



MEN RELIGIOUS MOVING FORWARD IN HOPE FINAL REPORT

A project of the National Religious Vocation Conference

2014



NRVC
National Religious
Vocation Conference

5401 SOUTH CORNELL AVENUE, SUITE 207
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60615
773-363-5454
NRVC@NRVC.NET | NRVC.NET



ABOVE: The December 2013 Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope workshop group at St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana.

ON THE COVER: The workshop group at the Holy Name Passionist Retreat Center in Houston in January 2014.

© 2014, National Religious Vocation Conference.

Prepared by Carol Schuck Scheiber. Material compiled from presentations and discussions at two U.S. regional gatherings of men religious (2013-2014).



AIM OF MOVING FORWARD IN HOPE

In keeping with its National Strategic Plan for Religious Vocations, and with help from a generous grant from an anonymous foundation, the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) sponsored two workshops in the winter of 2013-14 for men’s religious institutes. The workshops were developed by seven men religious representing a variety of religious institutes, along with the executive director and associate director of NRVC.

These workshops, titled “Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope,” had goals of helping the participating communities:

- to better understand the current vocation context
- to assess their own needs in regard to vocation ministry, and
- to begin planning action to further new membership.

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS & ACTIVITIES

Recognizing that leadership understanding and support of vocation ministry is crucial for an effective vocation program, NRVC encouraged the vocation director and major superior to attend this workshop together. With a few exceptions, that is who attended. A total of 114 men religious took part as regular participants, representing 62 religious institutes. (Speakers, committee members and guests increased the total number of attendees to 136.)

Over two half days and one full day, these religious men heard several keynote presentations; had Q/A time with presenters; took part in meals, Mass, and prayer with other communities; discussed best practices with similar communities; and enjoyed informal evening time with one another and with the speakers. The pairs of vocation directors and major superiors had time on the final day to discuss steps their communities might take based on what they had learned from the workshop. Every participant received a “Culture of Vocations Assessment Tool” to help institutes examine and address issues that attract or repel new members.

The following presentations were given:

- Father Francis Morrissey, O.M.I., J.C.D., Ph.D., former dean of canon law at the University of St. Paul, Ottawa, gave an overview of canon law and church documents as they apply to religious community membership.
- Father Thomas Gaunt, S.J., Ph.D., executive director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Washington, DC, spoke on contemporary demographics of the American church and religious communities.

WORKSHOP PRESENTERS



Father Francis Morrissey, O.M.I., J.C.D., Ph.D.



Father Thomas Gaunt, S.J., Ph.D.



Brother Seán Sammon, F.M.S., Ph.D.



Brother John Mark Falkenhain, O.S.B.

HIGH MARKS FROM PARTICIPANTS

"It was quite wonderful, especially the welcoming spirit of St. Meinrad's."

"I was pleased with the participation of so many congregations and the interest and energy they brought to the conference."

"One of the most useful workshops I have attended in my religious life. It was clear and practical and dispelled a lot of false assumptions."

- Brother Seán Sammon, F.M.S., Ph.D., former superior general of the Marists and current scholar in residence, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY, spoke on the social and ecclesial context for vocation ministry today.
- Brother John Mark Falkenhain, O.S.B. developed the "Culture of Vocations Assessment Tool" and spoke about the research and rationale supporting it.

POSITIVE EVALUATIONS

The workshop schedule was full, and for those not already exposed to the ideas presented (sometimes the case for superiors), the days were quite dense. Nevertheless, in their evaluations, the majority were content with the schedule and pace of the event. At St. Meinrad in December, 82 percent said the pace and schedule were "excellent" or "very good," and 96 percent reported the same for the event in Houston in January.

Overall the evaluations were positive, with the January event in Houston garnering a slightly more positive response. More than 90 percent of participants at both events reported that their expectations had been met. Ninety to 100 percent ranked the speakers as "very good" or "excellent." The discussion periods, prayer time, and socials were also overwhelmingly rated "excellent" or "very good." In fact, out of 13 aspects of the workshops (from individual speakers to table conversations to social times) 10 aspects were ranked in evaluations as "excellent" or "very good" by 90 to 100 percent.

Many respondents took time on their evaluations and later in their outcome reports to thank NRVC for a worthwhile experience. Here are a few expressions of thanks:

It was quite wonderful, especially the welcoming spirit of St. Meinrad's.

I was pleased with the participation of so many congregations and the interest and energy they brought to the conference.

It was a wonderful opportunity to share the struggles, ideas, and hopes (concerning vocations) of so many religious gathered in one place. I wish all members of our communities could participate. Thank you!



Participants bless each other during a prayer service at St. Meinrad.

One of the most useful workshops I have attended in my religious life. It was clear and practical and dispelled a lot of false assumptions.

I am altogether pleased with the conference and expect much good to come from it.

STRUCTURED TO ENCOURAGE ACTION

The workshops were structured to encourage concrete action. Every participant went home with the "Culture of Vocations Assessment Tool," a ready-to-use inventory of reflection questions aimed at examining the internal culture of a community in several

areas: charism, spiritual life and prayer, work, preparation for celibacy, and relationship to the larger church. The tool gave communities a practical way to identify their strengths and weaknesses in areas that affect the attraction and retention of new members. Brother John Mark Falkenhain, O.S.B. developed this tool based on research by NRVC and others about what brings people to religious life and what makes them leave. In his presentation he gave the rationale for the tool and encouraged people to adapt it for their institute.

Another workshop element that encouraged practical action was asking the pairs of leaders and vocation directors on the last day to turn in an index card listing at least one concrete idea or action that they were taking away from the workshop. Most wrote down multiple ideas; in many cases the index card ideas corresponded to steps the community actually took.

Finally, the fact that NRVC asked participating communities—multiple times—to report on outcomes no doubt reminded and prompted communities to act on their action ideas.

SPECIFIC STEPS TAKEN FROM WORKSHOP

Communities reported to NRVC six to seven months after the workshops. A total of 52 men responded to NRVC's requests for feedback. Most of those responses spoke for both participants from the community, which means that since 62 institutes participated, a little under 83 percent gave feedback. (There were cases of multiple respondents from the same community.)

Participants were asked: "What specific steps has your community taken in connection to what took place or was presented at the Men Religious Moving Forward event?" The feedback covered a wide range of activities, but a few themes did emerge:

• Shared workshop content

About half of the participants (52 percent) somehow shared the workshop information and assessment tool with others in the community. Approximately a quarter of the participating institutes made a formal presentation to the entire community; others presented and discussed the workshop with key leaders, such as provincial councils and vocation committees.

• Assessment tool

The assessment tool was well received and has already been used by many participants. In total, 48 percent said they were going to be using the tool with members (29 percent) or already had (19 percent). A number of apostolic communities noted that the tool needed to be adapted for a non-monastic community. Several communities revised it for their own needs, some breaking it into parts to be used over a period of time, others changing the wording or adding quotes from their founders or constitutions. One Franciscan community published the tool with a Franciscan flavor, even adding original artwork by a member. Some respondents who did not plan to specifically use the tool with the community said it helped focus their understanding of the issues linked to new membership or that they were using it for personal reflection.

CALL TO ACTION

Participants were asked:

"What specific steps has your community taken in connection to what took place or was presented at the Men Religious Moving Forward event?"

The feedback covered a wide range of activities, but a few major themes did emerge:

- shared workshop content
- assessment tool
- Internet action
- more people in vocation ministry

Some typical comments regarding the use of the assessment tool:

We have ordered for each member of our monastic community a copy of the “Culture of Vocations Assessment Tool.” ... We will hold community meetings to consider each of the six topics of that tool, inviting each member to comment on the questions and then hopefully coming to consensus on action items.

All the local communities are using the tool as a spiritual guide to move forward as a religious community.

One session of our province chapter will be on vocations.... I will be presenting copies of the tool to the delegates at the chapter.

ADAPTABLE SOLUTIONS

A strength of the workshops is that even though a single tool was given to all participants, the communities that took part were encouraged to take the steps that made sense for them. Participants were urged to analyze their own situations and take actions accordingly.

As a result, people reported very different actions, reflecting the diversity in religious life. Even when similar actions are grouped together, no single action was taken by more than 52 percent.

From the tone of many reports, it is clear that activities unique to single institutes were often carried out with great gusto.

• Internet action

Even though the Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope workshops did not directly discuss Internet issues, 29 percent of participants reported either revising their websites (21 percent) or starting or increasing their presence in social media (8 percent). Most likely this is a result of increased awareness about the need for a clear identity. If participants concluded that they needed a clearer community identity, addressing their image on the Internet would be a natural first step.

• More people in vocation ministry

For about a fifth of the respondents (22 percent), taking part in the workshop had the effect of either increasing staff devoted to vocation ministry (10 percent) or forming a committee of members who would be involved in vocation work (12 percent). One community formed a vocation committee composed of associate members.

One respondent whose community reorganized its approach to vocation ministry wrote:

The new approach is designed to engage a greater number of community members in a variety of ways with vocations ministry. The idea is to infuse a sense of responsibility for vocations throughout the community and increase a vocation culture that is attentive to our direct inquirers and our student body. We want to create an environment in which the topic of vocation ministry is on the lips of more and more members of our community.

• Myriad of responses

A strength of the workshops is that even though a single tool was given to all participants, the communities that took part were encouraged to take the steps that made sense for them. Participants were urged to analyze their own situations and take actions accordingly. As a result, people reported very different actions, reflecting the diversity in religious life. Even when similar actions are grouped together, no single action was taken by more than 52 percent.

From the tone of many reports, it is clear that activities unique to single institutes were often carried out with great gusto. For instance, the Resurrectionist Priests (one of two Canadian institutes that took part), decided to dramatically increase vocation action in the parishes where members minister. Every parish set up a Vocation Team. The Resurrectionists held a training workshop for the teams, and one parish already held a “Vo-

cation Culture Weekend.” MRMFH workshop participant Father Toby Collins, C.R. shared videos that reveal the enthusiasm behind the training workshop (<http://vimeo.com/94180079>) and the “Vocation Culture Weekend” (<http://vimeo.com/95543853>).

Participant responses to the question:

“What specific steps has your community taken in connection to what took place or was presented at the Men Religious Moving Forward event?”

- *The assessment tool is scheduled to be used at a later date or will probably be used at a later date.* 15 mentions (29 percent).
- *Material from workshop was presented and discussed with key leaders of the province or community. (In a few cases, the attendee gave a written report.)* 14 mentions (27 percent).
- *Material from the workshop was presented and discussed with the whole community or province.* 13 mentions (25 percent).
- *Website was revised. These actions ranged from complete overhaul of a vocation website to changing the information requested from inquirers.* 11 mentions (21 percent).
- *The assessment tool was distributed to the entire membership, often after being adapted.* 10 mentions (19 percent).
- *The material at the MRMFH workshop provided valuable guidance to the community in forming pastoral plans and policies.* 5 mentions (10 percent).
- *The community increased its investment in vocation staff.* 5 mentions (10 percent).
- *A vocation team or committee was established in order to expand member involvement in vocation ministry.* 6 mentions (12 percent).
- *The community initiated new vocation outreach in its schools, parishes, or ministries.* 4 mentions (8 percent).
- *The community started or increased its involvement in social media, especially Facebook.* 4 mentions (8 percent).
- *The community made changes in its formation program based on MRMFH content.* 4 mentions (8 percent).
- *The workshop affirmed what the community is already doing but did not result in new activities.* 3 mentions (6 percent).
- *The community brought in speakers from the MRMFH workshop to give presentations to their membership.* 3 mentions (6 percent).

Other reported actions that don’t fall into the above categories :

- *a logo and motto were finally chosen;*
- *a professional vocation video is being made; a “discernment ministry” is being expanded; the vocation minister began regularly communicating with membership about what is happening in his ministry;*

SPECIFIC STEPS

- “The assessment tool is scheduled to be used at a later date or will probably be used at a later date.”
- “Material from workshop was presented and discussed with key leaders of the province or community.”
- “Material from the workshop was presented and discussed with the whole community or province.”
- “Website was revised. These actions ranged from complete overhaul of a vocation website to changing the information requested from inquirers.”
- “The assessment tool was distributed to the entire membership, often after being adapted.”
- “The material at the MRMFH workshop provided valuable guidance to the community in forming pastoral plans and policies.”
- “The community increased its investment in vocation staff.”
- “A vocation team or committee was established in order to expand member involvement in vocation ministry.”

ONGOING WORK

For most institutes that attended, the Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope workshops gave a practical boost to vocation promotion. Long term, for any steps to continue to be meaningful, the communities will need to maintain sustained focus on vocations and internal issues that either help or hurt them. Having a superior attend along with the vocation director can only help to keep such a sustained focus going.

Brother Seán Sammon, F.M.S. expressed well how to maintain forward movement in vocations: “Those of us in religious life today would do well to rediscover fire, the fire that was there at the time of the foundation of our respective congregations. For fire has always attracted the young. When we find it for ourselves, young people will come once again to our way of life. They have in the past; they will in the future. Have no doubt.”

- *an application form was revised according to a new understanding of canon law (learned at MRMFH);*
- *vocation brochures were updated; and*
- *an old logo was phased out.*

HOW ACTIONS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED

Besides asking about action steps and use of the Assessment Tool, the one other question that NRVC put to participants was: “How have these steps been received so far?” The question was premature for many institutes whose plans had not yet been completely carried out. Forty-two percent did not give an answer.

On the other hand, 46 percent of respondents (the overwhelming majority among those who did answer) said the reception from community members and leaders has been positive. Only two respondents gave a negative response, and just four people gave a mixed response to the question of how action steps have been received.

Overall the tone of the feedback was cautiously optimistic. Typical language was “satisfied,” “favorable,” “appreciated.” One respondent wrote: “I have received quite a few compliments about the assessment [tool]. Most people have told me that we needed this to renew our identity.”

Another reported, “Feedback from members has been very positive. Several members volunteered to assist with [a] Come and See weekend ... including some men who have normally been on the margins of the province. Members are expressing more interest in vocation ministry and have a more realistic expectation of recruitment because of the information that has been shared with them.”

CONTINUING EFFORT WILL MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

For most institutes that attended, the Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope workshops gave a practical boost to vocation promotion. Long term, for any steps to continue to be meaningful, the communities will need to maintain sustained focus on vocations and all the internal issues that either help or hurt them. Having a superior attend along with the vocation director can only help to keep such a sustained focus going.

In addition, NRVC has taken two steps to keep the message of the workshops before religious communities. First, it has made the “Culture of Vocations Assessment Tool” available to anyone. It can be purchased for only \$4 (\$6 for non-members) at nrvc.net. (NRVC is exploring the possibility of publishing a parallel tool specifically aimed at women religious.) Second, NRVC published the MRMFH workshop talks in the Summer 2014 edition of its journal, HORIZON. These two steps circulate the ideas and resources of the workshops among a wider audience and keep them before the audience that attended.

Brother Seán Sammon, F.M.S. expressed well how to maintain forward movement in vocations: “Those of us in religious life today would do well to rediscover fire, the fire that was there at the time of the foundation of our respective congregations. For fire has always attracted the young. When we find it for ourselves, young people will come once again to our way of life. They have in the past; they will in the future. Have no doubt.”



Men had a chance for informal visiting during two evening socials.



INSPIRED TO DO MORE?

Order the KEYS TO THE FUTURE kit on CD. It includes a video of young religious talking about their hopes for religious life, the "Keys" process, a facilitator's manual, handouts, and a Power Point presentation about religious life realities.

Shop online at <https://nrv.net/products/show/12> or call 773-363-5454.

Discussions were lively at the Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope workshop, which built in time for similar types of communities to share best practices.



*For more information about the programs and services
of the National Religious Vocation Conference, visit our website:
www.NRVC.net*



NRVC
National Religious
Vocation Conference

5401 SOUTH CORNELL AVENUE, SUITE 207
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60615
773-363-5454
NRVC@NRVC.NET | NRVC.NET