

Hope Beyond the Challenges...

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Planning is an act of hope. This short sentence, heard from a speaker addressing religious some thirty years ago, opened the door for me to understand planning not just as good administrative practice, but as an action undertaken in the context of hope. My recent reading on hope and future visioning for religious congregations have expanded and deepened my notions of both planning and hope. In this article, I share snippets of these readings 'hoping' they will offer insight and inspiration.

Hope as Grace and Choice

In the book *Hope: Promise, Possibility and Fulfillment*, Colleen M. Griffith has an essay entitled *Hope, a Grace and a Choice*. This title highlights the dual dynamic of hope. She states: "Christian spirituality recognizes hope to be a powerful resource, something that is both gift and choice....As the gift of a generous God, hope stirs within the human the desire to be received and tended. As a choice made within the context of human freedom, hope remains ultimately something to be embodied and practiced."¹

Therefore, hope is a living gift, not something to be stowed away and retrieved as the need arises. Choosing hope involves ongoing turning to the God of hope, attending to the movement of God's spirit in specific situations, and responding to the call of God when we recognize it.²

Attending to the inbreaking of the Spirit requires the practice of discernment as understood in Christian spirituality. Good discernment enables us to move through individual assumptions and concerns toward fashioning something in common. It also enables us to recognize not only what is, but also what could be.

"Being able to use our imagination by looking forward to possibilities is a central aspect of a discernment process."³ Thus discernment, in addition to providing confirmation and direction for our particular context, will draw us into the realm of future possibility, the realm of the reign of God which is present and also 'not yet' or 'to come'. "People of hope move toward and act on behalf of a life-giving future in ways that help bring it to birth."⁴

Imagining Hope

In the same book, Philip Browning Helsel draws on insights from pastoral care and counselling to explore the role of imagination in accessing and sustaining hope. He explores how the process of accessing one's hopes reflects the breaking in of a future yet to be experienced. He describes a process employed in pastoral counselling for identifying hopes on an individual, personal level. He shows "how the exploration of one's future involves more than planning: it is an encounter with the future-self-held-by-God occurring in an atmosphere of imaginative discernment."⁵

Helsel connects future oriented questions in counselling with eschatology. He explains that eschatology, which was traditionally understood as the branch of theology describing final things, has been reoriented in the last fifty years to an examination of how the reign of God is breaking into the present. As such, it is an appropriate theological concept for questions regarding imaginative discernment of present change needed for future betterment.⁶

The imaginative personal discernment questions and process described by Helsel are similar to some of the future visioning processes I have experienced communally in congregational assemblies and chapters, which we know can be taxing as we strive for a common vision. When we are in the midst of these processes, might we be centered and refocused by welcoming them as the inbreaking of the reign of God?

The 'Emerging Future' and Hope

Carole Shinnick, SSND applies the insights of Otto Scharmer's *Theory of U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* to communal discernment in religious congregations.⁷ Scharmer speaks of 'noticing the arrival of your highest future possibility.'

Shinnick invites us to imagine what might happen if the task of communal discernment was reframed in these words. "This anticipatory wording opens up much more than it closes down. Could it be that even in our obvious diminishment the God of the future is still calling us to fresh horizons?"⁸ She notes the unexpected new life and energy she has observed in communities that have discerned their historical mission is coming to closure. I would add that the 'highest future possibility' approach would be helpful for meeting challenges in newer and thriving congregations as well.

Deep listening of the group is part of Scharmer's transformation process: listening with open minds, hearts and wills. Sustaining an open will is the more challenging piece of this process; it is the step toward 'letting go and letting come' (Scharmer), and the time for considering what is emerging. It requires time for reflection, "to await the tiniest hints from the future that echo our foundational stories."⁹

Scharmer also advocates acting soon on what is emerging from the group by creating a model or prototype, and acting on it, so as to explore, learn and clarify a way forward. Shinnick observes that religious congregations are not particularly adept at this, for fear of putting forward something that is not quite perfect.¹⁰

She concludes about Theory U: "...There is something very rich here to complement support and even excite us in our discerning quest. If we try to notice the arrival of our highest future possibilities, I am sure we will ultimately hear a familiar voice saying to us: I know the plans I have for you...plans for peace and not disaster...to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)¹¹

Conclusion and reflection

These three short samples barely do justice to their authors. However, I think I have captured the kernel of their thought, and that their reflections can offer fresh perspectives to deepen your understanding and enliven your hope.

As you reflect on these writings, what attracts you about hope as presented here?

What challenges you?

What affirms my/our journey in hope?

¹Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid, eds., *Hope: Promise, Possibility and Fulfillment* (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 2013), p. 4.

² Ibid, p.6.

³ Ibid, p. 8.

⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

⁵ "Imagining Hope: Insights from Pastoral Care and Counselling" in *Hope: Promise, Possibility...*, 70.

⁶ Ibid, p. 71.

⁷ "Noticing the Arrival of your Highest Future Possibility: The Power of Deep Listening." *The Occasional Papers* LCWR Summer 2017, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 10.