

Mark Clarke
October 2020



*Transformative Communities:
God's Co-creative Pioneers*

Transformative Communities: God's Co-creative Pioneers

“Our task is enormous...To look at all that has gone before us, and to recognize that each one of us, however small, has a unique task in co-creation- a unique contribution to make in the world and to humanity” (Bass 267)

God created the world in seven days, so goes the Genesis story in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Every culture and religion also has a unique creation story that describes who they are and delineates their shared history. As Diana Butler Bass notes above, Edwina Gateley, theologian, writer, and founder of Genesis House, speaks to the enormity of our current issues and calls for each of us to participate in co-creation by sharing our talents and energy. We need to have the spiritual discipline called for in One Corinthians 12:4 in the New American Bible: “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Lord; there are different workings, but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.” This passage affirms the fruits of embracing diversity as a collective stance. These gifts allow society to find shared solutions in periods of significant upheaval.

We now know that creation is evolving, and co-creation is ongoing and that God never stops. In our day, Transformative Communities join God as co-creators. How do they do this? As applied to religious communities, organizational systems theory helps us understand how each Transformative Community can be an effective co-creator with God.

Transformative Communities participate in creation in three formative ways:

- By embracing the diverse mosaic of God's creative process;

- By practicing contemplative action that incessantly pursues their social commitment to justice;
- By establishing an effective ecosystem of relationships to create answers for complex issues.

These three disciplines are spiritual practices. They are rooted in reverence for all creation through social justice and dynamic engagement in interconnected life. These practices are used by intentional communities to establish a collaborative approach to pioneering societal change for the common good.

The past two decades have jolted our world into exploring new questions. Various global issues like environmental catastrophes, racial tension, economic crises, and immigration have opened our collective eyes to society's hidden pain. Our souls are experiencing profound grief, asking emerging questions, and searching for quick yet fleeting solutions. The current pandemic has catalyzed issues long repressed. Racial tension, immigration bias, and economic inequality have volcanically erupted, creating widespread fear and anxiety.

These realities have created a sense of disorientation. Bruce Feiler in *Life is in the Transition*, illustrates this by quoting Margaret Atwood's analogy:

When you're in the middle of a story, it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion;

a dark roaring; blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept by the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it” (Feiler208).

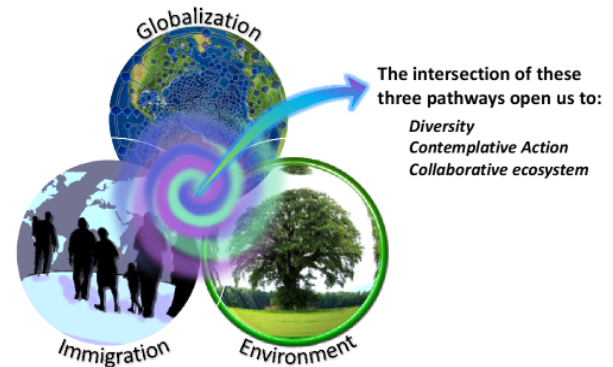
In other words, people often can’t find clarity amid the turmoil. For example, today’s emotions have engulfed large segments of society because the COVID virus has created a sense of frustration, loss of control, and radical shifts in one’s lifestyle.

These times demand the end of empty rhetoric and pious platitudes. Millions who have suffered decades of oppression want action. Transformative Communities must explore new opportunities grounded in diversity, contemplative actions, and effective collaborative ecosystems. These practices will support an action-oriented attitude to co-create with God. They will construct a platform to become innovative pioneers to address our time’s complexity and contentious questions.

🌿 The practices of diversity, contemplative action, and collaborative ecosystems are vital to fashioning an adaptive and creative approach to abrupt and stunning societal disruptions. 🌿

The graphic below depicts three continuous disruptions: globalization, environment, and immigration. They, individually and together, increasingly generate societal upheavals. In the past year alone, we have experienced several precipitous occurrences that have caused immediate panic. The worldwide pandemic and forest fires in California speak to the speed at which these events can cripple a region or an

entire nation. The pandemic has dramatically touched every sector of the globe and has resulted in thousands of deaths. Also, it has created a greater openness to global cooperation creating best practices leading to shared solutions. This level of collaboration has affirmed our global interdependence.



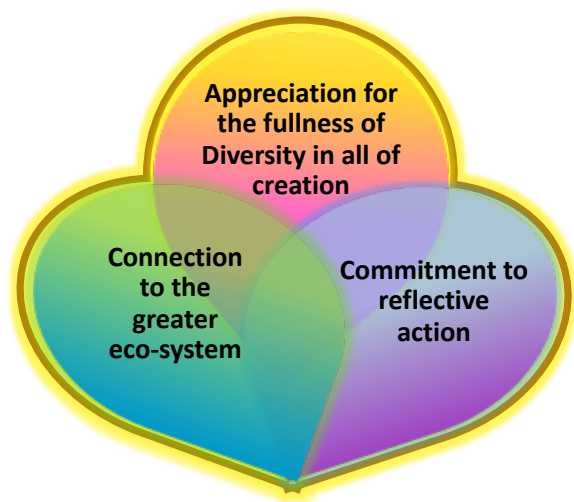
Society is realizing that these complex issues offer no simple solutions. For example, people migrating because of a crisis from one part of a region or globe to another create economic, housing, and social stress on their new community. These patterns of movement have raised cultural, economic, and social challenges. Migrants are entering well-established cultures, often with different languages, customs, and beliefs. Our traditional sequential change process cannot address today’s systemic problems. Therefore, we need to craft innovative solutions that summon us to become pioneers walking in the unknown, pursuing new horizons.

Practice One: Embracing Diversity

Diversity is grounded in the spirituality of Deuteronomy 30:19-20 where Moses offered the people of Israel the choice “of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, and then you and your descendants will live; love the Lord your

God, obey him and hold fast to him; that is life for you...". To choose by loving and holding fast to God is to embrace the unknown and the mystery of life. It is a constant choice to remain rooted while exploring new vistas. From the simple decisions to develop a new hobby or try fresh food, to the more difficult ones to understand a different culture or accept another's point of view, all are ways of opening oneself to the invitation to choose life.

The value of diversity opens one's soul to God's beauty, as seen in the montage of all creation. The acceptance of diversity increases opportunities to explore multiple solutions. The graphic below demonstrates the importance of seeing the uniqueness and intersection of these qualities.



*Diversity opens us to the grandeur and expanse of God's love and infinite goodness. In *Grounded*, Diana Butler Bass eloquently proclaims: "The world, the universe, is the 'body of God': all matter, all flesh, all myriad of beings, things, and processes that constitute physical reality are in and of God. God is not a spirit, but also body"(40). Bass speaks to the wonder and blessing of embracing God in the panoramic beauty of life.*

The richness of our world is its diversity in multiple forms:

- *Nature: trees, flowers, rivers, and landscapes*
- *Religions: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhist, Hindu, Taoism, etc.*
- *Culture: European, Asian, African, North, and South American, and the various cultures that comprise those continents.*

For Transformative Communities, the appreciation of this diverse splendor is fundamental to co-creation.

Diversity in all forms allows us to experience the enormity of life and go beyond self-imposed limits.

Sharing the universe's variety of cultures and people enables us to embrace the richness of the power of creation more deeply. It allows Transformative Communities to become prophetic witnesses to a world yearning for hope.

The increasing number of worldwide protests like Black Lives Matter, Woman's March, and similar demonstrations have shed light on the challenges of living in a multi-cultural society. These movements have raised profound and disturbing questions about inclusion, personal freedom, and individual rights. The marches have provoked passionate urgency to solve underlying racial tension and oppression. For the first time, many demonstrations are including intergenerational and culturally

diverse populations advocating for systemic change.

*In **Deepening Community**, Paul Born quotes Archbishop Desmond Tutu's *Future Without Forgiveness* when he describes the concept of ubuntu this way: "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." Born continues, "We belong in a bundle of life, a person is a person through other persons. If I am accomplished it is not the 'I' who identifies the accomplishments but the 'we.' We gain our identity and a sense of purpose in the context of our community" (49). His words define the grounding concept behind Transformative Communities' witness to the power of embracing the "we." Without this foundation, our world continues to validate its selfish individualism and self-absorption, which increases the tension already existing in our lives.*

Ongoing protests call us to reexamine long-held community assumptions and attitudes about equality. People who share their lived experiences highlight the difference between the minority's norms and the majority culture. As prophetic witnesses, Transformative Communities become leavens of hope and channels of change. Every day we hear beleaguered populations proclaim that they are tired of hollow promises and demand results.

 *Transformative Communities realize to co-create with God demands heartfelt conversion. These communities "Choose Life" by reverencing each culture's beauty and uniqueness with compassionate love.* 

*There is a collective recognition that this journey will demand an inner and outer transformation. Barbara Salter McNeil, in *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, defines reconciliation thus:*

Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance, and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God's original intention for all creation to flourish (26).

McNeil illuminates the importance of reconciliation as a spiritual practice to embrace our shared humanity. Reconciliation, by its essence, creates both opportunity and conflict as the foundation for growth. Our collective society needs to embrace reconciliation as an ongoing practice rather than an episodic approach created by civic unrest.

*Desmond and Mpho Tutu have developed a four-fold process for social healing in **The Book of Forgiveness** that lays a path toward reconciliation:*

- *Telling the Story*
- *Naming the Hurt*
- *Granting Forgiveness*
- *Renewing or Releasing the Relationship (49)*

We all have stories of being hurt, rejected, or scorned. Often, when this happens, we want to forget and quickly move on, but the scars remain in our spirit and body. We are regularly reminded that the holocaust exterminated millions of Jews only because of their nationality and religion. The telling of this story is a reminder of what can transpire without seeing the other's humanity. Thus

recalling the story opens the door to community healing and reconciliation. Transformative Communities co-create with God through witnessing the miracle of diversity by their spiritual practice of “Choosing Life” through reconciliation and love.

Practice Two: Practicing Contemplative Action

*The ongoing exploration of diversity opens the door to action. By entering into the beauty of a diverse world, we expand our ability to understand the complexity of critical issues. The resulting insights open the group to explore an interdisciplinary way of solving pressing social problems. Ilia Delio outlines the rationale in **The Unbearable Wholeness of Being:***

Anyone who has ever loved knows that love does not live in the abstract; when it is abstract, in word only, one is suspect of the lover. Love is an embodied act, expressed in physical reality. Because God’s love is relational, the name of God points to otherness and relationality (77).

This relational commitment strengthens the co-creative process with God to rejuvenate old systems and create new prototypes grounded in love seeking the common good.

Today, climate change, pandemic, and social unrest create seismic events that help us initiate new steps for recreating our systems. Migration and immigration are creating a more intercultural world. Thus we are at a crossroads

Society is yearning for innovative solutions for long-term societal struggles. One way is to embrace the journey witnessed by the great

mystics. Their methodology, grounded in contemplative silence, unleashes the group’s creative imagination and leads toward action. This reflective process weaves together contemplative silence and movement, enabling Transformative Communities to co-create with God.

In a society that demands instant gratification, the haunting question is: do we have the “will” to sustain action? Solutions, by their nature, require rigor and perseverance. The current cultural divisiveness over the wearing of face masks during the COVID crisis is a stark example of the polarity between individual rights and the common good. The simple wearing of a mask has become a politicized prop instead of a unifier in this crisis. Some argue that wearing a mask is an infringement on their civil and individual rights; others argue that wearing a mask is necessary for the common good and a responsibility of a good citizen. This simple conflict demonstrates the challenge of creating and agreeing on shared action for the common good.

Transformative Communities see this and other polarizing issues as challenges requiring a spiritual discipline. This practice demands a collective interiority of detachment, listening to others, and often compromise. Transformative communities recognize that it becomes impossible to maintain the balance between the individual and the community without communal solitude and honest dialogue.

Society is at a crossroads in seeking solutions to a puzzling future. It is not the first time our culture has faced this type of challenge. In the United States in the 1950s, the challenge of going to the moon summoned us to seek solutions yet to be

invented or achieved. In *American Moonshot*, Douglas Brinkley quotes John Kennedy's speech at Rice University. Kennedy's statement rings true in this historical moment.

...we choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because the challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone and one which we intend to win (363).

This challenge speaks to the weightiness it takes to create a transformational vision. It demands collective courage to detach from those mental models and behavioral patterns that block the transformative process. When Transformative Communities co-create with God, they make Kennedy's words real for their generation.



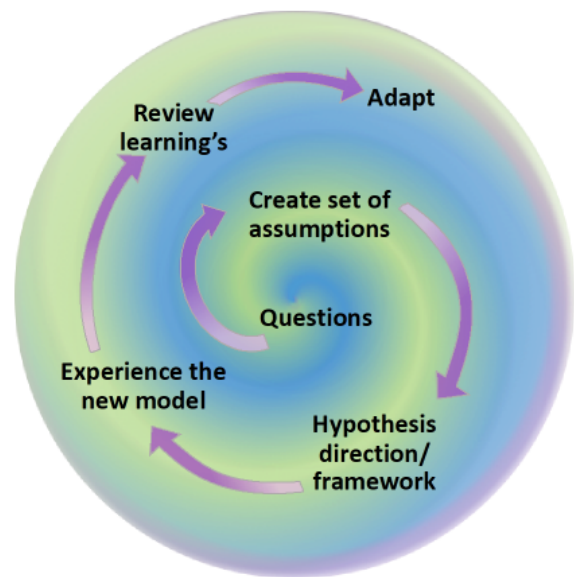
Today, society needs a sense of urgency, bold vision, and a commitment to act.



Like the moon shot, we will need to remain committed to a multiple-phase approach to achieve a direction.

So the question is, how? The graphic opposite lays out the elements of the process of contemplative action: questions, assumptions, hypotheses, and action. As humans, by nature, we yearn to explore the unknown. When we are seeking something new, it all starts with questions. Questions open up the mind and

heart to explore assumptions that lead to hypotheses, action, and continual adaptation. When we ask probing questions, they move us to explore our assumptions. This process slowly evolves into establishing a hypothesis or concept about a future reality. The deliberation moves to greater clarity, which catapults into a bold approach. There is a tendency at this juncture to believe we have completed the process.



The next challenging step is the implementation phase. There are two levels of creative process design and implementation. When the group decides on a course of action, it shifts to the implementation phase. At this phase, the espoused direction smacks up against reality, which is rarely a perfect match. Some elements succeed while others falter and need adaptation. It is why implementation is often a perplexing process. As the new model moves into actuality and experiences resistance, it demands constant learning, transformation, and vigilance. The unspoken yet poignant question that faces Transformative Communities is, "do we have the will?" It is a vital question because the challenge of implementing any vision or action meets

exasperating times, calling for perseverance and belief in the impossible becoming possible.

Success in any new venture demands a willingness to become detached from the initial aspirations. There is a tendency to believe that aspiration will automatically resolve the situation or lead to the desired outcome. That is why any new concept, idea, or activity often takes multiple steps to reach the goal.

The U.S. journey to the moon is an example of how often a bold vision can take decades to achieve. The prospect of going to the moon was a concept without the capacity to achieve it. It took a radical shift in every system to develop the science, technology, a collaborative ecosystem of resources to accomplish the dream.

There were three named phases, each with a unique purpose: Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo. Mercury was to check the capacity to launch a spacecraft, circle the globe, and safely return. Gemini focused on such critical elements as extended living and walking in space, and other necessary capacities needed to fly to the moon. Finally, Apollo was the process of going to the moon and returning safely to earth. Each stage demanded an intense commitment to expand knowledge, envision new instruments, and create technology never before conceived. It asked people to risk their lives for an endeavor that no human had ever experienced.

This adventure required an act of collective courage both by the country and the people involved. Every societal organization began to reimagine its purpose to align with this vision. It was a total national commitment in every sector of society to risk this transcendent vision.

*The pandemic is presenting our generation with the same question and demands. We are globally facing new challenges and the imperative to reinvigorate our organizations for a future yet unseen. In **Roadmap to Reconciliation**, Brenda Salter McNeil cites an anonymous statement: “Great achievements are not born from a single vision but the combination of many distinctive viewpoints. Diversity challenges, assumptions, open minds unlock our potential to solve any problem we may face” (69). Transformative Communities accept this challenge to co-create with God.*

Practice Three: Establishing a Collaborative Ecosystem

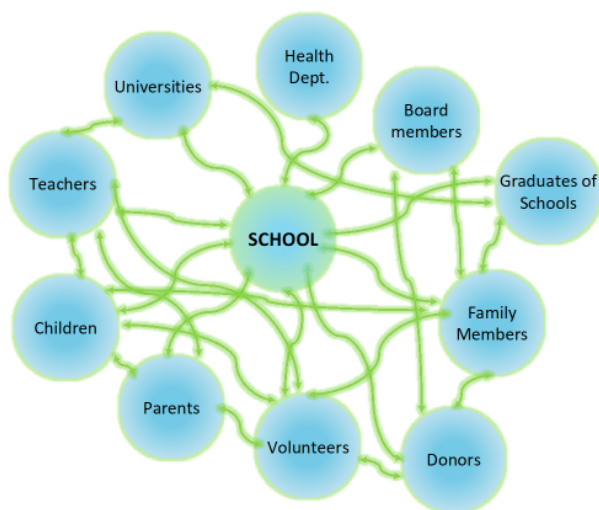
*In 2015, Pope Francis issued his second encyclical, **Laudato Si**, with the subtitle “on care for our common home.” This document calls us to see all organizations and systems as intricately united and asks us to respond to the world's internal ecology. It is the essential work of Transformative Communities in the twenty-first century. Pope Francis in **Laudato Si** said, “Each organism as a creature of God is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in defined space and functioning in a system” (95). In the past decade, we have come to appreciate ecosystems' value in every aspect of life.*

There is a tendency for organizations to explore the concepts of abundance and diminishment from their internal resources. What if the central question is: if we examine our relational ecosystem, could we reframe our reflection about diminishment and abundance? Could we understand diminishment better if we looked at a more comprehensive framework? Often when groups explore their relational connections, they

open themselves to potential collaboration and other possible solutions. Asking these questions transitions them from a limited perspective to a more outside –their– box consideration.

For example, the soil that creates our food is an integrated system woven together by bacteria, fungi, earthworms, amoebas, and protozoa. It is the power of these various agents interacting that feeds us. We see this framework in our lives, from nature to home to school to work. All are a part of a powerful interconnected and interwoven set of relationships. If we take a moment of reflection, we can understand the web of connections within our community.

The graphic below depicts an eco-system of relationships for a school. It illustrates how a school has a variety of connected relationships to achieve its students' educational outcomes. The school is an open system rather than a closed set of relationships. These connections foster the growth and development of the student, local community, and other institutions within the web.



*Transformative Communities at their core recognize they are more robust through active participation in their relationships. They embrace being an open rather than a closed system. Ilia Delio claims in **Making All Things New**: “The organization of an available system is the set of relations among its components, structures and the physical embodiment of its relational organization” (120-121). It is a significant shift for an organization to become an open rather than a closed system.*

When a group opens itself to expanded relationships, it delves more deeply into both the gifts and barriers of its interconnections. For example, collaborating on environmental issues exposes both the shared values and differences within the group as members work to set priorities and action steps. These relationships open groups to a renewed appreciation of their values, leadership styles, and call to action. It offers a contemplative space to seek greater clarity of their purpose based on collaborative seeking of solutions around a critical social issue.

The affirmation of being connected is essential for the community to “choose life.”

🌀 To choose life is to foster the spiritual practice of asserting that life's fundamental nature is interconnected. 🌀

Many cultures, however, believe in the guiding myth of the rugged individual. In contrast, the world has begun to understand and has moved to create a broader, more connected community to solve the most pressing issues. The current pandemic has demonstrated that a virus starting in one part of the world has a harmful

and unintended impact on all. The epidemic has shown that seeking solutions requires sharing resources and knowledge across countries. This level of collaboration lessens the impact from nation to nation. As we collectively grow in understanding this spiritual discipline, we expand the range of potential solutions.

Transformative Communities recognize the wisdom of establishing collaborative relationships and networks to solve complex social issues. Significant change usually demands an interdisciplinary approach. For example, the majority of us think homelessness is a housing issue. That is partially true, yet some individuals would not be homeless if they had work and a range of affordable housing. Others having debilitating mental or social diseases need society to provide intense psychological support and living space. Transformative Communities understand that social issues demand a rigorous commitment to an interdisciplinary approach to foster productive solutions.

An individual Transformative Community realizes that its mission and services address a particular issue because no single organization can serve all needs. To effect actual systemic change, therefore, they must fashion a coalition of partners with various gifts. They must continually foster and affirm their role with others in a more extensive ecosystem.

 *The spiritual experience of collaborative relationships helps groups appreciate God's infinite resources.* 

These associations create the landscape to co-create with God, seeking answers for today. Networks, collaboration, and other connections offer Transformative Communities extensive resources to co-create with God. It changes the mental and operational framework from diminishment to abundance promoting hope and passion for acting.

Conclusion

Diversity, contemplative action, and collaborative ecosystems are not three separate practices. They are interwoven efforts that, when linked together, create an integrated approach to solving complex issues.

In Re-Enchanting the Earth, Delio says: “Love tends to what is deep within us and draws us together into a new unity beyond our partial selves. Love causes us to see the world and all that is within it in a vibrant freshness, deep down freshness”(xxvi). It is the power of diversity, contemplative action, and a dedicated ecosystem that continually creates the freshness Delio celebrates. Both diversity and a collaborative ecosystem move the Transformative Community from isolation to connection, opening new creative opportunities.

According to Daniel O’Leary in An Astonishing Secret, “Creation is a web of relationships – a kind of mystical body. Everything in the universe is connected. We are all one, all part of the One Energy Field, the One Creative Source, the One Loving Creator” (203). The Transformative Community, at its core, takes to heart this message through its openness to diversity, contemplative action, and collaborative ecosystems.

Works Cited

- Bass, Diana. Grounded: Finding God in the World. Harper One: Greenville, SC, 2015.*
- Born, Paul. Deepening Community. Berrett-Koehler: San Francisco, CA, 2014.*
- Brinkley, Douglas. American Moonshot. NY: HarperCollins, 2019.*
- Delio, Ilia. Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness. Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 2015.*
- _____. *Re-Enchanting the Earth: Why AI Needs Religion. Orbis: Maryknoll, New York, 2020.*
- _____. *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love. Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 2014*
- Wcisel, Mary. Graphic Designs, 2020.*
- Feiler, Bruce. Life Is In the Transitions. NY: Penguin, 2020.*
- Francis, Pope. Encyclical Letter. Laudato Si'. (24 May 2015).*
- McNeil, Barbara Salter. Roadmap to Reconciliation. IVP: Downers' Grove, IL, 2016.*
- New American Bible. USCCB: Washington, DC, 2010.*
- O'Leary, Daniel. An Astonishing Secret. Dublin: Columba Books, 2017.*
- Tutu, Desmond. No Future without Forgiveness. NY: Doubleday, 1999.*

Transformative Communities: God's Co-creative Pioneers



Author and consultant, Mark Clarke, is a Senior Consultant for CommunityWorks, Inc. He is available for consultation and welcomes a conversation to discuss your thoughts and questions about his writings.

For more information about using his article and concepts, please contact him at mark_5777@msn.com or call 616-550-0083. Additional articles are available on the CommunityWorks, Inc., website:

cworksindy.com/publications.