

BETWEEN TOWNS

Religious Life and Leadership during a Time of Critical Change

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore and delineate leadership practices, which could facilitate the transition of Catholic religious institutes into the world of the third millennium, within groups facing the diminishment, and even death, of current forms of religious life.

Hermeneutical phenomenology, particularly as developed by Ricoeur, provided the philosophical base for an analysis of the multiple hermeneutical dimensions of culture, human sciences, spirituality and religion. Elements of postmodernism and feminism were also found to be useful starting points. Qualitative research provided the mechanisms out of which meaningful data was elicited and text and context explored.

An extensive literature review and individual interviews with thirty women and men in leadership positions in religious institutes formed the basis of the research. Initial findings were tested against the insights of a focus group of religious involved and interested in the future of religious life and its leadership. Additionally, the responses of the leaders of religious congregations in NSW at their annual conference provided a valuable sounding board for the research findings.

Core to the study, respondents believed, was a changing concept of God, described in the interviews as 'the larger God', and named as the foundation of contemporary religious commitment. A second fundamental call was pinpointed as that of radical commitment to 'the other'. 'Commitment to, and relationship with, the other' was seen as a critical focus for religious organisations in an increasingly divided and polarised world. For women and men currently in the midst of religious life transition, identity, mission and community were identified as specific orientations from which unfamiliar and emerging forms of 'the larger God' and 'relationship with the other' were examined.

Authenticating leadership was used to describe the form of leadership believed to be necessary during this time of transition to endorse and authenticate the tentative sparks of new life. This leadership was depicted as stimulated by a sense of spiritual dynamism and an outward focus, activating the motivation of the congregation towards 'the larger God' and 'the other'. Energising, empowering and challenging the group were described as intrinsic to these orientations. Demonstrating authenticity, embracing diversity, accepting suffering as the inevitable price of effective contemporary leadership, and 'holding leadership lightly', were also highlighted as essential elements for a leadership aimed at authenticating diverse expressions of new forms of religious life.

Two clear leadership practices were named as essential for effective transition during this period of decisive transformation. Consciously managing the disintegration and death of current expressions of religious life, while simultaneously mobilising the energies of small emergent groups to explore and attempt new and diverse forms, were seen as the most difficult, but probably the most critical, challenges for leadership at this time.