

Reflections From The Crossroads

Transformation, Leadership, and Religious Life

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Gather the Wisdom, Weave a Dream

When memory alone is not enough.

There is a line I wrote years ago that still unsettles me: When a community has more memories than dreams, it is dying. I do not say that lightly. Memories matter. They carry the fragrance of the founding story. They hold the names of women and men who gave themselves away with astonishing generosity. They preserve the grit, sacrifice, humor, grief, and courage that made a community what it is.

A community without memory is untethered. But a community with only memory becomes a museum. And religious life was never meant to be a museum. It was meant to be a living response to the call of God in history. A particular fire. A way of seeing. A way of loving. A way of standing in the world when the world is aching for something more whole, more just, more human, more of God. That is why dreaming matters. Not fantasy. Not institutional wishfulness. Not a strategic plan with better adjectives.

Dreaming, at its deepest, is a form of fidelity.

It asks: What is the Spirit trying to bring to life among us now? What is still unfinished in our charism? What future is already pressing against the walls of our present life, asking to be welcomed, tested, and embodied? Many communities today stand at a difficult threshold. The past is rich. The present is demanding. The future is unclear. That is not failure. It is the crossroads.

And at the crossroads, one of the great temptations is to keep looking backward, not because the past was perfect, but because it is recognizable. It has furniture. It has photographs on the wall. We know where the dishes are kept.

The future does not offer that kind of comfort. The future comes first as disturbance. It arrives as restlessness. As grief. As the quiet admission that what once gave life may no longer be enough. As the painful realization that maintaining what exists can consume the very energy needed to imagine what might yet be born. This is why transformative visioning is not simply about creating a vision statement.

Most communities have had vision statements. Some are beautiful. Many are forgotten. They hang on walls, appear in documents, and disappear from daily life. That is because a vision statement, by itself, cannot transform a community. It can name what a community hopes for. It cannot substitute for the journey that makes such hope believable.

Transformative visioning is different. It is not forecasting the future. It is not managing decline with softer language. It is not dressing up yesterday's answers for tomorrow's questions. It is a communal faith journey.

Its purpose is to gather the wisdom already present in the community and weave a dream strong enough to awaken its soul. That phrase still feels right to me.

Gather the wisdom. Weave a dream.

The wisdom is not found only in archives, though archives matter. It is not found only in founding documents, though founding documents matter. It is not found only in expert reports, demographic studies, or strategic analyses, though these have their place.

The deeper wisdom is found in the lived experience of the members. In the questions they carry. In the grief they do not always name. In the holy stubbornness of those who

still believe there is something more to give. In the younger or newer members who wonder whether there will be enough future to inhabit. In the partners in mission who may see gifts the community has become too tired to recognize.

Wisdom is gathered through honest conversation. Slow conversation. Conversation with enough safety for truth to emerge and enough courage for truth not to be managed into politeness.

This is where many visioning efforts fail. They stay too near the shore. They begin with energy and good intention, but when the real questions surface, the process grows cautious. People say there is not enough time. Or not enough money. Or too much conflict. Or too much fatigue. Or the community is too old. Or the members are not ready.

Sometimes these are real concerns. Sometimes they are beautifully dressed evasions. There is always a good reason to stay ashore. But transformation rarely begins with convenience. It begins when a community tells the truth about the cost of staying where it is.

The first movement is awakening.

Something has to break through the ordinary fog. A community has to see that going on as usual is not neutral. It has consequences. The status quo is not standing still. It is taking the community somewhere. The question is whether that somewhere is life.

But pain alone is not enough. Pain may wake us up, but it cannot sustain the journey. A community also needs hope. Audacious hope. Not optimism pasted over grief, but hope with dirt under its fingernails. Hope that has looked at reality and still believes God is not finished.

Then comes grounding.

A community must gather wisdom about its own culture, its wider context, and its deepest dreams. It must ask: Who are we, really? What do we say we value, and what do our patterns actually reveal? What is happening in the world, the Church, the neighborhood, the planet, that is asking something new of us? What dreams still live beneath the fatigue?

These questions are not answered quickly. Nor are they answered well by surveys alone. They require listening. They require contemplation. They require the kind of dialogue where people are not merely waiting to speak, but allowing themselves to be affected by what they hear.

Then comes dreaming.

This is often harder than it sounds. Many communities know how to analyze. They know how to critique. They know how to produce careful documents. They know how to remember. They know how to name constraints. Dreaming asks for another muscle. It asks: What would we love enough to risk for? What would make us want to get up in the morning? What would bring life not only to us, but through us? What might make God smile?

That may sound like a tender question. It is also a dangerous one. Because once a community begins to dream honestly, it may have to admit that some current commitments no longer carry the life they once did. It may have to let go of ministries, structures, buildings, customs, or self-understandings that have become more about preservation than mission.

Letting go is not betrayal. Sometimes it is the only way love keeps moving. But dreaming alone can become airy. At some point, dreams need to take shape. They need to be tested. They need criteria. Does this further the mission? Does it fit reality? Does it stir hope and passion? Is it doable with an all-out effort?

Then comes discernment.

This is where visioning becomes more than planning. A community does not simply ask, "Which option do we prefer?" It asks, "Where do we sense God's call?" That question changes the room.

It asks members to bring their desires honestly, but hold them lightly. It asks the community to weave together my will, our will, and God's will. That is not simple. Anyone who says otherwise has not spent much time in communal discernment. There is sweat in it. There is surrender in it. There is also freedom.

When discernment is real, the community is not merely choosing a project. It is being shaped by the choosing. The process itself becomes formative. Members listen

differently. They risk differently. They become more honest about what they love and what they fear.

And finally, there is realizing.

Dreams remain dreams unless they are acted upon. At some point, communities must do something. Not study forever. Not debate forever. Not wait until everyone is equally ready, equally enthusiastic, equally clear. Do something. Try something small enough to learn from and meaningful enough to matter. Experiment. Evaluate. Adjust. Try again. Some wisdom only comes after we move.

This is often the missing piece. Communities can spend years thinking their way toward a new way of acting. Sometimes they need to act their way into a new way of thinking.

The future does not arrive fully formed. It comes in fragments. Trace amounts. A conversation. A partnership. A younger member's question. A neighbor's need. A ministry that no longer fits. A grief that will not go away. A new possibility at the edge of the old map.

The work is to notice. To gather. To weave. To risk. The past deserves reverence. But reverence is not the same as repetition. To honor a charism is not to embalm it. It is to let it breathe again in a new time, through new forms, for new needs. That is the work before many communities now. Not to abandon the past. Not to cling to it. To allow the best of the past to be re-gathered, reinterpreted, and offered forward as gift.

This is not easy work. It asks for courage, grief, imagination, honesty, and patience. It asks communities to become more intimate with God and with one another than efficiency usually permits.

But there is still wisdom to gather.

There are still dreams to weave.

*And perhaps, even now, beneath the floorboards of consciousness, the
future is already stirring.*

For Reflection

- Where in your community, ministry, or own life are you being invited to move from remembering what has been toward dreaming what still wants to be born?
- What wisdom do we already carry that we have not yet gathered?
- What dream might emerge if we listened more deeply together?
- What small experiment could help us act our way into a new way of thinking?

More reflections will follow in the months ahead.

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See also, *Gather the Wisdom, Weave a Dream: A visioning guide for leaders and planners of faith communities seeking deep change and transformation.*

CCS Publications (2024)

and

Gather the Wisdom, Weave a Dream: Transformative Visioning as a Refounding Process.
Human Development, Summer 2010.

