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When the topic for the current issue of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT was announced, I began canvassing sisters I knew in several religious communities. My queries came in the midst of the difficulties the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) was experiencing with certain American bishops and their counterparts in Rome. Perhaps it ought not to have surprised me that the responses to my queries were slow in coming and, at times, lacking in specificity.

PERSONNEL ISSUES

Among the common themes that did emerge was that of the difficulties facing the community Mission Leader after surveying the membership and finding it top heavy with aging, ailing members who can no longer accept full time positions or engage in duties that require a fair measure of physical stamina. Many times lack of personnel led to wrenching decisions as to which missions could remain staffed, which were to be turned over to lay persons or another religious community, and which were to be closed. As anyone who has lived through the making and implementing of such painful decisions is aware, emotions frequently run high and range from sadness and anger to a sense of betrayal and



For the Sake Of the Mission Religious



Communities Embrace New Challenges

abandonment on the part of those whose lives and familiar ways of doing things are disrupted. Frequently, too, there is a sense of failure and guilt on the part of the community that is no longer able to provide personnel for a specific mission. This sense of failure has been enhanced, to some extent, by condemnation from ecclesial sources in which blame for lack of new vocations is meted out.

One of the religious communities that did respond to my request for information shared the results of a viability study conducted in 2012 that revealed sobering statistics. At that time, the membership of United States Province of the Daughters of Wisdom was less than one hundred and the median age of the sisters was 78 years. Given no new members and a steady rate of loss of membership through death, it was estimated that within 15 years there would be fewer than 40 members with a median age of 84 years.

While asking themselves what sorts of outreach to potential members might be developed, one issue the sisters identified was that of the age gap between current members and potential new members. As a rule of thumb, a difference of ten years or more between spouses or between the youngest and next youngest person in an organization of any type is considered significant and having the potential to lead to difficulties.

RECRUITMENT AND FORMATION ISSUES

The sisters who participated in the Daughters of Wisdom's viability study identified a need for renewed efforts in terms of vocation promotion and committed themselves to developing a new province-wide formation program that would align ongoing formation with initial formation thus providing new vision and hope as well as continuity in growth for all.

As the United States Province of this community is part of an international religious congregation, consideration was given to the need for cultural formation in order for the sisters to establish themselves as an international

community with a clear mission and a potential vocational outreach to a growing new population here in the United States. Essentially the sisters recognized the need to develop a vocational promotion plan designed to change their current profile to one that is more multicultural in its orientation. An offshoot of this desire for increased cultural diversity among the members was the recognition that local communities would also need to be re-configured for the sake of mission and for the accompaniment of the new members. Increased collaboration with other congregations within the United States and with the branches of their own congregation in other parts of the world in the areas of ongoing and initial formation was also perceived as assisting in meeting the goal of a diverse membership.

GOVERNANCE

Given their dwindling and aging membership, the Daughters of Wisdom also noted the need for changes in government and leadership. Thought was given to merging the provinces of the United States and Canada or to merging all the provinces in North and South America as well as Haiti to form a single Province of the Americas. Other communities have taken similar action, for example, the Daughters of Charity recently consolidated three of their four U.S. provinces in an effort to reduce the number of sisters in provincial administration, thus freeing some for work in other forms of ministry. Consideration was also given to the possibility of electing a provincial administration from among the English-speaking international membership of the community or appointing a lay person to oversee the financial and administrative aspects of the province with assignments and other matters relating to specific sisters continuing to be made by the Provincial Leader who would be an actual member of the religious congregation.

FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Financial constraints were also among the common themes mentioned by the sisters who responded to my

queries as was the stress that results when a religious community is no longer able to fund a particular work. Rather than close a mission completely, many religious communities are assisting these entities in moving toward self-sustainability, teaching those who will continue the work skills such as grant writing and other forms of fund raising and income production. Still, there are those who complain when obliged to make a financial contribution for services that were once freely given and who seem not to grasp that significant societal and economic changes now oblige many elderly religious to seek financial assistance to support themselves in their later years.

Despite financial limitations posed by the current economic climate, a shrinking base from which to obtain funding, and the limited earning power of aging community members, the Daughters of Wisdom indicated they would keep a reserved fund of restricted money to support mission initiatives for the next eight years.

Other sisters spoke of issues that arise when the work in question, particularly provision of health care in a hospital or clinic setting, must contend with moral and ethical pressures that would compromise its Catholic identity. Issues related to birth control, family planning and abortion, adoption by same-sex couples, and end-of-life matters often enough resulted in blocked funding or the siphoning of patients and resources to other institutions willing and able to offer an array of services that, in light of Catholic teaching, one opts not to make available. In at least one instance, it was reported, a religious community was obliged to close a hospital because it could not compete with another local institution that was not bound by the Catholic Church's code of ethics. Although it was a difficult decision, it became evident that selling the facility was to be preferred to *selling out* the Catholic identity of the institution.

Another respondent raised the concern of how the Catholic identity of a particular institution or work is to be maintained if non-revenue producing services, for example, pastoral care or

spiritual formation, are cut much the way art and music courses are dropped from school curricula when the economy contracts. Under such circumstances, she contended, the ability to be *something different* from any other institution is impaired.

EXCESS REAL ESTATE

Some communities who have witnessed shrinkage in the numbers of members have responded creatively to the problems of large buildings that were no longer used to capacity. The Daughters of Charity in Emmitsburg, Maryland, turned a nursing home that previously cared for their own sisters into a facility in which laypersons as well as the sisters could receive care. As one of the provincial councilors noted, the logistics were a nightmare as there were many state and federal regulations that had to be taken into consideration. Another community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, Long Island, transformed the nursing facility that had previously housed and cared for only their community members into an intercommunity setting where women religious from the various communities in the diocese might receive care. The Daughters of Charity also sold an unused wing of what was formerly the headquarters of the Emmitsburg Province to a non-profit organization that, after working with a convoluted set of state and local regulations, re-tooled that portion of the facility into low income housing for senior citizens.

CAPACITY BUILDING

While mulling over these and similar responses, I was struck by the depressive tone that seemed to permeate many of them, despite the elements of creativity found in some.

My research, however, eventually brought me into contact with the concept of *capacity building*. This term is likely to be familiar to those who work with non-profit agencies, those in the social services, and those engaged in international humanitarian work. Capacity building may be defined in

various ways, depending on the focus of the group. A definition drawn from the realm of non-profit organizations identifies capacity building as actions that enhance a non-profit's effectiveness while other definitions refer to the concept of actions that promote an agency's ability to work toward its mission. In the international arena, capacity building generally refers to teaching local people to do the work now performed at least partly by foreigners. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) defines capacity building as an ongoing process through which individuals, groups, organizations, and societies enhance their ability to identify and meet development challenges. CRS's guiding partnership principles emphasize the importance of building just relationships with local partners and strengthening their skills in such areas as strategic planning, advocacy, organizational management, and project development and management. As I read more about CRS and the concept of capacity building, it struck me that some aspects of the CRS model have already been implemented or could readily be implemented by religious communities.

For example, CRS rarely implements projects directly. Instead, it relies on its unique partnership strategy, working with local organizations with which the agency has forged ongoing relationships based on a shared vision and common values that include mutual respect, cooperation and dedication to fundamental justice. This sort of approach might well suit a religious community whose resources of personnel and money are limited but which could enter into partnership with a diocese or a particular parish to assist in the development of a school, a religious education program or a church-based health clinic. Branching out into the broader society, members of a religious community might link not only with the local church but also with other humanitarian and social action organizations. As organizations within our civil society assume a greater role in the work previously done by women religious in such fields as education and health care, the need to cross boundaries that formerly existed, such as religious/lay or church-sponsored/societal/public

organizations, becomes ever more important.

One group of sisters, The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, did just that. They paired their experienced teachers with AmeriCorps volunteers, forming the Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps. Both sides seemed to benefit from the exchange. The sisters were pleased to be able to share the knowledge gleaned during their many years in the classroom as well as the spirit of mission that imbued their work with a group of receptive, eager younger persons who were, in many cases, entering the teaching profession or embarking on a service career.

Other sisters, however, mentioned having mentored one or more employees, thinking he/she/they might take over some facet of the community's work—only to be disappointed. One sister noted the person she groomed to take her place on the ethics/mission effectiveness team sought employment with another agency. Another indicated that her sisters found the spirit or charisma that was so important to them in establishing and carrying forward their work for many years seemed to mean little to those who picked up the reins—and, in some cases, was quickly swallowed up by financial concerns, competitiveness and desire for prestige. Despite setbacks such as these, however, the concept of capacity building with its emphasis on collaboration is one that is already in place in many areas and ought to be explored in even greater depth.

FOCUS ON JUSTICE

Another of the fundamental principles of CRS is a *focus on justice*. Here again, one can see the change in the thrust of many of the religious communities, particularly, it would seem, for those who are members of LCWR or who are supporters of a national social justice lobby called Network. In the past, emphasis was often placed on charity, generally understood as giving to those who are poor and unfortunate, weak or ignorant. In doing charity, undoubtedly many religious communities and individual religious sought to model themselves on the criteria

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offered by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (25:35-36): For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. . . ."

Today, however, there is a renewed appreciation for the virtue of justice and its application to our lives in this time and these circumstances. The Public Religion Research Institute poll released on October 22, 2012, indicated most (60%) of U.S. Catholics favored increased focus on social justice and help for the poor, even if it meant focusing less on issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage. It would appear that groups such as the *Nuns on the Bus* have accurately taken the pulse of American Catholics who are responding to the call for justice that has been nurtured since the time of the Second Vatican Council. As the sisters of the United States sought to bring their lives more into line with the social teachings of the Catholic Church, in doing so they inspired the laity to follow suit. Not that the need to feed the hungry has disappeared, but there is a sense that we must also help those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6) to obtain their fill through the exercise of their civil rights, through our support for just laws regarding immigration, through provision for access to education, job opportunities, and health care—not merely through gifts of food, clothing or money.

Social justice, including eco-justice, also loomed large in discussions of specific mission activity and in plans for ongoing formation. The Daughters of Wisdom addressed this issue most thoroughly and noted they already had developed programs that linked their spirituality and charism in an inclusive relationship with social and ecological justice. They asked that further development along these lines take place to move the members to greater unity of life.

VIABILITY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

Of course, as various sisters noted, reduced membership and little sign of new members on the immediate horizon, issues related to viability of the

community and of religious life in general arose. The topic of ending or shutting down is not limited to religious life. The non-profit sector challenges us to think the unthinkable—to come to the recognition that closing down is not the ultimate disaster but a freeing thing that challenges us as to how to best utilize the human and other resources we have for, as the book of Ecclesiastes (3:1) reminds us: *there is a time for everything under heaven*. As one blogger, Jan Masaoka, noted, a non-profit exists to cure something, address an issue or elevate the status of a group of people. If and when that is achieved, there is a need to recognize death by success—the mission has been accomplished and the victory won.

Looking at religious life in the U.S. through a similar lens, I was reminded of the *Women & Spirit* exhibition that showcased numerous artifacts assembled from more than 400 communities included a handwritten letter from Thomas Jefferson, a cradle from the New York Foundling Hospital, traveling trunks, journals of immigration experiences, pioneering healthcare devices, diaries, samplers, musical instruments, student work and ephemera associated with a number of recognized saints, among them Frances Xavier Cabrini, Katherine Drexel and Elizabeth Seton. The exhibit presented stunning photographs of the sisters' activities, and included an introductory video, oral history listening stations and smaller videos that displayed archival footage. Moving from these depictions of the early lives of women religious in this country, one can see there is a case to be made for saying sincerely, mission accomplished.

Although much work remains, health care and education have been positively influenced in our country through the presence of the Catholic healthcare and school systems whose viability was made possible by the dedicated service of the women religious who staffed these institutions at a time when our country was segregated, when the education of girls and young women was not a priority, when health care for the poor and for those with illnesses such as cancer, polio and Hansen's

disease was limited, when orphanages and services for abandoned children were few and far between. As we read the Synoptic Gospel accounts of the Parable of the Sower, we see the seed that was planted fell upon a variety of soil types—the harvest or lack thereof was not a reflection on the goodness of the seed but on the quality of the soil on to which it was scattered. Thanks to the dedicated women religious who worked and continue to work in our country, we are certain we have been blessed with the gift of good seed—the question now falls to us, what sort of soil are we? Are we willing to follow the lead of the women religious whose sacrifices brought much needed services in the fields of health, education and welfare to our country? Are we willing to work with them in the ongoing struggle for the justice that will lead to the fullness of God’s reign?

CONSCIOUS CLOSURE

The non-profit sector, as Jan Masaoka noted, offers guidance that might readily apply to the need for closure of a particular work or of a religious community itself. It has been suggested that closure be framed as an organization-wide project in which everyone has a part to play and as a collective learning process. Periodic check-ins for reflection and connection were recommended to facilitate the organization-wide project. These would afford all members time to attend to the “inner landscape” of their emotions, mindsets, competencies and blockages and allow a variety of voices to be heard and perspectives shared in an effort to align outer actions and the decision-making process while enhancing group cohesion and mutual support as members hold the paradoxes of celebrating accomplishments and grieving losses.

With reference to the learning process, it was recommended that members make conscious the need to foresee and steward endings in the organization, and to listen to what the work and the mission are asking rather than imposing their own wants or expectations on the situation. Ms. Masaoka also noted a need for a shift in the attention of

the leadership toward the practice of collective stewardship, a form of leadership that involved inspiration leading to the development of skills and ways of thinking that would steward transitions and endings while facilitating within the membership the courageous ability to face and accept the natural process of lifecycles as applied to the organization.

LEAVING A LEGACY

In addition to asking themselves hard questions about the viability of their religious communities, sisters also expressed concern with their potential to leave a legacy to those who will come after them. Some communities, such as the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, found a creative way to pass along a variety of practical skills through their collaboration with AmeriCorps. Other communities, although few in number of members but financially robust, might consider allocating money or other tangible resources to projects in this country or abroad that are in keeping with the mission and charism of their founders.

Some groups expressed concern regarding the transmission of their spirituality and charism and reported they found an avenue to address their desires through the establishment of Associate Programs. While the programs vary from group to group, in essence they involve offering lay men and women a formation program that includes instruction in the history of the particular community, spiritual formation based on the charism of the community, opportunities for prayer with community members, and opportunities for service related to the mission of the group. At times, the Associates assist in fund raising and in some groups Associates are invited to take part in the governance of the community. Over time, some of the associate groups have demonstrated creativity in sharing their vision of the community, its spirituality and mission with others via Websites and social media.

And so the Spirit continues to blow where it wills, good seed falls upon our ground, and the *Quiet Yeast* (Margaret

Cessna, H.M., *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT*, Fall 2012), the good leaven bequeathed to American Catholics by women religious, continues to be worked into the loaf of church and society by new hands until all is raised. As T.S. Eliot reminded us in his poem *Four Quartets*: “What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”

RECOMMENDED READING

Jefferts Schori, K. *Gathering at God’s Table: The Meaning of Mission in the Feast of Faith*. SkyLight Paths, Woodstock, Vermont, 2012.

Kuepers, J., SVD. *JPIC and Reconciliation* (www.svdworld.org/media/Mission_As_Prophetic_Dialogue-_Jac_Kuepers.ppt).

Masaoka, J. See her blog at Blue Avocado, a Website that offers practical, provocative, and fun food-for-thought for nonprofits (www.blueavocado.org).

Schneiders, S., IHM. *Religious Life as Prophetic Lifeform*. Published in *National Catholic Reporter*, January 4-8, 2010.



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