

The Wisdom of the Cheshire Cat

Stephen Glodek, SM

The Society of Mary (Marianists) is in the midst of restructuring four of its United States Provinces into a single governmental structure.

Our intention was to make operative the two adjectives in the Chapter statement: courageous and realistic.

The new Province will include 650 members of the four former Provinces of Cincinnati, New York, the Pacific, and St. Louis and international implantations in India, Eastern Africa, Korea, and Mexico. This process, which was a leadership initiative rather than a grass roots call from membership, is scheduled for implementation on June 30, 2002.

The United States Provincials began discussing restructuring in response to the exhortation of our 1996 General Chapter that stated:

Our situation demands a profound and urgent renewal of our personal and community lives as Marianists; this includes the Society of Mary as a whole, which must adapt its organization and procedures in a courageous and realistic way to the needs of situations of today.

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the Chapter statement: *courageous* and *realistic*.

The proposals regarding restructuring were *courageous* because we wanted to inspire new energy to our Marianist mission in the United States and to begin a process that would make that mission more responsive to the critical needs of our culture. We were also trying to be *realistic* regarding future personnel projections and duplication of services in both administration and ministry. We needed to be more flexible and more creative.

I have been asked to pause, 18 months from the completion of our transition process, to reflect on important issues that I have observed in this process. We are deeply grateful to the United States Province of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (particularly in the person of

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Face to face gatherings facilitate discussion (here a meeting from last year's CMSM Assembly in New Orleans).

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Charles Banks, OMI) for their consistent and valuable assistance to us in our process.

These reflections are written from the perspective of leadership and it strikes me that two companion pieces for a more complete reflection on our process need to be written. It would be valuable for an ordinary member to write from his perspective about the process, and certainly a sequel entitled "The Last Eighteen Months" would be in order.

It's All About Mission

As I begin this reflection, I am reminded of the wonderful interchange between Alice and the Cheshire cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.¹

Perhaps the most important value to consistently hold before the membership in any transi-

tion process is why we are choosing to do this. In some way any governmental restructuring must be for the sake of the mission of the congregation.

We, Marianists, have to be able to demonstrate eventually not a more efficient government, nor even a definitely larger availability of personnel. Rather, we have to show how this new structure is helping us to define anew, with renewed energy, our Marianist response to the critical needs of our culture; otherwise, we are engaging in administrative reshuffling which will make no long term difference to the mission of the congregation in the United States.

Restructuring for mission will involve us in a process of theological reflection that will assess the particular response possible for Marianists to the critical needs of our culture. And it will result in reshaping our institutional commitments and our personnel assignments to more creatively meet those needs.

Restructuring is above all else a statement of faith. It is a faith-filled assertion, as we say in our *Rule of Life*, that the gospel can be still be lived in its letter and its spirit. Restructuring is a commitment of fidelity to refound our charism in this time and in this culture. And it helps to reaffirm the gift of religious life, in general, to the United States Church today.

No matter how clear leadership is in regard to the process of redefinition, we have to remember that this transition is experienced as a process of dying by the membership. There is tremendous personal and corporate identity involved in province membership.

For a community like ourselves, whose various provinces were founded at different historical periods and in different geographical milieu, there are definite cultures that have arisen in which members have been formed. Respect and rituals that reverence this dying have to be a coupled with celebrations that give ritual voice to the new hope that the restructuring aims to facilitate.

Some Reflections on the Process

Keep your ears open

Official voice has to be given to dissenting viewpoints. The efficiency of the process will always be in tension with those who wish to hear more, discuss more, and disagree. These voices need to be not only heard, but also creatively harnessed into the ownership of the process. Consultation of the

membership at all levels, in as many stages along the way, and in as many creative ways as possible is essential for ownership and identity in the new province. It is a difficult administrative task to balance attentive listening to the prophecy stated in dissent, while at the same time, moving a large and complex corporate project toward completion.

Things like dialogue via the Internet, planned diversity on committees, and respect and dissemination for dissenting “white papers” are essential pieces of listening. We have not always done this well.

Neither the decision for the unification of the provinces nor the processes followed has received universal acclaim from our membership. We have some conversations planned around theological reflection on critical needs for the Fall of 2001 that we hope will carry over into “institutionalized processes” for our new province.

When and where to meet is important

Restructuring is a huge and expensive process. For a group as geographically dispersed as ourselves the very effort to gather interprovincially for discussion is a large and expensive venture. Decisions around assembling the entire membership in assembly are difficult. Tension exists between the value of interprovincial discussion/consensus and the witness of poverty.

Our decision to gather the membership in national assembly once in the middle of the process and at the end has

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proved most beneficial. A national assembly helped us to meet each other at some level. It helped us to hear valuable input and discuss that information in “interprovincial group.”

The national assembly was a visual aid to our aging, to the energy of our youth, and to the excited sharing of mutual experiences. The liturgies together helped us to ritualize the movement of men of good will in a very complex situation moving toward the future with faith and song.

Involving the members

The members of a transition committee need to be men who can engender trust through their personal authority. They need to be able to generate interest when the complexity of necessary details wears on members and they need to be able to engender energy from the vision of the future that they hold consistently before the members.

The corporate complexity, legal paperwork, and planning are daunting and exhausting processes. All committees involved in the myriad aspects of the transition from formation to office allotment in the new headquarters need to be diverse in both voice and geographical representation. “One of ours” on a committee making a sensitive decision will greatly help the members of a former province achieve ownership of the decision.

The youngest members need to be seen as unique stakeholders in the process. These are the members who will carry the decisions of 2002 into the

future. Our gathering of members 50 and under resulted in energy and brought unique insights into both the process and our future mission that did not occur to the middle-aged leadership of our transition!

The most senior members need to be enlisted in the process directly, both in terms of participation and prayer. This is also a very delicate balance between reverence for what has been and a clear, new path for the future. We realized quickly in our planning that any specification of age groups will bring yelps from other age cohorts about being ignored.

Communicate openly and often

Communication for geographically disparate Provinces in a transition period is not only essential, but should be the banner given to both leadership and the myriad committees working at the process. The less things can be viewed as happening “behind closed doors,” the more opportunity for response by membership to proposals, and the more familiarity with each other that can be designed will greatly enhance ownership of the new structures.

A note about leadership

General Councils overseeing restructuring need to assess the impact of national restructuring on other parts of an international congregation like ourselves. Our congregation was founded, along with our Marianist Sisters, to support and multiply lay communities in the Church. The delicate task of hearing the impact of restructuring on our

sisters and the lay communities, of listening to their particular wisdom, and finally assessing structures that will continue to involve them intimately in our future is a difficult but absolutely necessary task.

General Councils also need to be aware of the tremendous personal cost to leadership, transition committees, and all who work directly at the process while maintaining other full time ministries. There is an inherent schizophrenia in “cheerleading the new,” while closing down the old that general leadership needs to monitor.

In the end ...

These are some of the things that we Marianists have learned, very painfully in some cases. But without a doubt those learnings, the accompanying pain, and what is yet to be experienced in the months ahead have been worth the effort. We look forward to the reenergized mission that our restructuring will call us to in the United States aware that the wisdom of the Gospel and of the Cheshire cat need to design the banners that we carry in procession for the inauguration of our new province.

We have to be credible witnesses of community and mission responding to the critical needs of our United States culture as Marianists.

That, dear cat, is where we want to get to!

Note

1. Carroll, Lewis, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Norwalk, CT: The Heritage Press, 1969), p. 85.

Some lessons from the Marianists restructuring process

- The restructuring effort is only worth it when it supports the mission.
- Leaders must listen attentively to all viewpoints.
- Face-to-face meetings can be important and effective.
- Involving the members from all age groups and regions will deepen ownership.
- Leaders need to stay aware of the personal costs.