

MARK CLARKE
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*Living and Leading Transformative Communities
In an Era of Societal Crisis*

*This article by Mark Clarke takes the transformative community and its leadership into
a deeper place of living and being transformative agents in a time of crisis.*

Transformative Communities of contemporary religious women define themselves as intentional organizations that co-create with God. It means to provide a safe emotional container for dialogue, envision the future, and build organizational capacity for growth and development.

As such, Transformative Communities recognize the unique challenges and crises of the times: destructive climatic events, economic inequities, discrimination, and a pandemic. They also recognize today's technological advances and need for increased collaboration, for example, developing the vaccine and other breakthroughs related to the climate, racism, and poverty.

These developments create a world of exhilarating change that challenges existing strategies and behavioral ways.

Systemic issues have led to institutional disruption and searching, catapulting transformative community members into a collective soul journey. Increasingly, uncomfortable questions are creating a society with new solutions that lead communities to engage in revitalization.

As Transformative Communities enter this process of change, they must reaffirm their essence grounded in their charism and mission. This rootedness becomes the foundation for continual exploration of a shared direction, shared values, and shared meaning for these times. It summons the group to pursue a bold and engaging North Star that demands intense communal soul work fostered by learning through action.

In a period of profound systemic and communal crisis, there is a tendency to lose purpose. This tension can often lead to disjointed communication, hurt feelings, and isolation from each other. The community recognizes that their comfortability has disappeared, and the future lacks definition. Pope Francis, in his 2020 document, Let Us Dream, says, "... the basic rule of a crisis is that you don't come out of it the same. The fact is that we are all tested in life. It's how we grow" (1).

Today is a summons to enter into the shared purpose at this historical juncture. The old narrative and cultural mores have become tired and no longer bring people together.

Jonathan Sacks claims in his book, Morality, that when a community faces challenges and demanding decisions, it often leads to "a crisis of connection"(84). The tendency is for individuals and groups to choose either/or solutions. They might also become inclined to define their position as the only correct path or search for someone or something to blame for their reality. All of these reactions lead to separation instead of a shared sense of community. Healthy relationships are imperative when walking on unfamiliar terrain. When a group moves into a defensive posture, it blocks their creative imagination and innovative spirit. The group's predisposition is to unconsciously become paralyzed by their anxiety rather than the future possibility. Thus the collective awakening becomes enveloped in darkness rather than in God's grace-filled light.

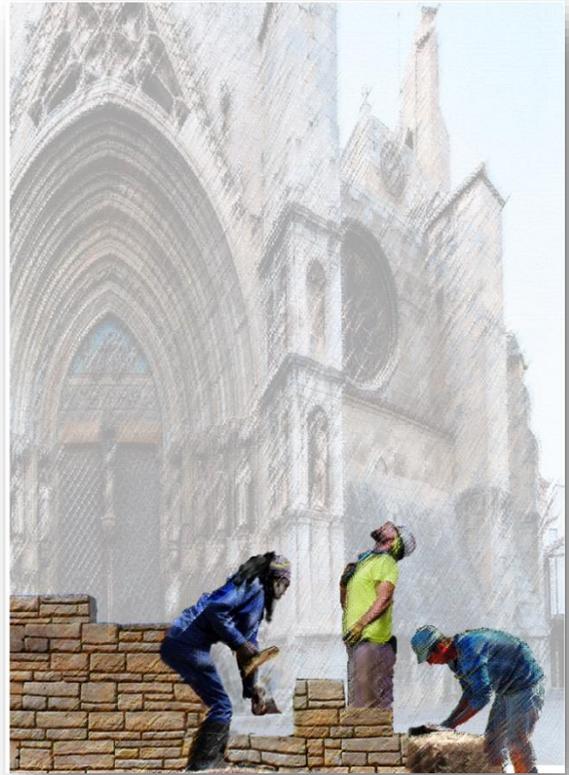
Every crisis brings new questions that challenge the status quo. The appropriate response is to embrace the questions that arise from the situation. In *Leading with Questions*, Michael J. Marquardt claims that “Questions wake people up. They prompt new ideas. They show people new places, new ways of doing things. They help us admit we don’t have all the answers” (3). Thus, it is crucial to establish a safe container to explore these inquires.

A crisis tests the group's spiritual will to live the gospel passage from Mark 12:31 to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” This passage calls the community to receive each member as one’s neighbor. As the Spirit unfolds the future, it is crucial to listen to each other’s truth. Love and compassion are vital to illuminate the group's collective wisdom.

In, *Leading from the Roots*, Dr. Kathleen Allen tells this story:

There is a story of a person watching three bricklayers. He talks to the first bricklayer and asks what he is doing, and this bricklayer says, “I am laying bricks.” He goes to the next and asks him what he is doing, and this bricklayer says, “I am building a wall.” The observer then asks the third bricklayer, and his answer is startlingly different; he says, “I’m building a cathedral” (35).

In times of despair, Transformative Communities remain laser-focused on their cathedral building grounded in their charism and mission. As Pope Francis states in *Let Us Dream*, “This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities-what we value, what we want, what we seek, and to commit to act in our daily life on what we dreamed of” (6).



These times summon us to be cathedral builders rather than bricklayers.

When a Transformative Community seeks to navigate a crisis triggered from either within or without, they focus on three levels of presence: faithfulness to their North Star (charism and mission), collective soul work, and integration of action and learning. These three aspects allow the community to remain focused on the now. The Transformative Community enters a discerning process that learns from the past, remains rooted in the present, and is open to an emerging future.

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*Transformative Communities are
faithful to their North Star.*
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North Star

We have always admired the men and women committed to placing a person on the moon and returning them to earth. Their passionate dedication to believe in a seemingly impossible vision demanded continual change, new concepts, and pulling on a nation's wisdom to achieve that aspiration.

Transformative Communities recognize that, like these pioneers who went to the moon, they need their moon shot. They realize that focusing on their charism and vision for the common good is central to finding a path through a crisis. Even though it will test them and ask for unforeseen adaptations, a bold vision offers shared meaning and direction. The two scripture passages below form the spiritual practice for walking through a crisis as a Transformative Community

"Write down the vision clearly on the tablets so that one can read it readily."

Habakkuk 2: 2.

In a crisis, the group is invited to explore emerging questions that open the window to envision a new future. As Michael Hyatt says in, *The Vision Driven Leader*, "Vision is the

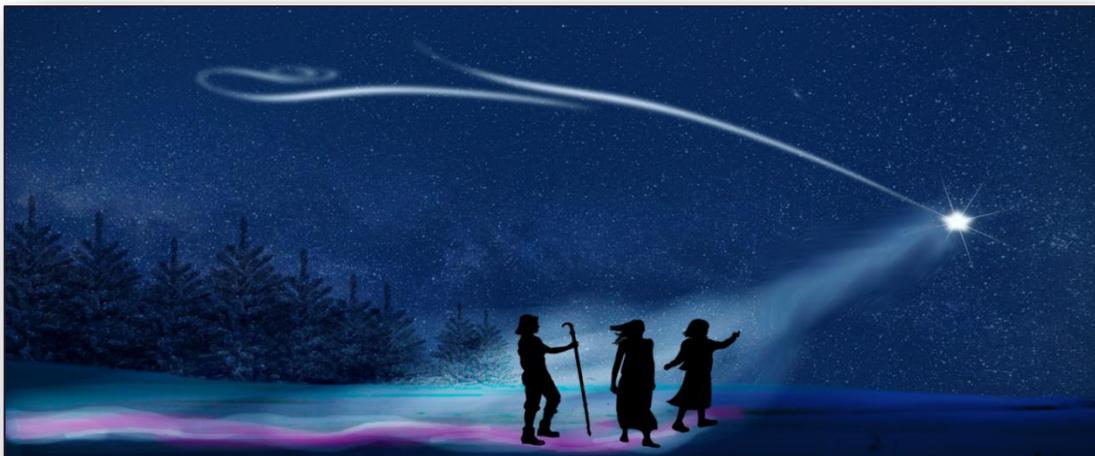
act of seeing what the future could be, and then articulating it in an inspiring, clear, practical and attractive way..." (26). In a time of crisis, a bold vision is imperative to offer people purpose. It is not an exalted statement. Instead, the vision stimulates soul searching through addressing the hard questions and detaching from aspects of the past to move forward.

Transformation is jarring because it often demands significant communal change to pursue a new direction. The group is required to release, adapt and alter their fundamental vision to meet this time.

When individuals within a community committed to a bold vision, they create a shared purpose. The vision unleashes both fear and energy to explore new concepts, approaches, and new ways.

This new passion leads to shedding meaningless projects, existing mental models, and patterns that no longer serve the North Star.

The collective opens its soul to ask, "What is our call to serve for these times?" It is a perennial question brought forth, especially in a crisis. A shared vision anchors the



group in an emergency to move forward in those difficult and scary moments. Thus as visionaries, they become cathedral builders. They often move from being sedentary settlers to becoming pioneers of an unseen future.

The second essential ingredient of a bold vision is exploring and celebrating a community's diversity as a gift. The scripture passage below is the spiritual call to recognize how we maximize our community's unique talents during a crisis.


One Corinthians 12:12: As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body through many, are one body...."


How do we celebrate the diversity within us as a gift in moving forward? The community needs to affirm both the individual parts and their organization's whole to move into the future. Even though change will happen, it demands alignment throughout every aspect of the organization to achieve the vision. Every individual and department or service needs to understand the critical role and adaptation required for the future. This alignment is crucial to the choices necessary for and the success of an emerging vision.

The many parts must include all the stakeholders. Each stakeholder has a unique understanding of both the limitations and challenges involved in achieving that vision. There is a need to share the emerging vision to harness the stakeholders' collective talents to achieve success. When advice and guidance are gathered from various stakeholders, members, employees, vendors, friends, donors, and family, a fuller

understanding of both the challenge and possibility in a crisis is achieved.

Diversity is both a gift and a trial. A variety of people leads to many new insights while often also creating tension or conflict. How the disagreements and differences are processed is crucial to achieving the direction. The group's culture needs to create a climate that fosters and affirms various views. There is a richness to this level of dialogue that allows the parts and the whole organization to work more effectively.

Since any crisis will demand adaptations to the community culture, the leadership, members, and staff need to understand and align with the transformative process.

The Exodus and Resurrection stories affirm the importance of diversity while pursuing the North Star. In Exodus, the people kept the promised land at the forefront of their journey. Likewise, the followers of Jesus honored his teaching as their North Star. They are reminders that every generation amends their current world view and experience to seek a new frontier. For decades, we have known that society and its institutions are at a crossroads. The numerous recent crises, in particular the pandemic, have asked us to leave the security of the known and journey into the unfamiliar. The Jews' exodus and the Christians' Resurrection journey exemplify the spiritual courage to move forward into the unspecified future.

*To create a new visionary North Star
and to maximize the gifts of a group
demand collective soul work.*

Collective Soul Work

Collective soul work is about the continual search for the common good. It is a process of continually deepening the group's commitment to its mission, vision, and values. Their living out of this core is collective soul work. The group's spirituality is rooted in the choices and decisions around setting priorities for their inspired direction. The fundamental relationships of the collective soul, therefore, create the path to a healthier community.

It is an arduous task for the group to seek the common good. Often it demands compromise. In fact, this transformative process can leave hurt feelings, and at times people are scarred from the process. If these wounds are left unattended, they may lead to the group forming camps or individualistic tendencies that paralyze its movement.

*The group needs to reconcile hurts through
effective collective healing rituals that apply
balm to individual and collective wounds.*

This level of dialogue and interaction calls the individual members to intensify their commitment to their inner path. One's soul journey is often enhanced and challenged by participating in a group seeking the common good. These paths ask the individuals to grow in their capacity to integrate contemplation and action. The practice of soul work

recognizes both the gifts and limitations of the journey that bring hope and desolation.

The primary focus of personal discernment is the "I." Group discernment is about the "we." The significant difference is the focus on what "we" means in making choices and directions. In a world steeped in individualism, this often presents a challenge, especially in a time of disruption.

In, *Love Is the Way*, Bishop Michael Curry describes the collective soul's work. "It often calls us to step outside of what we thought our boundaries were, or what others expect of us. It calls for us to sacrifice, not because doing so feels good, but because it's the right thing to do" (23). Bishop Curry invites us to seek a radical path of detachment to incarnate the charism.

The collective soul's primary purpose is to transcend individual preferences or desires to reach for a larger commitment of the whole. With society's numerous crises, communities are pushed to rethink what the collective soul means for our time. It becomes even more complicated in a world entering increased partnerships and collaborations. These new relationships seek to create a more integrated approach to serving homelessness, education, and other social justice issues.

*Transformative Communities must
examine their collective soul's
significance and integrate the concept
into their mission and structure.*

One of the essential practices in communal discernment is faith sharing. When focused on critical questions, issues, or emerging charism, this prayer style allows the group to break open and listen to God's movement. Whether within the context of community life, assemblies, or other meetings, this contemplative pause grounds the community. The richness of the soul sharing often opens the group to experience God's movement both in the individual and group.

The collective spiritual journey demands developing the communal dialogue capacities necessary to enter into this level of God's discernment for the common good. Many communities already have established such practices as faith sharing, contemplative dialogue, and pauses as part of their meeting ritual.

Contemplative pauses allow the group members to focus on the wisdom and insight emerging in the group. It is essential to have starter statements, for example:

- I feel...
- I sense we have shared ideas around...
- I experience common agreement on these themes, directions, etc....
- I sense areas of partial or significant disagreement around...

One of the vital elements is continual evaluation and building the group's capacity to reflect at the level of God's call for the congregation. This spiritual work takes time, openness to change, and a willingness to stay at the table.

A transformative process is a disciplined approach that allows the group to walk through both the light of agreements and the darkness of intense differences.

In a time of crisis, these two realities become mollified when a group is doing transformative work.

The collective soul journey is not for the faint of heart. It demands that the groups integrate each person's inner work with the communal path of the whole. Collective Soul Work is an integrated approach that incorporates the parts and wholes. Without respecting this polarity, it becomes a challenge to find the common good.

We live in a time that demands change, innovation, and exploration of new solutions.

Learning and Action

It requires that organizations have the courage and fortitude to risk a path that leads to a bold North Star. For this to happen, the organization needs to develop an actively engaged learning culture. The tendency has been to see an organization as a one-dimensional or hierarchical vertical thinking model, often called top-down.

The new model calls for unleashing the entire organization's imagination and creativity. Mauro F. Guillen looks ahead in 2030:

"Instead, I suggest we approach change laterally. Developed by inventor and consultant Edward de Bono, the concept of lateral thinking is concerned not with playing with the existing pieces but to

change those very pieces... Breakthroughs occur not when someone works within the established paradigm but when assumptions are abandoned, rules ignored, and creativity runs amok(8).”

Guillen suggests that an authentic learning organization is an entity that explores the shifts and questions which are happening within and beyond their system. Through action, the organization becomes a living system that adapts and evolves to achieve its vision. A learning culture fosters people committed to creativity and innovation as explorers and pioneers. They take responsibility on three levels: personal, area of responsibility, and organizational.


*The achievement of their North
Star is a heroic task that will demand
resilience and learning.*


In Presence, Peter Senge cites the work of Jonas Salk: “Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine, spoke of tapping into the continually unfolding ‘dynamism’ of the universe and experiencing its evolution as ‘an active process that... I can guide by the choices I make’ (10). It is in tapping this dynamism through acting, learning, and choosing that today's unknown becomes tomorrow's solutions.

Action and learning are about making our North Star visible in a dark sky. The values we espouse become real within every movement of the system and the larger world we serve. Brene Brown claims that “Living into our values means that we more than profess our values, we practice them. We walk our talk- we are clear about what we believe and hold

important. We take care that our intentions, words, thoughts, and behavior align with our beliefs”(Dare to Lead,186).

It is a continual growth process that fosters a more in-depth lived experience of the group's real-time values. The daily cycle of taking action creates a shared vulnerability as we make authentic our values and vision. Each act is a moment of insight that illuminates a richer appreciation of the vision.

The core task is establishing a learning organization that has three essential components:

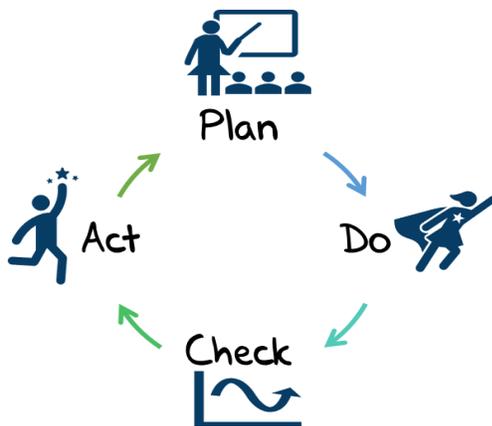
- ✧ Every department of the community aligned with the North Star
- ✧ Collaboration and inter-department shared learning
- ✧ Continual evaluation for improvement

It is critical to align every area of the system with the North Star. This alignment focuses the collective on being cathedral builders rather than bricklayers. When people understand their purpose, they recognize that every choice impacts the whole. It is the very essence of becoming a learning organization that integrates the parts and whole to commit to a transcendent vision and action.

Collaboration and inter-departmental shared learning are critical to having shared purpose and action. The outcome of maximizing community learning is creating a knowledge flow across the system. When we remain in silos, we learn only from a vertical dimension rather than integrating, as DeBono states, a vertical and horizontal perspective.

Cross-functional learning allows the individual department to understand the impact of their actions on others. It thus creates an adaptable organization to meet emerging societal needs. Therefore, as a Learning Organization or Transformative Community, they are cathedral builders rather than bricklayers through insight and effort.

Learning and action are critical in a time of crisis. Every step is about testing, learning, and acting. When a community creates a bold visionary direction, the challenge is taking the appropriate measures to achieve it. W. Edwards Demings, the guru of organizational development, offered an early understanding of how groups work. Transformative Communities that establish a culture of learning can relate to Deming's quality improvement process. His model below is a simple means to create continual improvement for the group.



This process continually opens the collective to challenging questions and new approaches. If they experience the inability to achieve that outcome, they adapt, change or release that activity. They are grounded in how knowledge informs action and aligns services to achieve the direction. Thus their

focus remains on building cathedrals, not laying bricks.

Summary

Thus as Senge and his collaborators in Presence say, “Appreciating the universe as an emergent living phenomenon can be done only from the inside’ through cultivating the capacity to understand the living world and ourselves as an interconnected whole”(207). For an organization, the fundamental task is to connect their North Star to the deepening of the collective soul and the practice of learning and action. The integration of these three elements begins the process of experiencing them as interconnected within and without the larger world. The living of this reality connects their transcendent call to a grounded, interconnected, and dynamic world.

The new world is a time of such rapidly changing events as a pandemic, economic crashes, floods, hurricanes, political upheaval, or other events that force an organization to adapt without notice.

The ability to weave the vision, collective soul, and learning/action together is necessary for co-creating with God in a time of immense social and cultural change.

In Dream! Do It!, Marty Sklar quotes Walt Disney: “It takes people to make a dream reality”(310). Through intense and committed soul work and learning, Transformative Communities create their cathedral, a task which seemed impossible in concept but is possible in actuality

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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: cworksindy.com/publications.