

The Challenge of Reconfiguration:

New Opportunities for Religious Congregations



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As many religious congregations continue to shrink and age, their leaders and members are increasingly exploring whether to reconfigure themselves by merging with other provinces—or even with other congregations. The best choice is not always immediately evident. A reconfiguration or merger can simply maintain the status quo of the component congregations, or it may even be actively harmful to one or more of them. Only rarely, and only with the deliberate effort of both the membership and the leadership, will a reconfiguration spark a new re-founding cycle in the merged community. In this article, I hope to outline some of the steps that could make this happen.

“HARMFUL” MERGERS

First, however, we must look briefly at the alternatives. When might a reconfiguration actually be harmful to one or more of the merging congregations? The most obvious instance would be if a financially solvent group merges with one or more communities that are in a more precarious fiscal condition. It is true that the more Christ-like course of action may, in fact, be to share one’s communal wealth with less fortunate congregations. It is also true that remaining selfishly aloof in one’s own security while others suffer penury is soul-deadening to both parties and a scandal to outside onlookers. So a religious congregation may choose to take the objectively “harmful” step of merging with one or several less-solvent congregations, in the spirit of Jesus’ admonition to rely on Providence and of the widow he commended for giving away her last penny. But such a reconfiguration poses obvious and frightening risks. If a congregation is reluctant to take this step, is it because its members are selfishly guarding their own comfort and security, or is it because they see how straitened financial circumstances would inhibit their future ability to respond to God’s call? Careful discernment is obviously needed before such a merger.

Additionally, any reconfiguration—even the merger of provinces within the same congregation—usually reveals subtle (or not-so-subtle) cultural differences between the component communities. Some of these differences will have developed over time from the different personalities of the original founders of each component community and of all their subsequent leaders and members, from inherited ethnic practices, having been located in different parts of the country, being geographically dispersed instead of confined to a single diocese, or simply the dynamics inherent in having been large or small prior to the merger. Other differences may arise from recent history: a congregation which has had no new members entering for the past ten, fifteen, or twenty years may be more pessimistic about the future than another congregation which still has a few younger members. One congregation’s members may expect frequent consultation with and visits from their leaders; a second congregation’s members may instinctively resent being “checked-up on.” Such unconscious assumptions and expectations, if not named and examined, may inhibit the successful melding of the merging groups into a genuinely new and unified community. Worse, the merged congregation may adopt its dysfunctional aspects of the component cultures rather than the functional ones.

None of these difficulties need necessarily preclude a successful reconfiguration—one that leads to a new dawn for the religious congregation in the twenty-first century. In fact, as I shall argue below, “harmful” mergers may actually be more beneficial than reconfigurations which merely prolong the status quo. But the dangers of reconfiguration do need to be recognized before they can be utilized as beneficial forces for true re-founding.

STATUS QUO MERGERS

This second type of reconfiguration may be the most common, simply because many religious congregations have merged out of economic practicality or sheer necessity, rather than out of a proactive vision for a new future. Merged congregations, after all, benefit from economies of scale: sharing retirement facilities, financial offices, and vocation/formation personnel. Some congregations have shrunk to the point that they no longer have a sufficient number of members under the age of 70 to serve in congregational leadership; for

them, a merger is unavoidable. Many reconfigurations, therefore, may spring more from the reaction to a congregation’s *present* difficulties than from any concrete vision for its *future*. In such cases, both the leadership and the membership are often too preoccupied with the plethora of legal, financial, and nitty-gritty details which accompany merging to want to rock the boat any more than necessary. The median age of the merged community is not changed, and few, if any, lifestyle changes are initiated or expected of the members. Other than a broader focus in intra-congregational communications and more people attending community gatherings—now often held in a more distant and unfamiliar place—the day-to-day lives of the members remain as they were before reconfiguration. *This kind of merger will not lead to a viable future for the merged congregation; it will merely postpone its eventual dissolution.* That is why, paradoxically, “harmful” or difficult mergers, by shaking up the component congregations, may actually be better for their future.

THE GIFT OF LIMINALITY

Hidden in the financial uncertainty, the large and small cultural shocks, and the other disruptions of reconfiguration is a valuable opportunity. Religious congregations, like all human groups, inevitably settle into predictable routines. The same persons end up on the same preparation committees chapter after chapter. Living situations remain unchanged year after year, as stable dyads grow old together or as an ever-dwindling cadre of six, then four, then three religious serve in the same school for decades. Thinking outside the box, while valued in theory, is nearly impossible in practice because the box’s walls are so taken-for-granted as to be invisible. There may be a handful of prophetic members with a consuming passion for ecological sustainability, feeding the homeless, or combating abortion/war/sexism or some other evil, but they do not all have the *same* passion. The rest of the community allows them their individual concerns, as long as they do not impose them on others.

Liminal periods, according to anthropologists, are the breakdowns of these predictable routines of thought and action. For a brief time, hierarchies and statuses are flattened, traditions are erased, and literally anything can happen. It is an unsettling and profoundly threatening time, and most cultures “tame” their liminality by confining it to a specific day (Mardi

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Gras, for example) or life cycle transition (the puberty rites of some traditional cultures). When a liminal period breaks out unexpectedly—after a natural disaster, for example—all those involved try to restore normality as quickly as possible.

The reconfiguration of a religious congregation is a liminal period. Merging two or more communities will inevitably scramble leadership hierarchies; cultural differences will be brought into bold relief; taken-for-granted assumptions and traditions will be questioned; established friendship networks expanded. As with any other liminal period, there will be a strong temptation to re-establish a “new normal” as quickly as possible. This, however, is precisely what should *not* be done. In liminality lie the seeds of true re-founding and the future of the congregation.

How can religious communities proactively use the liminality of reconfiguration to make merging their congregations more than a simple continuance of an eventually dying status quo? Both leaders and members must first of all know what a liminal period is, and how to harness its ephemeral energies and prolong them into their new future. It will not be sufficient simply to sit back and assume that the creative ferment of liminality will automatically bring about something new after reconfiguration. The pressures to return to the status quo will be too strong. Nor is it sufficient for a single subgroup of the community—the leadership, the strategic planning committee, the vocations team, an interested group of rank and file members—to try to make something new happen by themselves. As I have noted in a previous article (“Leadership as

Administration: A Defense and Prescriptions,” *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* 27, No. 4 [Winter 2006]), the leaders, the rank and file members, and the mid-level “staff” offices of a congregation all have essential roles in initiating or facilitating change in their religious community. No one sub-group can do it alone. This is even truer in the case of reconfiguration: its liminality must be prepared for and carefully developed by all involved.

STEP I: PREPARATION

Reconfiguration-initiated liminality has one advantage over other events that may upend a congregation’s routine: it is usually evident several years ahead of time that a merger is going to happen. Therefore, the accompanying liminality can and should be *planned*. A reconfiguring community can anticipate that several persons will be freed from leadership after the merger; duplicated offices will be streamlined and combined; some extra financial savings may accrue. Allocation of monies will be in flux. Individual members with a particular consuming interest will now have like-minded compatriots in the other component congregations. There will be a large gathering of some sort to finalize and ritualize the merger—with all of the elevated enthusiasm and commitment such an experience usually brings. Congregational leadership and whatever planning committees exist should actively plan on how to mobilize these assets during the all-too-brief liminal time before traditional expectations and assumptions arise again and dissipate them into familiar channels.

The first step in planning for liminality is to locate the remaining points of life and enthusiasm that will exist in the new community after reconfiguration. Every member of each merging community should be personally contacted and encouraged to share their individual, personal vision of the charism. What gives each brother life? Where/how does each sister find God in her daily activities? What are each member’s specific dreams for his/her future? If a member of one congregation dreams of starting a Christo Rey school, organizing an ecological retreat center, or painting religious murals, are there members of the other merging communities with similar dreams? What barriers, if any, keep them from joining together? Of course, not every member of a congregation will have such dreams: many or even most will want nothing more

than to continue what they are currently doing without being bothered. Others will be physically or emotionally incapable of participating in a new endeavor. At least initially, the members with sufficient health, ability, and enthusiasm to commit all their energies to something new in the post-reconfiguration period will be relatively few. They are therefore precious assets, to be identified, nurtured, and linked both to each other and to the resources they need.

“Points of life” may also include present ministries that work well—a thriving clinic run by one congregation, a retreat center in another—or, at the staff level, they may be vocation techniques that are successful in reaching young people, or an especially good public relations office. In all of these cases, an essential preparation for the liminality of reconfiguration should be to locate the human resources, the skill and knowledge resources, and the institutional resources which each merging congregation possesses and to begin strategizing how to connect them in synergy.

STEP II: IMPLEMENTATION

If this first step is adequately done, the membership of each component congregation will already have an idea that something new is afoot. They may have attended a day of recollection where they identified their gifts and passions. They may have filled out a survey. Ideally, they will have been personally contacted in a one-on-one meeting with a member of the leadership council or the planning committee in a “dream for the future” session. The second step will then involve linking together members with the same or complementary passions. This might be done from the ground up—encouraging like-minded members to connect across the merging congregations and develop action proposals for congregational support. Alternatively, the leadership council or a mid-level office or committee might proactively invite selected members to brainstorming or planning sessions. Either way, however, the danger exists that some interested members will be overlooked in the process. Ground-level connections may travel along pre-established friendship networks, excluding those outside. Leaders and planning committees, too, are human and used to thinking along familiar lines; they may confine their invitations to members who have been active in the past. To obviate this, some person or office should be specifically

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charged with making sure that a personal invitation to participate in the new endeavor(s) is repeatedly offered to all the membership. Those responsible for intra-congregational communications will need to be given the responsibility for publicizing the progress of the new initiative(s) on a regular basis. Enthusiasm for a new venture is not a zero-sum game: as more and more information about the joys and trials, the successes and the challenges, of those active in the new initiative is made available to the rest of the congregation, additional members are likely to find the same passion awakened in their own hearts. Ongoing arrangements need to be made to locate these newly-enthusiastic members (who had ignored previous invitations), and to connect them to the initiative when and as their interest is piqued.

In addition to locating the individuals with fire and enthusiasm and connecting them with like-minded compatriots in the other component communities, some active facilitation needs to be done by upper or mid-level administration to help them develop their vision. In my previous article, I noted that such facilitation would include:

inquiring about, or even anticipating, [their] needs for secretarial assistance, equipment, informational resources, and/or released time from ministry and travel money for group meetings. . . . Another necessary component of facilitation is helping these intermediate

groups sustain their level of enthusiasm: by encouraging them to make retreats together, by funding their attendance at some conference of like-minded issue groups outside the congregation, or simply by affirming, funding, praising, and publicizing their efforts. Good administrative facilitation must be proactive; it is not enough to sit back and wait until an implementation group or office requests assistance. Sometimes it requires anticipating and providing assistance that the implementing group does not even imagine it needs, and then inspiring the group to greater and more creative efforts in using it (“Leadership as Administration: A Defense and Prescriptions,” *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* 27, No. 4, [Winter 2006] p. 38).

These activities, of course, require both time and money. The liminal period immediately after reconfiguration, however, is precisely the time when leadership personnel and funds saved from reduplicative efforts are the most likely to be available for new uses—and not yet spoken for by existing interests.

The whole idea at this critical juncture is to harness the emotional “high” left over from the merger celebration, the freed-up time and talent of former congregational leaders and planning committees, the building space vacated by merging infirmaries and offices, and to use these resources to catalyze and support new articulations of the merged congregation’s shared charisma through their first precarious years. Once liminality fades and things begin to settle down into a “new normal,” however, the larger congregation needs to fulfill a third role: that of evaluation.

STEP III: ONGOING EVALUATION

If a congregation uses its reconfiguration to free up the energies of liminality for change and growth, then it will be necessary periodically to evaluate how well its efforts are succeeding. The dangers of merging will repeatedly conspire to derail truly creative initiatives. Members from different component orders, even if they share a common passion, may have divergent cultural expectations that inhibit their working together. Newly-merged provinces of an international order may

share approximately common cultures but find they are so thinly scattered across the entire country that a truly collaborative common effort would require a massive relocation of its most passionate members—a psychologically draining prospect. The monetary savings from merging offices will be quickly swallowed up by a plethora of competing needs. The larger merged order will inevitably be less “homey” and intimate, which may depress some members’ enthusiasm. Finally, those involved may be so committed to nurturing their dream for the charisma—the spirituality center, Christo Rey High School, or inner-city health clinic—that they may fail to give equal attention to locating a new generation to whom to pass on the charisma. If the new initiatives do not attract new members—vowed and associate—to the community, its reconfiguration efforts will have been in vain in the long run. If a new initiative falters due to unresolved differences, if an insufficient number of members are willing/able to join the new venture, reconfiguration will likewise have been in vain. Ongoing evaluation is needed to determine whether the allocation of community resources for an initiative is time, personnel, and money well-spent, as well as to recover from false starts and nurture incipient successes.

All of this has been rather abstract so far. In the following section, I will provide a few illustrations or examples of how the liminal period preceding and following reconfiguration might be harnessed to spark a true re-founding in a congregation.

EXAMPLE I. DEVELOPING A NEW MINISTRY

Scenario

Five separate congregations of the Sisters of X trace their origins to a single nineteenth century foundress. Now they are reconfiguring into a single community.

Preparation—Identifying Points of Growth

In preparation for the liminal period which will occur during and after their merger, the leadership of all five congregations convened a common “Open Space” meeting for the entire membership of all five congregations, inviting members to dream/brainstorm promising new or expanded initiatives. All sisters were strongly encouraged to participate; sisters in the various congregations’ infirmaries were connected by video.

During the open space, several sisters discussed a common dream they had: beginning an organized Arts Ministry sponsored by their merged congregations. They began to identify who might be interested: a sister-painter in Community X1, a sister teaching sculpture at Community X2's college, two sisters in Community X3 who lead mandala-drawing retreats at its retreat center, a retired sister in Community X4 who is into photography. No sisters from Community X5 were present in this particular open space session, so no one knew whether any members in that community would be interested or not. At the end of the day, the group submitted its preliminary proposal to the meeting's conveners.

Implementation and Evaluation

The Sisters of X had set aside a fund to support planning activities for these initiatives. The artists' preliminary proposal was accepted for further development. This included:

- Sending an invitation to all members of each congregation to attend a facilitated Arts Ministry Planning Workshop lasting several days. Scholarship funds were available for travel for those living at a distance. Agenda for the workshop included sharing the artistic interests and accomplishments of the participants, an input session and subsequent discussion on the spirituality of art, brainstorming about the practical needs (location, financial viability, mission outreach) of an Arts Ministry, and surfacing the names of other sisters who would be willing to join such an endeavor, and in what capacity. The leadership of the Sisters of X had set up a viability standard which had to be met for future funding/support of the proposal: At least 25 sisters would have to express preliminary interest by attending this planning workshop and at least 15 sisters would have to be willing to commit to active participation in the further planning. The workshop met these minimal criteria—barely.
- Subsequent planning meetings of the core planning group, plus whatever other sisters could come to help. Each meeting was held in a different location, hosted by a different one of the merging congregations, in or near a possible site for the new

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arts ministry. While several sites had possibilities, all also had liabilities. At the planning meetings, the sisters also met with representatives of each congregation's retreat centers, music ministries, communications offices, high schools, health care facilities, etc., to explore opportunities for complementarity and synergy.

- Ongoing updates on the progress of this and other initiatives reported to the congregations in their respective in-house newsletters.
- Planning a special ritual and commissioning for the Arts Ministry at the merger celebration.
- Evaluation Criteria: In addition to evaluating the practicality of the venture, a key point of consideration was how the proposed Arts Ministry would provide for outreach to potential new members—where were there young women who would be interested in spirituality and art? How could they be reached?

Dilemmas and Decisions

Even in the planning stages, several difficulties and dilemmas surfaced. Often no answers presented themselves that did not involve a serious risk to the success of the project. Some examples of these dilemmas included:

- Geographical location: The original plan had assumed that the Arts Ministry would be housed in a particular location. Choosing this location,

however, involved trade-offs between locations that each entailed distinct liabilities as well as advantages. Some of the most suitable buildings were located in areas peripheral to where most Sisters of X currently worked (thus necessitating more relocation and isolation), or lacked access to populations of potentially interested young people. More beneficially-located sites contained buildings that were not suitable or needed expensive repair. A few of the most interested and artistically talented sisters were tied (by aging parents, tenured college positions, health) to particular locations and would be unable/unwilling to participate if the ministry was sited elsewhere.

- **Cultural Assumptions:** For a large part of its history, Community X5 had drawn more working-class recruits than the other four communities. They were also the only one of the five merging communities never to have established a liberal arts college or a retreat center. This had resulted in a tendency for the members of this community to emphasize more “practical” and “down to earth” concerns over “less serious” things like art. Possibly as a result, the one sister in Community X5 who did professional-quality art was considered a bit “far out” by the rest of her sisters. She had taught for several decades at a state university six hours away from the rest of the community, and lived alone in an apartment there. She had tenure there, and was unused to collaborating with the rest of the sisters.

It also became apparent that there were subtle differences in the kind of Arts Ministry the sisters from various X congregations envisioned. The sisters on the planning committee from Community X1, for example, envisioned a professional art studio working on commissioned religious paintings, sculpture, and the like. The sisters on the committee from Community X2 wanted a teaching center for high school and college students. The two sisters from Community X3 wanted a retreat center that would give arts retreats. One of the sisters from Community X4 wanted the ministry to reach out to the elderly through art

therapy. Some of the locations under consideration were more suitable for some of these foci and some for others. Privileging one sister’s vision would diminish the other sisters’ ownership of, and enthusiasm for, the project. And there was not sufficient money to develop all of them.

- **Complementarity:** Community X4 had the best communications/publications office, whose lay director was interested in working with the new endeavor. But Community X4’s facilities were the least suitable, and there were few opportunities for connections with local young women. Community X1 had a dynamic vocation director—and was one of only two X communities to have anyone currently in formation. The merging congregation had already tapped her to serve as full-time vocation director after reconfiguration. But she was not very interested in the Arts Ministry initiative. While most of the merging congregations had on-site retreat centers, not all were interested in collaborating with an Arts Ministry.

What decisions should the merged congregations make about a combined Arts Ministry—where to site it, who will take part in it, what to focus on, what evaluative criteria to measure success—or even whether to sponsor such an initiative at all? (The Reconfiguration Committee, after all, had several other applications to consider for support.) The possibility that an incorrect choice could doom the entire endeavor could be paralyzing, except that to do nothing would make failure inevitable.

EXAMPLE II. RE-VAMPING THE VOCATIONS PROGRAM

Scenario

The Brothers of Y have merged their three U.S. provinces into a single entity. This involved merging various staff offices, including three separate part-time vocation ministers, two of whom were exhibiting strong signs of “burnout.” The third brother was asked if he would be willing to be vocation director for the merged province. He was willing to do so, but he had some preconditions for using the reconfiguration as a

catalyst to restructure the Brothers' entire vocation program:

- The program must be a full-time position and adequately funded. The third brother asked for a new budget line of \$50,000 per year.
- The vocation director must have a re-written job description, emphasizing that he would be responsible, not for inviting or mentoring potential recruits himself, but for motivating and equipping every Brother of Y to do these things.
- The entire order must mobilize to choose "inviting new members" as one of its principal foci.

The three merging provinces' leadership agreed to these preconditions.

Preparation—Identify Assets

The Brothers' leadership funded weekend workshops for all the membership at several locations around the country, organized around the NRVC "Opening Our Hearts and Homes" video. At the end of each weekend, each brother was asked to choose from a list of vocation activities—ranging from "I will pray daily for vocations" to "I will move across the country into an intergenerational vocation house"—which one(s) he would be willing to participate in. Pools of volunteers were created in each region where the Brothers of Y ministered:

- Volunteers to represent the Brothers of Y on local diocesan vocation committees.
- Volunteers to collaborate with the communications office to supply the diocesan (and secular) newspapers with stories about the Brothers of Y.
- Volunteers periodically to help out at discernment weekends.
- Volunteers to write lesson plans, plays, storybooks, songs, and other classroom aids for students at all levels to learn about the Brothers of Y and their founder.
- Volunteers to maintain and update the Brothers of Y web page.
- Volunteers to start and run one or several Brothers of Y blogs.
- Volunteers to organize and/or help at events (Theology on Tap, Inner-City Plunges, Eucharistic Adoration Retreats, trips to West Virginia or New

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Orleans to rebuild housing for the poor) for high school- or college-aged young men.

- Volunteers to open their local community to young men for dinner and prayer on a regular basis.

The new vocation director also held several brainstorming sessions at Brothers' houses around the country to surface further ideas.

Implementation and Evaluation

The new vocation director held workshops for the Brothers, led by vocation directors from other communities which had been (relatively) successful at attracting youth, on topics such as how to invite young people, the spirituality of Millennials, and how to guide discernment. "Adopt a Brother/Adopt a Student" programs were established between the Brothers' infirmary and students in Brothers' high schools and colleges. Several of the more ambulatory brothers volunteered to tutor at-risk students, while several students visited the more infirm brothers. One brother who taught history in the order's college enlisted his students to do oral histories with the retired brothers.

At the same time, the Brothers realized that they themselves had to change, as a community, in order to be ready to welcome young men who wished to come. The brothers who were willing to move into intergenerational discernment communities (which often involved major uprooting in ministry and city of residence), began to take part in a series of intensive

weekends on “Becoming a Welcoming Community.” On a practical level, suitable living facilities had to be found to house the discernment communities, once they were established.

Finally, the vocation director located brothers who had skill and interest in communications, and he arranged for several consultants to come and meet with them on ways of “marketing” the order to young men. This included a consultant on web page design, and one who specialized in “buzz” marketing among youth.

Dilemmas and Decisions

As with any human endeavor, difficulties and dilemmas soon surfaced. The vocation director had underestimated how much start-up money would be needed—possibly influenced by the fact that the provincial leadership had been aghast at the size of the first sum he named. There wasn’t enough money to do the kind of advertising the Brothers really needed to do to appeal to technologically sophisticated youth. Additionally, mismatches surfaced in the number of brothers who were willing and able to form discernment communities and the locations with the facilities to house such communities. The brothers in one of the merged provinces, who had not had a candidate enter in over a decade, did not believe that all this fancy new stuff would really work, and served as a sort of “wet blanket” at community meetings about vocations.

Finally, some of the young men interested in joining seemed more conservative (e.g. in wanting to wear the habit the older brothers has mostly discarded), which alienated some of the community.

CONCLUSION

As these two examples show, reconfigurational liminality is a potential resource that can be tapped to spark new and exciting endeavors in a merged congregation—initiatives that may spell the difference between life and death, growth and stagnation. But they are not a fail-proof guarantee. Religious leaders contemplating reconfiguration, and wishing to tap into these energies, must expect that unanticipated difficulties will develop. It is my hope, however, that the prospect of setbacks and mistakes—even of failures—will not deter religious communities from harnessing the exciting but daunting potential of liminality inherent in reconfiguration. It is here that the future lies.



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