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Communal Discernment

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*“Where two or more are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”
Matthew 18:20*

Communal discernment is a profound and sacred collective journey. The goal is to enter into the mystery of God’s call for this historical time. As Rainer Maria Rilke states, “The future enters into us, in order to transform us, long before it happens.”¹ This is the profound pilgrimage where discerners are invited by the divine to become vulnerable for the sake of a larger transcendent and authentic vision.

The pathway of discernment demands a painstaking collective spiritual discipline. This is real as we enter historical times filled with animated language over competing worldviews, global natural catastrophes and heightened tension between nations as we live simultaneously in a profound time of medical breakthroughs, increased interconnectivity, and technological advances in all sectors of society.

God’s call is to develop a direction that increases compassion and heals our divisions as part of our changing world. This celestial call has been put eloquently by Leo Rosten, “Courage is the capacity for us to see the embers of a dream and pursue with the vigor, tenacity and perseverance to make it real.”

This is also framed from another perspective by

Joan Chittister who states:

*“Learning to look at our worlds as if they were really made by God, as if God were really in them now, as if God were calling us from the other side of every event and situation is different from rushing about trying to find God somewhere else”.*²

We are collectively being asked to discern a future with both vulnerability and excitement in these times in order to seek God in the now.

It is to dream while embracing the unvarnished truth of both the light and darkness of the moment.

Communal discernment invites the collective to explore the mental models and assumptions that shape its worldview. This is the foundational thread that opens the door to create a strategic direction with supportive structures. In an era of rapid change, communal discernment is not a onetime event. Rather communal discernment demands a daily, monthly, and yearly review. This perspective allows a greater openness as to how God’s presence is breaking into the world. As Illia Delio states:

*“The challenge is to experience ourselves as making the gospels real for our time. To come to a new understanding of God in our age, a God who is the God of evolution, is to know ourselves, as privileged bearers of transcendence.”*³

¹Satya Nadella, *Hit Refresh, The Quest to Rediscover Microsoft’s Soul and Imagine a Better Future for Everyone*, (HarperCollins, 2017), Print. 12

²Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, (Harper Collins 1990), Print. 205.

³Illia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love*. (Orbis Books 2014), Print. 62

Communal discernment is not for the faint of heart. It can at times be perilous and scary; and It requires a profound commitment of personal and collective detachment. Historically faith communities have come to realize that in recognizing God's call we are often taken where we least wish to traverse. Understanding this is even more critical in these times of change where technology, the environment, immigration and other disruptive realities are questioning and challenging existing mental models and institutional structures.

Finally, the collective is called to walk the "middle way". This quote from the motion picture producer, Pixar, so exquisitely describes this middle Path: *"Pixar's entire success depended on developing enough strategy, order and bureaucracy to give it momentum without killing the creative spirit. This is the entreaty of the Middle Way: to inspire us to give expression to our spirit, creativity and humanity and still take care of day-to-day needs and responsibilities. The Middle Way is a dance between order and freedom, bureaucracy and spirit, efficiency and artistry."*⁴

The "middle way" for a religious organization is grounded in three contemplative processes: exploring the collective mental model, creating a mission-driven strategic course; and establishing an adaptable governance structure. This container aligns the various elements to support the vision. Each of these processes opens the collective heart to explore where the mystery of God is calling us while becoming co-creators

establishing a world increasingly filled with justice, compassion and love.

Rather than individual silos, the graphic below portrays an integration that signifies the middle way. The collective is called to face how mental models shape choices in the three areas: strategy, operations, and sustainability. The belief system of the collective determines the choice of a governance structure that liberates, holds the status quo or inhibits having a unified direction.



There is a tendency to minimize the central importance of understanding the organization's mental model in this three-dimensional model. However, it is not only indispensable but critical to recognize the assumptions, worldviews and mental constructs that guide the collective's thinking. In any significant change process or creation of a bold vision, the chosen mental framework can either be liberating or perpetuate the organization's status quo. This exploration usually will unleash a range of emotions, rigid patterns and reluctance to change as one enters

⁴Lawrence Levy, *To Pixar and beyond: My Unlikely Journey with Steve Jobs to Make Entertainment History*, (Mariner Books 2017), Print. 244

into dialogue about a future which moves away from the comfortability of the known.

Spiritual detachment with an open heart allows for being open to God's challenging call. As Ed Brown's poem so eloquently states:

**Washing my hands
I cleanse my mind
Of the same old thinking...
and offer to lend a hand to
each new task.⁵**

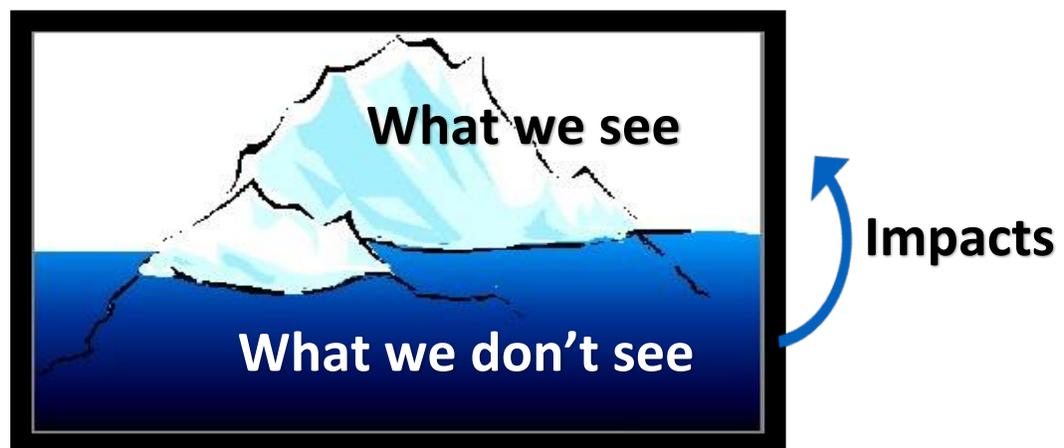
The iceberg image below powerfully shows the mental model's two-dimensions: what we see and what we don't see. What we see focuses on current reality. Yet, what impacts the collective future is often what we don't see. Often in society there are trends like technological advances or economic realities that impact the near future. For example, becoming more connected through technology over the past fifteen years has reshaped our communication and sense of community.

The failure to anticipate and or explore these elements can lead to affirming the status quo, and keep us stuck in old patterns. This can inhibit the group from seeing a future that can have greater purpose and societal impact. At these moments our collective spiritual practices and contemplation become imperative in order to be prepared to leave the known for the unknown.

Another way to frame this conversation is from the work of Chris Argyris. His research showed through the simple model below how our mental models informs our strategy and outcomes.



For example, our community wants to create a new vision and yet we continually say "yes/but", or "we have tried this" rather than change or adapt our strategies or model to move forward. This stems from being stuck in an existing mental model



⁵Jack Kornfield, No Time like the Present: Finding Freedom, Love, and Joy Right Where You Are, (Atria Books 2017), Print. 110.

As part of the group's communal discernment there is a prerequisite to enter into rigorous and healthy dialogue around collective assumptions, community trends and culture norms. This discernment opens the door to explore the ability create a bold and daring vision. The lack of due diligence and reflection at this point can impede or impact the creation of an inspiring visionary direction. Through this process the heart is open to God's invitation and thus explore and risk new vistas.

The second phase of communal discernment consists of the group creating a futuristic direction by opening their minds and hearts to God call. Quotes from the book, *The Disney Way*, and Joan Chittister's *Radical Spirit*, speak to the pilgrimage:

The Disney Way states, "Those who have prospered despite a pathway of obstacles have done so with an inner compass that steers their course...deeply held values that have crystallized and led them to achieve tangible results."⁶ And as Joan Chittister says, "tradition lives and thrives on the energy and clarity of its vision and its dreams, its purpose and its goals."⁷

These pronouncements speak to the discipline and meticulousness nature needed to create an inspiring and compelling vision with the courage to act. As the graphic to the right demonstrates the strategic, operational and sustainability are interconnected. There is a tendency to create a thorough well crafted document and then place

it on a shelf. To be effective, the group must enter into the hard work of shaping a real operational and sustainable path to enmesh a lofty vision. This process demands radical detachment of the collective ego and desire for the security of the known. It is not an easy path!

When planning for the future the group is called to reflect on these important questions:

Strategic: What are our hopes and aspirations for creating a compassionate and sustainable world based on our charism?

Operational: What are the concrete services, directions and activities we need to accomplish this inspirational direction?

Sustainable: What are the resources needed (people, partnerships, finances, etc.) to establish and sustain a bold vision?



⁶Bill Capodagli, and Lynn Jackson. *The Disney Way: Harnessing the Management Secrets of Disney in Your Company*. (McGraw-Hill 2016), Print. Preface

⁷Joan Chittister, *Radical Spirit: 12 Ways to Live a Free and Authentic Life* (New York: Convergent, 2017), Print. 146

Finally, in a historical period of continual change, we need to explore any planning from a more emergent model. As Megaret Wheatley states in her book, Who Do We Choose to Be, “Working with emergence means to be fully engaged, carefully observing what’s going on as we do our work, learning from experience, applying those learning, adapting and changing. In other words, behaving like everything else alive does.”⁸

Henry Mintzberg’s graphic below depicts the path. The chart shows the path and then unforeseen circumstances emerge that moves the group to adapt rather than rigidly stay on the path. In a time of rapid change, it is critical that all the strategic, operational and sustainable needs be seen from a more emergent model.

Structures by their very nature are powerfully supportive vessels. Yet, we live in a culture that fails to fully appreciate and embrace their

essential nature. This fear is grounded in a larger social context that deifies “individualism” over the common good. The prevailing community is meant to serve the needs and wants of the individual. Thus, we have become unable to hold a healthy polarity between the individual and communal. This incapacity often leads to paralysis and tribal tension.

A container or basin is simply a means to our transcendent purpose. The structure’s boundaries and limitations are meant to serve the mission and vision. For example, when we put water in a container it allows us to more easily drink the contents. The fundamental role of any structure is to liberate and align the organization for the common good. At its best, a structure is not seen or felt. When this happens, the group can focus more intentionally and fully on its mission, vision and service to others.



⁸Margaret J. Wheatly, *Who Do We Choose To Be? Facing Reality Claiming Leadership Restoring Sanity*, (Berrett-Koehler 2017), Print. 231

When we look at the graphic below we see the container allowing us to more clearly focus on the blue circle, the heart and soul of the organization.



The vessel affirms the individuality and interconnectedness of these essential parts of a healthy organization.

Summary:

As Satya Nadella states in the book, Hit Refresh, “But most important, it’s about the change coming in every life as we witness the most transformative wave of technology yet – one that will include artificial intelligence, mixed reality and quantum computing. It’s about how people, organizations and societies can and must transform – hit refresh – in the persistent quest for new energy, new ideas, relevance, and renewal.”⁹ This is the radical call of our time to take up the challenge in Walt Disney famous model of planning dream, believe, do, act. The call of the Christian journey to continually enliven the gospel for our times to become the Word made flesh, John 1:14. This call is the communal journey, today, for religious congregations.



⁹Nadella, 11

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