WHO WILL LEAD US?

From Hierarchical Authority to Transformative Partnerships

Reflections From The Crossroads

Transformation, Leadership, and Religious Life

REFLECTION NO. 6 · NOVEMBER 2026



"From him the whole body … grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

Ephesians 4:16 (NIV, excerpt)

Demographic changes in religious communities in the later stages of their lifecycle have brought many crises, none more urgent than a crisis of leadership. For these late-stage communities, the bench is thinning out: fewer members are willing and able to serve, while the responsibilities grow more complex and burdensome. Reducing a leadership team by one or two people because the community is smaller may sound logical, but it does little to ease the burden if the same work falls to fewer people. Leaders in these communities are overwhelmed, too often blamed for what they are unable to do, while maintenance responsibilities consume the energy needed for mission and visioning. As another election approaches, the question becomes urgent: Who will lead us?

A community's needs change across every stage of its lifecycle. At the last stage, it faces a choice among three pathways. It can die by default, taking the path of least resistance. It can live out its days with comfort and dignity, taking the path of fruition. Or it can choose life anew, taking the path of transformation. How a community responds to its leadership crisis depends on the path it chooses. For a community choosing the path of fruition, a smaller leadership team, or a commissary appointed by Church authority to assume responsibilities of governance that members can no longer carry, may provide a measure of relief. That choice deserves respect.

Yet these adaptations do not, by themselves, change the overall structure, let alone the culture and relationships that have made leadership so challenging. If the desire is for genuine transformation, it will require a new paradigm, at the center of which are "transformative partnerships": partnerships that share power and responsibility for the life and mission of a community while co-creating a new way of living into the future. Their strength comes from the core value of mutuality.

The Synod on Synodality places this invitation within the life of the whole Church. Its Final Document cautions: "If spiritual depth at both personal and communal levels is lacking, synodality is reduced to organisational expediency" (§44). The same is true of any effort to reshape leadership. For religious communities at the crossroads, this raises a searching question: Is your desire for change solely to ease the burden of leadership, or is there a deeper invitation?

A BROKEN SYSTEM AND A DEEPER INVITATION

The shrinking pool of leaders is about more than numbers, and more than the numbing narrative of "aging and diminishment." It is a sign of systemic failure. In her 2012 keynote to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Barbara Marx Hubbard declared, "The system is broken." Few of the leaders listening needed convincing. They had been carrying the weight of that system for years.

What is broken? In *Graced Crossroads*, I reviewed the literature on the decline of religious life: a Church out of step with the times, ministries now carried by governments and lay professionals, credibility marred by scandal, the loss of the flagship ministries that once gave communities a clear identity, and other paths now open particularly to women. Most of these lie beyond any one community's control. What a community can change is how it holds power and how its members relate to one another, and that is where the leadership crisis is felt most keenly.

Religious life, and the Church as a whole, is searching for a new way forward, a search that runs from the Second Vatican Council to the Synod on Synodality. Most congregations still carry a hierarchical model of authority, formed when they were large and young and built on position power: power over others by virtue of a title or office. The movement now is toward personal power, which grows from character, relationship, and shared wisdom and is exercised with others rather than over them. Position power does not disappear; elected leaders still carry real authority. The question is whether that authority serves shared power or replaces it.

> ***"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."***
> Mark 10:43 (NIV)

Jesus held no office and no title, yet he was arguably the most powerful person who ever lived. When his disciples argued over status, he set rulers who lord it over others against the way of service he asked of them (Mark 10:42–45, NIV). He never used his power to dominate or coerce. It came from his fidelity to love and to the truth, his compassion for the afflicted, his forgiveness of sinners, and his relationship with God. Nor was it without limits. In his hometown "he could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them" (Mark 6:5, NIV), and he "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16, NIV). He knew fear as we do and had no grand blueprint, yet he chose his path deliberately and acted with courage.

In this sense, Jesus was the archetypal expression of mutuality. "Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12, NIV) was both his message and his manner. His fidelity was threefold: to God, to others, and to himself. He did not lose himself in devotion or in care for others, nor did he abandon those relationships in order to be authentically himself. His boundaries were as clear as his heart was open. He did not fix people or shield them from hard choices; he invited them to choose life. Mutuality, then, is as much about how we carry ourselves as about how we relate to others and to God.

Measured against this, the crisis of leadership is also a crisis in how power has been held. A leader can be highly skilled and still use authority to silence dissent, withhold information, or protect a privileged few. A community can profess collaboration while rewarding compliance and treating disagreement as disloyalty. Members hold power too, and can use it to diminish others through passivity, quiet resistance, triangulation, or withheld support. Partnership requires both to stop locating all the power (and all the blame) in the other.

The brokenness shows in quieter ways as well. Arrangements that once helped a growing congregation organize its ministries can, late in its lifecycle, absorb its remaining energy just to keep an inherited system going, while administration fills the space once given to imagination, relationships, mission, and visioning. Care for elders and responsible stewardship remain sacred obligations; the question is how to meet them without smothering the life and spirit of the community.

> ***"A system is broken when serving it repeatedly comes at the expense of the people and purpose it exists to serve."***

This is the deeper invitation within the crisis of leadership: not simply to fill the offices, but to move in the direction Jesus showed us, from power over to power with, from position to mutuality. That movement cannot be decreed. It asks for new mindsets, heartsets, and skillsets, and for communal practices in which they can take root: discerning together and experimenting with a new way forward. The sections that follow take up each in turn and end where the question "Who will lead us?" presses hardest, as a community approaches its next election.

NEW MINDSETS

Transformative partnerships begin with a different center. Ira Chaleff, in *The Courageous Follower*, offers an image I have found helpful: "Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader." Rather than members following leadership's vision and direction, both leaders and members orbit around a shared vision and purpose, and that vision is shaped together. Members help discern what the charism asks of them now and what they are willing to bring into being. Leaders contribute their perspective and responsibilities while allowing what they hear to influence the direction. Through this mutual exchange, vision becomes a commitment people own rather than a statement they have been asked to endorse.

In this way, leaders and members have dynamic parity, each having real voice, influence, and responsibility, while their roles and authority remain distinct. An elected leader may be responsible for a decision that a member is not, while a member may recognize something the leadership team has missed. Each needs the other's wisdom, and each is answerable for how it is offered and received. Shared power, co-responsibility, and mutual accountability take root when mutual dialogue and discernment change what happens and commitments are shaped together.

What, then, of the long-espoused principle of "subsidiarity"? It sounds good in theory, but it is much harder in practice, especially as aging members face diminished capacities and the basic model of leadership remains hierarchical and top-down. Leaders might attempt to give members more responsibility, but when they are not effective or successful, leaders are understandably prone to stepping back in rather than letting things fail. Members then resent leadership's takeover and the implicit verdict of "you're not able." And leaders resent the ever-increasing burden of absorbing the work that others can no longer do. Increasingly, leaders take over, members become more passive and dependent, and the cycle escalates until the system breaks down.

Leaders and members need a new way of relating, one that respects the gifts and limitations of each. In international communities, this also asks whose language, culture, and assumptions dominate. A member speaking in a second or third language, or formed in a culture where one does not contradict elders in public, may hold back precisely what the community most needs to hear, while those at the familiar center may not notice the silence at all. Shared leadership becomes more truthful as the center itself becomes willing to be changed.

Partnership also reaches beyond the vowed members. Over recent decades, lay involvement has grown from help in kitchens and on the grounds to lay treasurers, administrators, and colleagues in ministry. Yet collaboration is not yet partnership. According to organizational thinker Peter Block, genuine partnership requires four conditions: an exchange of purpose, the right to say no, joint accountability, and absolute honesty. Can you imagine a lay partner telling you no? Everyone absolutely honest and accountable for the outcome, so that no one walks away when the going gets tough? A vision for the future co-created with laity, not simply yours with their help? That is qualitatively different from collaboration.

This does not erase every distinction. Church law requires a suitable period after perpetual or definitive profession for appointment or election as a superior (Canon 623). Yet within the requirements of Church law and each institute's constitutions, there is room for substantial forms of shared leadership. The Synod's implementation guidance names access to leadership for non-ordained women and men among the areas where local Churches are invited to take concrete steps (*Pathways*, §3.2).

Such partnership opens a community to the gifts of lay colleagues, associates, and the wider family drawn to its charism, not only to help with tasks but to exercise leadership and shape the future. Lay partners may see possibilities that members, worn down by years of carrying the

same responsibilities, find hard to see. It requires mutual formation: lay partners come to appreciate the community's charism and history, while members learn to receive what these partners bring. In my experience, such partnerships can bring new life even to communities in the late stages of their lifecycle.

For example, a men's community of 42 members with an average age of 85 was searching for a way to care for its elders. Like many communities in the same position, it was considering downsizing, selling most of its properties, and moving its elders into a healthcare facility. To explore other options, we organized a visioning day and invited lay people from around the town to join the members around one central question: What can we do better together than separately? Twenty-five townspeople came, and the energy in the room was palpable. Together they generated more than 30 possibilities for healthcare, properties, and for how the community's mission might serve the town. Today the community has a healthcare provider and a development on its land that includes affordable housing, a continuum-of-care facility, and student housing. None of this would have happened had the community acted alone. The ideas, imagination, energy, and resources emerged through its partnership with laity. Rather than downsizing, the community "upsized" its mission.

NEW HEARTSETS

In my 2022 keynote to the UISG Plenary Assembly in Rome, I spoke of vulnerability and its transformative potential. A leader who can say "I cannot do this alone; I need your help" makes room for other people's wisdom and care. A member who can name hurt without turning it into accusation opens a way to understanding. Such honesty requires relationships in which vulnerability will be received with empathy and treated responsibly. This is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage to risk rejection, share our true selves, and let go of a cherished way of life. Communities choosing this Exodus journey need leaders who model their own vulnerability and create soul-dwelling spaces where members can do the same.

> ***"Vulnerability is not a character flaw. It is the doorway to transformation."***

The myth that vulnerability is weakness, reinforced by prevailing masculine norms, expects leaders to portray unwavering strength and hide whatever might betray uncertainty or hurt. Yet credible leaders are grounded, honest, and relatable, courageous enough to risk failure for something more noble. Isn't that what your founders and foundresses did? Jesus did not armor-plate his heart; he entered fully into our human experience, willing to risk himself in love.

Efforts to numb our fear, shame, or hurt also diminish our capacity for joy, love, and compassion.

A woman of color attending a retreat I was leading told us that she wears a "breastplate" when returning to her predominantly white motherhouse, guarding her heart against anticipated judgment and prejudice. Her experience reveals how much can remain hidden beneath the surface of community life. I see leaders and members who can plan, organize, and teach with ease, yet fear admitting "I don't know" or "I need your help." Some leave leadership depleted, wounded, or exhausted. Their guardedness has a history: people learn to protect themselves when openness has brought ridicule, racism, betrayal, or rejection.

Religious life once reinforced this guardedness. Norms surrounding silence, custody of the eyes, chapters of faults, and "particular friendships" worked against honest sharing and wholesome intimacy, and their effects linger. Those who ask others to embrace vulnerability must be willing to undertake this soulwork themselves.

Building trust requires far more than imploring members to "trust leadership!" Communities need the skills of trust-tending: how to build trust, repair it when breached, and distinguish secrecy, privacy, and confidentiality. Leaders who act as anxious parents, telling members what to do or doing for them what they could do themselves, reinforce the very dependency they hope to overcome.

None of this happens by Chapter decree or a weekend workshop for a handful of people. It requires safe spaces, green spaces where people can fumble and fail, unlearn, relearn, and grow, and the sustained involvement of the whole community.

NEW SKILLSETS

New values and good intentions cannot substitute for the skills new paradigms require. For over 40 years, my wife, Beth, and I have been training religious congregations and other mission-driven organizations in what we call CARE, a Conversational Approach to Relational Effectiveness. It is based on the gospel call to love one another (John 13:34–35, NIV), the value base of mutuality, and practices that bring these to life. It is about developing the skills for transformative partnerships: leader to member, member to member, and vowed members with their lay partners in mission.

The basic skills taught in CARE include presence, self-disclosure, basic listening, giving and receiving feedback, empathic and intuitive listening, and the hardest of all, confrontation. Participants learn to create clear and permeable boundaries, stop triangulating, and deal more directly with one another to reconcile and work through their conflicts. CARE is not a "communication workshop" or a brief exposure to skills for a select few. It immerses an entire congregation in relating more effectively, authentically, and mutually, teaching members how to love one another in practice, not merely in sentiment. Fully training a congregation takes one to three years, yet the fruit of that commitment is a genuinely transformative paradigm for living in community.

Communities that have gone through this training sound different. Assemblies are no longer dominated by the handful of members prone to speak; more members find their voice and speak freely. Members are no longer "shoulding" one another, triangulating, or talking over and past one another. They find their way through conflict not by debating but by actively listening. Slips still occur; loaded comments and judgments still happen. But members are now able to catch one another and self-correct. Above all, they have created a green space for growth, where members experience community as a place more hospitable to the soul.

New mindsets, heartsets, and skillsets belong together; none will suffice without the other two. Yet inner change also needs communal practices in which it can take root and be tested. The first of these is learning to discern together.

DISCERNING TOGETHER

Communal discernment is more than individuals discerning in the same room. You can pray earnestly side by side and still be hesitant to let another person's insight reshape your own. Personal prayer is essential, but its fruits need to enter a shared process in which people listen, question, and allow their understanding to develop. As the Synod's Final Document puts it, discernment "is never just a setting out of one's own personal or group point of view" (§82).

I frequently encounter this in preparing communities for leadership discernment. Many report that before the retreat or election began, members were already whispering, "Don't put my name down," or "I'm not going to the discernment retreat," withdrawing before anyone could hear what they might offer or explore their reluctance together. Their freedom to decline must be respected. But when their reasons remain outside the communal discernment, the community loses something it needs to understand.

So I ask members to come to the discernment retreat carrying whatever truth they have already discerned in prayer, even if it means they are not called to leadership. Their reluctance is part of the collective discernment: What has made leadership so burdensome? What do they fear would be asked of them, and what would need to change? Participating does not require standing for election. The Final Document asks for exactly this breadth, "particularly involving those who are at the margins" (§82), and in a leadership discernment the reluctant are often at the margins. If only those willing to serve shape the conversation, the community remains blind to the reasons the system is broken and to what needs to change.

> ***"Their reluctance is not an obstacle to discernment. It is part of the truth the community needs to hear."***

Researchers know a similar blind spot as publication bias. Journals readily publish studies whose hypotheses succeed and rarely those that fail, so the literature loses crucial data: why an approach failed, what unexpected variables emerged, where inquiry should turn next. Communities that listen only to the willing make the same mistake. Those who no longer wish to carry on leadership as it has always been done hold a truth worth hearing.

The synodal process, with its conversation in the Spirit, and practices such as contemplative listening and engagement all seek to call forth what some call the fourth voice. Otto Scharmer and Eva Pomeroy write of a "fourth-person" knowing at the intersection of the other three: the first-person voice of my own experience, the second-person voice of what we come to know together in dialogue, and the third-person voice of what we learn through observation and analysis. The fourth voice emerges when these are integrated and transcended. For a community of faith, this offers a way of understanding how the Spirit can speak within and through the gathered body. Discernment of this kind prepares a community for the second practice: experimenting with a new way forward.

EXPERIMENTING WITH A NEW WAY FORWARD: AD EXPERIMENTUM

> ***"Be open to discovering new ways of being together."***
>
> Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher

We cannot think our way into a new paradigm; we must act our way into it by trying new ways of living it. An ad experimentum approach—piloting a new practice for a defined period and harvesting the learning from that experience—helps a community move beyond the limits of

familiar arrangements. The Synod's 2025 implementation guidance explicitly identifies opportunities for local experimentation in decision-making, accountability, and participatory bodies (§3.1). The invitation is to give promising possibilities a practical beginning and evaluate their fruits.

A community might begin by entrusting more administrative responsibility to qualified colleagues so elected leaders can give sustained attention to pastoral relationships and visioning. It might pilot a new way for members to share with laity in shaping and carrying its mission. These possibilities need room to be incubated, explored, and modified before becoming settled arrangements. Each experiment needs a clear purpose, defined authority, adequate support, and an agreed time for reviewing what has been learned. The people affected need a real voice in that review.

In *Gather the Wisdom, Weave a Dream*, I describe structures that help communities practice wider participation: Wisdom Circles of members and partners focused on mission, community life, and stewardship; a Guiding Team of leaders and members that designs and shepherds the process; and an Integration Team that connects the work across the circles and with elected leadership. Smaller congregations can adapt simpler arrangements. Each is an experimental pathway toward new partnerships among leaders, members, and lay colleagues.

Changing the boxes on an organizational chart can leave the old culture intact. A new council can reproduce the same concentration of power; a listening circle can become another place where people remain silent. Evaluation must therefore reach beyond efficiency to the quality of relationships and participation: who is speaking, whose contribution influences decisions, how conflict is handled, and whether energy is being released for mission. The learning may ask us to revise the structure and to change ourselves. Personal, communal, and systemic transformation belong to the same journey.

BEFORE THE FIRST BALLOT

Who will lead us? A community choosing the path of fruition may answer with a smaller team or a commissary, and if that is the choice, it deserves to be made freely, honestly, and with care. A community choosing the path of transformation will find that the question opens onto another: How will we lead together?

The answer may begin with the members who said, “Don’t put my name down.” Their reluctance carries wisdom the community cannot get anywhere else: what leadership has cost, what it has asked that no one should have to give, and what would need to change for someone to say yes. A community that invites that truth into its discernment is already practicing the partnership it hopes to create. It is reading the results that usually go unpublished.

An election offers an opportunity to begin this work before anyone takes office. Alongside discerning who should serve, the community can discern how to lead, how members and leaders can partner together in co-creating their future, what skills are needed, and what experiments it is willing to undertake. This work needs to happen before, during, and after the installation ceremony, when it is tempting to hand the future back to a new team. Leaders and members need ongoing opportunities to reflect on what they are learning, address what remains difficult, and deepen their partnership.

None of this makes the work lighter at first. Partnership asks more of everyone before it asks less of anyone. But it changes who carries the weight, and how it is carried. The question “Who will lead us?” then becomes a deeper invitation into a different way of being a body, one that, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, “grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

FOR REFLECTION

1. *What does our leadership crisis reveal about the system we are asking people to serve? Where is maintenance consuming the energy needed for mission and visioning?*
2. *What changes in our mindsets, heartsets, and skillsets would make partnership real? What am I personally willing to learn, relinquish, or practice?*
3. *When we discern, how do our individual insights enter genuine dialogue and change through the encounter with others? Whose voice is missing, including the voices of those reluctant to serve?*
4. *What experiment could we undertake together, including lay partners where appropriate? How would we share responsibility, evaluate its fruits, and learn from the experience?*

More reflections will follow in the months ahead.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Synod of Bishops. *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.* Final Document (October 26, 2024), §§44, 45, 82. The quotation in the introduction is from §44; the description of conversation in the Spirit is from §45; the quotations on discernment and on those at the margins are from §82. Read source.

General Secretariat of the Synod. *Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod* (Vatican, June 29, 2025), §§3.1–3.2. These sections support local experimentation, connect cultural conversion with structural reform, and name access to leadership for non-ordained women and men among the areas for concrete steps. "Ad experimentum" is used in this reflection as a description of a trial approach, not as a quotation from these documents. Read source.

Ephesians 4:16. New International Version (NIV). The opening quotation is an excerpt, echoed in the closing. Read source.

Mark 10:42–45. New International Version (NIV). The pull quote in "A Broken System and a Deeper Invitation" is from verse 43. Read source.

John 13:34–35. New International Version (NIV). Reference for the Gospel call to love one another in the CARE discussion. Read source.

John 15:12; Mark 6:5; Luke 5:16. New International Version (NIV). References in the portrait of Jesus' mutuality in "A Broken System and a Deeper Invitation." Read source.

Code of Canon Law, Canon 623, on the requirement of perpetual or definitive profession for the office of superior. Read source.

Ira Chaleff. *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and For Our Leaders*, 3rd ed. (Berrett-Koehler, 2009). Source of the image of leaders and followers orbiting around a common purpose. Read source.

Peter Block. *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest*, 2nd ed. (Berrett-Koehler, 2013; first published 1993). Source of the four requirements of partnership. Read source.

Otto Scharmer and Eva Pomeroy. "Fourth Person: The Knowing of the Field." *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change* 4, no. 1 (2024): 19–48. Read source.

Thich Nhat Hanh. "Dharma Talk: Sangha," *The Mindfulness Bell*, September 1997, based on a Plum Village talk given in September 1996. Read source.

Ted Dunn. "Embracing Our Vulnerability and Its Transformative Potential." Keynote address, UISG Plenary Assembly, Rome, May 2022. Read source.

Ted Dunn. *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation* (CCS Publications, 2020). Source of the review of the literature on the decline of religious life. Read source.

Ted Dunn and Beth Lipsmeyer. *Transforming Communities Through CARE: A Conversational Approach to Relational Effectiveness* (Comprehensive Consulting Services, 2023), especially the chapters on mutuality, presence, self-disclosure, feedback, empathic listening, intuitive listening, and confrontation.

Ted Dunn. *Gather the Wisdom, Weave a Dream: A Visioning Guide for Leaders and Planners of Faith Communities Seeking Deep Change and Transformation* (CCS Publications, 2024). Sections on partnering with laity and structures for transformative visioning, including Wisdom Circles, Guiding Teams, and Integration Teams. Read source.

Ted Dunn. "Triangulation and the Misuse of Power: A Dance of Victims, Villains and Rescuers." *Human Development*, Spring 2006.