



Engaging Aging

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“Though your destination is not yet clear, you can trust the promise of this opening. Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning that is at one with your life’s desire.

*John O’Donohue
 For a New Beginning*

A Lifetime of Transitions

**By Sister Mary Hopkins, OP, and
 Brother Wayne Fitzpatrick, MM**

Throughout our lives we have been in a state of transition. The greatest and most traumatic transition in life is birth, something that each of us managed successfully, though we have no memory of it. In the years following our births, we’ve had the support of parents, family, friends, teachers and a whole host of other people. That support helped us grow into the persons we are today.

During our active years in ministry and even in our retirement years, we have offered support to others who were growing into adulthood. The various ministries of men and women religious over the years have contributed to the growth of this country and the Church in the areas of education, health care, pastoral and social services. Many mission territories benefited from the services of religious as well.

Today, our religious congregations are filled with women and men who are wisdom figures. These individuals have carried out the ministries of the past and have handed over these responsibilities, in many cases, to the laity who were trained by brothers, sisters, and priests.

While some religious continue to be in active ministry, the planning of religious congregations is quite different today from what it was in times past. As congregations look to the future, they are traveling in un-chartered territories. While continuing to live out the mission, they need to do the planning that is required to look realistically at the future. This may also include planning for a different expression



Mary Hopkins, OP, (left) is a consultant on third age and retirement needs for religious congregations and dioceses. A member of the Sinsinawa Dominicans, she maintains a spiritual direction and counseling practice.

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of how religious life can be lived. Some questions facing religious communities are:

- What do we do with buildings no longer needed for our ministry and membership?
- What do we want our land to be used for in the future?
- Can our cemetery remain where it is or do we need to relocate those who are buried there?
- Who can perform the ministries at our motherhouses and centralized residences that used to be carried out by our members?
- How do we care for our elder members while planning for future ministries to be carried out by our members?

These are just a few of the challenging questions that need answers and action. Each one carries with it an element of transition. These transitions and changes our congregations are experiencing call for an ever deepening level of prayer and contemplation. Without this spiritual grounding, it will be an even greater challenge to face the necessary strategic planning and actions that congregations need to take in order to face the future while embracing their particular charism.

Pictured below, Sister Mary Hopkins, OP, (second from left) speaking with sisters about the grieving process. (Photo appeared originally in "Dominican Vision," May, 2012. Used with permission of Sinsinawa Dominicans.)



Responding to challenges

Transition is a change from one thing to the next, either in action or state of being. With every transition there is loss. With every loss, there is grief. Recognizing the major movements of change in religious communities, the National Religious Retirement Office conducted a survey addressing the needs of religious leadership. Responses indicated that some of the critical areas needing educational input for religious congregations were transition, grief, and loss. To address this need, a group of men and women religious gathered to develop a workshop that would assist congregations in dealing with this most important need.

We have been coordinating these workshops for religious congregations over the past few years. Our interactions with religious throughout the country have led to important learnings about transition, grief, and loss as related to religious communities. We suggest that there are five distinct areas calling for attention. Each one requires time for prayer, reflection and development. Therefore, a definite shift is required from active ministry to a more reflective lifestyle.

Areas calling for attention

Loss of Relationships: Death may signal the ultimate end to relationships we've enjoyed in our lives, but that's not the only way we lose connections. It also happens when we move from one apostolate or ministry to another, or when our living situation shifts. Consider also how our relationships change when we outgrow former interests, or those times when we suffer alienation from people we've known.

Change in our living situation: Having to move out of one ministry and into another can seriously affect our daily lives for a period of time. Community living and daily routines are also affected by relocation and the changing relationships with the people

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who live there. Moving from singular living to institutional community living is a great challenge today. Institutional living is not the same as when one entered religious life years ago. Orientation and education is needed in order to adjust to this major transition.

Personal Changes: All of us undergo certain personal changes over time. Most of us will experience more intense periods of change eventually. For example, we may become ill or undergo psychological shifts. The “what” of our life in terms of ministry becomes much less important and the “who” of our life takes on major import. Individuals do not make this transition easily. They need tools and supports to prepare for the future. The spirituality of the elder is that of storytelling which leads to developing one’s life story to leave as a legacy for future generations.

Inner Changes: Sometimes, we experience shifts within us: personal conversions, deeper levels of prayer and contemplation, psychological awakenings, modifications in our self-concept, and realignments in our values. Crisis situations may lead to lasting internal changes that are nothing less than transformations.

Institutional Loss: An additional area of transition, grief, and loss which at times can be neglected is that of institutional loss. Individuals have identified with places where significant ministries were accomplished and suddenly, those edifices no longer exist. The ministry performed and the place it was carried out are important identifying elements in the life of a member. In earlier years, what one accomplished was far more important in the life of the individual than who one was. Only in the latter years of life does the sense of who one was and is take on significance.



Motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters in Blauvelt, NY, poses challenges for elder living. (Photo first appeared in NRRO newsletter, Fall, 2012.)

Consequences of ignoring transitions

Today, thanks to the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and others who have helped us over the years to understand and process transition, grief, and loss, we know the importance of processing our transitions and working with the emotions that flow from them. But this has not always been the case.

In the past, the effects of transitions were pretty well swept under the rug, ignored, and silenced. Some men and women entered religious congregations without ever talking about the death of a parent or sibling. They may have never processed physical, sexual, and emotional childhood abuse. Past losses in life may never have been addressed. At the time, psychological testing wasn’t required by most congregations. Consequently, the silence that permeated our lives in earlier years only encouraged the suppression of thoughts and feelings that brought internal pain and hurt. These unspoken feelings were often projected upon community members, children in schools, people in ministry, and others who failed to understand the source of such feelings and behaviors. Unresolved grief also evidenced itself in physical and psychological illness. Additionally, our lifestyle of moving from place to place without bringing closure contributed to a sense of carrying unfinished business in our lives. Add to that the lack of consultation and poor decision making that sometimes

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characterized the changes and individuals were left with some heavy emotional baggage.

Moving Forward

Today, as congregations attempt to face their diminishment, the baggage that members are carrying from the past can slow the progress of dealing with the present realities of loss. The necessary movements of letting go become difficult because of unresolved losses from the past. There is no room to integrate current realities. The progress that leadership envisions can be hindered because some members hold them back. To avoid such resistances, leadership may move toward decisions without proper consultation of membership. This, in turn, only leads to greater loss and grief in the future. To break the cycle, it is important to intentionally address our losses, both past and present. This is one means of bringing vitality to both the individual and the community.

In closing, we share with you a few comments from participants in our workshop, "Meeting God in Times of Change and Transition." They underscore the importance of intentionally engaging our futures together. "The fact that we have finally come together to talk openly about loss has been a blessing." "We found ourselves facing the reality of our future for the first time." "The National Religious Retirement Office personnel clearly listened to a deep need within religious congregations as they reviewed information provided by leadership. The challenges for congregations into the future are monumental but are more easily met when members have let go of heavy baggage related to transition, grief and loss in order to walk more freely together into the future."

From the Offices of NRRO, Brother Bob Metzger, SM Associate Director for Planning and Education

In 2011 the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) ran two workshops entitled *Through Grief to New Life: A Spirituality for Meeting God in Transition Times* that had more than 150 participants. Sr. Mary and Br. Wayne, along with Sr. Ann Billard, OLM and Br. Mark Knightly, CSC, conducted these workshops for NRRO.



These educational workshops were designed to provide support as well as information to leadership showing how unresolved grief issues can impact individuals, groups and leadership teams themselves. The feedback we received told us that the congregations were seeing these issues present in their members.

Since the time of those workshops the issues of loss of members, loss of ministries and the aging of members have continued. These are issues that need to be attended to by leadership in order to be of service to their members.

Here at NRRO we continue to see the rise of median ages for religious institutes. After compiling the data received in 2013 for Direct Care Assistance, we found there were 47 religious institutes of men and women with a median age of 80 or higher. We are just beginning to compile the statistics from the 2014 Direct Care Assistance applications but already we are finding some startling statistics. The number of religious institutes with a median age of 80 and higher has now increased to 78.

In the December, 2013 issue of *Engaging Aging* Sr. Helen Garvey, BVM wrote of her experience of moving from her ministry in Appalachia and returning to her motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa. In a

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recent conversation with Sr. Helen she said that she has been contacted by several congregations of women religious to give a presentation on her experience. The issue of a transition back to the mother-house of a congregation is a very emotional one and leadership is trying to find different ways to help their members.

Dealing with the issues of transition, loss and grief are very real for religious institutes. I hope this issue of *Engaging Aging* gives you some food for thought. Please feel free to contact me at NRRO if you have found ways to cope with these issues or if you have any suggestions of how NRRO can assist religious institutes with transition, loss and grief.

Have ideas or in need of help with transitions, loss and grief?

Please send your suggestions as to how NRRO can be of assistance to religious institutes with issues of transition, loss and grief to rmetzger@usccb.org

Calendar

August 6 - 9

- CMSM Assembly; Pittsburgh, PA

August 12 - 15

- LCWR Assembly; Nashville, TN

August 19

- NRRO Webinar at 1:00 PM ET

September 23 - 25

- NRRO Planning and Implementation workshop; Dayton, OH

September 25- 28

- CMSWR Assembly; Belleville, IL

October 4-8

- NCDC National Conference; Chicago, IL

Resources

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The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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