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Leadership in a Pioneer Community:  
*Maximizing the Gift of the Eco-system*



**Overview:**

Julian of Norwich's 14<sup>th</sup> century statement still speaks to us in the midst of current shifting and changing times as women religious focus on dwindling numbers, repurposing of property, letting go of sponsored ministries and the grief that comes with these changes. An indispensable question facing women religious today is, 'in what ways do you desire to interface in a world that is radically redefining relationships and connectivity?' This paradigm shift calls for communal transformation in how religious congregations choose to relate in this expanding network environment. If women religious embrace this call, they must identify their resources and enter into a whole new way of being in relationship.

One powerful resource every congregation of women religious has is its long standing eco-system of relationships. These bonds of connection have been formed through friendship, sponsored ministries and other ways over decades. This eco-system offers myriads of relationships which will become a resource for being on mission in these emerging times.

In his new book *The Seventh Sense*, Joshua Cooper Ramo (2016) focuses on the impact of our society living in two connected realities: the real and the virtual. He states, "Today a fresh

hammer is cracking the world. The demands of constant, instant connection are tearing at old arrangements. The formation of networks of all kinds for trade and biology and finance and warfare and any of a thousand varied needs, is producing new and still dimly understood sources of power. They are eroding the roots of an older order as a new one is beginning to appear" (Preface). As religious congregations move toward being a smaller, pioneer community, they need to define the future based on the unfolding experience Ramo has placed before us.

Virtual reality is defined as presenting one's senses with a computer generated, virtual environment that can be explored in some fashion as if one is really present. While sitting at a computer, a person can connect with online communities simply by subscribing to a shared experience such as the daily reflection from Richard Rohr, or the 21 day-meditation webinar with Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey. In addition, messages on our phone are creating instant awareness of local, national and international events. All of these and many additional opportunities are foundational to the virtual world.

This reality is an invitation for congregations to pause and listen in the quiet of their hearts to discover God's call.

*As the emerging paradigm continues to unfold the poignant question is how to share the richness of the charism in a world based on both face-to-face and virtual existence?*

Congregations are being invited to deeply examine the power of the congregational eco-system in order to share the timeless wisdom of their charism with the world. This exploration becomes not only critical but essential for being on mission as religious congregations delineate what it means to once again be a pioneer

community. In this moment, unleashing the potential energy of the congregation's eco-system becomes imperative. Religious congregations, caught at a crossroads unique to these times, are being summoned to discover how to access their largely untapped reservoir of relationships for sharing the charism in both the real and virtual dimensions.

Webster Dictionary defines an eco-system as an ecological community and its environment interacting and functioning as a unit. By this definition, the congregation has a powerful group of people both vowed and non-vowed who have been instrumental for decades in spreading the charism. These people have cherished the charism as a treasured gift that daily nourishes their life.

Both Acts and Corinthians speaks to the profound power of community (or eco-system) having a shared vision. Acts states, "The community of believers was of one heart, and mind and no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they held everything in common" (Acts 4:32, NAB, St. Joseph Edition). This could be said about those who share in the congregation's charism and hope for the future. Corinthians highlights the important purpose of being one as it says, "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body" (1Cor. 12:12). These timeless passages illuminate the gift of togetherness and its vital importance for sharing the gospel way. The wisdom of these passages can teach us much about the power of a charism community being on mission at this transformative moment.

In many ways this new understanding of being communal can be experienced as an invitation by God to clarify our own mental constructs. Each

day the world beckons us to deepen what it means to live in love in harmony across cultures and traditional tribal boundaries. These occasions open us to appreciate alternative ways of living what it means to be globally linked.

In the emerging paradigm, tools like social media, blogs and webinars have opened us to the power of networks and multiple forms of communication. These unfolding vehicles have created a world with few boundaries. This redefinition presents a challenge for those congregational members who were neither formed in, nor actively participate in this communication age. This profound shift in communication is requiring us to move beyond the traditional ways of one-to-one encounters or small groups. Society has thrust us into the world of networks and eco-system of relationships. Congregations are being asked to appreciate God's presence in these new forms of relationship. The profound question facing congregations is, 'Are they willing to be transformed with a diverse world daily at their door steps?'

Religious Congregations must continually answer the call of transformation for each epoch by rethinking, reimagining and redesigning the bonds of connection. There is ongoing dialogue among congregations about the how and meaning of collaborative partnership. Yet, religious in their "heart of hearts" are being asked to examine the question, 'Are we truly open to the sacred path of mutuality?' This question invites the members to enter into the mystery of detachment and vulnerability. The invitation to investigate the rich diversity penetrates the very fiber of transformation in order to express the charism that includes a broader charism community who shares a mutual direction.

*In order to undertake such a profound journey, there is a need to explore and reflect on four profound questions How do we:*

- *Share our charism in this historical shift of redefining community and relationships?*
- *Create our eco-system map and explore its transformative potential?*
- *Communicate an inspirational charism narrative in an evolving and globally connected world?*
- *Build effective eco-system structures and systems for sharing our spiritual path and charism with the world?*

This article will explore the profound journey based on the four questions above. In Illia Delio's book *Making All Things New (2015)*, she quotes Irenaeus, "For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace." (P. 11). Another way of proclaiming this statement is that where any member of the Charism community is, so is the congregational spirit.

**How do we share our charism in this historical shift of redefining community and relationships?**

Thomas Merton emphasizes the need for the congregation to begin the change process where it already exists. He stated, "You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize you are already there. We already have everything but we don't know it and don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we possess." (Burton-Christie, 2005) This is the power of the charism and vision the pioneer members started and each succeeding generation deepened for their times. At this moment there is a call to catapult forward the charism, to unleash its energy through the community's eco-system in new, creative and innovative approaches.

In historical times when we are compelled to move toward dreams that are yet unimagined, it is interesting to note Walt Disney's vision. He developed the magic kingdom which became an iconic image that speaks to dreams that always

continue. His belief was that the dream was ongoing and transcended beyond any one individual or group. In truth, much of what the magic kingdom has become was developed by his successors. This is the story of a charism. When we listen to the story of a congregation, its members talk about the past its-founding, the present its-impact today, and the future.

The invitation is for the eco-system to embrace its own "magic" in three essential and integrated dimensions: the charism, spirituality and sense of mission. For this to happen, there needs to be an intentional means of togetherness through shared planning, implementation and learning. Yet, the tendency is to plan in isolation and thus hold the charism in individual silos. For example, a sponsored ministry creates its direction, the congregation embodies its vision, and the Associates develop their direction. Today's reality requires holding the polarity of the uniqueness of the parts in tension with the whole. This holding of the both/and opens increased opportunities to transform the world through our spirituality and charism.

These are not new concerns. Congregations have been exploring this transition for the past two decades. There have been many attempts and experimentation in how to collectively share the charism. Yet far too often it has been accomplished through structures like mission effectiveness and silos. As effective as these means have been, there is now an increased opportunity to maximize the spirit of the charism through a powerful network of virtual connections.

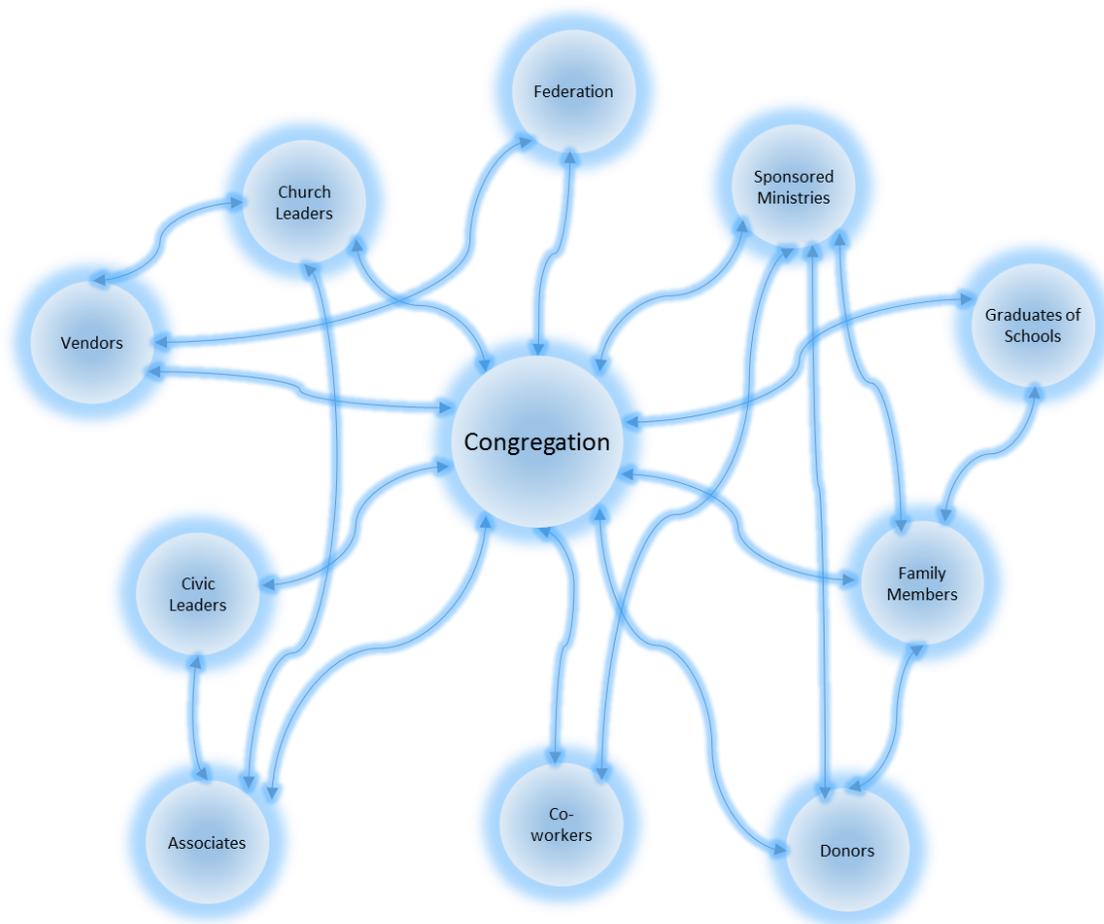
**How do we create our eco-system map and explore its transformational potential?**

There is a proliferation of connections, avenues, through various social media platforms. An eco-system is not static rather it is interactive and expansive. For example, on Facebook you can post a picture, comment or post a comment and open a wide range of connections. When a

congregation places a photo on Facebook the individual friends receive a notification they were tagged thus sharing with their friends and potentially their contacts. Before long, the photo and its message have the potential to be viewed by hundreds of people. This photo has a life of its own in the virtual world that opens the congregation to people and thus influencing them.

**Eco-System model:**

Here is an example of a congregation's eco-system map.



The Nike platform model (below) shows how relationships are maximized using social media. Nike uses a sensor embedded in a running shoe to monitor health, share information with friends, offer coaching and give real time updates. The platform uses daily items like a shoe, cellphone, internet and social media to expand connections. It also has the potential to send information to your doctor, other social media pages and runners association. The platform allows one-to-one virtual connection, and networks all from a sensor placed in a shoe.

As this Nike platform demonstrates, the shoe is an entry point or vehicle into a profound three-dimensional experience that integrates healthy living, fitness direction/coaching support and social connection. In applying this framework to congregations Leadership has a two-fold challenge. First, to learn how this model can enhance congregational connectivity offer

practical suggestions. Second, to nurture and disclose to the congregation the benefits of this multi-dimensional approach for connectivity with others. For example, a congregational activity like a social justice service project can be three-dimensional in relation to being spiritual, creating social impact and fostering connections with a wider circle of relationships.

*Understanding the potential of the eco-system offers hope and possibilities for sharing the charism and being on mission*

This hope balances the fear and vulnerability of diminishment or completion, and changes the focus from inward looking to a more outward thrust for mission.



### **How do we communicate an inspirational charism narrative in an evolving and globally connected world?**

Often members 60 and older believe this reality is a blip on the screen. Yet, for the first time, the new norm is that 20's, 30's and 40's demographics are digital natives. Thus if we want future generations to interface with the congregation's values and beliefs, there is a need to develop a narrative that recognizes this shift. The story needs to generate interest through both old and new mediums.

The majority of the current membership often including the leadership, has grown up and found success in a historical time based on a closed system. They were not formed with instant communication or relationships based on virtual networks. Yet, the congregational narrative has been based on being in a system based on one-to-one or group relationships in a geographical region. One of the important aspects for Leaders is to create community dialogue that evaluates the current mental model in order to integrate both the real and virtual worlds.

This becomes important because today's communication mental models are being reshaped by social media. People today are informed in a nano second about a plane crash, tsunami, the installation of a new leader or a multitude of other events. Through apps the access to instant communication is at one's fingertips. The leader's role is to help the congregation have the capacity to share their story and mission in real time. Leaders need to create formational opportunities, planning and actions that allow the congregation communication direction to grow and mature in order to navigate this environment. Leaders through dialogical opportunities need to explore with the members how to have an inter-generational narrative in order to enhance its societal influence. While at the same time the story needs to respect the richness of the past and simultaneously open the door to this networked future.

There are abundant opportunities in a 24/7 highly connected world for the congregation to create an eye-catching story. The gift of religious communities is their commitment to spirituality, community, social justice and dialogue with others. The Generation X and Millennial demographic often share these same values so there is a natural appeal.

*Thus a well-constructed storyline can show this alignment and offer partnership and resources with these non-traditional means in solving the world's most pressing concerns.*

Religious congregations can offer these two generations a means for deepening their spirituality and commitment to social justice.

The presence of these possibilities emphasizes the critical role of the congregation's narrative to engage young adults in the charism and mission. The simple graphic of a potential eco-system depicted earlier in the document shows the possibilities of relationship and potential partners. This is where social media, collaboration and building upon existing relationships opens the door for an expansive sharing of the congregation's mission.

### **How do we create effective eco-system structures and systems for sharing our spiritual path and charism with the world?**

We live in a 24/7 world. Innovation has become a constant. With this, it is critical that congregations explore this innovation to discover ways to share their charism and mission in both the real and virtual world. What does this mean practically? For example, Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple looked at calligraphy and saw this as a powerful tool in the lettering of the keyboard. He asked the question, what does calligraphy have to do with computers? This simple question shaped the type face spacing and many other features we use and take for granted today.

As Thomas Edison demonstrated innovation, and bringing new ideas into reality, is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration. Today, we need the sweat of our brow to bring to life new, innovative means that allow us to enter into expansive partnerships that address the critical issues of healthcare, property and sponsored ministries.

There is a growing expansion of an interdisciplinary approach to responding to social issues which includes businesses, foundations, philanthropic donors, governments and others working in a more collaborative manner. This emerging trend is another path for religious congregation to create effective partnerships with non-traditional partners. Religious communities' commitment to the care of Earth, immigration, woman and children present a multiple of collaborative opportunities on a local, regional, national and international stage.

Generation X and Millennials align with many congregations' values. They are being exposed to new forms of interdisciplinary experiences which religious congregations have practiced for decades. For example, businesses like Google are recognizing in a highly connected world there is a need to teach mindfulness as a form of being centered. The practice of mindfulness has grown exponentially over the past decade. This growing exposure and awareness opens the door for congregations to share other spiritual programs and resources. While the interdisciplinary reality creates both mentoring prospects by the members as well as the Millennial and Generation X being mentors to the congregation as they explore social media platforms possibilities. These bonds create an inter-generational mutual sharing of gifts for the betterment of humanity.

Health care offers real opportunities for collaboration given the age of the sisters. For example, what if sisters' healthcare could be done in partnership with research especially as countries like Japan and United States recognize the critical role of technology in healthcare.

Given the pervasive issue of global aging facing communities are there opportunities for potential alliances that could benefit both worlds?

Rather than have each congregation seek to answer their concerns around healthcare separately, perhaps there is a way through the strength of relationships to find new ways of addressing this issue. It is important to acknowledge that sisters want to remain in their geographical area for healthcare. Yet, envisioning some form of collaboration could support finding answers that come from health care experimentation and insights into the ongoing integration of the mind, body and spirit in relation to the healing process.

Advancement/fund development is another area of potential collaboration. Often sponsored ministries and congregations are protective of their donor lists for fear of losing donors. What if there was a partnership between congregations and sponsored ministries to see themselves as an eco-system living out the same charism and gospel message with a common narrative, messaging, communication and commitment to sharing the many ways they are shaping lives. For a congregation that has multiple sponsored ministries, sharing the combined impact is significant and fits the majority of donors and foundations direction.

What if where there are multiple communities in a city or state congregations explored creating a back office around finances, IT, human resources and other services. This offers the potential of cost saving and strengthens meeting ministerial needs. In addition, this back office concept may be an opportunity to collaborate with a sponsored ministry; thereby, strengthening both groups.

The above are a few ways to explore the *what if* in this networked world. It will take dialogue, planning and experimentation to explore potential ways of living in a more open system of networks.

## Summary:

The challenge before us is both spiritual and technical. In order to enter into the emerging virtual world, the congregation is being called individually and collectively to enter into the paschal mystery. Responding to this spiritual subpoena is to be transformed by walking through the inevitable changes that accompany learning to live in a new virtual reality. This call is to reimagine the congregation as a pioneer community in an open system and networked context.

This new horizon of virtual reality demands that

*The changes will demand discipline and rigor to let go of dated mental models and methods. All too often, the tendency is to modify and tinker around the edges of our current mental maps and beliefs.*

congregations enter into and be bathed by feelings of intense vulnerability and at times a paralyzing lack of certainty in finding the new path.

The death and dying process is never easy. It demands a deep entry into the mystery of contemplative prayer and seeking God in the unknown. Congregations are being summoned to a deep stillness. Through the soul of silence, it offers the opportunity to balance the fear of the

unknown with the possibilities of the new. Today's communities are like the early founders who went to new lands and birthed a new reality. The unique variance that the birthing is happening in the tension between the real and virtual worlds. Religious are being asked in faith to leave the security of the upper room and walk an unknown path to the tomb and to be surprised by the resurrection.

Yes, we must die to old mental models and tapes that will catapult us into Holy Saturday. This is a profound time of being in our own upper room, to feel the pain of loss, a dark and unknown future and dare to risk going to the tomb uncertain of what we may find.

With faith in what is emerging and in embracing true change, congregations will move into a new pioneering age. This age will be one of vibrant communities consciously connected in a great web of relationships. The network of smaller, vibrant communities will continue to 'cast fire on the Earth' and 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'

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