January 17, 2014

Dear Sisters,

Greetings from the Institute Leadership Conference! We welcome you into Year 2 / Phase 2 of Women of Mercy, Women of Hope Contemplative Dialogue.

You will recall that Women of Mercy, Women of Hope Contemplative Dialogue is a three-year process initiated to address some of the aspects of our Institute Chapter Declaration Statement. The first year focused on Our Membership in and Relationship to the Institutional Church.

Presently, in Year 2, we are focusing on Vibrant Community Life. We trust that the months you have spent with the Year 2 / Phase 1 materials on this topic have prepared your hearts for sharing even more deeply as we come together at our Community Gatherings. (If you still need Year 2 / Phase 1 materials, they can be accessed online [http://www.calameo.com/read/000346091a83b8f4b78c3].)

Vibrant Community Life is not a new topic for us. Rather, it is an integral part of our Mercy life. The purpose in our dialogue is to support and encourage vibrant community life in Mercy and to nurture our Mercy Institute identity, as we act on our Chapter Declaration. How this takes shape is always a work in progress; that is, an ongoing communal conversation and discernment.

Part of that ongoing communal conversation and discernment is touching into what is already happening in our Mercy life that contributes to deepening our understanding of vibrant community life. We invite you to reacquaint yourself with our Institute-wide work on Awakening the Dreamer: Mercy Taking Action [http://bit.ly/1dPSXU8] and Dismantling Institutional Racism within the Sisters of Mercy [http://bit.ly/1ktMGka] and consider these initiatives as resources for your reflections and preparations for a larger communal conversation.

Just as in Year 1, what is most important in Year 2 with its focus on Vibrant Community Life is our engagement in contemplative dialogue. With the Spirit’s grace, it is our hope that this level of conversation will lead us to a deeper place in terms of how we understand and hold sacred each other and our experiences.

The preparation materials and day of contemplative dialogue will be common across the Institute. However, scheduling of Community Gatherings will vary given each Community’s calendar of events. When possible, ILT members will join Communities for their day of Contemplative Dialogue.

In this packet, you will find the following materials in preparation for the Community Gatherings:

1. Cover letter from the Institute Leadership Conference (this letter).

2. Brief excerpts focusing on community, as well as other suggested materials for your reflection.

3. Five articles to ponder and pray with as preparation for the Community Contemplative Dialogue (choose one or all five).


5. For your review: Liz Sweeney, SSJ “Contemplative Dialogue” View at [http://www.screencast.com/t/XIUWRPS1].
6. Community Gathering: brief agenda of the day.

We hold you gently in our hearts and prayer and look forward to engaging with you at our Community Gatherings. Please know that the responses we receive from our Community Gatherings will contribute to Phase 3 as we continue our collective, contemplative dialogue across the Institute.

In Mercy,
The Institute Leadership Conference

[Signatures]
Vibrant Community Life

Year 2 /Phase 2

Our 2011 Chapter Declaration calls us to “deepen and make evident our Gospel-based spirituality through passion for service and vibrant community life.”

I. Suggested Excerpts for Reflection

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”
—Matthew 18:20, NAB

“Because the loaf of bread is one, we though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”
1 Corinthians 10:17, NAB

“By our life in community and by sharing our faith and mission, we come to know ourselves as sisters and to form bonds of union and charity. Reverence for the unique gift of each member—the young and the old, the well and the infirm—helps us to live together in affection and mutual respect. When breaches of charity occur, we encourage each other to speak the truth in love and to bring prayer and patience to the restoration of harmony.”
—Constitutions, 18
“Community strengthens us for mission when we listen openly to one another, seek the common good and promote mutual trust. A sign of our union and charity is our personal and corporate willingness to share our lives and resources with the poor and the afflicted.”

—Constitutions, 192

The Witness of Community Life

In 1973, three years before Soweto, Taizé began to speak of “struggle and contemplation” in the quest “to become men and women of communion.” The struggle was two-fold: to struggle for interior freedom and to struggle with the poor for justice. Contemplation transformed one’s vision of personal identity, engaged with others for justice.

In South African life the word struggle has a deep and powerful history. To join “struggle” and “contemplation” in one phrase is to speak of a synergy of transformation. Interior and exterior transformation become one and contemplative experience deepens the energy and commitment of persons and community to be faithful to God and to each other.

(excerpt from page 61)
II. Additional Readings and Extended Reading Material:


III. Suggested Video Materials for Your Reflection

- How does passion live in me? ... as well as my sense of humor?
- What is the condition of my/our passion? For what am I/we passionate?

Sisters of Mercy Institute Website—Cost of Convenience http://bit.ly/1gReoln

Liz Sweeney video—“Contemplative Dialogue” http://vimeo.com/56954766

- How is technology affecting the Mercy Community, personally, locally, and more corporately, positively, negatively, and questionably?

1 You may also wish to revisit the reflection quotes from Year 2, Phase 1.
2 For other references about community life see our Constitutions 17, 23, 25 28, 84.
The forces that push us toward and pull us away from community

by Nancy Schreck, OSF

This article is based on a talk presented at the National Religious Vocation Conference Study Days in September, 1999.

No doubt you have seen drawings which can be viewed from a number of perspectives revealing very different images. One such profile reveals an elderly woman and at the same time, from a slightly different angle, a young girl. Another reveals a duck or a rabbit. I use this idea to begin because I want to say that what I call a rabbit you may claim as a duck. In times of major change it is difficult to know how to name things. This is such a time in regard to community life in religious institutes. The important thing is that members engage in honest dialogue about community and its relationship to the identity and purpose of religious life.

Many such conversations begin with the idea that community doesn’t have to mean “living in the same place.” While this is true, the problem is that the conversation often doesn’t go anywhere after that comment. In this article let us play with the possibility that community involves living together in shared space, with shared resources. However, it includes another dimension that is often overlooked. From a biblical perspective community includes a sense of “those called together for a purpose.” The purpose is not the care, comfort, or economic efficiency of the group. In the Christian context the purpose is to enable the members to be followers of Jesus. The “community” was made up of those who met to pray and break bread, who supported one another especially in the face of opposition, who helped one another in their physical needs and in their commitment to care for the widows, the orphans, and the sick. It was a group who experienced themselves called into mission, and their reason for being together was to create the possibility of a radical following of Jesus. Notice that I am not talking about friendship or a means of having our needs for intimacy met. We may find these things in community but it is not the purpose. One of the things that creates confusion about community is the tendency to speak about it in terms of family and friendship relationships, as a place where needs for intimacy are met. In conversations I have with people who are struggling with community, they frequently speak of loneliness and affective needs. There seems to be an implicit assumption that community should take care of these needs and provide friendship. Rarely do people talk about the enhanced...
ability for radical Christian action. Certainly it is wonderful when there is affective support, but at the core we are talking about something different.

As I have experienced congregational leadership, years of membership in Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), and facilitation work with congregations, I find many groups saying something new is happening in regard to community life. There are new questions, and a desire to explore. I am stating it as positively as I can. Said in another way, there is an elephant in the living room and some of us are walking around pretending it isn’t there.

Raising the issue of community life in most groups still causes quite a reaction. Some people break out in a sweat and it is not because the room is hot. Others get defensive, and tears come to some as they process hurts from yesterday and 20 years ago. Some fear we are “going backwards,” many have questions, and some hope that if we just leave the elephant alone perhaps it will decide to wander out of the room. There are many layers to the issue. Added to this is the perspective of those in vocation and formation ministry who are concerned about living arrangements for new members and the need for healthy supportive local communities.

I am not claiming clarity about the direction we need to go; what I do know is that we must deal with the issue. I hope this article will focus some aspects of the struggle and thereby evoke needed dialog in community groups. I do so realizing struggle and difference of opinion will be involved. Margaret Wheatley talks about times when things are not clear and says, “In this realm there is a new kind of freedom where it’s more rewarding to explore than to reach conclusions, more satisfying to wonder than to know, and more exciting to search than to stay put.” Perhaps if we could free ourselves from the feeling that community is an emotionally charged albatross around our neck, we could claim wisdom from the years of our experience, acknowledge the creativity of this time, and believe that it will be rewarding to explore with each other. In her novel Where the Heart Is Billie Letz says, “I used to be afraid of the dark but sometimes you can see things in the dark you can’t see in the light.” I invite us to look at community and see that this is a graced time in religious life for exploring.

To further this dialog I propose that we do a force field analysis of community. This approach is typically used in strategic planning processes. A force-field analysis acknowledges that there are certain “energies” or “forces” that push or move an issue from one side and others that move or influence it from the other direction. There are “energies” that either promote or restrain movement. The important thing is to be aware of this dynamic and to resist the temptation to label these forces as positive or negative, they simply exist.
The important thing is to be aware of them and to decide how to respond wisely. What I will do in this article is to name and briefly explore these “energies” pressing on the issue of community in religious institutes. You will likely add others, and at times place an issue on the other side.

**Driving Forces**

- **Cosmic awareness** In this time there is a new understanding of community arising from many places. Religious institutes by no means have the corner on the community dialog. There is a growing awareness in society of the power and benefits of community. In business for example, there are literally thousands of management books about improving productivity and quality by building “work teams.” Leaders in education talk about a community of learners, social change activists focus on building neighborhood communities, and staff members of large parishes try to create small Christian communities. An appreciation of cosmic spirituality with its sense of communion between the human and other than human is growing. So there is a movement toward community that is very large. There are at least two implications of this reality. First, if we are not aware of this reality and do not respond creatively, those who might be interested in religious life will go other places in their search for community. Second, if we do not deal with our issues, we will not have much to offer the public dialog.

- **The struggle with diversity** A second energy is paradoxical to the first. At the same time that there is a desire for communion we know the opposite experience as well. The daily news is filled with stories of war, ethnic cleansing, racial and sexual hate crimes, and the list goes on. So, another of the realities pushing us to look at community is precisely a dangerous lack of community, especially related to the struggle to build unity in diversity.

- **The need for prophetic witness** The first two energies invite us to reflect on the need for prophetic public witness in regard to community. There is a new claim made on us in these days by the dynamics of our worldwide culture. If we are to respond then we need to be involved in practices and a lifestyle that assist us. We will be better able to deal with the tensions of participation in the global community if we have experience living in communion with people from various ethnic and racial groups, people of different abilities, and from multiple cultures. A number of years ago I was in a group of religious women being addressed by Sr. Elizabeth Carroll who was speaking about the need to act for social justice. She said that any issue we deal with internally in the congregation is not for ourselves alone, it is really for the larger world. Her insight is critical to this issue of community. As the larger world negotiates how to live together well, perhaps one of the most prophetic things we can do is witness our commitment to live together negotiating every kind of difference, and offer wisdom about the human ability to build unity across all the so-called barriers of diversity.

- **The action of the Spirit** Another energy that seems to be pushing is what I describe as a call from the Holy Spirit. It is not just the Dubuque Franciscans, or the California Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy, or the New England Province of the Christian Brothers who are addressing this issue. Rather there is a very broad movement in groups exploring community. There is something larger than any individual group drawing us to explore our experience, our longing and our purpose. We can claim that the Holy Spirit is inviting us into the depths of reflection. As usually happens when the Spirit acts, we will experience a crisis, and things may feel chaotic.

- **Identity of religious life** It also is...
Community
Force Field Analysis

Driving Forces

- Cosmic awareness
- Struggle with diversity
- Prophetic witness
- Movement of the Spirit
- Mission effectiveness
- New desire of members
- Desire of new members
- Limited resources
- Others

Restraining Forces

- Paradigm paralysis
- Impact of U.S. mainstream culture
- Influence of patriarchy
- Drift
- Lowest common denominator
- Adjustments made in good faith
- Lack of need
- Lack of energy
- Community as an event
- Ability of members
- Public witness
- Growth
- Multiple communities
- Others
fairly consistent across the broad spectrum of religious life that there is a renewed effort to explore the identity and meaning of religious institutes. Key questions in this exploration include: “How critical is community to our understanding of religious life?” “Is it an essential element?” These questions cause some discomfort to some people because they haunt us and invite us into difficult conversations with each other. It means going beyond the surface when discussing our values and choices for living situations.

- **Mission effectiveness** Nearly 40 years after the second Vatican Council we religious have experienced many different types of ministry. We have gained new insight into this aspect of religious life. Now with diminishing numbers and resources we are asking questions such as: what really makes for ministerial impact, what brings about solutions to social challenges, what most effectively enables change to happen? Again, I do not pretend to have the answers, but in my years in leadership I’ve been haunted by some research reported by Anne Munley, IHM, in the LCWR publication *Threads for the Loom*. Anne says that based on research it takes approximately twenty years to make a lasting impact, to really effect change. We probably didn’t need Ann to tell us this. In religious congregations I often hear questions about the effectiveness of individual commitments. The conversation goes something like this: “One person lives in a place for six years, does fine ministry, and then moves on to a different location. She or he may or may not be followed by a member of the congregation. Are we making best use of our limited personnel by this process? Can a community impact be different and more effective than that of an individual who might do outstanding personal work?”

The solution is not in either-or thinking. What I am saying is that the question of ministerial effectiveness is pushing the community issue. Joan Chittister raised the concern in her NCR article “The Eight Mountains of Religious Life” when she said that although we have individuals doing prophetic things we need prophetic communities.

- **A new desire in the members** An increasing number of members want to relook at the place of community in their lives. Though non-committal about what this might look like many speak about “something a little more intentional.” This movement, almost imperceptible at times, seems to include a desire for deeper shared life and common purpose. It appears that our important years of exploring and growth since the 1960’s now leads people to be able to say, “I’ve done it all, I’ve had every freedom to live where I wanted, and do what I wanted, and is that enough?”

- **The desire of new members** Those in vocation ministry can speak to this issue with more insight than I can. What I will say is that every major research into new and potential candidates reveals that community is something these men and women seek. This reality presses upon communities to deal with the issue. Vocation Directors are often put in the uncomfortable position of trying to respond to candidates, questions such as, “If community is a value then why do so many of your members live alone?”

- **Limited resources** Perhaps less esoteric but very real is the question of how many individual houses congregations can afford. This is a practical issue but is a reality that must be dealt with by the members and not only by the leaders.

This list can certainly be expanded and I hope you will do so. Much could be written on any one of the above listed “forces” or “energies.” I’m simply raising up for your consideration the reality that a whole series of “energies” or “forces” is pressing...
on those in religious life to look at the issue of community.

**Forces against community**

In doing a force field analysis it is important to explore the energies pressing on the issue from the opposite direction. We can talk about these forces as “resistances” to solving the problem. I turn now to noting some of those energies. Once again the list is not exhaustive and readers are invited to add others.

- **Paradigm paralysis** Often when people start talking about community a concern is expressed about “going back” to where we were before. Images of religious community life in the 1950’s, 1960’s and perhaps even into the 1970’s scares people. This “paradigm paralysis” keeps us from thinking creatively about how we could be community now. It would be wonderful to explore how we could be community based on the experiences and growth that have been part of our common life in the past 35 years. This growth has brought us to greater personal and group psychological health.

We are better able to care for and be cared for by others. We have grown in our skills of inclusion and are more able to recognize the equal value of the self and the other. We have a greater ability for reciprocity. It is not that we know it all now, but we have grown in our skills for interdependent living. The challenge before us now is to ask what we are doing with all that we learned. The writer Starhawk speaks about the importance of community. She says, “To connect across our common lines of difference of race and gender and class and religious belief and sexual orientation and physical conditions and appearances is the creative act that founds a new world.”

We have gotten better at being able to negotiate difference. We have learned much about unity and diversity. We know community has power, yet our predominant community image is what we knew in the 1970’s and the struggles we had over cars and budgets. Then we become fearful of negotiating community relationships for this new time. Starhawk also says, “The experience of bonding between socially dissimilar selves dissolves like nothing else the conditional need for hierarchical relationships.” In other words, there is great power in being able to bring socially dissimilar realities together. Are we using what we know in the creative act that founds new worlds?

- **U.S. mainstream culture** A second force of resistance is the impact of United States culture on us. This reality conditions us to isolationism, individualism and consumerism. I do not need to develop a detailed explanation. The influence of this reality is all around us. My concern is that we are not awake enough to see how it has overtaken us, has seduced our minds, our hearts, and our habits. People from other countries and our members who have worked in other parts of the world help us critique this influence. However, we ought to be able to do this for each other and this is one of the gifts of living together in honest community. We must ask ourselves if the need for individual ownership dominates us to the point of a stranglehold. “My” apartment,” “my” car, “my” space. We swim in this ocean of individualism so it’s very difficult not to succumb to the pull of the culture toward self-sufficient individualism, autonomy, and accountability to no one. So for all the forces pushing us toward community we have this very strong and deeply embraced individualism pushing against community.

- **Patriarchal influence** Another of the forces causing resistance is what I call patriarchal influence. This is difficult for those of us who think we have grown out
of patriarchal ways of doing things, but in reality we continue to be heavily influenced by the patriarchal perspective on maturation which involves extricating oneself from anything that might smack of dependence on another person. We live surrounded by the promotion of an ideal of the independent, self-sufficient, highly skilled, self-made person. Naturally what often lies behind this mask is a lonely soul and an alienated spirit.

- Drift Another "force" influencing this process is drift. Notice the number of members living alone. I wonder if Chapters, leadership teams and members have deliberately taken this direction with the belief that it is the best way for us to live our mission. Or is there a "drift" toward living alone? Members who had very good reasons for choosing to live alone a number of years ago may have never re-examined the choice. Leaders are hesitant to ask the question. The problem is not simply in having a large number of people living alone. A greater concern is for the consequence of this reality. One result is that members may not know each other as well. Are we eroding the relationship base which enables members to be really honest with each other? Have our conversations with each other moved to the level of social convention? "Where do you live now? What are you doing?" The next consequence is that we diminish our ability to negotiate with each other about our future together and our common dreams. We are less able to plan together and to commit to corporate action which is part of the purpose of community. We are drifting and as we literally drift apart from each other in terms of living we must ask if we also drift apart emotionally, relationally, and in terms of mission.

- Lowest common denominator Because the issues around community get emotionally charged we can get into an "it's easier not to" mentality. It is easier not to deal with this issue with each other.

The group then sinks to the lowest levels of agreement and never struggles to get beyond compromise. Fears arise that some might leave if the issue is pressed. It is not unusual for groups to resort to the lowest common denominator, but again there are consequences related to group morale. Donna Markham, OP articulates the result when she says, "A half-hearted, watered-down, comfortable life in the mainstream is simply not enough to hold many of us in community much longer." So as with any crisis, this is a dangerous opportunity. The danger is that due to the difficulty of the conversation we will settle for the lowest common denominator.

- Adjustments made in good faith We were all involved in adaptations after the second Vatican Council which moved us out of our isolating convents and parish houses. Empty convents were sold, bigger houses were converted into other uses. So now we have the challenge of finding suitable housing for group living. Notice that I said challenge, not impossibility. The old adage that "there where there is a will there is a way" applies here.

- Lack of need My comments here may sound judgmental, so please bear with me. Another of the forces working on this issue of community life is that not enough of us are living in the places of greatest need in our society and therefore in situations of danger. When we live in dangerous places, be they physically dangerous or dangerous because of the stand we take for justice, then we need each other more. Perhaps your congregation is different but in most groups the majority of members are doing comfortable work in comfortable middle-class locations. This does not put us in any real danger or need of support from each other. I offer an example. When I was elected to leadership in 1992 I left Mississippi, where I was living with a Sister of St. Joseph. That year she was on the school board in a town filled with racial strife, much of it focused on the
school. Some very difficult decisions needed to be made. The sister took strong, unpopular and just positions. Word of her position on these issues “got out” of executive session, and eventually she started getting threatening phone calls and hate mail.

She would call me and sing, “You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille!” That experience helped me to know that in precisely such situations we must be able to say, “I will be here when you come home from the school board meeting, I will receive some of those phone calls.” If we never get ourselves into those situations then we can come home and it doesn’t matter. This lack of need is of concern to me. Certainly this reflection takes into account and makes exception for those members who have need for increased safety due to past trauma.

- **Lack of energy** How many times have you heard people say, “I need to live alone, I just don’t have energy for community,” or “My ministry is very intense and when I finish with a day’s work I am exhausted and don’t want to ‘do community.’” Rather than energizing for mission, community is perceived by many as another duty. Recently a psychologist and I were leading a congregational gathering when the issue of energy for community life arose during a dialogue session. The psychologist responded that certainly some diminishment of energy accompanies aging but she also raised another interesting perspective. She said that in her field when a person chronically complains of low energy often the symptom is related to lack of purpose. Could this be true of community life?

- **Community as an event** What we have begun to call community is periodic gatherings for sharing, support or bonding, and community business. So we are developing an experience of community that can be defined as event. We get together for a community meeting, or have a meal and sharing, or maybe a weekend together. The problem is that anyone can be on their best behavior for a weekend. So the members never have to experience that sort of daily response to each other that pushes us past polite conversation and sharing.

- **Ability of members** It is a reality that some who are now part of community do not have the personal abilities needed for community life. They may have entered the congregation when the relationship skills needed for today’s community were not as necessary. Others may have developed emotional challenges that limit their ability for community interaction. Other arrangements must be made for these members. In addition, at any time, a member may need time apart from the group to work with personal issues.

- **Public witness** Who knows when the brothers or the sisters are living in a neighborhood? Perhaps a neighbor could say, “The brothers are nice people,” or “We like to have sisters rent from us because they keep the property nice.” I’m not talking about some kind of magic in sign value but we ought to have more conversations with each other about the visibility of our beliefs. If community is a value and important to our identity, then are we doing the things that keep the community witness public? We might want to explore whether our members prefer to be anonymous in their “after ministry hours.”

- **The asceticism of personal growth** The question to be explored here concerns our ongoing process of conversion and the challenge of growing beyond our own egos in situations where so many of us live alone. What experiences do we have that invite a generosity of heart and spirit? Certainly there are many ways to grow, and our ministries call for much personal generosity. The concern I want to reflect is that in ministry and in many other associa-
tions to which we belong religious are often in positions of authority, if not by structure then simply by status. There is a different dynamic when I am called to growth by a brother or a sister. There is a certain asceticism that exists in community life which, when well integrated, enables the person to move beyond himself or herself, to become generous, sensitive, truly human. Some of this happens precisely because I am formed by my peers. This is important because religious forego the spousal or other life partnerships that provide this kind of experience for those in other states in life.

- Participation in multiple communities. A final energy that pushes on this side is the members’ experience of participating in many communities. Sisters and brothers say, “My community is my parish, or my ministry team, or my professional colleagues, my friends, my women’s spirituality group, the brothers group, Call to Action, the Legion of Mary” and so forth. While these groups without a doubt can be a community the question is whether they are what we intend by religious community. Is there a difference for us? Do we substitute one for the other? Again I invite your additions to this part of the force field analysis and encourage dialogue in your community group about these issues.

In conclusion, I leave you with a story from the Church of the Sojourners, an Evangelical Community. (Reported in The Other Side magazine July-August 1999.) The members of this community are concerned about the absurdity of the consumer culture and want to find a way, as followers of Jesus, to make a response. This is what they commit to do together. They set reasonable amounts of money members can spend on themselves each month, share cars in common, and live in households larger than the nuclear family based on the belief that the nuclear family alone is not a healthy model. In addition they are committed to dialogue in community about relationships and marriage commitments. Each household commits to take into their home one troubled person. They say that these things not only give witness to the world but strengthen their spiritual life. The members of the Church of the Sojourner believe that in the New Testament community, the disciples responded to the culture in ways that would keep them from being absorbed by that culture. They say, “This culture sucks the life out of us, so we have got to find another way to organize ourselves so that we can respond in the manner of Jesus to the culture.” The author of the article is aware that a danger is legalism, which can deteriorate into conformity, but he says that what they are trying to do is to “respond to a culture which has very destructive ways of organizing itself.” The Sojourner community is interested in being a contrast culture, and the writer says that in this contrast culture they make the reasonable effort to do things in ways that are not so soul-impoverishing. Those of us searching for the meaning of community might frame our discussion in the large view of the Church of the Sojourner. We might want to begin our conversation with the question: How much do we live in our culture in a way that does not impoverish our souls? ♦
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n this piece I will reflect on two different modes of living community as vowed religious. One is the more prevalent practice of living together under a common roof. The other involves members of the order or congregation participating in the life and mission of the group while living under separate roofs. The second mode may consist in the province of a congregation formally treating as a single community a collection of religious who live within a single geographic territory but in separate residences. That modality has been common for some time in women’s communities and has recently increased in men’s provinces. Or the second mode may simply involve recognizing individual members living under a separate roof as belonging to the wider congregational community.

Readers of this journal will probably have experienced the contentiousness that frequently characterizes conversations about these realities. For that reason, it is not easy to find nonprejudicial terminology to name them. Does one designate the two variations as “living together” and “living apart”? Or do we use other commonly used expressions: that some people live “in community” and others live “outside” or “away” or “independently” or “on their own,” or even “alone”? It should not require inordinate honesty to recognize that each of these phrases may have its origins in subtle or not so subtle biases, usually tilted against the acceptability of the less prevalent model (“Why don’t they come back to community?”).

The only specific reality that clearly and necessarily distinguishes one of these modalities from the other, regardless of anyone’s ideological commitment, would seem to be the matter of the roof over the members’ heads. Regardless of what one may think or believe about the appropriateness (or even the validity) of some of these arrangements, the simple fact is that in one case the roof shelters more than one person, and in the other it protects only one. For that reason I have opted in this article to speak simply of the one-roof community as distinct from the multiple-roof community. The terminology may be a bit awkward, but it has two redeeming characteristics. It keeps our reflection grounded in behavioral reality, and precisely because it is not common parlance, it may open up fresh perspectives and thereby help us to frame better questions and even new insights.

It is not my intention to advocate for either one of these ways of being-in-community over the other. My aim is, rather, to reflect on one—and only one—particular aspect that is frequently adduced as an argument for the single-roof mode of community living: the witness it gives to the people of God and, indeed, to the “world.”
In the interest of helping the reader to weigh the impact of my own unconscious ideological biases, as well as in an effort to uncover them in myself, I need to note my credentials for entering upon the subject at all. For the first 26 years of my life as a Jesuit, I lived in one-roof-communities. There were the large houses of formation and study for the pre-Vatican II Jesuits, including the reality of residing in one building with as many as 300 Scholastics. Then there was a smaller higher-education community of 30 to 40 men. A brief stint of one year was spent living in a student residence at a slight physical remove from “the main community” but with expectations of daily participation in some common prayer and socializing. Later, I spent two years in a small 11-member community of priests and Scholastics, with common duties of cooking and upkeep of the residence. For the past 29 years I have lived under a roof that shelters only myself, while being canonically a member of a community nearby, the majority of whose members reside under a single roof.

The result is that after many years of reflecting and praying over the differences in these two styles and the kinds of spiritual, psychological, and even physical issues each one entails, I have much to say about the relative benefits and stresses each one brings to the individual who may live in it, as well as to others in the same community. The literature on religious community living is, of course, voluminous (what does it mean that we have to talk about it so much?). Others have written much on these matters, though perhaps not explicitly contrasting the implications of the two different modalities for the persons of the individual religious living them out. Someday I may be tempted to add yet more words on that subject in the light of my own history and experience of living under both modalities. In any case, the internal realities are not our concern right now. At the moment we are talking about witness, which presumably involves symbolizing something to outsiders.

WHERE DOES WITNESS HAPPEN?

Before we consider the witness value of a residence containing many vowed religious, we may need to take one step back and remind ourselves that what religious people call witness is a subset of the broader reality called communication. To make the point in a slightly facetious manner, we might imagine a person alone on a desert island, proclaiming to the winds, “I am an extraordinary witness to evangelical poverty!” The only true comment to be made about such a scene is that the person is perilously out of touch with reality. There is no witnessing going on, because there is no recipient of the message supposedly being proclaimed.

Communication (and, therefore, witness) happens in the mind or spirit of the one who receives it, not in the intention of the one who believes he or she is communicating. To quote the wise insight with which Scholasticism anticipated the McLuhanesque “discovery” of our contemporary era of communications, “quidquid recipitur recipitur secundum modum recipientis.” A message is effectively sent when it resides in the receiver, and what is actually transmitted depends on the meaning the receiver gives it, on the basis of the receiver’s internal screens or lenses. If I were to write this article in Urdu, most readers would effectively be precluded from receiving it, and the loss of communication would be due not to my spiritual shortcomings or to the readers’ degree of receptivity to my message, but simply to the lack of receptors to take in the message.

I offer a true story that may fix the point in the reader’s memory. Father John Courtney Murray once gave a lecture, after which there was a question-and-answer period. A woman put up her hand and said, “Father Murray, in your talk, were you really saying such-and-so?” To which Murray, all six-foot-three of him, looking through his rimless glasses in his courtly but friendly fashion, responded, “Madam, I don’t know what I said until I know what you heard.”

IT’S TRUE OF “WITNESS,” TOO

If we then turn to that particular form of communications we call witness, the insight remains just as true. Whether witness happens or not depends on the reception in the witnesses; the pious wish or intention of the witnesses is quite irrelevant. In Gumpian terms, we might say that witness is as witness does.

The net result is that if we want to find out just what is witnessed to by the fact that a group of religious live under the same roof, the belief of the religious that they are witnessing to something is the wrong place to look. To discover what has been witnessed, we need simply to ask the laity or others who are presumably those being witnessed unto. What message are they receiving? And what is it saying to them? As a first step in answering those questions, I offer an observation from my own experience.

My work as a church consultant places me in direct contact with many laypeople and diocesan clergy. They speak openly about their experiences, good and bad, with men and women religious. The simple fact is that I have never heard a single person say anything remotely like “It’s a real gospel witness to me that this body of religious men or women live under the same roof.” I have often heard them say things
like “The Passionists really know how to stand with you when you are suffering or sorrowing,” or “You Augustinians are genuinely welcoming,” or “You Marianists really care for one another,” or “I don’t even hear any of your sisters bad-mouth one of your community; you take pride in what your sisters do in ministering in the church.” What they report as witnessing, in other words, is how religious relate to one another or to their religious body as a group. The fact that they do this relating under a single roof is simply not mentioned. And I have never heard any religious tell me that they have heard an observer mention the fact of single-roof residency as being of any witness value in itself. But you can be sure it will be trumpeted in every chapter discussion on community living.

OTHERS DO THAT

If we move beyond the observable fact—that outsiders do not refer to residential living as witness—to ask ourselves what might account for the fact that it is not mentioned (in spite of the belief among religious that they are witnessing by the fact of common residency), one hypothesis comes immediately to mind: Residing with other persons under a single roof has, in itself, no distinct witness value, because just about everybody outside religious life does that themselves. Extended families, until quite recently, lived under a single roof. Even today, if adult children move away from the family home, they usually wind up living with other people under a single roof. They prepare and eat meals more or less together. They care for the upkeep of their common dwelling. They bed down, set up each day, perhaps at different hours, therefore having to respect others’ clocks. They negotiate, more or less formally and more or less successfully, the schedule of the group, the temperature in the house, the kinds of chores to be carried out by various members, and whether the body will allow a pet in the house. Often enough they pray, both individually and as a collective unit. And frequently they do so under conditions that many, if not most, religious would find unbearable, and in quarters much more cramped, to boot.

I do not note these things in order to evoke guilt in religious who share the same roof. There can be many good reasons for the kind of space, privacy, common appliances, and even domestic help that some such religious enjoy; the needs of mission and apostolate being uppermost. The point is that living under the same roof with others is the common lot of most people; in and of itself, it has no significance as witness.

THEN WHAT IS WITNESS?

Laity and diocesan clergy will, nonetheless, frequently pay tribute to the witness of the life of vowed religious. What are they really talking about? As noted earlier, they are referring to the outstanding manner in which religious present themselves: the way they relate to one another, the way they exemplify some special characteristic of their particular order or congregation: peace, hospitality, reconciliation, contemplation, simplicity of life. The point is not that religious do this under a single roof but that they live out some dimension of the calling that is incumbent on all the baptized to a unique and recognizable degree. (Do we still need to be reminded, at this late date, of Vatican II’s declaration that religious vows are only a modality of the call of all the baptized to practice the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience?)

A final irony emerges from these reflections. If the way religious actually live and relate to one another is the only reality that can be received by outsiders as witness, two things seem to follow: the requirements are the same whether the religious live under a single roof or under separate roofs; and the witness can’t happen if outsiders, as a result of the religious’ need for privacy, are shut out from ever experiencing the reality in action. It would seem a bit bizarre for religious to be saying to one another, “We sure witness to the laity by the way we live in communities—but let’s make sure they don’t get in to see it.”

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Until all have ENOUGH

World and National Perspectives on Poverty and the Vow of Poverty

I would like to thank each of you for the invitation to speak at this conference today.

For those who do not know me, my name is Deirdre Mullan and I am the Mercy International representative at the United Nations in New York. I am a national of Ireland and come from a city with two names: Derry/Londonderry, in the North of Ireland. I am a teacher by profession, a Roman Catholic by tradition and a Sister of Mercy by life-choice.

The part of the world I come from is well known for all the wrong reasons. I grew up during what were known as the ‘Troubles’ in Ireland and I witnessed hatred and death far too often. As a teacher in one of the schools run by the Sisters of Mercy, I often saw firsthand what can happen to young minds and hearts when they are colonized by an ideology which demonizes the one who is different and “other”.

I am delighted to be with you to today, to reflect with you on our topic: World and National Perspectives on Poverty and the Vow of Poverty.

My presentation to you will be in three parts, under the title – Until all have enough

1. World and National Perspectives on Poverty
2. The Vow of Poverty as a way toward sustainable living
3. Until all have enough – Re-thinking Poverty

Part 1:

1: World and National Perspectives on Poverty

The philosopher John Hicks argues that “incarnation” should be understood as a metaphor for human life rather than the term applied uniquely to Jesus. “All human beings have the potential to “incarnate” or “live out” truths, values and love that reflect a divine reality at work within us. Jesus offers us extraordinary insights into the nature of God. He offers life-giving insights about the manner of our relationships with God, with all of creation and with each other. We who profess to be Christian would do well to listen to and promote Jesus’ message of salvation in ways that link it primarily with this world, not the world to come.”

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In 1948, the UN General Assembly ratified the Declaration of Human Rights. The thirty Articles of the Declaration proper state that all people have a right to freedom and liberty; that no one shall be enslaved or held in servitude, or subjected to torture or cruel and degrading punishment.

By definition, human rights apply to everyone who belongs to our species, wherever they are found in our world. Concern for human rights, while not a recent phenomenon, has been grossly uneven throughout its history. Along with gross violations of human rights, there are also the endless indignities that billions of people endure.

What human beings all over the world want is universal: **security, the ability to support their families, educational opportunities, affordable food, clean water, sanitation and access to health care.**

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, the UN Member States agreed on eight goals − the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) − that call for national action and international cooperation to provide access to food, education, healthcare and economic opportunities for children, women and men everywhere. In the Millennium Declaration, world leaders resolved to halve, by 2015, the number of people living on less than $1 a day and also to set targets in the fight against poverty and disease. For many people the Millennium Development Goals represent a major landmark in public policy-making because these eight goals:

- Set international targets for reducing global poverty
- Set the target to lift 500 million people out of poverty by 2015
- Represent a synthesis of many of the most important commitments made separately at international conferences and summits during the 1990s.

However, the implementation of the MDGs is dependent on all of us who believe that another world is possible. Healing the wounds of the earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party − only gumption and persistence. At a time when people feel powerless, an altruistic approach can be a balm because it reveals the power of helpful and humble acts. It is a reminder that constructive changes in human affairs arise from intention, not coercion.

Speaking at the United Nations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said:

“...**People of faith** are on the front lines of efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest and bridge chasms of ignorance and misunderstanding. Religious groups can also be powerful advocates in mobilizing political leaders and the public at large... I look to religious leaders and scholars everywhere to work hand in hand with us in that mission.”2

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2 Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the UN speaking to the General Assembly, September 2008.
People of faith are key to achieving the MDGs. They know that malnutrition, ill health, lack of education and lack of economic power violate human dignity, and every day they turn conviction into action by caring for the neediest and most vulnerable. Religious communities have done more than any others to make us aware of the sheer scale of human suffering in our world, and of our duty to end it. People in the pews must help to create the political will needed to translate this rhetoric into reality.

As we grapple with the concept of poverty in this conference today, I bring to your attention part of a submission which we, Sisters of Mercy, have presented to the Forty Ninth Session of the Commission on Social Development to be held at United Nations Headquarters in New York from February 9-18, 2011. The priority theme of the session is the Eradication of Poverty.

“Poverty Eradication is an unparalleled challenge facing member states and the global community. As an international community of religious women working in 47 countries we see firsthand the consequences of poverty.

In 2001, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defined poverty as a “sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.” (E/C.12/2001/10)

Poverty is not simply the lack of money or resources. It cannot be measured by GDP alone. Poverty is a multi-dimensional violation of human rights. It is death dealing, physically and morally.”

According to the latest Human Development Report, 1.44 billion people around the world live in poverty and subsist on a daily income of $1.25 or less. Moreover, 1.75 billion people around the world experience the many dimensions of poverty – that is, they experience at least 30% of the indicators reflecting acute deprivations in health, education, and standard of living.³

Furthermore, the global community and member states together have a serious responsibility to address gender inequalities which underlie poverty, disproportionately affecting women and girls, and impoverishing the entire community.

The responsibility for addressing the root causes of chronic poverty lies at national level. Poverty eradication requires effective partnerships that challenge and transform economic, social, cultural and political structures that have given rise to and maintained the current inequalities.

While many situations remain dire and progress is slow, what I have seen and experienced personally as I do my work as the executive director of Mercy Global Concern at the United Nations, and experienced personally makes me believe that another world is possible. I am moved by the sentiments expressed by the poet Adrienne Rich, who wrote:

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”

My challenge to you today as people who prepare young and newer members for religious life, is to seriously address this question?

- What is the connection between the United Nations analysis of Poverty and the Vow of Poverty?
- How can we help our members move beyond parochialism to global thinking and action in relation to both the Vow of Poverty and its relationship to Poverty as defined above?

In part answer to these questions, I turn to the second section of my presentation:

**Part 2:**

**The Vow of Poverty as a way toward sustainable living:**

I believe that the vow of poverty is an attempt to try both to model an alternative way of living and to restructure our world – so that all may indeed have enough.

To aspire to live in this way will obviously have implications for how we try to live our religious life. Traditionally, the vow of poverty – until the Renewal Years - was largely seen as personal and a matter of permissions.

With the Renewal Years, a marked evolution began to take place which brought to the fore a very strong – and even central – social dimension of poverty for vowed religious. The seminal ideas for this marked shift can be found in the early renewal documents and were clearly were influenced by the writings and thinking of Sister Marie Augusta Neal, and by such thinkers as Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) as we began to understand the concept of conscientization – which is an in-depth understanding of the world and of social and political contradictions.

As Sr Marie Augusta Neal pointed out in her work, *The Just Demands of the Poor: Essays in Socio-Theology* when the church elaborated its theological position on human

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development and Church ministry, it shifted the primary focus on ministry - from alleviating the results of poverty, beyond the goal of human service – to eliminating its causes. And this shift recognizable in the Church’s post-Vatican II position, as for instance in Pope JohnXXIII statement’s in 1961 Mater et Magistra and 1963 Pacem in Terris; and by Pope Paul VI Populorum Progressio 1967 and Octogessima Adveniens, 1971.

The impact on this body of teaching of the Church on Women Religious in particular, was profound. Many Chapter Directives refocused on the founding call by responding to the pressing needs of the day, and by listening to the voices of poor and disempowered people. Recognizing the need to help build a world of redeemed humanity opposing all selfish individualism and nationalism, most congregations sought to find ways of recognizing their internationality; and they also reflected on how the vowed life was/is meant to be a life of liminal, prophetic calling.

Seen in this context, the vows are concerned with values and not with laws.

Modern and post-modern religious life is lived against a backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation, and the crippling extremes of wealth and poverty. The shift in focus and the need to live more simply so that, other can simply live, away from a culture of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum in the past decade. The vow of poverty is meant to be a safeguard against the abuses related to wealth and property. But in many cases, as Diarmuid O’Murchu has argued, it is dogged by a double flaw:

“(a) the accompanying spirituality is not about responsible care of the goods of God’s Creation, but about stripping away all attachment to material things so that the soul is set free for eternal life or for nirvana; and (b) the onus is ultimately on each individual person; consequently, the collective wealth of the monastery was never subjected to the same intensity of evangelical scrutiny.”

O’Murchu argues that the Vow of Poverty as traditionally understood, emphasizes the betrayal of creation and the abandonment of basic human responsibility for the goods of creation entrusted to human care. True to the hierarchical norms and traditions, the care of goods was entrusted to a bursar figure who distributed from a collective pot while adult religious (men and women) behaved in a submissive way by asking permissions for the use of the most basic of goods. This in turn led to widespread abuse and a great deal of irresponsible evasiveness.

With the growing awareness of the finite resources we share as earthlings and our call to live in an inter-dependent way conscious of all living systems, the Vow of Poverty takes on a whole new meaning.

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6 Diarmuid O’Murchu, Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience, A Radical Option for Life, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, p. 64
Of course, trying to live in a conscious way has consequences because how I as an individual live my life has far reaching implications for other people and for the planet alike. The consequent attitudes and actions regarding how we use and regard property and resources are informed by awareness. To live in a sustainable way needs to be realized and informed; and ethical behavior is informed by education.

This enlightened wisdom is elucidated vividly by Joan Chittister:

“To say that we can possibly minister to the poor and never read a single article article on the national debt; to think that we can be moral parts of the global community and never study a thing about debt; to imagine that we can save the planet and never learn a thing about ecology; to infer that we work to promote women’s issues but never go to a women’s conference, read a feminist theologian or spend a minute tracing the history the ideas about women; to say that we care about the homeless and never say a word about the evil of homelessness or the lack of medical care for the indigent, smacks of pallid conviction at best. Simply to do things is not enough anymore. Professional education that fits us for particular skills but neglects to prepare a person for dealing with the moral questions of our time is not enough anymore. The world needs thinkers who take thinking as a spiritual discipline. Anything else is denial practiced in the name of religion.”

The shift in thinking alluded to here, demands that we think in terms of horizons rather than boundaries. To try to live in this way is to recognize that religious life is not about religion! It is a value witness at the service of humanity. By restricting it to a religious context, we violate our calling to be liminal witnesses to cutting edge issues. Our task is therefore to “re-member” our founding call to be liminal witnesses at the service of vulnerable humanity, living in a vulnerable planet.

The vow of Poverty or the Vow for Sustainability is about fostering the reign of God upon our Earth. Such awareness knows that, under God, things should be different from the way they are now. Too often, this awareness is defined as justice doing. It is more than the narrow confines of justice making; it is about a quality of engagement that confronts the oppressive suffering of our time. Most religious are notoriously naïve and ignorant about the systemic nature of poverty. Most of our work on poverty eradication is mere tokenism. We give generously to poor people and in so doing we exonerate governments from having to address what is primarily a political problem. The justice that arises from the liminal space requires a set of skills and wisdom that traditional formation programs for religious never address. It requires a resilience and wisdom that understands how the world operates and requires the backing of groups of supportive networks. It works in creative networks such as the religious at the United Nations (RUN) who work in a consistent and collaborative way with a quality of engagement and monitoring which puts many governments to shame!

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7 Joan Chittister, Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience, A Radical Option for Life, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999, p. 69
If we really believed in the **Vow for Sustainable Living** and were focused on the horizon **when all have enough**, more of our memberships would be engaged in political analysis such as that undertaken at the United Nations and, our Non-Governmental-Organizations and UN offices would be staffed adequately by individuals who are both profoundly spiritual yet imbued with the wisdom to understand how the world works!

For this to happen, we need leadership people who understand that having effective agents of gospel justice, requires vision-makers who are not constrained and who will fearlessly speak truth to power. Sadly, decisions about personnel and where they should be located are based more on the bottom black line than on liminal witnessing!

How do we move forward to the place of liminal witnessing and a world where all have enough?

The starting point for such a shift in consciousness is right here where we are today.

- How do we deal with the hoarding of goods which takes place in convents and monasteries across the globe?
- How do we educate membership to vote? Do we vote with a nationalist mindset or in a way which respects the needs of all of humanity?
- How do we educate membership in the area of Earth systems and the interconnectedness of all of life?
- How do we deal with an ecclesiastical status which imposes upon us a respectability status which in turns limits our liminal availability?
- Have we ever given serious thought as to why “preferential option for the poor” was such a stumbling block for religious men and women?

When we look to the life and witness of Jesus we realize that he never talked about poverty but about poor people. He never recommended poverty as something to be embraced either spiritually or materially. From a Gospel perspective, the call and challenge as I see it, is to work toward a new world order or until all have enough …and this brings me to my third and final part of my presentation...

**Part 3:**

**Until all have enough: Rethinking Poverty.**

“The vowed life is often been portrayed as a life of frugality and destitution. Frugal it may have been but never destitute! In many cases it was, and continues to be, a life well protected from the insecurities that the bulk of humanity endure.”

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8 Diarmuid O Murchu, Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience - A Radical Option for Life, Crossword Publications, 1999, p. 78
Rethinking poverty has an important place in any discourse about **living in a sustainable way until all have enough**. It prompts us to re-examine, at the deepest levels, who we are and what our purpose is in life. The human experience is essentially spiritual in nature and is rooted in the inner reality – or what we call the soul. The culture of consumerism in which we live out our lives has tended to reduce human beings to competitive, insatiable consumers of goods and to objects of manipulation by the market.

The articulation of a **vision for sustainability until all have enough**, must emerge from the discourse on the vowed life, especially in relation to the Vow of Poverty. It is not enough to conceive of sustainable consumption in terms of creating better conditions for those living in poverty to meet their basic needs. A sustainable social order is distinguished, among other things, by an ethic of reciprocity and balance at all levels of human organization. A relevant analogy is the human body: here, millions of cells collaborate to make human life possible. “The astounding diversity of form and function connect them in a lifelong process of giving and receiving. It represents the highest expression of unity in diversity. Within such an order, the concept of justice is embodied in the recognition that the interests of the individual and the wider community are inextricably linked.”

Such a transformation will entail no less than an organic change in the structure of society itself so as to reflect the fully the interdependence of the entire social body – as well as the interconnectedness with the natural world that sustains it. Among these changes, many of which are already the focus of considerable public discourse, are:

1. The Call to Global Citizenship;
2. The call to Ecological Justice.
3. The eventual federation of all nations through an integrated system of governance with a capacity for global decision-making;
4. The establishment of structures which recognizes the interconnectedness of all of life and humanity’s common stewardship of the earth’s resources;
5. The redirection of massive military spending toward constructive social ends.

“The current model for progress which is based on the economic system depends on a society of vigorous consumers of material goods.” In such a model, endlessly rising levels of consumption are cast as indicators of progress and prosperity. This preoccupation with the production and accumulation of material objects and comforts (as sources of meaning, happiness and social acceptance) has permeated every level of our society and has consolidated itself in the structures of power and information to the

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9 Forging an alternative to a Culture of Consumerism, Bahai International Contribution to UN Commission on Sustainable Development 2010.
exclusion of competing voices and paradigms. The unfettered cultivation of needs and wants has led to a system fully dependent on excessive consumption for the privileged few, while reinforcing exclusion, poverty and inequality, for the majority. Each successive global crisis – be it climate, energy, food, water, disease, financial collapse – has revealed new dimensions of the exploitation and oppression inherent in the current patterns of consumption and production. There are stark contrasts between the consumption of luxuries and the cost of provision of basic needs: for example, basic education for all of the world’s poorest boys and girls would cost $10 billion \(^{11}\); yet $82 billion is spent annually on cigarettes in the United States alone. \(^{12}\) The eradication of world hunger would cost $30 billion; water and sanitation would cost $10 billion. \(^{13}\) By comparison the world’s military budget rose to $1.55 trillion in 2008. \(^{14}\)

The narrowly materialistic worldview underpinning much of our modern economic thinking has contributed to the degradation of human conduct, the disruption of families and communities, the corruption of public institutions and the exploitation and marginalization of large sectors of the population – women and girls in particular. Economic activity and the strengthening of the economy have a role to play in the prosperity of a region and its people. Yet, the shift towards a more just, peaceful and sustainable society, will require attention to a harmonious dynamic between the material, and moral dimensions of consumption and production. The latter in particular will be responsible for laying the foundation for just and meaningful human relations; these include the cultivation of trust, the eradication of poverty, promotion of art, science, and the capacity for collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The present system of profit at all costs has, too often, been accompanied by delocalization or the transition to automation thus raising unemployment and underemployment worldwide. Those living in poverty have no voice in such a system. Movement towards a greener economy alone is not enough and must involve systems that enable all human beings to contribute to the productive process.

The shift toward the **Vision of Sustainability: until all have enough** will involve vow education, based on a clear vision of the kind of society that we wish to live in; and the kind of individuals who will bring this about. Advocates for such a system need to be able to reflect deeply on learned behaviors and to adjust accordingly incorporating the inextricable link between earth poverty and human poverty. Education must be transformed from simply imparting knowledge to developing the vast potential inherent in human beings. The vow of poverty as many of us understood it in the past, took

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\(^{11}\) *Action Aid* (United Kingdom). Fact file. (www.actionaid.org.uk)
\(^{13}\) Secretary General, addressing side-event, spells out sectors ‘crying out for action’ in advance of implementation of water and sanitation agenda. 25 September 2008.
detachment as the primary virtue. The vow for mutual sustainability cherishes the sacredness in the most simple of things. Let me share with you ……:

I once experienced this in a profound way. On a visit to a rural region in Cambodia where I had helped to build a small school, I was asked to go to the home of the village elder to receive a thankyou gift. My western mind was wondering what this might be! The elder, bestowed on me a Buddhist blessing as I entered her humble dwelling. Then she brought me to a small square opening at the back of her one-roomed thatched home and pointed to the VIEW OF THE MOUNTAIN- My gift to cherish and remember. This poor Cambodian woman epitomized for me the “poor in spirit” – those who are open to the generous abundance of God, who recognize that God is very near in the ordinariness of daily living and encounter.

The Vow for Sustainable Living: Until all have enough is an invitation to connect with the sacredness within and without all living systems. The Vow for Sustainable living is more about being rich in soul than poor in spirit. “The language we now employ must liberate us from the oppression of the past in order to engage with the liminal task of demolishing competitive consumerism and replacing it with care and compassion. Under God, the whole earth is ours and yet nothing is ours. All is entrusted to our care, to develop and re-create.”15

This idea is beautifully crafted in the words of Irish Poet John O Donohue –

In the world of creative work, where your gift is engaged, there is no competition……. In the world of soul, the more you have, the more everyone has. The rhythm of soul is the surprise of endless enrichment.

I believe that as humanly-divine creatures that we have within us the resources to break the vicious, violent cycle and reclaim our true humanity. The challenge is: Who will risk the doing of this? As catalysts for a different quality of reality we cannot continue to allow our liminal witnessing to be subverted. In short, the liminal vision is a call to transform behaviors and attitudes which cause us to collude with violence. The scholar Walter Bruggemann provides a useful synthesis for this challenge. He names amnesia, greed, and despair as our inherited sins:

In our world of fragmented disconnectedness we encounter:

- Memory as a covenant that aggressively forget
- Covenant in a community enmeshed in commodity,
- And hope in a community that believes very little is possible.

The counter witness to which we are called is:

• Remember a rich past
• A relational presence in the face of commoditization
• And Hope for a marvelous future in the face of resigned despair.

Finally, in *Called to Global Solidarity*, 1997, the US Catholic Conference said:

“Cain’s question, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ has global implications and is a special challenge for our time, touching not one brother but all sisters and brothers. Are we responsible for the fate of the world’s poor? Do we have duties to suffering people in far-off-places? Must we respond to the needs of suffering refugees in distant nations? Are we keepers of the creation for future generations?

For the followers of Jesus, the answer is an unequivocal YES.”

“It has already been pointed out,” wrote the theologian Karl Rahner, “that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or s/he will not exist at all.”¹⁶ Rahner’s prediction is proving prophetic. We who belong to religious communities know that the current crisis makes all the more urgent the need to be still, to quiet our souls, to wait prayerfully – for a certain contemplative quiet is necessary for the voice of the Spirit to be heard. Living contemplatively may well save our sanity in a spirit-crushing, fast paced society in which we live. Such mindfulness has the power to melt our fear so that we can act and be faithful to our prophetic calling, to preach and teach the gospel. The living Christ continues to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. The voice of the church, wounds and scandalizes when it does not “speak the truth in love.” It fails its mission when it denies the reality of issues that affect the lives of its members.

I would like to share with you a story told by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, the great moral voice of our time.

“One of the Just Men of Sodom determined to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment. Night and day he walked the streets and markets preaching (and teaching) against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning, people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening: he no longer even amused them. The killers went on killing, the wise kept silent… One day a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate preacher, approached him with these words: ‘Poor stranger. You shout, you extend yourself body and soul; don’t you see that it is hopeless?’ ‘Yes, I see,’ answered the Just Man. ‘Then why do you go on?’

‘I’ll tell you why. In the beginning I thought I could change (men and women). Today, I know that I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent (the politicians and the pundits, the movie stars and ‘image makers’, the indecent and the indifferent), from ultimately changing me.’

That is why I speak – not so much to change them, but so they do not change me. The essence of being a HUMAN being is never to give into despair. Never to give up. Never to stop shouting. And never to let them change me.17

I offer this story because I believe that we need to ask – and continue asking – who is influencing and changing whom in our world today?

I also believe that too many of us are notoriously naïve and ignorant about the systemic/institutional nature of sin and suffering in our world. The root cause of much of the injustice is not unjust deeds done by individual people, but oppressive social and institutional forces that compel people into acting immorally, and even oppressively, towards each other. In many parts of the world, governments themselves are the most corrupt and corrupting of influences. And the mainstream religions are not without their internalized oppressions, often fostering the values and strategies of war, sexism, exclusion and patriarchal domination. The new learnings in science are challenging us to rethink the role of the human and the role of our institutions in the wider web of life upon which we depend.

Extreme poverty is an abuse of human rights. As the BBC correspondent Fergal Keane said:

“After the Iraq war and with the terrible abandonment of Darfur, it is easy to think that international law is bunkum. The powerful or the most ruthless decide how things will work. I disagree. The infrastructure of international justice is small; the pressure not to investigate or call to account is great. But there is a community of conscience – organized, passionate but also practical – which will not go away.

In matters of human rights abuse, the destruction of the planet or world hunger there is not the option for despair. You recognize the contradictions, the hypocrisies, the defeats, but you go on. There is no other civilized choice.”18

In a globalised world of trans-national corporations, where so much exploitation takes place, and where governments often collude with trans-national forces, it is easy for people to feel helpless. But with utter defiance we cannot capitulate to such an erosion of hope. We need, therefore, to be very vigilant about the quality of our thinking, even in

18 Fergal Keane, BBC Correspondent, speaking at the UN, April 2007.
small things, and we need to ensure that we regularly feed our minds and nurture our spirit with constructive and creative ideas.

We know that Action follows thought and ideas, and that if enough people begin to think differently and imagine more laterally, in time we will create the conditions for transformative change. In this way, we can contribute to building up a new envelope of consciousness in the human community. Yes, we believe that another world is possible.

As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning, a new way of living together – to be prophetic voices and a leaven for Good in a Hurting World;

As Clarissa Pinkola Estes reminds us…

“In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or un-mended in the world. Do not focus on that….

Your task is not to fix the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world within your reach. Let us take one step at a time. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed for dramatic change is the accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth gale.

In my uttermost bones I knew something as you do. There can be no despair when you remember why we are on this Earth, who we serve, and who sent us here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours: They are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here.”

We, who profess to live the liminal calling - cannot give up until all have enough.

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Baltimore
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Challenges in Religious Life in the Diversity of Religious Communities

We are experiencing a change of time. The world is revealing this to us from different realities: indigenous peoples, scientists, nature… We are also experiencing the globalization phenomenon in different expressions: social processes; communication networks; bonds; the way we relate to one another and form families; our cosmovisions and paradigms. We are in a moving cosmos.

If we acknowledge life as the center and that for us GOD is there, a time opens up in which the cosmos reality challenges us to awaken our conscience and opt for a more plentiful life for us and others.

“… I have come so that you have life and life in abundance...” Jesus tells us.

In our history of religious life in Latin America the presence of God Spirit led us to great changes arising from Medellin, Puebla, Santo Domingo. Social and ecclesial movements in America took us to life options alongside the impoverished and the dispossessed.

I am writing from the experience of having been formed as a religious woman inserted in poor and popular districts. I have lived for more than thirty years in different places such as small communities and houses in marginal neighborhoods.

I have been involved in inter congregational issues in different situations since formation: courses, seminars, gatherings, meetings. Together we have grown in friendship and have been engaged in a common search; we have not limited formation to a personal experience; we have made our way together listening collectively to the GOD of life.

I accompany religious women and men and I appreciate listening to their sincere search, in honesty with the human, religious, social reality that happens among us.

Listening to experience has shown me the desire to work with power in communal discernment acknowledging God’s invitation: love in the best possible way. I express it in this way because in life we learn to love everybody, rendering the possibility of having a partner, in solidarity with the impoverished, sharing our goods, time, friendship, etc. We are where life cries out… building community. Our vows help us to manage our power, our owning, our way of loving.

I believe that God sows in each of us a potential for growing in this life, reconnecting persons, having experiences in communities that give sense and depth to spirituality in this religious life we want to live.

We also want to live based on a mystic nurtured in silence, shared prayer and community life that bond us. We experience a spirituality that connects us with the cosmos and nature. We also acknowledge the indigenous peoples` teachings in varied, simple and deep bonds.

Life changed us and is changing us. If we flow with God, the vital energy that flows in each of us, we get transformed or preferably, life transforms us.
Our communities have changed, we are few in numbers; we are aware of our vulnerability, our humanity and we pursue being truthful in our sharing.

Communities changed without intending; it happened… The small houses and communities have changed our perspective; one of them is how to BE community.

We sought living and befriending the poor people because it was the place with greatest potential to live Jesus’ way and deepen our sharing as brothers and sisters. Thus, communities were transformed.

We enter into dialogue about different ways of living and living together sharing the depth of life. We discern where we should be to be more fruitful and how we should work with the people in places where life is meaningful and GOD’S LIVING PRESENCE is manifested and where truthfulness and transparency – God’s Glory - are manifested.

We accompany people and are part of social movements in which the lives of the dispossessed people of this land are advocated; we work in vast networks. We find God’s presence in the poor people; we walk with women who want to rebuild their bonds so as to live without violence. We promote the deconstruction of cultural patriarchy. We generate healing processes that refer to the body, psyche and spirituality. All this helps to bring about a new way of facing life, a new way of relating. It also generates a vital positioning and a new spirituality with symbols, gestures that flow from our bodies in movement.

We want to continue serving in ministries in poor areas, geographical and human boundaries; we feel that the preferential option for the poor is still valid; it is Jesus’ invitation.

We integrate movements that fight for justice, care for the earth, deconstruction of patriarchy, gender nonviolence and human trafficking. We do not act in “powerful” ways in risk situations but from shared power with others with the perspective of our charism that bestows us a particular mystic.

All this has connected us with the poverty inside us, with our vulnerability although we cannot deny there is great physical, emotional and psychological wear. With all this we can have a taste of happiness and find meaning when we give out our lives and draw upon deep experiences of God in simple situations. We learn a great deal from the people!

Amid these social, cultural and religious changes we ask ourselves: What are the nurturing communal areas we would not like to lose? In what ways can we share in depth? In what ways do we live together in the rhythms of daily life? In what ways do we pray? What is a religious community? Why do I remain here? And there are many other questions.

There are new ways of sharing in community, praying together. People and alliances are diverse so are our communities.

But we cannot lose the specific originality of our life, the mystic of service which is building from the community, acknowledging that living together and community can be built in different ways. We are challenged to be truthful in our living together, to love one another and not to bear or hurt one another or wear ourselves out in our daily life together.

We build community accepting diversity that does not separate but enrich and nurture us. We do not just try life experiences, we seek those we can live our charism with and how we can live it. We open our lives to our
brothers and sisters, share our prayer. Everyday conviviality helps us to walk together. We make agreed upon options… There are religious women who stay connected although they live on their own because they are involved in deep sharing and a common search. In such diversity it is important that bonds are filled with love and tenderness, to know that we are not just officials of religious life living out established regulations. We always try to live as community and want to be recognized for our love for one another.

We have been invited to LOVE this world, this earth, and this cosmos passionately. From this blazing fire which interconnects let us allow RUAH to blow wherever she wants and take us… who knows where… I believe in a religious life that never gets tired of searching, wondering… A religious life that walks with the poor in the open, that is surprised at the miracle of LIFE, that admits being vulnerable, that does not boast power or grandeur.

In this manger and stable Jesus continues to be born. In this shared poverty we are in synchronicity with women and men who are looking for a more equitable and just world and love in diversity.

Estela Ruth Gomez RSM

Estela Ruth Gomez. Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina - professed for 29 years
At present I live in Clorinda, Formosa in the geographic border of Argentina – Paraguay
Community as Sacrament
Mary-Paula Cancienne, RSM

Ministry is central to the *Mercy* charism, as recognized and embraced by Catherine McAuley. The community of *Mercy* began as a heart-filled, mindful response to the needs of the time, particularly to women and children who are poor and who live on the edges of society. The ministerial dimension, both personal and in terms of the larger, corporate community, speaks to the very soul of the *Mercy Community*, both to those who are involved in active ministries and to those whose days of active service are in their evening time. Still, there are two other critical dimensions of *Mercy* and these are prayer and the *community*, itself. These three domains challenge and nourish each other. This reflection will focus on *community*. More so, as the *Mercy Community* considers the question of what "vibrant community life" actually is, we must keep in mind that there are many inter-related dimensions and levels of community.

For vowed members of *Mercy*, the patterns of community come into particular form through discerning and living the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service to the “poor, sick, and ignorant” in the context of the gospel relationships of its celibate women members. As celibate women, community rest in our shared, lived experience of *Mercy spirituality*, even if certain aspects, such as *service*, and how we *live* community, change over time, depending upon where we are in the various stages of our lives.

From a Christian perspective, the term *community*, indicating *with* or *together*, may refer to or point toward the Reign of God, Kin-dom (Kingdom) of God, the *Mystical Body*, the cosmos, all of creation, Earth communities of various life forms and species, which also includes humankind. It can refer to and describe families, different groupings of peoples as in nations, ethnic and cultural groups, communities of commerce, religious communities such as the Catholic Church, and, more to our focus, apostolic religious communities like the *Institute of the Sisters of Mercy*. Within the *Institute of Mercy*, there exist *Mercy* regional communities,
ministry communities, *Mercy* faith-sharing and conversation communities, vowed members, Associates, Companions, and Volunteers, *Mercy* boards, local convents of communal living, and a network of smaller housing situations. These are all dimensions of the larger community of relationships, and kinds and levels of commitment, but some sub circles of relationships and commitments bear upon one's active identity more so than do other ones.

In addition, as vowed members reflect on what *vibrant community* means in *Mercy*, as well as for the broader community of *Mercy*, we are aware of our particular lived reality at this time. For example, we continue to welcome and encourage new members to the path of vowed life in *Mercy*, while we acknowledge and work with the blessings and challenges of a graying membership. This truth influences how we *understand* and *do* ministry. It influences how we make decisions, and how we *understand* and *live* community.

In the context of shifting and challenging political, social, and environmental situations, and as an integral part of the spiritual life, vowed members, Associates, Companions and others of the wider umbrella of the *Mercy Community* regularly reflect on our life experiences through the lenses of spirituality, our faith tradition, and the *Mercy* charism. We do so in hope of living with the awareness of something *more*, that is, with the awareness of the presence of the relational, loving Spirit who is in our midst, who animates all of life’s relationships, and who calls us to be the *more* of who we are, as well.

Consequently, as part of our reflections, and because of our reflections, we return repeatedly to touchstone questions that serve like a compass to orient our journey. For example, where do we witness the presence of the Spirit's joy? Where do we hear the thin, small Voice of hope and comfort? What prophetic word echoes in the suffering of those on the margins, who are often never recognized or counted? What does our own suffering, both personal and corporate, have to teach us? How do I experience the call to be a symbol of hope and mercy in the day-to-day, as well as, how do vowed members, in their present reality, experience their particular call to be a corporate symbol of mercy in broader arenas, however significant or
humble that presence and symbol might be? In addition, at this time, what is the Spirit’s gift to us that we may not be recognizing in terms of a call to live community more deeply?

Jesus demonstrated his commitment to the community of love and mercy through his encounters and in his stories. It was and is through his living and in his dying, which then opened to new life, that we have the cornerstone story and Symbol of the Christian faith. Jesus reveals and makes present something mysteriously powerful and gentle about a relational and loving God. This God is not static, but seems, indeed, more like a community of love.

A sacrament, often described as a visible sign or symbol of a deeper, invisible reality, is poetic and paradoxical in character, and its meaning never fully grasped. The strength and efficacy of a symbol is as elusive as a floating leaf in a whimsical breeze, as powerful as a slow, undulating earthquake, as direct as a piercing arrow, and as limitless as a mother's love. With the person of Jesus, there is Symbol of loving Mystery as incarnate reality. With the living Church, there is the gift and call to be symbol of the Spirit of Mystery who dwells among us. With the living Earth, there is God's gift and symbol of unfathomable beauty, dynamism, and creativity. With Mercy Community, there is the invitation to participate in the gift and call to be one expression and symbol of God's mercy in the world today. Thus, as circles of participants we enter into the process of becoming sacrament, living symbols and stories of hope to and with each other in our ministries and in our experiences of community within Mercy.

Sandra Schneiders describes Jesus’ relationship with his disciples as gospel, or evangelical friendship. See, Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life, (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 278.

2 Thus, the Christian incorporation of the ancient symbol of Trinity to communicate dynamism.
As people of *Mercy*, we claim to have known the kindness of a gracious God. As a result, we eagerly set our ears toward a nudging call to live in and from the heart of God, with the result that we feel drawn to respond to the Holy One of uncompromising mercy and generosity. As participants at special gatherings of worship and thanksgiving, such as at the Eucharistic table, we eat and drink from the richness of Paschal memory, recalling, as well, those glimmers of encounter with Mystery that we sometimes humbly experience. The dynamic circle of receiving and giving, of encounter and memory, continues when we are sent forth to share from these experiences.

Going forth implies that we are to be *eucharist*, communion; that is, we are to be a community for one another, which includes being thankful for one another. We are to break bread and share the cup of our very lives, *body* and *blood*, with those in our ministries and in and through our many relationships and, more specifically for this reflection, in our *Mercy community* as well. This requires generosity, but also the art of knowing how to receive.

When we are mercy to one another, whether in ministry or in the more intimate community experiences where we relate and connect, our encounters can become a kind of sacrament, a kind of communion. As such, community as sacrament includes sacrifice, an offering of self, but also a reception of gift, that is, an openness to receive the other. This can be easy if it means being with someone whom I enjoy, but when it involves tension with someone, it can certainly be more challenging and uncomfortable, if not worse.

Community happens in time, *real time* that is. Living community at any level (not just under one roof), is never easy; it comes with all of our human frailties and in a world with many pressures and expectations. However, with God's grace, and the glue of patience, honesty, discretion, forgiveness, humor, mutual values, and affections, we usually make our way forward, sometimes with the added surprise that our understanding of community has deepened. Relational tensions, even broken relationships, can be opportunities to encounter the *Spirit* in the context of community, who is alive and never boring. Consequently, community as sacrament
requires, not only service to one another, but also a willingness to receive each other as blessing, and, more so, it requires a commitment to the art of listening, as well as to the art of meaningful dialogue. Thus, these practices and understandings of community as sacrament lean intimately upon the cross as part of any “vibrant community.”

*Mercy*’s identity and charism are fired anew, made real again, and again, when we listen for and respond to the voices of those who are poor and who suffer. The cry of suffering is like a bell attached to a floating buoy that dings and clangs in a foggy sea, alerting us to the direction we must follow in order to find the channel. As such, together, we practice the contemplative art of listening for the cry, the bell, and the invitation to be marrow and solace for one another.

We further engage this call to listen and dialogue when we break open the *Word* in the context of our personal and shared reflections upon our ministerial and communal experiences, observations, feelings, questions, concerns, and hopes. In turn, these reflections and encounters are more than informative; they nurture the aesthetic heart of community, a kind of sensitivity to beauty, kindness, and for those who suffer. Reflecting upon the *Word*, in text and in our lives, gives form to our days, beginning and ending with prayer. This, in some sense, nurtures the emotional timbre of our lives, as well as our imaginations, personally and corporately.

Still, only when I have received mercy into my own bones can I be merciful to someone else. Practiced in fidelity, the rhythm of religious community helps me to reflect upon and to continue to learn the lesson of mercy over the course of time with and through shared committed relationships focused on the *Mercy* journey. During moments of grace, the curtain toward Mystery can seem just a little drawn open, if only for a moment. We have all felt those moments of *Mercy* . . . and the stillness of these times of awe.

Because none of us sees all there is to see, together, we share our insights and visions. At our best, we practice forgiveness and letting go and we lament our shortcomings. More so, we lament the suffering and pain of those who are poor and sick, the world community that yearns for peace, and the deformation of Earth's natural habitats and systems. In counter point, we sing
of thanksgiving for having witnessed so many occasions of kindness and beauty, we celebrate
the unique presence of each person, and we rejoice for those moments when we sense the mercy
of God in our midst. Sometimes we do so with a soft, gentle morning song, and at other times
with great style and flare! In addition, as vowed members of the Mercy community, we
collectively search for meaning pertaining to our particular path, and we discern how to
prioritize, organize, live, and focus our resources and our energies creatively for ministry.

As vowed members, as well as in the context of the larger circle of Mercy, we often
gather to pray and worship. It is, indeed, a daily blessing to be in communion; that is, to be part
of a religious community such as Mercy, a gift that no one can own. However, we are not alone
in asking what vibrant community is. The church community, other faith communities, and
secular and political communities are asking this question, as well. Nevertheless, what do we, as
a Catholic women’s, ministerial, religious community, bring to the conversation?

Finally, Mercy as vibrant community cannot be constructed. Rather, from a Christian
perspective, it emerges from the kindness and invitation of Divine Mystery who is in dialogue
with us. The question is; how do we stay in the dialogue and respond authentically and
meaningfully?
Recall: Principles of Contemplative Dialogue

- Relax—speak slowly—speak and listen from an inner attitude of quiet contemplation.
  - When you are listening, look at the person who is speaking.
  - When you are speaking, look to the center (not necessarily to any one individual).
  - Speak from your deepest place (your contemplative center).
  - Speak briefly, a few sentences, a paragraph … (that’s all others can absorb).
  - Build on what’s been shared to create shared meaning.
  - Speak to your present-moment (e.g. your thinking … awareness) instead of from past experiences.
  - Let your and the others’ words disappear … return to inner silence … allow pauses—Listen deeply and make a connection/bridge with what has just been spoken.
  - Stay curious—ask questions—make inquiries to the group.

Brief Agenda of the Day

Experience #1: Becoming Familiar with the Contemplative Dialogue Process
  - Focusing the Dialogue
  - Contemplative Silence
  - Contemplative Dialogue

Experience #2: Exploring Vibrant Community Life
  - Focusing the Dialogue
  - Contemplative Silence
  - Contemplative Dialogue
  - Group Response

Lunch

Experience #3: Listening for Meaning, Naming Emerging Insights, Building Shared Understanding
  - Focusing the Conversation
  - Contemplative Silence
  - Contemplative Dialogue
  - Hearing the Whole
  - Gathering the Response