

# DISCERNING CHOICES

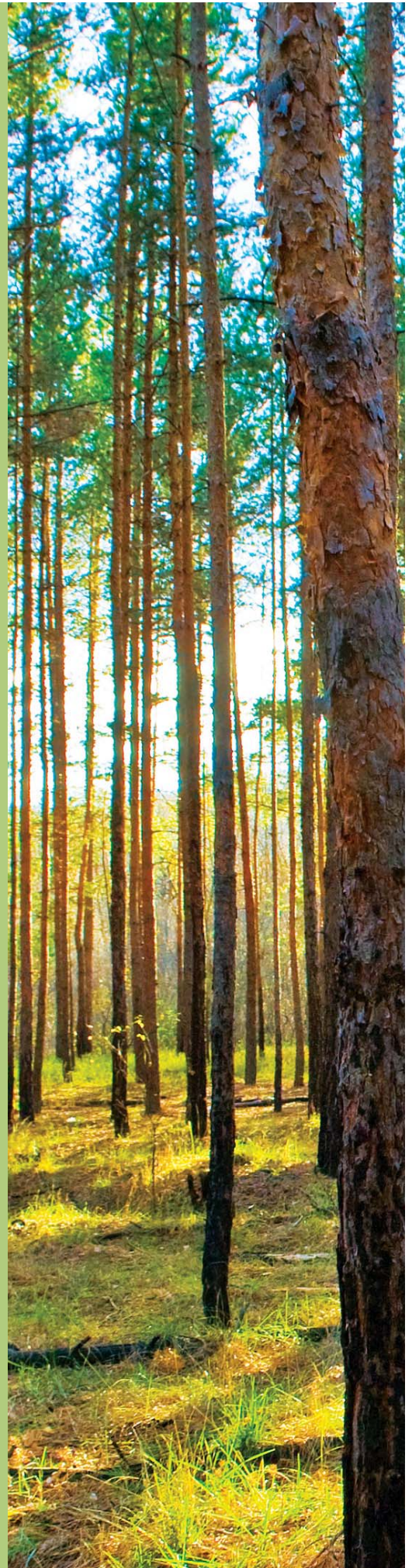
## for New Life A Survey of Options

Ted Dunn, Ph.D.

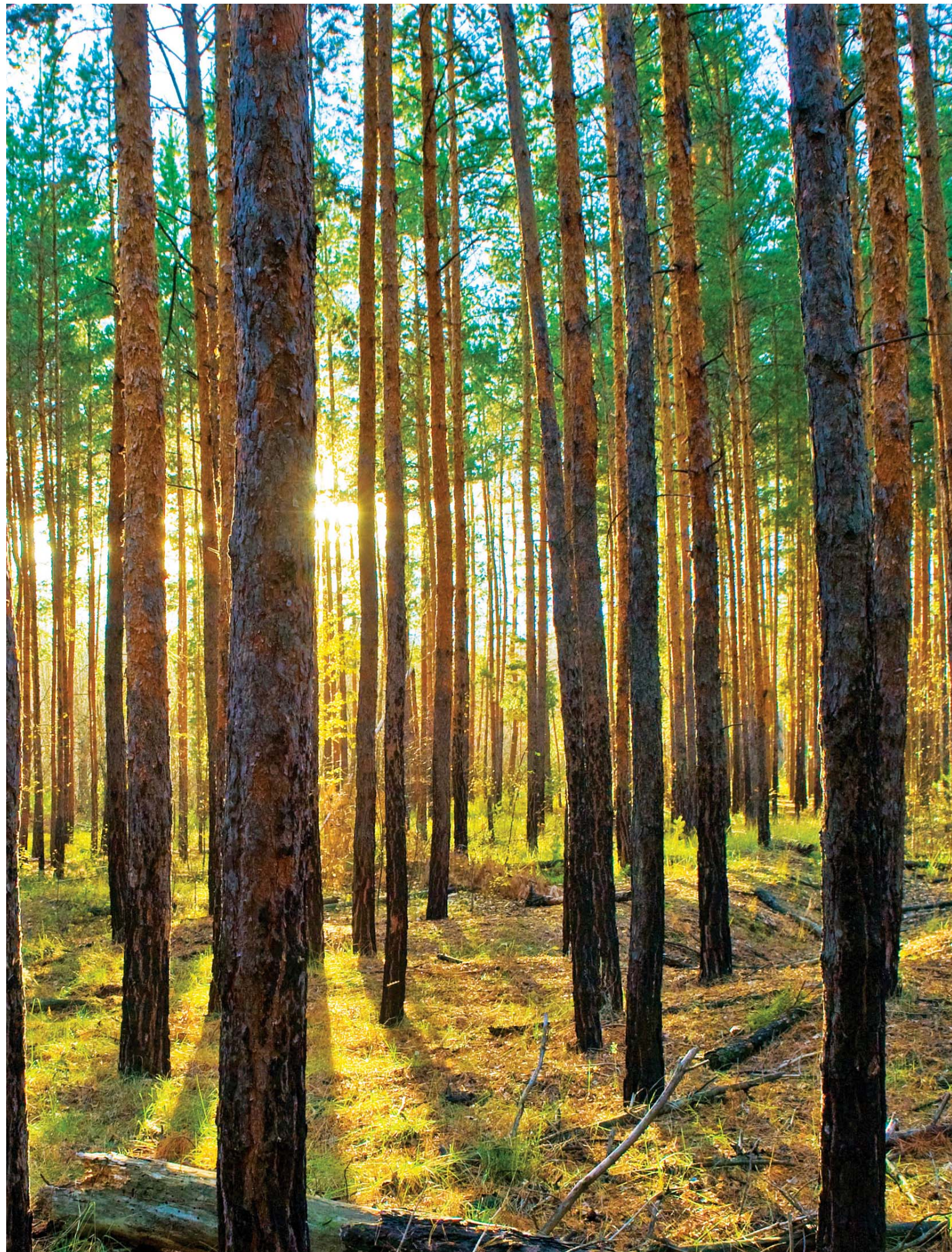
"I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life then, so that you and your descendants may live in the love of Yahweh your God."  
—Deuteronomy 30:19–20

Time marches on and religious life in North America continues to undergo profound changes as a result of familiar trends: An inexorable decline in numbers and advancing age of its members, internal shifts in the values that undergird religious life, and the recognition that certain aspects of religious life require adaptation to a rapidly changing world. These pressures take a cumulative toll, making it increasingly difficult for communities to go on as is. When going on as is becomes impossible, the critical question for communities becomes: Which option, of those available, will bring us to new life?

Most authors agree (Chittister 2006, O'Murchu 1998, Wittberg 1996, Couturier 2006) that religious life is in the midst of profound transition and only the most courageous and innovative communities will come through this period to birth a new cycle of religious life. Communities who wish to choose life are exploring their options. Some are choosing to *reconfigure* by joining with other communities of a similar charism through merger, union, federation or alliance. Others are choosing to restructure, changing models of leadership, downsizing and reorganizing their way of life. And still others are choosing refounding, taking that leap of faith into a journey toward transformative possibilities and new paradigms of religious life.









Communities under pressure to change are making the best choices they can with whatever information they have at their disposal. They try to imagine what certain options might do for them and reason through potential pros and cons. They might consult with other communities and find out what they have done when facing similar options. They might hire facilitators and consultants who have been down this road to assist them in creating processes for discerning their future. These are all proactive and worthwhile avenues of investigation.

What communities do not have, however, and what would service them greatly, is sound data upon which to base these critical, life-altering decisions. While there are articles and books that discuss the theory and practice of reconfiguring, restructuring and refounding, most are not written specifically for religious. Of the few that are written for religious, there is a dearth of empirical studies to substantiate these authors' claims. Leaders and members continue to engage in decision-making processes without the benefit of basic information about the options available to them. For example, based upon the experience of communities that have already explored these options:

- What were the desired outcomes and anticipated costs and how did these compare with the actual outcomes?
- What processes did they use when exploring, deciding upon, implementing and evaluating their options and how long did these take?
- What kinds of resistance did they typically encounter and what proved to be the best way of handling this?
- What learnings can be gleaned from those who have traveled these roads and what recommendations might they offer based upon their experiences?

This article provides the results of a national study I conducted from 2008 to 2010 in an effort to explore these kinds of questions and address this basic information gap.

## A SURVEY OF OPTIONS

### *Purpose*

The primary purpose of the 2008–2010 study was to provide religious communities with a sound basis of information from which to make critical decisions about their future. The results are summarized here in order to help communities make wise choices regarding their options of reconfiguration, restructuring and refounding based upon:

- Factual pros and cons, rather than imagined hopes and fears;
- Comprehensive empirical data, rather than limited anecdotal information; and
- A basic understanding of the processes related to these options.

### *Methodology*

In order to gather this information an online survey was developed and religious communities from across North America were invited to share their experiences of reconfiguring, restructuring and refounding. Information about the survey was distributed via an email announcement from LCWR to its member congregations. The men's equivalent, CMSM, was invited, but declined to announce the survey; hence, few men's communities responded. The survey consisted of 65 questions (multiple-choice and open ended) pertaining to motivations and expectations, processes and outcomes, as well as learnings and recommendations regarding the three options. Both leaders and members, who were either favorable toward or resistant to their options, were invited to complete the survey in order to obtain a robust appreciation of experiences.

### *Respondents*

One hundred and one people responded to the survey representing some 37 different communities. Nearly all were women's communities (6 were men's communities) from the United States (2 from Canada and 3 from England). While communities varied widely in size (from more than 4,000 to under 50) most communities represented had between 200 and 400 members (enlarged perhaps by reconfigurations). The average age of

membership across all communities was 71.

About half of the survey respondents were leaders and half were members. Despite casting a wide net, however, the vast majority of respondents were favorable toward the desired direction of the community (only 12% were resistant). Most were also on committees implementing the various processes. Because of the respondents' initially favorable attitudes and extensive involvement in the processes, a positive bias in responses would be expected. Further research would be needed in order to take these biases and limitations into account.

In order to examine more closely the processes communities used, questions about process were divided into four phases: (1) Exploration; (2) Decision-Making; (3) Implementation; and (4) Evaluation. At the time of the survey, communities had completed different phases of the process. Ninety-eight percent had completed the initial exploration phase, 80% completed the decision-making phase, 58% completed the implementation phase and 40% had completed the evaluation phase.

### *Definitions*

The following operational definitions were provided to survey respondents:

**Reconfiguration** joins two or more congregations, typically of a similar charism or founder, in a more comprehensive manner (i.e., forming a new structure). Reconfiguration could involve *merger, union, federation or alliance*.

**Restructuring** is an effort made by a community to modify its existing organizational structures in order to better address current realities and their desired way of organizing community. Restructuring efforts might result in downsizing or simplifying existing governance models or creating new governance models (e.g., from hierarchical to circular models of governance).

**Refounding** is an effort to shift the very paradigm of religious life. It is a decision that springs from the belief that such a radical shift in operating values, prevailing attitudes and normative interpersonal behaviors must take place in order for a community to birth new life into the

future. This could involve processes such as: reconciliation and conversion; transformative visioning; creating a new consciousness, re-authentication of a community's inner voice; learning new ways to live community and carrying out its mission (Dunn 2009).

Definitions were more thoroughly described in the survey itself. The complete survey and information is available at [www.cccsstlouis.com](http://www.cccsstlouis.com).

## OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND CHOSEN

Of the three options, 54% of the communities that responded initially considered reconfiguring, 43% restructuring and 34% considered refounding. Of those who had reached a decision 33% chose reconfiguring, 31% chose restructuring and 31% chose refounding as the direction to take.

From the data collected it could not be determined why communities chose one particular option over another. The reasons a community gave for choosing a particular option (e.g., refounding over restructuring) were often the very same reasons given by another community for choosing a different option (e.g., restructuring over reconfiguring). Hence, the reasons behind these choices appear common to all, rather than option-specific.

### Success Rates

Respondents were asked to rate the degree of success in both their community's decision-making and implementation efforts along a five-point scale across different dimensions of success. The overall success rate for both reaching a decision and implementing these decisions was quite high. Nearly 90% reported either a high or moderate degree of success across the various dimensions for both of these phases.

Success in the decision-making phase was defined along six dimensions: (1) Members were fully informed; (2) at peace; (3) experienced ownership and involvement; (4) reached a consensus; (5) had a collaborative and cooperative spirit; and (6) made a wise choice. Across all six dimensions nearly half of the respondents indicated a high degree of success and another third

indicated moderate success. The most challenging aspects appeared to be in reaching a decision peacefully as only 23% reported a high degree of success on this dimension.

Success in the implementation phase was defined as: (1) Members were fully informed; (2) worked through conflicts, differences and points of confusion; (3) experienced ownership and involvement; (4) had a collaborative and cooperative spirit; and (5) met their goals and objectives in a timely manner and with a high degree of quality. Results indicated that across all five dimensions, just under 50% of the respondents indicated a moderate degree of success while another 40% indicated high success. The most challenging aspects appeared to be the ability to work through conflicts, differences and points of confusion as only 32% reported a high degree of success.

### Process Durations

It took nearly a decade on average for communities to complete their entire journey. It took an average of 3 to 4 years to complete the exploration phase, 2 years for the decision-making phase, 3 years for the implementation phase and another year for the evaluation phase. This decade of work does not take into account all of the preliminary conversations that leadership or committees may have had prior to starting serious community-wide explorations. Nor does it account for the ongoing cycle of implementation-evaluation-modification that inevitably follows any initial evaluation.

### Motivations

What brings communities to the crossroads of these life and death choices? According to the respondents the reasons given for all three options were similar. When asked to indicate the initial impetus for exploring the possibilities of reconfiguration, restructuring or refounding the following results were obtained:

1. 63% indicated a limited number of members were available for leadership and other internal ministries;
2. 46% referenced their diminishing numbers and

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advancing age adversely affecting their ability to care for members and carry on their mission;

3. 36% referenced a difficulty in financially caring for members and carrying out their mission;
4. 29% had an invitation by another community to reconfigure;
5. 19% said their existing model of governance no longer fit their realities or contemporary understandings of their vows and values.

There was no single event that triggered the exploration of a particular option. Rather, the initial reasons seemed to be many and varied across communities. Most respondents named the tipping point in terms of a crisis of leadership, vocations or finances or some combination of these. The bottom line, as one person said, “We could no longer meet the needs of God’s people.”

In addition, the reasons seemed to evolve over the course of time. It appears that what initially pushes communities toward new options is a response to changing realities of one kind or another (e.g., financial struggle, shrinking pool of leadership, advancing age, declining numbers). What seems to sustain motivation over time, however, is an internal desire to proactively choose life for the sake of mission and community

(especially for younger members). Communities want to be proactive in shaping their future. They want to enkindle a new spirit in their charism and mission. They are seeking a conversion of their collective soul (i.e., *metanoia*).

#### EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

##### *What Are Communities Seeking?*

What are the desired outcomes of communities engaging such change efforts? What specifically do they hope will happen as a result of pursuing any of these options? The common themes for all three options were choosing life, strengthening mission and renewing relationships.

Overall, communities are trying to somehow renew and revitalize the life they are living. As one person said, “We didn’t look at what we would gain, we simply wanted new energy and hope.” Another said, “We wanted each member to take ownership and work together, more effectively in service of church and mission. We hoped to achieve a fidelity to God in service of the people to whom we minister; to come to a better understanding of what our future could hold for us; to open our minds and hearts to explore options we had not explored.”

Others focused specifically on mission and spoke of it this way, “We hoped to strengthen our mission and preserve our charism for future generations.” Unique to reconfiguration was a





desire to gain strength in numbers, “We’d be better together than apart.” They wished to become one voice believing, “We would have greater advocacy and political power if we came together as one congregation.” Another said, “We wanted to combine resources to make a difference in our world today.” One person lamented, however, saying, “We said it was for the sake of mission, though no one could articulate what that meant.”

Among those emphasizing relationships there was a strong desire to build trust and to become more open and honest with each other. Some wanted to “deepen our values and vows,” viewing these as the foundation of their relationships. Many hoped to “free up leaders to participate in ministry,” and “reduce the number in leadership.” Others wished to relate in a less hierarchical manner and become more interdependent.

#### *Greatest Benefits*

What specific benefits resulted from all of their efforts and did this match their original expectations? In many respects communities did achieve what they had hoped to achieve regarding the themes of new energy for mission and community, and a renewed sense of hope for the future. Clearly communities were strengthened by the options they pursued. The most important benefits clustered around the following seven areas:

**Hope for the future:** The promise of new life was claimed with a “new spirit, energy and hope for the future.” There was a renewed appreciation of the abundant blessings of life and determination to go forward.

**New perspectives:** There was recognition of new horizons and broader perspectives on mission. “It broadened our thinking, gave us a new understanding and a more global vision.” “We now have seeds of new life for a new vision.” “It made us rethink the reason we entered religious life.”

**New sense of home:** Communities have found new friends and claimed a new sense of home. They have deepened their appreciation, respect, trust and understanding of one another. There is a greater degree of closeness, inclusiveness and belonging. “We are rediscovering and growing to care for one another again.”

**Stronger partnership:** Members have gained a sense of “being-in-it-together.” There is greater interdependence, partnership and a growing sense of solidarity and unity amidst diversity. There is a greater sense of shared mission (“I am an integral part of the whole”) and stronger common heart. “Those who were on the fringe are now more engaged and volunteer for committees and leadership.”

**Greater ownership:** “This is now our community.” There is more ownership because of more voices and participation in the process. As result, there is more passion, energy and pride. Stronger identity: There is a clearer

sense of “identity and who we are as a community.” In addition, there is a clearer sense of charism and mission.

**Deepening faith:** “We have been faithful to the journey and become more spiritually acquainted.” “We can truly say we lived the Paschal Mystery of dying and rising and this has made us strong in facing the continued transition of religious life. God is leading us to new life.”

#### *Greatest Costs*

What did it cost communities for the benefits they received? By far the most common tangible costs were time, money and energy, especially for travel and meetings. Added to these costs, however, were the costs of accountants, lawyers, facilitators and consultants of all kinds. And many struggled with this cost because these “resources could have been spent on mission.”

The less tangible costs, however, proved just as burdensome. There was the emotional toll of generalized fear and anxiety because of “not knowing where all this is leading us” and “risking with no guarantees.” There was the pain of divisions, conflict and disengagement by “those who wanted to take different directions.” For some there was a strong fear of splitting and camps were formed between “us and them.” There was pain in “facing the reality of who we are and our own limitations.”

For most there was grieving of one kind or another. There was letting go of the “way things have always been”

and the “way we’ve always done things.” For nearly all there was some kind of death and dying. As one conveyed it, “Our grieving is about facing the reality of who we are and that change is essential if the community is to live on.” For those reconfiguring there was a loss of intimacy that had come with their smallness.

Another cost often mentioned was the unearthing of old wounds and the struggle toward reconciliation. For example, “Anyone who has emotional baggage from the past did not handle the process well, especially those who had questions about religious vocation. It seemed to bring up all their personal insecurities.”

#### *Was It Worth It?*

Were the benefits worth the costs? While there is no simple way to answer this question, as a general gauge respondents were asked to rate the degree to which their community’s desired expectations and fears were realized along with their overall levels of satisfaction.

#### *To what degree were these expectations realized?*

Across all respondents, 19% said their community’s expectations were completely realized, 49% said these were fairly well realized, 20% said somewhat

and 12% said little or not at all. When asked if their initial fears actually came true, for the most part the answer was very little or not at all: The majority (60%) said not much or somewhat, 20% said not at all and only 12% said that yes they did. Regarding the level of overall satisfaction by the members with results of all their efforts: 9% reported very high levels of satisfaction, 46% high, 45% neutral or less.

#### LEARNINGS ABOUT PROCESS

##### *What Part of the Process Was Most Helpful?*

Although different processes were used in pursuing differing options, an attempt was made to glean what helped in their approach to process. The most common learnings centered around the themes of: involvement, information, communication, prayer, process design and the use of outside assistance.

**Relationships:** *Relate, involve, engage* were the key words. This translates into gatherings of all kinds: Local community meetings, congregational meetings as well as inter-congregational meetings. The involvement of grass-roots membership and leadership at all levels was repeatedly stated as important. Cross-pollination of groupings and personal engagement were critically important. Some referenced pen pals and prayer partners as a way to

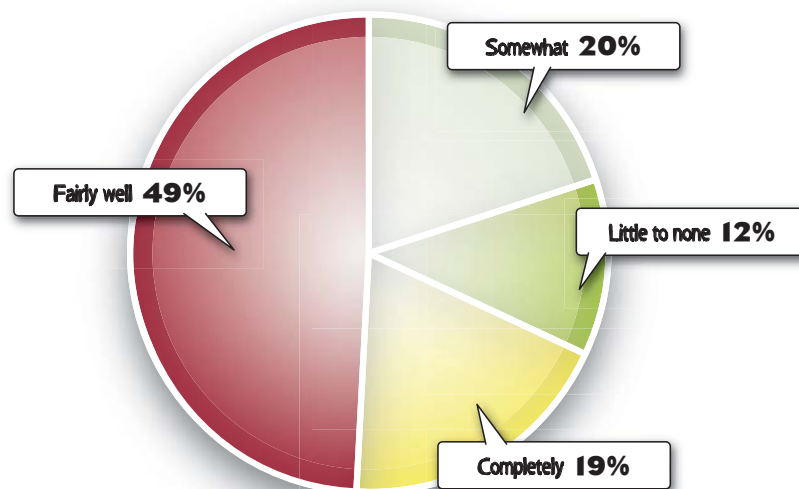
engage, but nothing seemed to replace face-to-face conversations. Total inclusivity and involvement were the ingredients that led to ownership and passion for the process.

**Communication:** “Communicate, communicate, communicate!” Clear and constant communication was emphasized. The use of newsletters, websites, letters, and emails from committees, leadership and members in order to keep everyone in the loop was essential. The use of articles, DVDs, CDs and booklets were all helpful tools. Providing clear and timely information was stressed.

**Education and Information:** Education was also key. “Look at all of the options and understand what these might mean.” Knowing the pros and cons, basic facts and terminology (e.g., merger, refounding, circular models) about the options was important. Helping members understand the process and the steps that were involved was important. There was an emphasis also on total transparency, “putting all of the cards on the table,” regarding finances, formation, health, ministry, retirement and demographics.

**Prayer and Discernment:** Respondents were asked specifically about the degree to which they used communal discernment to assist their community in reaching a decision. Each and every respondent reported

## Realized Expectations



that communal discernment was used. Sixty-three percent used it extensively and 32% reported having used it moderately. Prayer, ritual and contemplative dialogue were valuable components throughout the process, especially for decision-making.

**Process:** The design and implementation of process was also seen as significant. Consistency and continuity of the process were important along with using new approaches (e.g., U-theory). Reflection booklets and keeping journals were noted as helpful. The development of possible future scenarios was useful. “Introversion time” so that members could assimilate information was just as important as active listening and conversation. The use of straw votes and consensus testing was noted as helpful in moving toward decisions.

**Outside Assistance:** The use of canon lawyers to educate members on the options and legal parameters was important. Nearly all communities relied upon outside facilitation to assist in designing and implementing the process. This was particularly helpful in ensuring that conversations at assemblies did not break down when tensions emerged. Training the community in skills of dialogue was also seen as important.

#### *What Part of the Process Was the Greatest Challenge?*

Respondents were asked what they found as challenging or problematic in the processes they used. There were many reported challenges and most fell within the following five categories.

**Facing the Fear:** As one put it, “fear was a constant companion.” Numerous fears were mentioned. Topping the list, however, was a general fear of the unknown. There were also fears of failure or of making a wrong choice resulting in bad outcomes. There were fears of the community splitting or becoming separated as a result of the process. There was also considerable fear regarding the financial impact of their efforts. A fear expressed widely among those pursuing reconfiguration was loss of identity. For the elders facing reconfiguration, there were specific fears about where they would retire or be buried.

**Mistrust:** Related to the fear perhaps were concerns regarding trust. Mistrust emerged between leaders and members of the same congregation as well as between different congregations or provinces involved in reconfiguring. Concerns were expressed here about withholding or distorting information. Some reported that members repeatedly stated that it was a “done deal” and that leadership had already made up their minds, despite efforts to prove otherwise. They didn’t trust that their voice mattered or would influence leadership.

**Differential Commitment, Involvement and Pace:** Another common struggle was getting everyone on board, involved and committed at the same time. For example, “Difficulties surfaced when all provincial leaders did not have the same level of commitment to reconfiguration as the process continued.” For some the process was too slow and dragged on, while for others it was too fast and there was not enough time to assimilate material. What made this even more frustrating was that some members chose to opt out of the process while at the same time complaining about being left behind or not kept abreast.

**Limits of Time and Space:** Time limits placed upon members because of calendared processes (or particular needs of another congregation in the case of reconfiguring) were a struggle for many. Yet, carving out the time to meet, travel and keep up with material was a tremendous challenge regardless of deadlines and limits. For those communities involved in reconfiguring, the geographical dispersion added to the complexity of coordinating communications, meetings and moving along together in the process.

#### *What Was the Nature of the Resistance?*

In order to hone in specifically on how groups addressed some of these challenges, the survey asked specifically about resistance (i.e., dynamics opposing the process). So, what was the primary nature of the resistance they faced? The resistance emerged along a continuum from denial, to refusal to change, to outright subversive opposition.

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*The most common approach for handling resistance was constant communication and total engagement.*

**Denial and Foot-dragging:** A number of behaviors were reported that evidenced a softer kind of resistance. Some believed that whatever changes took place would not touch their daily life (e.g., “We’ll still have ice-cream on Wednesdays”). Some observed foot-dragging on the part those who did not want to deal with potential changes (e.g., “It looked like someone attempting to assist an elderly person across the street who didn’t really want to go”). Some wanted to “keep all options open” and “leave it to God” to the point of avoiding any personal responsibility for making the decision.

**Refusing to Change:** A more direct expression of resistance was evidenced by those who refused to let go, change or participate in the process. They refused to come to meetings, listen, engage in conversations or view things from another’s perspective. In a nutshell, “They simply refused to budge.”

**Subversive Opposition:** Those labeled as the strong opposition or power people were often the ones who missed important meetings. Yet, when present, these same people protested loudly against the efforts. They seemed to “sow seeds of discontentment” and induce side-taking, divided loyalties and we/they camps. One leader said, “Many times the resistance was subversive and secretive. They published distorted facts and dire consequences. Pressure was put on the most vulnerable among us (e.g., elders and those for whom English is a second language).”

*How Was the Resistance Addressed?*

Given these various expressions of resistance, how did communities attempt to handle it and how did this work out?

**Talking It Through:** The most common approach for handling resistance was constant communication and total engagement. People needed a place to have open and honest discussions and express their feelings. Conversations and feedback were frequent and ongoing occurrences. Beyond the assemblies, committee members and leadership often met personally with those expressing resistance.

One respondent summed up these efforts by saying, “being transparent as possible and not shying away from the questions.”

**Time for Prayer and Going Inward:** The use of prayer and ritual throughout the gatherings was cited as a key way of working through resistance. People needed time to go inward and assimilate. They needed to be brought “back to God” in both personal and communal discernment. They were constantly reminded of the need for patience, that the process was a journey of faith and that they were discerning a response to God’s call.

**Offering Abundant Information:** Appealing to reason was also important. As such, an abundance of information and frequent clarifications to questions was offered along the way. The use of DVDs, booklets, letters addressing frequently asked questions, outside speakers and the like were noted. One group used specific committees formed for the expressed purpose of exploring differing aspects of potential resistance. For example, a committee was formed specifically to look at loss, another to explore transformation.

**Outside Assistance:** In order to foster safety, encourage honesty and skillfully work through challenging conversations many respondents cited the need for outside facilitation. “We had a facilitator who helped us address the issue and speak to one another with respect and understanding.” One respondent said, “The facilitator helped us see resistance as a piece of information. Because of the questions raised by the community, the committee began to explore other options that the community could consider.”

*Success in Working Through*

Respondents were asked to rate the overall level of success in working through resistance. A successful approach was defined as one that incorporated the wisdom of those who were resistant while successfully maintaining a collaborative, cooperative partnership among all members.

The data here is somewhat mixed. Most (70%) reported a high or moderate degree of success in working through resistance, while 25% reported

only partial success. Only 5% reported that their efforts to work through resistance actually made things worse. There were a number of comments indicating that resistance was not addressed (e.g., “I’m not sure we really worked through resistance”). An encouraging trend was that resistance was strongest in the beginning phases and climaxed leading up to a decision. Once a decision was made and implementation began, much of the resistance abated.

**Myths and Misunderstandings:** Respondents were asked to identify the most important myths or misunderstandings about the options, processes and outcomes. Myths common to all three options were that these would somehow solve the very problems that brought them to explore new options in the first place. These problems were, in fact, not solved:

**Aging and Diminishment:** “What I have learned is that it doesn’t solve the problem of an aging community. We are still dying, but we have a lot more energy and vitality in our last years.”

**Shrinking Pool of Leadership:** “In the new congregation, the pool of leadership, in terms of ‘ratio,’ was smaller than our small pool.”

**Ministry Options:** “Members are not as willing as we imagined to move ministries across the provinces. It did not free up personnel to earn a salary in other ministries.”

By far the most common myth related to smaller communities engaged

in reconfiguring was that it would result in their being swallowed up, losing their identity or culture. Many were afraid of losing their voice and personal freedoms (e.g., lifestyle, residence, ministry choices). Apparently, for the most part, these fears did not become a reality.

Another myth or misunderstanding was that there is a definite endpoint wherein efforts to pursue these options would come to completion. “The myth was that once the leadership took over, the merger took place. We are still merging and learning how to do this respectful of our goals, similarities and differences.” “The myth was that we could refound and it would all be over. And once we did that, then all our problems would be solved.” Regarding a restructuring effort, it was said, “We are still living into these changes.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Respondents were asked to offer recommendations based upon their experiences of reconfiguring, restructuring and refounding. The following are the top ten recommendations that emerged.

**1. Involve everyone:** There is no way around it. Ownership and passion come from involvement. “The involvement of as many members as possible in committees, in consultations and in gathering were all important.” Leaders and members must fully commit to the work at “every phase of the process, no matter the cost.”

**2. Be utterly honest, fully informed and explore all options:** Keep people repeatedly informed and communicate the same information at the same time. Challenge distortions, put all cards on the table and be utterly transparent. Understand the process, your options and hoped-for outcomes. Ask and address the hard questions, examine the pros and cons and “don’t be afraid to go over and over the same material until the majority are on board.”

**3. Do the soul work:** Appreciate these efforts as a communal faith journey and do the personal and collective soul work required in such a journey. Do this substantively, concretely and relationally and not by over-spiritualizing or avoiding the depth and honesty required. Encourage this through communal discernment, contemplative dialogue and theological reflection while being vulnerable, real and honest at the same time.

**4. Do the relationship work:** Connected to this soul work is the work of strengthening relationships: Reconciling what is broken, grieving the losses, celebrating the gifts, embracing the diversity in both its tension and richness, understanding what is not yet understood, and letting come what is yet to be born. Members must get to know each other anew and learn to share power with mutuality and respect. As one put it, “Handle the human issues first and the canonical and legal issues will fall in place.”





**5. Keep your eye on the prize:** Look at the big picture: God, mission and a journey of faith for the community as a whole. "Be faithful to the process you put in place and keep a broad perspective." "Trust that the Holy Spirit is working and know that some will never get on board." "Love them as God loves you in your grieving and letting go."

**6. Be patient with God's time:** Any path of deep change is hard work and is only done in God's time. Such *kairos* time cannot be rushed. Be patient with the process and challenge the need for closure. It takes time to absorb and work through emotions, work through resistance. Everyone enters at a different pace. "There is not an endpoint at which time the process is complete. It is ongoing, unfolding and future question will arise that require more decisions." "If we stop and think we have accomplished it all, we are fooling ourselves."

**7. Respect differences and work through conflicts:** Stay in the struggle to engage your differences or conflicts. This is the work of change. "Don't discard anyone or anything." "Listen to the opposition without judgment" "Create an atmosphere of experimentation. There is no failure, just more information that gives further direction." "Listen to and respect differences and divergence."

**8. Seek assistance:** Use outside facilitators experienced in these issues. "The facilitator is key. You need folks who are bright, agile and know how to design a process." Seek assistance from spiritual leaders, canon lawyers and consultants. "Bring in the smartest, best people you can." Get help with learning about resistance, the gifts it can offer and how to work through it.

**9. Willingly pay the price:** To succeed in these endeavors there must be an all out commitment by leaders and members alike. This requires a willingness to spend the necessary time, money and energy. Do not do the minimum or you will pay even more down the road. The price also includes a willingness to struggle with the accompanying fears, conflicts and anxiety. These are inevitable costs of any successful endeavor to attain deep, lasting and systemic change.

**10. Seek transformation:** No matter what option is chosen, transformative change must be more than ornamental or structural. Deep change involves transformation, conversion and a radical departure from what has been. In order for reconfiguration, restructuring or refounding to result in meaningful, lasting and systemic change, commit to the work of transformation at all levels: personally, in local communities and as an entire congregation or province.

## CONCLUSION

Reconfiguration, restructuring and refounding are all viable options for communities discerning God's call to choose life. It is essential to understand, however, that success in choosing any one of these options is dependent upon the work that is also done with the other two. For example, reconfiguring must also include restructuring as well as the deeper work of refounding; otherwise, the transformation needed to birth new life will not occur. All three, in other words, are interconnected and to focus upon one to the exclusion of the others would be a grave mistake.

Hopefully, the lessons from those who have gone before will assist those who have yet to begin such journeys. As one who has gone before summed it up: "It seems that in the end what is important is that members have grown in self-awareness, choosing to be part of a group for the sake of building the reign of God. It is the individual and group transformation which results from entering the Paschal Mystery that is the real achievement."

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish thank all who responded to the survey for your willingness to reflect upon your experiences and share these with others. I wish to thank the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament of Victoria, Texas, who helped initiate this survey. I also wish to thank LCWR for helping this study become a nationwide effort. It is my hope and prayer that the results of this study will assist communities facing the profound opportunities to shape the future of religious life.

## RECOMMENDED READING

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Ted Dunn, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, works internationally with religious communities and other organizations providing education, training and facilitation. He can be reached at [www.ccsstlouis.com](http://www.ccsstlouis.com).