

The Discipline of Communal Discernment

Carole Shinnick, SSND

The role of leaders is not to be better role models or to drive change: their role is to create structures and experiences that bring [people] together to identify and solve their own issues...The primary questions for community transformation are: "How do we choose to be together?" and "What do we want to create together?"

— Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (1)

I think we must accept the fact that the purpose of leadership is not to make the present bearable. The purpose of leadership is to make the future possible.

— Joan Chittister, OSB — 1977 Presidential Address to the LCWR National Assembly (2)

To be in the role of leadership of a religious institute today is primarily to be about making the future possible. And to make the future possible demands convening the institute's members to face together the critical questions of our day.

The questions are complex and daunting. Ironically, the task arrives when membership is older, fewer, and frailer. In planning for gatherings where members will grapple with these issues, more and more communities turn to two complementary modalities: contemplative dialogue and communal discernment.

I believe these tools are well-suited for today's mature religious grounded in the fullness of their institutes' stories as



“... to make the future possible demands convening the institute's members to face together the critical questions of our day.”

they face the complex matters of property, assets, sponsorship, governance, and legacy. These tools offer freedom, support, and spiritual space. They nudge participants to move from “I” to “we.” And they nurture that non-negotiable discipline of a generative people - releasing the treasured and familiar so that the new can emerge unencumbered and free. This issue of *Occasional Papers* includes an article by Liz Sweeney, SSJ entitled “Communal Discernment Through Contemplative Dialogue.” I highly recommend it as an excellent portrayal of contemplative dialogue and, I hope, as a companion to this article on communal discernment.

Here I would like to enlarge on a piece I wrote for the 2013 summer issue of *Occasional Papers* - “Communal Discernment: A Governance Style for Generative Adults.” (3) Since the article appeared, I have had the chance to hear some probing questions about the discernment process and about the relationship of the stages of maturation to the governance styles employed since the latter half of the 20th century. In addition, in facilitating a variety of congregational gatherings, I

have noticed a few patterns that might be useful to mention and are offered here as cautions as we continue to learn more about communal discernment.

Unique Ideas, Creativity, Minority Views

A question and a criticism I have heard about the communal discernment process goes something like this: “Using communal discernment seems to prevent a minority opinion or a unique idea from making it through the process to the full group. Doesn't this suggest that the process minimizes fresh thinking, innovation, and creativity in the final decision?”

This is a good question to consider. Since the process essentially attempts to hear what emerges from the whole group rather than from a few persuasive individuals, I used to think that someone like a Steve Jobs could never have

invented the iPhone if the decision to go forward had to be made by communal discernment. Of course, Mr. Jobs was an entrepreneur so his context was quite different. However, even he had to present his ideas to potential investors in order to make the concept a reality. If his concepts had not caught the imagination of others, the iPhone might have died a quiet death.

So, too, a unique and unusual idea of one person offered in the context of communal discernment needs to catch the imagination of at least some others in order to be considered. And in turn, it has to spark genuine interest in additional others as well. Actually, that is how most religious congregations were founded. One charismatic person attracted a gathering of others who were drawn enough to the vision that they were willing to give their lives to it.

The communal discernment process helps a group to sift, refine, and get clarity about what they can say and do together and about what will best serve the common good. As ideas and issues are winnowed, much more falls away than remains. That's why it is essential for participants to offer what they can while holding their contributions lightly. Actually many groups often come to very imaginative decisions – not because one person had a brilliant idea – but because many persons' insights interacted to create a way forward that no one person could have conceived.

So, communal discernment holds place and possibility for unique ideas to develop from personal inspiration to communal direction. Even more importantly, the process necessitates that discerners practice that quaint-sounding virtue concerning their contributions: detachment. It is very hard to let go of something we think is brilliant. But letting go of it with grace might mean it will surface again in a new and improved form.

Not All Players are at the Generative Level

Other questions relate to my suggestion that communal discernment seems to be fitting for religious at this time because it calls for the generativity of investing in a future most will never see, and it moves participants from "I" to "we." The concern raised is that not all members, all leaders, all colleagues have reached that particular level of development. Some may prefer the parental model of pre-Vatican religious life. Others may prefer the post-Vatican governance models that gave voice, vote, and opportunity for robust floor debates, rousing speeches, and frequent quotes from *Robert's Rules*.

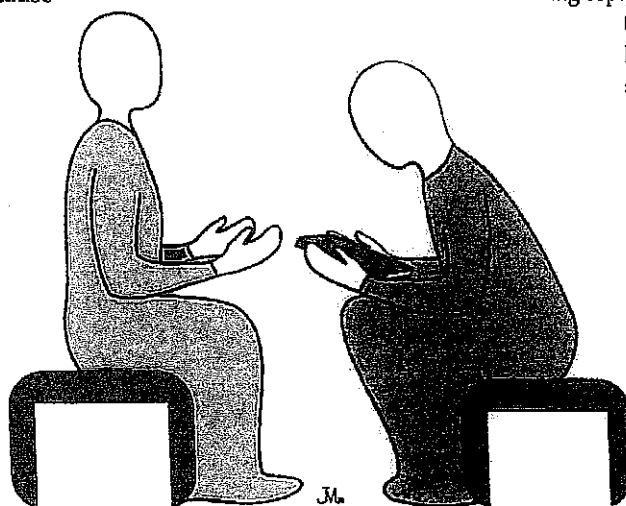
It is true that groups are not homogenized – not all are at the same place of development, not all manifest maturity in the same way. As individuals, we wax and wane. Some days we are very altruistic and generative. The next day, not so much. Even the most mature and generative persons sometimes want to shout, "Please – someone just make a decision so we can get on with it! No more reflecting! Enough already!"

That's why communal discernment is a discipline with clear guidelines and focused practices. It re-enforces the best

in us. It helps us to become a spirited, generative people because the group agrees that for this time in this place for this question they will all do their best to enter the process. They will share faith, listen more than speak, hold their own suggestions lightly. They will sit in silence. They will release their agendas. They will try to stop judging and preparing rebuttals in their heads. They will commit to searching for what God is saying through each person. They will look for the next best steps they can take together. And they will be fine.

Communal discernment is a little like swimming. You can't read a book about swimming and then jump into the ocean. You learn how to swim, to trust the water, to practice the strokes, to breathe properly, to pace yourself. You become a swimmer. And it is God's transformative grace and practicing the discipline of communal discernment that moves us to a new more generative place.

Sometimes religious institutes find themselves interacting with organizations or groups whose preferred approach to governance is the "command and comply" model wherein the expected response to a request is usually "yes." In these situations, the religious institute will likely come to its response by entering a period of communal discernment. The resulting reply might please or disappoint the requesting party. Nevertheless, because of the process that shaped it, the response will be authentic, respectful and non-violent. Hopefully, it will expand the dialogue. And it may slowly draw the requesting party into the less-familiar but potentially transformative modality of seeking a mutually acceptable way forward together.



“The processes trust that God's Spirit speaks through each person in the assembly and that together the body will gradually see and hear an emerging direction rising from the whole.

Some Cautions

Communal discernment and contemplative dialogue create a way for faith-based persons to work together to find a common way forward. The processes trust that God's Spirit speaks through each person in the assembly and that together the body will gradually see and hear an emerging direction rising from the whole.

Some behaviors that enhance and maintain the communal discernment process framed by contemplative dialogue include:

- Making all the information needed available to all the participants
- Insuring that all voices have equal opportunity to speak, that no one dominates and no one is silent
- Pacing the process contemplatively with time for sharing and time for silence
- Listening attentively to one another; facing congregational realities together as God's call for the future emerges
- Ensuring that all critical decisions take place within the parameters of the meeting, in the presence of all
- Respecting agreed-upon guidelines for confidentiality

Some behaviors that are incompatible with, and even toxic to communal discernment include:

- Sharing information unevenly, inconsistently, or in a misleading fashion
- Caucusing outside the meeting; strategizing how a sub-group will try to push an agenda forward
- Attempting to dominate the process and/or to persuade a group through rhetoric
- Trying to control the meeting, especially by calling for the process to be changed
- Debating with another, changing the group from participants to audience
- Shifting the energy in the group from collaborative to adversarial

In truth, when we are under pressure, when we are afraid, when we sense we

are about to lose something precious, we can revert to earlier stages of development and engage in some unhelpful behaviors. Contemplative dialogue and communal discernment represent a high level of deliberation. They require personal and group discipline to stay on that higher plain. It is to be expected that when considering the emotion-laden issues of this time in religious life, feelings of fear, sadness, loss, failure, and shame can surface. Acknowledging them and honoring them is essential. But acting from them to try to block the process, to scare the group, to return to another time is not helpful.

Perhaps there is a special responsibility borne by those members who served in leadership earlier in the institute's history. As former leaders, they may have a particular call now to help the community let go of what was and to embrace what is and yet to come. Their graceful letting go will encourage others to do the same.

In describing his work as a facilitator in South Africa shortly after the end of apartheid, Adam Kahane writes:

A popular joke at the time said that, faced with the country's daunting challenges, South Africans had two options: a practical option and a miraculous option. The practical option was that we would all get down on our knees and pray for a band of angels to come down from heaven and fix things for us. The miraculous option was that we would continue to talk with each other until we found a way forward together. (4)

As we watched the coverage of Nelson Mandela's life this past year, we knew

which option South Africa chose. In these challenging times, religious choose the miraculous option, too.

Carole is a School Sister of Notre Dame and a former executive director of LCWR; she facilitates gatherings of women religious.



Endnotes

1. Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009, pp. 74-75
2. Joan Chittister, OSB, "Making the Future Possible," Presidential Address to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious: National Assembly, 1977 from *Spiritual Leadership for Challenging Times: Presidential Addresses from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*, edited by Annmarie Sanders, IHM. Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, p. 14
3. Carole Shinnick, SSND, "Communal Discernment: A Governance Style for Generative Adults," *LCWR Occasional Papers*. Summer 2013, pp. 15-18
4. Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening and Creating New Realities*. San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007, p. 30

“It is to be expected that when considering the emotion-laden issues of this time in religious life, feelings of fear, sadness, loss, failure, and shame can surface. Acknowledging them and honoring them is essential.”