The forces that push us toward and pull us away from community

by Nancy Schreck, OSF

This article is based on a talk presented at the National Religious Vocation Conference Study Days in September, 1999.

No doubt you have seen drawings which can be viewed from a number of perspectives revealing very different images. One such profile reveals an elderly woman and at the same time, from a slightly different angle, a young girl. Another reveals a duck or a rabbit. I use this idea to begin because I want to say that what I call a rabbit you may claim as a duck. In times of major change it is difficult to know how to name things. This is such a time in regard to community life in religious institutes. The important thing is that members engage in honest dialogue about community and its relationship to the identity and purpose of religious life.

Many such conversations begin with the idea that community doesn't have to mean "living in the same place." While this is true, the problem is that the conversation often doesn't go anywhere after that comment. In this article let us play with the possibility that community involves living together in shared space, with shared resources. However, it includes another dimension that is often overlooked. From a biblical perspective community includes a sense of "those called together for a purpose." The purpose is not the care, comfort, or economic efficiency of the group. In the Christian context the purpose is to enable the members to be followers of Jesus. The "community" was made up of those who met to pray and break bread, who supported one another especially in the face of opposition, who helped one another in their physical needs and in their commitment to care for the widows, the orphans, and the sick. It was a group who experienced themselves called into mission, and their reason for being together was to create the possibility of a radical following of Jesus. Notice that I am not talking about friendship or a means of having our needs for intimacy met. We may find these things in community but it is not the purpose. One of the things that creates confusion about community is the tendency to speak about it in terms of family and friendship relationships, as a place where needs for intimacy are met. In conversations I have with people who are struggling with community, they frequently speak of loneliness and affective needs. There seems to be an implicit assumption that community should take care of these needs and provide friendship. Rarely do people talk about the enhanced

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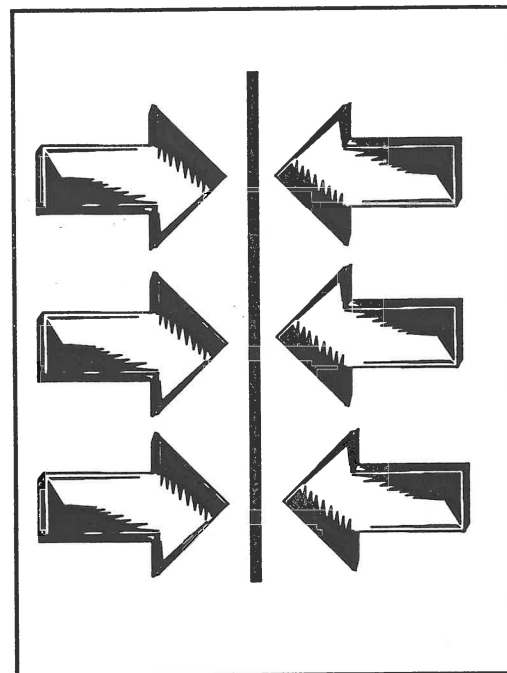
ability for radical Christian action. Certainly it is wonderful when there is affective support, but at the core we are talking about something different.

As I have experienced congregational leadership, years of membership in Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), and facilitation work with congregations, I find many groups saying something new is happening in regard to community life. There are new questions, and a desire to explore. I am stating it as positively as I can. Said in another way, there is an elephant in the living room and some of us are walking around pretending it isn't there.

Raising the issue of community life in most groups still causes quite a reaction. Some people break out in a sweat and it is not because the room is hot. Others get defensive, and tears come to some as they process hurts from yesterday and 20 years ago. Some fear we are "going backwards," many have questions, and some hope that if we just leave the elephant alone perhaps it will decide to wander out of the room. There are many layers to the issue. Added to this is the perspective of those in vocation and formation ministry who are concerned about living arrangements for new members and the need for healthy supportive local communities.

I am not claiming clarity about the direction we need to go; what I do know is that we must deal with the issue. I hope this article will focus some aspects of the struggle and thereby evoke needed dialog in community groups. I do so realizing struggle and difference of opinion will be involved. Margaret Wheatley talks about times when things are not clear and says, "In this realm there is a new kind of freedom where it's more rewarding to explore than to reach conclusions, more satisfying to wonder than to know, and more exciting to search than to stay put." Perhaps if we could free ourselves from the feeling that

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Force Field Analysis

community is an emotionally charged albatross around our neck, we could claim wisdom from the years of our experience, acknowledge the creativity of this time, and believe that it will be rewarding to explore with each other. In her novel *Where the Heart Is* Billie Letz says, "I used to be afraid of the dark but sometimes you can see things in the dark you can't see in the light." I invite us to look at community and see that this is a graced time in religious life for exploring.

To further this dialog I propose that we do a force field analysis of community. This approach is typically used in strategic planning processes. A force-field analysis acknowledges that there are certain "energies" or "forces" that push or move an issue from one side and others that move or influence it from the other direction. There are "energies" that either promote or restrain movement. The important thing is to be aware of this dynamic and to resist the temptation to label these forces as positive or negative; they simply exist.

The important thing is to be aware of them and to decide how to respond wisely. What I will do in this article is to name and briefly explore these "energies" pressing on the issue of community in religious institutes. You will likely add others, and at times place an issue on the other side.

Driving Forces

● **Cosmic awareness** In this time there is a new understanding of community arising from many places. Religious institutes by no means have the corner on the community dialog. There is a growing awareness in society of the power and benefits of community. In business for example, there are literally thousands of management books about improving productivity and quality by building "work teams." Leaders in education talk about a community of learners, social change activists focus on building neighborhood communities, and staff members of large parishes try to create small Christian communities. An appreciation of cosmic spirituality with its sense of communion between the human and other than human is growing. So there is a movement toward community that is very large. There are at least two implications of this reality. First, if we are not aware of this reality and do not respond creatively, those who might be interested in religious life will go other places in their search for community. Second, if we do not deal with our issues, we will not have much to offer the public dialog.

● **The struggle with diversity** A second energy is paradoxical to the first. At the same time that there is a desire for communion we know the opposite experience as well. The daily news is filled with stories of war, ethnic cleansing, racial and sexual hate crimes, and the list goes on. So, another of the realities pushing us to look at community is precisely a dangerous lack of community, especially related to the struggle to build unity in diversity.

● **The need for prophetic witness** The first two energies invite us to reflect on the need for prophetic public witness in regard to community. There is a new claim made on us in these days by the dynamics of our worldwide culture. If we are to respond then we need to be involved in practices and a lifestyle that assist us. We will be better able to deal with the tensions of participation in the global community if we have experience living in communion with people from various ethnic and racial groups, people of different abilities, and from multiple cultures. A number of years ago I was in a group of religious women being addressed by Sr. Elizabeth Carroll who was speaking about the need to act for social justice. She said that any issue we deal with internally in the congregation is not for ourselves alone, it is really for the larger world. Her insight is critical to this issue of community. As the larger world negotiates how to live together well, perhaps one of the most prophetic things we can do is witness our commitment to live together negotiating every kind of difference, and offer wisdom about the human ability to build unity across all the so-called barriers of diversity.

● **The action of the Spirit** Another energy that seems to be pushing is what I describe as a call from the Holy Spirit. It is not just the Dubuque Franciscans, or the California Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy, or the New England Province of the Christian Brothers who are addressing this issue. Rather there is a very broad movement in groups exploring community. There is something larger than any individual group drawing us to explore our experience, our longing and our purpose. We can claim that the Holy Spirit is inviting us into the depths of reflection. As usually happens when the Spirit acts, we will experience a crisis, and things may feel chaotic.
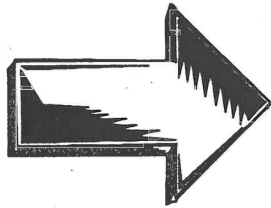
● **Identity of religious life** It also is

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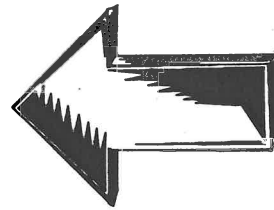
Community

Force Field Analysis

Driving Forces

Restraining Forces

Cosmic awareness

Struggle with diversity

Prophetic witness

Movement of the Spirit

Mission effectiveness

New desire of members

Desire of new members

Limited resources

Others

Paradigm paralysis

Impact of U.S. mainstream culture

Influence of patriarchy

Drift

Lowest common denominator

Adjustments made in good faith

Lack of need

Lack of energy

Community as an event

Ability of members

Public witness

Growth

Multiple communities

Others

fairly consistent across the broad spectrum of religious life that there is a renewed effort to explore the identity and meaning of religious institutes. Key questions in this exploration include: "How critical is community to our understanding of religious life?" "Is it an essential element?" These questions cause some discomfort to some people because they haunt us and invite us into difficult conversations with each other. It means going beyond the surface when discussing our values and choices for living situations.

● **Mission effectiveness** Nearly 40 years after the second Vatican Council we religious have experienced many different types of ministry. We have gained new insight into this aspect of religious life. Now with diminishing numbers and resources we are asking questions such as: what really makes for ministerial impact, what brings about solutions to social challenges, what most effectively enables change to happen? Again, I do not pretend to have the answers, but in my years in leadership I've been haunted by some research reported by Anne Munley, IHM, in the LCWR publication *Threads for the Loom*. Anne says that based on research it takes approximately twenty years to make a lasting impact, to really effect change. We probably didn't need Ann to tell us this. In religious congregations I often hear questions about the effectiveness of individual commitments. The conversation goes something like this: "One person lives in a place for six years, does fine ministry, and then moves on to a different location. She or he may or may not be followed by a member of the congregation. Are we making best use of our limited personnel by this process? Can a community impact be different and more effective than that of an individual who might do outstanding personal work?"

The solution is not in either-or thinking. What I am saying is that the question of ministerial effectiveness is pushing the community issue. Joan Chittister raised the concern in her NCR article "The Eight Mountains of Religious Life" when she said that although we have individuals doing prophetic things we need prophetic communities.

● **A new desire in the members** An increasing number of members want to re-look at the place of community in their lives. Though non-committal about what this might look like many speak about "something a little more intentional." This movement, almost imperceptible at times, seems to include a desire for deeper shared life and common purpose. It appears that our important years of exploring and growth since the 1960's now leads people to be able to say, "I've done it all, I've had every freedom to live where I wanted, and do what I wanted, and is that enough?"

● **The desire of new members** Those in vocation ministry can speak to this issue with more insight than I can. What I will say is that every major research into new and potential candidates reveals that community is something these men and women seek. This reality presses upon communities to deal with the issue. Vocation Directors are often put in the uncomfortable position of trying to respond to candidates, questions such as, "If community is a value then why do so many of your members live alone?"

● **Limited resources** Perhaps less esoteric but very real is the question of how many individual houses congregations can afford. This is a practical issue but is a reality that must be dealt with by the members and not only by the leaders.

This list can certainly be expanded and I hope you will do so. Much could be written on any one of the above listed "forces" or "energies." I'm simply raising up for your consideration the reality that a whole series of "energies" or "forces" is pressing

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on those in religious life to look at the issue of community.

Forces against community

In doing a force field analysis it is important to explore the energies pressing on the issue from the opposite direction. We can talk about these forces as "resistances" to solving the problem. I turn now to noting some of those energies. Once again the list is not exhaustive and readers are invited to add others.

● **Paradigm paralysis** Often when people start talking about community a concern is expressed about "going back" to where we were before. Images of religious community life in the 1950's, 1960's and perhaps even into the 1970's scares people. This "paradigm paralysis" keeps us from thinking creatively about how we could be community now. It would be wonderful to explore how we could be community based on the experiences and growth that have been part of our common life in the past 35 years. This growth has brought us to greater personal and group psychological health.

We are better able to care for and be cared for by others. We have grown in our skills of inclusion and are more able to recognize the equal value of the self and the other. We have a greater ability for reciprocity. It is not that we know it all now, but we have given significant attention to issues of personal development, individuation, and growth. During this time it was necessary for some to live apart to be able to develop skills for interdependent living. The challenge before us now is to ask what we are doing with all that we learned. The writer Starhawk speaks about the importance of community. She says, "To connect across our common lines of difference of race and gender and class and religious belief and sexual orientation and physical conditions and appearances is the creative act that founds a new world."

We have gotten better at being able to negotiate difference, we have learned much about unity and diversity, we know community has power, yet our predominant community image is what we knew in the 1970s and the struggles we had over cars and budgets. Then we become fearful of negotiating community relationships for this new time. Starhawk also says, "The experience of bonding between socially dissimilar selves dissolves like nothing else the conditional need for hierarchical relationships." In other words, there is great power in being able to bring socially dissimilar realities together. Are we using what we know in the creative act that founds new worlds?

● **U.S. mainstream culture** A second force of resistance is the impact of United States culture on us. This reality conditions us to isolationism, individualism and consumerism. I do not need to develop a detailed explanation. The influence of this reality is all around us. My concern is that we are not awake enough to see how it has overtaken us, has seduced our minds, our hearts, and our habits. People from other countries and our members who have worked in other parts of the world help us critique this influence. However, we ought to be able to do this for each other and this is one of the gifts of living together in honest community. We must ask ourselves if the need for individual ownership dominates us to the point of a stranglehold. "My" apartment," "my" car, "my" space. We swim in this ocean of individualism so it's very difficult not to succumb to the pull of the culture toward self-sufficient individualism, autonomy, and accountability to no one. So for all the forces pushing us toward community we have this very strong and deeply embraced individualism pushing against community.

● **Patriarchal influence** Another of the forces causing resistance is what I call patriarchal influence. This is difficult for those of us who think we have grown out

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of patriarchal ways of doing things, but in reality we continue to be heavily influenced by the patriarchal perspective on maturation which involves extricating oneself from anything that might smack of dependence on another person. We live surrounded by the promotion of an ideal of the independent, self-sufficient, highly skilled, self-made person. Naturally what often lies behind this mask is a lonely soul and an alienated spirit.

● **Drift** Another "force" influencing this process is drift. Notice the number of members living alone. I wonder if Chapters, leadership teams and members have deliberately taken this direction with the belief that it is the best way for us to live our mission. Or is there a "drift" toward living alone? Members who had very good reasons for choosing to live alone a number of years ago may have never re-examined the choice. Leaders are hesitant to ask the question. The problem is not simply in having a large number of people living alone. A greater concern is for the consequence of this reality. One result is that members may not know each other as well. Are we eroding the relationship base which enables members to be really honest with each other? Have our conversations with each other moved to the level of social convention? "Where do you live now? What are you doing?" The next consequence is that we diminish our ability to negotiate with each other about our future together and our common dreams. We are less able to plan together and to commit to corporate action which is part of the purpose of community. We are drifting and as we literally drift apart from each other in terms of living we must ask if we also drift apart emotionally, relationally, and in terms of mission.

● **Lowest common denominator** Because the issues around community get emotionally charged we can get into an "it's easier not to" mentality. It is easier not to deal with this issue with each other.

The group then sinks to the lowest levels of agreement and never struggles to get beyond compromise. Fears arise that some might leave if the issue is pressed. It is not unusual for groups to resort to the lowest common denominator, but again there are consequences related to group morale. Donna Markham , OP articulates the result when she says, "A half-hearted, watered-down, comfortable life in the mainstream is simply not enough to hold many of us in community much longer." So as with any crisis this is a dangerous opportunity. The danger is that due to the difficulty of the conversation we will settle for the lowest common dominator.

● **Adjustments made in good faith** We were all involved in adaptations after the second Vatican Council which moved us out of our isolating convents and parish houses. Empty convents were sold, bigger houses were converted into other uses. So now we have the challenge of finding suitable housing for group living. Notice that I said challenge, not impossibility. The old adage that "where there is a will there is a way"applies here.

● **Lack of need** My comments here may sound judgmental, so please bear with me. Another of the forces working on this issue of community life is that not enough of us are living in the places of greatest need in our society and therefore in situations of danger. When we live in dangerous places, be they physically dangerous or dangerous because of the stands we take for justice, then we need each other more. Perhaps your congregation is different but in most groups the majority of members are doing comfortable work in comfortable middle-class locations. This does not put us in any real danger or need of support from each other. I offer an example. When I was elected to leadership in 1992 I left Mississippi, where I was living with a Sister of St. Joseph. That year she was on the school board in a town filled with racial strife, much of it focused on the

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school. Some very difficult decisions needed to be made. The sister took strong, unpopular and just positions. Word of her position on these issues "got out" of executive session, and eventually she started getting threatening phone calls and hate mail.

She would call me and sing, "You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille!" That experience helped me to know that in precisely such situations we must be able to say, "I will be here when you come home from the school board meeting, I will receive some of those phone calls." If we never get ourselves into those situations then we can come home and it doesn't matter. This lack of need is of concern to me. Certainly this reflection takes into account and makes exception for those members who have need for increased safety due to past trauma.

● **Lack of energy** How many times have you heard people say, "I need to live alone, I just don't have energy for community," or "My ministry is very intense and when I finish with a day's work I am exhausted and don't want to 'do community.'" Rather than energizing for mission, community is perceived by many as another duty. Recently a psychologist and I were leading a congregational gathering when the issue of energy for community life arose during a dialogue session. The psychologist responded that certainly some diminishment of energy accompanies aging but she also raised another interesting perspective. She said that in her field when a person chronically complains of low energy often the symptom is related to lack of purpose. Could this be true of community life?

● **Community as an event** What we have begun to call community is periodic gatherings for sharing, support or bonding, and community business. So we are developing an experience of community that can be defined as event. We get to-

gether for a community meeting, or have a meal and sharing, or maybe a weekend together. The problem is that anyone can be on their best behavior for a weekend. So the members never have to experience that sort of daily response to each other that pushes us past polite conversation and sharing.

● **Ability of members** It is a reality that some who are now part of community do not have the personal abilities needed for community life. They may have entered the congregation when the relationship skills needed for today's community were not as necessary. Others may have developed emotional challenges that limit their ability for community interaction. Other arrangements must be made for these members. In addition, at any time, a member may need time apart from the group to work with personal issues.

● **Public witness** Who knows when the brothers or the sisters are living in a neighborhood? Perhaps a neighbor could say, "The brothers are nice people," or "We like to have sisters rent from us because they keep the property nice." I'm not talking about some kind of magic in sign value but we ought to have more conversations with each other about the visibility of our beliefs. If community is a value and important to our identity, then are we doing the things that keep the community witness public? We might want to explore whether our members prefer to be anonymous in their "after ministry hours."

● **The asceticism of personal growth** The question to be explored here concern our ongoing process of conversion and th challenge of growing beyond our own ego in situations where so many of us liv alone. What experiences do we have tha invite a generosity of heart and spirit Certainly there are many ways to grov and our ministries call for much person; generosity. The concern I want to reflect that in ministry and in many other associ

tions to which we belong religious are often in positions of authority, if not by structure then simply by status. There is a different dynamic when I am called to growth by a brother or a sister. There is a certain asceticism that exists in community life which, when well integrated, enables the person to move beyond him or herself, to become generous, sensitive, truly human. Some of this happens precisely because I am formed by my peers. This is important because religious forego the spousal or other life partnerships that provide this kind of experience for those in other states in life.

● **Participation in multiple communities** A final energy that pushes on this side is the members' experience of participating in many communities. Sisters and brothers say, "My community is my parish, or my ministry team, my professional colleagues, my friends, my women's spirituality group, the brothers group, Call to Action, the Legion of Mary" and so forth. While these groups without a doubt can be a community the question is whether they are what we intend by religious community. Is there a difference for us? Do we substitute one for the other? Again I invite your additions to this part of the force field analysis and encourage dialogue in your community group about these issues.

In conclusion, I leave you with a story from the Church of the Sojourners, an Evangelical Community. (Reported in *The Other Side* magazine July-August 1999.) The members of this community are concerned about the absurdity of the consumer culture and want to find a way, as followers of Jesus, to make a response. This is what they commit to do together. They set reasonable amounts of money members can spend on themselves each month, share cars in common, and live in households larger than the nuclear family based on the belief that the nuclear family alone is not a healthy model. In addition

they are committed to dialogue in community about relationships and marriage commitments. Each household commits to take into their home one troubled person. They say that these things not only give witness to the world but strengthen their spiritual life. The members of the Church of the Sojourner believe that in the New Testament community, the disciples responded to the culture in ways that would keep them from being absorbed by that culture. They say, "This culture sucks the life out of us, so we have got to find another way to organize ourselves so that we can respond in the manner of Jesus to the culture." The author of the article is aware that a danger is legalism, which can deteriorate into conformity, but he says that what they are trying to do is to "respond to a culture which has very destructive ways of organizing itself." The Sojourner community is interested in being a contrast culture, and the writer says that in this contrast culture they make the reasonable effort to do things in ways that are not so soul-impoverishing. Those of us searching for the meaning of community might frame our discussion in the large view of the Church of the Sojourner. We might want to begin our conversation with the question: How much do we live in our culture in a way that does not impoverish our souls? ✛

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