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DISCERNING OUR EMERGING FUTURE: LEARNINGS FROM THE JOURNEY

INTRODUCTION

At the Assembly four years ago, with acute awareness of dramatic changes occurring in member institutes, LCWR set out on a journey to discern the emerging future. Every journey begins with a purpose that guides, inspires, gives strength and direction. The discernment initiative is exploring how LCWR religious institutes may collaborate to find new ways of supporting religious life so that those living it can fully participate in the mission of the Gospel now and into the future.

The discernment journey so far has moved forward through numerous Zoom meetings, regional discussions, in-person collaborative leadership hubs held in different parts of the country, focused interviews of LCWR leadership teams, conversations on the findings of the interviews, and contemplative reflection on the learnings gleaned along the way. Every step of the process has been enriched by the committed participation and generous sharing of experiences by LCWR members. In the course of the journey, we have discovered that LCWR is more than an aggregate of leaders of religious institutes; it is a microcosm of the transformational change that is underway in religious life. As citizens of a beautiful and wounded world, we are immersed in life and change and surrounded by invitations to consider once again the power and promise of God's reminder voiced by Isaiah: *"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will name a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert"* (Is 43:18-19).

The more I ponder what we are learning as we journey together to discern the emerging future of religious life, the more aware I become of the significance of this juncture in the evolution of religious life. We are living at a crossover point in religious life—a liminal time of endings and beginnings, a time for taking stock of our own realities and the realities that surround us, a time to focus on the essence of our call and mission as we navigate the many transitions that we are

experiencing personally, congregationally, and across the broader spectrum of religious life. The future is not something out there. The emerging future is already here, and our challenge is to embrace our vocational call fully as we live into the future with faith and trust in the God who is with us as we journey.

This is a critical point in the evolution of religious life that calls us to see the charism and identity of religious life as gifts of the Spirit joining us together in broader and deeper ways that transcend our individual identities and institutes. God is bringing forth something new in a growing collective consciousness that realities of deep change are presenting an opportunity to strengthen religious life and one another through intentional solidarity and renewed commitment to greater interdependence.

Harvesting the fruits of the discernment is helping us to name and clarify some of the broader trends that characterize this journey of endings and beginnings and to suggest some of what this means for our particular institutes as we do the practical work of adjusting to the demands of changing times and circumstances.

TRENDS IN THE BIG PICTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

What are we discovering about trends in the big picture of religious life as we discern the emerging future together? An important learning shows that we are coming to deeper understanding of some of the core elements of religious life in the context of our call to mission in these times. In the process of discerning, letting go and letting come, we are being transformed. Discernment is a dynamic process.

The deep change we are experiencing currently is part of the ongoing evolution of religious life. We are living into a new phase of the quest for God that has permeated human history from the age of the desert mothers and fathers, through the various expressions of religious life, to the present context of chaos, crisis, and opportunity. As we explore the big picture of religious life and implications for these times, there are four trends that I would like to highlight that have emerged clearly from the discernment process:

- A shift in identity and perception of charism
- A shift in understanding of mission
- A shift toward reimagining leadership and
- A shift toward greater interdependence.

A Shift in Identity and Perception of Charism

Over the past few years most congregations have taken a serious look at the demographic changes that are taking place globally in religious life as well as in their own institutes. Being grounded in the realities of demographics has opened our eyes to awareness that the meaning of our lives is not determined by numbers or by institutional accomplishments. The meaning of our lives flows from the ever-transforming personal and collective call to intimate union with God and communion with all creation.

In a graced way, our demographics are pushing us to the realization that the structures that have carried religious life forward are not the essence of religious life. We are not our

institutions or our ways of organizing or governing ourselves. At the core of our identity as religious is a collective call to be a presence of love in a suffering and divided world. The structures that we will need are those that support this end. The dynamic pulling religious life forward is the desire to live this life with integrity, right relationship, and depth in the context of these times. This movement of the Spirit is calling us to demonstrate God's love by how we live and what we value.

The shift we are seeing is a breakdown of silos. There is a growing sense of a broader charism of religious life that is prompting us to focus on the essence of religious life and what we can be and do together as we journey in a common quest for God. We are learning that the identity of religious life is far less about doing than being. A characteristic of this time of change is that we are being brought together by a shared sense of vulnerability that is opening us up to solidarity, awareness that "we are all in this together," and growth in capacity to see ourselves as part of a global sisterhood. We are growing closer to one another and becoming more dependent on one another in a good way.

Our focus these past several years on contemplative reflection and dialogue is helping us to clarify the essence of our life and to free ourselves from struggling to sustain what is. We continue to deepen awareness of call, charism, the spirit of the founders, community, and a tradition of good decision-making as key elements of our way of life. We are learning to let go and to grow into a change in the identity of women religious from being the workforce of the church to now becoming more intentionally a contemplative presence of joy, love, unity and peace.

The shift toward a broader sense of identity and charism is helping us to become more engaged across congregations and with a host of lay partners in working together to ensure the centrality of mission and shared response to the needs of God's people.

A Shift in Understanding of Mission

Mission is deeply interwoven in the spiritual DNA of religious women and men. It is a core element of our constitutions, and we all have beautiful expressions of it in our documents and direction statements developed at our Chapters. The mission of religious life is inherently related to the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church. It is a mission of lavish love and inclusion focused on bringing forth God's dream "that all may have life and *have it to the full*" (Jn 10:10).

As I analyzed the LCWR Leadership Team Interviews, I was struck by some emerging trends in our understanding of mission. In the growth and expansion phase of many religious congregations across the past century, mission was often equated with ministry. For many, ministry provided a profound sense of identity and meaning, so much so that transitioning to retirement often triggers loss of purpose and wonderings such as "*Who am I now?*" and "*How can I contribute?*" The interview findings reflect recognition that mission and ministry are not interchangeable terms and therefore, there is an intentional re-focusing on mission. Mission flows from Baptism and while a given religious may no longer be in active ministry, she is always engaged in the deeper call of mission. Coming to terms with this distinction is a necessary step to becoming an *elder* in the true sense of the word.

Here are a few examples of how this shift in awareness was expressed in the interviews:

- *The mission now is helping our sisters learn how to be in the ministry of presence.*
- *Aging poses challenges for ministries, but as we look at mission the question is how do we understand ourselves in mission wherever we are in our life cycle and how do we continue to support the future?*
- *We are coming to understand the difference between mission and ministry and are coming to see ourselves as part of mission for life.*
- *It is important not to equate mission with ministries. We need to develop a better sense of what mission is; we used to think of it as teaching, now spirituality is central.*

Interview responses to a question asking leadership teams to identify current needs and opportunities they see in the area of mission show persistent passion for mission and desire to contribute. The top three current opportunities for mission identified were responding to the needs of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, collaborative approaches to meeting needs, and spiritual accompaniment. Advocacy for and work with the poor, financial support of organizations whose mission aligns with institute priorities, impact investing, and participation in justice initiatives remain strong as expressions of mission.

A Shift Toward Reimagining Leadership

There are several layers involved in interpreting the shift toward reimagining leadership. This time of rapid change for religious life is also a time of deep change and institutional breakdown in the church and in society. In the United States and throughout the world, religious institutes are part of a social milieu impacted by shifting and sometimes competing cultural, political, and economic values and realities. This is an important time for leaders in religious life and elsewhere to assist people in making sense of the experience of change and transition.

Times of significant transition evoke soul-sized questions of meaning and call forth a capacity for spiritual leadership. The social and cultural context is starved for meaning and reconciliation. This is a time when our spirituality, beliefs, values and deepest convictions must permeate all we are and do. This certainly applies to religious life and to the changing realities of our congregations. As I analyzed the responses to the LCWR leadership team interviews, I saw a resurgence of desire to simplify the administrative aspects of institute leadership so that there could be greater attention to spiritual dimensions of leadership within institutes and in the broader social context.

At its essence, leadership is a journey of the heart. Spiritual leaders operate with integrity and intuition, are attuned to the movement of the Spirit in the life of the group and in the signs of the times and courageously call the group to this awareness. They bring a dynamic understanding of the purpose of religious life to discerning the work of the Spirit in people, circumstances and shifting realities. In a time of uncertainty, spiritual leaders help to interpret what is going on in the social context and are able to communicate with clarity why we have freely cast our lot together so that the Gospel mission of “abundant life for all” may be realized. Leaders steeped in inner soul work have a capacity to ask the right questions at the right time.

Emphasis of the spiritual dimension of leadership fosters readiness for change, awareness of the presence of the Spirit in the letting go and letting come that are at the heart of change, a sense of

urgency to address practical concerns, and commitment to streamlining administrative responsibilities so that a prime focus can be on the essence of religious life and its continuance as a transformative life form in the broader evolutionary movement toward communion in the Cosmic Christ.

At this time, reimagining leadership and using well the social capital and moral voice we hold as religious congregations, include telling the current collective story of religious life and working through the specific changes needed in our institutes. This is stretching us toward new and more agile ways of collaboration.

The tapestry of this time in religious life contains strong threads of willingness to collaborate across institutes and charisms in mutually beneficial and intentional ways. We are growing in awareness of the capacity of leaders to impact the cultures of their institutes as facilitators of change. Leaders who befriend change create a climate for members to engage in deep and sometimes difficult conversations that can move a congregation beyond resistance to Spirit-led unity and ownership of outcomes.

The shift toward reimagining leadership involves persistence in creating a culture for change, developing and communicating the vision, planning and providing resources, addressing problems appropriately, and celebrating progress.

A Shift Toward Greater Interdependence

A fourth trend in the evolving future of religious life is a shift toward greater interdependence within, across, and beyond religious congregations.

A fruit of the national discernment process is a reawakened focus on ensuring that all members have opportunities to flourish and thrive in their vocations. Within congregations and in the broader reality of religious life, there is growing awareness of the richness brought to our institutes by the different generations and cultures that constitute the whole of who we are.

As the discernment deepens, we are learning that there are challenges as well as blessings associated with the intercultural and intergenerational experiences of religious communities. Through honest dialogue, we are seeing the importance of learning what different generations and cultures value. We are also moving to deeper levels of understanding and developing skills for intercultural living and ministry.

As the de-Westernization of religious life continues, there is increased awareness that different ways of praying, leading, living mission, and being in solidarity with one another are gifts to our communities, religious life, the church and the world. As we grow in understanding of systemic racism and our complicity in maintaining structures of white privilege, we are recognizing how unconscious bias, micro aggressions and deeply internalized prejudices and stereotypes have blocked authentic witness to the values of mutuality and inclusion within our own communities. Throughout the interviews, leadership teams repeatedly cited the importance of diversity and interculturality for religious life and mission. As religious communities we have much to learn and to share with one another as we live into shifting intercultural and intergenerational realities within and beyond our institutes. What we experience and how it transforms us will bear witness to the wider world.

One of the consequences of the pandemic was that we grew in first-hand experience of just how interdependent our world really is. Within our institutes and across congregations we saw how much we need one another. A blessing of this evolutionary moment in religious life is that the vulnerability that we are experiencing is opening our hearts to compassion and an ability to enter into the world of the other with feeling. The grace of compassion continues to draw religious life to the margins, to see the pain and suffering of our sisters and brothers, and to find ways together to share our lives and resources with those most in need. We see this in collaboration to address emergent needs and in the desire of many of our newer members to engage in ministries of direct service.

During the discernment process we learned that newer members are not afraid of the future. What drew them to this life was a desire to deepen the inner life. In this time of change and transition, they are helping us to see that our identity is not to be found in institutionalized expressions of what we do, but in the quality of the presence that we bring to one another and to the world. At every age, religious life offers an opportunity to fall in love again. The quality of presence that flows from a life of lived love is a precious gift to all those with whom we are in relationship and for the church and the world.

The shift toward greater interdependence invites us to examine how the culture of religious life or the cultures of our institutes are facilitating or inhibiting the transformative potential of interculturality, intergenerationality, and the capacity for interdependent relationships and new forms of collaboration. This is a central task for religious life at this juncture in our collective journey.

DOING THE WORK OF TRANSITION

In addition to identifying trends in the bigger picture of religious life in this turning point of evolutionary change, the national effort to discern the emerging future has generated significant learnings about what institutes are doing in practical ways to navigate change and transition. Engagement of members in the process of change is crucial.

Religious congregations are organizations and, as such, have structures in place to ensure opportunities for members to participate in the life and mission of the whole. Engagement of members is a means to meaning making, participation in governance, strengthening of identity and sense of belonging, relationship and community building, and collective transformation. In times of profound and rapid change, each of these components requires an intentional focus.

Overall, learnings from the discernment about how institutes are engaging members with the process of change and transition demonstrate persistence and creativity in ensuring communication and participation. These efforts are essential for consultation, dialogue, consensus building, inclusive participation and sense of agency. Effective engagement is indispensable for organizational wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Practical Tasks of Transition

Institutes differ in the specific actions that need to be put in place as they respond to changing circumstances; however, I can suggest some general learnings about areas that demand

particular consideration and appropriate action that I have gleaned from collective wisdom during the national discernment process so far.

- Pay attention to the changing demographics of your membership and project them into the future. Demographic analysis and trend data are essential for good planning. This is not a “one and done” effort; it needs ongoing attention. Numbers are not everything, but they are powerful indicators of realities.
- Continue to identify and infuse lay partners with the mission, charism, values and heritage of the institute. Transfer direct responsibility for administration and management functions with appropriate accountability to institute leadership. The interview data reflect expanding commitment to partnership, mutuality and lay leadership. This theme emerged consistently in responses to multiple interview questions.
- Provide for the needs of members moving forward, for example, specialized areas of healthcare, age-appropriate housing, spiritual and pastoral care, ongoing formation, a holistic approach to aging, relationship to broader religious life and to mission-related efforts in the church and society. At a time of major transition, connection to a bigger world is essential. When our “worlds” become too small, the spirit shrinks within us.
- Attend to mission and ensure its ongoing vitality. Mission is integral to religious life, and one of the things I have noticed throughout the discernment is how having a shared sense of mission energizes and connects us. Where there are sponsored ministries, be proactive in putting structures into place that will sustain and carry the legacy forward when there are few or no sisters directly involved. There is much we can learn from one another and advisors about board development and ministerial juridic persons.
- Deal with land, buildings, property and resource issues now so that younger members can focus on mission and building relationships that will help them live fully into a vision of religious life that will be different from what we have known.
- Cultivate a mindset and a spirituality of collaboration that let go of desires to control, and create space for others to enter. This requires humility and graced awareness that vulnerability is pushing and pulling us toward new and deeper ways of collaborating. Individual institutes are not able to do everything. Living into collaboration more fully will be transforming not only for our institutes, but also for religious life, the church and the world. Collaboration is integral to synodality.
- Keep engaging with one another about things that matter. Encourage members to show up and participate in congregational meetings and processes. Find ways to connect with the richness of your collective story and enter into discerning and decision making about directions for the future. No question or wondering is too big or too small. Wonderings often lead to significant breakthrough questions that need to be explored and acted upon in a time of rapid change.
- As you consider governance, know your constitutions, engage canonical assistance, and learn from the experiences of other leaders and institutes. Institutes have different

realities and different needs, but there is genuine concern across congregations about the sustainability of present governance structures and lack of a sufficient pool of leaders who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the ministry of leadership in this complex time and moving forward. Pay attention to what charism families and other congregations are working toward as they consider association models of governance. Follow what institutes are learning from the experience of having a commissary. Creativity flows from shared learning and possibility thinking.

- Recognize and celebrate progress and accomplishments, and most of all celebrate special moments in the lives of the sisters and of the institute. In a time of massive change and transition, coming together for professions, funerals, anniversaries and jubilees generates life and reinforces the collective meaning of this way of life. Sometimes when so much energy is focused on the future, we can miss the beauty of the present moment. Cultivate spiritual practices of mindfulness.
- Remember to live with the questions, as Rilke tells us, but also to love the questions. Questions deepen contemplation and contemplative dialogue. Some questions raised by Sue Monk Kidd in *When the Heart Waits* are provocative for reflecting on the “here” and “not yet” realities of religious life at this time. For example,

*What has happened to our ability to dwell in unknowing, to live inside a question and coexist with the tensions of uncertainty?
Where is our willingness to incubate pain and let it birth something new? What has happened to patient unfolding, to endurance?*

Kidd goes on to note that staying with the questions is a “seedbed of creativity and growth—what allows us to do the daring and to break through to newness” (p.25)
The waiting Kidd speaks of is not a passive waiting—it is active and contemplative, an impetus for imagination.

What are some significant questions in need of loving and courageous discernment at this point in our journey? Here are a few that apply not only to religious institutes but also to the broader context of church and society:

*How do we find joy in the process of change and transition and in doing what needs to be done while expanding our hearts for relationship-building and mission?
Where are the conversations about the future of religious life and consecrated life as a gift to the church?
How can we speak the truth to one another in a way that doesn't dispel hope and that generates creativity?
What structures do we have to let go of in order to have prophetic leadership for the future?
How do we do leadership development for tomorrow?
How might we move from collaboration for necessity to collaboration for the gifts of a new emerging identity?*

Significant questions are indeed a “seedbed of creativity and growth.” Remember to “stay with the questions.”

- Lastly, lean into the mystery of the unknown in which the only certainty is that God is with us in the journey. Take things seriously but hold them lightly. Keep moving forward. Trust in the promise of the One in Whom all things come to fulfillment: *“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Is 43:18-19).*

This passage is very consoling. It invites reflection on the Paschal Mystery and its current expression in religious life here in the United States and in other parts of the world. At this great turning point of religious life, we are living the Paschal Mystery individually and collectively. Twenty-six percent of the participants in the recent Collaborative Leadership Hubs indicated that their institutes have discerned or are presently discerning coming to historical completion. Sixty-four percent reported that they anticipated that their institutes will be in existence at least for several more decades; some did not respond. All are experiencing significant change. There is a dying of what is known and familiar and this brings with it a profound experience of loss and grief. We see it in our personal and community lives, as well as in local and global societal realities, and this must be acknowledged and lamented as Bryan Massingale powerfully expressed.

At the same time, we are growing in awareness of shoots of new life springing forth as we draw closer toward communion with one another in God. We are learning that the single-hearted quest for God that is the core of religious life involves freely giving our lives and our deaths away that all may become one. Resurrection is the ultimate triumph of meaning. The experience of the Paschal Mystery is reflected in the deepened sense of spirituality shaped by the losses, letting go, and stripping away of this time; it is also manifested in the mystical glimpses of the peace and joy of resurrection.

As we live into the emerging future that is already here, we are called to hold both the dying and the rising, and this is drawing us deeper into the mystery of God and the essence and profound meaning of religious life. There is a hunger for God, and we are naming it together. In a world steeped in division and starved for meaning and right relationship, we are growing in awareness of our call to be a transformative presence of God’s unconditional and all-inclusive love. As we ponder the question, *who are we to be now*, the Spirit is leading us to deeper interiority that manifests itself in love, integrity, justice, joy, hope and in the radical hospitality Maricarmen Bracamontes OSB spoke of so compellingly. These are the hallmarks of lifegiving and loving presence—gifts of the present and a way of being present, sure to bear life for the future.

CONCLUSION

During the Collaborative Leadership Hub held in Baltimore in May, I mentioned that working with the discernment process and the LCWR Leadership Team Interviews often filled me with awe and wonder. Shortly after the Baltimore Hub, Michelle Bisailon DHS sent me a poem that she wrote as she reflected on the experience of the hub. She named it *“Emerging: Awe and Wonder.”* In closing, I share an excerpt from her poem about the chrysalis phase in the development of a monarch butterfly, a metaphor for where we are as we journey together in discerning our emerging future:

Now I wonder—

Is this it? What will be?

It is still...

And then, it is time—

*there is slight movement,
and change of color.*

Darkness, blackness comes.

What? How? To what end?

And then in its time—transparency.

And then—

*a breaking forth
a cracking open*

And...

What? What is this?

Where is the caterpillar?

What happened in that chrysalis? During that time?

“How can this be?”

I am in awe. I wonder...

*as this little creature of beauty opens itself to new life,
to a new beginning.*

Slowly it exudes fluid as it opens its wings—

And lo—monarch butterfly

creature of beauty

of grace

of new life.

I am in awe. And I wonder.

As I ponder this mystery

I envision us—

Once as caterpillars, women on the move—

*we have been struggling, twisting and turning, hanging on to what we believe,
weaving a web of life*

and now, in chrysalis, it would seem.

What is happening?

We may struggle to know.

We give ourselves to this mystery we name “emerging.”

We listen to life.

We may struggle in this chrysalis stage. We don't know what happens in there.

It is all mystery.

But we are enveloped in the green of hope.

And when it is time—

We, too, will break forth—

“monarchs” of the kin-dom

transformed

and more beautiful...

I am in awe.

And I wonder...



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING

- ❖ CAN YOU SEE YOURSELF IN THE EMERGING TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE?
- ❖ WHAT ARE SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THESE TRENDS AND PRACTICAL, ACTION-ORIENTED LEARNINGS FOR THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN THIS TIME OF CRISIS, CHAOS, AND OPPORTUNITY?

