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Religious Formation Conference
5401 S Cornell Ave, Suite 304
Chicago, IL 60615

773.675.8362 phone

rfc@relforcon.org
www.relforcon.org

Managing Editor
Carol Regan, susc

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Beth Ponticello, cedc.org

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Journey of Transformation

Insights offered by "Younger" Sisters

In this article, Ted Dunn, Ph. D., continues the conversation begun with RFC members and others in his recent webinar. A clinical psychologist who has worked with religious congregations both nationally and internationally for more than thirty years, Dr. Dunn brings a wealth of experience to his reflections on the journey of transformation. Appropriately for this mid-Lent issue of InFormation, he links our current experience to "the core of our creed," the Paschal mystery of life, death, resurrection, and new life.

Introduction

While facilitating Chapters and assemblies aimed at exploring future possibilities, I have increasingly heard members ask, "What do the younger members think?" When asked, there is often an awkward pause, and all eyes turn to locate the younger members. *Where are they?* There are usually only a handful of them and they are often hesitant to speak, particularly on behalf of all younger members. The younger members are so few and their voices are easily eclipsed by the majority of "older" members. *What do the younger members think?*

The dominant culture of religious life consists of "older" members (I'll spare you the statistics). In contrast, the "younger" members of community are a minority voice. They did not arrive in bands. They do not have as much shared history, and they are typically a more disparate group than their elders. Being a minority, they have comparatively less collective impact upon shaping a community's future than their seniors.

Yet, *younger members are the future of religious life*. They will soon be the leaders of your community. While their current influence may be limited, their influence will grow significantly in the next ten years. A changing of the guard is taking place. These younger members are the leading edge of change, and I wanted to know what change they will bring.

It was within this context that I developed a survey to illuminate and amplify the voices of younger members. This survey was sent to sisters under 50 years of age. The choice to start with women religious was pragmatic, as the Giving Voice network offered to disseminate the survey. Ideally, a follow up survey will include men as well.

I invited their in-depth reflections on how they understand the current transformation of religious life. I wanted to help give voice to their experience of the changes within their own communities. I sought to understand how they might be trying to transform their own lives and give birth to new life if, indeed, that was a direction their communities were choosing. I wanted to know what they see on the horizon, as well as their hopes, dreams and fears related to the future. Finally, I wanted to surface their reflections as a catalyst for communities to invite a more robust discussion and discernment of the choices they are facing.

The Occasional Papers published my initial findings in January, 2017.[1] Additionally, in February, I discussed many of the results in a webinar sponsored by the Religious Formation Conference. Following the webinar, I was invited to offer this article to further elaborate and discuss the implications of these survey findings.

Part I of this article addresses the *Great Turning* taking place right now and a brief synopsis of the *Journey of Transformation*. This refers to the work I am doing with communities that was the impetus, and partial focus, for the survey. Part II describes three central themes that emerged from the survey of younger members, along with the implications and questions these might raise for your own community's discussions and discernment.

Context: A Great Turning

"We are living in the greatest revolution in history, a huge, spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race. Not a revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contractions that have even been in people, a revolution of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it anything we are free to avoid."
~ Thomas Merton

Our entire globe is undergoing a great turning and these dramatic changes are accelerating exponentially. Alarm bells are ringing, from

climate change to geopolitical upheavals to swollen rivers of human migration, the magnitude of which has never before been seen. These changes are bringing humanity and our planet to the brink of either its next evolutionary leap or its devolution into an abyss that could jeopardize our very existence. There have been five mass extinctions over the course of our 13.7 billion years of history. It remains to be seen if we will avert this one and transform the chaos into a new evolutionary ascension of humanity's journey toward God.

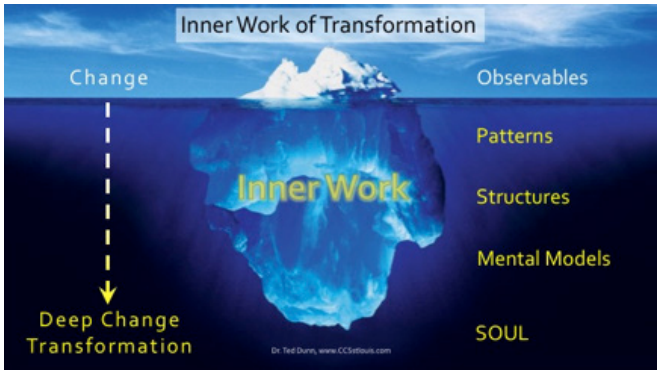
The accelerating rate of these changes is mindboggling. Moore's Law, proffered fifty years ago, suggested that our technological capacities would double every two years. These predictions have since been validated, though revised upward, now doubling every 18 months. We have more computer power in our smartphones than was used to launch Apollo 13. According to Google CEO Eric Schmidt, from the dawn of history until 2003, five exabytes of information were amassed. Now we are creating five exabytes of data every two days – that's 5,000,000,000,000,000,000 bytes! Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat – OMG!

Religious life is not immune to these massive, rapidly accelerating, global changes. Amidst this great turning, religious life has also been undergoing dramatic shifts for over half of a century. Its demographic shifts alone have brought about a number of crises familiar to us all: shrinking pool of leaders; financial strain; and, member resources spread too thin to handle existing internal and external ministry demands.

Marcia Allen, in her 2016 LCWR presidential address, spoke of the dramatic downturn this way:

> *"We are keeping a brave face on it, but the truth is that the very thing that makes the Conference possible is disappearing…. Our members are virtually evaporating! … We've been doing what must be done, … but still the members keep slipping away…. We are wrapped in a sense of futility, doing more of the same in a most tiresome and enervating way…, and still the status quo prevails."*

As dramatic as these demographic shifts are, these are but the tip of the iceberg. What's underneath? Beneath the surface of observable changes are tectonic shifts that are shaking communities to their core. These subterranean movements are related to patterns and practices, values and beliefs, and worldviews among religious that undergird all of these. Together, they represent paradigmatic shifts rooted in the very soul of communities. The essence of what it means to be a vowed religious, to live in a religious community, and to make manifest a particular charism and mission is undergoing a profound transformation.



Changes among things you can see and count, such as demographics, finances and the number of ministries, are merely the surface story. It is much harder to see and articulate tensions beneath the surface. Yet these differences in practices, values, structures, theologies, and mindsets are where the deeper story of transformation is unfolding. It is the *inner life*, not simply the externals, of religious life that is undergoing a profound transformation. Religious life is at a graced crossroads wherein God's invitation to choose life is once again revealed.

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Graced crossroads

This *great turning* in our world and within religious life itself has brought religious life to its own crossroads. Religious life, as it has been known in the past, is giving way to a new lifeform. Taking the long view, however, offers hope. We have seen several such cyclical transformations since the time of Jesus. Each cycle consists of roughly 250 to 300 years of relative stability before the prevailing lifeform recedes, leaving remnants behind while a new lifeform emerges. External societal changes and internal religious life changes conspire to bring the prevailing form to its end, a crisis for those who live it, but a seedbed of possibilities for those who follow. The life, death, resurrection, new life cycle is repeated: *"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains but a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest" (John 12:24)*.

Religious life is not just at a critical juncture; it is at a *graced crossroads*. It is graced, as all of life is, with God's loving presence. But at crossroads such as these, when we are brought to our knees and can no longer go on as we have, we hear God beseeching us to "choose life." At such crossroads, we are urged to let die what needs to die in order to choose life anew. This is where our hardened hearts are broken open, our souls are far more receptive, and God's grace does more abound.

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This great turning is well underway offering hope of a continued, spiraling movement and evolution of religious life. Religious life is not dying. It is transforming, and you are part it! You can either be agents of transformation helping to give birth to its new life, guardians of the status quo, or you can sit on the sidelines as (sadly) most people do at such times. The choice is yours. How you respond to these internal and external shifts and the choices you make at this *graced crossroads* will ultimately determine what new form, meaning and purpose this nascent religious lifeform will take.

Religious life is not dying.
It is transforming,
and you are part it!

Journey of Transformation: A Synopsis

My understanding of transformation and the types of processes that help have given me a template for what I have come to call the "Journey of Transformation." The Journey of Transformation combines individual (i.e., emotional and spiritual), interpersonal (i.e., relational and communal), and systemic (i.e., structural and organizational) processes. Thus, it is it a multilayered, multidisciplinary approach that I use to help communities make manifest their deepest longings as they discern God's call to new life.

Beyond its organizational complexities, the Journey of Transformation is, in essence, a faith journey. It speaks to the core of our creed, the Paschal Mystery of life, death, resurrection and new life. The journey is more of a pilgrimage than a strategic plan. It is more about the sort of people you are *becoming*, rather than an effort to create some grand vision. It is a journey of coming home to God and to one another.

A mystery we know by faith

While the experience of transformation is a divine mystery, *it is a mystery we know by faith*. It is a mystery we celebrate in Eucharist and have experienced throughout our entire lives. Although the essence of any transformative journey is a mystery, the journey is not entirely cryptic. There are common dynamic elements that take place when we move through transformative experiences. These are fundamental elements involved in any individual and communal transformation. They are *dynamic* in that they interact and combine to foster growth and transformation.

The science of evolution, theories of human growth and cultural development, as well as the faith traditions that provide *the way* toward spiritual maturation, all converge along these lines. Let me offer a synopsis of the five dynamic elements that are part and parcel of the Journey of Transformation:

1. **Transformation of Consciousness:**
   Writing a new narrative
   Einstein, among others, taught us that we cannot solve today's problems with the same level of consciousness that gave rise to them. Healers have always known this as they emphasize the need to shift our thinking about entrenched wounds by writing a "new narrative" for our lives. These kinds of fundamental shifts in consciousness are brought about by looking through new lenses. Pouring new wine into new wineskins is essential to move beyond the status quo.
2. **Re-authentication of your Inner Voice:**
   The soul of community
   When we are broken and brought to our knees, when we have drifted from our own soul, we eventually reach a point in which this is no longer tolerable. Our false self crumbles in the face of hypocrisy, and we know our lives to be inauthentic. We start the long road back to our true selves. We re-claim our true selves in a whole new way. For communities, this means re-authenticating your true "collective" selves, the soul of community.
3. **Conversion and Reconciliation:**
   The crucible of transformation
   This is the Achilles' heel of nearly every relationship and every community. Communities have years, even decades, of unresolved and unhealed conflicts. These wounds often reflect the shadow side of their charism. They may be reconcilers to others, but unforgiving among themselves; hospitable to outsiders, but judgmental among themselves; evangelizers to the laity, but unloving among themselves. Religious are not immune to brokenness. Working through the inner, and interpersonal, conflicts is the work of conversion and the pathway to new life.
4. **Experimentation and Learning:**
   Acting your way into a new way of being
   Transforming old ways into new ways means learning, and for a religious community, it means becoming a "learning community." Being a learning community means letting go of the need to prove how much you already know, breaking entrenched communal norms, and behaving outside of your comfort zone. It means trying things differently rather than just trying harder. This is what it means to be "evolution in action."
5. **Transformative Visioning:**
   Lifting forth your deepest aspirations
   Deep change and transformation requires more than the usual strategic planning. When the problems are clear and the solutions are known, strategic planning may be adequate. However, the research is undeniable that when a new cycle of life is needed, known maps and traditional ways of planning no longer work. New maps and methods of visioning must be created to tap your deepest longings.[2]

A Survey of Younger Members

The survey was initially circulated among the *Giving Voice* network, "a peer led organization that creates spaces for younger women religious to give voice to their hopes, dreams and challenges in religious life."[3] They were instrumental in spreading the word among their membership and elsewhere. Eventually, 61 sisters under 50 (average age, 40), representing 42 communities, completed the survey. The survey was *qualitative*, not quantitative, in nature. I wanted to get beyond multiple choice questions and parsing statistics to hear their deeper reflections. Indeed, many of them referenced having taken the survey to retreats, prayer, and spiritual direction.

The survey itself consisted of 40 questions, inviting their reflections related to four domains of content:

1. Impact upon them of shifting demographics (e.g., advancing age, deaths, few new members);
2. Their experiences of community crises (e.g., survival, identity, integrity and relevancy);
3. Communal discernment of God's call to new life and related transformative efforts (i.e., referencing my "five dynamic elements");
4. Their hopes, fears, and imagined scenarios for the next ten years.

My focus for this discussion are the three primary themes that emerged and their potential implications. The three themes that emerged are these: 1) Greater interdependence and an identity in flux; 2) fears of being stuck; and, 3) hope for new life.

Greater interdependence and an identity in flux

Interdependence: Pragmatic necessities and desired values

The most salient theme emerging throughout the survey responses was a movement toward greater interdependence both within and beyond the boundaries of community. The communities represented in the survey are pushing the traditional boundaries that mark their identity. They are collaborating more as leaders and members as well as with outside laity and other religious. Two forces seem to be driving this movement:

1. Pragmatic needs: communities can no longer be as independent and self-sufficient as they once were; and,
2. Internal values: communities are increasingly embracing the values of interdependence, mutuality, and the richness of their diversity.

Pragmatically, these communities can no longer do by themselves what they were once able to do with larger numbers of younger members. Thus, they are not only trimming back on all that they are doing (e.g., downsizing), they are inviting other religious and laity into their lives to help them more than ever before. They simply cannot go on as is. As one respondent put it: "My community has struggled to survive. We keep looking at the list for someone to be novice director, or liaison for this or that, or to serve on this board – a little like the violinist on the Titanic."

Exacerbating the pressures from having fewer members, some members remain unwilling to let go of their current ministries or living arrangements to "come home" and care for the community. They want to continue their personal pursuits (e.g., outside ministries, care of family members) and delay returning to the motherhouse for as long as possible. Additionally, the effects of aging are taking their toll on the capacity of members to take on the complex and demanding responsibilities of internal ministries. For example, members are elected into leadership despite showing signs of diminished energy and cognitive decline.

Thus, purely from a pragmatic standpoint, there are fewer members available, willing and capable to serve in internal ministries. The net effect is that these communities are having to rely more on others to keep things going. They are relying more on the general membership to help with responsibilities previously held only within leadership. They are exploring new approaches for handling internal ministries. Additionally, they are collaborating more with laity and other religious to assist in caring for the community and its mission.

Although greater collaboration may have been pragmatically necessary, there is also a deeper motivation pulling them in this direction. Many of these respondents affirmed a shift in values and practices toward greater mutuality and interdependence. This movement is giving them new energy, ideas, and a more viable means for sustaining their life in community, as well as their mission. They want to move away from "hierarchical," "imperial," "competitive" leadership toward more "participatory" and "shared" leadership. In addition, these values are the reason behind their greater inclusion of laity in various facets of community.

Laity have been involved with communities for many years, of course, in staffing or administering internal and external ministries. In addition, they have participated as spiritual companions (e.g., associates). These respondents indicated that laity are not just helping, companioning, or co-ministering, but they are collaborating more fully in shaping the future of these communities. Laity are participating more in assemblies and Chapters as "partners," co-visioning and co-creating the future along with these sisters.

Thus, beyond their pragmatic need for help, these communities are increasingly embracing the values of mutuality, interdependence, shared power and diversity. These values are the driving forces behind increasingly flexible and permeable boundaries. These are the driving forces behind the shifts toward greater collaboration and partnership among laity and other religious.

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Identity in flux

The shift in boundaries has left some respondents with a case of "identity confusion." They are not sure where the boundary around vowed members ends and laity begins. For example, some indicated confusion as to whether associates and other laity ought to be at Chapters or assemblies. They are uncomfortable with the "dependency" on laity, or the loss of status of vowed religious as "special." Boundary skirmishes arise when deciding who comes to assemblies wherein finances, formation, governance or other "family business" are on the agenda.

Some see their identity as particularly murky. As one sister put it, "We are an amorphous blob of values." They are not sure how to distinguish their own community from any other community, or from an "association" of believers. Some acknowledge an integrity gap: "Our behavior does not match who we say we are;" "We don't know what we stand for anymore." Others believe they are dying. These factors, combined, have led some to put a "moratorium" on inviting new members. They are not clear on how to represent themselves to new members. They believe it is "morally wrong" to invite new members until, or unless, they get their own "house in order."

In contrast, however, most respondents claimed to have a "strong" sense of identity. They are quite comfortable with the shift in boundaries, values, and practices. This may, in part, be due to their movement away from external definitions of identity toward internal, less tangibles ones: "Our identity is tied to our charism, not our clothes." Their identity is also more tied to their mission, rather than to the motherhouse walls or to a flagship ministry. The glue that holds their identity together is their common heritage, shared values and way of life as well as the Eucharist and the Church.

The spiritual and emotional home base for these respondents remains their community. It is where they are most rooted. However, out of a desire to be among peers with similar developmental needs, interests and energies, these women are networking, sharing ministry, community, and their faith life with others outside of community. Cross-congregational and international formation programs, federations, and peer networks have offered them many more opportunities for building new relationships. These connections provide them with a "second home."

Thus, these younger members are pushing the envelope when it comes to defining their identity as vowed religious. Many see themselves as eventually living in "trans-national," "trans-congregational," "interfaith," or "multi-cultural" communities. As one put it: "I see one possible future of religious life as a collection of hubs where a core of vowed religious create space for communities that connect." They are connecting and collaborating more fully with associates, consociates, mission partners, laity and other religious. They are much more open to diversity, and they eschew any notion of one right way to live religious life.

Fears of being stuck

When asked about what fears they have as they look ahead ten years, the respondents did not hold back. Numerous fears emerged which, taken together, can be described as a "fear of being stuck:" stuck in the past, focused on survival, and saddled with internal responsibilities.

Stuck in the past

The respondents are very afraid of being stuck in the past with "old baggage" and "old mindsets." While the respondents truly cherish their older sisters, they are worn down by "age-old unresolved conflicts" and years of "rancor" and "resentments." It is sapping the life out of them. Furthermore, these respondents did not hold out much hope that these old issues would ever go away or be resolved. Consequently, some are just "waiting" for these members to die off in order to clear the way for something new: "Ten years from now, when most of the elders have died, we will be freer to risk something new."

Focused on survival

Additionally, they fear that their communities are focused more on "surviving" rather than "thriving." They fear that maintenance demands are overshadowing mission, literally smothering the life out of their mission. The time and energy, as well as financial and human resources needed to maintain older buildings, older members, and life as it has been, is so all-consuming that there is little left for focusing upon mission and its future.

They fear that the focus on survival and putting out fires with short-term fixes will prevent them from making more radical, long-term changes that could offer the possibility of a viable future. They fear that their communities are more likely to make only improved versions of the past rather than risk experimenting with something new. They are afraid that old norms and old structures will simply perpetuate the status quo.

Saddled with internal responsibilities

The issue of leadership is a bit of a double-bind for these younger members. On the one hand, they want to be heard, to have influence, and not seen as "too young" for leadership. On the other hand, they are in no rush to be in leadership. They want the same opportunities that their elders had to be in outside ministry for many years. They don't want to be seen as too young for leadership, but they also do not want to be stuck in leadership for the rest of their lives.

The financial burdens of these communities frighten some of them: "I might have to work for money and not for mission." On the whole, though, they see that their elders worry more about money than they do. Most respondents have no illusions about being cared for, and they fully anticipate facing financial strains in the future. However, they are not "fretting" about the future or running out of money or even of dying out. They don't want concerns about money or fewer members to supersede their desire to do mission.

Hopes and intimations of the future

Despite an uncertain future, these respondents remain undaunted. They are sure of their vocational call, and they are more hopeful than frightened about the future. They know there are no guarantees and they have no illusions about the losses they are facing. They are, by their own admission, "experts in grieving." They see the handwriting on the wall and, in many instances, they understand and accept that their community will die out: "I know the community has to die out in order to bring new life." Even so, they are hopeful about the future, excited to be a part of it, and proud of what they are doing.

When asked about discerning God's call to new life, and what "new life" means to them, they did not point to the "recruitment" of new vocations as the answer. Rather, they spoke of embracing this time as the "paschal mystery" and "being faithful to the journey" no matter where it leads. From this perspective, they see it as an opportunity to "expand the reign of God." They want to "let go of old ministries and mindsets" and are eager to create "new ways of living out their charism and mission." New life to them means "breaking patterns that no longer serve, creating new structures, and inviting new partnerships." New life means cooperating with grace and "letting the river flow."

> New life means cooperating with grace and "letting the river flow."

They report that their communities are trying new ways to discern God's call to new life. They are meeting more frequently in assemblies. They are using communal discernment more regularly. They are using outside facilitators as guides and to train them in learning new ways to dialogue, listen, and reach across their differences (e.g., contemplative dialogue, sitting prayer, nonviolent confrontation, and mutual communication).

New life has also taken the form of new ways of living community and creating new ministries. "Intentional communities" and "discernment houses" were often mentioned. In addition, there were various new ministries: brain plasticity, safe zones, photo-voltaic generators, and teen groups. They are planting plenty of seeds for the future.

Insights and Implications

These respondents do not speak for all younger members, let alone all religious. They represent a small sampling of one small segment of religious life, hardly representative of its rich diversity of ethnicities, cultures and generations of men and women who make up religious life. Even so, these women spent countless hours praying and reflecting about what is happening in their lives, in your lives, and where God is calling religious life. Their insights offer much food for thought.

What can you glean from these respondents that might inform those of you working in formation or leadership as mentors for your members? Hopefully, you will engage this material with your community and come to your own insights to advance your own efforts. To help you get started, let me offer you some departure points and questions for you to ponder.

Partnerships and collaboration are key

Boundaries have two defining characteristics: clarity and permeability. Communities need clear boundaries to maintain a solid sense of identity. This is a challenge in times of transition during which your identity is in flux. Your boundaries will need to shift for you to become more of who you are being called to become. Additionally, transformation will require you to have more permeable boundaries that allow for a two-way exchange of energy. It is the only antidote to entropy, the inevitable slow decay and death of closed systems.

If communities are to transform and bring forth new life, they will need new energy, not solely from new members, but from new partnerships. No doubt, you already co-minster with laity and you employ them at every level of your organization. What might it be like to have them join you in an ongoing way to co-create a future? I'm not talking about a one-day visioning session to have them "help" you, but an ongoing process of mutual engagement. Some communities are partnering in these endeavors. This may be a matter worthy of your discussion as a community. ***Who will be your most important partners ten years from now, and how are you bolstering these relationships?***

Entropy also creeps in when communities destroy the natural abundance of diversity. Individuals in your community, I'm sure, are bright and educated. But you could have a room full of individuals with an average IQ of 125, while their collective IQ might only be 85. If groups cannot learn to reach across their differences, work through their conflicts, and tap the richness of their multi-generational, multi-cultural diversity, they will decay, rather than flourish. ***What skills do you need to acquire in order to improve your capacity to harness the richness of your diversity?***

> If communities are to transform and bring forth new life, they will need new energy

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The inner work of transformation

There is a great turning happening both in religious life and across the globe, and you are part of it. You need to decide if you will be agents of transformation and midwives to the birthing of new life, or agents of the status quo, perpetuating improved versions of the past into the future. Alternatively, you may choose to sit on the sidelines as (sadly) most organizations do when facing a bend in the road. For those of you in formation work or in leadership positions, these are decisions that I believe are worthy of both personal and communal discernment.

I have long held that the crisis of religious life these days is not a crisis of vocations, but a crisis of courage and imagination. Only a small number communities will ultimate succeed in giving birth to new life. Those who do will be made of members and leaders, young and old alike, who are willing and able to engage in the inner work of transformation.

Communities cannot plan their way out of today's challenges. Strategic planning alone will not bring about transformation: "If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans." There is a difference between change and transformation, between deep and incremental change. If you are looking to engage in deep change and transformation, you will need to help your communities engage in the inner work of transformation.

Most communities on the downside of the lifecycle fail to make the turn toward new life because they will fail to do the inner work. Out of fear, they will do too little, too late. They will make small incremental changes to cross the divide when, actually, a leap of faith is required. They will focus on making surface changes (e.g., downsizing and tightening their belts) and neglect the inner work. You can change where you live, what you do, even get new members but, as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, "You take your patterns with you." ***What are the patterns and practices, norms and structures, values and beliefs, that need to shift in your community to help foster new life?***

These respondents indicate that many of their communities are trying, but have "a long way to go." The inner work of transformation is the hardest work of all. It is the soul work of the dark night: reconciling relationships, working through resistance to change, grieving together, and healing together. Communal discernment, contemplative dialogue, working through tensions, and sharing more intimately, are critical skills many communities are trying to acquire in order to strengthen their capacity to do inner work of transformation. What is your community doing to strengthen your capacity to engage in the inner work of transformation?

The younger members in this survey are full of hope and committed to an "enduring future." As one respondent put it: "We no longer describe our community as diminishing, dying or declining. We are in the age of transforming, running to catch up with the sprit!" ***How is your community running to catch up with the spirit?***

"You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope." Thomas Merton

Endnotes

1 Ted Dunn, (2017). "Transformation of Religious Life: Contemplative reflections of 'younger' members." *The Occasional Papers* (Winter), pp. 25-31.

2 Ted Dunn. (2009). "Refounding Religious Life: A choice for transformational change." Human Development. 30 (4), pp. 5 – 13.

3 Giving Voice Organization. (2017). https://giving-voice.org.