Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



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The other day I sat beside our new receptionist trying to make sense of the dial plan for our telephone system. There on the screen in front of us, we could trace any phone call that came into the neighborhood center where I minister and follow the route it would take to each office. Imagine an old-time operator's station, complete with wires and plugs, but digitized. Instead of long cords connecting telephone extensions, colorful arrows stretched across the computer screen in front of us. As we gazed upon the mess on the screen, we wondered aloud how so many conversations could happen at once. Surely with all these intersecting arrows there would be something lost.

After following each dial plan's arrows to completion, we saved our work and with a little trepidation, picked up a cellphone to test it all out. As I pressed the cellphone to my ear, I heard the sweet sound of the center's recorded welcome, followed by a ringing phone down the hall. Hanging up, I moved on to testing the next line. With each call, I found a successful connection. What had seemed like a mess on paper, in fact, was a network calibrated and ready to ring out.

All it needed was a call.

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On a recent video conference with Sisters of St. Joseph from congregations around the United States and Canada, the conversation turned to our vision for the future. As people spoke about what they dreamed, I could see the arrows and connections mapping out before me. Common themes emerged in the conversation. By and large, this wasn't a new conversation but an evolving one.

It is a conversation happening in so many places and on so many levels. In inter-congregational spaces, among congregations that share charisms, within individual congregations, within age and interest cohorts, and among individual members, there is a process of envisioning for the future that has been going on for years, and is continuing to take place as we live into the future.

In following the preparations of the U.S. Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or LCWR, for their annual assembly, it is evident in conversations between leaders around the country. The work leaders have been doing through the conference's "Discerning Our Emerging Future" initiative broadens leaders' view of what key

components need to be considered in looking to the future.

Many of the themes that are found in LCWR's conversations are echoed in other circles: inclusivity, diversity, empowerment, relationships, shared ministry, reconciliation, joy, call, charism, formation, movement to oneness, and trust. These themes underscore the viability of religious life moving into the future and the critical need for conversations that listen and actions that include, so that the future of religious life reflects the Gospel vision and call that is at its core.

In the multitude of conversations, it's important that we all continue to keep showing up. This can be difficult in a process that is more of a marathon than a sprint. The spirit inspires, and yet we discern that movement in conversation with one another and in the realm of conferences and committees. At times, such work can be tedious; we must endure. Conversations can seem repetitious; still we must continue, speaking our truth and listening so that all voices are heard.

We must remember that multilevel conversations will inevitably bear multiple fruits. There is no one "right" answer but a multitude of threads being pulled together by the Spirit. Our challenge will be recognizing, balancing and reconciling these fruits of the Spirit, even if they don't seem to be part of the same plan. We're making fruit salad, patiently and perceptively recognizing the multiple paths the Spirit is devising to make our future a reality.

To embrace this reality, we must trust in the work of the Spirit and trust in one another as we journey into this uncharted territory together. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:2-4), we are being called to journey together "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call."

In hope, we journey together.

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On the way, we engage in conversations, recognizing that the prayer and discernment we are about at this moment is done in motion. Where we stood yesterday is not (and cannot be) where we stand today. In pursuit of the moving target that is the future, we come to see that there are many ways to get there.

There is not one answer to the question of our emerging future but a multitude of conversations to be had.

As those conversations (and ultimately the faithful people who pursue the actions they imply) yield fruits, we will be called to reconcile the resulting plans and visions with one another. In so doing, may we hold true to the common charism of religious life that unites us while also enriching one another (and our world) with the particular charisms the Spirit inspires in each of us.

In the master plan for religious life, we can trust that the Spirit is the One connecting these many conversations. What, at times, can feel like a jumble is, in fact, the creative spirit of God working in the chaos.

Like a busy operator, God is making the connections. The call of religious life can and will make its way through if we trust and cooperate with God's vision. We must remain engaged and available.

Now is the time to listen. Can you hear it? The future is calling.