

Community life could reinvigorate church leadership

Isabella R. Moyer | Aug. 15, 2012 NCR Today

For some, the final words coming from the LCWR annual assembly were anticlimactic. There were no earth-shattering decisions announced and no screaming headlines to publish. A careful reading and pondering of [Sr. Pat Farrell's presidential address](#) [1] provide insight into the model of leadership embraced by many religious communities today. It also helps us understand the prayerful and thoughtful strategy the assembly overwhelmingly supported.

Sr. Farrell [addresses](#) [2] six "tools that have served us through centuries of religious life" that will aid the group in its dialogue with the Vatican. I would like to focus on the gift of community.

For those who think the present leadership structure in our church is beyond reform, Jamie L. Manson [noted](#) [3] that, "Within a generation, women religious allowed their organization to evolve from a system of rigid obedience, to a leadership structure that is non-hierarchical and collaborative." Sr. Farrell admits that creating community in an individualistic culture is not easy. It requires seeking unity amid diversity and respecting the gifts and opinions of all. And yet, many religious communities have evolved from a rigid, hierarchical model to one that is non-hierarchical, participative, dialogic and collaborative. They evolved from blind and unquestioning obedience to "obedience in community" or "attentive discipleship."

Being in community is messy. The genius of the Rule of St. Benedict lies in his balance between exhorting the spiritual life of the monks while making sure they could get along in day-to-day tasks. Pious prayer is not enough if you harbor visions of smacking the brother sitting next to you in chapel.

Community life requires embracing all gifts in a spirit of equality, for all gifts are needed. It requires honesty and openness so small disagreements don't fester into crisis proportions. It requires staying at the table when conversations become difficult.

Leadership within a true spirit of community is a gift to be shared and not a privilege. Collaborative leadership requires the difficult process of allowing a larger dialogue in order to discern the Spirit working in the many rather than in the one.

Sr. Farrell writes, "The participative structures and collaborative leadership models we have developed have been empowering, lifegiving. These models may very well be the gift we now bring to the Church and the world." I firmly believe this. This is the model of church that inspires me and gives me hope.

Perhaps it is a simplistic generalization, but I wonder if our church would be different if more of her leaders left their privileged lifestyles and tried community life for a while.

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Links:

- [1] https://lcwr.org/sites/default/files/news/files/pat_farrell_-_presidential_address_1.pdf
- [2] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/lcwr-presidents-six-tools-answering-vatican>
- [3] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/what-lcwr-teaches-us-about-church-leadership>