



The Value of Mutual Inculturation

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As Catholic health care continues to transform itself to become more nimble, seamless and patient-oriented, leaders also must transform and find new models for the work they do. The lessons learned from practical theology and the respectful approaches of the field missionary — particularly the concept and practice of mutual inculturation — offer mission leaders a way forward in the changing roles and expectations of health care.

The process of inculturation was first defined by Pope John Paul II, in paragraph 52 of *Redemptoris Missio*, as “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.” In other words, inculturation is the ongoing process of mutual influence and transference between one culture and another. Inculturation is different from enculturation, which is a one-sided practice that uplifts the giftedness of one culture while requiring the other to assimilate by abandoning its identity and traditions. In contrast, inculturation is rooted in the conviction that each person and community possesses unique wisdom and giftedness and that it entails a long-term process of mutual give and take wherein each party is as much student as teacher, as much giver as recipient. The ongoing process presupposes dispositions of love, hospitality and humility, all exercised in a commitment to know and understand the other. In paragraph 53, Pope John Paul II explained the process in this way:

Missionaries ... must immerse themselves in the cultural milieu of those to whom they are sent, moving beyond their own cultural limitations. Hence they must learn the language of the place in which they work,

become familiar with the most important expressions of the local culture, and discover its values through direct experience. Only if they have this kind of awareness will they be able to bring to people the knowledge of the hidden mystery ... in a credible and fruitful way. It is not of course a matter of missionaries renouncing their own cultural identity, but of understanding, appreciating, fostering and evangelizing the culture of the environment in which they are working ...

When the process of inculturation is applied to Catholic health care, it can deeply impact the culture of the organization.

MISSION LEADER AS MISSIONARY

For mission leaders to practice inculturation requires a shift in perspective and culture. We are accustomed to leading with our gifts, so as mission leaders we tend to provide formation for other leaders and co-workers and share our knowledge and expertise regarding ethics, pastoral care and church relations when appropriate. At the same time, however, we often know little of the day-to-day issues, problems and passions of executive leaders, departments or co-worker groups within our organizations. Inculturation calls us to engage these local cultures from an attitude of genuine inquiry.



Committing to inculturation involves developing deeper partnerships between mission leaders and other executive leaders, especially in the spaces those leaders operate. As mission leaders, we take on something of a missionary spirit when we emerge from the safety of the office or step down from the podium from which we sometimes speak to engage with others within the organizations we serve. Inculturation as a mission model can result in strengthened relationships and facilitate more seamless mission integration because it calls us to extend our communities. In the transitions ahead, strong relationships at executive levels will be essential to how we will steward Catholic health care into the future.

There are two elements critical to taking on the process of inculturation. The first is a disposition of genuine humility. That allows mission leaders to enter relationships simultaneously confident of their gifts, comfortable with uncertainty and willing to be immersed in the culture they may be called to influence. The second element, related to the first, is letting go of one's ego in order to accomplish an agenda larger than one's own.

LOVE AND HOSPITALITY IN LEADERSHIP

In the Christian tradition, the three virtues of faith, hope and charity (*caritas*, that is, love) are foundational to all others. First Corinthians 13:13 exhorts us to remember “the greatest of these is love.” The mandate of love is essential to the success of inculturation and demands that mission leaders remain open and receptive, since all characteristics of leadership are contained within it. This open stance is true hospitality, which always pushes us beyond ourselves into wider spheres. Moral theologian and ethicist M. Therese Lysaught, PhD, explains that *caritas*, or love, is at the root of all relationships in Catholic health care: “*Caritas* in communion as the fundamental theological reality should inform, infuse and transform every aspect of Catholic health care, every action, every structure, every practice.”¹

This missionary approach seeks opportunities to learn, listen and discover what is unknown. Sharing the gifts that are unique to each of us, mission leaders work to uphold hospitable cultures wherein no one is afraid to share their tal-

ents. This is not a platform for pious religiosity, but a culture embedded in the everyday outcomes and decisions of health care. The spirit of *caritas* and hospitality enable us to immerse ourselves in cultures and conditions beyond what is expected or comfortable. As practical virtues, they bridge gaps by celebrating all the ways God works in Catholic health care, including clinical specialties, finance, technology, bedside care, operations, supply chain, call centers and so on.

Christine D. Pohl, PhD, professor of social ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, offers a helpful explanation of the type of hospitality needed for inculturation. “Hospitality depends on defined communities, but it always presses those communities outward to make the circle of care larger,” she says. “It requires the crossing of significant social boundaries and the simultaneous affirmation of certain distinctions. Hospitality should be offered with grace and enthusiasm, yet it is often provided in the context of limited resources ... hospitality often benefits both hosts and guests.”²

RELINQUISHING EGOS

The second critical element for inculturation is relinquishing our ego. We must get out of our own way and cultivate an openness of spirit that is devoid of ego or agenda. Poet Robert Waldron reminds us, “When the ego dominates life, there

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is no room at the ‘inn’ of consciousness for God.”³

A good way to begin is to pay attention to the role our ego plays in interactions. Once we have noted its presence, we try to put it aside so we can focus on God's movement. Identifying our motives, fears and prejudices helps us mindfully discern the difference between when we are acting on God's behalf and when we are pushing our own agendas. Humility helps keep us



detached from our egos and focused on what is best for those we serve. As each of us “empties her/himself of preconceptions, paradigms of interpretation, or presumptions”⁴ and listens to the stories of others, we also open ourselves to new insights in the ministry. The very process of emptying ourselves of ego, agendas and expectations makes sacred space for new wisdom, new

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relationships and new, unforeseen gifts.

This mutual exchange of gifts takes our relationships beyond the ATM-mindset of drive-by, drop-in mission interactions and places them within a context that is ongoing, reciprocal and relational. This new dynamic of exchange builds teams whose strength lies in the shared gifts of each person offered for the good of the ministry. Working together in this way sharpens our skills, broadens our understanding of the ministry and creates relationships of trust and true communion. Rather than polarizing the camps between mission and margin, care for the poor and market share, common good and bottom line, the conversation can bring leadership teams to face issues and priorities together.

Mission as inculturation takes the long view and embraces the ultimate goal of a high-functioning, integrated ministry. Mission inculturation positions the mission voice as a “value add” rather than an “add-on.” Instead of being relegated to an agenda item, mission can engage wider ministry activities and benefit from the insights of other executive leaders in answering their questions. Inculturation seeks inroads, finds points of connection and builds up the community for the good of all.

ELEMENTS OF MUTUAL INCULTURATION

Specific approaches and embodiments of mission leadership via inculturation will vary as widely as the systems and structures of Catholic health

care, but a few general elements are relevant in most situations.

Showing up in humility means we assume the best intentions and integrity of our colleagues. We need to be intentional about seeing others as partners and teammates. Practical ways to show up in humility include getting out of our mission-designated spaces and visiting others’ offices, departments and public areas. Other possibilities include rounding, taking meals with others and getting onto others’ meeting agendas. Accepting the hospitality of others places us in a receptive position as listener and learner. When a mission leader asks to attend a finance meeting in order to understand the decisions, challenges, culture and daily work of finance, it can begin relationships of reciprocity and trust. Establishing a listening presence in an unexpected place follows the lead of God, who seeks us out rather than waits to be sought.

We continue to build relationships by finding points of connection and common ground. Asking leading questions raises defenses and suspicions: “What are your struggles with mission?” “How can mission be more integrated into your areas?” Questions like this assume there is a problem, whereas nonjudgmental questions open conversations that help us understand the expertise, perspective, passion and goals of those within the ministry. Open-ended questions are essential to the process: “What are your goals?” “What are you excited about?” “What are you trying to achieve in the next two weeks? Six months? Two years?”

The process of inculturation isn’t about losing our mission lens, but about using it to find natural connections and seeing the way mission can be braided into the work. Inculturation seeks to make mission connections explicit across the ministry rather than to sell the products of mission (formation, discernment processes, pastoral care, spirituality, etc).

This kind of alignment will look different in each location. It may be a collaborative effort between mission and finance to create formative materials around stewardship and budgeting. It could focus on supporting a nursing leader who wants to enhance his or her team’s understanding of sacramental moments. Once the practice of inculturation is vibrant, the possibilities for alignment and collaboration across departments grow exponentially.

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Enhanced teamwork empowers all co-workers to see the mission connections in their work. The culture shifts from one of silos to appreciating that all of us, working together, are accountable for the health and viability of ministry into perpetuity. As we broaden our understanding of the ministry through mutual inculturation, we begin to encourage and trust each other to steward the mission in ways authentic to his or her role.

We may raise questions about how a revenue-generating project aligns with caring for the poor, or what effect consolidations will have on employees already at risk, but we should not provide answers or prejudge solutions. Once we have made ourselves available as resources and have asked forthright, but respectful, questions, we stand as a team to support the ministry's work.

BENEFITS OF INCULTURATION

Our ministries, communities and co-workers will all benefit from a mission model of inculturation. Within the organization, inculturation establishes healthy channels of collaboration and communication by fixing attention on the good of the entire ministry and not one or another set of interests. Additionally the communal vision can help break down existing silos and deepen the understanding of what it means to be a ministry. Leaders who genuinely engage practices of inculturation set a profound tone for the culture of the organization. As the diversity, dignity and wisdom of each per-

son is upheld, the engagement and experience of ministry will deepen across the organization. In the context of this type of community, possessiveness is diminished, trust grows and right relationships can flourish.

Change is rarely easy, and shifting paradigms can be complicated and messy work. But as mission leaders, we must remain relevant and engaged in the life of our ministry. As health care continues to recreate itself, we, too, will need to shift. Taking the long view, mission as inculturation offers a great opportunity for influence and integration. The model presents an avenue of transition from a hierarchical structure to a communal process rooted in shared wisdom and respect for the giftedness of each of us in the healing ministry.

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NOTES

1. M. Therese Lysaught, *Caritas in Communion: Theological Foundations of Catholic Health Care*. (St. Louis: The Catholic Health Association of the United States, 2014), 47.
2. Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 127.
3. Robert Waldron, "Gerard Manley Hopkins' Incarnational Vision," *Spiritual Life* 57, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 219.
4. Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, Kentucky: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 76.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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