

LCWR 2023 Annual Assembly Breakout Session
Re-thinking Institute Assemblies and Chapters at this Time of Significant Change
Submitted by Kate DuVal, SSND

Our two presenters offered a wonderful way to begin our morning session, quoting from Amanda Gorman's poem, *The Hill We Climb* ... "For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it." This quote was very appropriate given the topic for which 50+ persons gathered and the manner in which Catherine Bertrand, SSND and Carole Shinnick, SSND managed this break-out session.

In the context of that "light," we were reminded in our prayer that the previous Sunday we heard in the Transfiguration account of Jesus, his being radiant, filled with light. Annmarie Sanders, IHM, editor of LCWR's *Occasional Papers*, in her introduction to the latest edition, noted that the authors of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures understood the essential role of both physical and spiritual lights and used the word "radiance" to describe persons and places that most notably reflected the attributes of God, the origin of love.

In that spirit, we were invited to pray: "Creator God, flood our souls with Your spirit and Your life. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly, that our lives may only be a radiance of Yours. Shine through us and be so in us that everyone we come in contact with may feel Your presence. (St. John Vianney Church – Houston)

Our prayer led us into a morning of attentive listening and meaningful conversations on 1) Purpose of Chapter, 2) How the "face" of a Chapter/ Assembly has changed, and 3) Participants in Chapter. Hopefully a few highlights from each of these three topics as well as our afternoon "Q and A" session based on the morning input and dialogue will shed additional light on preparation for and experience of Chapters so that all participants in Chapters and the congregation, as a whole, may be and feel the radiance of God as they prepare for and experience a sacred event in the salvation history of its congregation.

What is a Chapter? What is its purpose? What can only happen at a Chapter or best happen at a Chapter? What is not a Chapter?

- Sacred event/gathering of the community periodically, frequency usually stated in a congregation's Constitutions
 - To assess what has happened since the last Chapter
 - ✓ To account for all that was activated in response to the directional statement(s) from last Chapter
 - ✓ To update congregational realities (demographics, finance, etc.)
 - To set direction for moving ahead to the next Chapter
 - ✓ A time limited vision statement
 - ✓ "Big picture" conversation replaces proposals
 - ✓ Not about "how" to get there but a vision – a "what"
 - To elect persons with the commitment and skills to lead the congregation toward their articulate vision.
 - ✓ Who will inspire/ motivate/empower the community to bring the vision alive?
- Simple and intimate as a periodic family meeting
- Spiritual journey, enjoyable, not an endurance test

- Religious and even transformative experience
- Uncluttered, elegantly solemn
- Focus on Chapter business ... not desirable to squeeze in practices for other celebrations that take place right after Chapter
- Belonging on agenda are “Matters of Greater Importance” ... decisions that affect the life and mission of the whole community and cannot be addressed in another type of gathering
- Peaceful Chapter where decisions are made by faith-based persons

How the “face” of a Chapter/Assembly has changed

- Demographics
 - Critical mass ... elderly; not lose sight of those not retired and/or not living in healthcare facilities
 - Given where critical mass lives, where do the real conversations happen and how are decisions made?
 - Fewer have the capacity for intense Chapter work
- ZOOM
 - Good at it, many prefer, allows less mobile to participate
 - Pre-Chapter meetings becoming more common via ZOOM for both direction-setting and elections
- Capacity
 - Not dependent on age nor “entitlement;” not everyone has ability, health and/or stamina
 - Awareness of “Tyranny of Inclusion”
 - Very difficult to assess; to some extent role of leadership or pastoral care ministers to assist in this assessment
- Pre-Chapter meetings
 - More common that much work on direction-setting, even creating a draft statement is pre-chapter work

Who Participates in Chapter (Delegates, Associates, Lay ministry partners, etc.) and in what ways?

- Make use of interrelated and complementary disciplines: communal discernment and contemplative dialogue to arrive at peaceful, respectful, prayerful, and non-politicized decisions about moving forward as a congregation.
 - Need to be willing to enter fully into these practices
 - Let go of personal agendas
 - Has ability, health and capacity for the whole of pre-chapter and Chapter work as a communal discerning process
 - Non-delegates be present and participate as appropriate, given their relationship with the vowed members as a congregation.

Additional helpful points to consider arising through dialogue after presentations and during “Q & A” time

- Communication
 - For many, information more appreciated than full participation
 - Membership has a right to know what is happening before, during and after Chapter

- Determine what can be live-streamed, etc.
- Discernment
 - All are in discernment as prepare for Chapter, not just delegates
 - Requires solid information
 - Sacred and ancient way of deciding, as ancient as the Council of Jerusalem and Pentecost itself.
 - How can time, effort, resources of the Community best be used FOR THE SAKE of life and mission?
- Length of Chapter
 - Shorter than previous times because more attended to during pre-chapter work or in other ways
- Site of Chapter
 - In order to create a discerning community and maintain confidentiality, best location is off site or secluded part of motherhouse.
- Chapter Planning Committee
 - Best appointed, rather than chosen from volunteers; should be members who are “agenda free”
 - Include a liaison between the committee and the council
 - Helpful to meet at least once at the beginning with the Council and possibly close to the Chapter itself and, if possible, meet in the setting where the Chapter is held.
 - Understand that the ongoing work of the committee is confidential until it is ready to be released.
- Role of Facilitator
 - Educate the whole congregation on the three elements (discernment, contemplative dialogue, and manners of making decisions)

We left the afternoon feeling very challenged, supported, encouraged, and grateful to embrace our identity as manifestations of radiance as all prepare for a Chapter as a whole congregation and the event itself. This sacred experience offers a significant opportunity in the life of a congregation to participate in building a more loving and just world by being a clear and powerful reflection of God. Are we “brave enough to see it ... are we brave enough to be it?”