Toward a Theology of the Community

BY MARY KATHRYN GRANT, PhD

Turning on my computer the other day, I found an advertisement for a new book on e-commerce: *The X-Economy,* by Theodore Koulopoulos. An excerpt from the book said, "The x-economy is a *community,* not a market . . . [and it is] built on *trust,* not transactions." It went on to say that "if exchanges are to replace, much less outpace, today's methods of doing business, they must provide a *trusted community"* [emphasis added].

"Provide a trusted community"! That advice would seem to apply more aptly to Catholic health care than it does to e-commerce. One of our ministry's more critical current needs is a deeper understanding of a theology of community and the common good. The ministry needs workplaces that are trusted communities—trusted by both the communities beyond our walls, which we serve, and those within them, which are made up of those who do the serving.

We live in an age of "dialogue training," "relationship rescue," difficult conversations, "transformative" language, all of which are popular topics for workshops, lectures, books, and *Oprah*-like TV shows. These phenomena—which promise to teach us skills in developing community, identifying common ground, and restoring the common good—are nowadays unavoidable. All are evidence of a strong hunger for community.

Strip mall Starbucks and Barnes & Noble cafes, in which people congregate and seek familiar faces, have replaced the corner drugstore hangout. The instant messenger is a very popular feature of e-mail provider services. And almost all online learning, even predominantly asynchronous courses, has a communitarian component, ranging from chat rooms to simple e-mail. In fact, a growing number of studies describe how successful communities can and must be created in cyberspace—a testament to the human need for connectedness.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING SKILLS

Granted, the phrases "community" and "common good" are often misunderstood and fre-

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quently carry a lot of mixed baggage. For religious women and men, the word "community" often conjures up memories of the struggles involved in communal living and the negative feelings that concept carries for some people. However, a negative reaction to the words does not negate the pressing need for the reality.

So what does this have to do with leadership development? In today's health care environment, and particularly in our faith-based ministry, community and a seeking of the common good are clearly imperatives. These imperatives can be demonstrated in many ways.

As has been observed repeatedly, the complexity of today's health care world demands the full collaboration of many and varied parties and perspectives. Mission-based discernment, integrated strategic planning and quality improvement efforts all require interdisciplinary teams focusing on the best alternatives for the community served. Self-interest yields to common good. Mutual accountability draws out the best from each contributor—creating trusted communities.

The skills required to create and sustain these trusted communities are leadership skills in the truest sense. They require the integration of personal attributes and values with finely honed business and professional skills. They require inner reflection, spiritual practice, and professional skill building.

The May-June issue of *Health Progress* contained a special section, "The Ties That Bind," that looked at the factors enabling a health care merger or consolidation to succeed. Informal wisdom suggests that good relationships and efforts to form trusted communities are predictors of good outcomes for such transactions. Moreover, a spirit of holding the assets of the ministry "in common" in the name of the church facilitates consolidation for the common good. (This is an aspect of "community" and the "common good" that deserves its own exploration, beyond the scope of this column.)

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