

## **Susanna Wesley Foundation Conference 2017 - *Changing Church***

### **Case study: The Sisters of Nazareth**

**Keith Elford**

#### **What was the situation facing the church/organisation?**

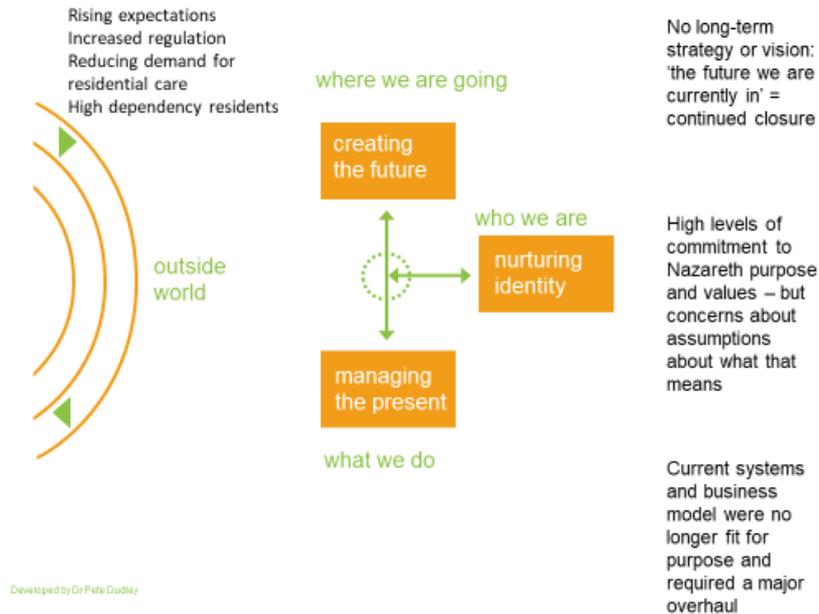
The Sisters of Nazareth are a Roman Catholic Religious Order, founded in 1851. Their ministry today is primarily fulfilled through the residential care of the elderly and takes place in five Regions: the UK, Ireland, Southern Africa, Australasia and the United States. In 2006 there were 299 Sisters.

I was introduced to the Superior General, Sr Mary Monaghan, in 2007. The Congregation had several significant problems. At the height of the Sisters' fortunes there had been 66 houses. In 2007 there were 37. Most of the closures had taken place in the previous 20 years. Sisters were aging and increasingly unable to manage the care operation; there were few new vocations, especially in the UK and Ireland; the care work was operating at a loss; the lack of modern processes and business disciplines made it hard to measure the extent of losses never mind manage them; regulatory standards and public expectations were rising and many of the care homes were outdated or in poor condition; increasingly residents were highly dependent and arriving near end of life. The Sisters were in a business in which other, arguably more well-equipped, operators were struggling with the basic economics of residential care. The quality of care remained high but the operation was not sustainable and both the religious order and the ministry faced a challenging future. House closure had become the default strategy.

#### **How did you and the church/organisation approach the problem/opportunity (Initial thoughts/method)?**

Throughout the project our approach was informed by "the Trialogue", a model of organisation developed from earlier work by Stafford Beer: the Viable Systems Model. The model also gave us the framework for a diagnosis:

# Diagnosis



Some of what needed to be done was obvious – the establishment of new businesses processes and systems – but it was also clear that other things had to happen to make that possible. Firstly, the Sisters had to be reassured that the changes that would be required would not violate the Congregation’s charism and vocation. Change would not be possible or sustainable without the Sisters’ support. Secondly, the Sisters had to renew their sense of common cause. For historical and geographical reasons regions and houses operated virtually autonomously. Now the Sisters would need to work together. The process of change and what followed from it would need enough central control to ensure that congregational objectives could be met while preserving sufficient local autonomy to ensure fitness of organisation and mission in highly diverse circumstances.

## **What process was followed/what activities were undertaken?**

We started by reviewing the Congregation’s purpose and values with Sr Mary and the General Council. We went back to the governing constitutions and explored the history of the Congregation. We noted that the apostolate was to the “poor and needy”. Although the decision was made quickly to retain the focus on the elderly this distinction between core purpose and historical role created a new and liberating sense of choice and possibility. The Council then developed a hypothesis about the future. Key features included: the creation of a new partnership with non-religious staff; a new governance and management structure; new roles for

Sisters as trustees rather than managers; and the commitment to achieving an operational surplus.

This was followed by two rounds of meetings which included all the Sisters in all five Regions in which the hypothesis was shared and developed. There was then a round of planning meetings (with non-religious managers and staff now involved) which led to the creation of plans at congregational, regional and house levels. This all involved well over 100 meetings over a two-year period.

The next stage was a management development programme for Sisters and managers which was held in each Region. In the UK, this was complemented by a course leading to a post-graduate diploma at Loughborough University for a group of Sisters and managers.

The process of implementing plans led to significant changes: new business processes supported by new IT systems; the appointment of new managers and Regional support teams (often where none had previously existed) and the establishment of new Regional governance structures.

Of course, nothing happened as neatly as this suggests, but by the 2012 General Chapter considerable progress had been made and the new way of thinking and working established. The Chapter charged Sr Mary and the General Council with continuing the work but shifting the focus to the renewal of the Congregation itself. The period after 2012 to date saw continuing implementation of the original plans, but also the “Journey of Hope” a programme held in all the Regions (tailored and designed in detail within the Region to meet local needs) aimed at helping Sisters to renew their personal and community lives.

### **Please describe any notable features, events or stages of the process**

A great deal of discussion and concern centred on the concept of “business”, and this was linked to a suspicion of the “men in suits” who had become part of the Sisters’ lives, as staff or trustees or advisers. “Business” tended to be thought of as implying a commercial, instrumental mindset. Sr Mary constantly emphasised that business served mission and that managing their affairs properly was essential to maintain the mission and this became accepted over time.

The process of change brought Sisters together in way they rarely experienced before. The sense of renewed bonds, discovery and spiritual renewal was striking. For all the hard work, it was also a lot of fun. Staff too (many unaware that there were other Nazareth Houses) found the process involved becoming part of a larger world. This links to another key feature

of the process – the need for the Sisters to make staff partners in the mission rather than merely ‘helpers’ or ‘employees’. The Sisters had to develop ways of educating staff about the mission to ensure that the vocation behind the mission did not entirely depend on a shrinking group of religious. Staff had to come to terms with the fallibility and humanity of the Sisters; Sisters were surprised by the readiness of staff to become their mission partners.

### **What outcomes were achieved?**

There are regional and local variations in performance but the new structures and business models are established in all the Regions. In 2016-17 there was a £4.3m surplus worldwide on a turnover of £104m. One house has closed, but another one has opened. Houses have been refurbished or rebuilt or there are plans to do so. Most (not all) the Sisters are embracing the new world and many are finding it liberating. The ministry is sustainable. The number of Sisters continues to fall, but there have been several new vocations (chiefly in Southern Africa) which gives encouragement for the future (though with it, a cultural challenge!)

### **Looking back, what have you and/or the Church/organisation learned about change from the experience?**

There is, perhaps, a fashion for bottom up change and a tendency to downplay the role of leadership. In this project the drive, determination and complete commitment of Sr Mary and the Council was critical to its success – not because they had the answers but because they were determined to find the answers and see the process through. It was also crucial that they were both able and willing to give their time to the process and allow the process to take the time it needed. They created the necessary confidence, the environment for change.

The transformation required a great deal of the Sisters at a stage in their lives when most might have been supposed to have preferred a quiet retirement. They had become used to expressing their identity through doing the practical work of care. This required them to develop new ministries of pastoral care (for example) and/or operate as trustees or proprietors – to oversee the work of others. It was only possible because of the power generated by of the basic sense of religious purpose in their lives – for most this trumped the power of custom and habit.

From my point of view, as a consultant, it has reinforced my sense of the critical nature of the relationship between the consultants and the people

of the organisation, its leaders in particular. My being a priest (albeit an Anglican!) was crucial and allowed trust to be built.

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**Keith Elford** is sponsored by the Susanna Wesley Foundation to pursue a part-time doctoral research project on the relationship between ecclesiology and organisational theory. Keith has been a consultant on the theme of organisational effectiveness since 1998. He is an Anglican clergyman, now self-supporting, but with experience as an incumbent and as Bishop's Chaplain. These two strands come together in his desire to bring the insights available from organisational theory and practice to the challenges facing the Church today. His book, *Creating the Future of the Church*, was published by SPCK in 2013.