

What do you nurture in your Congregation and in your communities?

Dynamics of life or forces of death?

A reflection using excerpts from, Ted Dun, *Graced Cross Roads*.

Without knowing the members of religious communities nurture the seeds of life or the seeds of decline and death in their religious communities. Knowing how they contribute to life or decline of the life and mission of their communities, provinces and the entire Congregation can help them to opt for renewal and refounding of their charismatic spirit in hard times.

Here is what Ted Dun observes about the dynamics of religious communities. Adaptation of the text is made to help reading.

Cultural Norms Favoring Life or Death

You have a *culture* of community that either nurtures a desire for life or seduces an inclination toward death. What are the cultural norms of your community and are these supporting the movement toward life or toward death among your members? Consider this now familiar, ancient Cherokee legend called, "Two Wolves:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego:

He Continued, "The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside of you - and inside every other person, too: The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed:"

Which wolf is your community feeding by the culture it has created? Some communities, by the attitudes and behaviors that are normative, are nurturing life, while others are feeding the cause of death. Most likely, the culture you have created, and the wolf you are feeding, is not in your members' conscious awareness. With some reflection, however, you can raise your community's consciousness and assess whether you need to make more favorable choices.



Here are ten dimensions to help assess the culture of communities: cultural norms favoring life or death. There are many elaborate and more scholarly definitions of "culture." However, for this exercise, let's use a simple and common vernacular for culture, defined as, "The way things are around here: Use these descriptions, along with the table that follows (Table 1, *Cultural norms favoring life or death*), and the subsequent reflection questions, to help you explore and self-assess your community's viability.

Indicators of dying and thriving communities

Patricia Wittberg said,

"Even successful orders are fossilized by their own commitment mechanisms, lose their original fervor, and so become both unwilling and unable to meet the challenges of later environmental changes"



The size and age of a community's membership, even the number of new members, likely reveals less about its future viability, than the strength of its culture and the quality of life in community. In communities where death is near, when they have become "fossilized;" there are telltale signs and

symptoms. To what degree are these signs and symptoms present in your community?

- 1. Dying communities have more memories than dreams.** Setting up the trophy room and spending more time reminiscing about the past than planning for the future is a sure sign of a dying community. Dying community's live life looking through the rearview mirror. They glorify the past. They spend more time and resources seeking beatification of their founders and foundresses than they do on developing the current and future life among existing members. Meanwhile, life in community has become a museum of monuments, calcified and stuck in the past.

Thriving communities build upon their dreams. Communities that are thriving build upon the works, traditions, and inspirations of those who came before them. However, they lift up their own dreams and focus these upon the future. They listen to their deepest longings as the foundation for their planning. They listen to their wisdom figures and the dreams of their "newer" members. They listen to the needs of the world and align their mission accordingly.

- 2. Dying communities are conflict-avoidant.** A dying community has a vast wasteland of unresolved conflicts that has poisoned the well of vitality and squandered the richness of diversity that is otherwise meant to nourish and strengthen community. While mostly avoided, intermittent eruptions of anger and hostilities occur. These are quickly swept back under the rug. Left unaddressed, the damage is done. If attempts to address conflicts are made at all, the lack of skill, discipline and practice make the odds of success highly unlikely. The history of failed attempts adds to the justification for avoiding such efforts ("Leave well enough alone!"). A good meeting or assembly is defined as a "nice" one (i.e., without tension). Meanwhile, the baggage accumulates.

Thriving communities work through conflict and tensions. In a thriving community conflicts and tensions are addressed, not because of the joy of it (hardly), but because of the value seen in addressing them. They recognize the generative power of tensions as a source for creativity. They value the healing that comes from interpersonal reconciliation. They are able to reach across their differences and harvest the richness of diversity. They know that working through resistance is the heart-work of change. They have collectively acquired and continually practice the skills for handling interpersonal conflict and tension. These communities are successful more often than not because they have developed the skills and practice them repeatedly. Success builds on success leading to more confidence and a willingness to stay in the struggle.

- 3. Dying communities avoid risks.** The more a group has accumulated things (e.g., buildings, ministries, reputations, resources and wealth), the more they are invested in keeping them, and the more they worry about losing them. An attitude of scarcity keeps them from taking risks that might jeopardize their security. Risking reputations by taking bold public stands, or risking finances on new ventures, are not the ways of dying communities. They would prefer to play it safe and not rock the boat. Their risk avoidance leads them to make only small, safe changes that have little substantive impact.

Thriving communities take risks. Every founder and every successful community has been successful because they have taken risks. They aimed high knowing they might fail. Failures, in thriving communities, are expected as a normal course of events. These are viewed as learning opportunities, not opportunities for blaming and shaming. Thriving communities have resiliency and can bounce back from failure. The only real failure is not to try, not to take risks, not to learn and not to bounce back.

- 4. Dying communities are not a green space for growth.** In a dying community, there is no genuine community to nurture the growth of its members or mission.

Members no longer grow inside community because it is too unsafe to try. Members, out of cumulative experiences of being hurt, no longer feel safe enough to be their authentic selves inside community. If they are fortunate, they have found green spaces elsewhere, in new local communities, new ministry settings, or in counseling and spiritual direction, where they can start afresh, free from any baggage or reputations. These new green spaces may allow for personal growth, but this by no means translates into *communal* growth.

Community remains an unsafe space until a community works as a whole toward changing its communal norms.

Thriving communities are a green space for growth. Thriving communities encourage growth in their members by offering each other a healthy dose of both affirmation and challenge. Breaches in trust, misunderstandings, and poorly handled conflicts, while inevitable, are redeemable. If someone flubs up, he or she may get a re-do, a chance to say it better and repair the damage. Members actively work at tending the garden of community: tilling the soil (building trust), planting seeds (new possibilities), watering (nourishing members), weeding (mending wounds) and repairing fences (shoring up boundaries).

- 5. Dying communities use power for control.** In a dying community, those with *position power* (i.e., power that comes with position or title) use it to keep people in line. Tensions abound regarding who has the *right* to make certain decisions. Leaders hide behind their position power ("Do as I say because I'm the boss!") and the trust between leaders and members is low. Members who are resistant to the control and power of leadership attempt to garner power through numbers by forming *camps* of like-minded people. They jump the rails of *appropriate* channels and use back channels and closed-doors to caucus and build their case. Win-lose dynamics impede resolution of communal disputes and add fuel to the power struggles between *we-they* camps.

Thriving communities use power primarily to empower others. Leaders and members share power according to their distinctive areas of responsibility. Position power is not used to hide behind, leverage or subvert members' *personal power* (e.g., the power to tell the truth, heal, forgive, create, love, challenge, support, etc.). Leaders use their power to empower others. Lines of authority are clear which makes their use of position power more effective. Those authorized with position power are not elevated to wield more power over others but to use their power in distinctive areas and share power more successfully. Personal power of members is robust regardless of the structure of governance (e.g., circular or hierarchical).

- 6. Dying communities emphasize form over function.** A dying community suffocates from a proliferation of rules and the need to follow protocol. Rules are prescribed to keep things as they are and maintain the status quo. There is more emphasis on who does what and how, rather than on why and what works. Order and control take precedence over new possibilities. Hours are spent hammering out minutiae, wordsmithing documents, approving minutes, taking roll call, counting secret ballots, and chasing red herrings, while elephants sit prominently in the room. They ignore the deeper conversations about longing and desire. They are focused, instead, upon following the Constitutions, Robert's Rules, the handbook of policies and procedures, and the even larger handbook of unwritten norms (i.e., "The way we've always done things:").

In thriving communities, why something might be done is more important than who might do it or how. Rules and norms are challenged, if necessary, in order to move beyond the status quo, get outside the box, and make room for change and transformation. They do not waste time changing the Constitutions, Directories or policy handbooks, but simply suspend them for the purpose of *experimenting*. In a thriving community, new agreements are not written in stone, but stamped as a "work in progress" and are subject to change. Thriving communities constantly keep their eye on the prize, stepping back periodically to ask themselves: "Why are we doing what we are doing? What is our definition of 'progress?' What are we doing well; where are we struggling; and what, therefore, do we need to do next?"

- 7. Dying communities see opportunities as problems.** A dying community eschews opportunities for new ventures. New ways of doing things and new ideas, are seen as unwelcomed disruptions and an affront to tradition. Problems do not spur on innovation or imagination as they did in the early years; rather, these are viewed as unfair interruptions to their best laid plans. Not rocking the boat, avoiding new ways, and sticking with the "devil that you know" is the preferred mode of operating. They have stopped making down payments on the future and, instead, are in foreclosure.

Thriving communities see problems as opportunities for change. Problems signal a needed course correction. As with their attitude toward conflicts, problems are not enjoyable as much as valued for the change they can produce. Problems are addressed with an eye toward creative solutioning, an opportunity to reexamine issues and change people's perspectives. Problems necessitate that people change their approach, their patterned ways of behaving, their minds, their

structures, or the system as a whole. Problems are seen as grist for genuine discernment, soul-searching conversations, and catalysts for personal and collective transformation.

- 8. Dying communities attempt change by fiat.** In a dying community, change is decreed by legislation (e.g., changing the Constitutions, Directory or policy handbook) rather than through processes of dialogue and discernment. Change is mandated by leadership or brought to Chapter for a vote. The majority wins and those who lose feel disenfranchised. The ownership needed for implementation is also lost: "I didn't vote for this, so why should I support it?" The vote takes precedence over dialogue, creativity and working through differences. Robert's Rules, secret ballots, majority rule, the Constitutions, policies and procedures, along with traditions and existing norms, all support the way things have always been and inhibit any change.

Thriving communities view change as a collective endeavor. Thriving communities know that you cannot legislate conversion. They thrive on the collective emergence of newness and possibilities of change. It's not a matter of ignoring the Constitutions or time-honored traditions. Rather than forbidding everything because *that's the way it's always been*, they opt for change, knowing the necessity of it. They engage in the messiness of open and honest discussions, creative solutioning, discernment, compromise and consensus, knowing that these produce the sweat-equity that yields ownership. Ownership, in turn, provides the personal investment needed for implementation.

- 9. In dying communities maintenance overshadows mission.** Keeping things going *as is* sucks the life and energy out of any possibility for new growth and vision for the future. So much time, energy and resources are spent on maintaining and administering what presently exists that there is never enough remaining to address the future life and mission of the community. The daily press to get tasks done and keep things going, like a heavy wet blanket, smothers the life out of mission and its viability for the future.

Thriving communities focus their energy, time, and resources on the future. The press of maintenance responsibilities urges them to try *different*, rather than continue to try harder. They understand that the system is broken. The maintenance mission squeeze becomes an opportunity to look more broadly at the systemic structures and patterns of interacting that need to change. Leaders put members

and the future of mission ahead of maintaining things as they are by handing over much of the maintenance responsibilities to laity (e.g., hiring outside management companies) or creating new structures that invite members to take on more responsibility for the life of community (e.g., circular models of governance).

10. Dying communities are rife with complacency. Members take little self-initiative and are reluctant to offer their time and talents to the community beyond their own ministry responsibilities. Many remarks, "I've paid my *dues*!" Other members are reluctant to offer because they expect to be *micromanaged* by leaders who aren't confident in their abilities. Indeed, leaders end up micromanaging, or doing things themselves, because of what they perceive as members' minimal investment, self-initiative, capacity and follow through. A vicious cycle results where *leaders over-function* and *members under-function* in self-reinforcing patterns.

Thriving communities share the burden and privilege of caring for community and its future. Everyone pitches in as able. No one gets a pass. Self-initiative is encouraged. Subsidiarity is a lived experience, not just a word written in documents. Members want to take initiative and leadership encourages and supports their efforts. Leadership does not micromanage. Instead, they provide mentoring, guidance, training and resources. There is a genuine partnership between leaders and members.

Cultural norms favouring life or death

Tick what is predominantly yours in the box at the right

Attitudes and Behaviors Favoring Life and Growth		Attitudes and Behaviors Favoring Death and Dying	
1	Dreams are more important than memories	Memories are more important than dreams	
2	Conflicts are addressed constructively leading to reconciliation, deepening trust, creativity, change and healing	Conflicts are avoided and poorly addressed leading to inertia, mistrust, triangulation, more wounds, displaced hostility, and we/they camps	
3	Risk-taking is normative; success is measured by the degree of courage and creativity, regardless of the outcome; expectations often exceed results	Success is defined as achieved outcomes, smooth sailing, minimal risk-taking and maintenance of the status quo; results typically exceed the low expectations	

4	Community is a green space for growth; members feel safe enough to be authentic, to experiment and to take risks		Community is not a safe space for growth; members go elsewhere to be themselves, to risk and to grow	
5	Position power is used to empower and resource others; personal and position power are blended and shared		Position power is used to exert power over, micromanage and control others; position power preempts personal power	
6	The emphasis is why and what works, over form and past policies of trying new things		The emphasis is on form over function, protocol over effectiveness, following rules instead	
7	Problems are viewed as opportunities to create something new, a signal for needed change		Opportunities are seen as problems and obstacles to maintaining the status quo, order and control	
8	Change is the norm and continually emerges from leaders and members; everything is permitted, unless explicitly forbidden		Change is attempted by fiat and legislation; everything is forbidden, unless expressly permitted	
9	Future mission takes precedence over maintenance of the status quo; new means for attending to maintenance are sought		Maintenance overshadows mission, smothering the life out of mission and its future	
10	Mutual accountability (leader to member, member to leader, member to member), co-responsibility and self-initiative are normative		Complacency, entitlement and reluctance to serve drain the life out of community; there is little accountability, except for leadership who has to account to members	

Reflection

1. As you look at the above table of Cultural Norms Favoring Life or Death, which cultural norms best represents your community today? Notice the ticked columns, read them together and ask yourself which wolf are you feeding?
2. What stirs within you as you reflect upon the culture of your community?
3. What behavioral or attitudinal shifts might you want to consider, personally and communally, in light of your reflections?

- (This is only for personal reflection. Not for circulation)