

Leadership makes the difference

By Sister Mary Rowell C.S.J.

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Vocation ministers often need to help their communities to consciously choose to invite new people. Hopefulness for making that choice can be fostered through contact between young adults and membership. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto were invigorated by the enthusiastic participation in a pilgrimage to sites related to their community. Pictured here is Sister Joan Atkinson, C.S.J. (left) with two pilgrims. Photo courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto.

"HERE COMES EVERYBODY!" Many will recognize this description of the Catholic Church found in *Finnegans Wake*, the final work of Irish writer James Joyce. It describes the church, the Body of Christ, formed of its many parts, called to life. Indeed, without the vibrant diversity of each gifted and limited person brought into oneness, life is not possible at all. Both Christian theology and modern cosmology teach us this truth.

I hope to suggest here that the work of vocation ministry today, in its varied settings, is grounded in this reality of "all and one." It is a work of informal leadership, the primary purpose of which is to animate the gifts in individuals and in the whole to foster life in response to the love and call of God to each person and to each community.

Animate the gifts of each

Everybody! Everybody has gifts. As Brother Loughlan Sofield, S.T. pointed out in a 2015 address to the Religious Formation Conference, leadership that brings life begins

with the identification, affirmation, and animation of the gifts of each person. Traditionally vocation ministers have done this as they have walked with individuals in discernment, and it is appropriate that they continue to do so. They encourage in others the most important question, "Where is God calling me?" Vocation ministers, in light of the Spirit, call out and affirm the gifts of discerners to enable them to reflect upon their particular call. In doing so, vocation ministers exercise the leadership skills of listening, reflection, values clarification, and invitation as a process of mutual discernment takes place. Focusing on, calling forth, and affirming the gifts of individuals is a critical part of this process.

Today, however, this is not enough. Younger people rarely reach a point of truly discerning a particular vocation because the language of vocation in the church is absent, misconstrued, or limited. Moreover many religious communities lack visibility; people no longer even know we exist, and we have ceased to invite others to consider our way of life. Besides, many younger people no longer go to church on a regular basis, and while they may attend Catholic educational institutions, awareness and discussion of vocation is often largely absent from school and college curricula. (See "How universities can cultivate vocations," by Father Vincent O'Malley, C.M., 2016 HORIZON, Number 2.)

This situation now invites the vocation minister to work in a wider context and to assist in leading initiatives that help people recognize, claim, and live their gifts. For, as Brother Loughlan emphasized in his talk to formation directors, "Gift and call always go together." In other words, gift recognition is essential to understanding and living out one's vocation, and a vocation is about using one's God-given gifts for the sake of the whole and for mission. I am reminded of the beautiful definition of vocation offered by writer and theologian Frederick Buechner: "Vocation is the place where our deep gladness [and I would add here, gifts] meet the world's deep need."

So, I suggest that vocation ministers are called today as leaders who first help create, with others, initiatives in parishes, schools, colleges, coffee shops, and youth gatherings that facilitate the claiming of gifts to introduce healthy vocation awareness. Initiatives may include worship experiences, social events, relaxed discussions, retreats, hiking days, movie evenings, creative writing and art projects, social media events, and ecological and justice programs. The goal of such initiatives is to help people identify their gifts and ways in which their gifts have relevance for their relationship with God and significance for service in the contemporary church and world.

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer emphasizes this important first step in vocation leadership. He says:

from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God." Vocation leadership finds a starting point in facilitating self-discovery, giftedness, and call.

This approach presupposes that all are gifted and called. All have a vocation, and until this is fully realized, processes relating to the discernment of particular vocations are, at best, weak. Vocation ministry today entails that ministers take seriously the importance of working together to create a culture of vocation.

Vocation leadership to encourage a culture of vocation

The Third Continental Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life in North America, which met in Montreal in 2002, made clear the varied vocations in the church which "express in diverse ways the universal call to holiness implicit in baptism." The congress further emphasized "a deep respect for the complementarity and interdependence of all vocations." As community and communion of vocations, "its members need to be concerned about and committed to the flowering of all vocations in the church." The congress thus called for the development of a culture of vocation. The importance of this direction was demonstrated in NRVC's 2015 study conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate showing the positive impact of the family in nurturing ordained and consecrated vocations.

Despite considerable attention to the need for a culture of vocation, however, programs are not yet widely developed. Experienced vocation ministers have an exciting opportunity to capture the energy and to partner in initiatives to bring about a lively sense of vocation. This is not about a vocation minister doing it all him or herself. Rather it entails letting go of traditional models of leadership, as management consultant Margaret Wheatley, puts it, "Goodbye, command and control." Here the vision of leadership implies a model of cooperation and empowerment.

What a vocation minister may be able to offer at a direct level to begin are general presentations and workshops on vocation. These can create a deeper vocation awareness for all. Thereafter particular leadership skills are needed:

- facilitation and dialogue for the unfolding of a vision that can be widely embraced,
- motivational skills to engage all with passion and commitment,
- listening and reflective skills to clarify the will of the group necessary for collaborative decision-making,
- invitational skills to include a wide range of people, mobilizing the gifts of all in practical plans and in future shared leadership.

Perhaps most needed are leaders who recognize that the visioning and work belong to all. They generously contribute and share their special gifts and experience; they respect others and their unique contributions; and they are appropriately aware of their own limitations such that the project truly engages vocational diversity for service in the church and world to nurture all types of vocations.

These approaches to vocation leadership are consistent with certain general theories of leadership. Adaptive leadership models suited to our changing times emphasize the importance of "giving the work back to the people" by garnering the gifts of all, encouraging personal empowerment, getting people to own greater responsibility, listening and respecting various viewpoints, even those most difficult to hear, and challenging self and others to transformation. One of my teachers during novitiate would say it is "calling one another to greatness."

The servant leadership model articulated by Quaker Robert Greenleaf also calls for valuing the contributions of all, listening, discussing, and assisting others to achieve their potential and to assume responsibility. It is leadership in the model of Jesus who received the raw material of his followers and who formed them over time in prayer, vision, and action for the sake of the reign of God.

Leading an internal culture of vocation

Building a culture of vocation throughout the church truly enriches all vocations. But what of a culture of vocation within our religious communities? Internal vocation ministry is a vital context in which urgent and dedicated leadership is now needed.

We have long known that for a vibrant vocation ethos in religious communities, everyone (and not just the vocation minister) has a responsibility. Revitalizing an internal culture of vocation is urgent if we are to invite new membership. In this context, as in the situations described above, a vocation minister exercises leadership through the gift of animation of individuals and of charism and community.

Each member has something to bring to the vision, ethos, and work. This was movingly brought home to me when the Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada organized a weekend pilgrimage for young people to various community sites. The pilgrimage was entitled "Living Joy," and 24 young women and men participated. Part of our time together was spent at one of our residences where senior sisters are living. One sister in particular, who has early stage dementia, remains true to her social personality and joy in life. She greeted the pilgrims on arrival, showed them her room, joined them for a barbecue, and generally entertained them with warmth and kindness, though her struggles with dementia were obvious. At

particular sister. For them, she represented the joy and call of the gospel and of “living vocation.” She continues to be an inspiration for their personal discernment journeys.

Look at the bigger picture

These things become possible within a wider context. The vocation minister as leader is also called, as proponents of adaptive leadership would say, to “get on the balcony.” This calls the leader to view the larger landscape and to see emerging patterns that yield essential questions concerning the whole: What is the essence and gift of the charism of the community? What is the call to live it fully today? What are the unmet needs in the church and world that invite change and transformation in how we understand and live the charism with relevance and renewed passion?

To do this the leader builds warm and sometimes challenging individual relationships and facilitates conversation, shared reflection, and story telling. The leader recognizes his or her personal gifts and limitations and thus affirms others in their contributions. For this task the leader is gifted by “the wisdom of the ages”—all that he or she receives from the community’s history, spirit, expertise, and witness.

At a practical level, communal gift identification can be achieved through reflective questionnaires, workshops, or spirituality days designed to intentionally call forth the gifts of all to enhance community and contribute to the vocation climate.

Motivated by a need to discern and help create conditions for inviting and attracting new life, the vocation leader may initiate processes of communal discernment that seek to refine understandings of identity and role in light of call and charism. In such communal discernment, Sister Maria Cimperman, R.S.C.J. points out, “Our deepest values, hopes, priorities, and identities are named, and what is no longer the deepest value or priority or keenest identity is gently let go.” (Find Cimperman’s article, “Inviting thresholds: How communities might respond to shifting times” in 2009 HORIZON Number 2.)

Group discernment first invites the contributions of all in order to surface existing goods and build upon them together. It entails creating prayerful opportunities that inspire individuals and communities to “dream a future,” whatever that future may look like, under the guidance of the Spirit.

As Marty Linsky of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government says in *Transformational Leadership: Conversations with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*, “Our experience is that when you are inventing the future and searching for next practices, rather than looking for best practices, the more voices that you can bring to bear in that conversation, the more likely it is that you will be able to generate ideas and options that will be accepted broadly and deeply and will get you where you want to go.”

Of course, communal discernment of this kind already takes place at community assemblies and General Chapters. When such discernment is initiated as part of the work of vocation ministry, however, its primary intent is to energize the community and thus to create an invitational environment for new membership. Processes of communal discernment that take place at assemblies and Chapters are more broadly motivated. Nonetheless they must also maintain a mindfulness for vocation. After all, there are limits to identifying and naming inspiring directives to carry us into the future if there are no new members partnering with others to carry these out.

General Chapters are key moments

I am not denying that some communities will come to a natural end, as is the right order of things, having served well the building up of God’s work in their time. Nor am I denying that others outside the community, given their particular vocation and gifts, may also live the charism of a religious community and carry on some continuity. However, for religious to neglect explicit discussion and discernment of religious vocation at any of our major communal events, is arguably to choose, inadvertently, our own demise. This preempts the work of the Holy Spirit, closing ourselves off from outcomes best entrusted to the Spirit.

Anecdotally, it is clear, as international vocation leaders have attested, that even for communities experiencing considerable diminishment, when vocation is discussed at a General Chapter, it is taken seriously once again, even if it is ultimately for the benefit and growth of religious life in general. This observation suggests that the leadership work of the vocation minister involves positive and proactive communications with formal congregational leadership as they discern the future together with members and with Chapter preparation teams. This proactive communication allows possibilities for vocation animation to be integrally incorporated into discussions for wider well-being and mission.

Courage to face hard questions

To “stand on the balcony” observing the wider context may also be a dangerous task and one that may not be welcomed! For the view from the balcony today is revealing emerging patterns that are not necessarily in harmony with one another. Take, for example, the great desire of those presently attracted to religious congregations for community living and communal prayer. Meanwhile many existing members have come to differing views of what it means to live in community and to pray.

and today's societal ethos, community is the counter-cultural witness. Community, in different forms in the past, and for many of us now, was and is the attractor to religious life.

While the length and substance of this article precludes any in-depth discussion of this particular difficulty, the existence of such challenges does invite vocation leadership to create pathways of dialogue and to act sometimes as "translators," to bring all to threshold moments of discernment. This role of translating what newcomers are seeking may require the vocation leader to propose challenges to him or herself and to the community. Sister Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D. discussed these concerns in the video "A Future Full of Hope from the Religious Retirement Office." FitzGerald says of the case in point, the crux is that this is "going to call for sacrifices. And sacrificing things that we may legitimately have ... we are going to have to be on call to mentor ... to provide a model for [new members] of how the life needs to be lived. And unless communities can offer this, they are not going to have and keep new [members]."

The leader must sometimes have the courage, integrity, and commitment to suggest sacrifice for the sake of new life. He or she may need to face frustration and receive the criticism or even anger of others. It is not an easy task, but FitzGerald knows whereof she speaks given the courageous challenge taken on by her community, the Discalced Carmelites of Baltimore, who entered into a process of discerning, letting go, sacrificing, and real change. The reward was the gift of remarkable new vocations to the community and a gift of hope.

Communicate hope

Above all at this time, vocation leaders need to communicate and engender hope through affirmation and sometimes challenge. Sessions in community that generate seeds of hope, even in difficult days, can be invaluable in creating a context for inviting new life. In saying this I am reminded of our own community's ecology center where each fall we plant the garlic for the new season. Given the Canadian climate, it takes an act of outrageous faith annually to believe that in the spring, after being buried so long in the snow, the garlic shoots will appear. But they always do appear, and faith and hope meet once again. The vocation leader must provide such hope for the regeneration of an invitational climate so that the shoots of new life appear.

Hope is essential for creating a context that is attractive to new members. In recent years of diminishment, however, it has become a difficult virtue and context to create. So I suggest that leaders in vocation ministry, indeed all leaders formal and informal, need to look for ways to engender hope in all they do. Otherwise our lack of hope will send out negative messages and may itself become a self-fulfilling prophecy with respect to vocation. In my experience offering hospitality in our homes, opportunities for praying with our members, open houses and social events not only provide an opportunity for visibility and witness, but in turn bring hope. One of our larger communities once held a young adult open house that included contemplative prayer, a vocation DVD, discussion, and a pizza supper. It brought great vitality to all the sisters who participated, both younger and older members.

Vocation leadership that includes affirmation and development of charism and community has the capacity to re-create a sense of grateful identity and an attractive context. For while a new generation has been deeply exposed to change and instability and are, thus, flexible, it is paradoxically those same conditions that attract them to ventures and groupings that know and name clearly who they are and to what they are called. Identity, albeit an identity in transition, is critical. Reclaiming who we are and who we are becoming may well lead us to actively invite women and men to consider the possibility of a religious vocation.

Finally, which one of us, I wonder, doesn't "come alive" when our gifts are affirmed and called upon or when we are engaged in seeking and claiming the gifts of communal identity? Through these leadership processes, vocation ministers, with others, call out a lively and engaged joy, an essential component for a community that attracts. At a 2014 gathering of religious men and women in Korea, Pope Francis said: "Joy is a gift nourished by a life of prayer, meditation on the Word of God, the celebration of the Sacraments, and life in community. When these are lacking, weaknesses and difficulties will emerge to dampen the joy we knew so well at the beginning of our journey." Above all, together in mission and in shared leadership, we are called to witness to living joy and to be joy-makers! For, as Pope Francis continued, "Only if our witness is joyful will we attract men and women to Christ." Leadership indeed!

A version of this article appeared in 2016 HORIZON, Spring, Number 2.

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