

Gathering – Leadership reflection and invitation to dialogue

To say the least, in these past three years as Congregational Minister I have enjoyed and appreciated the times spent with all our sisters in each of our countries. It has been a blessing for me to have had the opportunity to be present with you. Often my schedule is filled with administrative duties, financial responsibilities, board meetings, etc., however I hold onto the belief that my first responsibility and call is to our life, our spirituality and our mission as sisters together.

The amount of responsibility, the work and travel at times has been daunting. I've gotten better at keeping a balance of work and time off, which is so important. I am grateful for the support and presence of the other members of Congregational Leadership, the staff and so many others. It is helpful and comforting to know that there are so many qualified people who share in this work of leadership.

So, what happened to the specific directives from Chapter 2021, where have we been?

I believe that utmost for us as a leadership team was the clear call throughout Chapter for Transformation. This became the central topic in our early meetings following Chapter 2021. For me the first paragraph of the statement became the guiding principle of our conversations. "led by the Holy Spirit to interior conversion and life-long transformation, we must respond to new realities of our world..."

In the Transformative Assembly, Ted posed the following questions:

- What are you truly seeking?**
- What is your ultimate goal for a hope-filled future, personally and communally?**

Our response was:

- "We want to 'choose life' as well as revitalize our mission, community, and relationships with one another and others."**
- "We have a deep appreciation for our charism and the need for it in our wounded world."**
- "We avoid intimate conversations about what we honestly feel."**

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- **“We fear letting go and don’t engage in the grieving we need to be doing together.”**

These are words that I’ve held in my heart. They resonate within me and have impelled me to keep moving forward.

Having served in leadership for many years. I believe that we needed to do this work of conversion and transformation together, and in very different ways than in the past. The structures of working in committees, or in separate or siloed projects, or working top-down will not touch our lives, individually and communally. They would not challenge us to discern together new and creative opportunities for us to give birth to new life.

So, the question is why CARE?

Personally, this question brought me back to those comments of avoiding intimate conversations, the fear of letting go, and holding ourselves so stoically, not allowing ourselves to grieve together.

In reflecting on grief I was moved by this quote, “Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.” — Vicki Harrison

In times of grief, I’ve described pain and loss as coming in waves. I experienced intense grief, when my brother Jim died unexpectedly 14 years ago. Sadness overwhelmed me as if I were drowning. I could not draw in enough breath to sing. Yet as time passed and with the support of friends and family, the sensation of rising up from that dark depth and finding my breath became palpable.

How can we learn to swim together through the storms and turbulent seas of grieving the deaths of our sisters, our family members and loved ones? As we leave the time-honored places and pass on ministries that we can no longer do by ourselves, how do we navigate the feelings of anguish, heartbreak and sorrow? How do we invite others in to share and buoy us up with new visions, insights and hope?

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Why CARE? In my experience of living in community, there have been times when conversations and relationships were a struggle, especially in our conversations with one another without judgement or defensiveness. In CARE, I've heard sisters talk about their experiences of hurt and pain living in community.

Sometimes these difficult situations lead to distrust and distancing so that living singly or in very large groups becomes easier, because you don't have to be so engaged. Space and distance become safety, insulating us from the encounters that have been and could be wounding.

I have personally experienced hurtful and judgmental criticism over the years. With the aid of spiritual direction and counseling, I have intentionally decided that I would not to be ignored, belittled or pushed aside. I came to religious life to live in relationship with you my sisters and others.

Through having participated in all the CARE training sessions, I have heard sisters speak openly, some for the first time in large groups. They have shared their experiences, their hurt, struggles and losses of ministry and loved ones. We have talked and shared with each other more intimately and openly. I believe this sharing continues in the small groups and other conversations such as our clusters and Inner Work groups.

I ask the following questions of myself and I ask them of you:

- How do I and we work through difficulties, differences and conflict with the skills we've learned so we do not continue the hurt and distrust?**
- How do I and we keep these processes, learnings and conversations going as life continues to unfold?**
- How do we continue and become more deeply involved and engaged with our Associates and our Partners in Mission?**

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My greatest fear is that if we do not keep moving, keep talking and keep working together we will just give up. We will choose safety and distance. I want to choose life. I want us to choose life.

I was an affiliate at Holy Cross in the Bronx when the sisters had just returned from a Chapter that discussed the choices of Extinction, Minimal Survival or Revitalization. Just starting out 50 years ago, I didn't fully understand, yet I was deeply grateful that you chose revitalization. It continues to be my hope and desire that we revitalize our mission and nourish our life in community.

I know our charism is needed. I see it in Jamaica in the passion and conviction in our sisters and those who partner with them as they enliven and continue to foster the Franciscan presence and ministry that has served the people of Jamaica these 145 years.

I see it in Brazil as our sisters engage in the Campanha da Fraternidade, the Campaign of Fraternity in the church in Brazil with its emphasis on Social Transformation for all people and especially the young. I've witnessed it in the critical efforts to make our Santa Casa hospital sustainable as they provide essential service to people. I am deeply grateful for the partnering that has begun with St. Joseph Hospital in Tampa and BayCare.

Lucy Cardet and I spent time last year in Bolivia with Maria and Elvira. I am humbled in their faithful living and serving those who poor, especially the people in Pedragal. Their presence, ministry, dedication and support of people who truly live on the margin of city of LaPaz, speaks to their commitment to Franciscan simplicity and poverty.

I witnessed it in Florida when our sisters came together for the difficult conversation and decision to close St. Elizabeth Convent and their willingness to lead in finding a new purpose and mission for that space. Here at the Motherhouse, I see it in the activities and projects do by the crafters, in collections for the Warming House, Genesis House and Mary's Shower, raising funds and providing clothes and basic necessities to those who are poor and in need locally.

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I am grateful to have spent time in Mozambique with Liliane, Euripides and Abadia. In within a few short months of their arrival they were deeply rooted within the community sharing their presence and their gifts, partnering with the people and the youth of Maganja. I was proud to hear from Bishop Holario that our sisters know how to live and do mission.

I believe in our desire for relationship and intimacy. I experienced it in the deep sharing during CARE training. In many ongoing personal interactions with sisters, I am grateful to be invited into your soulwork of grieving. This for me is a sacred place where I learn anew the ways of attentiveness, openness and compassion.

I have, we have, shed many tears together as we've mourned and celebrated our sisters transitus into God's love, and just recently felt the pain of sudden and unexpected death of Norma Matthews and our Franciscan brother Dan Riley. We tenderly and prayerful hold Cindy, her family and our friars as we allow the harsh sting of death to break open our hearts so that boundless love may pour forth.

I believe what we said in Chapter 2021, that our future lies in our willingness and ability to engage together and do the hard work, the soulwork of conversion and transformation.

And so, as I conclude this reflection I leave us with the question. Who are we to become and what is ours to do?

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