

# Holding Steady: The Psycho-Social Service of Leadership in Times of Change

How can leaders support members through the processes of transformation?

Maria L. (Marisa) Guerin

## Introduction

**W**hat courage, humility, and love it takes to accept congregational leadership in these challenging times! The kinds of changes over which community leaders must preside are usually not dramatic, urgent crises. Instead, the process of transformational change affecting religious institutes these days generally unfolds with the gradualness of nature itself: on the outside, manifested in almost inexorable demographic and ecclesial trends; on the inside, a ferment of deep spiritual energy, that which is falling away making room for that which is emerging and alive. The emotional complexity of normal life these days in religious communities is intense, even if hidden below the surface of what looks calm.

It is not within my expertise to offer thoughts on how religious life is evolving, or how the church in America will look in the future, although both questions are important to me as a Catholic lay woman and consultant to religious communities.

What is within my expertise, however, is to offer some of the wisdom from the social sciences to suggest how leaders can provide sensitive support to the psycho-social experiences that individual com-

munity members face when change is happening to them or around them. This article is organized to address questions that I hope will respond to the realities faced by leaders of religious institutes.

### Question 1. What is a meaningful role for leadership of a religious community when it comes to helping the members cope with change?

You cannot make people change their long-established ways of perceiving, thinking, and framing problems. You cannot alter people's deep-seated habits by directive. Only they can do it themselves when they really want to, when they themselves experience a strong need to do so.....What you can do, however, is to provide conditions that will increase the chances that people will make changes themselves. [1]

Because adults cope with change on their own terms, the approach I suggest is based on the "transitional" approach to change. It characterizes the human developmental process from infancy through adulthood, as proceeding by way of the "working through" of complicated transitions.

Psychologists advise that for persons to successfully "work through" changes

of significance, there are three elements that will be helpful: a frame that doesn't change, time and space in which to explore the change, and containing leadership.

The first useful element is that something has to be understood NOT to be changing -- the frame or ground that reliably holds one. For persons of faith, we find that unchanging frame in our confidence in the Providence of a loving God. This trust in the Holy Mystery that we can never fully understand but to which we give our entire lives is the steady frame that holds us safe no matter the difficulties of change.

For specific religious communities, there are probably also very concrete things that are not changing -- the relationships with other parts of an international congregation, or the sustainable future envisioned for a beloved ministry, or the commitment to stay in a particular location, etc.

A second element needed for helping adults to work through the emotional transitions involved in coping with change is provision for what the literature calls "transitional space." In simple terms, it refers to times and places for dialogue. Religious communities, especially women's communities, are extremely effective with respect to this

factor. Religious communities make sensitive use of conversation circles, dialogue groups, regional or local gatherings, small groups, committees and task forces, think tanks, and retreats. All of these can be occasions of transitional space, giving each member the opportunity to express her feelings, offer her thoughts, and solve problems.

The third useful element is the “containing” function of leadership. “Containing” is a psychological term for the “holding” function of a leader, a parent, a teacher, a therapist. When a leader provides containment, it means that she displays a willingness and a capacity to weather the ambiguities and stresses of the role, the courage to step up to the requirements of the position to which she has been elected or appointed, and the honesty and humility to be realistic, and that she offers a caring and reassuring presence.

When leadership containment is weak, fractured, or displaced – which certainly happens a lot – the ability of the community to work through the challenges of transformative change is impaired to some degree. Grace can bring everyone through, but it is often painful. There is a human need for emotional containment that must be met if adults are going to be able to work their way through to a mature integration of what the change means for them.

If you are in leadership, please resist the tendency to abdicate your containing role if your community’s culture is highly collegial; no matter how collaborative the culture, the emotionally-containing leadership role is a critical service to a community undergoing stress, change, or challenge.

**Question 2.** What are some of the most common dimensions of the change experience and how could you respond helpfully to each one?

**Rational Dimensions of Change:** Any significant change has very reasonable difficulties inherent in it. This means one can expect ques-

tions and concerns that are not always “resistance,” but actually contributions to the important tasks of accomplishing the change.

Some examples might include the complexity of the overall system that will be changing, the legal obligations that must be handled, international dimensions both canonical and civil, the need to allocate sufficient resources, the importance of education for members and staff, etc.

“Rational” implies that these are predictable and realistic issues, not primarily arising from personalities or feelings. Any complex change entails a lot of expected issues, and it is also possible that changes will produce unanticipated consequences that could be problematic.

The point of managing the rational dimension of change is not to treat it as resistance, but to proactively invite and facilitate conversations that help those involved to work out the kinks and resolve the problems that might arise.

*Implications for leaders:*

- Display prudence and thoughtfulness so that others know that you are appreciating the realistic issues and taking appropriate actions to address them. If they know you are aware and respectful of the practical

challenges, they are more likely to be constructive in their comments, as opposed to raising alarms that leadership has overlooked or minimized something important.

- Ask questions and listen for the concrete wisdom of those at the living edge of the religious institute. They will see the practical side of changes better than leaders will. This especially applies to staff roles and to sisters holding local responsibilities that aren’t on the daily radar screen of elected leadership.
- A very useful habit is to make sure there is a time to ask “What could go wrong?” or “What might we have forgotten?” or other similar questions that invite others to test the soundness of plans.
- Use expert resources to support planning and change, and to assess risks.

**Emotional/Spiritual Dimensions of Change:**

Emotional reactions in response to change can exist both at the conscious level, where people can name them and be in touch with their feelings, and also at the unconscious level. At the unconscious level, emotions can be triggered if the change confronts a person with very hard-to-tolerate experiences of risk, loss, or anxiety.

I have connected emotional reactions with spiritual dimensions because of the great complementarities that exist in the practices of emotional and spiritual maturity. The role of leaders in this dimension of change involves both the skills of emotional containment, and the skills of spiritual support.

Sometimes, conversations that appear to be about something practical (governance changes, budget processes, etc.) may in fact be the vehicle for expressing feelings which are otherwise hard to acknowledge. Listen to the “music,” not just the words. All kinds of emotions can be stimulated by profound change.

- For community members, there may be hope and en-



The very experience of being communicated with is a validation of belonging, of relationship, of unity

ergy for the future, and also anxiety, loss, grief, fear, or frustration.

- For staff that will experience change, there is certain to be anxiety, fear, and perhaps anticipation of job loss for themselves or their colleagues, but there will likely also be feelings of loyalty and commitment to the community they serve, and the desire to be helpful.
- For associates and lay co-ministers and maybe donors, there may be anxiety, curiosity, hope, worry, and perhaps a sense of helplessness or dependency because they may be outside the main forums in which the change is being discussed.

Emotional/spiritual reactions may not be “logical” or “rational” but they are deeply meaningful and potentially transformative for the persons experiencing them. Responding in sympathetic ways is important.

*Implications for leaders:*

- The leadership function of emotional containment and tending is critical here. This means explicitly being able to validate the emotional experiences of others without being overcome or disabled by them, but rather being able to express calm and faith-filled confidence in the journey, and being willing to honestly assure those who are genuinely facing risk and unknowns that you will communicate often and truthfully and that you will provide support where it is needed.
- Face-to-face, in-person contact is exponentially more important in times of emotionally-fraught change. Think carefully about which conversations should be conducted in person, and which ones can be handled via technologies like telephone or videoconference. Face-to-face interactions are especially important if you expect to surface and resolve complex or conflict-holding issues. Leaders instinctively know this when they choose to visit an area to deliver difficult news.
- Communicate all the time, even when there is not much to say. The very experience of being communicated with is a validation of belong-

ing, of relationship, of unity. Don't forget your wider world of staff, donors, supporters. They travel with you.

- Rely on the discernment and contemplation methods that are so powerful and that religious understand. Ritualize endings and beginnings as you go along, and not just for sisters.

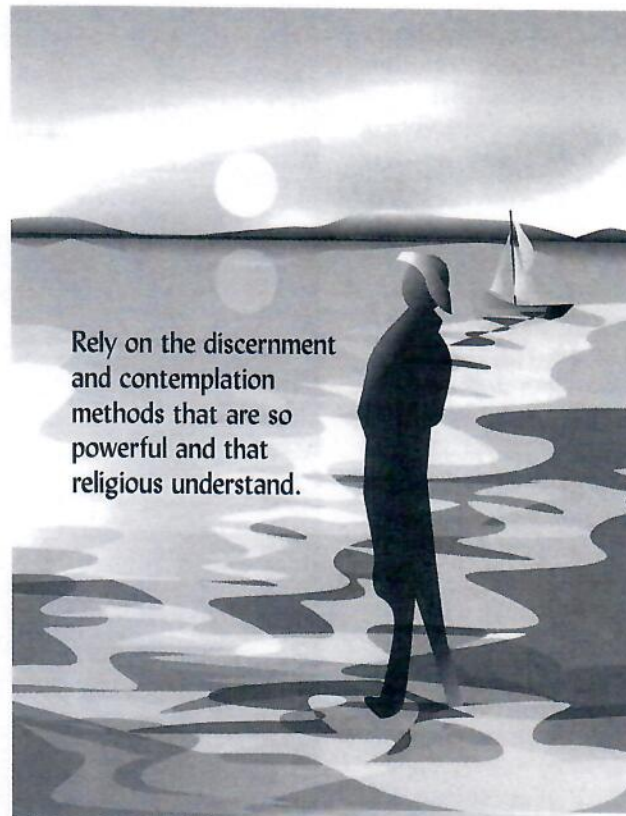
**Political Dimensions of Change:**

Some governance or structural changes likely involve important shifts in the power and influence dynamics of the religious institute. The political dimension has to do with who can influence what, who is connected to sources of influence, and how close or far members and staff and co-ministers feel from the power centers that matter to them. Another word for it might be the “communal” dynamics of change.

Changes in the dimension of politics and influence may be especially impactful to those who serve on boards of ministries that serve the mission of the community. They will want and need both formal clarity and informal connections to maintain their sense of access to decision-makers.

*Implications for leaders:*

- Design changes in structures thoughtfully. Ensure that authority is distributed wisely and in ways that make sense to those most affected. When you are examining the “rational” options, don't forget to assess their effect on “political” needs for access to leaders.
- Keep periods of ambiguity as short as possible to allow power shifts to move in a healthy way. The sooner leaders or planners of a change can lay out a pathway that makes sense, the sooner others will re-orient their political connections in appropriate ways.
- Challenge your normal assumptions about how long it takes to get things done through appropriate groups, etc. Don't put matters of urgency or matters that cannot be resolved through consensus through lengthy processes of discernment or decision-making.
- Consciously engage with those whose support will matter a lot, and also with those whose resistance would matter a lot. Stay close to those most sensitive to the politi-



cal shifts. This is another dynamic where face-to-face contact is very important.

### Behavioral Dimensions of Change:

The behavioral side of change is really a bid for taking the necessary time for people to learn what they need to learn to be successful in the new realities. Members, leaders, staff, and ministry colleagues may have to learn some new ways to work together, for example: Who needs to attend which meetings? How to strengthen local bonds? How to communicate appropriately? Whom to go to for what?

Elected and delegated leadership and staff will need to adjust their knowledge base and perhaps their skill sets to respond to the changing scope of their responsibilities.

### Implications for leaders:

- Take time to learn and talk through changing expectations for behavior, meetings, communications, etc.
- Explicitly re-negotiate or resolve conflicts as they inevitably arise.
- Stay attentive to the importance of anti-racism, nonviolence, and inclusivity, since cultural and behavioral blind spots can be especially unconscious during times of stressful change.

### Concluding Advice

The horizon of information available to those in leadership is very helpful to leaders and generally not so visible to others. Share as much as you can, make others into “insiders” as much as you can. Help them to see more of the whole picture.

Unconscious projection from members and staff “loads up” leaders with the unspoken feelings and concerns of those they lead – they can feel the weight, the anxieties, the anger, the need, the expectations. Like members, leaders are subject to ambiguity and stress and the temptation to escape them. Make sure you take care of yourself so that you can contain the concerns of others.

For issues to be worked effectively there must be sufficient energy available, and not paralyzing levels of anxiety – a “productive range of distress.” Provide safe forums for issues to bubble up, and regulate the temperature. You can turn up the heat by focusing attention on hard issues that must be addressed; you can turn down the heat by managing the pace of change, or tackling some do-able elements along the way. Think – what does the group you are working with need? To be gently jostled out of complacency or denial? Turn heat “up.” Or to be calmed from too much worry and concern? Turn heat “down.” [2]

Remember that perfect competence is not as important as courage and faith. Courage means marshalling the self-confidence to lead...

- with strong and reliable “holding” of the mission and the challenges,
- with respectful invitation to the contributions of others,
- with commitment to the common good rather than blame or complaint
- with trust that the larger holding is in the hands of God’s Providence.

This is the surest grounding you can have in navigating the transformations to which the Spirit has called you.

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### Endnotes

1. Gilles Amado and Anthony Ambrose, Eds., *The Transitional Approach to Change*, London, Karnac Books UK and NY, 2001, p. xviii
2. Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, Boston, Harvard Business Review Press, 2002, pp. 107-111



Lead with trust that the larger holding is in the hands of God’s Providence

# THE Occasional Papers

Volume 45, Number 2

Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Summer 2016



*The Occasional Papers* publishes articles on topics of interest to the membership of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Additional copies may be purchased by contacting Carol Glidden at 301-588-4955 or [cglidden@lcwr.org](mailto:cglidden@lcwr.org). Subscription information is available online at [lcwr.org](http://lcwr.org).

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