

Donna Fyffe
As appeared in
LCWR Occasional Papers
Summer 2009



**An Interview with Donna Fyffe
Unearthing the Potential of
Uncertain Times**

An Interview with Donna M. Fyffe

Unearthing the Potential of Uncertain Times

Donna M. Fyffe is president of CommunityWorks, Inc., an international consulting practice located in Indianapolis, Indiana. She holds a master of arts degree in administration and history and a doctoral degree in educational administration and supervision. Her expertise resides in community building, leadership development, and cultural change. She works extensively with congregations of women religious and with faith-based and educational institutions. LCWR communications director **Anmarie Sanders, IHM** interviewed Donna regarding her insights on the call to women religious leaders in these uncertain times.

Q Political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon says that “we need to know in our bones that we ride the razor’s edge between order and chaos,” and that to “truly know we inhabit such a world makes us more resilient.” Would you see such a mindset helping women religious leaders at this time when much of what we have known in life is breaking down?

Homer-Dixon has some underlying assumptions behind this statement that would be helpful for us to understand. In his writings, he speaks to the complexity of our world realities which impacts our daily world. He notes that while connectivity is viewed as a virtue in a complex reality in times of crisis (tightly coupled, circle the wagons), the system collapses – catastrophe. To be resilient in this time of crisis, Homer-Dixon notes that we need a better balance of self-sufficiency and interdependence and we need collaboration among diverse interests. Both of these capacities are constantly being refined among women religious.

A place of hope in his thinking is that there is a normalcy in the breakdown of systems. What we know is that following breakdown there is rebirth and renewal. This occurs through a system’s capacity for being adaptive, creative, and able to




do reformative work. Given the more than 50 years of renewal that religious life has experienced, here is the razor edge of choice. Will women religious see, believe, and go into the place of rebirth — into the chaos?

Dixon notes that as humans we don’t choose to embrace system breakdown or change. His observation is that “we cherish our systems and we want them to be permanent; we haven’t really understood that our challenge isn’t to preserve the status quo but rather to adapt to, thrive in, and shape for the better a world of constant change.”

What does this take? A mind not fixed

on the status quo, but rather a mind and attitude that is “comfortable with constant change, radical surprise, even breakdown...and must constantly anticipate a wide variety of futures.” Clearly this is the place of possibility thinking.

Dixon’s quote is really about the capacity to see the complexity of our world, to embrace the reality of change. It’s about holding in balance self-sufficiency and interdependence; the individual and the community. For women of Spirit, open to the God of surprise, the God who creates out of chaos, the God of constant change allowing us to continually evolve, this is no surprise.

Talk about being prophetic! Dixon is putting before women religious what you know deep in your bones. You see the world unfolding right before your eyes. There is a dom within religious life to be open to constant change, to delight in radical surprise, to have the capacity and courage to cross thresholds bridging breakdown and renewal and co-create with God what is yearning to be birthed today.

Now, does everyone get this and want this? No. I truly believe that “No” is real. Yet, at the same time, I also believe that members want their leaders to call them to this because in the deepest recesses

of their hearts they want mission, their charism, and the Gospel to flourish and shape the world.

Q So much is changing and being lost all around us — parts of the ecosystem, cultures, and more. Some people respond to this kind of massive loss by holding on to a fixed view of things, to something that is known and certain. Do you see that tendency in religious life and, if so, what are its effects?

Our world has changed and is changing. Over the last more than 50 years women religious have lived constantly with

What if the work of women religious is to create deeper insight; reframe what is; see reality differently; generate greater consciousness; go to people's blind spots and uncover values, beliefs, the Christ within?

change. Like the world about them, they have dealt with the change in society, our church, the world, and the universe. Some women religious readily embrace change, others lead the change, and, of course, some hold the line on change. We see the internal loss of a clearly defined way of living religious life. Clarity is waning about one's relationship with the church, theology, ecclesiology, cosmology — everything is changing. How change is handled or coped with is dependent on its level of impact, one's perspective on change, and the maturity of the group in dealing with change. Groups can feed one another's desire for change and movement. Groups can also feed fear and anxiety, retarding change.

Women religious, like their lay counterparts, can hold on to a fixed view of things. They can hold on to "perceived certainty" and deny their reality. What is lost is the gift, capacity, and insight to see the innovation and creativity in the change. They fail to see the possibilities and how to bring their life into the times we are living in. For

example, at this moment in history, the majority of women religious are older adults. Pretending to be young is to miss owning the gifts of wisdom, integration, and influence that come with age and maturity.

What if the work of women religious is to create deeper insight; reframe what is; see reality differently; generate greater consciousness; go to people's blind spots and uncover values, beliefs, the Christ within? What if their work is one of integrity, being in the place of mystery and grace, so that they can influence social transformation and co-create with God what is needed for these times?

Resistance occurs during times of change. Think of times when you've moved to a new location; changed your ministry; experienced rituals/prayer different from how you like to pray, and engaged in conversations that questioned your values, beliefs, and perhaps your core identity. All of this could actually be very good. In fact for some, these changes might be life-giving while at the same time generating feelings of loss and resistance. What is key is to allow ourselves to feel all our feelings — those of pain and of joy — and to acknowledge and grieve the loss we are feeling. The degree to which we will change or be



Will women religious see, believe, and go into the place of rebirth — into the chaos?

adaptive, that is, find new ways to live within our changing environment, is contingent on our ability to recognize our fear and our anxieties and to deal with them.

What are the effects of holding on to a fixed view of things? A congregation becomes antiquated, non-relevant, and loses its capacity to be about mission in today's world.

Q Many people seem to think that the way religious life has been lived in the past probably will not be the way it will be in the future, yet they don't know what the new ways might be. What do you recommend for how to live without anxiety and with hope in that in-between time?

First and foremost, I would banish this statement. Women religious need to name the life that is. They need to name what is essential to them and what that looks like as they live faithfully day in and day out. To live in what Lynn M. Levo, CSJ calls a place of "nowhere between two somewheres" is not healthy. It stifles resiliency, vitality, and hope because it holds people in suspension. People are being asked to keep looking back to what was. And people are constantly reminded of the unknown, fostering doubt and uncertainty. All of us need to name the life that is and to make choices each day about the life we want now and for those who follow. Each day we are creating the future we want by the decisions we make and the actions we take.

I'm not sure we can be freed of anxiety. What we can do is notice what triggers our anxiety; notice it and how it is making us feel. If we can put the situation outside of ourselves and look at it objectively, we can see the assumptions and the mental models that are holding us captive. It takes spiritual discipline to be non-anxious. If we strive to follow this discipline of noticing and living in the now, we will be comfortable with who we are, at one with our inner truth, and be a non-anxious presence. All of this calls for a profound trust that God is ever present within us.

What normally sustains people in times of chaos?

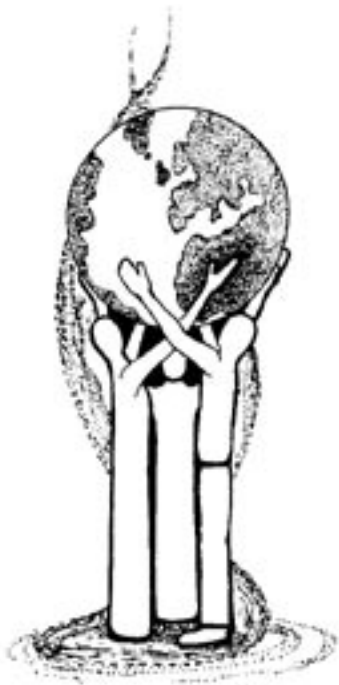
I asked a friend who is a woman religious what sustains her in times of chaos. She said she had just recently watched again the DVD of the four leaders from New Orleans who spoke at the 2006 LCWR assembly and noted what sustained them. It was knowing who they were (their identity as women religious) and their purpose (or mission), who God was in their lives (personal and communal), contemplation (putting all in God's hands), and a supportive community and supportive relationships.

I affirm what she says. The one thing that consistently sustains me above everything else during my own times of anxiety and fear is my belief in and relationship with God. The other thing that I'm learning about when dealing with chaos, confusion, and grief is the importance of having the inner freedom to allow myself to be disturbed. For it is in this place of being disturbed that I can break patterns that keep me stuck. I can see into my blind spots and make new choices. I can actually find stability in the disequilibrium. This is not easy. For me, it takes incredible spiritual discipline.

Perhaps this can be articulated in a different way. What sustains people in times of chaos is dependent on how much inner discipline they have. Are they able to identify, tolerate, and manage what they are feeling? If yes, then the chaos doesn't leak out and infiltrate the group or encourage negativity. How much a person is in charge of her attitudes, her view of things, and her reality also impacts the capacity to sustain oneself. If people aren't centered while in the chaos, they will actually feed it.

From your work with women religious, do you see anything emerging from the chaos of these times that would be worthwhile to note?

There is a goodness and a deep desire to be a transformative presence growing within women religious as they seek to



There is a goodness and a deep desire to be a transformative presence growing within women religious as they seek to be about mission and their charism in this broken world.

be about mission and their charism in this broken world. I see:

- A deep sense of presence, contemplation, and spirituality
- A consciousness that has the capacity for healing the environment and a very broken world.
- A de-centering that is calling women religious to step aside from places of professional leadership to allow a new generation to lead. Maybe it is realizing that they aren't going to be the ones to shape the new reality emerging before us as a world but they can be the wisdom figures, the guides, and influencers for the next generation.
- A breathtaking generativity in provinces, congregations, and monastic communities as they move to a more open, global system.
- A movement towards deeper relationships and communion with one another.

And truth be told, I see many women religious who are not choosing this path

or way of being. And, this is why the "razor edge" is such a great image. It depicts the danger of not changing and not evolving with the world around it and in not making relevant that which is of essence in their lifestyle.

What qualities would you recommend leaders try to develop that would be helpful for leading in a time of great uncertainty?

- Leaders need to strengthen their capacity to trust their "seeing," and their "knowing," that is, naming and acting on what is of essence instead of wading through tons of data with no action. We have way too much information with too little meaning-making.
- Leaders need to look for what is changing in and around them. Where is movement happening? Often we can find this in art, music, poetry, symbolism, science, and business. The arts are well received by women religious. There is a

If people aren't centered while in the chaos, they will actually feed it.

struggle to see the insight and wisdom is some areas of science and business.

- Leaders need to ask questions. It is key not to ask the usual or the expected questions. Leaders need to challenge themselves not to focus on the predictable, the evident questions but to find the unexpected.
- Leaders need to listen deeply and with an empathic heart to see what is, to see what is outside of themselves and what is emerging.
- Leaders need to watch for change. It can come from unexpected places and change can come from unrelated objects or topics being seen together. Our tendency is to focus on the evident. We need to look to the periphery where change

is happening, where life is and let that inform us as to where to go.

- Leaders need to recognize that the next generation of sisters and laity comes from a different perspective than their generation or the majority of sisters. The next generation has a different understanding of global and social issues, and the impact technology is having on the landscape of spirituality and on relationships with the world. The issues from the 1960s and '70s, while similar to those of today, have morphed into problems reflective of today's reality – issues of agribusiness, genetic engineering, and more.
- Leaders need to be aware of the context surrounding their congregation and bring insight and change into the congregation so it can navigate the context or world in which it resides with authenticity and relevance.

Leaders, really all of us, need to "Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything." Ps. 46:10 (Translation from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson) They need to step out of their busyness; go up on the balcony and sit in the place of mystery and grace and see what is transpiring and notice how God is working within them and those they serve.

Q Women religious talk about wanting to find new ways of being, and not necessarily new ways of doing. What would you recommend to persons desiring to be stretched toward these new ways? How can women religious today best stay open during these chaotic times to a call to something new within themselves?

Connection with others is critical. Women religious need to move out of their place of isolation, to move from being a closed system to a more open system where they can let in other viewpoints and people from other walks

of life to help them see their lives with fresh eyes.

They need to travel lightly. Women religious are encumbered with multiple responsibilities: those of their congregation, sponsored ministries, families, and professions, and at the same time must deal with often unrealistic expectations by the broader world and church. They need to be compassionate with themselves and one another allowing themselves to know "enoughness."

Julie Cameron, a writer and artist, speaks of an artist date with oneself through which she encourages a person to do



Make an artist date with yourself and do something different each month, go some place out of the norm to see different colors, textures, other realities, and to experience something new.

something different each month, to go some place out of the norm to see different colors, textures, other realities, and to experience something new. I think we all need to be about this. We need to place ourselves in situations that will disturb the familiar, where the deepest "you" has to show up.

I would recommend letting go of perfectionism and fear of failure; and encourage people to experiment, learn,

refine, and create what is meant to be born.

Q What would you recommend for leaders who want to tap into the deepest, best, and most creative parts of their congregations?

You can't play to the whole. You have to listen deeply to where the Spirit is calling your congregation and religious life and put that forth fully knowing not everyone will agree. I would recommend that leaders:

- Go to the places within your congregation of most potential where there is passion, consciousness, and insight and invite those members and associates to work for the good of the whole. Too often leaders are caught in the tyranny of inclusion and don't allow themselves to call forth those who can further a concept or dream for the sake of the whole.
- Invite members to be about more. As leaders it is critical to see the potential, yearnings, and goodness within your members and help them unleash their potential. Leaders need to challenge their members to see and act on their talents and capacities.
- Provide "what ifs." Often people can't see possibilities, but once they see the challenge or the shared idea, they respond.

Without a doubt, women religious need to listen to their newer members, younger members, and connect with young people in multiple ways to help them see how to make the depth and essence of the life relevant for these times. Congregations need a breath of fresh air and insight.

Q If questions can often be more transforming than answers, what kinds of questions do you think would be helpful for women religious leaders to be raising these days – among their

members, with their publics, with one another?

- Do you know, believe, embrace that first and foremost your commitment is to God? Therefore your relationship to God, your spirituality and your vowed commitment is absolutely fundamental to living religious life. Are you happy?
- What do you need to be freed of so that you can be about mission, be about the Gospel?
- What are you willing to risk personally and communally of your finite and precious resources for the life and for mission? In what areas of your life are you willing to be held personally and collectively accountable?
- When will you move beyond congregational boundaries and

For Your Reflection ...

Some “perceived certainties” I hold that may be blocking my vision to see innovation and creativity are ...

A fear or anxiety that I hold is ...

What often triggers this fear or anxiety is...

You can't play to the whole.

You have to listen deeply to

where the Spirit

is calling your congregation and

religious life

and put that forth fully knowing

not everyone will agree

Some signs of transformation that I see within my congregation are ...

The places of most potential within my congregation are ...

leverage your collective knowledge, resources, and contacts in order to create a great society; to empower women worldwide; and to bring about social transformation?

- How can you bring together the gift and the grace of the individual and the community to model a new reality for our world, our church that transcends the shadow of individualism and nation-states?
- As a community, what are we “pretending” or “denying” that is keeping us from tapping into our greatest potential as a congregation of women religious today?

The question I would most like to explore with my congregation is ...