

Transformative Community in an Era of Societal Change



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From the great trials of humanity – among them this Pandemic- one emerges better or worse. You don't emerge the same. I ask this of you: how do you want to come out of it? Better or worse? (O'Murchu 1).

Quoted in O'Murchu's book, Pope Francis posed this question to the world, which is now the sacred question before us. The Covid-19 Pandemic awoke not only the reality of the world's interconnectedness but also critical social concerns such as racism, sexism, and inequality of resources, issues that were always present only below the surface.

This reflection will consider the implications of the Pope's question to us as members of the greater society and our singular religious community. It will also continue the thread of reflections about the current and emerging roles of the transformative community. As a society, we must ask how do we want to transverse the lingering trials of the Pandemic and the other challenges for better or worse. How do we respond to the question asked by Pope Francis?

- What if we see this historical moment as a sacred time of discovery, curiosity, and creation that establishes a more just and inclusive world?
- What if we see groups and organizations, particularly our religious community, as transformative leaders in this sacred movement?

The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Moonshot

When the world during COVID became paralyzed with uncertainty through loss of life, shutdowns, and isolation from others, it called for a moonshot. It meant exploring new ways, concepts, and ideas. The finding of the serum and how to ship it challenged current workable methods, which led to innovative ways. Pioneers, learners, and collaborators choosing to risk the stability of their organizations and careers recognized that the world needed their expertise.

One such company, Pfizer, risked all and took a moonshot. The Pfizer moonshot of developing new ways, concepts, and ideas to meet the challenges of COVID led to the development of the serum and the technology necessary to ship and deliver it. It challenged the then-current workable methods, which led to new innovative ways. The individuals and groups responsible became pioneers, learners, and collaborators, often choosing to risk the stability of their organizations and careers because they recognized that the world needed their expertise.

Dr. Albert Bourla's *Moonshot: Inside Pfizer's Nine-Month Race to Make the Impossible* describes how Pfizer had to find new methods

to hold the temperature to ship the serum. It led to freezer farms holding the serum and changing their factory to create enough dry ice to maintain the cold for shipment worldwide. It was a \$2 billion risk because the money to fund was not readily available. Thus the risk and the development of the shipment process became their moonshot.

The moonshot concept is the founding principle of risking and walking into the unknown. The journey demands a deep passion for finding a pioneering way with the courage to persevere. It engages the collective will to believe that stepping into the unknown, virgin territory is today's divine call. Often this invitation seems both irrational and unbelievable. That is what a Transformative Community chooses when it enters such a pilgrimage and recognizes that success or solutions are not guaranteed.

What separates a Transformative Community from the noise and despair of the world is that it remains doggedly faithful and rooted in its mission/charism. The goal of reaching one's moonshot offers a guiding purpose that aligns the services, operations, funding, and staffing decisions of a Transformative Community. Creating a moonshot is believing with an all-consuming passion that the Transformative Community can make a difference.

The Role of the Transformative Community

Pope Francis speaks to the sacredness of this moment and the path that the Spirit is asking us to embark on. That is why the Transformative Community has a unique role

in this process as its members enter more deeply into a contemplative stance. Spiritual growth and maturity enable them to enter into and seek collaborative partnerships.

A Transformative Community engages the Spirit by seeking oneness rather than separation and by exploring the impossible through practical steps which lead to a fresh way of moving forward.

Yes, we can focus on the current differences and anxious tension, but, as David Ehrlichman quotes activist Greta Thunberg, "Change is coming whether you like it or not." He says, "The great uncertainty is what the world will look like on the other side" (2). We live, therefore, in this sacred moment that demands collective still points to explore breakthrough opportunities. Communal reflection calls us to imagine our moonshot opportunities. It will take bold, audacious, and even crazy imaginative reflection to solve our most pressing issues that seem impossible, scary, and out of reach. A Transformative Community engages the Spirit by seeking oneness rather than separation and by exploring the impossible through practical steps which lead to a fresh way of moving forward.

Theologian Ilia Delio says:

We constantly pray to God to make order of our chaotic lives, but what if God is the very source of the chaos? What if chaos and disorder are not to be shunned and avoided but attended to and embraced?

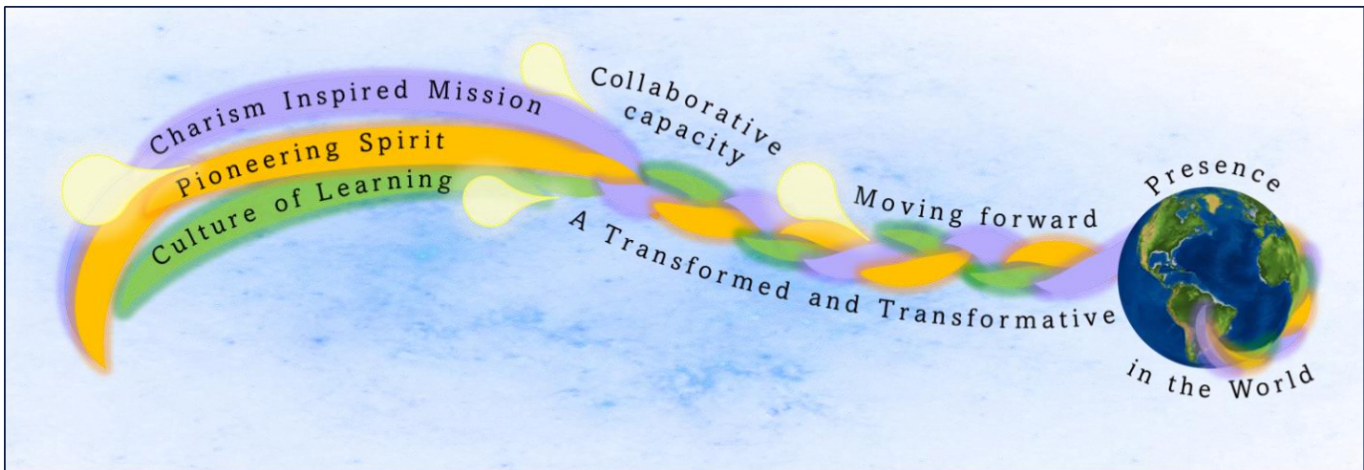
Nature shows us that life is not meant to be nice, neat, and controlled but lived on the edge between order and disorder. Perhaps what we need is not planned retreats but unplanned contemplation that can take place anywhere and anytime – the alert mind in a dynamic world (O’Murchu, 15).

Delio describes our experience of our chaotic and evolving world. There is an emotional tug and pull around issues, from reparations for indigenous people to expanding our understanding of sexual identity, recognizing systemic racism, etc. These issues create both opportunities for healing and also for polarizing cultural realities. Pope Francis's dictum: “We are not emerging the same and are faced with choosing how to move forward,” is powerful because the solutions must encompass both realities.

The Mayo Clinic, originally a group of traveling doctors, one of whom was named Mayo, opened their first building in 1914, their first moonshot. Mayo Clinic, founded by the Sisters of St. Francis and the Mayo

Brothers, created a hospital after one of the worst tornados in Rochester, Minnesota’s history. It seemed illogical and budgetarily not feasible, yet it became a reality through perseverance. It was rooted in the founding purpose, which remains even today; a century later, every decision and action focuses on its core direction of “Patients first, research and education.” These core principles have become institutionally embodied, from patient care to the architecture, landscaping, and programs they offer. Mayo was founded on the same principles as our current moonshot ventures.

Today that mission is grounded in three essential ingredients: the ability to think as a pioneer, the creation of a culture of risk-taking and learning, and alignment through collaboration.



The Mission of a Transformative Community

The preceding graphic demonstrates how a Transformative Community is mission-focused in every element of its institution. Today that mission is grounded in three essential ingredients: the ability to think as a pioneer, the creation of a culture of risk-taking and learning, and alignment through collaboration. These three concepts strengthen the collective capacity and ability to engage actively in creating a just society. The graphic illustrates the Transformative Community’s intersection of these elements with the mission.

The linkage of these aspects allows the Transformative Community to continually become an active agent of change and presence in the world and to fulfill its mission.

To enter into this level of engagement, Alan Seale's book *Create a World That Works* offers a four-level model of engagement: drama, situation, choice, and opportunity.

Seale’s influential model to the right shows we have a choice. When we remain passionately alive, walking in alignment with our mission, we can climb above the noise and explore choices and opportunities.

Take a moment and reflect on the following questions. On a continuum of one to five, identify where you would score yourself and the communities you participate in.

FOUR LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT TYPICAL QUESTIONS

- Do you/we collectively live in a world of drama? Who is to blame, or whose fault?
- Are you/we prone to seek quick fixes or band-aid approaches?
- With whom do you/we choose to have a choice and say, and how do we desire to be in a relationship to make a difference?
- Do you/should we engage in a proactive approach? What is the opportunity or what can happen in this situation?

FOUR LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT	TYPICAL QUESTIONS
Drama	Whose fault is this? Whom do I blame? Can you believe this happened?
Situation	How can we fix it, and how quickly?
Choice	Whom do I choose to be here with? What do I choose as my relationship to this situation?
Opportunity	What’s the opportunity here? What wants to happen?

When we focus on drama and quick fixes, we remain in a heightened level of tension and move to seek quick solutions that relieve our anxiety. Yet, those choices often create additional anxiety and emotional struggle

that often create divisiveness or other unwanted results. When we collectively enter the choice and opportunity phase, we enter a contemplative stance that is often slower yet offers more creative solutions.

Is it possible that we live in an age of the explorer and adventurer open to releasing our past patterns and choices that have inhibited us from moving forward? As previous generations faced difficult times, we likewise can risk seeking new answers and solutions. It is a spirituality of detachment, like that of the followers after Jesus's death who embraced the resurrection.

Members are open to the impossible when the community has a mission-focused culture rooted in learning and collaboration. They open their hearts to the profound, often thorny, questions that lead to insight. Thus begins a learning process that affirms what is currently beneficial, and with open minds and hearts, members walk into the unknown and embrace God's invitation at the historic moment.

In *The Imagineering Story*, Leslie Iwerk says that Imagineers build dreams.

They never say "never," and the sky is no limit. No idea is a bad idea (at first, anyway!), and they inherently have it in their veins to say "Yes, if" instead of "No because" to a creative idea. Imagineering is a mindset. It is teamwork. It is passion. It is egoless... That is the challenge of our time to enthusiastically enter into the questions and challenges that face us internally and externally (xiii-xiv).

Pioneers

The pioneer journey is a sacred spiritual pilgrimage of the individual and collective to incarnate something new or adapt for society's betterment. There is a tendency to think that pioneering has to be a grandiose breakthrough. Instead, a pioneering mindset continually strengthens or develops a new approach or concept. For example, one congregation I work with has examined how each department is eco-friendly in its purchase of products and vendor relationships. They have embodied their ecological value in every aspect of their life.

Without a pioneer set of beliefs and values, the tendency is either to make incremental changes or maintain the status quo.

The foundation of being a pioneer is asking the question. Warren Berger quoted E.E. Cummings' line in his book *A More Beautiful Question*: "Always the beautiful answer/who asks a beautiful question"(3). He says, "A beautiful question is an ambitious yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something – that might catalyze to bring about change"(8). This profound statement opens the door to the possible and unimaginable.

Take a moment and sit in the quiet. Ask yourself some "what, what if questions" about your congregation.

- What is your moonshot?
- What if we collaborated with others to create the emerging global sisterhood and shape the future ministry of working with those on the margins?
- What if we had more resources to create a sustainable approach to our ecological and sustainability commitment?

Committing the group to become pioneers begins with small acts of questioning and probing that open the vista to exploring and implementing a new idea, concept, or action. These set the foundation, confidence, and culture to embrace more significant changes and breakthroughs.

Sacred moments in every organizational life call for radical shifts to create the future. These shifts often mean walking into the scary unknown and letting go. Without a pioneer set of beliefs and values, the tendency is either to make incremental changes or maintain the status quo. Both choices often lead to stagnation, paralysis, or choices hindering decision-making. These stances block a group from being proactive and transformative.

The pioneer spirit is rooted in becoming the artist. The picture emerges when an individual walks to the blank canvas, probes their heart and uses their talents. When the artist puts the paintbrush on the canvas, with each stroke, something comes alive, takes shape, and evolves into an artistic design.



That is the definition of a pioneer looking at a canvas and seeking new horizons through a passionate choice. Each choice and action allows a group to grow, learn, and find the desired shared future. A pioneer takes steps that allow them to enter the evolving process.

A Transformative Community recognizes that pioneering involves risking, miscalculating, missing the mark, and achieving small breakthroughs. Yet, perseverance leads to the new.

- Take a moment and look at your congregation's history; where did the collective body risk and take a new course that led to making a difference?
- What is the most current risk that you have taken? Explore the key insights and learning.

This history of risk-taking and resilience existed at each congregation's founding when pioneering was the norm. That historical story developed into today's reality. That is the story of Christianity; its very roots are founded in the death of Jesus so the church could be born.

Risk Taking: Learning Culture

The critical and essential key to becoming pioneers is establishing a culture that fosters risk-taking and learning at all levels of the Transformative Community. When every member becomes empowered to risk and learn, the fundamental organizational potential exponentially opens the window to renewal and adaptation. This commitment to learning embodies knowledge management and growth in the individual departments and the entire system.

When the organization fosters ongoing learning and training that aligns with the mission, there is a synergy and desire to implement multiple ideas on many fronts.

A hierarchical model no longer makes sense in an immediate change environment. Hierarchy is cumbersome, slow, and not easy to adapt to. When the organization fosters ongoing learning and training that aligns with the mission, there is a synergy and desire to implement multiple ideas on many fronts. This type of change creates leveraging learning across departments, increased cooperation, and seeing the congregation as a whole.

In *Connect*, the authors David Bradford and Carole Robin “describe “a learning mindset as one that has several characteristics. One is a willingness to let go of the idea that your way of doing things is the best. Another is being game to trying new things and taking the risk of making mistakes. And a third is seeing mistakes as learning opportunities rather than something to be embarrassed about and hide. Curiosity is key” (17).

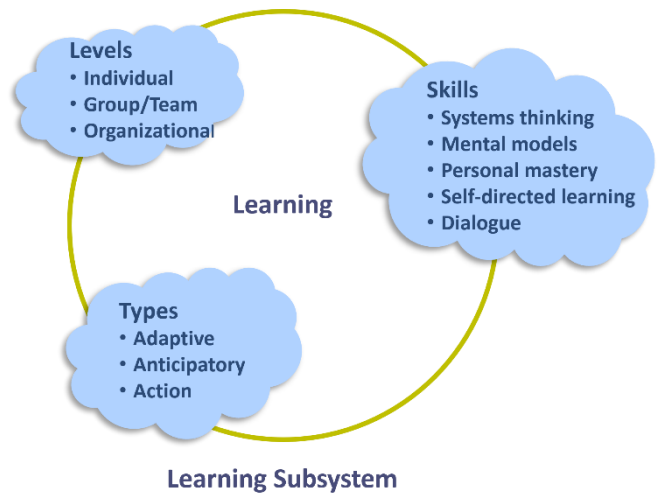
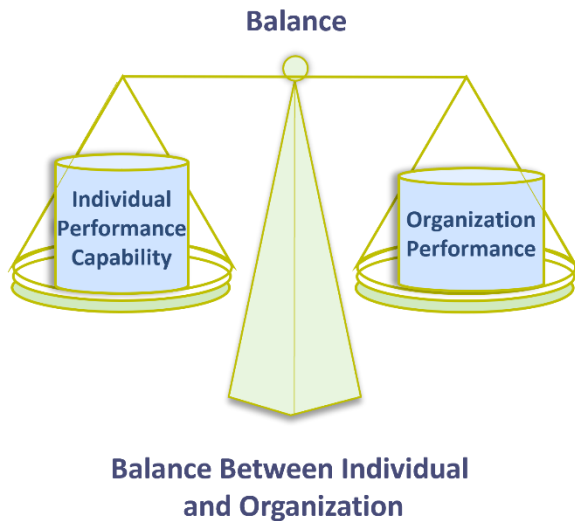
The following is a framework for thinking about establishing a learning culture. One of the critical first steps is defining learning goals at all system levels. The graphic below, developed by Russell Sarder in *Building an Innovative Learning Organization*, depicts the three levels of learning goals. His entire premise is about cascading learning throughout the community (67).



For example, many religious communities are committed to the *Laudato Si's* seven-year platform. Using this model as a framework, below is an example of a way to explore the three levels of learning.

- Community Level: If we successfully implement our direction, what are new overall learnings and insights we need to develop? For the first year, we will focus on these learning goals.
- Team Level: If we implement the congregation's annual goal, what new learning and insights do we need to achieve the year one goal?
- Individual Level: What new learning or insights does the individual need to perform their essential role in the system?

This reflection creates an integrated model for accomplishing a crucial congregational direction throughout the system. The models below, adapted from those by Michael Marquart, show a learning system's two dimensions. The first focuses on balancing personal and communal dimensions, while the second shows the levels, types, and suggested skills for creating a healthy organization.



Adapted from: Marquardt, Michael J. Building the Learning Organization: Achieving Strategic Advantage through a Commitment to Learning. Nicholas Brealey Pub., 2011.

When a community adopts a learning model, they are in a growth mindset, seeking possibilities that lead to increased energy and commitment by the members and staff to achieve the mission and direction.

Alignment: Collaborators as Instruments of Communion

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis states: “As Christians, we are also called to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbors on a global scale” (11). Collaboration is one of the prime ways of living in communion. When we open ourselves to a collaborative mindset, we begin to see and experience our interconnection with others who share our

hope and aspiration for the world. *Laudato Si’* is a perfect example; when we adopt it, we connect with a global movement to heal and restore the environment by participating in the seven-year plan.

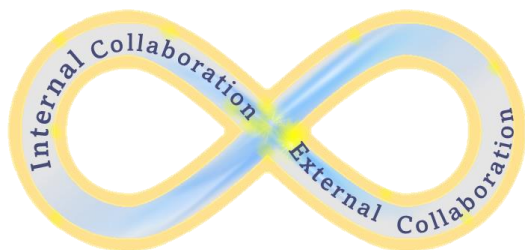
Collaboration is essential. To solve today’s complicated problems, we need collective wisdom to increase curiosity and capacity to explore possible solutions. Collaborative ventures have the potential to become concrete examples of what Francis calls the “sacramental of communion.”

Covid experientially taught us that we are in a connected world and are dependent on each other. It was a shared experience of pain, suffering, and an outpouring of concern for

each other. For example, schools became food distributors for those in need; neighbors ensured people had food, and front-line workers opened hospitals and essential stores. During Covid, we saw many examples of selfless giving, compassion, and generosity, which allowed us to walk through those painful times.

In *Beyond the Pandemic*, O’Murchu claims, “The various mystical traditions of our world share a universal desire for unity and harmony. What we share as one is perceived to be more basic and original than what divides and differentiates us. Oneness is the unarticulated goal of all mystical pursuit” (51). He speaks to an essential common bond we share with others and the realization that we are one. Science and theological writers continue to teach us through their evolving insights into the importance of treasuring and nurturing that all things are interconnected.

The desire for collaboration is both internal and external. The infinity loop illustrates the connective tension needed to build this capacity within and beyond the community.



Today more than ever, organizations are invited and often implored to collaborate internally and externally to achieve their mission and dreams. For example, I am on a school board

for children with cerebral palsy. The school’s methodology is rooted in the Peto method founded in Hungary. Our local community decided to create an integrated collaboration among a Children's Medical Center, a Rehab Center, and our educational system to increase positive outcomes for pediatric children. This model necessitates a significant community change, and our group to explore this new model and collaborate with others around this shared vision.

When we participate in a journey that needs increased capacity or resources to achieve an outcome or when another group wants to collaborate, we must balance self-preservation and self-transcendence. There is a polarity between the two; see the graphic below.

Holding in tension the midpoint between the two perspectives:



As in any collaboration, there might be internal struggles and questions among participants. Some might feel that their identity is being threatened; others might have questions about the quality or nature of the service; some might worry about losing their institutional identity, and there might be many other excuses to avoid the inevitable. When participants recognize a larger vision and benefit to the people they serve, they might realize that the better option is to be open to the possibility of a partnership.

Any moonshot is rooted and grounded in creativity, collaboration, and transcendence. These are the collective spiritual virtues needed in these times if we will solve the various and diverse challenging issues we face. Do we want to remain entrenched in our tribes and hold on, or can we learn and risk how to partner with others for the greater good? Any group must hold to its core mission and values to remain firm. To launch our moonshot successfully and achieve our goals, however, we must remain faithful to our charism while opening ourselves and our institutions to the charisms, wisdom, knowledge, and experience of others to work together for the love of God, each other, and the world.

Take a reflective pause and ponder these questions:

External and Internal

- Describe what being with other organizations could mean for society's betterment.
- What is our theoretical framework and practice of collaboration?
- What have you/we learned from our collaborative initiatives?
- Describe potential areas for collaborative opportunities.
- What learning or tools do you/we need to increase our collaboration?

Summary

O'Murchu cites Hazel Henderson, a British futurist and environmental activist, who commented: "We can see ourselves and our diverse social change activities as a living

orchestration, generating larger patterns, out of which grow new paradigms of knowledge, policy, and personal behavior (152). The role of a Transformative Community is to participate in this journey. It is a sacred moment. To enter it takes a deep spirituality and an openness of our hearts to the Spirit that guides this movement as it unfolds.

We live in the era of moonshots. Indra Nooyi, the former Chairman and CEO of Pepsico stated in her *My Life In Full, Work, Family and Our Future*:

I believe we must address the work and family conundrum by focusing with energy and ingenuity like never before. We should consider this a moonshot, starting that every worker has access to paid leave, flexibility, and predictability to help handle the ebb and flow of work and family life and then moving fast to develop the most innovative and comprehensive childcare and eldercare solutions that our greatest minds can devise (xiii).

Our moonshot will demand a rigorous commitment to learning and adapting. It is the spiritual quest. Kay Lindahl says in *The Sacred Art of Listening*, "By allowing ourselves to integrate our experience, there's more space for new possibilities. We feel alive and have energy. We're ready for the next wave and look forward to seeing how it builds crests and tumbles" (20).

So the question before us, individually and collectively, is: how will we develop our moonshot to create a transformative

community and world? Moreover, how will we develop our mission of being pioneers, learners, and collaborators who ignite the Spirit within and beyond ourselves? The process is like living in the eye of the hurricane that is quiet inside while chaotic events swirl around it. The call of our era is to live as a Transformative Community centered on our mission while pioneering, learning, and collaborating with others to create a healthier and holier world yet to be experienced.

Catherine Keller, in her commentary on the role of the Spirit in Genesis, demonstrates how the Spirit flourishes in drawing forth creative possibilities from chaos and breakdown. In doing so, the Spirit plumbs the depths and draws on energetic wisdom that is deep and ancient (*ex profundis*)(260). In other words, the Spirit works within the contexts of chaos and breakdown to find potential solutions and create anew. That is the invitation of our historical times.



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.

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