

For Misesan Cara: THE SYNODAL WAY
in context of MISSION and DEVELOPMENT
Anne M. Codd *pbvm* Ph.D.

It is a huge honour, not to mention surprise and privilege, for me to be invited to speak here at your conference. I come in awe and admiration of the work of overseas development by your members and in appreciation of the vision that inspires your service to them as Misesan Cara.

Having said that, I come from my own fields of Practical Theology and pastoral development. The synodal way is, I find, a powerful means of advancement in both fields.

Fr. Gerry O'Hanlon's fine introduction to synodality as a way of being Church and his cross references to your work as Misesan Cara sets me up nicely to share some thoughts with you as conversation starters. For this I will rely mainly on what we in our contexts are learning about **the necessary conditions for synodal experience**. And I've seen in previewing Christina Duranti's presentation (to follow) a great case study of the fruit of working in this way.

Basically, I will introduce two points: (1) A brief reference to organisations as living systems rather than machines; consequences for reflecting on dynamics, responsibility and power; (2) the synodal approach in organisations: meaning, conditions, methods, potential. I plan to finish with brief cross reference to Christian mission and how it may be served by the synodal way.

Organisation: a common factor

It was the English anthropologist/social scientist Gregory Bateson (d.1980) who observed that many human and social problems arise when human beings and societies, as well as nature and the planet, are treated as if they were machines, whereas in fact they are **living systems**.

The living system is more than a metaphor or a model of organisations. Whether we know it or not, take account of it or not, in reality the effective energies of groups and organisations interact internally and with their external environments according to their own inherent laws. We cannot 'fix' or even predetermine how a living system will respond to our intervention. We can only create what we consider optimum conditions for change, development or growth. This we know from our experience, enlightened by the explosion of knowledge in the physical, human and social sciences since the end of the 19th century! The expansion of scientific discovery continues apace with revolutions in recent decades, not least in field of neuroscience. Who knows how this is going to develop our understanding of ourselves and our groups and organisations.

The paradigm shift often described as that from Newton to Einstein lies behind emergent methodologies with which we are all familiar: Training for Transformation, the pastoral cycle, the Lumko model of growing community, your own profiling of MADI, your growing emphasis

on localised leadership, as well as in current discourse on synodality. There is no issue with acknowledging that, not for the first time, Church is in catch-up mode here.

Living systems are real, self-organising and self-perpetuating. What we describe as ‘new consciousness’ emerges when we become aware of the interconnectedness and interdependence of our living system, ultimately the cosmos.

Practically, our understanding of our **essential co-responsibilities**, as well as our experience of and use of **power** can be greatly enhanced by these considerations.

THE ‘SYNODAL’ EXPERIENCE

In this context, what do we mean by synodal experience? I propose that in essence we are talking about what happens when the energies/powers in a system are tapped and aligned to a common purpose. Methods and techniques which facilitate synodal processes are constantly being sought.

(An abiding image of this, for me as a former science teacher, is the induction of magnetism in a soft iron bar by stroking it with a strong magnet. If this works for you, great. If not, forget it!)

What are we learning?

At our recent AMRI synodal event, one of the main themes for conversation was the **conditions necessary** for synodal experience. Religious Congregations and Missionary Societies have grappled with the challenges of dialogue and discernment for years. Here are some pointers to what has been learned in terms which I hope will be relevant in your context:

1.

At every level of organisation there is need for critical reflection and self-reflection which feeds into **reflective conversations**: what needs are calling for attention (whether crisis or systemic)? Which lines of action may have the greatest ripple effects and prove most sustainable?

What is our ultimate purpose and driving force? (espoused and operative – recognising that these may not always coincide). Is our way of working true to our goals? Are we alert to possible and/or real unintended outcomes? Are we attentive to resistance, and even engage with it as a resource i.e. might it be holding something which the system needs?

Are we consistent, personally and as an organisation, in terms of norms and values? How would we characterise our ethos? Does our way of working release a good spirit? (Theologically we are invited to interpret such as the action of the creative Spirit – the divine energy.)

Peter Senge, author of ground-breaking book *The Fifth Discipline* is fond of quoting a colleague: ‘the primary determinant of the outcome of an intervention is the inner disposition of

the intervener'. Senge you may know as founder of the Society for Organisational Learning, as well as more recently the Compassionate Systems Framework.

2.

Among the **conditions necessary** for synodal experience is openness to the perspectives (and the gifts) – diverse as they may be - of all involved in the project/work in hand. Implied here is a culture of respect for their basic equality, as well as their interconnectedness and interdependence. Fr. Gerry referred to the importance of this and how challenging it is in Church context. In this regard in our prior conversations, we have alluded to the fear that in listening to diverse voices there may be 'a paralysis in decision-making'.

I would like to share here the wisdom of a great German theologian of our time, Walter Kasper, who speaks of 'three publics'. I'm translating here from a Church context to wider society. The 'publics' then become (1) the common sense of the people, (2) the contribution of scholarship, and (3) the service of legitimate authority. In a synodal approach, whether we are engaged in needs-assessment, interpreting situations, envisaging best next steps, decision-making, planning or action, Kasper's view necessitates dialogue as a primary language of community. Ultimately, in this scenario, what formally designated leaders do is articulate the consensus in a compelling way.

For me, one of the best examples of synodality I've heard of was when a sister was preparing her conversation-starter for our synodal event. She was recounting a process she was involved in quite a long time ago. It marked a transition for her group from a 'parliamentary democracy' style of decision-making to what we would now recognise as a synodal way. Having stayed with the stages of speaking truth with intention, and listening with patience and generosity, there came a point when, and I quote: '**we knew what we had to do**'. This is a point beyond winners and losers, even more so beyond orders from on high! The decision may or may not be the same, but in any case, the added value is the ownership, or buy-in, by all involved. *(In synodal theology there is an axiom: a topic is not closed while there is not as yet peace.)*

Here I will lift some direct quotations from participants in our synodal event – demonstrating conviction and passion arising from experience:

Listening is key; listening to the wisdom of the elders, listening to the other, listening especially for diverging views; to the unexpected.

Cultivate attentive, deep listening, honest listening, listening with freedom to hear, with the ear of the heart, listen to ignite! Create spaces that facilitate listening; go beyond the

safety of established ways, listen to the prophets, listen to the young. Ask who is included and who is excluded?

Synodal processes are radically different from democratic procedures. Do not fear conflict – process it.

3.

In summary: Synodal experiences require conversations which take time and patience, as well as trust; they require listening, holding and leading; for this we create open (generative) spaces, meeting in person and also using technology creatively. I note Misesan Cara's commitment to being a learning organisation. To become adept at proceeding consistently in a synodal manner calls for huge learning by all concerned. We will not know the outcomes in advance; the challenge is to be free and open to how processes can lead to unexpected places; also, I might mention again, to unintended outcomes. Interestingly, Peter Senge notes that developers in the age of the industrial revolution hardly said: this mining and burning of fossil fuels will most like harm the environment but who cares? What they were missing, he suggests, was systemic thinking.

'Synodality' through the lens of religious belief

I was very interested in the final section of Gerry's piece, where he mused on the relevance of faith, religious belief, in the context of international development.

Within a community based on a shared religious belief, constructive synodality means tapping and aligning the energies of the community with their shared purpose, which in turn is informed by their faith including their anthropology and their world view.

'SYNODALITY' IN CONTEXT OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND MISSION

For Christians, mission means the invitation of (their) God, through Jesus, to fullness of life shared within the communion of the divine three: a world of justice, love and peace - the 'kingdom of God'. Their energy for mission lies in the gift of the Spirit, which in the Catholic tradition is, as it were, mobilised through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. Synodality then, means personal and corporate attentiveness to the Spirit through contemplation of the sources of the tradition, the context and the signs of the times, discerning, personally and together, the paths to follow in service of justice, love and peace. What needs to be done we may call development.