

Restructuring for Mission

To Live and Give Witness to the Experience of God

David Kalert, OMI

*Supposedly there is a Chinese curse that says:
“May you live in a time of change!”*

During our lifetime we have experienced change at lightening speed in our world, the Church, our families, and in our religious families. The changes in our religious families have called for aligning our communities in different ways to guarantee our viability for the future. The famous question is whether we are realigning our communities so that we can die more comfortably or so that we can be energized for mission.

Having gone through the process of reorganizing for six or seven years and experiencing the reality of a newly formed province for almost two years, let me assure you that, if you are looking for a peaceful death, reorganizing your structures is not the way to do it.

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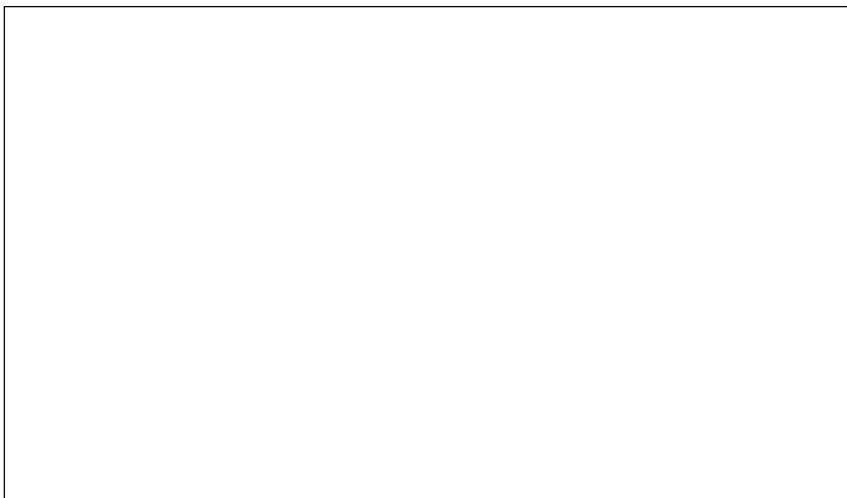
Even though a majority of the membership is in favor of such a move, there are always changes, some unexpected, and there is always a small percentage that will continue to find fault with the new structure and new procedures.

We learned to be very careful what terms we used in describing the change of structure. We tried “merger” for a while, but many read that to mean that one or two provinces had prominence, and the others were simply being pulled into existing structures. We all stressed that the structure needed to be something new which involved everyone. We chose to refer to our change of structures as “restructuring.”

Ironically, I have since heard from other groups who are reorganizing structures that they are not able to use the word restructuring because it sounds too corporate. And that comes down to our motives for changing.

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John Curran makes a point to Oblates Gerry McGovern, Boni Wittenbrink, Bill Sheehan, Mike O'Hara, and Joe O'Brien. during Convocation 2000. Photo Mike Viola Belleville, IL; courtesy Oblates U.S. Province.



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Also, even though we may be in favor of the change, we simply cannot comprehend the implications with regard to how we understand certain aspects of our community. How we view community, traditions within community, procedures for assignments, and so forth, all come into question.

It is only in living the new reality patiently and prayerfully that we will be able to fully implement the new structure. No matter how long and thorough the discussions, the full impact comes only in living the new structure day to day. So if you are looking for a peaceful death for your community, stick with what you have. You might survive nonetheless; but if you are going to die, it will be much more peaceful.

Defining the mission

Would I do it over again? I certainly would, provided it is indeed for the sake of the mission. Otherwise, we are simply going through a lot of motions to tidy up the Titanic for the grand finale.

However, in saying change is for the sake of the mission, you

will find that the understanding of that is quite different among the membership. For some, change for the sake of the mission is admirable, as long it does not affect “my” ministry. Or change for the sake of the mission is acceptable as long as we throw out everything we are presently doing and start over again to give our charism a fresh start. Most would probably agree that change for the sake of the mission involves refocusing some current ministries and taking on new ministries in tune with the needs of our time.

How do you do that?

For us as Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, like most religious groups we started with our basic call or charism. Ours is to evangelize the poor.

Through preaching and our ministry commitments with the poor, we have attempted over the past 15 years to reestablish that charism in our daily lives. Most Oblates have strived over these past years to live out this charism, and so the basic commitment could be built upon. The real test is to find effective ways to live out our charism.

Implications for personnel

Through restructuring into a larger province of about 500, we are able to share personnel resources across the entire province. As an example, in the past if someone trained for preaching, the opportunities were limited to serving with a particular preaching team or retreat house. Now there are more choices and those involved in preaching ministries have one another as a resource. There is a larger group from which to draw support. The same can be said for many other ministries, especially with minority and immigrant groups, where special training is required.

Is this type of exchange and support possible without restructuring? I think it is possible, but after experiencing that type of collaboration prior to restructuring, I find the present structure easier and more effective.

Mission effectiveness

We are also attempting to reflect with all of our personnel, Oblates and lay people, on the purpose of our Oblate commitments. With the help of a mission director, we are spending time with all of our ministries discerning how our values are being put into practice.

Many healthcare institutions have been using a similar model for sometime. This is an opportunity to assist grassroots members in asking and examining some of the obvious questions. As we are all immersed in our ministries, we do not always take the time, energy or resources to attempt some of the

bolder directions of evangelization.

Formation Programs

An essential part of every religious community is its formation program. Restructuring provided us with the opportunity to establish several sites for pre-novitiate programs tailored to specific needs of the community and of the candidates in the programs.

One program is for those who have not yet completed their college studies. Another is set up to assist those whose first language is Spanish.

On the post-novitiate level, we have two programs, one at Oblate School of Theology and the other at Catholic Theological Union, which provide a rich diversity for the life of the province and its mission.

Before, as a single province, we could not have supported this kind of diversity in our program.

The laity

Like most religious groups, we are attempting to invite and involve the laity in meaningful ways in our ministries. Through various forms of association, lay people are finding their presence to be significant and enriching. With the help of a director for lay associations, we are providing educational and supportive systems for them and the community.

Personnel

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the previous provinces. While we had a personnel director specifically for the professed Oblates, it was still difficult to find the time and resources to provide various programs. The one-to-one contact was great and was very much appreciated, but there was still a need for other kinds of programs.

There are many materials available on the vows, community life, missionary activity, issues of justice, peace and the environment, and these can be used. However, if there is no one to provide and organize them, very little will happen.

Many times, there are specific needs within the community for which materials are not available. In those instances, it is necessary to create something.

With expanded resources in one province, it is easier to provide these services. For example, in some of our previous provinces, there was a strong office for issues of justice and peace. Others had very little, not because they were not interested, but because of limited resources.

Retreats

One of the ways we have gathered people during and after the restructuring has been through province-sponsored retreats scheduled at various times throughout the year to give everyone a chance to participate. These retreats proved to be a wonderful opportunity for the men to get better acquainted and to cross former province boundaries. They also provide the occasion to reflect on similar issues and to simply pray together. We are attempting to pick themes and speakers from an Oblate perspective so that our lives and ministries can be jointly enriched.

Administration

The word “administration” can be a negative word, especially if those in administration are perceived as bureaucrats or impersonal functionaries. If the administrative structure is not serving the mission of the province, then it is merely an exercise in futility.

I try to think of administration not as something to which or from which everything flows, but rather something that is available for the mission. Sometimes I feel the need to ask

Some benefits of restructuring:

- All members become involved in redefining the mission.
- Increased opportunities for sharing among personnel.
- More time for an analysis of mission effectiveness.
- Increased diversity in the formation process.
- Expanded resources make it possible to provide more programs for personnel.
- More resources to address the retirement needs of members.
- Increased involvement of local leaders in the decision-making process.

whether what I am doing makes any difference at all for our missionary efforts of evangelization.

Among the administrative tasks, the financial and legal issues in a restructuring are enormous. Thanks to two generous and talented treasurers, we were able to make that leap rather smoothly. I feel that if you do not unnecessarily unsettle the membership in the areas of finances, vacations, and automobiles, you will survive!

Pulling together various insurance plans for personal, community and institutional needs was no small task. There were many meetings to explain the details and to reassure one another. After only a year and a half, things have been amazingly smooth.

Is this detail an exercise of administration in a negative sense? I hardly think so since these are the practical elements of our lives to enable us to commit ourselves to the mission. Furthermore, some of these joint projects have saved significant money. In our Oblate Constitutions and Rules, we say that our money is the “patrimony of the poor.” If we are spending it needlessly, it is hardly anyone’s patrimony.

Retirement

An area of comfort for everyone is that, as a restructured province, we are able to address the retirement needs for the members. While this was not a serious issue for the former provinces, we are able to handle the retirement fund and the program itself more efficiently. Certainly for the sake of the

mission, we have the responsibility to care for those who have served generously over the years. Their examples and their prayers continue to be a vital part of our mission today.

Local communities

Another aspect of restructuring for the sake of the mission has been the focus on gathering everyone in active and supportive local communities. To make this a reality, we are attempting to give more attention to the training of local superiors as leaders in their communities.

Personnel assignments are also given in a way that every Oblate has the opportunity to participate actively in community life. Materials are made available for more dynamic and interesting local gatherings.

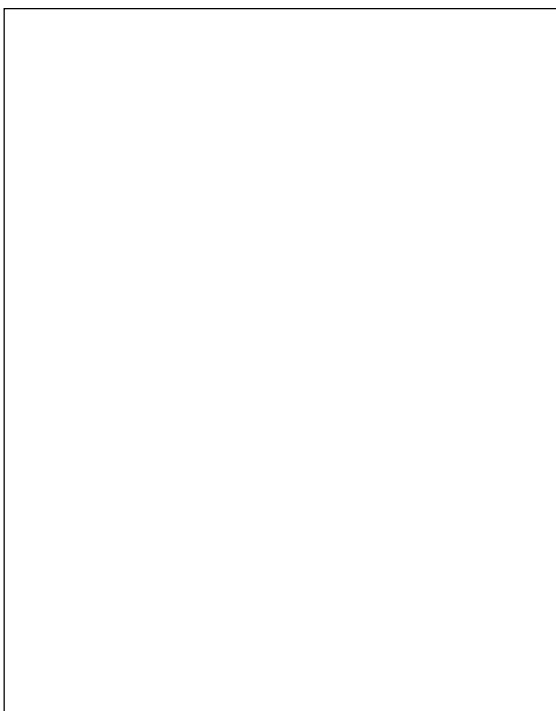
To facilitate their role as local leaders, we gather the superiors annually to share events of the past year and to provide facilitation tools so that they will be more effective leaders. The local superiors also serve as advisers to the provincial council members from their areas. Their meetings prior to council meetings provide mutual input and information with the provincial council.

First convocation

Prior to our becoming a new province, there were many meetings by areas, but we had never gathered the entire membership. Since we have the custom of general assemblies, rather than gatherings of delegates, we arranged for our first gathering of all the members. Some 270 Oblates participated

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*Brother Tom Ruhman
looks on as Oblate Vicar
General Eugene King
(right) welcomes
Archbishop Roger
Schwietz during a
Convocation 2000
liturgy.
Photo Mike Viola
Belleville, IL; courtesy
Oblates U.S. Province.*



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in our convocation in Albuquerque this past November. Considering the number of those who could not participate for health reasons, the percentage was rather high.

The theme of our convocation was “Oblate Mission in the United States at the Dawn of the Third Millennium.” At this meeting, we looked at how we can be better missionaries, especially within the context in the United States. We finished the convocation with 13 proposals about current and new ministries. These will continue to be refined in dialogue between the provincial council and the membership.

More importantly, the convocation gave us the opportunity to be together for the first time. It was a moving experience and

far surpassed expectations. The prayer opportunities were well planned and probably the highlights of the convocation. We began with a prayer service in which each of the six regions of the United States brought water from its area. These waters were then mingled, blessed and sprinkled over those gathered together. It was a moving celebration. The Holy Spirit and our founder, St. Eugene De Mazenod, were very active in our midst.

Conclusion

As far as the restructuring, would I do it again? I definitely would do it once, but I am not sure I would have the energy to do it a second time. When I am asked the proper time to begin the process, I encourage those inquiring not to lose too much time. If you wait too long, the negative forces only become stronger, and energies begin to wane.

After their reorganization process, one of the Christian Brothers advised me not to wait until every “i” is dotted and every “t” is crossed before starting the process. It would never happen.

These are some reflections after two years. The book is still being written, and there will be more to the story with the passing of time and experience.

Restructuring is a lot of work, but for the sake of the mission it is definitely worth it!