



## Leadership in Religious Life as it evolves

*Lidasip long Riligius Laip olsem  
em I kamap*

Sr Patty Fawkner SGS

## Reflection Six



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#### Question 1

You are part of many conversations with other religious leaders Patty – what are you grateful for, or what excites you or gives you hope as you reflect on those conversations?

**W**ell, first up, I come away from such conversations knowing that religious life is alive and well!

There's an ever-increasing solidarity among religious leaders. We work well together, and we like each other! There's no sense of tribalism or competition. The Sisters of Mercy, are incredibly generous in sharing resources, personnel and services in support of other congregations.

I'm grateful for the support of women religious leaders. We do have a shared experience of sexism and, at times, misogyny in our Church: our exclusion in decision-making, our invisibility sacramentally, liturgically, in the language. We get it that we're often guests in our own ecclesial house.

I also appreciate the support I feel from male religious leaders who want a more inclusive role for women in the Church.

I'm excited when I see how congregations are expanding their tent to engage more vibrantly with their mission partners. I see congregations

meeting the hunger for spirituality that lay colleagues feel, how lay people want to be on mission in partnership. So many of your ministry companions are nourished by their connection with you and your works, a nourishment they often don't find in the local parish. And it's never one way traffic. We're mutually nourished.

How leaders are engaging with professional standards gives me hope. I continue to be encouraged by the commitment to victims and survivors of sexual abuse. Some congregations, yours and mine included, have huge legal and financial challenges, but I don't hear people complaining – acknowledging it, yes, challenged by it certainly, and I witness a first class professional response. But I'm constantly edified that compassionate concern for victim/survivors is the first priority.

Our congregations are diminishing in various ways, yet I see congregations responding very creatively, and so often acting out of a stance of plenty rather than scarcity.





## Question 2

From your experience, what are some of the dilemmas designated religious leaders face in balancing the 'within the congregation' operational challenges with the more outward-focused mission direction issues?

One of the members of my leadership team talks about the challenge of "leading into smallness". I like this. Most of our congregations are getting older and fewer in number. We want to keep the whole ship afloat, but I find myself asking the same few Sisters to do most of the work.

To continue to be on mission, we need to widen our focus, our heart, and include our lay colleagues more and more in what it means to be Mercy or Good Samaritan, and to see this not as a default position but as gift and opportunity, despite the financial implications that brings. Vowed leaders need to constantly delegate to and trust their lay colleagues, while still keeping the oversight but not the hands-on managerial tasks. I truly believe we have to partner or perish!

I think CRA's initiative to establish the Emerging Futures Governance Collaborative is visionary. At the same time I think your congregation and mine still has governance and service provision capacity. But I think there's a real challenge for us in how we "do" leadership and, given our demographics, we need to do it differently. And Rome might just have to catch up with any creative solutions we come up with.

I've got more questions than answers. How do we engage younger members who may live beyond Australia, in current and future leadership? How do we do that without overwhelming anyone in the process? I don't think the answer is to simply elect them onto a leadership team. We've just got to do leadership differently and I'm sure new models will emerge.

As a Sister of Mercy, you might retire from a ministry but you never retire from mission. The Mercy charism can be lived out in any circumstance. Pope Francis says, "You are a mission". You can be a mission of merciful love even if you're a bed-ridden 95 years old.

I think while expanding our tent, in all humility we also have to lower our expectations of what we can do. We are not the saviours – never have been. Our legacy shouldn't be a nostalgic, "Weren't the Sisters of Mercy wonderful, and isn't it a shame they're not here?" Any legacy we leave mustn't be self-referential, but always for ongoing mission.



### Question 3

As religious life continues to unfold, what 'signs of the times' are particularly relevant for congregations of religious women today?

**L**umen Gentium named the criteria for what signs of the times are relevant for us. Remember those beautiful words "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor". They're our joys and anxieties.

**THE** sign of our time is obviously the pandemic. I think God's words in second Isaiah become even more poignant in our response to COVID: "Console my people. Console them". We need to do that with our own members and then encourage them in turn to find creative ways of consoling others. People's desire for connection across all sorts of boundaries is a sign of our time.

Sexism and gender violence is rampant, rampant in our world, and in the Church. I attended an International Women's Day Zoom event in March. I was so moved by the presentation of two religious, Sr Julie from India and Sr Mumbi (Moombee) from Kenya. They spoke about the various forms of sexual abuse Sisters suffer at the hands of clergy. At times, shockingly, their superiors colluded with the abuse. I think we

have a particular responsibility to stand with Religious women around the world.

Another sign of the time is our increasing awareness of gender fluidity. I attended a WATAC event titled, Working towards a LGBTQI+ Affirming Church. I think this asks of me, and our congregations a response of wonder at the mystery of the human person, a response of inclusion, and an invitation never to think of anything or anyone in binary, black and white terms.

The social sin of racism is endemic. And it's in our congregations. Some congregations in the US are coming to terms with their history where many of their schools and hospitals were built with enslaved labour. Racism isn't only historical; it's also present in our anglo-dominated congregations in subtle and insidious ways. It takes courage to name it and challenge.

And the sign of the time for ours and future generations is the climate catastrophe we're facing. What world are we leaving to future generations?





## Question 4

How might we best respond to these signs of the times - what focus and qualities in leadership might enable us to respond authentically in our spheres of influence?

**T**he best way to respond to these signs of the times is to continue to become who we say we are. Sandra Schneiders distinguishes those religious who continue to become and those who enter, even stay, but never truly become. I think the role of leadership is to encourage us to become as individual religious and as a prophetic community.

The Sisters of Mercy have a very broad sphere of influence. So, use your position of influence, but always for the sake of those on the margins.

Pope John XXIII said, "We are not here to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life."

We're called to be gardeners rather than maintenance workers and curators. There is something organic, and dynamic rather than mechanistic about this image. I think it's calling you to tend the seeds of new life, and to be curious how your institute continues to evolve, rather than harking back to some supposed "good old days". I think we need to hold our structures lightly rather than gripping on tenaciously, so that we can be responsive to the future that is luring us onward. To that end, I believe we have to be agile, adaptable, collaborative and open to the wonder and mystery of life.

Whatever we do, we have to remind ourselves that it's all about relationships and we have to find new and creative ways of building communion.

We need to be visionary risk-takers. That is not my strong suit. Leaders need to call upon others for the gifts they don't possess, and there needs to be gifts differing in any leadership group.

I think a focus for women religious should be the support of women's lay leadership in the Church and support of female theologians. When I think of wonderful Mercy scholars – Jan Gray, Pat Fox, Elaine Wainwright, Veronica Lawson, Liz Dowling – what an incredible gardening tool kit the Sisters of Mercy have developed, giving all of us tools to question, critique and to nourish. How do you build on that treasured legacy?

I think we women religious should be doing all we can to support female lay theologians and scripture scholars, actually doing anything to encourage and enhance women's participation and leadership in our Church and world.

**Sr Patty Fawcner SGS**

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