as societal discrimination, environmental catastrophes, an overwhelming number of migrants, and expanding global economic inequality.

These mounting ailments have led to personal and societal discomfort and periods of social paralysis. This individual and collective tumult has led to communal vulnerability. Yet, society is moving forward because Transformative Communities pushed aside their panic and established

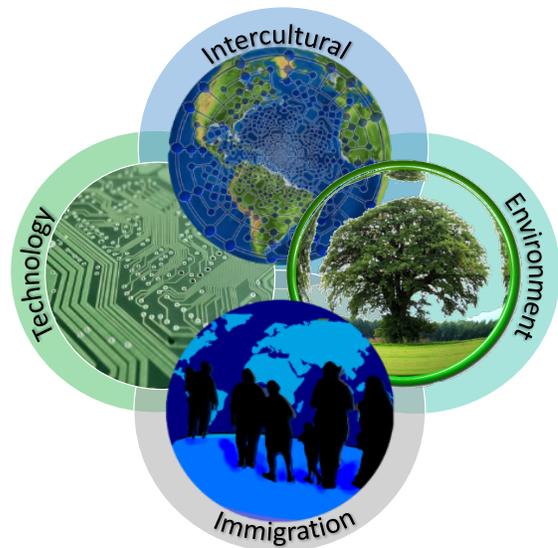
new mental frameworks, relationships, and opportunities.

## The Work of Shared Leadership within a Transformative Community

We live in a world shaped by four intersecting realities:

- ↪ Increasing intercultural societies
- ↪ Environmental crises
- ↪ Increased immigration and migration within countries and the globe
- ↪ Expanding technology.

Individually and collectively, these realities are touching every sector of society. These intersecting dynamics demand Shared Leadership and ongoing learning to detect emerging solutions and ideas.



Shared Leadership maximizes the gifts and knowledge of both leaders and followers. In their book, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder state that "Appreciating the collective nature of knowledge is especially important

in an age when almost every field changes too much, too fast for individuals to master. Today's complex problem-solving requires multiple perspectives" (10).

## Foundational Elements

Three crucial elements, purpose, interdependence, and growth, form the foundation for establishing Shared Leadership and a Learning Community within a Transformative Community.

### Purpose

The community seeks to deepen its understanding of and commitment to its higher purpose by defining its mission and vision for impacting the world.

### Interdependence

The organizational culture affirms and commits to achieving its aspirations by developing a collaborative, interdependent system between itself and its partners.

### Growth

The community commits to nurturing a Learning Community that maximizes each person's gift and wisdom so that through these insights, they might open their hearts to discern God's invitation.

These three foundational elements are integral to becoming co-creative partners in God's unfolding creation. A culture grounded in Shared Leadership enables individuals, teams, and the entire collective body to become energetic and passionate about seeking the common good. This disciplined learning approach creates growth rather than a fixed mindset. When a group has a growth mindset, it continually discerns God's path for creating a more sustainable society.

## Purpose

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Amelia Earhart knew about true purpose. Her words highlight the importance of a passionate commitment to pursue one's dream. "Everyone has oceans to fly, if they have the heart to do it. Is it reckless? Maybe. But what do dreams know of boundaries?" (223).

The core of a Learning Community is defined in the context of the role of the writer in, *Letters to a Poet*, by Rainer Maria Rilke: "No one can advise you. No one. Ask yourself why you pursue this thing you call writing. Look and see its roots, draw from the deepest place in your heart" (14). In a healthy Learning Community, Rilke's advice means creating an environment that continually nurtures people to explore this question of motivation. The hallmark of any organizational culture is exploring this concept. A culture rooted in learning and continual growth fosters inner confidence and courage, thus increasing the capacity of Shared Leadership to achieve the mission.

Earhart and Rilke's reflections illuminate the magnitude of the enthusiasm and commitment needed to persevere in the pursuit of a noble vision. Any vision that has substance demands individual and collective initiative to pursue innovative practices. The future is built on foresight and perseverance to establish new models and services that seem unrealistic today and often taken for granted in the future.

The North Star, a metaphor for vision and mission, represents the outcome of a healthy and vibrant Learning Community

and Shared Leadership model. The key to achieving the North Star is recognizing the variety of gifts and talents needed. One Corinthians: 4 expresses this reality well: “There are different kinds of Spiritual gifts yet the same spirit.” Thus, every member has a significant role and contribution to achieving the group’s visionary direction. A Transformative Community culture has this maxim at its forefront to enhance the co-creation and alignment of all activities to grasp the North Star.

Transformative Communities establish a disciplined set of practices to support the ongoing collective passion for learning, discerning, initiating, and improving, leading to the establishment of clear benchmarks. These markers allow them to understand and evaluate their successes and challenges in achieving their aspirational vision.

Benchmarks to the final destination might include the following:

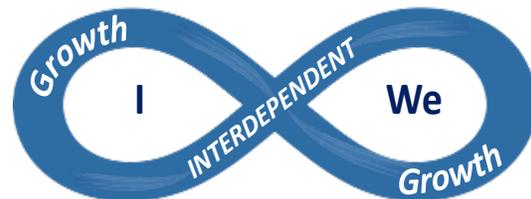
- ↪ Creation of innovative services
- ↪ Development of technological breakthroughs
- ↪ Exploration of collaborative relationships both within and beyond the organization
- ↪ Commitment to renewing and sustaining a healthy culture

### Interdependence \_\_\_\_\_

According to Kouzes and Posner, “One of the most significant ingredients to cooperation and collaboration is a sense of interdependence, a condition by which people know that they cannot succeed unless everyone else succeeds, or at least

that they cannot succeed unless they coordinate their efforts” (112).

The key to creating a healthy and robust commitment to interdependence is balancing the I and the We. The graphic below depicts how an organization must hold these two essential components in an intersecting tension.



When we reflect on interdependence, we must acknowledge that every person is a valued participant moving toward the transcendent North Star. Healthy interdependence of the group allows people to pursue their purpose as integral to the transcendent North Star. We might ask each person three essential questions:

- What motivates you?
- What gives you personal meaning?
- What influences you to continue to pursue the North Star?

The answers often surprise the questioner. They open the window to ask how the community can support their aspirations as the collective pursues a bold vision. This concept became a reality for me when I consulted with a nonprofit that helps homeless women and children. Leading a focus group of homeless mothers, I asked what their vision of the future was. One woman responded: “I am the third generation living in poverty, and my hope is

for my children to be successful and break the cycle.” Her response surprised me because I thought she would focus on life necessities, yet the depth of her desire was for a different future for her children. Her goal was also the North Star.

The understanding of each person's desires and wishes opens the doors for creating a collaborative organization. It establishes an appreciation of the system's interdependence. Thus, it widens its horizons to explore how the various areas intersect and impact the collective vision.

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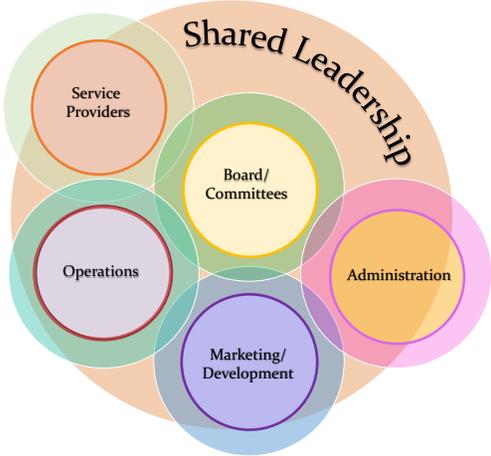
*Every member of a group has a pivotal role in achieving the larger purpose. A community is like a symphonic orchestra creating spellbinding music that stirs the soul.*

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If one part is out of sync, it disrupts the harmonic sound. Similarly, a collaborative group creates a symphony of services to serve others. When the parts are no longer aligned, distrust, blame, and other negative consequences impact achieving the desired direction. The creation of a harmonious path takes trust, learning, and perseverance over time. These ingredients support synchronizing the various systemic parts to create a unified sound. Every person's integration of their creativity and passion makes that magic.

Shared Leadership transcends and complements positional leadership. Organizations, by their nature, are comprised of such various parts as administration, boards, committees,

operations and service delivery, development, marketing, etc. The simple graphic below offers a lens into the variety of expertise within the organizational ecosystem.



Organizational research has affirmed that many significant breakthroughs or changes happen through individual initiative rather than positional leadership. Each member and group has a vital stewardship role, whether serving on a committee, leading a department, volunteering, or performing their everyday functions. The unique lens of each organization allows it to examine its collective strengths and growth areas leading to ongoing prioritization to achieve its North Star.



Three critical questions foster and maintain interdependence.

- ☞ Does each part of the system and person understand its importance and critical role in achieving the purpose?
- ☞ Is there freedom for cross-functional teams to collaborate?
- ☞ Are there shared learning and growth opportunities to strengthen individual and organizational capacity?

## Growth \_\_\_\_\_

A Transformative Community cultivates a thriving organic culture by creating a space that allows its members to grow. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder speak to this cultivation: "Cultivation is an apt analogy. A plant does its own growing, whether its seed was carefully planted or blown into place by the wind. You cannot pull the stem, leaves, or petals to make a plant grow faster or taller. However, you can do much to encourage healthy plants; till the soil, ensure they have enough nutrients, supply water, secure the right amount of sun exposure, and protect them from pests and weeds" (13). The organization's role is to create shared leadership by establishing an environment that encourages and motivates people to grow and blossom.

The importance of continual organizational improvement and personal growth is not an option, but a core principle. Groups must foster a learning culture to successfully traverse the whitewater rafting of today's world with its sudden twists and turns.

When people feel they can take the initiative, innovate, and make a difference, they create a healthy and passionate organization. This energy fashions a quality environment for being possibility thinkers and explorers of options.



*Every meeting, gathering, and time together is an opportunity to learn, build capacity, and define the path forward. Each session is a sacred space for each individual to be still, listen to the group's movement, and discern the next steps.*



These times will have moments of ecstasy and "wow" and other moments of stagnation and disagreement. All of these realities are normative. Accepting these realities is crucial because the ultimate goal is to focus on the next steps, learn from one another, and remain adaptable and agile.

A Learning Community at its core fosters growth by engaging these deliberative activities: inquiry, curiosity, imagination and by exploring alternatives such as:

- ☞ Nurturing Resilience
- ☞ Cultivating Group Adaptability
- ☞ System Thinking
- ☞ Becoming Lifelong Learners

The pandemic is a prime example of the importance of a Learning Community. Overnight, groups developed such new technological capacities such as Zoom, working at home and meeting constituents' needs. For instance, restaurants strengthened their online and pick-up service. Every organization supported its

online ability to provide the services so often previously based on an in-person model. This rapid transition happened through new learning, resilience, and adaptability. The pandemic became a great teacher about the ability to be agile and flexible. Those who found ways to adapt both during and post-pandemic remain vital with a zealous focus on their North Star.

These are reflective questions critical to forming and growing a Learning Community:

- ☞ Does every employee or member of the group have a learning plan?
- ☞ What new insights, questions, or musings are surfacing within individuals and group members?
- ☞ As we continue to move forward, what capacity is vital to achieving our direction? What capacities do we need to develop?
- ☞ What are the decisive steps to move the vision forward through the various dimensions/committees/vendors/staff?

### Summary

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One morning, while eating at my favorite diner and talking with the General Manager, a 40-year-old woman, I realized that each individual within an organization is experiencing a transition in their personal and professional lives. We talked about the number of unforeseen incidents like the 2008 financial crisis and the pandemic. She stated that she and her husband had lived their lives learning and adapting; they had left college with student loans; then impacted by the 2008 financial crisis and

now the pandemic. She stated that she assumed they would constantly learn and change in their personal and work lives. This couple is adapting and creating their transformative community.

They are following the advice of Keith Hancock, who, in his book *48 Whispers*, discusses the role of the follower: "As modern leaders learn to disseminate power, those accustomed to following must learn new skills. This will take courage. Reinventing followership requires us to trust in our abilities, speak our truth, and embrace our shared responsibility for creating the future" (76).

Hancock highlights the importance of Shared Leadership and becoming a Learning Community. The by-product of being a Learning Community is the consistent development of new competencies and action-oriented approaches. This development leads to the establishment of a flexible and adaptive organization for these precarious times. Transformative Communities live by the Talmudic precept of "grow, grow, grow." They foster a pioneer spirit through establishing an internal culture of learning and ongoing transformation.

Shared Leadership is the container that holds and fosters the commitment to learn, transform and create a future that is often not seen, yet over time becomes a reality. The dedication and zeal needed for a community to foster these traits are crucial in a period of rapid and often disconcerting change.

Is your community a Transformative Community? Are you rooted at the

intersection of Shared Leadership and  
being a Learning Community?

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