

Planning for the Future

Growing a Culture of Leadership Among Congregation Members

The Congregation of the Humility of Mary grows a 'culture of leadership' based on the LCWR 'Leading from Within' manual

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Tending the Garden was the working theme for the 2004-2008 term of the leaders of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary (CHM) from Davenport, Iowa. John Evelyn's words, "A Gard'ner's Work is never at an end: it begins with the Year, and continues to the next," proves an accurate description of our task of growing a "culture of leadership" among our members.

The topic of community leadership had been a part of our dialogue in 1980 and again in the 1990s after engaging in a long-range planning process. However it wasn't until 2004 that the soil of the garden and the environment seemed favorable enough to plant the seeds for enhancing leadership skills among our sisters and associates.

The president invited all sisters 65 years of age or younger to a conversation concerning future CHM leadership. This group of about 35 sisters, with a few 70 years of age also included, used the presentation of Sandra Schneiders, IHM, "Religious Life in the Future," as the springboard for discussion. Diane Schlachter, a CHM associate and organizational development management consultant who had worked with the congregation over the previous 25 years, was the facilitator. Their conversation resulted in the formation of a task force to meet with the administration and the consultant.

This dedicated group of 8-10 persons, calling themselves FLAP (Future

Leadership Action Planning), set about involving the total congregation in planning for the development of future leadership. They worked diligently over the next year, often struggling with diverse opinions about the future of the community. Some believed that, with the help of our associates and the laity, we would grow slowly and prosper. Others believed we should be preparing to die gracefully. After several trees were sacrificed in newsprint summaries, and having reaped the experience of a focus group of members who had previously served in leadership positions, we finally had the "seeds" of a plan for enhancement of leadership.

The Seeds Planted: Our Plan

At the June 2006 CHM general assembly, community members were invited to reflect on future leadership capacity using a survey created by our consultant based on the LCWR research report, *Dimensions of Leadership Capacities, Skills, and Competencies for Effective Leadership*, and on her previous CHM research work. In November members received the individual survey as a reflection

tool. Some members returned the completed survey indicating interest in "going beyond" self-assessment. The information was compiled and used for growing other components of the plan so that the focus was on the whole community.

By June 2007 the CHM Leadership Enhancement Plan was completed and communicated to those members who indicated interest. The elements of the plan included a "kickoff" conference, community development priority areas, opportunities for individual development, and the formation of *Leading From Within* discussion groups.

In August 2007 Mary Ann Zollmann, BVM presented the day-long "kickoff" conference entitled *Nurturing Our Leadership Potential – Step One*. Forty-one sisters and four associates participated. Enthusiasm was high and several persons, after learning what leadership enhancement opportunities were available, committed themselves to continue in the program.

There are five *Leading From Within* discussion groups, each comprised of

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five to seven persons. Groups meet in Davenport and Des Moines, Iowa. A "distance learning group" uses webcam to communicate from Mexico, Washington state, California, and Iowa. The groups were asked to hold seven meetings over a one-year period from April 2008 through April 2009. Some sisters who had volunteered to be mentors were contacted by the congregation president and invited to facilitate a group.

The next phase was to have a facilitators' preparation meeting in March 2008. Each sister who agreed to be a facilitator was given a *Leading From Within* manual in advance of the training session and asked to familiarize herself with the content. By the end of the day of training, conducted by our consultant and the administration, the facilitators felt confident and excited about getting the discussion groups underway. The facilitators were given the names of the participants in their group and a unit guide for each of the seven sessions. These guides were for use with LCWR's *Leading From Within* materials; they included selected units from each of the "Dimensions of Leadership" with reflection questions modified to better fit the CHM strategy of promoting a culture of leadership. A *Leading From Within* manual and *CHM Discussion Program* guide was given to each participant. The locations and times for the initial meetings were set. Logistics for future meetings would be decided by the members of each discussion group.

On April 25, 2008, the CHM *Leading From Within* Discussion Program was launched! The facilitators were asked to complete an evaluation after each session and send it to the consultant. This was to insure continuity due to a change in CHM leadership at this time. Besides communicating regularly with the president, the consultant was available to offer support to the facilitators.

In October 2008 the consultant met with each facilitator to assess the group's progress, to "touch base" with the process to date and to gather feedback. In general the facilitators report that there is an increase in trust, in sharing,

and even healing among participants. The participants seem to see leadership more holistically and some said they had already experienced an impact on their own development. All praised the quality of the reading materials.

Harvesting the Fruits: Hoped-for Outcomes

The abundance and variety of fruits of the program harvested by the individual and the congregation may not always be apparent but we hope to:

- increase knowledge of what a person needs to be an effective leader;
- stimulate thinking and reflection about one's gifts and potential strengths, gaps, and needs;
- see leadership as a vital ministry for the CHMs;
- experience a group that is

welcoming, affirming, and that is a safe place to explore, be vulnerable, and learn.

"Tending the Garden" takes much patience, tolerance, and commitment to produce informed, competent future leaders for the congregation. It has grown because of the determination of all — community, participants, administration, and consultant — to plant and tend the seeds necessary to produce the desired fruit. We gratefully acknowledge the outstanding work of LCWR on the pertinent issue of leadership in religious congregations. We find the *Leading From Within* manual an invaluable tool in our endeavor to "Tend the Garden" of CHM leadership.

Mary is president of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary in Davenport, Iowa. Roberta is the immediate past president.

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