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**LEADING TOGETHER: A Grounded Theory Study of Women Religious,  
The Power of Collaborative Leadership  
And the  
Development of an Extensive Social Services Network**

A Dissertation Presented

By

Madeline E. Gunn

to

The Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Social Welfare

Stony Brook University

August 2010

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Abstract of the Dissertation

**LEADING TOGETHER: A Grounded Theory Study of Women Religious,  
The Power of Collaborative Leadership  
and the  
Development of an Extensive Social Services Network**

by

**Madeline E. Gunn**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**Social Welfare**

Stony Brook University

**2010**

The external events that initiate organizational change can have a significant effect on workers. Today human service organizations are being asked to adapt and adjust to an ever changing external environment causing a significant effect on workers and the clients they serve. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics almost 500,000 social workers are employed in human services organizations. Understanding how organizational change can be an opportunity for productive change becomes relevant to the world of human services organizations and social workers.

This qualitative study examines a community of women religious (Roman Catholic nuns) who experienced dramatic and significant organizational change during a specific 23 year period of their 150 year history. The study seeks to understand how this organization went from a semi-cloistered, monastic, exclusively teaching community to

an open, monastic community responsible for the creation, development, and continued management of a broad range of social service initiatives and agencies serving poor, disenfranchised individuals and families.

The mixed methods of ethnography (participant observation) and grounded theory analysis resulted in the emerging themes of '*seismic shifting*' (second order change), '*standing together*' (empowered worker) and '*leading through change*' (transformational leadership). These separate themes, working together set in motion a complex, series of internal processes that created the basis for a fully energized community willing to take on new initiatives. The study focuses on the processes and seeks to understand how change can happen and the organization stay not only intact, but whole and flourishing.

Drawing on the literature from organizational change, transformational leadership and worker empowerment, I discuss the ways this organization responded to external events. Also considered are ways human services organizations may consider when facing powerful external forces themselves.

Based on the findings, I discuss recommendations for policy changes to foster worker empowerment and leadership development. Also discussed are recommendations for changes in social work education to include and require management and leadership development.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie Pennsylvania and to all women religious who continue to fight the good fight. My hope is that this work accurately conveys the remarkable lives they live. Also, I hope I have adequately captured the power of their collaborative leadership style which serves as a model for worker empowerment and in turn the clients we serve.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This is a qualitative research study which seeks to understand the interaction of and relationship between major organizational change and relationship-based leadership. It is important to the profession of social work because most social workers (80%) work in human services organizations. And it is exactly these organizations that continue to respond to external forced change as a result of shifts in funding, continued evolution of managed care and the move to a market-model of the human services environment.

This study seeks to understand how managers and workers in these fields can respond to these changes while continuing to maintain their integrity and mission to serve people in need.

#### *Organizational Change in Professional Social Work Settings*

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) a professional social worker's role is to "assist individuals, groups, or communities to restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning, while creating societal conditions favorable to their goals." (NASW, Social Work Profession, General Fact Sheet, 2008). To engage individuals, groups and communities, the overwhelming majority of professional social workers find employment in organizational settings (versus self-employment) categorized

as human services. And according to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics as of 2006, almost 80% of all social workers are employed in organizational settings that include social service agencies, health care, education, government and corporate. In actual numbers, this equates to almost 500,000 workers.

At the same time, it is exactly these organizational settings that are experiencing dramatic change due forces external to organizations such as shifts in funding, continued evolution of managed care, and a reduction of resources formerly relied upon as fixed – such as public monies (Van Slyke, D.M., 2007). Along with these external forces, it is the “marketization” of the human services environment that is leading to organizational change (Fabricant & Brughardt, 1992, Harris & McDonald, 2000). These external forces affecting organizations are prompting profound organizational change which creates uncertainty for those employed in these settings (Jones, Watson, et al, 2008).

### *Leadership in Human Service Organizations*

Although a high percentage of professional social workers are employed in human services organizations, the senior level (leadership) positions are predominately given to individuals whose backgrounds are in business management and economics (Healy, 1998). This is attributed to the perceived need for individuals with formal managerial and leadership training and experience, specifically MBA and MPA graduates (Cupaiuolo, A., Loavenbruck, G. & Kiely, K., 1995), although Moran, Frans & Gibson (1995) found MSW students to have a higher degree of awareness of their employer’s (organizational) mission, values and range of services. Organizational-awareness is an exceptionally important quality of leadership (Bass, 2008).

Above and beyond the perception of not producing managerial candidates, social work schools have not developed an environment that is supportive of management and leadership studies – the emphasis is on direct practice (Hoefler, 2009). Only 3% of MSW students pursue management social work studies (Patti, 2000). Additionally, social work professionals have lost ground in the leadership of agencies in the central fields such as mental health, housing and homelessness (Wuenschel, 2006).

### *Relationship Based Leadership*

In his influential work “Leadership” (1978), J.M. Burns first introduced the then new concept of transformational leadership and describes it as, “[leadership] lies in seeing that the most powerful influences consists of deeply human relationships in which two or more persons *engage* (author’s emphasis) with one another. It lies in a more realistic, a more sophisticated understanding of power, and of the often far more consequential exercise of mutual persuasion, exchange, elevation and transformation – in short, leadership.” Since then, much has been written about the subject of leadership, especially relationship-based leadership. Bass (1990) lists more than 3000 studies that concern themselves with the relationship between leaders and their constituents. Yukl (1998) makes clear the difference between the more traditional transactional versus transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is marked by an exchange of rewards for complying with leadership, while transformational leadership concerns itself with the values and priorities of constituencies.

Given social work’s mandate to “engage individuals, groups and communities,” the relationship-based leadership models seem to be a natural fit for the profession.

### *Significance of Empowerment in the Social Work Profession*

The term empowerment is very familiar to social workers. It is a concept at the core of every social worker's educational and professional pursuits. cursory searches of social work text books almost always include references to empowerment: empowerment theory, empowerment perspectives, empowerment interventions, empowerment research etc. It is central to the profession of social work (Hopps, Pinderhughes & Shankar, 1995) Implicit in social work's core values "social justice... human rights" is the concept of empowerment (NASW Code of Ethics 2008). Explicit in the preamble to the Code of Ethics, which states that the "primary mission of the social work profession is ...empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty." This statement makes clear the centrality and relevance of empowerment to social workers.

#### *Social Workers as (Dis)Empowered Employees*

Given the importance of empowerment to the social work profession, it is noted that little consideration has been given to the issue of the empowerment of social workers themselves as employees in the work environment (Cohen & Austin, 2001). The notion of empowerment is considered in connection with those they serve – individual, families, groups and communities. And yet there is evidence that social workers do feel powerless in the organizational settings in which they work (Arches, 1991). One study cautions that disempowered workers tend to withdraw and are ineffective with their own clients (Hasenfeld, 1987). Kondrat (1995) states that client empowerment is contingent on worker empowerment. Additionally, Gutierrez, GlenMaye & DeLois (1995) found that social workers employed in an empowerment-based organization were more likely to have the capacity to empower clients. Social workers as empowered employees have further implications than job satisfaction for themselves.

### *Models of Worker Empowerment*

In Cohen & Austin's (2001) review of the literature on worker empowerment, they cite various models developed over the past 20 years. Some suggest workers create mutual support groups (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988), others discuss change from below (Brager & Holloway, 1978), and a third approach considers change from within – initiated by administrators (Resnick & Patti, 1980). This work was built upon by Holloway (1987) and a practice referred to as “staff-initiated organizational change” (SIOC). Cohen & Austin state that this model is based on assumptions that need to be challenged. Cohen and Austin's (2001) model of staff empowerment proposes three practices:

- “1. Worker participation in organizational improvement efforts should be designed into the organizational structure and formally sanctioned.
2. Participation in organizational improvement should be build into the professional social worker's role and should be seen as part of the job.
3. Opportunities for individual and organizational learning should be designed and encouraged throughout the change process.”

### *This Study*

As previously noted, human services organizations are in a state of tremendous change and flux. These organizations are where most social work professionals find employment. The focus of this study is one of process, not structure. It is a study of the combined dynamics of relationship-based leadership, which includes employee empowerment as an aspect of this model, in the face of powerful external forces necessitating organizational change. It focuses on an organization that moved through



tumultuous times and was delivered to a place of stability, remaining not only intact, but thriving and whole.

The notion of relationship-based leadership (supervisor/manager) and social worker as an empowered employee has not been thoroughly researched (Tsui, 2004) and is an area that could provide a significant positive change to social workers and the clients they serve. Outcomes associated with an empowerment model include program effectiveness and reduction in staff turnover (Hardina, 2005).

This study focuses on the important dynamics between leadership and empowered workers in the face of external forces necessitating organizational change. It more specifically intends to build on to Cohen & Austin's (2001) previously mentioned model of social work staff empowerment.

#### *Research Method*

The methodology employed in this investigation uses the mixed methods of ethnography and grounded theory. I chose these methods because of the nature of the research site used for data collection, and the focus of the research questions. The site chosen was a monastic community of women religious who extended permission to me to live with them for whatever period of time I deemed necessary. I entered the research site with the intention of understanding a faith-based organization delivering a broad array of social services to mostly inner-city clients. And, since the faith-based literature is still emerging, and all of the variables have yet to be identified, this methodology was the best fit given the area of focus.

This community is credited with the development and continued management of a broad array of social service initiatives, which in and of itself may not be remarkable.

However, the extraordinary nature of their situation is that, within a 23 year period, they transformed themselves from a semi-cloistered, (exclusively) teaching community to an open community responsible for this vast network of social service agencies and initiatives. Their change was not only dramatic, but they ‘arrived’ at their current destination as a thriving community. This investigation views their ‘community’ as the organization under study where my focus is process versus structure. And although the model of religious communal life cannot simply be superimposed on a human services organization, it turns out there is still much this community has to teach those of us working in and / or leading these organizations. The question(s) always were, how did they go through this organizational metamorphosis and what do we (social workers, middle-managers, and leaders of human services organizations) have to learn from them.

After living with them for almost 4 months, I conducted 14 in-depth interviews which were transcribed, coded and sorted into major categories of related themes. Along with the interviews, months of field notes also served to support the data. It is the evolving relationship between the developing themes that the basic social process of “*Leading Together*” emerges. The basic social process (Leading Together) or core code is a sought after concept in grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1996). The emerging basic social process was ‘discovered’ utilizing a co-constructivist method, meaning the theory was developed in partnership with the community/organization. Charmaz’s (2006) co-constructivist method of grounded theory is utilized in this investigation.

### *Study Findings*

The findings of this investigation indicate that dramatic organizational change occurred when the external environment perpetrated demands on the organization. These

demands presented challenges that the organization could not ignore. During the 23 year period under study, this organization experienced four major events that presented potentially life-threatening challenges to their continued existence. The findings explicate their survival in the face of these difficult, 'seismic' events.

During the taped interviews, as well as more informal exchanges, the discussion of turbulent change almost always surfaced. The sisters talked about the changes in their collective lives as defining moments. At the same time, they talked about their always having an opportunity to participate in the change process and the leaders that provided opportunities for them to move through it without having to be forced to comply.

This study examines the combined concepts of an empowered staff in collaboration with transformational leadership and the power of this combination within the context of organizational change and ultimately survival.

### *The Chapters that Follow*

Chapter II, "METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION OF SETTING" includes a description of how this investigation was initially conceived, conducted and documented. It describes the two phases of fieldwork, the challenges of being a participant observer especially in such a large setting involving over 100 individuals, various residences and a dozen not-for-profit agencies. A detailed description of monastic life, including prayer schedules, rituals and practical considerations of this life are also described. Additionally, it takes into account the use of grounded theory and each of the stages that comprise the theory: data collection and simultaneous analysis, code construction, comparison, memo writing and the emergence of theory.

Chapter III, “ANALYSIS OF THE DATA,” describes and discusses the emergence of the first two major themes of this study, “*Seismic Shifting*” and “*Leading Together*.” “*Seismic Shifting*” describes four major events, external to the organization, causing the community to respond in ways that may have ended their organizational life, but did not. These ‘seismic’ external events are discussed in detail, including how they handled and processes each event and the effect each had on the community.

“*Leading Together*” describes the sisters solidarity in the face of life-altering change. This solidarity is part of a learned culture referred to as Formation. This enculturation process produces an organization of individuals with shared values and vision. Also included in this chapter are descriptions of the struggles of their life and the process of overcoming differences in order to “stand together” enabling them to survive the seismic shifting.

“*Leading Together*” describes the method of this organization’s leadership process i.e. how the process begins, unfolds culminating in the election of their prioress and council. Also discussed is the unlikeness of secular organizations choosing leadership in this way, but the value of the process should not be lost. It is this collaborative process that results in a leader that suits their organizational needs at a particular moment in time. And it is this “fitness of role” that in fact helped to facilitate the organizational changes.

Chapter IV, “DISCUSSION OF STUDY RESULTS” presents the results of this study. It presents a synthesis of the findings within the context of the organizational change and leadership literature. It answers the primary research questions of this study, which include:

1. How did this community change from a semi-cloistered, monastic, exclusively teaching community to who they are today; an open, monastic, community responsible for the creation and continued management of a broad range of social services?
2. What were the factor(s) or event(s) initiating these changes?
3. How did the community react to and move through these changes?
4. What role if any did leadership play throughout this period?

This chapter discusses analyses and interprets the findings and includes a synthesis of the findings with the pertinent literature. The chapter is organized by the following two discussion categories:

1. Relationship between the external events and the organizational changes that the community experienced. (Research questions 1 & 2) [Organizational Theory literature]
2. Processes employed by the community enabling them to move through the changes (Research question 3 & 4) [Leadership literature]

Chapter V, “CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEACH”

provides a summary of the findings, conclusions, and policy implications. The policy implications include both educational as well as social welfare policy. Suggestions for further research are also included in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION OF SETTING

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodologies employed to conduct this study and provide the rationale for these choices. All aspects of data collection are described, including gaining entry to the community, fieldwork phases, document collection, taped and transcribed interviews. The preliminary analysis is also described in detail, which includes coding, creating categories and memoing, resulting in the emergence of theory.

A complete and comprehensive description of the setting follows. It is a monastic community which includes 145 sisters, numerous residences (including a monastery housing 90 of its members), and approximately 12 not-for-profit agencies and numerous political action initiatives. Because of its comprehensive size, a “*Ministries (in brief)*” section is included for ease of quick reference. Some quotes from the taped interviews are used in this chapter to enhance the descriptions of some of their agencies.

#### *Methodology*

This study is qualitative research using a combination of ethnographic and grounded theory methods. This mixed method approach was implemented because it best suited the goal of the project and more importantly, addressed the research questions

under investigation. Grounded theory methodology is especially suited to areas of investigation where very little academic research has been conducted; (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990) such is the case regarding faith-based social services, communities of women religious, organizational change and leadership. Also, since grounded theory results in an analysis of processes versus proof or disproof of a hypothesis, the chosen methodology is the most logical choice given the project's research questions and focus of investigation.

The data collection strategy was to gain access to the community, establish relationships with key informants and engage these subjects in semi-structured interviews which were taped and transcribed. Additionally, data sources include personal field notes; the notes document recollections of untapped conversations, participation in activities, personal reflections. Additional data sources include community documents, newsletters, and any relevant printed material made available to me.

Because the research site is located approximately 470 miles from my home, choices for data gathering were to move to a location in close proximity of the monastery or to move into the monastery itself. Since I had some familiarity with the monastery, I knew the community received guests. Based on this information, I decided to ask permission to live in the monastery. The advantage to staying there has the obvious benefit of considerably greater access to the community. The logistics of this arrangement are detailed later.

#### *Original Study Plan*

The original plan of this study was to focus on the creation, development and on-going management of the community's not-for-profit agencies. It was hoped that this

focus would uncover all of the early questions around faith-based social services, the sisters' original involvement in all of their initiatives, and how they came to develop this network of agencies. As I became more involved in the community, they made clear that their social services were an outgrowth of their total lifestyle. In other words, I would not be getting a complete or accurate picture of what I was seeking unless I also studied their community and prayer lives. Hence, the research lens was broadened to get this complete picture.

### *Study Design*

The project is divided into two phases: the fieldwork phase, which involved living, working, dining and recreating with the community for a four month period. During this time, the following actions took place: daily note taking which included documenting observations and members' behaviors, the writing of analytical memos and commencing in conducting semi-unstructured taped interviews with key informants. Additionally, documents, pamphlets, newspaper articles and books were collected and used as supporting data. The second phase was the analysis phase, which involved transcribing interviews, coding and building categories utilizing grounded theory methodology facilitated by the use of the qualitative software application *Atlas.ti*®. The analysis concludes with a theory of this community's life cycle over a 23 year period and how they evolved from a semi-cloistered, monastic teaching community to an open, monastic one responsible for the development and management of a large social service network. The resulting theory serves to contribute to the body of knowledge on the topics of organizational change and development and the role of leadership within this framework.



### *Researcher Bias*

In grounded theory studies, the researcher is the lens through which all data is perceived, analyzed and documented (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In order to maintain clarity throughout a research project, it is important the researcher be aware of any biases he/she may have regarding the object(s) of investigation. To address the issue of researcher bias, I offer the following information regarding my background, relationship to religious communities in general, this community specifically, and potential biases.

I was born into a Roman Catholic family and for eight years was educated by a community of women religious – essentially all of my elementary school years. My family and I and most of the people in my sphere of influence held these women in high esteem. In fact, one could describe my feeling as possessing a certain sense of wonder and awe for the sisters. During high school, I continued to have contact with this community. However, it was minimal and informal, since they no longer had responsibility for my formal education. As I progressed through early adulthood, my contact with the Roman Catholic Church and religious communities waned, although my sense of curiosity, respect and wonder did not. Without an awareness of this sentiment, a researcher could lose his/her sense of clarity, and this lack of clarity could have an undesirable effect on the investigation.

Over the ensuing years, I have worked in the not-for-profit sector and institutions of higher education where women religious were my colleagues and in some cases became personal friends. It was during these years, I developed a better understanding of the life of a religious.

Some months before finishing doctoral coursework, I visited the monastery that was to become my research site, as a retreatant. It was during this retreat that I decided to use this community of women religious as the focus for dissertation. They were immersed in various social service agencies of their own creation, faith-based initiatives, political action, and feminist theology. It seemed like the most natural place for me to launch a research project that I personally connected to on many levels offering numerous areas of genuine interest.

Since I was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, one potential bias could be to enter the research site with preconceived notions and assumptions about the site. Also, my contact with women religious over the span of my life could potentially influence my thinking by convincing myself that I “already understood” what they were all about and in doing so, not ask and/or miss important questions or misconstrue actions, statements, or observations.

I mindfully entered the site with a keen awareness of these potential biases. In my effort to prevent them from skewing my analysis, I made a daily practice of keeping this awareness in the forefront. When writing my memos/notes, I continually questioned the underlying assumptions, unasked questions etc. In doing so, I believe the biases were addressed to the degree we are capable of addressing our own biases.

### *Informed Consent*

The research design, consent form and correspondence were submitted as required to the institutional *Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects* (CORIHS) review committee as an exempt application. As designed, the study met the

criteria for an exempt application as it involved interviews only, with adults and did not involve any anticipated risks. The application was approved as submitted.

### *Gaining Entry*

My relationship with this community began 5 months prior to considering them as a research site for purposes of a dissertation. I spent one month in their monastery as a retreatant which provided me with limited access to the community. However, the access was enough for me to become interested in them because of their large social service network of agencies in the area. That said, access to them as a researcher was an entirely different experience than as a retreatant.

Access to the community was first gained by meeting with the Prioress and simply asking permission to spend an extended period of time (between 3 – 4 months) living with the community for purposes of research culminating in a doctoral dissertation. And although my stay for research purposes was an entirely unprecedented event for this community, the conversation I had with the Prioress was surprisingly short and straight forward. She was immediately agreeable to the request. This was a significant action to moving forward, since access to a research site and the experience the researcher can expect is contingent on the relationship between the “access giver” and the community members (Goodall, H.L. Jr., 2000). The Prioress also advised me that access to the social service agencies, would have to come directly from the sister in charge and it would be my responsibility to gain that individual permission.

In my attempt to neutralize any conflict of interest with regard to my stay, I met with the sister responsible for the community’s finances, to determine the monthly cost of living at the monastery. After the amount was established, I discussed the details of

living there with the sister in charge of hospitality. It is important to state that the sisters in no way requested payment; this was my decision and the intention was to avoid any perception of conflict of interest.

The monthly amount covered room, board, parking and access to a washing machine and drier. Other amenities, included in the agreed upon arrangement, were access to the library, computer lab, exercise room and dining hall which included off-hours access to coffee, tea, soft drinks and fruit at no extra cost.

### *Early Fieldwork*

Since it was their social service network of agencies and initiatives (approximately 15 - described later) I was initially most interested in, I realized it would be necessary for me to circulate around the monastery to discover who the sisters responsible for the agencies were, establish a connection to them and somehow get an invitation to visit each agency and possibly spend some time at each of the sites.

### *Dining Room*

To this end, I quickly found out that the dining room was an excellent starting place to make connections. The sisters gathered for meals three times a day and by choosing to sit at different tables for each meal, I was able to circulate through much of the community and make initial contact with most of the sisters in a relatively short period of time.

Each meal experience was very different and the information I collected and observations made varied from time of day (breakfast, lunch and/or dinner) and day of week. Breakfast was most often spent with sisters rushing to their ministries and because of this, conversations often revolved around work related subjects; hence, breakfast was a

good opportunity to learn about their social service agencies and initiatives. Breakfast also became the time when I was able to identify who I needed to meet to gain access to the agencies.

Lunch time in the monastery consisted of a smaller group of sisters. This meal consisted mostly of community administrators and elderly sisters who no longer went outside of the monastery to work. Lunch became a time to learn how the monastery operated and community business was conducted. Depending on who was at the table, these conversations could range from the cost to repair broken tractors, the state of the capital campaign or who signed out for a car, and did not use it (cars are community property and sisters sign out for them on a weekly or daily basis depending on who the sister is and how the car is being used). I found these conversations an excellent source of practical information as well as having a broadening effect on how I thought about the community in general. Maintaining a community and monastery has a very practical side that outsiders often do not consider unless exposed to this side of the life.

Lunch was also an excellent time to connect with the elderly sisters who had been in the community for many decades and were now infirm or too frail to leave the monastery without accompaniment. Many of these sisters had entered the community more than fifty years earlier and for this reason, were an invaluable source of historical information. They had lived through so many major changes and often possessed a tremendous sense of perspective.

### *Prayer Services*

Since I was also living in the monastery, I decided to abide by the community schedule which included attendance at communal prayer three times a day, Sunday

liturgy and occasional gatherings that were either religious and/or celebratory in nature. In fact, they appeared to appreciate my taking such an interest in their prayer life. One sister commented, “You are so faithful to the prayer schedule.” I discovered that by taking an active part in their life (attending prayer, eating meals with the community etc.), connections were more easily established. Also, by making the effort of letting the sisters get to know me, by sharing my story with them whenever appropriate and/or asked to, they became more open to inviting me to their work places and recreational outings. So it was through the combined effort of eating and praying with them for the first few weeks that I was able to establish relationships that would eventually lead to the access I was seeking to the social service agencies.

#### *Note Taking (privately)*

From the beginning of my stay, I made note taking and memoing a daily practice; both of which took place in the privacy of my assigned room. Although the sisters knew I was there to observe, I decided not to take notes openly. I found open note taking to be a distraction at times to the sisters as well as to myself. The daily notes/memos consisted of descriptions of places, contexts, rituals, conversations I experienced during the course of the day. Writing this information was especially important because so much of the experience was new and outside of my own lived experience and I did not want to miss important aspects of the life.

#### *Continuation of Fieldwork*

As I continued to develop relationships with the sisters, invitations to participate in many of their activities became more frequent. These invitations included preparation for Sunday Liturgy, Sunday Liturgy itself, daily prayer readings, weekend excursions to

local parks, small group dinners in community owned cottages along the lake, dinners with some sisters living away from the monastery in their inner-city homes. All of these experiences introduced continued opportunities to build upon relationships and the trust needed to gather rich data.

Although the “*Description of Setting*” provides a much detailed account of each of the community ministries, for purposes of clarity, I offer the following information. The sisters view their ministries in various ways: community-sponsored (funded by the sisters), separate not-for-profits, which may not be funded by the community, engage a fair number of the sisters as regular employees or volunteers, and individual ministries (teachers, professors, hospital chaplains etc.) Also, the sisters differentiate ministries geographically, for example, they reference ministries as inner-city, rural, out of the state, foreign missions. This investigation focused on the inner-city ministries.

Opportunities to volunteer in the community ministries were offered approximately one week into my stay. For the next three months, I rotated my time volunteering in all of the inner-city ministries described in the “*Description of Setting*” section of this investigation. My volunteer role varied depending on the setting. For example, at the soup kitchen, I helped prepare and serve meals, spent time with the families and individuals who came to eat, and helped to clean up after closing. At the food pantry, I helped sort donated and purchased food items, pack and distribute groceries and receive packages for next day distribution. At the Inner-City Art House, I assisted teachers with activities engaging the children. In each of these settings, I made a conscious effort to observe and listen to interactions between sisters, clients being served,

the parents or guardians of children, the children themselves, donors, other volunteers and anyone else who they came in contact with them (sisters).

At the end of each “work day,” I returned to the monastery and intentionally waited in the monastery’s common areas to observe interactions between sisters returning from their ministries. Often, the sisters would initiate a conversation with me about how I spent my day, who I met, and what I thought about a given setting. I believe they were as interested in my experience as I was in theirs. These “after work” conversations were of value because it presented an additional opportunity for me to ask questions of sisters about another sister’s ministry. These questions often led to long conversations about why they do this work, how they changed from a teaching community to social service providers, aspects of their monastic life, personal/family of origin interactions etc., valuable information that may otherwise not come up in a professional or structured context.

### *Taped Interviews*

During the last 3 weeks at the research site, taped interviews were conducted. Subjects were either chosen for their openness, interest, position in the community and/or quality of personal relationship with this researcher which evolved over time, and finally, some simply volunteered. A total of 14 interviews were completed. Questions were intentionally open-ended and touched on a broad range of topics including why they chose the life, what had the changes in their work and lifestyle, over the years, meant to them, major challenges, rewards, regrets, hopes for the future, and any other topics they may have mentioned on their own. The interviews were transcribed and imported into the qualitative software program *Atlas.ti*®.



### *Field Notes*

During the almost 4 months of data gathering, approximately 15 typed pages of field notes were compiled in *Microsoft Word*® and hand written notes collected in a notebook. *MS Word* documents were imported into *Atlas.ti* and hand written field notes were transcribed and also imported into *Atlas.ti*. Both sources of notes were used as data sources along with taped interviews.

### *Coding, Categories and Memos*

Initially, the data was read through to regain familiarity with the information. This preliminary exercise was followed by line-by-line coding. This process produced approximately 450 codes which were sorted and sifted to generate preliminary groups of similar codes. To better manage the large number of code groupings, each were transferred to 3X5 color coded index cards (blue, yellow, green and lilac) and further sorted and subsumed into larger, more abstract categories.

This process of sorting and sifting continued until major themes emerged and the highest level of abstraction was achieved. Memos were written to further develop the emerging themes and to explore relationships between the themes. As the relationships between the major themes emerged, a cohesive theory about this particular community and my experience with them also emerged.

### *Description of the Setting*

#### *The Community*

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania are a community of Roman Catholic women religious, hereafter referred to as: Sisters. They are a monastic order which differentiates them from other Roman Catholic orders in that upon entry each

Sister takes a vow of “Stability”. The vow of stability means that they promise to live in their specific community (Erie) and no other community, even if it is another Benedictine community, unless there is good reason. The process to leave and reenter another community is referred to as discernment. The discernment process (explicated later) could conceivably take years. The implication is that most of the Sisters have lived together for many decades; many have actually grown up together, and some lived in the same neighborhood if not the same block in Erie. These lifelong relationships help to connect this community in ways that are not inherent in the apostolic (explicated later) orders. Although not all grew up together, most grew up in the Erie, Pennsylvania metropolitan area or in the surrounding counties. Many, if not most, attended St. Benedict’s Academy, the community’s high school which closed in 1987. It was this exposure to the Benedictine order that attracted many Sisters to choose this path for their own lives.

There are currently 145 fully professed members who range in age from late 20’s to early 90’s. (See Appendix A) This number fluctuates at any point in time since Sisters enter, leave or die. The overwhelming majority is above the age of 59, which makes aging and aging issues, topics discussed with relative frequency. Since this was a teaching order, almost all of the Sisters have Bachelor degrees; many have Masters and a small number have Doctorates. All of the Sisters are U.S citizens of European descent.

### *Declining Numbers*

The declining numbers of Roman Catholic women religious is well documented. In 1975 women religious worldwide numbered about 970,000; in 2000 this number dropped to just over 801,000. In 1965, the number of women religious in the U.S.

numbered almost 174,000; today this number is just under 59,000, representing a 66% decline in just over 40 years ((Center for Applied Research in the Apostate, 2007). There is much debate on the reasons why. Some theorize it is a consequence of religious communities misunderstanding Vatican II and hence losing their identities during Renewal (Pardilla, 2008). Some claim it is the result of an ever increasing materialistic and secular world (Rocca, 2008). Some believe it is the liberation of women, especially those emerging from the activism of the 1960's. The positions, arguments and theories continue to proliferate in the popular, religious and academic literature. It is not the goal of this investigation to research this particular issue. However, any research involving Roman Catholic women religious would be incomplete without acknowledging this phenomenon. This community is no exception. Their numbers have decreased over the past 50 years.

*“Of course we know our numbers are declining. And we do talk about it. We talk about it at Chapter [meetings], we talk about it just amongst ourselves. We are always open to the sisters’ suggestions and ideas about this issue.”*

*“I have mentioned to Sr. [Prioress] that we are sitting on a gold mine here [monastery]. I’ve told her, if our membership drops to very low numbers, we could sell this property [monastery] and move sisters into Benetwood [apartments behind monastery].” Sr. MP*

Recruitment strategies are a topic of conversation and one strategy employed by many religious communities is through use of the internet. Today, most communities of women religious have web sites and use it for recruitment.

*“We have been able to reach out to a much wider group of women because of the internet. We now have a member from as far away as California (she states with emphasis). And one of our oblates is from England (also states with emphasis). Without the internet I don’t think we would have met these two lovely women.” Sr. ME.*

Although the issue of declining membership is actively discussed, I never got the sense that it was a major issue or concern to this particular community.

#### *Mount St. Benedict Monastery and Surrounding Community-Owned Land*

Of the 145 Sisters, approximately 105 live at Mount St. Benedict Monastery, familiarly referred to as “The Mount” by community members. The monastery sits at a distance from the road, atop a broad, sweeping lawn, which has a significant rise to it, hence the name “the Mount.” The monastery, a long sweeping two-story blonde-brick building, sits on roughly 66 acres along the shores of Lake Erie. The community’s chapel is situated at the east end of this structure and consists of floor-to-ceiling stained glass windows designed by community members. These very large, impressive windows make up the east and west walls of the chapel allowing full sunlight to enter on either side for all of the daylight hours. Construction on the building was completed in 1969 after which the Sisters moved from their then current monastery located in inner-city Erie. The building is a two-story construction and besides housing the chapel, includes administrative offices, a large community room for gatherings, the community library,

dining hall, commercial kitchen, and 125 private rooms for both Sisters and guests. On the second floor, besides additional sisters' private rooms, the community maintains a fully equipped infirmary for both Sisters and their close relatives. The infirmary is staffed by a variety of health care professionals including registered nurses and home health care aids. The hours of operation are 24/7, year round. Also housed in the monastery is the community gift shop (Chapter 57 – so called for chapter 57 in *The Rule of Benedict* – which addresses the artisans of the monastery), offering arts and crafts, created by the Sisters including pottery, ceramics, woodwork and embroidery. The lower level of the monastery houses the community archives, art studios, music and tutoring classrooms, additional community meeting space and storage areas.

The property surrounding the monastery includes a greenhouse, various gardens that grow large, colorful irises that the Sisters and guests look forward to every spring. The gardens also include other varieties of flowers and a broad array of flowering shrubs, trees and bushes. There is a 'garden of memories' that incorporates professionally engraved stones with scripture, poetry and other inspiring quotes in memory of Sisters and family members who have died. The southeast corner of the property includes a large community vegetable garden tended to by the Sisters.

In the most southern section of the plot, which is heavily wooded, sit the community's three self-contained hermitages named *Hildegard*, *Walburga* and *Scholastica*, which were completed in 1990. The hermitages are used by both the Sisters and guests and because of their popularity, require reservations well in advance. These hermitages are 2 bedroom houses with a living area, kitchen, bath and outdoor porch, simple yet picturesque structures deep in the woods. These woods also have many

winding, picturesque pathways that are marked with small gardens typically not found in wooded areas, created by the Sisters.

Across the public road from the monastery, directly on the lakeshore is the community's plot of land named Glinodo Center, so called from a truncated Latin translation of "God's glory in all work." Glinodo Center occupies forty-six acres and is bounded on the west by Seven Mile Creek and on the east by woods. Woods and lakefront border the north and south edges of the property. This property includes one large wood frame house, a timber-lodge building and two small cottages used primarily by the Sisters for solitary retreats or recreational 'getaways'. The wood frame house is headquarters for EarthForce, an ecological not-for-profit, which employs 3 of the Sisters as environmental activists and teachers. The timber-lodge building is presently closed up and has not been used for a number of years. It formerly housed an overnight summer camp for children. The community is presently deciding what to do with this particular building. Various outside groups use Glinodo Center for occasional retreats and meetings including educational outings for local school children.

Directly south of the wooded hermitage land, is a 9-acre plot on which Benetwood Apartments sit. Benetwood Apartments is the community's federally funded apartment building described in detail later (under *Ministries*).

#### *Inner-City Erie Real Properties*

In the heart of Erie, along East 9<sup>th</sup> Street, the Benedictine community owns one square city block on which sits the monastery they lived in prior to their current residence and a number of their inner-city ministries. The original monastery, St. Benedict's Convent, is a 5 story, red brick building completed in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which dominates

the block. Although no longer a primary residence, there is a small community of Sisters who do live there (Pax Priory). Within this same block is a private 2-story red brick house, which is home to another small group of Sisters (St. Scholastica Priory), a one story wood frame pottery and ceramic studio, St. Benedict's Community Center (former parish gymnasium), St. Benedict's Education Center (former Benedictine high school); the entire square block is equivalent to roughly 6 acres. The community owns other single family homes in the city used for small group living and one used for their soup kitchen and food pantry. These homes were willed, donated or sold to the Benedictine community.

#### *Ministries (in brief)*

Although this section (*Description of Setting*) includes a detailed account of each of the following ministries, I offer this brief index of each ministry for purposes of ease of look-up, if a quick reference is preferred:

- *St. Benedict's Education Center (SBEC)* – the state's largest welfare-to-work program providing job development and placement to approximately 800 individuals a year.
- *Emmaus Ministries* – combined soup kitchen, food pantry and food program for children of the inner-city where the program operates
- *Inner-City Neighborhood Arts House* – provide classes in the visual, performing and literary arts to inner-city children at no cost to their families.
- *St Benedict's Community Center* – the mission of the Community Center is “to provide a recreational facility inclusive of peoples of all races and challenges.”

- *St. Benedict Child Development Center* –an accredited child care center, also housing their East Coast Migrant Head Start Project for the children of migrant workers and an infant care center.
- *Benetwood Apartments* – a 75 apartment building, designed, developed and managed by the community and subsidized by federal money.
- *Chapter 57* – the community’s shop, located in the monastery where the sisters sell their own art, crafts, books and others’ articles of inspiration.
- *Benet Press* – the community’s printing production effort. Staffed and funded by sisters.
- *Benedictines for Peace* – is the community’s peace and justice outreach through prayer, action and civil disobedience. It is comprised of both sisters and lay people who are involved in anti-war, nuclear, poverty and violence actions.
- *Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM)* – provides spiritual, educational and building assistance to approximately 160 monastic communities world-wide.
- *Individual Ministries* – not all sisters work in community-sponsored ministries, some are employed in local schools as teachers, college professors, hospital nurses, one is an EMT for the local fire department (individual ministries are not discussed further in the next section – *The Ministries*).  
  
There are many sisters working in this category that it would become unmanageable to include each of them in this investigation. However, the absence of their important and interesting work in this report should not be



perceived as work that is of less value than work that is being reported upon in this document. Their work alone could easily be a separate, extensive report unto itself.

- *Retreats and Spirituality Programs* – each year, the community hosts five separate and distinct retreats and/or spirituality programs. These programs focus on prayer, meditation, shared wisdom, life transitions etc. and are made available to community members and the public. These programs are an integral part of this community. However, space and time prevents a full report on each of the efforts. And like the individual ministries, exclusion from this investigation should not be perceived as having less value than their social service work. In fact, these programs add to the fullness of who these women are and the contributions they have made to the world.
- *House of Healing* – although not formally sponsored by the sisters House of Healing is never-the-less part of the community’s life through their support by way of either staff, use of property, and level of participation by community members. The mission of the agency is to serve incarcerated women who are re-entering the community. It is included in this investigation because of its uniqueness and close relationship with the sisters.

#### *The Ministries (expanded)*

The Sisters informally classify the ministries in which they are engaged two ways: Benedictine owned and controlled (“our ministries”) and individual ministries. Benedictine owned translates to not-for-profits controlled and managed by the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and individual ministries refer to those ministries pursued by

individual Sisters e.g. college professor, K12 teacher or hospital chaplain. The subject of this research project is the first model of ministry although the second model is discussed.

*St. Benedict's Education Center*

St. Benedict's Education Center (hereafter: SBEC) is the name of the Benedictine community's welfare-to-work program. It is the largest of this type of program in the state of Pennsylvania, serving six counties, the largest being Erie County. It is housed in the community's former St. Benedict's Academy (high school) which, due to decreased enrollment and burgeoning teacher salaries, closed in 1988 after a 33 year period.

The closing of the academy was a significant loss to the community. It was not only their largest ministry but an important source of income for them. They now had to decide how to use the building that optimally could house and educate a body of 500 students and scores of teachers and administrators.

Around this same time, the Family Support Act of 1988 (H.R. 1720, Public Law No. 100-485) was passed by Congress. This act, designed to reduce the number of people on public assistance, put the responsibility of enacting its reforms on the individual states. In Pennsylvania, the program took the form of the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) Program. A committee with representatives from the Philadelphia Department of Welfare, the Philadelphia County Assistance Office, the Department of Labor and Industry, the Community College of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Workforce Development Committee (PWDC) administers the SPOC program ([www.pwdc.org/trans-spoc.html](http://www.pwdc.org/trans-spoc.html)). The Private Industry Council of Erie was named to find an independent agency to administer the program for Erie County and solicited the Benedictine community to submit an RFP. They were awarded a two year grant of

\$550,000 to provide case management, job training, job placement and support services for 150 welfare clients, most of whom were single mothers. The uniqueness of this arrangement was that it provided a single agency (SBEC) through which welfare recipients could receive the services they needed to become economically self-sufficient.

Over the succeeding years, the SBEC program has continued to grow and develop from a one county program to serving six counties, engaged approximately 9500 clients, arranged roughly 5500 job placements, and was granted 14 Governor's Achievement Awards. When asked "why the State of Pennsylvania awarded so much responsibility to the Benedictine community?" the Executive Director, a sister, replied "because they knew we would do the work."

#### *Emmaus Ministries*

Emmaus Ministries, almost 30 years old, is the largest soup kitchen in the city. It serves approximately 1000 meals per week to local people who count on this service to eat. Besides the soup kitchen, Emmaus also is a food pantry which distributes 30,000 bags of groceries annually. Additionally, Emmaus houses a lunch program and an after-school recreation program for children from low-income families.

Although the Sisters' history is that of a teaching order, they have been feeding poor, hungry people for decades before Emmaus Ministries came into being.

*"When I entered, the Sisters would always make extra sandwiches and if anyone knocked at the back door of the convent, they would always have a sandwich for them. It really was Sisters A. and T. that were the 'generation' before us that really started our social ministries. They were*

*the ones who got us involved in the African-American neighborhoods. It was really in the spirit or charism of who we were.” Sr. G.*

### *Inner-City Neighborhood Art House*

Established in 1995, the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House is a 501 C3 not-for-profit which provides the children of inner-city Eire an opportunity to learn and engage in the creative arts. It is the sisters’ vision “to enable children to experience beauty, grow in positive self-expression and self-discipline, and develop into full and productive human beings.” (Mission statement of the *Inner-City Neighborhood Art House*)

Children from the city’s public housing complex are offered classes in painting, music, poetry, dance, sculpture etc. The sisters hold firmly to the belief that art is as important to a child’s life as is food, clothing and shelter.

*“Children from this neighborhood need the beauty and fulfillment of creativity as much, maybe more, as the rest of us. We have sisters and lay volunteers and employees here who are experts in their own fields and generously share their gifts with the children every day.” Sr. E.*

The program is housed in a renovated tire/transmission shop one block from the community’s original motherhouse in the inner-city. It was the vision of a small group of sisters to create the space for the local children which was realized by partnering with public officials, prominent families of the city, fund-raising and volunteer and paid workers.

*“Many of us have art and music backgrounds. It’s always been important to continue to provide the children with a tradition of creativity, art, music in their lives. We know how important it is to us and felt strongly about*

*making this happen. You'll notice that many of the sisters volunteer in the programs." Sr. I.*

The program operates year-round, serve approximately 500 children per year, and employ approximately 30 full and part-time teachers.

#### *St. Benedict Community Center*

Almost 30 years ago, the Benedictine Sisters bought a building from the local parish in which the gymnasium, kitchen and various offices is housed. With the help of benefactors, the community itself and many alumni of their now closed academy, the gymnasium was completely refurbished with new floors, sporting and recreational equipment, and kitchen facilities. The center is now used by many groups, including special needs and handicapped individuals for recreational activity and as the Executive Director, a sister herself, describes "holy leisure."

#### *St. Benedict Child Development Center*

Originally started as the *East Coast Migrant Head Start* program in 1978 for the children of migrant workers who came to the area to work on farms and vineyards from March through November each year, the *St. Benedict Child Development Center* has evolved into one of the largest child care facilities in the area. It currently serves 120 children from ages three through five. The children are from low-income families, and some continue to be the children of migrant workers. The program is staffed by 40 full and part-time employees, some of who are Benedictine sisters. The program is located in the lower level of the sisters' original monastery in the inner-city.

#### *Benewood Apartments*

The Benetwood Apartments is a subsidized U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing facility for elderly and handicapped individuals. The Federal low-interest loan was extended to the Benedictine community who collectively wanted to develop the land for a public community good. It is comprised of 75 units in a three-story building constructed in 1979. Each unit consists of one bedroom, a bath, a living/dining area and a kitchen. Common indoor areas, as well as screened porches, offer residents space to meet for formal and informal gatherings. A portion of unused land in the rear of the building is sectioned off and offered to tenants as individual private gardens, resulting in an interesting mix of flowers and vegetables. Benetwood is managed by one of the Sisters who have an apartment in the building in order to maintain 24-hour coverage in case of emergencies.

*vii. Chapter 57*

Chapter 57 in the *Rule of Benedict* is titled “Artisans of the Monastery,” in which Benedict recognized the gifts and talents of the monks as something that should be given time and space for expression. The ministry Chapter 57, so called, is the community’s shop which is located in the monastery. The sisters’ arts and crafts, which include pottery, painting, weaving, wood carving, needlework and other work done by hand, as well as photography and books authored by community members and others, are on sale in this shop.

*Benet Press*

Benet Press is the community’s printing production endeavor. Since its inception, Benet Press has reproduced hundreds of thousands of pledge cards, reflection guides,

various editions of the community's constitution – *Called to Life* and other documents distributed through peace and justice organizations and religious communities.

Benet Press also produces several communications for the not-for-profit community, newsletters and the community's monthly magazine – *The Mount*. Benet Press is staffed by sisters and lay volunteers from the local community.

### *Benedictines for Peace*

Benedictines for Peace (BFP) is the community's peace and justice outreach through prayer, action and civil disobedience. The group was first organized in 1980 and has since grown beyond the local level and presently partners with other local peace and justice organizations to take action against injustices. The following are two examples of their many actions:

### *Take Back the Site*

*Take Back the Site* – a street prayer vigil is organized each time a citizen dies through violence. The idea is to “neutralize the violence” committed at the location. The sisters along with volunteers and neighbors of the victim gather at the site, with the permission of the victim's family, to pray, sing and remember the life of the deceased individual. During my time with this community, sadly, I had the experience of participating in two of these vigils: nothing in my own frame of reference compares to this moving and unique event.

The prayer service is carried out entirely in the street of the victim's neighborhood – at the site of the violence. Solemn music is played over a portable CD player with speakers which attract the neighbor's attention. As the street begins to fill up with people, the prayer service begins. At the end of the

prayer service, the victim's families are asked if they wish to speak, which becomes a deeply emotional and tearful occasion.

#### *Good Friday Peace March*

At the annual Good Friday Peace March, the sisters and hundreds of participants make a 7.5 mile march through the city and stop at pre-determined locations to pray for oppressed and poor people suffering at the hands of injustice. Some of the stops include the community's soup kitchen (stand against poverty), the armory (an anti-war action), a local tavern featuring topless dancers (violence toward women) and other locations. All participants are fed a simple lunch of bread and soup when arriving at the monastery (last stop).

#### *Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM)*

The Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM) is an organization which partners 160 monastic communities of Benedictine men and women religious with approximately 250 English speaking like communities in the emerging world. The mission of this organization, which is headquartered in the Erie community, is to provide educational, formation and building assistance to monastic communities in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Sisters from the community often travel to the distant monasteries for relationship building, education and or spiritual growth.

#### *House of Healing*

For many decades, the community has been involved in some kind of prison ministry, but in 1998, this involvement was taken to new heights when a local criminal court judge asked one of the Sisters to be the executive director to an agency unlike any



that existed in the state of Pennsylvania. This partnership between the criminal justice system and the Benedictine community has taken the shape of a prison deferment program called the *House of Healing*.

The *House of Healing*, situated in an early 20<sup>th</sup> century brick building – formerly a convent in the middle of Erie, is a residential program for women, and their children, convicted of non-violent crimes. It is the sentencing judge that makes the decision whether a woman and her child(ren) get to serve their sentence at the *House of Healing*. When a woman moves into this program, she works with the staff to develop a plan for the duration of her time which may include work, education, recovery program, and/or parenting skills program. The women are required to contribute to the household by cooking, cleaning and financial contribution based on income and ability to pay. Because it is an “extension” of the criminal justice system, there are elements of the program that reflect this connection. For example, the whereabouts of the women are always known to staff and are at times verified by calling their appointment, family member, job or intended destination. Pockets and bags are always searched before entering the residence. Random drug tests are administered. Any infraction of the rules is possible grounds to return women to jail where she will spend the balance of her sentence.

#### *Analysis of the Data*

Preliminary analysis of the data was conducted by transcribing all of the taped interviews and rereading them for content. The first round of coding was conducted using grounded theory, line-by-line coding method. This first exercise produced 450 separate codes which I organized around the major heading of prayer, community and ministry. A second round of coding was conducted seeking patterns of their perceptions

of their lived experiences. A second coding structure began to emerge around the issues of change, adjustment and leadership. It was through this continued process of emerging myself in the data that the themes of this study became clearer. Ultimately, relationships between the themes emerged and memos were created. As these themes emerged and memos developed, the preliminary findings were reviewed with some of the sisters. These individuals were key informants were open to discussing this study.

Ultimately, the concept of “*Leading Together*” became the basic social process or unifying concept that helped to understand how and why the sisters moved in the direction they did. “Leading Together” provides a conceptual framework that explicates the nature of relationship-based leadership and its power to transform people’s lives.

## CHAPTER 3

### ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

#### *Introduction*

The primary finding of this study is that leadership combined with empowered staff is a powerful and significant combination of dynamics that can be basis for organizational change, survival and renewal. The leadership of this community is a leadership of partnership between those ‘in charge’ and their constituents. It is a model of co-leadership, hence the unifying theme “*Leading Together.*” This dynamic of “*Leading Together*” in the face of significant change and internal turmoil is what enabled this community to move through the 23 years that are the focus of this study and remain a whole and thriving community.

There is a second concept which helps to further understand the significance of the concept of “*Leading Together.*” This second concept is referred to as “*Seismic Shifting.*” “*Seismic Shifting*” is this the theme which refers to enormous movement, or shifts, external to the organization yet leaves the organization compelled to respond to this shift in order to survive. This study uncovers four such shifts that affected the Sisters’ personal, spiritual and communal lives. I contend that “*Seismic Shifting*” is crucial to understanding the organizational change that occurred over time within the

community. It was the community's response to each of the shifts that contributed to who they ultimately became: an open monastic community responsible for the creation of an extensive network of social services.

In the end, I conclude that it is the interaction of "*Leading Together*" and "*Seismic Shifting*" that explains the evolution of this organization. Each seismic shift has unique characteristics and affects the community in a different way, necessitating different responses. The responses were strategic, financial, spiritual and otherwise. But the community came together in a spirit of cooperation and collaborative leadership and moved together.

With the intention of optimal clarity, I present the theme of "*Seismic Shifting*" first, which is followed by "*Leading Together*."

### *Seismic Shifting*

The concept of seismic shifting conjures up movement so dramatic and significant as to create a new landscape necessitating new modes of behavior and adaptation not previously known. It is my contention that this community of women religious experienced four such seismic shifts over a twenty-two year period that initiated unprecedented organizational change, which today continues to be discussed between and among its members. Each seismic shift had a specific and unique effect on the community, and each contributed to overall organizational change.

A discussion of each of the seismic shifts follows, along with an explication of how this community responded to each of the shifts which helps to clarify the research question, "Who are these women?"

### *First Shift - Renewal*

The first such shift is the *Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican* (1965) of the Roman Catholic Church. This was an important historical event in the history of the Roman Catholic Church which resulted in scores of documents that essentially changed many of the Church's rituals, practices and teachings. One such document, *Perfectæ Caritatis*, also referred to as the *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* (1965), called for all religious orders to return to their founders' original inspiration behind their own community and to make adjustments to the changed conditions of the times. This decree also called for suitable adjustments to be made regarding constitutions, customs, prayer books and ceremonies. "The winds of change were already strong and steady and their effect on the Community was to be far-reaching, causing joy and consternation, radical change as well as strong resistance to change." (Campbell S., 2001, p. 66)

The *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* launched a decades long process hereafter referred to as: Renewal. The Renewal process challenged religious communities to bring themselves into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in whatever way it made sense for the particular community. The responses to this document ranged wildly from some religious orders doing little to nothing to some going through extraordinary change (Carey, 1997). The response of this religious community to Renewal was dramatic resulting in extraordinary change.

And so began the long process which took this group of women religious from a semi-cloistered, monastic teaching community, wearing religious habits designed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to an open, non-cloistered community permitted to choose other than a

teaching career, with the possibility of living in an apartment separate from the monastery and wearing everyday street clothes.

*“Renewal put us on a path and had us questioning every aspect of religious life. We looked at our prayer life, our community life our work as teachers. Everything was up for discussion. Yes, the habit was a point of contention, but remember the times we were in. Things were different than they are now. I am very proud of all that we’ve accomplished.” Sr. T.*

*“Experimenting with small group living was almost more controversial than the habit thing. Everyone had something to say about it including the Bishop. He felt it was a ministry thing – which would have given him a right to say something but we said teaching is our ministry not our personal living situation. We had the Federation behind us and that felt very powerful. He finally did accept it.” Sr. M.*

*“We were criticized by lay people, sometimes our own families. They didn’t understand what was happening to us. They wondered if we were still going to be sisters! How could we be sisters if we weren’t wearing habits and living in convents? It was a very tough time... in some ways liberating, but in some way frightening. You know, it was like this constant debate about who we were, where were we going and what was it going to look like when we got there?” Sr. B.*

This change from habit to street clothes cannot be underestimated. The habit was part of one's identity; in some cases, it was part of the attraction to religious life.

*“The first time I saw it [habit], I knew I wanted to be a member of religious life.” Sr. M.*

*“I was impressed with the rosary beads, the habit. You know, there was a sense of holiness, and I liked that - there was just something about it.” Sr. D.*

*“They didn't understand how we could be Benedictines if we went outside the monastery, if we didn't all live in the same building, if we weren't wearing habits...” Sr. M.*

#### *Second Shift - Moving to the New Monastery*

As far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social scientists have been making connections between our physical environment and its effect on our behavior and sense of self. (Aiello & Thompson, 1980, Lawrence & Low, 1990) In 1966, the local city government advised the community their monastery was no longer habitable due to overcrowded conditions and a dangerously outdated physical plant (electrical etc.) Some Sisters had grown accustomed to the overcrowding, sharing their rooms – in some cases 6 to 8 Sisters in one room with (hospital-style) curtains dividing the beds.

*“This is what we knew. We simply adjusted to the overcrowding. It was just one of the sacrifices we made in order to live in religious life.” Sr. A.*

*“Most sisters slept in large dormitories, some of them almost to the time they died, unless they lived in parish houses... There was no space, no time, no privacy, no sense of personal freedom. ‘I couldn’t even find a place to cry,’ one young sister said just before she left the community.”*  
(Chittister, 2005)

The sisters considered all their options and decided to build a new modern monastery on a 66-acre plot of land they owned along the banks of an area lake approximately 6 miles out of town. The customary fund-raising efforts were launched, mortgages and variances applied for and approved and within 5 years, the monastery was completed.

Moving to a new home was as “seismic” a shift in the community’s life as such a move may be in the life of a family or individual, maybe more so. Moving to new space affects everyone’s life. A new space can provide a new sense of self, especially if the space is dramatically different than the original space. In the case of this community, the change was immeasurably different. The new space provided privacy which for most of the sisters was a new experience. The privacy provided a quiet space to reflect and experience one’s own solitude. The new space provided large, open outdoor areas to walk, garden, meditate, and exercise. The new space also provided the community with large rooms in which the entire community could meet as one cohesive group. The move set the stage for a new life.

The move precipitated unexpected changes in their collective lives. One of the most dramatic changes they experienced was having their own private bedroom, an unprecedented situation in their 150-year history.



*“For the first time, we had our own rooms. It was new. It was different. They were designed to accommodate our needs as far as sleeping, closet space and a desk for our work. The privacy was welcomed.” Sr. T.*

*“It wasn’t just the privacy that we had, but the spaciousness of the dining hall, community room, chapel and the grounds. We could garden, farm, and go down to the lake by just walking across the street. The move made us feel very different about ourselves individually and collectively.” Sr. B.*

*“In a way, it [moving] was like fresh air had blown through the entire community and invigorated us to renew.” Sr. N.*

*“So that [moving] helped us with renewal - just moving faster.” Sr. P*

*“Yes, and so I think the miracle of that [moving] happened in the middle of all of this that none of us planned was the move. We were in the middle of renewal. If we would have stayed in there, we would have had to sit down and rule with some aspect of belaboring how we were going to move into renewal in some new ways and open the community up. That would have been much harder in that space, we moved out here.” Sr. R.*

For the first time in their collective lives, the sisters were able to invite outside guests in for meal, recreation, celebrations etc.

*“Like in the old place, we could not have invited people into our dining room. We had no room. We didn’t even invite priests into the dining room. But then when we got here, it was so easy and so natural. We didn’t know how it was going to make us about being so open.” Sr. MM*

The combined dynamics of renewal and a move to the new monastery would dramatically change the community forever without either one being part of an explicit plan initiated by the community. It was external events (Renewal & the need to move) that precipitated the community to react and their collective response to the events would change them forever.

### *Third Shift – Choosing Individual Ministries*

For 150 years, this religious community taught school to the children of Roman Catholic immigrants. As the population of immigrants continued to grow from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sisters fulfilled their professional calling as educators. This is, in fact, what this community of sisters considered part of their calling. In some cases, sisters may not have had an interest in becoming teachers, but very definitely wanted to join this particular community and simply accepted the fact that they would train and eventually become professional educators. When the discussion of permitting individual ministerial choices arose, many sisters actively voiced their preference for other choices. “They came into the office wanting to be artists, wanting to be spiritual directors, wanting to be canon lawyers, wanting to go to Africa to work in the missions, wanting to do work in the bush in Alaska, wanting to start Benedictines for peace in every monastery across the country.” (Chittister, 2005,

p. 205)

*“I entered because I loved this community. I wasn’t really interested in becoming a teacher; it was the community I wanted. So when the opportunity came up where I could become a full-time retreat director, I jumped at it.” Sr. P.*

*“I have always been interested in medical related things, especially working directly with patients. After teaching biology, it made sense for me to go into a nursing kind of thing, I’m now a home health care worker and I love it.” Sr. S.*

*“I always knew I loved music,” a sister said to me. “But I don’t want to teach it. I only want to use it for liturgy.” The difference was now clear: teaching was one gift, playing an instrument was often entirely another.’ (Chittister, 2005, p. 190)*

*“I didn’t have a particular interest in teaching; but I really wanted to become an Erie Benedictine. They had taught me for 12 years and I knew I just wanted to be part of this community. Becoming a teacher was for me a requirement to join the community.” Sr. C.*

*“When I entered, I thought I could help with the sewing, cooking and cleaning. That is what I really wanted to do. Sister A., who was prioress*

*at the time, told me we already had plenty of sisters to do that work and she said I would have to go to college to get my teaching degree. I was really upset at the time, but as I look back I am so grateful. The education and teaching career served me and the community well.” Sr. PM.*

By the late 1970's, the decline of the teaching ministry was taking hold for various reasons including a decrease in student enrollment, the high cost of lay teachers (compared to sister stipends), and the economic needs of the community itself with an aging population and fewer entrants (Campbell, 2001). The combined dynamics of Renewal and a decline in teaching positions led the community to review its longstanding rule that teaching is their collective and sole ministry. The community's decision to support an individual sister's choice of ministry is based on the sister's skills and the needs of the community. When there is concurrence on these two aspects along with the agreement of the Prioress, the individual sister moves forward with her choice of employment.

#### *Fourth Shift - Closing of St. Benedict's Academy*

Under most circumstances, loss of one's income can be a traumatic experience; loss of a community institution complicates the trauma. Job loss can leave the individual fearful of the (financial) future, uncertain regarding their professional/social identity, and sad over the loss of such a large part of their life. When a community institution closes its doors, this same affect is cast over the entire group.

In the late 1970's, it became apparent the community's 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade high school, St. Benedict's Academy, had to close due to low enrollment and rising (lay)

salaries. St. Benedict's Academy was the community's high school which they founded in 1955. It was also the main source of employment for this teaching community. The prospect of closing their institution was extremely stressful and difficult.

*"I'm a tough kid - I don't cry very easy - partly because I'm not supposed to - I was on the board and we went to meet with the faculty that morning to tell them. I sobbed. I didn't even go in the afternoon when they - I went back from Clarion - I could not go to the afternoon when they told the students." Sr. A.*

*"I'm a graduate of St. Ben's. It has always been a fixture in my life. I taught there and had many administrative positions over the years. So when it closed, it felt like a death in the family. It was such an important part of our life that to not have it there in the way we always did was really hard." Sr. J.*

It was not only an emotional loss, but it prompted fear of the future in the lives of the many sisters working there. The Academy was a source of income for over 30 years for the community, and they would now have to consider new employment options for the soon to be out of work teachers.

*"I had been a teacher for 30 plus years. Not all of them at St. Ben's, I worked in St. Mary's and in Oil City, but most of my time was spent teaching at St. Ben's. So there I was, having to figure out what I was going to do, and then do it. It was not what I had been expecting at that point in my life. But, you know, I knew the community was going to be*

*very supportive and that helps a lot.” Sr. B.*

*“I loved teaching, I always did. I did not want to give it up, but I knew I may have to. I tried to imagine what I was going to do and all I could think about was teaching. Then of course Sr. M. received the grant to open SBEC and I continued to teach, a different type of student, but I continued to teach and still am.” Sr. T.*

The community’s response to the closing is an example of negotiating and adjusting to change as a process versus a problem.

### *Leading Together*

The concept of “Leading Together” invokes the idea of group solidarity or cohesion so strong or impenetrable that outside influences, forces or manipulations would not be able to move or sway the group in one direction or other. It does not mean rigidity for the sake of itself, but a collective confidence or self-assuredness that is an expression of self-knowledge and earned wisdom that outsiders may find both attractive and immovable.

The category, “*Leading Together*,” is comprised of two sub-categories *Forming a Life* and *Acknowledging Struggle*. Both of these sub-categories further describe and explicate at a detailed level of the lived experience of a sister in this community.

It is my contention that the qualities that define this category, along with the subsequent category “*Leading Together*,” helps to answer the question of how this group of monastic women religious not only withstood the onslaught of (previously described) *Seismic Shifting*, but evolved into the thriving, productive community they are today.

## *Forming a Life*

### *A Brief Description of the Formation Process*

A brief description of the community's formation process follows. Providing this description is beneficial and necessary for two reasons: first, it serves to differentiate the formal process of formation with this investigation's category of "Forming a Life," and second, it is in and of itself an important aspect of the category "Forming a Life" and serves to deepen the categorical understanding.

The concept of formation in religious life is common-place. Most religious orders have a formal process/program in place addressing the issues of formation. It is often a team whose purpose is to address all of the matters regarding the formation of both new entrants and fully professed members.

The concept of formation in this context addresses two main issues: first- how do new entrants become members and second – how does the formation process continue to support and encourage fully professed members.

With regard to new entrants, it is the work of this community's Formation Team to guide, advise, counsel and otherwise direct the lives of women considering membership. Typically, prospective members come to the monastery with preconceived notions about what the life is all about. The process of formation provides the time, space, and experience that clarifies the realities of the life and concretizes the experience of the prospective member.

The first year of the formation process, referred to as the postulancy, is spent living at the monastery and spending time in the community's ministries. There is no requirement on the part of the postulant to attend prayer, meals, rituals or any community

activity for that matter. In fact, the postulant is not required to spend time in community ministries if she does not want to. The purpose of this first year is for the postulant to become acquainted with the community, its practices, culture, and people. This period of gaining familiarity with the community is reciprocal in that the community is also interested in familiarizing themselves with the candidate. Some of the questions they may collectively be asking are: Is she prayerful? Does she get along with people? Is she kind? The candidate is given an opportunity to renew the postulancy year for one year, if she wishes to. This decision is made collaboratively with the Formation Team and the Prioress.

If the postulant, together with the formation director and in consultation with the prioress, decides to continue, she enters the next stage of formation. This next stage, referred to as the novitiate year is considered an immersion experience in that she (the novice) remains in the monastery for one year (unless she has a ministry outside) and only leaves to work in her ministry. If she does not have an outside ministry, she is generally assigned an internal ministry. She is also assigned a mentor – whose job it is to answer questions, give advice, and provide clarity about any aspect of the community life. During this year, the candidate's focus is academic. She attends daily classes designed to provide her with a deeper and richer knowledge and meaning of the community's charism, history, culture, and monastic lifestyle. At the end of this year, she may decide to enter the third year of her formation, and as with the postulancy, this decision is made in consultation with the formation director and prioress.

The third year of formation is referred to as the scholastica year. For the most part, the candidate spends more time in classes, but is now given more freedom to leave



the monastery for things beyond work (ministry). Additionally, the candidate attends all community meetings and discussions but does not have the right to vote on issues until she becomes a fully professed member. It is at the end of this third year, she can take her final vows and become a fully professed member of the community.

Many of the programs developed by the formation team/director also include fully professed members and run throughout the year. Formation as a process is on-going and intended for all members, not only potential candidates hoping to enter. Formation programs include community retreats (four per year) workshops, sponsored speakers etc. These events are ongoing and planned each year.

*“We have a saying in community, ‘Formation is forever’.” Sr. N.*

#### *Having a Shared Vision*

The category *Forming a Life* includes the sub-category of *“Having a Shared Vision.”* A shared vision implies a collective or communal view about how the group’s life is to be lived (or not lived). The quality of vision is an individual quality. An individual with vision has the capacity to picture a future that she feels compelled to act on, to move toward, and to create. This desire is so strong that she would find it difficult to not move in the envisioned direction.

*“There was no stopping me... That’s what a vocation is. I couldn’t not do this [enter the community]. Everything in me suits it. This person, this place, this thing, this activity and I have the interest and I see the need. It’s that simple. That’s a vocation.” Sr. K.*

*“And when I had first entered - I was hanging up clothes - I think it was New Year’s Day. I thought, this is for you, if I stayed. I knew I was going to stay. I was just totally, totally - I can’t tell you what - convinced that that was the thing I needed to do. This was the thing I wanted to do.” Sr. B.*

This vision for one’s life may be captured and crystallized in one moment or may exist in the background, for years, never far from consciousness.

*“I remember as a young [high school] student, sitting in the chapel with the sisters. It was one of those moments, you know... I had this moment of clarity about how I wanted to spend my life. I wanted to be a sister. I just knew.” Sr. D.*

*It was those years of having to help my mother with the [family] business. But I was always active with St. Ben’s Alumni and the sisters. I always had this idea in the back of my mind that I would enter. I can tell you exactly the circumstances. I was 32, my sister was in the hospital having her first baby and I remember thinking, I was going to finally take the step. Sr. R.*

Within the context of this sub-category, the vision is a realistic one, meaning it is different from a characteristically youthful vision which sometimes includes fortune, fame etc. The vision for this life, in most cases, has already been witnessed by women who eventually become community members. In fact, it was this witness that, in many cases, was the impetus that engendered the vision.

*“[As an elementary school student] I think I liked the way they looked and smelled. I was impressed with it. I was impressed with the rosary beads (laughing), the habit. You know, there was a sense of holiness, and I liked that - there was just something about it. And the singing and the Church stuff - yes, that was the beginning.” Sr. E.*

*“As a student at St. Ben’s, I could see how different [this community] was as compared to [another community]. They were very close to each other; they cared about each other - that really made an impression on me. It influenced my decision about entering.” Sr. P.*

Almost every community member spoke of possessing a vision, early in their life, of entering the community – hence, *Having a Shared Vision* is the quality of communal or shared vision, a unified worldview about how one lives their life.

Having vision for one’s future while still young is only part of the sub-category – *Having a Shared Vision*. *Having a Shared Vision* is a quality one possesses for a lifetime and guides the questions asked that are important to the individual or community, the process employed to resolve issues, as well as the choices made that eventually guide behavior. For example, the land behind the community’s monastery was, according to one sister, “just sitting there.” There was no real need to sell, no interest in financial gain, but the question was raised out of a vision of the possibility for a piece of land. At a chapter meeting, the question presented to all was, what, if anything, should we do with that land?

*“We [community] knew we wanted to do something with the land [behind the monastery]. We just needed to figure out what made the most sense to the community and our neighbors. We were land rich and money poor.”*

*Sr. P.*

*“We all agreed to do something with the property. We just didn’t know exactly what it was. Some wanted to build low-income housing, oh... other ideas; I can’t remember all of them. We decided to do research first and include our neighbors. In the end, because of various circumstances such as zoning, money, we built HUD housing.” Sr. M.*

Similarly, the community’s Neighborhood Arts House began with a vision. When the local neighborhood tire shop closed its doors, a group of sisters envisioned this concept housed in a renovated version of this dilapidated shop. The vision was to avail inner-city children to the arts at no cost to their families. Again, this idea was presented to the community and discussed at a chapter meeting as part of the process. The community fully supported the vision and through various fund-raising initiatives, the vision became a reality.

Using land for a greater good, creating social service or art programs does not encompass “having vision.” Having vision is a broader concept which implies the possession of a long(er) view of life. It cannot be completely understood in isolation. Having vision is one of the guideposts for living in this community.

*Having Shared Values*

*Forming a Life* not only includes the quality of shared vision, it includes possessing a clear sense of one's values, concerns, interests and ultimately pursuits. Values guide our individual behavior, manifested in our pursuit of wealth, status, educational credentials. Institutions rely on shared values to connect as an entity moving in a particular direction with the intention of some version of success.

When one community's shared values are prayer, compassion for others, self-reflection, concern for the greater good, peace, justice, equality, simplicity, the outcome can be formidable.

One of this community's primary values is prayer. Prayer is essential to the life. It is as fundamental as daily meals, going to work or paying bills. This is evidenced by their prayer schedule, which includes daily communal prayer three times a day, weekly liturgy and a whole host of additional opportunities to pray communally. The importance of prayer in the lives of this community cannot be understated.

*"It is prayer that supports us. It supports our life, our work. It brings us together as a community. And so it is out of a deep prayer life that a deep community life in the service of others emanates." Sr. H.*

This community's prayer practices can be classified into two general categories: community and personal prayer forms. Community prayer forms consist of the Daily Office (described earlier), daily / Sunday liturgy, and an inventory of additional prayer forms that celebrate the seasons, saints, holidays and many other official or non-official events. Community prayer practices, which by definition include the entire community, are structured and familiar to all members.

Personal prayer differs from sister to sister. Some sisters engage in private prayer in their rooms, offices, cars, parks, gardens etc. Some consider the act of gardening itself a prayer. Some engage in silent, Zen-like meditation in an area of the monastery reserved for this practice. The important point is that prayer is an integral value to the life of this community and to the individuals who inhabit it. Every sister spoken to (formal interview or informal conversation) spoke of the importance prayer played in her life.

*“In the morning, I try to take the prayers into the car with me and into work. I pray for the clients that I’m going to meet with that day. I like doing that; it makes my prayers come to life. When we first changed our evening prayers to 7 p.m., I didn’t like the change. Now I like it, after the news you sort of settle down and you take what you see on the TV to prayer with you and try to pray - there’s so much need of prayer in our world.” Sr. A.*

*“[About her personal prayer life] “I’m not as good at it as I should be but every night I pray before I go to bed. I sit often and try to think about the day and try to put it into prayer. When we go down to camp, I sit in my lounge and spend quiet time. I pray often during the day.” Sr. P.*

*“We are called to prayer three times a day. I’m able to make morning and evening prayer because I’m almost always there at those times. If I am in the monastery at lunch time, I make it to noon prayer, but I’m*

*usually at work. I love the call to prayer; it keeps me grounded in the way I want to live my life. It is really important to me.” Sr. C.*

*“At this point in my development, working in the garden, is prayer to me. But there are times that obviously prayer books, shared prayer, directed retreats are very important and real important in my development. But I don’t go that route very much anymore. I’m more likely to sit at the Peninsula listening to Chopin as a form of prayer.” Sr. I.*

*“And a big, big center that held us together was prayer, because... during the Viet Nam war and a lot of groups, even peace groups that were disbanding even if they lived together as community. And I always said, what kept us together was prayer. That no matter, whatever conflicts we had, we were rooted in community and prayer, and somehow that kept us on the journey.” Sr. H.*

In addition to prayer, this community’s shared values also include service to the poor, disenfranchised and/or marginalized populations. This value is most evidenced by their expansive array of ministries, which almost exclusively involves agencies and organizations whose clients are poor, homeless, mentally ill, physically disabled, undocumented or otherwise underserved. These clients are without the access or the ability to take advantage of the resources many of us take for granted such as education, adequate employment and/or basic housing. Their service-provision work includes services as basic as the distribution of food, clothing and shelter and as sophisticated as

advocating and organizing for public policy change that would improve the lives of poor people. The essential value of ‘serving the poor’ is intrinsic to this community. What differs from sister-to-sister is how the value manifests itself in each individual sister’s work. When discussing this value, there is a consistency about how the value is held and expressed across the spectrum of sisters. The deeper meaning of the value is evident.

*“If you look back in our history, giving out food from the 9<sup>th</sup> street building was not brand new with Pax Center, because way back, before I even entered, way back, people would come and ring the door bell and look for sandwiches. The sister who was at the door always had access to some food to give out and she did. We always did. So this [social ministry] is not like its brand new here.” Sr. B.*

*“When we decided that we could minister outside of teaching, most of us gravitated toward social work. It was always there, I mean we always felt a connection to the poor, but when we were given the choice, we actively sought out that kind of work.” Sr. A.*

This value of service also includes hospitality to others (outsiders), stewardship of the environment, and political action involving the issues of nuclear power, war, and capital punishment among other things. These are fundamental values shared by all community members and also serve to hold them together as a community.



The value of service extends also to each other and is manifested in their daily life; it may include caring for those sisters who are ill or simply greeting sisters when they return to the monastery after work.

*Forming a Life*, as a category, incorporates the passion and energy that invigorate these values. This passion and energy is what fuels the entire lifestyle. The importance of possessing the vision and passion cannot be understated. This vision serves to guide the individual and the community in all that matters most to her/them. Equally important is their passion and energy without which their vision would merely be words.

*Forming a life* includes the social structures that lend themselves to support the vision of such a life. The structures, in some cases have been in place for centuries, and in some cases, newly formed. *Forming a life* incorporates ritualized practices whose purposes may be to emphasize or celebrate an event, mark an anniversary or launch a new program or project. *Forming a Life*, in the context of this investigation, is a dynamic process that is integrated throughout the lives of these women and serves to unify them as a community. This process goes beyond their formal formation process. This process is one that permeates every aspect of their lives and influences most decisions.

Along with shared values and vision, *Forming a Life* as a category includes knowing what is not included in the life, i.e. knowing communal boundaries, what they will include as well as exclude from their pursuits. By knowing who they are, the community avoids the mistake of being ‘all things to all people’. This community possesses clarity about who they are (and who they are not) which helps to maintain their collective identity. This collective identity is, in fact, a public one. They take stands on

issues of peace and justice, poverty, discrimination and many other controversial subjects which both attract and repel outsiders.

*“I think people are drawn to us because of one of two things I think happen to the majority of them. I think people are seeking - people are spiritually hungry and they are looking for - not necessarily religion - but spiritual growth. And I think a lot of people find that in our community. But I think also people are drawn by our ministry and our public stance on peace and justice and major issues.” Sr. S.*

*“Once a local radio talk show had callers call in on an issue we had taken a stance on – I think it was the first Gulf War. They were taking a poll – for or against our community’s stance. I think we lost (she laughs). Sr.B.*

*“I had someone come to me and say they didn’t understand how a community with a corporate commitment to peace didn’t say the rosary every day... because that is the prayer for peace. So I said “some of our sisters do”, so they said, “well, I don’t understand why the whole community isn’t saying it, so I said, “well it isn’t something the community has chosen to do, but the Office is our communal prayer”. “Well the community I join would have to say it everyday, could you look into that?” I said, “No, I will not be looking into that but thank you very much”. Sr. P.*

These two statements make clear who this community of sisters are and are not. Potential candidates may consider membership but if they are looking for something other than what already exists within this community, it is unlikely they will stay.

### *Acknowledging Struggle*

Early in the investigation, while having a casual conversation with a sister, she cautioned me to “make sure you remember we are human beings first.” When asked what she meant, she responded that occasionally it was her experience that people outside the community made the mistake of idealizing the sisters and missing their humanity. Their works of charity, a strict prayer schedule and materially spare life style could obscure, to the outsider, their struggles as people and in doing so, overlook the intensely human experience of the monk.

This good advice was taken seriously and while circulating through the community, I made it a practice of asking about the challenges of the life, whether past or present. The sisters were surprisingly open and in being so, made known that life in the monastery is a deeply human one.

The concept of struggle in human life usually refers to our attempts to overcome the difficulties that cross our paths. The category *Acknowledging Struggle* further explicates the notion of struggle. Some of the struggles are of the type that many of us encounter through life; some are unique to monastic life. These struggles usually revolve around our attempts to meet our financial obligations, get along with other people, stay in marriages (or not), and meet the demands of our professional lives. We tend to accept these struggles as a natural and normal part of human life. *Acknowledging Struggles* attempts to capture each of these sub-categories of the sisters’ challenges.

### *Ordinary Struggles*

When those of us on the outside of the community think about monastic life, we generally do not associate these types of struggles (financial, relationship, professional) with monks. We may associate monastic struggle as leading a materially spare life, a search for God or maintaining an arduous prayer schedule. These ideas have been documented and popularized in bestseller books such as Kathleen Norris' *The Cloister Walk* or even Dan Brown's novel, *The DaVinci Code*. Both are true.

Finances are an important aspect of monastic life. As one sister commented, "we all have to eat and pay our bills." The personal finances of a Sister are not personal in the way we conceive our own personal finances. In other words, sisters do not have their own separate bank accounts or charge cards. However, each sister is required to contribute to the community by earning a paycheck and turning the salary over to the community. In return, the sister is provided with room and board and a small monthly stipend that covers clothing, personal toiletries and entertainment. When a Sister loses her job, she is expected to find another one in a reasonable amount of time. And although the community supports an unemployed Sister, she usually feels the pressure of locating another source of income. She utilizes the usual sources for finding employment such as personal network, classified ads, and the internet. In the meantime, the unemployed Sister is expected to spend spare time helping around the monastery. This may include driving the older Sisters to their medical appointments, visiting frail elderly Sisters in the monastery infirmary, or helping with clerical activities in the business office.

The Sisters' professional demands are as ordinary or difficult as most of us have been confronted with in our own lives. For the Sisters who teach, it is making sure lesson plans and lectures are prepared, papers and tests graded in a timely fashion, office hours kept. For those Sisters in the not-for-profit sector, it is meeting the demands of needy clients, satisfying funders, raising money and dealing with personnel issues.

*Struggling with the Lifestyle*

When a Sister's professional workday is finished and she returns to the monastery, her life as a community member begins. In practical terms, this means community dinner at 6:00 p.m., nightly news in the community hall at 6:30 p.m. if interested, and evening prayer in the chapel at 7:00 p.m., committee meeting(s) at 7:30 p.m. Committee meetings address a broad variety of community issues, rituals, and practical aspects of community life and / or celebrations. Committee meetings typically last between 1 and 1 1/2 hours. For those evenings your committee is not meeting, you are likely to be responsible to attend to a particular chore (via sign-up sheets). These duties may involve answering the switchboard (referred to as 'The Bells'), sorting incoming mail, clearing dinner dishes (no small task when you are serving 80-90 people every evening).

*"I was trying to teach full-time and then I would come home and be Mount coordinator. And I really needed a break in between, when I would get in the door and think if I could just put my book bag down, if I could just take ten or fifteen minutes and kind of catch my breath then I can do practically anything." Sr. M.*

*“I was working with adjudicated girls in a lock-down situation which I found emotionally exhausting. Then to come home, eat, pray and start a new task in the late evening, was exhausting. At times I simply didn’t want to get up in the morning.” Sr. H.*

The physical schedule is not the only challenge of community life; dealing with other Sisters can also be a challenge. In secular life, when confronted with difficult people, most of us simply employ strategies to avoid conflict and steer clear of them if possible. This strategy is not possible in monastic life. The structure of monastic life (living under one roof) makes this impractical.

*“You can’t avoid the Sisters. We’re living on top of each other here!” Sr.*

*B.*

Close quarters, common workplaces, shared community tasks and committee work could all be a formula for interpersonal conflict that would make community life dysfunctional at best, impossible at worst. The Sisters are aware of this and employ strategies that address these potential issues. Communication among and between the Sisters’ is one of the most important ways. And everyone is given an opportunity to voice their position.

*“We talk and talk and talk and talk (she laughs). We are really good at that.” Sr. M.*

*“Oh yes, we talk and, I don’t remember the issue, but we were in a big circle in this room (community room). And all the chairs and were placed in a circle. We had Sr. E. F. as the (outside) facilitator and we talked about the issues of that time - it’s fuzzy and I don’t want to say what it is if its not the exact thing. We actually talked and went through the process. “You heard what she said, tell me what she said?” “Tell me what she said?” “Now, this is what you heard, is that what you meant?” And it was harsh at times, it was hard and we’ve been able to do that.” Sr. A.*

*“I think we spend time talking a lot about things and people have an opportunity to have their voice heard now if they take that opportunity or not is up to them. But I think that’s what Benedict talks a lot about, you know, you shouldn’t be grumbling.” Sr. D.*

### *Struggling to Stay*

In the ordinary course of lived life, most of us ask, at some point(s), if we should stay where we are. This may be a question about our professional position, friendship, spousal relationship, or some other context. Living in monastic, religious community does not preclude its members from asking the same question or experiencing some version of struggle to stay.

*“I’ve had doubts over the years. Sometimes I wonder ‘what if I had said yes to [her romantic interest]’ and, sometimes I wish I had my little house on the prairie with my own Christmas tree on Christmas morning. There are times when I think about that. But then when I just sit down and*

*think about my life and how it has evolved I think ‘no, I’m where I’m supposed to be’.” Sr. F.*

*“To be perfectly honest, there have been periods in my life when I have had struggles and it might be ‘what am I doing here?’, ‘do I really want to be in community?’, ‘is that where I should be living my life fully or do I now want all of this?’. And so I might pull back a little bit.” Sr. J.*

*“I think in many relationships, like marriage, we ask ourselves if this is where we belong, or is this what we want? It is no different in community. I would guess many of us have asked these kinds of questions? Sr. H.*

For those sisters who may think about leaving, the reason(s) to remain in community may be due to the long-term relationships forged over the many years of living together, or love of a ministry they do not wish to leave, or after reflection on other options concluding community is the life for them.

*“These are my sisters in the deepest and truest sense of the word. Yes, we argue and disagree but I love them and wouldn’t want to be without them.” Sr. B.*

*“I entered in 1949. There were 9 of us in that class and now there are 3 of us left. We were always very close. Up until 1956, we did everything*



*together. That was the way the life was lived. It has changed a lot, but we are still a really close group.” Sr. PM.*

*“There are times I think about leaving, but I wouldn’t want to give up my ministry. I really love what I do and giving up that would be too hard.”  
Sr. N.*

*“Once when I was with family, I said, ‘you know, I’m tired of living the gospel (she laughs) I’m so tired of living the gospel. I just want to go out and have fun and to hell with what happens to anyone else and the world (she’s laughing heartily). I just... I don’t want to work here anymore. I’m tired.’ And then I thought, ‘that would be such a boring existence’.” Sr. S.*

### *Using Struggle for Spiritual Growth*

Seeking pleasure and comfort and avoiding pain and struggle, in popular culture, is the norm. The notion of using struggle as a path to spiritual growth is exceptional. This community of sisters sees inter-personal struggle as an opportunity to gain greater self-knowledge and in doing so reach a deeper spiritual realm.

*“Why is community essential to the search for God? Because each of us is another ‘way’ to God. So if I am really seeking God, I have to listen to you. I have to.” Sr. J.*

*“You can’t be nice this week because you’ll be someplace else next week and they’ll never get to know you. These people get to know you. You can’t run away from yourself. You are constantly confronting and dealing with your own issues.” Sr. K.*

And although struggle is part of communal life, the community can also be a source of great comfort in a time of need.

*“The beauty of community is - and some would call it a luxury - because not everyone can do this, but that’s part of the beauty of community too - is that at some period in your life, you’re going to need to be carried. It’s more likely than not that you are going to need to be carried, for one reason or another - something traumatic happens or you go through your midlife crisis and have to figure things out or whatever the reason may be and the community carries you. But the beauty of it is, is that you are carrying others then too when you are in your good space and feeling comfortable and able to do the community things every day and feel involved and part of it - now with the program - then chances are you are carrying somebody else - and that’s the beauty of it.” Sr. A*

#### *Fulfilling and Disappointing at the Same Time*

In any social setting there are those who are either dissatisfied with the evolution of the organization, cultural changes, or things of lesser importance; perhaps it is our lot. This community of women religious is no different. At the edges, in the center and throughout, there are pockets of dissent of various types. It was difficult to quantify and document the size of the pockets and is also beyond the scope of this investigation.

The general areas of dissent fall into two categories: community related and issues related to the institutional church. Community issues include internal dissent between and among sisters who may disagree on issues of dress (habit), prayer practices, community schedule, and privacy. The institutional church context includes the community's position on one issue which stands in opposition to church teaching.

### *The Community Context*

Changing an organization's culture, in order to shift its focus or safeguard its existence, is almost always a huge undertaking and an arduous task. Besides creating a new vision and mission and ways of engaging the world, organizational change includes changing the orientation of the people who inhabit the organization; changing the ways they think about themselves, the organization, what they do, how they do it and even if they do it. If successful, many will laud the achievement as progressive, bold and / or necessary for the continuation of the life of the group, which may very well be the case. However, for the insiders or group members, the experience is not always received in a positive way. It can be a disruptive, unsettling and a threatening or frightening experience. For long-term members who have invested much of their life into the group, it can be especially difficult, and this community is no exception.

During the course of the investigation, it came to my attention that a small number of sisters were not as amenable to the organizational changes that had taken place during and after Vatican II Renewal. And although these particular sisters represent a small minority, it is important to discuss this group, their reactions and adjustments made to the significant changes. This importance lies in the fact that all of the possible consequences of organizational change need to be understood in order to thoroughly

understand the complexity of organizational theory and how change impacts the lives of those in the organization. In the secular world of corporations, and non-profit agencies, employees that resist change may simply be dismissed or laid-off. This religious community deals with its disaffected members differently.

Some sisters were not as open to speaking about negative feelings on the change issues, but would allude to a sense of loss or sadness about their former experiences of living in their pre-Vatican II community.

*“It is not the community I entered. We were very different back then. We lived by a strict schedule, we were semi-cloistered and of course we wore the habit. We’ve gone through so many changes. Maybe we wouldn’t have survived, I don’t know. I just know it is not the community I took my vows in.” Sr. B.*

*“Some of us struggle with the whole question of hospitality. We feel as if we have no privacy. You know, there are all of these strangers in and out of the monastery. Years ago, we were semi-cloistered and we just didn’t have the room to take in people. Now that we do [have the room], we talk about how we can take guests in and still have our own space. I don’t know if you noticed, but a few of us have rooms on the lower level, away from most of the people. It’s very quiet back there.” Sr. M.*

*“There are a few of us that go out to a nearby parish for Sunday Liturgy. We feel it is closer to the liturgy we participated in all of our lives.” Sr. J.*

Each of the above quotes, reflects the end of the habit and strict schedule, the appearance of guests in the monastery and the change of worship services, and signifies major shifts and changes in the quality of their respective lives. These sisters did not embrace or accept the changes that occurred over the past several decades. They grieve for their earlier way of life and in some cases feel betrayed by what has happened to the community they entered and what it has become.

In another example of complicated change, the community became politically active in the 1960's and remains so today. During the 1980's, a communal decision to fly the World Flag in front of the monastery arose. The World Flag is a symbol of universal or world unity among all peoples. The World Flag organization seeks a world without political or national boundaries ([www.oneworldflag.org](http://www.oneworldflag.org)). This issue was discussed, voted upon, and passed. Some sisters were not in favor of the decision:

*“I remember one sister saying she felt she was betraying her father’s service during WWII. She did not want us to fly that flag. It was a very contentious issue.” Sr. C.*

When asked how it was resolved, this sister laughed and said she could not remember. She remembered it being flown for a while with the American flag and then it quietly “faded away.”

Obviously, all of the changes did not work for the entire community; some actually left the community, shortly after the Vatican II mandates. Those who stayed made adjustments to the life; these adjustments enabled them to remain. Also, the

community itself appeared to exercise tolerance for these sisters and even made adjustments to accommodate their expressed differences. Some sisters adapted a “modified” habit and continue to wear it today. To the rest of the community, this is a non-issue. Also, guests are still welcomed into the monastery, but are restricted to certain areas. And sisters attending liturgy outside of the monastery is an acceptable practice.

This openness and willingness to adapt to or work with those individuals opposing new directions within an organization may be unique to religious community. However, its uniqueness should not be dismissed; it is an authentic dynamic that exists when organizations go through significant or not-so-significant change. These dispossessed individuals may, in fact, bring a valuable point of view forward that should be considered.

When asked about these sisters and the community’s willingness to accept all points of view, one sister responded by stating, “we cast a wide net,” a biblical reference to Jesus’ seeking fishermen. She laughed and added: “we know that all of us don’t agree on everything, but at the same time, we also know everyone brings something to the table.”

#### *Institutional Church Context*

This community of women religious has earned a worldwide reputation of challenging the authority of the Vatican (institutional Church). Challenging authority was not restricted to Church authority. This reputation has some of its beginnings in the 1960’s when a number of the sisters joined the peace movement and were arrested and jailed for the activism. This activism exists today in various expressions. Some of the sisters organize a monthly demonstration outside of the local prison as their stand against

the death penalty. Each year a group of sisters travel by bus to Atlanta, Georgia to stage a demonstration outside of the 'School of the Americas'. This organization is funded by the U.S. Department of Defense and was staffed by U.S. Army trainers. Their original mission was to train the Latin American forces supporting U.S. backed dictators, including those armies involved in the now infamous Iran-Contra arms dealing affair of the Reagan administration.

*"... and we're working to close it [School of the Americas]. It's now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Operations - which is the School of the Americas. There was so much opposition to it; they said they were going to close it. So they closed it on one day and reopened it the next doing the same thing." Sr. K.*

The challenging of Church authority surfaced to international attention when one of their former prioress' agreed to speak at a conference on women's ordination in 2001. This story is well documented in the national press. One article appeared in August of 2001 in the nationally known *Time* magazine. The article was titled "*A Nun's Dangerous Talk.*" The Vatican notified the then-prioress of the community and demanded the sister's silence at this conference, citing the vow of obedience as the basis of this demand. This prioress traveled to Rome to discuss the issue in detail with those representing the Vatican's position. Upon her return, she discussed the issue with the sister and the entire community. The community voted on whether this sister should speak, and the result of the vote was 127 in favor and 1 against. The sister went on to speak at the conference, and the Vatican never responded. When asked about this event

now, the former prioress commented, “I never spoke about women’s ordination, I merely wanted to open up discussions about the topic and on that, I succeeded.”

The Vatican’s official stance on women’s ordination continues to forbid the discussion of the topic. Women’s ordination is not only forbidden, but cannot be discussed publicly or otherwise. To most anyone with feminist sensibilities, this position is offensive. Eliminating half of the world’s population from positions within the hierarchy based on gender is a fundamental issue of social justice. In a community of women with strong, public positions on social justice, the question of how one can remain within an institution that clearly stands in opposition to their beliefs becomes an interesting one. And although it is not specifically pursued within this investigation, when mentioned to one sister, she strongly replied, “It’s our Church too, you know.” Another sister replied differently to the same question by responding, “You can work within or outside of a system to change it. I choose to work within. The community provides me the support I need for the work I do.”

### *Leading Together*

The qualities that define the category “*Leading Together*” include the community’s vision of leadership, process of selection, and relationship to the prioress (elected leader). “*Leading through Change*” is an important category in this investigation, since leadership has a powerful influence on the evolution of the community during turbulent years when most of the change occurred.

### *Description of Governance Structures*

Describing the governance structure (referred to by the members as cenobitic government) is useful when understanding the community leadership process. To that



end, what follows is a brief description of how this community elects its leaders, organizes its governance structure, and governs itself.

Every six years, the community, using a ballot system elects a prioress; each fully professed sister gets one vote. When a simple majority is reached, the election is complete. The newly elected prioress, with the advice of her council oversees the governance of the community; she is the principal authority. The Monastic Council serves as an advisory body to the prioress and consists of 5 members, the community chapter elects two, and three are appointed by the prioress. The Monastic Council advises the prioress on specific goals the community has established. These goals may include disposition of property and financial issues, as well as communal study and education.

Directors are part of the organizational structure and serve at the will and discretion of the prioress, and they are responsible to the community in their daily work. There are eight directors, and their responsibility is evident in their respective titles: Development and Communications, Infirmarian, Liturgist, Dean of Monastic Spirituality, Director of Monastic Formation, Physical Resources Director and Treasurer. Directorships have individual staffs and are made up of community members and / or lay people. Additionally, directorships may have committees that further support their goals and work.

The administrative staff is also part of the governance structure and is responsible for all of the various administrative tasks associated with community governance and the work of maintaining a monastery. The administrative staff supporting the prioress includes the subprioress and the community secretary, who is responsible for recording

and signing minutes of chapter meetings, and all official monastery correspondence and documents which require the secretary's signature.

### *The Prioress*

During the course of this investigation, it became apparent that the prioress of the community is the central figure with a significant amount of power and influence within the community. "The cenobitic (monastic) government ... is circular because circles best represent a visual image of cenobitic authority – a monastic community where all are united in Christ around the prioress. (*Call to Life, Authority*, p.30)

*"... It's also the role of the prioress. I mean the prioress is the spiritual director of the community. The prioress has the central role in the community; the prioress assumes the role of Christ. So the prioress is not only the administrator, she is the spiritual leader of the community. It's in the Rule." Sr. D.*

One sister described the prioress's actions during the time when the question of whether to abandon the wearing of the habit was the biggest issue of the community. Although the prioress took the action that she did, the more significant information is the reaction of the community. Clearly, they were waiting for her response to the question of habit and understood the response had significant meaning.

*"We were all waiting in the lobby for Sr. M. (prioress at the time) to come out to see what she would be wearing. We knew it would be an important statement to the entire community on the direction of the question of the habit. She came out in a tailored suit without a veil. I will never forget*

*that moment.” Sr. V.*

The nature of the questions being asked today is different than they were at an earlier time in the community’s history. However, the prominence of the prioress’s role continues to be central to the community.

*“We go to her with questions both personal and with issues that may impact the community. For instance, I was faced with the question of donating an organ for a family member. I would never make that decision without first consulting with the prioress.” Sr. P.*

These statements go directly to the essential and central role of the community’s prioress. She is the one individual who is to be consulted on matters that are personal, professional and spiritual. She is also the community’s public spokesperson. When asked about the current prioress, all of the sisters had strong positive statements to make:

*“She is the person in this community that I most admire. She is absolutely incredible. I have been with her and she is... how she led us through 14 years of that business of Vatican II, unbelievable. And the day of my profession in '69, I'm standing by the mirror getting dressed and I thought “should I put this veil on, should I take it off?” And I said, “I'm not going to wear it.” And then Sr. X appeared without her veil, and I thought “oh, good”. That whole veil was a very divisive thing within the community. But she is just an incredible, incredible person.” Sr. G.*

*“Sr. X. is always available to speak with us. Everyone knows she has an open-door policy. Even though she is very busy and travels a lot, when*

*she is here, she spends all of her time with us. When she is home, she waits in the community at the end of the day to greet the sisters as they come home from work. It is so nice to be greeted by her after working all day. We all know, she is devoted to all of the sisters.” Sr. A.*

*“We have always been blessed with good leadership. As far back as Sr. A., we always elected the right prioress for the time.” Sr. D.*

Selecting good leadership, especially in a time of organizational change, is critical to any organization. Leadership sets the tone of the organization’s culture, and retains its collective focus and maintains its viability. Good leadership communicates the mission and vision of an organization clearly, consistently and often (Bass, 2008). In doing so, leadership can steer an organization through turbulent times and keep it intact.

Through further questioning and discussion with community members, the process of electing a prioress is more complex than casting ballots as their constitution may lead one to believe.

### *The Election Process*

Months before the election, the entire community comes together and collectively asks themselves, where they are with regard to a broad array of issues. These issues may include, but are not necessarily restricted to: condition of their finances, member activity, state of their ministries, focus of their work, condition of their property including real estate, tractors, auto fleet, etc. These are questions that organizations periodically reflect on and use as the basis for planning. For this community, it becomes a far-reaching set of

questions since the answers affect every aspect of their lives – both personal and professional. They are, after all, monastic and live under the same roof and for many, work in the same professional setting. The questions include their living arrangements, prayer and spiritual lives and areas of life that would not be of concern in the secular organizational world. The process engages the entire community at every level:

*“We organize ourselves into committees and discuss all of the issues. And after much discussion, we end up with the areas that we agree need attention. Each of the committee’s issues are brought to the attention of the whole community and we continue to discuss and discuss and discuss (she laughs). Over time a picture emerges and we have a pretty good idea of where we are with things.” Sr. A.*

*“We come together and sit in a circle and talk about each issue. Everyone has an opportunity to be heard. Everyone may not agree on everything, but everyone has an opportunity to say what is on their mind. Once we make a decision, and agree to it, we leave it there. I mean, we don’t go out and complain about the decision.”. Sr.S.*

The process continues:

*“We prioritize our issues and discuss the details. Sometimes we see we are too busy in one area over another. Sometimes we see we need more attention in one area over another. It depends. What matters is we base the outcome of these discussions on what kind of leadership we need for the next six years. Sometimes we need a slowing down period. Sometimes*

*we could use someone who challenges us more. Sometimes we need something else. It just depends on the process and the sisters.” Sr. T.*

*“I remember when Sr. X. was prioress. We were running in so many different directions at once. We were starting all these different initiatives. I mean it was good in that we probably wouldn’t be where we are today if we didn’t have that kind of energy. But, you can’t sustain that level of activity for a long period of time. At some point you need to stop and reflect and see where you are.” Sr. B.*

*“Many of our discussions and decisions take place over an extended period of time. We have community days where we spend our time together talking about our concerns. I am not at liberty to discuss any real details, that’s understood, but we do talk about everything.” Sr. B.*

Based on the list of priorities developed by the community, their vision for the next few years is clarified and agreed upon:

*“We look at our needs and discuss what personal attributes our new prioress should have given our view of the next 6 years. If we need to slow down and focus on our ministries, we need someone who has the ability to maintain that kind of pace. You know, not everyone can do that.” Sr. P.*

*“We look at the list and surface the names of sisters who best fit those qualities. This is who we think could be the best leader. It is all based on where we are at that point in time and who we think could best fulfill our needs. This is all done in the context of prayer.” Sr. M.*

From time to time, organizations use ‘off-site’ retreats to discuss the issues they may be facing. In the business sector, this reflection time may be the starting point in the budget review process, questions of market position, shareholder concerns, etc. For the not-for-profit sector, the important questions may also be budget related, mission relevant, client focused, etc. In both of these examples, the outcomes of such a process have the potential to impact professional lives. However, it is unlikely for most organizations to conduct such meetings with regularity, let alone have by-laws that require such meetings. Additionally, to conduct such meetings with the intention of concluding with the election of new leadership is especially unique.

For this community, this process is so much more extensive than electing a leader to supervise or oversee their institution, organization or professional lives. The issues addressed also reach into their personal life of prayer, liturgy, and living arrangements. It is a process of full engagement of the entire community involving every aspect of their lives. They are as serious about the process as they are the outcomes.

*“It is one of those times where we all come together in the spirit of collaboration, community and prayer. No, we don’t all sit around and sing Kumbaya (she is laughing), we have serious conversations about who should be the prioress for the next few years. It is very important to us. She is the one we will go to for all kinds of help and advice. We will pray*

*with her over all the issues we take to her. We take it [election] very seriously.” Sr. A.*

*“We let the names surface and really talk about that [next prioress] and be open to it and by the time you get to election, the election has kind of already happened through the discussion because it’s like the formal process - it ritualizes the work that’s already been done.” Sr. K.*

#### *After the Election*

With the prioress in place, the leadership for the next 6 years is launched (if reelected, it could be 12 years). Like the community itself, the role of the prioress has also evolved with time. Preceding the renewal process of Vatican II, sisters were subject to the authority of the prioress; they took vows to obey her as the ultimate authority in the community. The concept of obedience to superiors was a different one than it is today. The old concept of obedience was an unquestioning acquiescence to the demands of authority. As one sister, whose time with the community spans the decades of change stated:

*“We were getting very good degrees from very fine schools, running million dollar organizations, coming home getting down on our knees saying “Mother, for the love of Jesus, may I go to the PTA meeting tonight?” Stupid, nonsense... But it was felt, this bringing forward of a culture that no longer existed here and now. There had been a cataclysm in society and we were very slow in catching up to it. What I’m trying to*



*say is obedience had cultural overtones more than even poverty or chastity in many ways.” Sr. C.*

*“So then when you trace the meaning of obedience, in [this community’s] culture, you are not tracing it back to 17<sup>th</sup> century French Jansenism. You are tracing it back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century by bringing it forward through those cultures, always remembering this is obedience to the voice of God as is demonstrated, manifested, exemplified in this group, in this life, at this time.” Sr. C.*

Today the role of the prioress is one of collaboration with the community, its committees, her council and the individual members. She discusses and strives to resolve issues that affect all areas of their lives. She is not an authoritarian figure; she is an associate, a colleague who is respected, revered and the center of their collective lives.

*“The authority of the community is primarily with the prioress but it is also in each sister because each person - you should want and are asked to give your insight and so when we have community meetings, there might be disagreement and discussion, but that’s healthy. So if you chose not to let your voice be heard, that’s your problem really. Because how can we discuss it if we don’t know what people are thinking. On the other hand, once we have the discussion and a decision is made, you go with the program.” Sr. S.*

The prioress is the individual selected for the current time. She is chosen on the basis of her abilities and qualities most suitable for the community in this place and time.

Therefore, the prioress best suited to the community in the past, is not necessarily the one best suited for the community in the present time. She is not elected based solely on having a specific set of leadership qualities. She has been elected on the basis of the needs of the community, in this moment in time as articulated by the community and her qualities that correspond to current community needs.

### *Summary*

Over a twenty-three year period, this community went through tumultuous change. All of the changes were forced upon them by externalities beyond their control and not of their choosing. These forced changes are referred to “Seismic Shifting.” They are crucial to understanding this community because it was the “Seismic Shifting” that provided the opportunities to change. And although the changes were traumatic, they were able to move through these events and remain together. In the end, they grew into a whole and thriving community. They accomplished this through a unique set of processes which is the main theme of this study, referred to as “*Leading Together*.” “*Leading Together*” is the unifying concept that enabled this community to survive dramatic change. This concept includes their collaborative decision making processes that they employ when making all of their important decisions. These decisions include financial matters, ministerial choices, living arrangements, election of leaders and anything else that they collectively decide requires communal conversation.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION OF STUDY RESULTS

#### *Purpose of Study*

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the dramatic organizational changes experienced by this community of women religious during a specific 23 year period of their 150 year history. It sought to understand how they managed to not only survive the changes but produce the outcome of a thriving and robust community, and the development of an extensive network of social service initiatives. It was hoped that a better understanding of how they progressed through these changes would provide insights into how organizations could also survive tumultuous change, especially human services organizations and agencies.

The research employed the combined methods of ethnography and grounded theory analysis. The ethnographic methods included participant observation and detailed daily note-taking, culminating in 14 in-depth, taped interviews. Supporting data included notes from daily attendance at most communal rituals and printed material supplied by community members. The data were transcribed, analyzed and organized into categories and themes. Connections were made between the categories and the resulting theory (findings) emerged as depicted in Chapter 3. The study was based on the following research questions first presented in Chapter 1 Introduction:

1. How did this community change from a semi-cloistered, monastic, exclusively teaching community to who they are today; an open, monastic, community responsible for the creation and continued management of a broad range of social services?
2. What were the factor(s) or event(s) initiating these changes?
3. How did the community react to and move through these changes?
4. What role if any did leadership play throughout this period?

These four questions were for the most part answered by the findings in Chapter 3. The main findings of the study revealed that there were four major external events in the life of the community that precipitated dramatic organizational change. These were not events that they (the community) themselves had brought about, but external to the community and beyond their control. However, their willingness to open themselves and their environment to these events (open-systems theory) allowed them to consider alternative paths. These events were responded to by communal processes that included the participation of all members in a spirit of co-leadership with the prioress and her council. Changes were discussed, debated and completely vetted before a community vote was cast. These discussions and debates were held in the context of formal, informal, small, and large community meetings, committees, sub-committees and retreats. Some discussions were brief, while others lasted for years. Prayer was central to setting the tone for the meetings, as it was and continues to be in the lives of these women.

### *Analysis & Interpretation*

This chapter discusses analyses and interprets the findings and includes a synthesis of the findings with the pertinent literature. The chapter is organized by the following two discussion categories:

1. Relationship between the external events and the organizational changes that the community experienced. (Research questions 1 & 2) [Organizational Theory literature]
2. Processes employed by the community enabling them to move through the changes (Research question 3 & 4) [Leadership literature]

These categories are in line with the above research questions, which were first presented in Chapter 1. These same categories were those that emerged during the coding, sorting and theory building process described in Chapter 3. As the categories surfaced, relationships between them were established. Chapter 3 presented the findings of this study by organizing the coded data into discrete categories derived from interviews, notes and printed materials. These categories were connected and a reasoned theory of this organization emerged.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide interpretive insights into these findings. While the previous analysis separated the findings into singular themes, this chapter will attempt to reconstruct these themes to provide a more holistic understanding of the findings / theory.

*Discussion Category 1: Relationship between the external events and the organizational changes that the community experienced.*

The first research question sought to determine how this community changed from a semi-cloistered, monastic, exclusively teaching community to who they are today; an open, monastic, community responsible for the development and continued management of a broad range of social service initiatives. Throughout the course of the data gathering period, all of the community members talked about the substantial changes that had taken place in their collective lives between 1965 and 1988. Their references to them were part of almost every conversation during the formal interview process and were frequently mentioned during less formal verbal exchanges and conversations. As discussed earlier, the four events were:

1. Vatican II Renewal (1965)
2. Forced move to a new monastery (1970)
3. Choosing individual ministries (1978)
4. Closing of St. Benedict's Academy (1988)

These four events marked the twenty-three year period of time which is the focus of this study. Each event had a significant effect on this community which changed it permanently. Some of the events were more disruptive to the community than others, and some of the events, although not invited by the community, paved the way for – some would say -needed change. As one sister reflected on the community's position after Vatican II renewal began: "We were between two worlds, one a version of our 19<sup>th</sup> century life and one a vision of a 20<sup>th</sup> century possibility." None of the events were planned, but were external to the community and placed them in a position to make decisions about reacting or not, and if so, how. These external events are referred to as second-order change (Bartunek, 1984, Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Second-

order change is unintended, and it is these destabilizing events that help bring about change (Plowman et al, 2007).

Prior to the 1980's, the organizational change literature focused on internal structures versus processes and concerned itself with performance versus people (Sashkin & Burke, 1987). By the 1990's, the literature began to focus more on those events external to the organization's internal environment, and a marked focus on process versus structure (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999).

### *Open-Systems Theory and the External Environment*

The academic organizational change theory literature spans all of the predominant disciplines including sociology, psychology, anthropology, business and communications arts to name a few. One needs only to do a cursory search on the subject to realize the vastness of this body of knowledge. In my attempt to remain focused on the themes and theory of this investigation, the discussion and supporting literature will remain centered on what the organizational theory literature has to say about the effects of external events on an organization. This allows access to the theories and ideas of all of the disciplines while remaining centered on the pertinent aspects of organizational theory that helps to inform the findings of this study.

As far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, organizational theorists documented their conflicting views of organizational systems. One conflict or division stood out then and continues to be a division today. This division between engineering and managerial theorists centered around studying systems from the bottom up (engineering perspective) or the top down (managerial perspective); both perspectives were largely prescriptive versus empirical (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Between early 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists and

the late 1960's, most organizational change theory literature focused on organizations as closed systems (versus open). It is during this period that the effects of the external environment and its impact on an organization began to emerge as a theme in the pertinent literature (Clarke & Krone, 1972). This view through the lens of open-systems theory emphasized to decision makers, managers etc. adaptive change as a means of dealing with outside pressures and even organizational survival (Jayaram, 1978). This community's capacity for adaptive change, I contend, was a significant

These insights intended to be used to modify internal organizational structures through open-systems design (Krone, 1974).

Open-systems theory has been part of the organizational theory literature for over forty years. The concept falls under the larger heading of systems theory. The distinction between open and closed system is important to this investigation in the following way: closed system theorists assume all of the significant elements of the organization are internal while the open-system theorists acknowledge that the external environment also influences the organization. Although the environment may include an element within the organization, open-systems theory also recognizes the effect of the external environment on the organization (Katz & Kahn, 1968).

The importance of including the concept of 'external environment' in this investigation cannot be overstated. During the course of this investigation, the sisters almost always spoke of the aforementioned 'seismic shifts' or external events as the precipitating factors of their change process. None of these events were planned by the community or internal to their organization. Each event was imposed upon the community from the external environment such as Vatican II and the forced move from



their inner-city monastery. Or, in the case of choosing individual ministries and the closing of their academy, the external events were actually the external economic environment that initiated and drove their decision to change. These changes to their internal environment include the community's governance system, ministerial life, prayer rituals, personal dress and living arrangements. All of these changes were the community's response to external events.

Because the internal structures of this community were changed so dramatically, open-systems theory becomes a relevant and appropriate theoretical lens through which to understand the metamorphosis of this organization. During the time period under investigation, the internal organizational structures underwent tremendous modifications to accommodate the changing external environment. For example, Vatican II mandates affected this community so deeply that it continues to be discussed and debated today.

[Vatican II] *"...put us on a path and had us questioning every aspect of religious life. We looked at our prayer life, our community life our work as teachers. Everything was up for discussion. And yes, we changed"* Sr. T.

[Vatican II] *"It was a very tough time... in some ways liberating, but in some way frightening. You know, it was like this constant debate about who we were, where were we going and what was it going to look like when we got there?"* Sr. B.

[Vatican II] *“We were criticized by lay people, sometimes our own families. They didn’t understand what was happening to us. They wondered if we were still going to be sisters! How could we be sisters if we weren’t wearing habits and living in convents?”*

### *Open-Systems and Contingency Theory*

Over time, open-systems theory became more sophisticated and refined and a more expansive view of organizational change followed. Out of this expansion emerged new insights and enhanced approaches under the umbrella of open-systems theory. One of these new theories is referred to as contingency theory (Galbraith, 1973). Contingency theory continues to recognize the external environment as a crucial aspect of organizational theory. However, it states that the environment is complex and diverse and therefore organizational structures differ from one organizational model to another (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Additionally, contingency theory further states that organizations with the most adaptable internal structures to their specific external environment will have a higher survivability rate than those who do not (Donaldson, 2001).

Given the assertions of contingency theory, I argue that this community’s willingness to negotiate the demands of their external environment (seismic shifts) was instrumental in facilitating their successful navigation through the years of change. This argument is based on two positions: first, that the community did, in fact, successfully navigate through tumultuous change and second, that the communities that either split apart or resisted their external environment did not successfully navigate the demands of their changing external environment. As the community proceeded through change, they

changed, adapted and in some cases eliminated internal structures. For example, change to their decades old prayer structure is testament to this adaptation. Prior to the organizational changes, one sister describes the daily schedule:

*“We really prayed seven times [a day] as the [1500 year old] Rule says. Then we either went to the Academy or St. Mary’s school. And everybody came home for lunch and everybody went back to school.” Sr. MP*

During the process of changing ministries – in this case the dissolution of their teaching ministry - another sister describes the daily prayer and the reason for the altered schedule.

*“Our professional lives took us in very different directions. I needed to travel every day into Erie, most of us do. Some of the other sisters work in rural areas. Some travel long distances from the monastery. Our prayer schedule was not practical. So we pray three times a day in the monastery, but if we are away, it is understood you can’t show up.” Sr. A.*

As Donaldson (2001) states, those organizations with the most adaptable internal structures are the most likely to survive. Alternatively, the previously mentioned (Chapter 3 )and well documented case of one Los Angeles community of women religious who openly refused to abide by their local Bishop’s interpretation of the Vatican II mandates split from the local Roman Catholic diocese and lost their ecclesiastical (official) relationship with Rome. This example is one of many communities who were not able to adapt their internal structures to the changing external environment, and the consequence was a division in the community.

Open-systems theory recognizes the organization as a social system with permeable boundaries versus a closed system with impermeable boundaries. And by the

1980's open systems theorists began to focus on the separate themes of organizational structure (content) and organizational process in a more fully integrated way (Sashkin & Burke, 1987).

The theoretical concepts of open-systems, adaptive change and the integration of structure and process provide one conceptual framework to better understand the organizational changes experienced by this community/organization. These three concepts together serve as the theoretical lens through which this community's change is understood.

### *Leadership*

As discussed in Chapter 3, leadership played a key role in the evolution of this community. During the course of this investigation, the subject of leadership was frequently referenced by the sisters as a prominent and essential factor in the evolution of their community. When the question of 'how the community went through these changes' first came up, one sister commented, "We have always been blessed by good leadership." This sentiment was shared repeatedly as I progressed through the data-gathering phase of this investigation.

When referring to the past and current leadership, the sisters always spoke with reverence and respect; and in turn, the elected leaders spoke with humility and grace about being elected to their respective positions. Their collective sentiments were always reverential without any hint of boasting. It was during these exchanges that I quickly realized leadership not only mattered very much to these sisters but also had a significant effect on the community, especially during the years of change. They looked to their prioress and council for guidance, support, and advice. Leader actions and responses to

important matters did not go unnoticed; in fact, leader actions would be used as a guide post for their own behavior. This became obvious when one sister talked about the question of the elimination of the habit. Her sentiments capture the significance of their-then leadership.

*“We were all waiting in the lobby for Sr. M. (former prioress) to come out to see what she would be wearing. We knew it would be an important statement to the entire community on the direction of the question of the habit. She came out in a tailored suit without a veil. I will never forget that moment.” Sr. V.*

The following quote is the then-prioress’s response to this particular occasion.

*[Of the elimination of the habit] “I had the support of most of the community. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to encourage it. I’m sure the whole community... if I thought more of the community was against it I probably wouldn’t have encouraged it. But with the Federation - our Federation -was encouraging. It was very strong.” Sr. M.*

This former prioress is describing a leadership style that is committed to remaining close to her constituents – including listening, observing and interested in their development and transformation. Their opinions matter and shape her positions and decisions on important issues. And although she had an opinion of her own regarding the disposition of this question of the habit, her judgment to appear in the lobby, in a tailored street suit, was based on the fact that the majority of the community and Federation were also supportive of this change. Had they not been, she makes the point that her decision

would have been different. She was not going to force her decision on the community – commonly referred to as a ‘top-down’ method.

### *Leadership and Women*

The number of women in leadership roles is far more common today than in the recent past. Women now occupy almost 24% of all corporate chief executive positions in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). They make up 44% of school principals (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2005), and 21% of all college and university presidents (Corrigan, 2002). Although these statistics demonstrate some of the tremendous advances made by women, they continue to be underrepresented in senior level government positions and the top ranks of corporate placements. And yet women make up almost 47% of the U.S. workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006).

### *The Leadership Literature*

The academic literature on leadership, much like that of the organizational change literature, crosses all of the major disciplines. The topic is broad and deep. And in the interest of keeping the discussion of this investigation’s findings useful and relevant, only the major leadership theories – which also cross all of the major disciplines – will be utilized. These include trait theory, situational theory, leader member exchange theory, transformational and authentic leadership theories. These theories were chosen because of their dominance in the literature, distinction between each, and relevance to the findings of this investigation.

### *Trait Theory*

Between 1930 and 1950, most of the leadership literature was based on what is

now referred to as trait theory. From 1950 to the late 1960's, trait theory fell out of favor but re-emerged in the 1970's (House & Aditya, 1997). As its name implies, the focus of this work was based on leader traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, behavioral predictability and self-monitoring (Schneider 1983, House, Shane & Herold 1996). Trait theory becomes relevant to this investigation because this community elects their prioress based to some degree on her traits. Although there are more considerations to the election process such as the state of the community, their ministries and future plans as explicated in Chapter 3, the future prioress's traits are very much part of the discussion.

The election of new leaders includes a lengthy process of discussing and determining which traits the community should be looking for at a particular moment in time. Excerpt from Chapter 3:

*“What matters is we base the outcome of these [election] discussions on what kind of leadership we need for the next six years. Sometimes we need a slowing down period. Sometimes we could use someone who challenges us more. Sometimes we need something else. It just depends on the process and the sisters.” Sr. T.*

Where trait theory does not fit into this scenario, is in the fact that leader traits are pre-determined and universally shared by all leaders (Stogdill, 1974). Conversely, the sisters first determine the traits they are seeking in their soon-to-be elected leader and base election decisions on their needs at that moment in time. Therefore, the traits of one of their leaders may be very different from the traits of another leader elected at a different moment in time. Excerpt from Chapter 3:

*“We look at our needs and discuss what personal attributes our new prioress should have, given our view of the next 6 years. If we need to slow down and focus on our ministries, we need someone who has the ability to maintain that kind of [slow] pace. You know, not everyone can do that.” Sr. P.*

Therefore, traits are an integral part of the decision making process. However traits change depending on the state or situation the community finds itself in at the time of elections.

### *Situational Leadership Theory*

Specific situation(s) or contingency(s) determine leadership. There is no optimal trait-based profile of a leader (Fiedler, 1971). This position is held by a group of leadership theories referred to as situational or contingency theory. According to Fiedler (1996), the interaction between leader-type (task-motivation & relationship-motivation) and situational control are what determine successful leadership. Fiedler posits that the task-motivator performs best in a high and low control situation and the relationship-motivator performs best in moderate control situations. He defines situational control as the degree to which a leader can control and influence the group.

Situational Leadership Theory (hereafter: SLT) was first introduced under the name Life Cycle of Leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). And although it has undergone a number of evolutions and revisions since its introduction, it continues to hold a place in the leadership literature. It has also been used with frequency in leadership training programs due in large part to the popularization of the then best seller *The One Minute Manager* by Ken Blanchard published in 1983 (Graeff, 1997).



The central premise of SLT today is that each situation / setting may call for a different leadership style. Therefore, to be an effective leader, one has to adapt to a given situation / setting. This is an obvious departure from the previously discussed Trait Theory.

The SLT model is best understood by describing its two major concepts individually and their relationship with each other. These two concepts are: leadership style and (subordinate) maturity level. Blanchard et al (1993) define leadership style in four ways. The first style (S1) is the high-directive-low support which means the leader is focused on specific goals, manages closely and provides no social support to workers. The second style (S2) is the high directive-high support which means the leader communicates the specific goals and tasks and is supportive to workers. The third style (S3) is the high supportive-low directive meaning the leader uses supportive actions to develop the skills workers need to accomplish tasks. Some of these actions include listening, encouraging, approving, and providing feedback. The fourth style (S4) is low supportive-low directive style which means the leader offers less task orientation and support thereby facilitating worker confidence and motivation.

The development levels of the SLT listed as D1 (low) through D4 (high) are a rating system for worker competence and commitment. These levels are constructed around the idea that employees move along a developmental continuum. For a leader to be effective, he/she must determine where workers are situated on the continuum and adapt their leadership style (S1 – S4) to meet the developmental level.

Situational theory was an important departure from trait theory due in part to its consideration of combining situational factors and leader-types. This departure was

advanced to resolve differences among findings concerning trait theory (Fiedler, 1996). When compared to trait theory, situational theory takes into consideration another applicable view through which to observe this community's leadership model. The sisters make clear that their situational circumstances (state of the community etc.) along with the attributes of potential prioresses are essential elements of their election. No one element (situation or traits) overrides the other.

*“We prioritize our issues and discuss the details. Sometimes we see we are too busy in one area over another. Sometimes we see we need more attention in one area over another. It depends. What matters is we base the outcome of these discussions on what kind of leadership we need for the next six years. Sometimes we need a slowing down period.” Sr. T.*

#### *Leader-Member Exchange Theory*

Leader-Member Exchange Theory (hereafter: LMX) is a third departure from the two previously discussed leadership theories. Trait-theory focuses on leader traits as the measurement for organizational leaders, while situational theory focuses on the interaction between the leader-type and situational context. Leader member exchange (LMX) theory focuses on the relationship between leaders and their constituents. This later theory developed by Graen and Dansereau (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975) has as its central concept that effective and successful leadership occurs when leaders and followers are able to develop mature relationships/partnerships, enabling both to be productive and creative.

This relationship development is (according to LMX) a three stage process. These phases are referred to as the stranger phase, acquaintance phase and partnership

phase. The LMX process evolves over time and includes the leader's evaluation of newcomers (stranger phase) and his/her effort to move the relationship along the LMX continuum. During this early phase of the relationship continuum, the leader-member relationship is marked by a prescribed contractual arrangement usually derived from job description and/or organizational hierarchy. This early phase sets the groundwork for workers to become part of the "in-group" or the "out-group." Personality, style, work ethic are all part of this process (Dansereau et al, 1995).

The second phase of the LMX process (acquaintance phase) is marked by the continued relationship development between leader and member where trust-building is essential. This phase begins when leader or member offers improved career-oriented social exchanges. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991) are referring to a sharing of resources and personal or work related information. It is a testing period on the part of leader and member to assess if they can trust each other to meet professional needs. Any action perceived as betrayal, especially by the leader, can result in the member being 'demoted' to an out-group status. Members who are more similar to the leader were found to be more likely to succeed. These similarities include gender, race and culture (Linden, Wayne & Stilwell, 1993). The last stage (routinization) is when a pattern of ongoing social exchange becomes established. Trust, empathy, patience are often the hallmarks of a successful third stage outcome (Graen, Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The final phase (partnership) of LMX theory is characterized by what is referred to as high-quality leader-member exchanges (Schriesheim et al, 1999). Leaders and members who have progressed to this stage experience a high degree of mutual trust, respect and obligation toward each other. In a recent study of Israeli organizations

examining employee perceptions of leader-member exchange and its relationship to energy and creativity, it was determined that perceived high quality leader-member exchanges were positively related to feelings of energy, which was related to greater interest in creativity at work (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009). The researchers add that LMX theory did not directly affect creativity but cultivated workers feelings of energy which led to enhanced creativity. Researchers have also studied the relationship between quality of LMX and worker empowerment. Harris, Wheeler, and Kacmar (2009) found that the quality of leader member exchange mattered most for workers who felt disempowered. For these workers, high quality leader-member exchange compensated for not being empowered.

In the context of this investigation, LMX is a relevant theoretical lens through which to examine the leadership model of this community. The leader/prioress of the community already has a personal relationship with every member of the community. Her relationship with each member as well as their relationship with her is marked by mutual respect and trust. Additionally, the sisters' relationships with each other are the same. After all, these women have lived and worked together for decades. This particular quote from Chapter 3 underscores the quality and depth of this relationship. And although the quality and depth of their relationships are not the same – sister to sister – the collective sense of relationship is reflected in this sister's comment:

*“These are my sisters in the deepest and truest sense of the word. Yes, we argue and disagree but I love them and wouldn't want to be without them.” Sr. B.*

Their closeness and commitment to each other may make for a unique situation when compared to the typical world of work; the power of relationship should not be overlooked – in either situation. LMX asserts that mature relationships enable members to be both productive and creative.

It is exactly within the context of trust that one former prioress became so concerned about the community finances following the dissolution of their teaching ministry that she encouraged the sisters to pursue ministries they had previously only dreamed of pursuing. She believed that individual, professional pursuits enabled people to mature. It was in these pursuits she writes “women religious were meant to go to God as adults, not as perpetual children... they began to move in public circles as well as Catholic ones. They opened programs for the inner-city poor and unemployed adults, for women in prisons and for women in rural areas, for gays and lesbians, for rich and poor.” (Chittister, 2005 p. 151). Her relationships with her constituents were trusting and the sisters were both productive and creative. LMX provides a third analytical lens through which this community’s model of leadership functions. It also contributes to theoretical understanding of how the community traversed through the years of change and developed their network of social service agencies. Graen & Uhl-Bien (1991) emphasize that leaders should develop high-quality exchanges with all members in all work groups rather than just a few. The leader who succeeds to make all members a part of the in-group is more likely to experience higher productivity and lower member turnover than the leader with more out-group dyads in the organization.

### *Transformational Leadership*

Today the leadership literature continues to be focused primarily on the

relationship between leader(s) and follower(s) (Bass, 1990). This focus of relationship-based leadership theory is traced back to the work of J.M. Burns and his concepts of ‘transactional’ and ‘transformational’ leadership (Bass, 1985). Burns’ (1978) conceptualization between the two different approaches is the difference between a ‘give and take’ relationship (transactional) where the leader – who has power – influences or coerces the follower to do his/her bidding through a system of rewards and punishments. Instead he argues that the transformational leader sees power and leadership not as instruments of coercion, but as a relationship. “It lies in seeing the most powerful influences consist of deeply human relationships in which two or more persons engage with one another. It lies in a more realistic, a more sophisticated understanding of power, and of the often far more consequential exercise of human persuasion, exchange, elevation, and transformation – in short, of leadership” (p.11). He adds that this form of leadership “seeks to raise the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both the leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (p. 20). Burns’ early work was criticized due to its lack of empirical studies supporting his theory, but his more recent work (2003) addresses some of these criticisms (Stewart, 2006).

Bass’s transformational model of leadership was chosen as a fourth theoretical lens for this investigation for this reason: this model is relationship-based and the findings in Chapter 3 emphasize the deep meaning of relationship between and among the sisters of this community. Relationship is required to launch and move through the selection and election of their leaders. Moreover, their close, respectful relationship with their prioress is at the heart, not only how and whom they elect, but their relationship with each other. As discussed in chapter 3, they create their roster of potential candidates

based on her personality traits, past experiences and their needs. This process, by definition, requires a depth of relationship with everyone in the community.

### *Bass' Model of Transformational Leadership*

Bass' (2003) transformational leadership model is more complex than simply an examination of the relationship between leader and follower; it consists of additional aspects – which he refers to as Factors - that become relevant to this investigation. What follows is a brief explication of each of his “factors”, and a synthesis between the explication and the findings of this investigation. The quotes are excerpted from the findings in Chapter 3. These factors are as follows: charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.

- Factor 1: Charisma or Idealized influence is measured by follower reactions to the leader and the degree to which followers identify with these leaders, who they see as trusted and respected. Another aspect of this category is the leader's ability to consistently communicate a reachable mission and vision that followers (at all levels) identify with and participate in, regardless of their role. A leader with a high degree of idealized influence is greatly respected, and possesses a high degree of referent power.

The findings in Chapter 3 make clear the level of trust and respect the sisters have for their prioress. The tone of their references regarding her was consistently reverential about who she was in their collective and personal lives and filled with confidence about decisions she has made affecting the community. These sentiments were also true when they spoke of former prioresses. As one sister stated when describing the prioresses role [excerpted from Chapter 3]:

*“I mean the prioress is the spiritual director of the community. The prioress has the central role in the community; the prioress assumes the role of Christ. So the prioress is not only the administrator, she is the spiritual leader of the community.” Sr. D.*

Another excerpted comment:

*“It was a very challenging time for us [Vatican II Renewal] and we knew she would make decisions that were in the community’s best interest. We had no doubt about that.” Sr. MP.*

- Factor 2: Inspiration – provides symbols and simplified emotional appeals to increase awareness and understanding of mutually desired goals.

The sisters’ lives are filled with important symbols. Even those that are no longer in use are displayed in their Heritage Room referred to in Chapter 2 – Description of the Setting. One of the most powerful symbols in their collective lives was the habit. It was their then prioress who understood the effect she would make on the community with regard to her decision to simply wear or not wear the habit to an important meeting:

*“I knew all of the sisters were waiting outside in the foyer area and that they would be watching what I had on. And that it was important for me to present a professional demeanor. I decided very quickly to wear a tailored suit to that meeting.” Sr. M.*

And another sister, who was in the foyer, responding to the prioress’ decision:

*“I will never forget that day.” Sr. A.*

In this example, the prioress’ action had a powerful effect on the community. She knew that it would; she understood the emotional component of appearing in public wearing



street clothes and by doing so, she inspired the sisters.

- Factor 3: Intellectual stimulation- encourages followers to think on their own, especially problem solving and develop their own solutions. Transformational leaders support follower developed solutions.
- Factor 4: Individualized consideration- followers are treated respectfully and equitably. Each person is taken as an individual whose interests and needs are taken into consideration. Assignments are presented as learning/teaching opportunities.

This community's approach to decision making, problem solving and teaching / learning opportunities are well documented in the Chapter 3. Their method can be accurately described as collaborative, mutual, and jointly agreed upon activities. This collaborative style permeates the spirit, fabric, and being of the community. The prioress is as deeply invested in this collaborative style as is the entire community. All issues are discussed and debated by the community – in open forum fashion. All decisions that have an effect on more than one sister are made by way of a vote of a house (sisters living in a particular residence), committee, or the entire community.

Bass' transformational leadership model, particularly Factors 1 and 2 more than adequately capture the style of leadership in this community. By contrast, Factors 3 and 4 suggest a subtle separation or division between follower and leader that does not satisfactorily capture the relationship between the community and their prioress or her council. For example in Factor 3, "Transformational leaders support follower developed solutions" implies that the prioress is distanced or standing away from the solution-development process, which may be true in some cases but a more accurate statement modeling this community's leadership would substitute the word "support" for

“participate in” the development of solutions. In Factor 4, Bass states, “Assignments are presented as learning/teaching opportunities.” And where this may also be true in some cases, the more accurate statement modeling this community’s leadership would read, “Assignments are discussed and decided upon collaboratively as learning/teaching opportunities.” Again, there is an implication that the leader is in an unequal relationship with the follower that may hold true in most leader-follower relationships, but does not hold true in the leadership model representing this community.

Both Factor 3 and 4 are partially or tangentially applicable aspects of a leadership model reflecting this community, but do not fully capture the essence of the relationship between the prioress and sisters. Obviously, the secular world of work would naturally differ from a religious community, especially a monastic one; however, this difference is a significant one to this investigation in that I posit the relationship between the prioress and sisters as the major aspect of how this community moved through the years of turbulent change.

#### *Authentic Leadership Theory*

Authentic Leadership Theory (hereafter: ALT), a continuation of the emerging relationship-based leadership theories, was introduced by Luthans & Avolio (2003). It is still in the formative phase of development and emerging as a new model (Northhouse, 2010) which presents challenges to those of us who are students of leadership theory. However, for purposes of this study ALT has resonance because of its focus and emphasis on vision, values and relationship between leaders and followers. These are the aspects of this community that are the focus of this investigation. And it is these aspects that are at the center of how this community was able to transform itself over a twenty-

three year period and remain intact and thriving.

Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) first documented pseudo versus authentic transformational leaders which began the use of the concept of authenticity in the leadership development literature. However, transformational leadership differs from authentic leadership theory in a number of ways. One of the most significant differences is that ALT is posited as a root or generic construct and the use of the term (root) makes the point that authentic leadership theory forms the basis of what is referred to as the “positive forms of leadership” (Avolio et al, 2005). Hence, the notion of transformational leadership, charismatic, or other forms of positive leadership are all contained in authentic leadership theory. This differentiation becomes important to this area of research as they begin to build construct validation (Ilies, Morgeson, Nahrgang, 2005).

The literature presents multiple definitions for Authentic Leadership Theory. There is no single accepted definition by the researchers; each write from a different viewpoint or perspective (Chan, 2005).

#### *Authentic Leadership Theory Perspectives*

ALT researchers have documented three perspectives from which ALT can be understood. The perspectives are intrapersonal, interpersonal and developmental. Each perspective carries its own set of definitions which are derived from the corresponding point of view. What follows is an explication of each viewpoint with the intention of clarifying ALT’s expansive, newly emerging body of theory.

#### *Intrapersonal Perspective*

The intrapersonal perspective focuses on the inner-life of the leader. This includes the leader’s self-knowledge, self-regulation and self-concept clarity. Shamir & Eilam

(2005) present the four necessary attributes that serve to define authentic leaders:

1. *The role of leader is central to one's self-concept.* The authentic leader always thinks of him/her self as a leader regardless of context. One does not have to be 'in role' to act as leader.
2. *The authentic leader possesses a clear self-concept.* Such a leader has strongly held values which are internalized and at the core of his/her being. It is this internalized core that energizes their leader role.
3. *The authentic leader possesses self-concordant goals.* Such leaders are energized by goals that represent their passions, values and core beliefs. This is in contrast to goals that are pursued out of a sense of responsibility to others or an institution etc. In other words, the authentic leader is motivated by internal commitment.
4. *The authentic leader's behavior is self-expressive.* Their behavior is motivated by their internalized values and identities (as leader) in contrast to behaving by calculation or some expected benefit.

Avolio et al (2004, p. 803) summarizes the intrapersonal perspective of authentic leadership in this way: "knowing who they [leaders] are, what they believe and value, and acting upon these values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others."

Within the context of this study, ALT's intrapersonal perspective serves to illuminate the fact that the prioress' (leader) values and vision, already well known and understood by the community (followers), serves to strengthen her position as leader of the community. As discussed in Chapter III, she is energized by the same values and concerns that dominate their collective lives. And although this is a religious community whose model cannot be exactly duplicated in the secular world of work, it should not

preclude us from learning and applying those aspects of communal life that serve to improve an organization and/or institution where it makes sense. In other words, leaders whose values and actions are known and accepted as authentically theirs, will be perceived by their followers as the legitimate leader.

Although Shamir and Elam focus on the intrapersonal experience of the authentic leader, they state that followers also play an important role. They add that followers need to have realistic expectations of their leaders.

### *Interpersonal Perspective*

The interpersonal perspective of ALT emphasizes the fact that authentic leadership is relational and arises out of interactions between leaders and followers (Eagly, 2005). Eagly takes the position that to focus on the intrapersonal is “curiously one sided.” Avolio et al (2004) define authentic leadership as the interaction between leaders whose values endorse the interests of the greater community (institution, nation etc.) and express these values to followers. While at the same time, followers personally identify with these values and accept them as suitable for the greater community (institution, nation etc.). Therefore, the interpersonal perspective emphasizes the interaction between leaders and followers and the persuasion and negotiation that may follow if the ‘authenticity’, or values, or vision of the leader come into conflict with followers. Eagly (2005) posits that ALT researchers too often assume that followers’ accept leader values. However in communities (institutions, nations) values are often contested. At this point, a leader has to engage in negotiation and persuasion.

The interpersonal perspective of authentic leadership theory resonates deeply with the leadership selection process and management of this community. After an extensive

communal needs-assessment is completed, they determine the traits or qualities necessary for the best next prioress. Because they are all in relationship, share values and vision, the authenticity of the next leader is virtually guaranteed. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 3, it is within the context of interpersonal relationships that most decisions are made and actions taken.

#### *Developmental Perspective*

ALT's development perspective takes the view that authentic leadership is a developmental process that can be nurtured over the life span of a leader. The developmental perspective contrasts with both trait and situational theory in that leaders are not born (*trait*) nor does the '*situation*' or context define leadership. This notion of development over time is discussed in more detail below.

#### *Components of Authentic Leadership Theory*

One definition of ALT "a process that draws from both positive psychological and a highly developed organizational context to foster greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, producing positive self-development in each" (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). It is "...through increased self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive role-modeling, authentic leaders foster the development of authenticity in followers" (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumba, 2005). In response to this dynamic, followers' contribute to the well-being of the leader and the development / performance of the organization. Shamir and Eilam (2005) underscore the concept of authentic followship which they posit as "followers who follow leaders for authentic reasons and have an authentic relationship with the leader." It is the dual concepts of leadership-followship within the context of authenticity which form the

basis of this emerging theory.

The concept of authenticity becomes central to understanding the authentic leadership construct. The definition of authenticity in authentic leadership theory is borrowed from Harter (2002, p. 382) and refers to “owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants” and “expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings.” Conversely, Henderson and Hoy (1983) defined a leader as being inauthentic when the leader is excessively compliant with external or superficial notions of the role of leader.

The findings in Chapter 3 of this investigation regarding the community’s leadership model include additional aspects of ALT beyond those previously discussed. For example, at the heart of authentic leadership theory is the positive psychological relationship between leader and followers. This relationship is mutually beneficial to both members of this dyad and also of equal importance is the notion of this relationship developing over time. In other words, the authentic leadership theory posits that relationship development is essential and therefore authenticity is a process that unfolds over time - versus an end or goal to achieve. Excerpt from Findings Chapter III:

*“We have been together so long, we consider ourselves family.” Sr. A.*

The relationships that authentic leaders have with followers are characterized by transparency, openness and trust and guidance toward worthy goals (Gardener et al, 2005). The transparency and openness is made clear by their practice of discussing issues – controversial or otherwise. Excerpted from Chapter III, regarding important/controversial issues:

*“We talk and talk and talk and talk (she laughs). We are really good at that.” Sr. M.*

*“Oh yes, we talk and, I don’t remember the issue, but we were in a big circle in this room (community room). And all the chairs and were placed in a circle. We had Sr. E. F. as the (outside) facilitator and we talked about the issues of that time - it’s fuzzy and I don’t want to say what it is if its not the exact thing. We actually talked and went through the process.*

*“You heard what she said, tell me what she said?” “Tell me what she said?” “Now, this is what you heard, is that what you meant?” And it was harsh at times, it was hard and we’ve been able to do that.” Sr. A.*

*“I think we spend time talking a lot about things and people have an opportunity to have their voice heard now if they take that opportunity or not is up to them. But I think that’s what Benedict talks a lot about, you know, you shouldn’t be grumbling.” Sr. D.*

This action of discussing openly difficult or challenging issues is inherent in the community’s culture. Authentic leadership calls for this degree of transparency in order to develop authentic leaders and followers.

With regard to ‘worthy goals’, all of the sisters share common values made evident in Chapter III. Each sister discussed their “calling” to religious life, devotion to community, commitment to prayer and service to others. These are their ‘worthy goals’ that tie them together in this well developed bond of authentic leadership-followship.

*Women, Leadership and Feminist Theory*



This community's corporate commitment in part states that they are, "...*working for sustainability and justice, especially for women...*" This is a community of women, working to improve the lives of women. They have founded, managed, and taught in many schools and universities and more recently have developed an extensive social service network that reaches far beyond the state in which they operate. They have proven their leadership capability beyond question. However, the disparity between men and women, in general, and in relationship to leadership specifically still remains an issue that is well documented in the academic literature. It would seem an unexplainable omission to not include this subject in this investigation.

The gap between men and women achieving leadership positions has improved in recent decades. However, there continues to be measureable differences between the two groups that are significant. For example, although women earn over 60% of all college degrees (undergraduate and master's levels) and almost one half of all professional degrees (U.S. Census, 2008), women continue to be underrepresented in the most senior level positions of U.S. corporations (e.g. CEO, COO) and government (e.g. House of Representatives, Senate at the state and federal levels). Women represent 3% of Fortune 500 CEOs, and occupy less than 16% of Fortune 500 board seats (Catalyst, 2009).

In our political institutions, women occupy less than 6% of the 535 possible seats in the U.S. Congress (approximately 17% of seats in the House and 17% in the Senate) (Center for American Woman and Politics, 2009). As of 2009, women's representation in national legislatures worldwide is less than 20%. The United States ranked 71<sup>st</sup> out of 188 countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2009). The leadership gender gap between men and women is also indicated in the highest levels of U.S. military where women

represent approximately 6% of officers at the brigadier general or rear admiral level or higher (U.S. Department of Defense, 2009).

The explanations for these well documented differences are beyond the scope of this investigation. In summary, the literature attributes some of the reasons for these differences as revolving around women's culturally imposed, disproportionate domestic responsibility (e.g. child rearing) (Eagly & Carli, 2007), the fact that women are more likely to quit work due to these responsibilities taking them out of the promotion track (Keith & McWilliams, 1999) and institutionalized biased judgments (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

The women who are the subject of this investigation do not share these challenges because of the uniqueness of their life style. They are women religious and by definition do not marry or have children. Their professional accomplishments, which are the focus of this investigation, are of their own creation and therefore institutionalized gender biases are not typically their experience. However, this does not mean that they do not interact with men. Nor does it mean that they do not depend upon men to participate in or be responsible for decisions that significantly impact their lives. In fact, they negotiate much of their business dealings with men and women who may be banking executives, public welfare officials, bishops (exclusively men) and heads of various educational and employment institutions. However, because they are exclusively a women's organization whose corporate commitment calls them to be of service to women, the subject of women in relationship to the subject of leadership cannot be ignored.

In their work on feminist collaboration Singley and Sweeney (1998) discuss collaboration as the process of working jointly with others to achieve common goals.

They add that “collaboration between individuals or organizations means working together effectively in an egalitarian manner...” (p. 65). Feminist collaboration is viewed as the cornerstone of the feminist process (Worell & Johnson, 1997). This collaboration process is marked by a continuous stream of communication between those involved. Everyone has the opportunity to be heard. All perspectives are respected. And although this may involve disagreements, they are discussed and resolved through compromise or consensus (Rice & Austria, 2008).

The concepts of collaboration, communication, compromise and consensus are in alignment with the processes employed by this community in the course of all of their decisions. This approach is continuously documented throughout Chapter III. Whether they are making deciding on issues related to property, finances, professional or communal life, the strategies of collaboration, communication, compromise and consensus are employed. These practices are carried over into all of the social service initiatives managed by the sisters. For this community, it is more a ‘way of life’ than a style. They would deem it necessary for the survival of their community and the organizations they are responsible to manage.

### *Summary*

This community of women religious moved through a turbulent period of time that by most accounts could have easily left this organization permanently fractured or divided. However, they managed to move through this turbulence and arrive at their current destination not only intact, but thriving. They are all actively engaged in the work of education, social and political change, peace initiatives, and creative arts. They are collectively energized about the lives they live and feel a deep sense of purpose in

their varied pursuits.

It is unknowable if this community would have arrived at their current destination without the external forces – seismic shifting – imposed upon them during these years. However, history did happen. They were forced to examine and change the only life they knew. They were forced out of the only home they knew. They were forced to create new sources of income and close their largest source of employment. They did respond and in doing so, became who they are today. It is also unknowable if they would have become who they are today with a differing model of leadership. However, they collaboratively process, discuss and debate all of the issues that revolve around their collective lives. Everyone's voice is heard. Everyone's opinion matters. Changes are made when the process is complete. Process trumps product.

It is my contention that the combined dynamics of the external environment (*Seismic Shifting*) interacting with the co-leadership model of this community (*Leading Together*) enabled them to become who they have become – a healthy, whole and thriving community.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

#### *Summary of Study & Conclusions*

When I started this study, my questions revolved around the transformation of this monastic community of women religious. I was interested in why and how they had transformed themselves from a semi-cloistered, exclusively teaching community to who they are today – still monastic but responsible for the development and on-going management of a broad array of unique and vibrant social service initiatives serving the poor in both the inner-city and rural areas of their state. The secondary question was always “do we social workers, in the secular work world, have anything to learn from this religious community?” The changes this community experienced not only involved their professional or ministerial lives’, they also became engaged in political action, the peace movement, international mission work, retreat facilitation, environmental efforts and the creative arts. This extraordinary transformation transpired over the course of a continuous twenty-three year period of their 150-year history.

The combined methods of ethnography (participant observation) and grounded theory were employed to conduct this study. This decision was based on the nature of the research questions, an extensive setting to make contact with, and over one hundred

potential interviewees, necessitating a significant amount of time to adequately cover. I also knew it would require a considerable amount of time to develop relationships with the sisters, move through their social services network, and make sense of this sub-culture. Over the course of almost four months, data was collected consisting of field notes, internal documents and in-depth taped interviews. All of the data became the basis of a theory through which an understanding of how and why the sisters had moved through the dramatic organizational changes and ‘arrived’ at their current ‘destination’.

Because of the formidable size of the research site – a dozen independent, not-for-profit agencies, political action groups, the expansive monastery and a handful of independent living situations – the challenge was to glean from all of the data what was of primary, secondary and tertiary significance. As I progressed through the data collection period, it became clear the sisters had a wide range of viewpoints and opinions about why and how change took place. These differing viewpoints made sense since their chronological ages and time in the community varied tremendously. Yet change emerged as a significant theme for this community. However, that said, other common themes also emerged and major categories were discovered. The categories were connected; relationships between them became apparent and a coherent theory of this community’s dramatic change process emerged.

All of the sisters talked about the meaning of prayer, community, and ministry in their lives. As I integrated myself into the community, it became clear that there was a high degree of integrity between their professed values and the lives they actually lived. In fact, prayer permeated their lives, community was a constant theme of conversation, and all of the sisters regardless of age, and unless they were too frail or ill, worked in a

ministry. These are their core values, and it is these values that bind them as a group. As one sister commented “*you can’t have one without the other,*” referring to – prayer, community and ministry.

The findings in this study began to emerge almost before the sorting, sifting and memoing methods of grounded theory were employed. The sisters all spoke about the tumultuous changes they experienced over time. Their moving narratives about the life they had originally entered and known for decades and its subsequent demise told the story of processing inevitable change and adjusting to new arrangements. Vatican II, the forced move from their home, the loss of their teaching ministry all contributed to who they are today. All of these events were deeply felt experiences, both individually and collectively. All of the sisters spoke about how these events changed the way they thought about themselves, their chosen path, and their future. It became clear that these external forces were significant to the sisters, and forever marked their lives. Some of these events continue to be discussed and debated today. For example, the effect of Vatican II on their prayer lives, personal dress and living arrangements are still discussed today, in some cases, as if it happened more recently than the 1965. After understanding the why of changing, the obvious question becomes how they survived the changes, remained intact, sustained themselves during this period, and became a thriving community.

During the early data-gathering period, the preliminary answers to these questions revolved around this community’s shared values and vision – consisting of prayer, community and service to others. The sisters not only spoke of these values, but also embodied them in their lived experience. Their schedules were organized around these

values and comparatively very little time was open for personal activity. It was Saturday and Sunday afternoons that most of the sisters visited friends and family. The significance of shared values and vision cannot be understated when addressing the research question of - how they stayed together. These shared values connect them as a group and nourish and support the life.

As the data gathering progressed further and the significance of external events began to answer, in part, how the dramatic changes that took place in this community it only answered part of the question of 'how? The shared values and vision, in and of themselves, are not enough to sustain an organization through tumultuous time. With further probing, it became evident the sisters credited their leaders with getting them through these years. As one sister stated, "we have always been blessed by good leadership." With further questioning about leadership and the election process, the unfolding of a co-leadership process began to emerge. This emergence was to become a significant finding in that it was the beginning of the second half of the answer to the research questions posed earlier. In other words, the external events prompted the sisters to take action, their shared values and vision supported and nourished them while their leadership guided them through the years and allowed them to remain intact.

Leadership, according to some researchers, is everything (Bass, 1985). If not everything, it was a significant factor in the successful metamorphosis of this community. A more accurate descriptor for their leadership, within the context of this study, I refer to as co-leadership. The sisters talked about their own leadership with tremendous respect and reverence. They relied on her (prioress) as their spiritual conscience, advisor, and public face. They trusted her and anticipated her talks. When she traveled, they looked



forward to her return to the monastery. Clearly, she is an important figure in their collective lives.

However, as their narratives continued to unfold, it became apparent that all of the sisters had a significant amount of ‘voice’ in the decision-making processes of the community. These processes included making decisions that affected all of the changes emanating from Vatican II, their forced move from their original monastery, and the loss of their primary ministry (teaching). All of the sisters talked about how decisions were and are made and issues resolved. It is an entirely collaborative process that engages the entire community. Everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard.

Besides the ongoing administration and oversight of the community, their unique election process also contributes to their collaborative leadership model. Every six years, the entire community comes together to have their elections. It is a lengthy process that is carried out over a series of many months. The object of the process is for the entire community to collaboratively establish a ‘state of the community’, identify their needs (temporal, financial, professional, spiritual etc.), from which they develop a plan for the next six years and determine the most suitable personality traits that could assist them in implementing such a plan. Upon completion, a roster of sisters – whose personality traits are deemed suitable – is developed and an election is launched. This process results in the election of the ‘best leader’ for the community at that moment in time. This newly elected leader continues the collaborative leadership process with the community, that is, in partnership with her council and the entire community, as they move forward on issues and decisions for the next six years.

The questions of how and why this community moved from their former selves to whom and where they are today are not simple questions. Their movement along this path was an unsteady twenty-three year journey of turbulent times and significant change - collectively and individually. Each sister has her own narrative describing her lived experience. It is from all of their points of view that this story of change, growth and movement is told. It is from their points of view that the work of this study emerges.

This is the study of a community of women religious who experienced external, powerful forces necessitating their collective response. In each instance, they did so with grace, creativity, and intelligence. They worked collaboratively and understood and respected process over product. They, in fact, '*Lead Together*'. In short, it is this interaction of external forces and collaborative leadership that answers the research questions posed by this study.

#### *Policy Implications of Study Results*

Organizational change is inevitable, especially in the area of human services (Van Slyke, D., 2007). This is due in large part to the continued evolution of managed care, fluctuations in public funding streams, and the 'marketization' of the human services environment (Harris & McDonald, 2000). And since most professional social workers are employed in human service agencies as both workers and managers (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006 ), it seems imperative for us to prepare social workers with the skills and knowledge necessary to enable them to move through change and remain viable as individuals and as agencies. And although this type of preparation seems evident, it is unfortunately not the case. As discussed earlier, our schools of social work have not developed an environment that is supportive of management and

leadership studies – the emphasis is on direct practice (Hoefler, 2009). In fact, only 3% of MSW students pursue management social work studies (Patti, 2000). Additionally, social work professionals have lost ground in the leadership of agencies in the central fields of mental health, housing and homelessness (Wuenschel, 2006). The senior level positions in human services organizations are predominantly given to individuals whose backgrounds are in business management and economics (Healy, 1998). The perception is that these are the individuals best suited to address the management of agencies.

### *Educational Policy*

Given the current state of the human services environment and the overwhelming number of professional social workers employed in these settings, it seems evident that social work education is positioned to be a significant participant in an effort to ameliorate these issues. Based on this fact, I propose the following changes to social work education policy:

1. Social work education is the where new students first learn the necessary skills required to gain employment in human services agencies. If social work education programs developed courses addressing the issues of management, employee development and leadership, it follows that social workers would be better prepared when they enter the field and at the same time possess a professional trajectory that includes a future for securing a position of influence.
2. Schools of social work also need to develop an environment that is supportive of management and leadership studies – versus the emphasis being on direct practice. Because social work educators play such a significant and influential role in their student’s lives, they need to impart the importance of leadership and

management studies on their student's futures and the future of the profession. In some situations, this may necessitate refreshing the macro-practice knowledge base of faculty especially in the area of the latest leadership development theories – i.e. transformational, leader-member exchange, authentic etc.

3. The issues of spirituality and religion have undergone pro and anti-phases within social work education for many years (Doe, 2004, Canada & Furman, 1999). The findings of this study indicate that the role of spirituality carries significant importance to those who are service providers themselves. Using Canada & Furman's (2010) definition that "spirituality refers to a universal quality of human beings and their cultures related to the quest for meaning, purpose, morality, transcendence, well-being, and profound relationships with ourselves, others, and ultimate reality" (p. 5), I propose including spiritual education into macro-practice social work education to prepare leaders with the skills necessary to incorporate a sense of spirituality in the workplace.

### *Public Policy*

Since 2001, an Executive Order issued by then-President George Bush establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The goal of the initiative was to assist the Federal Government in coordinating a national effort to expand opportunities for faith-based and other community organizations to strengthen their capacity to better meet social needs in the nation's communities (Office of White House Press Secretary, 2001). This one Executive Order, which suggests unprecedented and sweeping change to social welfare policy, continues to be part of the national debate. The question of 'faith-based' is at the heart of controversy.

When surveyed in 2001, three quarters of Americans support government funding of faith-based organizations (Bartowski & Regis, 2003). Cnaan (2002) outlines the role that religious congregations play in the American social safety net. He asserts that religion provides a set of values that motivate charitable acts, and the religious institutions are the social context for performing those acts. Alternatively, Wagner's (2000) contention is that the role of church has been more to substitute charitable sentiments and legitimize social structures than to overturn any of them. The church he contends "obscures the need for rational inquiry into the causes of society's problems and deeper efforts at changing social structures" (p. 8).

The attempt to define *faith-based social services*' is not a new notion that surfaced with the Bush Administration's *Faith-Based Initiative*. Others have tried. Over thirty years ago, Wilson (1974) defined faith-based social service agencies as "purposive organizations that draw staff, volunteers and board members from a certain religious group and are based on a particular religious ideology that is reflected in the agency's mission" (p.103). It has become increasingly more difficult to fit organizations into such a clear category as Wilson offers.

This study may clarify or cloud this issue which continues to present challenges to researchers. However, what is clear is that the community which is the focus of this study does operate from a faith-based position. And although they do not hide their faith, they do not offer their social services to clients in return for attendance at services, commitments to participate in any religious event, profess faith to anyone or anything. They offer their services as an expression of their own individual and collective belief

systems. In fact, if a client is of another faith or of someone without faith, it makes no difference to the sisters.

Based on these findings, I propose the following regarding public policy:

1. As long as there is no proselytizing involved, faith-based social service agencies should have access to public money in the same way that secular social service agencies do.
2. That as long as federal, state and local laws are being obeyed, full funding should be made available to these agencies in the same way secular agencies receive funding.
3. Because the need for social services is growing exponentially, public funding across the board should be increased, not only to faith-based agencies but to all agencies serving the poor, indigent and marginalized people of the world.

#### *Suggestions for Further Research*

The findings in this study indicate an important role for religious community and the provision of social services. Based on these findings, I think that continued research around the question of differences between faith-based initiatives should continue. However, there are the salient findings of this study that deserve more research because the potential of improving peoples' lives is great.

Good leaders of organizations care about and pay attention to the development and quality of work life of all employees. Good leadership seeks to build empowered employees who can think and act on their own. In the case of social service or human service agencies, not much attention is paid to empowered social work employees (Cohen & Austin, 2001). The notion of empowerment in social service agencies is usually

considered in connection with those they serve – individuals, families, and communities. And yet there is evidence that social workers do feel powerless in the organizational settings they work (Arches, 1991).

The findings in this study indicate when individuals (workers) can use their gifts and talents in ways that serve the mission and goals of the organization, creativity and productivity flourish. Based on these facts, additional research needs to investigate and understand how employers can, at least, minimally support workers talents, gifts and interests so that they can use these gifts with the context within which they work.

The findings of this study also indicate that human relationship between and among individuals in the workplace is another fundamental aspect of creativity and productivity. And although this study looked at a religious community who, in fact, live and work together, and this arrangement is an unlikely scenario in the secular work world, research around how to develop and support work place relationships may be a path to more creative and productive social work settings. Creative and productive social workers can only improve service delivery to our clients.

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