

Transformation – An Experiment in Hope

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Marcia Allen, csj

Good Afternoon! It's nap time! But I'm committed to do my very best to keep us all awake!

Many of us will remember the last word that Sharon Holland left us with last year: *Avanti* – forward! After the *sturm und drang* of the last few years I must say that it was challenging to contemplate this presentation to the Conference. What could I say except that the year has been spent with extraordinary effort on the part of the Conference being the best that it is called to be – suddenly unencumbered by the past and free to move into the future. We have all read the annual report – what the office has been doing – what the regions have been doing. What can I say – other than to congratulate the staff, the committees, the central office, and you the membership for all that you are contributing to the health and energy of this Conference and religious life in general! We have all been the recipients of the Conference's services. What could I possibly add to what you already know?

As I pondered these questions and my dilemma, the realization of at least one conundrum began to present itself. So, this afternoon I'd like to tease out this puzzle through several vignettes that might at first seem unrelated. But, in the end I hope that in this Assembly we can weave them together into a whole piece.

This year, our theme – Embracing the Mystery: Living Transformation!
What does transformation actually mean? According to Webster transformation is characterized by major change in form, nature or function; it indicates change throughout the whole of a system.

“Transformation is the new normal,” says Nancy Roof, the editor of Kosmos Magazine.¹ Transformation is the new normal – every system of which we are a part, she says, is in this process of changing form, nature and/or function. From now on there is no stability or security, but only the disruptive and challenging process of transformation. Roof says that it is “time to leave behind un-lived, static lives, and join the crowd experimenting, spontaneously creating, joining together with passion to create something brand new. There is no right or wrong – success or failure – just the sheer joy of creating.”² In other words, it is time to move into and embrace the processes swirling around us, and over which we have little control. We must enter the mystery of it all and engage in the experimentation and exploration and creativity that it requires to live this 21st century mystery.

Hold that thought!

¹ Roof, Nancy (2016). Editorial. KOSMOS, spring/summer, volume xv, number two.p.1.

² Ibid.

The conundrum that I mentioned? At this juncture, despite the successes there is a growing awareness of a peculiar reality in our midst. I would like to suggest that it is the mystery of the Conference's "full steam ahead" approach amid the continuously decreasing membership of those it represents. We are keeping a brave face on it but the truth is that the very thing that makes the Conference possible is disappearing, that is, the membership of the communities who comprise it. Granted the membership in this assembly continues healthy but the fact is that those the membership represents is seriously decreasing.

At a recent Executive Committee meeting I remember being particularly struck when a finance committee member announced that as of that time the Conference membership represented about 39,000 members. Thirty-nine thousand members! This Conference was created at the time when there were over 150,000 members in the Conference of Major Superiors of Women as LCWR was then called.³ By 1966, according to Marie Augusta Neal, there were 181,000 sisters and nuns in the United States, not all of whom belonged to this Conference.⁴ So, thinking that I had misunderstood, I checked the NRRO office statistics. I did this only to find a much bleaker picture. They publish not just the numbers of members who belong to LCWR but who belong to all those men's and women's congregations who respond to their request for statistics each year. We can infer from their numbers what ours must look like. We know that not all congregations respond but the majority does.

Let's look at the 2015 report. The statistics for comparison begin in 1995.⁵ (The numbers are rounded off to the nearest thousand.)

In 1995 there was a total of 107,000 members in the NRRO survey with the majority being under 70 (by a total of 67,000).

Ten years later, in 2005 there was a total of 72,000 members with the majority being 70 and older (by a total of 6,000).

In 2015 there was a total of 49,000 members with the majority being 70 and older (by a total of 19,000). This 49,000 includes all religious who responded. So, within this number, 49,000, we in LCWR had in 2015 around 39,000 members within our member communities.

The projection for 2025 is much more startling. The projected number of responders to the NRRO annual survey in 2025 is around 29,000 with the majority being older than 70 by a total of 17,000.

³ Neal, Marie Augusta. *From Nuns to Sisters*, 1990. p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 31. "Neal says: By 1966, there were in the United States 181,000 sisters and nuns in over 500 different religious congregations and orders."

⁵ Sources: Statistics for reporting years 1995,2005, and 2015, based on data submitted to the National Religious Retirement Office by participating religious institutes; 2025 projections based on William M. Mercer Mortality Tables for Religious.

To summarize: from 1995 to 2015: the population of men and women religious in the United States went from 107,000 to 49,000. In the next ten years it is projected to drop to 29,000. We have to ask: What kind of a Conference will be needed?

Our members are virtually evaporating! This Conference was built for leaders of 150,000 to 181,000 members but will have in the near and foreseeable future – 2025(which is only a mere 9 years away) - according to NRRO projections fewer than 29,000 members. Remember, I'm using the NRRO statistics which includes men and women who take part in the NRRO grant distribution. There are, of course, congregations that don't take part in the NRRO survey. But from these statistics we can infer that our own membership will not be larger. I would suggest that this picture of the Conference itself simply reflects the picture of most of its individual member congregations. In nine years what will your congregation look like?

What is required here? What does *Avanti* mean in the face of this collapse? What is the responsibility of those of us gathered here today? Not next year? But today. And not for the Board or the consultants to figure out – but here in this Assembly, I believe the response to this must take hold!

This is where my thoughts ran up against the impenetrable and seemingly immutable reality of what is: this mystery of collapse. From the self-confident 181,000 of 50 years ago to the mere few thousands of the present moment. We have all been struggling several decades to come to grips with the changing realities of our congregations and this Conference. The charisms hold but we are challenged to something new.

Hold these thoughts!

It was while I was wrestling with these current challenges and remembering past ones that I read Anne M. Butler's book *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850 – 1920*.⁶ What had inspired her interpretation of those years of the Sisterhoods at the frontiers of this country was something that Terrence W. Tilley had said in his book, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*. His thesis was that, yes, tradition can certainly be reinvented by time, circumstances and the choices made by the actors during these eras.⁷ Butler's thesis was that this had certainly happened to the various women's communities by those women who had taken their religious life and its mores (traditions) into the American wilderness to the mining camps, the logging camps, the rail road builders camps and the desperately lonely prairies, mountains and deserts of the land west of the Mississippi river in the last half of the 19th century and early 20th century. What was considered traditional ways of doing things did not hold up under the exigencies of the moment. Traditions were reinvented. Charisms survived; purpose survived, but all of the customs and homey expectations of the east were left behind. In the face of the necessity to survive and to serve in some meaningful way, a new life was, in fact, invented. In many, if not most, the form, nature and function of these frontier women's religious life changed. Many of us are the results of these reinventions.

⁶Butler, Anne M. *Across God's Frontiers: Catholic Sisters in the American West, 1850-1920*, University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

⁷Tilley W. Terrence. *Inventing Catholic Tradition*. WIPF & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2011, p. 152ff.

Hold this thought!

I'd like to move now to a 20th century theologian: Jurgen Moltmann and his work, *Theology of Hope*. He examines hope through the lens of the ancient Israelite's history, in order to come to terms with hope in the postmodern era with which we've been challenged.⁸ As he reflects on the losses of the people of Israel – tabernacle, temple, kingships, and the land they were promised, and so it seemed, even the promise itself, he concludes that Israel as a nation did, indeed, collapse.

Moltman goes on to say that in the short view, immediate collapse is just that, immediate and local. Given the long view, however, it is possible to see that local collapse actually gives way to a much wider and deeper picture of how God shapes the promise in a new way even while those with the short view conclude that the promise has been withdrawn.⁹

In fact, concludes Moltmann, in the midst of collapse, when all is lost, this is where all possibility exists. We hear God saying: "See I am doing something new! Now it springs forth. Can you not perceive it?"¹⁰ Collapse in the local picture does not mean the end of it all. No, it means that now there is a wider venue in which to bring to life the full potential of the Divine dynamic that pervades all things.¹¹

Moltmann was describing transformation from a theological analysis of ancient Israelite culture. Collapse had struck their identity. They were a conquered people. Their population had been down-sized to the point that they hardly knew themselves any more. But, argues Moltmann, this was only the local picture. A short vision could only see collapse of a promise, a betrayal, the ruin of a nation.

Through his story of the Israelites Moltmann introduces a subtle intimation of what hope might be. He says that system failure – collapse – unveils what he calls the "horizon of expectation."¹² Not a vision. Not a new plan. Not even a new promise. In fact he shows that these are not necessary or even wanted. Rather, the eyesight of the imagination or the eyesight of faith, if you will, is stretched across a whole horizon of possibility, a landscape filled with potential and unlimited opportunities. And the people are invited to participate in this new horizon.

If we apply our own situation here we realize that today we are not talking about an optimistic future, or about the idealism that seems genetic to women religious, or even about the American can-do virtue and drive that made us successful in the past. No, we have now been thrust onto a different plane, a place where no rational thought, no logic, no well-thought out and time-tested strategies, plans and goals serve. Everything we have known about ourselves is but history at this point. It will turn out to be a hollow shell, a pyrrhic victory unless we enter into the challenge before us. We are thrust forward into a horizon – a horizon of expectation: a far-wide imaginal scape in which we

⁸ Moltmann, Jurgen. *Theology of Hope*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 106 ff.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 127.

¹⁰ Isaiah 43:19.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 129.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 125.

can expect every possibility and potential that might await us. There before us lies a full panoply of opportunities. It seems to me that it is our responsibility here to enter into this horizon and to enter it with all our expectations.

Hold this thought!

I have long been operating on J. B. Metz's theory that we are not in a crisis of numbers of vocations but in a "crisis of function."¹³ As I thought about this, it seemed to me that perhaps we have pretty much bridged the crisis of function. That is, we are totally useful in our world today. We are inventing any number of new ways to meet the increasing needs of our times. But all of these efforts have not made us younger or filled our communities with multitudes of new members. So perhaps what does remain is the challenge of a quantum leap which is ultimately the challenge of faith exercised by hope.

You are thinking: we've been struggling with this question for decades. We have done studies and surveys. We have all done futuring exercises ad infinitum. We've embarked on reconfigurations, refounding, mergers, covenants, commissaries. At the moment a systems analysis of the Conference is being conducted. This is responsible stewardship. It is concern for the future. It is appropriate action. It is what we do to sustain ourselves.

As a Conference and as communities we've been doing what must be done – taking care of the mundane and extraordinary tasks that sustainability requires...preserving the institute's charism for the next generation. We have employed the experts to help us. We've done everything possible, but still the members keep slipping away at a faster rate than new members appear. We are wrapped in a sense of futility, doing more of the same in a most tiresome and enervating way, if we will but admit it. We work hard in the day to day sustainability, yet dissolution is at work. In other words: after everything has been tried – and still the status quo prevails, then what? Obviously there's a new question – a new question that we have not yet considered. It is the question at the horizon...

So back to the horizon:

The horizon is a symbol of a different framework – a different question than we have heretofore been imagining. How can we frame a question that will reinvent us as our new and future reality actually requires? Transformation is required. Remember, it is the new normal. We experience it all around us. We cannot escape it or pretend here in the Conference that it is someone else's problem.

We might argue that members come and go – very often as many as one-third of us in the room is new each year. Another third will leave office before the next assembly. We say that this indicates that we have a fluid membership and it is a manageable situation, thanks to the genius of staff and planning. It is difficult to assume responsibility with so many coming and going. We might also say that this is reason enough to let someone else figure this out.

¹³ Johannes B. Metz. Followers of Christ, 1977, p. 13.

But for now let's just say that everyone in the room is responsible for this Conference because our successors will need it. Actually, what we learned during the Apostolic Visitation and Doctrinal Investigation was that women religious all over the country and throughout the world benefit from this Conference; our co-workers and associates benefit; the general reading public benefits; all those with whom we live and work have a stake in this Conference. And while the Conference belongs to a larger reality, by the same token the collapse of our membership belongs to a larger reality. As a matter of fact, we belong to an implicate order, the responsibility for which we cannot ignore.

So hold these thoughts.

So far this afternoon we've considered transformation, re-inventing tradition, demographics, hope, our status quo and our universal responsibility. Avanti!

David Cooperrider, co-founder of the Appreciative Inquiry process and the inventor of many methods and processes to create more productive organizational systems, has recently invented another method to transform businesses.¹⁴ I think we can apply his process to our work at the horizon. It just could be the way to exercise faith and hope in this new plane.

Cooperrider suggests that we must put our present situation in the largest or most comprehensive question possible.¹⁵ This question can't be answered by five-year plans, property assessments and various other strategies. He uses the example of the question that drove the end of apartheid in South Africa. Rather than frame the question: how do we end apartheid, the question became: how do we design a post-apartheid system. Rather than get bogged down in strategies around the immediate and local problems they moved into the horizon of expectation.

What would such a question look like for us? We would not be asking how do we sustain the Conference as our population diminishes or how can we down-size it to meet the needs of much smaller organizations. Rather we would be asking: how do we design a conference for a post-contemporary generation of women's religious communities for the 2nd quarter of the 21st century! (I am not minimizing or disparaging the importance of how religious life is now described. I am suggesting that what is happening in contemporary women's religious life right now will create a change in description for the next generation.) With that in mind: what kind of a conference can we design to meet their needs?

It seems to me that if we take Cooperrider's concept and process, Moltmann's horizon of expectation, and the contemplative conversation we're using here we will find a way to reinvent our Conference on a different plane.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cooperrider, David. (2016) "Mirror Flourishing: The New business North Star". KOSMOS, spring.summer, volume xv, number two, pp. 8ff.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 12-13.

For our purposes here, I have adapted Cooperrider’s process to fit our work. Let me briefly summarize it. First, the process calls for an all-encompassing question.¹⁷ Next we stretch our question across the horizon but begin to look at the horizon/question out of the corners of our eyes. Then we talk to one another in an intense exchange of what we’ve seen in our peripheral vision.

I’d like to experiment with this process here and now. I believe that it is an exercise of hope that expresses our faith. That is, a way to reveal the question at the horizon in a way in which it is already accomplishable. The response to the question comes toward us from the horizon.

So, if I lead you in the process, will you join me in this experiment?!

(I lead the group in a 30-minute process of imagining according to an adaption of Cooperrider’s and Moltmann’s thought; hopefully, some tables will come up with a new model of LCWR Conference! I’m assuming that they will!)

Reflect on what happened at your tables; on what you heard at the mics. Walt Whitman seems to reflect it best in his poem “Passage to India” written in the late 19th century:

After the seas are all cross’d (as they seem already cross’d.)
 After the great captains and engineers have accomplish’d their work,
 After the noble inventors – after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist,
 ethnologist,
Finally shall come the Poet, worthy of that name;
 The true Son [Daughter] of God shall come, singing [their] songs.¹⁸

After all the rational has been tried; after the solutions have been articulated and failed; when old language turns to ashes in our mouths, then we are reduced to silence. That is when hope is activated. In the belief that something will come of the ravages of collapse, hope is forged. Against a far horizon, revealed obliquely in the periphery, the big question begins to emerge already articulate in new language. In the exchange with one another you began to see clearly what you are creating and why; that is, you began to see where the exploration of reinvention begins.

David Cooperrider and his colleague, Ron Frye, call this process “the Mirror Flourishing effect.”¹⁹ Each of you provided a mirror for one another. This created the ability to hear yourself in the other and as each provided this service the conversation became more intense until it became more articulate; it became new. Cooperrider says that in this way it moves past the technologies of sustainability into what he calls “sustainability flourishing.”²⁰ Not to maintain, but to create a new plane of growth; a reinvention of what was. Now there is a transformation that has already taken place – in the imagination and in language that will eventually become reality. I call this putting faith

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁸ Whitman, Walt. “Passage to India” in Leaves of Grass, 1900, Lines 102 – 106.

¹⁹ Cooperrider, p. 12. Cooperrider is citing a work by Cooperrider and Frye, “Mirror flourishing and the positive psychology of sustainability.” Journal of Corporate Citizenship, 46, 3-12, 2013; Footnote #13.

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 9ff.

into the practice of hope. In this case believing becomes seeing. You have accomplished what you could not have done rationally. You have begun to reinvent this Conference.

This is the same thing that must be done at home in local communities. This new way of exercising hope – to see obliquely and therefore to believe something new into existence. At home you will worry about the canons. Here in the Conference we will be worrying about the newly approved by-laws. But the point here is that in transformation it is necessary to move further than the rules and regulations can imagine. In a generation or two our successors will find that the canons and by-laws will want to catch up and transformation will be once again necessary. But for the first half of the 21st century this Conference and its member congregations will have entered into transformation with purpose true to our genetics. We will be new. Alive and flourishing, not just ourselves alone, but with all with whom we are related.

In the few moments remaining to us I would invite someone from each table to sketch an outline of what you discovered at your table. Leave it at Table 57 on your way out the door!

Friends, you, the song masters discovered together a new language, a new song. You rewrote who we are and what we are about as a Conference. Now we have a system (at least imaginally) that will respond to the longed-for future. It will require effort and more imagination, the application of logic and technical skills. But it will already be the sign of a future life whose vibrancy will enable religious life and this Conference by whatever description you've given it to flourish in our time and through this first half of the 21st century.

This day you have invented a new tradition. You have banked your future on the horizon of expectation. You have sung a new song. You have emerged new. Now there is a future and a people for it.

Thank you.