

# Three Pathways: Implications for Your Critical Issues

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*“A bend in the road is an end in the road, unless you fail to make the turn.”*  
*Helen Keller*

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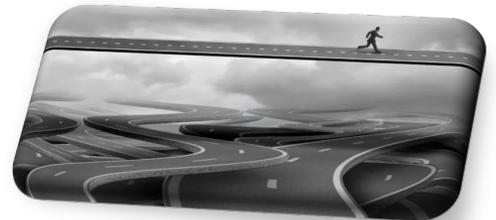
## Three Pathways

Communities facing a crossroads are taking one of three pathways. *Which pathway are you taking as a Congregation and in your respective countries?* The pathway you choose to travel will shape how you understand and approach the issues you named as “critical:” *completion, vocations, and leadership.*

### Path of Least Resistance: Death by default

About forty-five percent of communities are choosing to go down the path of least resistance. They are making few, if any, changes in the face of increasingly daunting challenges. They are in high denial and bereft of any vision for the future or effective leadership to guide them. Absent any real change or choice for life, they are dying by default. Consequently, these communities will not make the bend in the road. They are walking slowly and inexorably toward their own demise. The communities who travel this path generally have these four characteristics:

1. The future happens to them
2. The community closes in on itself
3. Their spirit, mission and charism are dying



4. They have no hope for the future

**The future happens to them.** These communities are doing little or nothing to proactively plan for their future. They are either two mired in conflict, fearful of change, apathetic about the future, lacking good leadership, or confused by the ambiguity of it all, that they are unable to coalesce around making plans and taking steps to alter their course. They react to a future that is happening to them, rather than proactively shaping a future for themselves. Whatever efforts they make to change are too little, too late. Their short-term, band-aid approaches for addressing issues keeps them continually in, or on the verge, of crisis.

They try harder to keep doing what they have always done, rather than try things differently. Their narrative for the future is driven largely by fear and shaped by aging and diminishment and fiscal determinants. Members cling to their own independence and privacy. They stick with the tried and true, the known and familiar, and their comfortable ways of doing things. Their future is essentially an extension of their past, the viability of which attenuates day by day.

**The community closes in on itself.** The boundaries around the community become increasingly rigid and closed. They circle the wagons and close in on themselves. Fear of “others” interfering with their lives, disrupting their preferred status quo, prevents them from collaborating with others. Individualism is stronger than communalism, and privacy takes precedence over transparency, as each member fends for herself. Members disengage from one another, and prefer doing their own thing, resulting in ever increasing isolation and breakdown of community. The net result of their closing in on themselves is “culture lock,” entropy and decay.

**Spirit, mission and charism die.** The community increasingly disengages not only with themselves but also with “outsiders.” They withdraw from participation in parishes and outside ministries. They stop attending LCWR gatherings or other larger forums that could provide a sense of renewal. Fewer and fewer members are in active external ministries, and they are recycling members who take on internal ministries. Maintenance takes is smothering the life out of mission. Just to maintain life as it is, requires so much time and energy that there is little left over for visioning the future and its mission possibilities.

Their spirit, mission and charism die long before the members themselves. The loss of a sense of identity and relevancy slowly erodes their spirit. Interpersonal wounds of the past are left unattended and unhealed further eroding their spirit. The pain is continually recycled, transmitted rather than transformed. Members act out with judgmental comments, explosive interactions, passive-aggressive behaviors, withdrawal, scapegoating, etc. The festering wounds of the past, and furthering of new wounds, destroys the spirits of members. The collective spirit and soul of community slowly withers away.

**No hope for the future.** Leadership in these communities is increasingly stressed, overwhelmed and ineffective. Membership is increasingly apathetic toward any future and disengaged. Any sense of meaning and purpose eludes them. The future looks like more of the same, a continuing spiral of diminishment and death. Members are demoralized by false starts and a lack of follow through with any initiatives that are attempted. As resources and members diminish, anxiety, lethargy and malaise set in. The result is a predictable loss of hope for any viable future.

## Critical issues

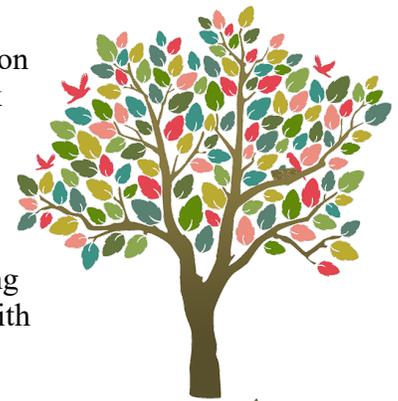
**Vocations:** New members equate to new life. The only hope for the future for these communities rests on the possibility of recruiting new members. Sadly, these communities have not had a “finally professed” new member in ten years or more. While most have given up hope, some insist it is still possible (“Trust in God”). However, either no one is willing and able to take on this ministry or, if they are, no new members come and stay. There is no viable community in which to bring in new members.

**Completion:** These communities see “coming to completion” as inevitable and the death of their community. Indeed, it is self-fulfilling prophecy. They experience themselves as dying. They grieve in private adding to the unprocessed pain. They will either get a commissary or close the community entirely.

**Leadership:** These communities recycle the same members repeatedly because there are so few options of willing and able members. The ones elected are often marginally willing and able as aging and diminishment takes its toll. Consequently, the quality of teaming among these leaders weakens over time.

## Path of Fruition: Living with Dignity

About forty-five percent of communities are traveling the path of fruition or fulfillment. Some might call this the “path of completion” and speak of this as “dying with dignity.” I believe; however, it is more hopeful to call it a “path of fruition: living with dignity.” Either way, these communities are seeking to care for community and its future mission for as long as they are living. They are proactively adapting to their circumstance and making the necessary changes. They are living as comfortable as they can for as long as they can. They want to live with dignity and peace, if not with the possibility of transformation.



Despite any enthusiasm they might have about the *idea* of transformation, they, too, will not make that bend in the road. Unwittingly, bit by bit, they will whittle away at the radical moves needed to bring about genuine transformation. They will not put forth the kinds of efforts needed to truly transform their lives. They will be seduced by the same gravitation pull as so many others: (e.g., trying harder, rather than differently; playing it safe, rather than innovating; pouring old wine into old wineskins: focusing on the outer work of change and avoiding the inner work of transformation).

These communities commonly have these four characteristics:

- Change through proactive planning
- Focus on completion
- Strengthen community
- Hope for the future

**Change through proactive planning.** These communities know and accept the fact that they will eventually die out, but they are not actively dying. They are planning for life, not death. For the most part, they have broken through the denial and resistance to change and have come to a more realistic appraisal of their community, mission, and resources they have available. Like

everyone, they are forced by circumstances to change, but they are also proactively planning for the change they want to see. They wish to live out their days with meaning and purpose.

While relying mostly on strategic planning to navigate these changes, they are also experimenting with new processes (e.g., e.g., contemplative engagement, appreciative inquiry, theory U) and practices (e.g., meeting more often as a community) to shape their future. They are also making some structural changes to adapt to their changing demographics (e.g., adding or reducing the number in leadership). Visioning efforts are largely done through committees or by leadership.

**Focus on Completion.** These communities are focused heavily on the traditional tasks of completion: 1) caring for their aging members, 2) transferring sponsorship of their ministries; 3) divesting from the management and ownership of ministries, properties, and facilities, 4) turning over administrative responsibilities to others, and 5) engaging in legacy and succession planning. The value undergirding these efforts is to attain the “highest and best use” of their resources toward the generative and sustainable future of their life and mission.

Many have let go of their focus on vocations, though some have adopted alternative approaches (e.g., partnering with others in these efforts; walking with others as they discern commitments other than vowed Religious Life). Many have widened their tent to collaborate more fully with associates and other laity, though few forge genuine partnerships. The emphasis is on easing any administrative burdens (e.g., choosing to have a commissary, downsizing and simplifying life).

**Strengthen community.** These communities are finding ways to nourish one another and strengthen community. They are growing in their capacity to share more honestly and relate more meaningfully. They are grieving more *together* as they move through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, resignation to acceptance. They are celebrating more *together* and deepening their bonds. As a result, they are discovering a greater sense of security and belonging in community. Ministry is still their priority, but the value of their life in community is increasingly important. The toxicity related to old wounds is abating, though genuine efforts to reconcile these are rarely undertaken. Members want to get along and enjoy one another, hence they keep whatever pain they might have known or are currently experiencing under wraps.

**Hope for the Future.** These communities are finding hope for the future through a spirit of generativity and mature surrender. They want to plant seeds for a future, even if they are not around to see them come to fruition. They want to believe in the promise of new life. They have hope for the future of Religious Life and want to do their part in bringing it to life.

### Critical issues

**Vocations:** Roughly ninety percent of communities in the United States are getting no new members. Communities on the path of fruition are among the ten percent getting one or two new members every now and then. Even so, questions remain whether they should put forth these efforts. With diminishing resources, odds are stacked against them, hope for future is less often reliant on getting new members and many have stopped recruiting. Some have voted to put an end to vocations, while others have quietly stopped trying but left the door open. Some have

experimented with accompanying people through a variety of commitments, while some persist in their hope for new members. Some are getting a few new vocations, and some are not.

**Completion:** These communities see “coming to completion” as the eventual death of their community, but they are planning for life, not death. In other words, they are taking care of the tasks of completion so that they can ultimately be less burdened with these and, hence, have more time and energy for life in their remaining days. They want to live with dignity and relevancy in the time they have remaining. The challenge, however, is that completion tasks require enormous time and energy such that these communities remain consumed by them. Even with these challenges, they are finding ways to live well with the time they have remaining.

**Leadership:** These communities recycle many of the same sisters in leadership because there are so few options of willing and able members. They toy with the idea of “new models,” but this largely amounts to adding or subtracting one or two sisters to leadership. Without any real change in mindsets, skills, and norms of interacting, the so-called new model does little to change things. Regardless of the model, the ones who are elected remain less and less able as aging and diminishment takes its toll. This, in turn, impacts the quality of teaming. Eventually, however, there will be no viable leaders. Without any viable leaders, communities are left to either search for a commissary or close their community.

## Path of Transformation:

### Birthing a new way of being

The path of transformation is one that leads communities toward a new way of being. It is the path “less traveled” that makes all the difference between *change* and *transformation*. Maybe ten percent of communities will take this path and make the bend in the road. It is the ancient path, a journey, or pilgrimage, that requires communities to live through the core of our Catholic creed – the paschal mystery

of life, death, resurrection, and new life. It is a path that requires great courage, creativity, and tenacity from those who walk it; hence, the reason so few will choose this path. Communities who travel this path are generally engaged in these four efforts:

1. **Journey of Transformation**
2. **Transformative visioning processes and structures**
3. **An all-out effort that is multidimensional and multilayered**
4. **A faith journey**

**Journey of Transformation.** For communities on this path, it is less about what they are doing or not doing, and more about who they are becoming. In fact, they are likely doing many of the same things described on the path to fruition. However, the key distinction is the additional and primary focus on the deeper soulwork of transformation. These communities are connecting the outer work of change with the inner work of transformation. They are integrating strategic



planning focused on the observable dimensions of their life (e.g., land, buildings, ministries, finances, etc.) with the deeper work focused on their interior life (e.g., the emotional and spiritual dimensions of their personal lives, along with the relational aspects of their communal lives).

This Journey of Transformation is an effort to cooperate with grace and create the conditions for new life to emerge using processes informed by these now familiar dynamic elements:

- *Transformation of Consciousness: creating a new narrative.* These communities are searching for ways to re-frame and re-understand the meaning and purpose of their lives and their mission (e.g., evolutionary consciousness; universe story; Laudato Si'). Some are working at a deeper level to develop new “structures of consciousness” through the mindfulness disciplines (e.g., prayer, contemplation, meditation, discernment).
- *Reconciliation and Conversion: the womb of our becoming.* These communities are doing the hard, heart-work of healing the wounds personally and interpersonally. It is the crucible of transformation (e.g., spiritual direction, counseling, facilitated conversations).
- *Reclaiming Your Inner Voice: the seat and source of everything that lives.* This soulwork is aimed at bringing forth the true, inner voice of members and the community as a whole. (e.g., CARE training, the inner work groups, and facilitated conversations).
- *Experimentation and Learning: becoming a learning community.* These communities are trying to experiment with using new skills, processes, and approaches. They are creating a green space for growing together (e.g., CARE training, theory U, World Café).
- *Transformative Visioning: gather the wisdom and weave a new dream.* This is a process of visioning a future distinct from the past, one that is born of their deepest aspirations and greatest longings. It connects the outer work of change with the inner work of transformation (e.g., *Glance at the future* letters; Guiding Teams, Integration Teams and Wisdom Circles).

**Transformative visioning processes and structures:** To engage in transformative visioning, these communities are creating new structures for visioning. For example, Wisdom Circles are used to include all members in visioning. A Guiding Team, which is a combination of leaders and members, is used to create the processes used for visioning. These communities involve all members in regular reflection processes centered around the inner work of transformation. They integrate strategic planning with communal discernment. They create novel processes for visioning and invite partners in mission to join them. All of these processes and structures are an effort to promote depth, integration, and partnership. All of these processes help to create the “container,” a common framework and safe holding environment in which members can withstand the chaos and mess of transformation.

**An all-out, multidimensional, multilayered effort.** These communities ask every member to engage as fully possible in all of these efforts. It is an all-hands-on-deck effort, priority one, for the community. All activities and planning efforts fall within this larger framework of a Journey of Transformation. Such a transformative journey is a multilayered approach addressing not only the changes related to concrete and observable aspects on the surface of their lives where more groups focus (e.g., finances, ministries, buildings), but also the deep layers of community where transformation takes place (e.g., patterns, structures, values, culture and soul).

The path of transformation is also multidimensional. It addresses not only the organizational (systemic and structural) dimension of community where most groups focus, it also includes the

personal (spiritual and emotional) and interpersonal dimensions (relational and communal) that most groups avoid. It's an all-out effort. Everyone is involved and meeting regularly.

**A faith journey.** Such a Journey of Transformation is, at its core, a faith journey, not just in name, but in action. The spirituality of the community must be the heart and soul of this work and integrated into the journey. While the journey includes organizational changes, its essence is the personal and communal faith journey. It is a pilgrimage that requires a radical and mature surrender of the members to cooperate with grace. It is pain that brings these communities to their graced crossroads, but love that pulls them through.

### Critical issues

**Vocations:** Hope for the future abounds, but it is not tied to new vocations. Some are getting an occasional new vocation, some are not. Either way, it is not a primary aspiration or approach for birthing new life. Hope for new life resides in the existing members, their passion for creating a future and in the partnerships they forge along the way. Hope lies in their deepening sense of belonging, their renewed life in community, and in their renewed understanding and approach to mission. Hope lies in their belief that they are being led by the lure and love of God, not in recruiting new vocations.

**Completion:** The tasks of completion are proactively addressed, often with the help laity. However, the real energy and passion lie far more in the future that lies ahead and their efforts give birth to new life. The outer work of "change," including the tasks of completion, are intertwined with their inner work of "transformation." While ending, letting go, and grieving are a significant part of the journey, they understand its purpose is to make room for the New. These communities are seeking to flourish in their season of surrender.

**Leadership:** Recognizing that existing approaches to leadership are no longer working, these communities are attempting to create new approaches. However, these are not simply focused on new models of leadership, but new paradigms of leaders and members working together with partners in mission to co-create a new vision for the future. Instead of the usual top-down approach where leaders create and sell the vision to members, these new paradigms invite leaders, members, associates and other partners in mission to participate in dynamic parity with one another, all of them orbiting around an emerging vision. Beyond any new structures they might create, the deeper transformation takes place in the patterns and practices, values and mindsets, the culture, heart and soul of the community.