



Session 4: Exploring our Emerging Future: Communal Discernment Discernment & Small Group Summary Report

Women at the Well Dialogues Session 4 applied key elements of a communal discernment process to a fictional case study. On October 22, 2019, 65 sisters from 10 CCA Communities and Kirkintilloch participated in Session 4 of *Women at the Well Dialogues* via Zoom. The first section of this summary outlines ways the communal discernment process was used by all participants. The second section of this summary provides an overview of all small group responses and considerations.

The discernment centered around NCA's Leadership Team seeking input from the 4 communities that comprise the membership of the association, regarding if they would endorse exploring a common formation model for the association. The question small groups explored was "From the perspective of community #4 do you recommend NCA LT exploring common formation?" First we share the process as it was used and then details of the outcome 'leanings' from all 10 groups which was overwhelmingly positive with carefully considered reservations.

CCA Session #4 Communal Discernment Process Summary

NCA Leadership Team is identified as the decision-maker: A communal discernment is undertaken by each community, asking them to explore using a common NCA formation model for both ongoing and initial formation. Contributing factors include recommendations outlined in *Cor Orans*, and the realities of current day-to-day life and commitments faced by individual communities. The case study specifically describes community #4 and asks each *Women at the Well* small group, using a consistent communal discernment model, to provide feedback as community #4 to the NCA LT on the question of exploring a common NCA-wide formation model.

Framed Discernment Question: The NCA LT question is whether community #4 can support exploring a shared-formation model across the association, including initial and ongoing formation. Most often in real-time discernment a question may engender the need for more information and data collecting. For this exercise small groups were asked to 'run the model' in absence of additional information, and to capture the additional essential information desired or needed. Small groups were also asked to assume NCA would include all communities to participate in any next steps. The focus therefore was on, considering the dynamics of community #4 -- could community #4 affirm the value of exploring a common NCA formation model or not. In pre-work the need for additional information began to surface, and continued into the communal discussion. For example participants wanted to know more about the make-up of the other 3 communities. A desire for more information is common. Often additional information is needed and collected as a group

moves through discernment. Sometimes however additional information will not be available and a group works with what they have. It's always valuable to honor, capture and consider emerging questions. Given the constraints of this exercise small groups were asked to walk through the process in absence of additional data. (*Additional information and specific questions raised by small groups is captured and shared in the session summary.)

Personal Discernment and preparatory work: Authentic communal discernment necessitates personal reflection, because each member comes to the table with their own experience and wisdom. In order to access and articulate one's personal leaning pre-reflection is needed. In preparatory work for session #4 the case study and supporting information was provided, along with a worksheet & reflection questions to serve as a thought-starter for personal reflection. Feedback was unanimous that each person entering small groups having done personal reflection and coming prepared to share was foundational to good dialogue. Session 4 feedback underscores participants recognized taking time to reflect prior to the session informed their perspective, strengthened their articulation and deepened their approach to the discernment question. Many participants shared the process of doing personal discernment in advance was the beginning stages of recognizing predispositions, assumptions, and opening the heart-mind to other options. Holding one's own position/leaning lightly invites in other perspectives thus honoring every position is valid and meaningful.

Communal Gathering & Discussion: Each small group began with sharing their personal leanings, modeled by the facilitator. This approach demonstrates each member does not need to defend their position or share all the details of how they landed where they did through personal reflection, but does invite each person to have a voice. After all have shared the discussion is opened. Here participants may ask questions of each other (often for clarification or to better understand how someone reached their leaning) which can bring forward ideas and angles that do not emerge when a decision is made individually or without pre-reflection. An appreciation of complexities, nuances and valid yet competing values of group members are named. This sifting and winnowing strengthens dialogue and confidence as the small group travels toward consensus/recommendation in response to the discernment question. The process is designed to move the group to recognize contingencies, name any additional stakeholder/persons impacted, and clarify additional facts & perspectives to be considered. Often a communal discernment process will involve several meetings. This allows for continued prayerful personal discernment, collecting available additional information, ensuring all impacted persons are part of the discernment. Even without several meetings a communal discernment often provides ample time for prayer and silent reflection. Through these practices the whole group moves deeper and deeper toward clarity.

Role of Facilitator: Facilitator role is to keep the group on track, clarifying varied perspectives and reflecting back what is emerging. A facilitator works to identify when a group moves off track or out-of-scope, as well as ensure all are heard. Often a facilitator may test the process by introducing alternative ways of thinking (ie playing the devil's advocate), particularly if a group is moving too quickly to consensus or engaging in group-think before deeply discerning the question. The facilitator and note-taker are capturing themes, parking lot items, and watching time. Feedback from Session 4 demonstrates facilitators functioned using these facilitation techniques.

Outcome (Recommendation/Decision): A communal discernment moves in a natural progression from individual leanings through open discussion to group recommendation/decision. Feedback from Session 4 participants underscores how hearing a myriad of perspectives and approaches to a particular concern or question provides opportunity to see the question from a variety of angles and reconsider positions, or expand possibility thinking around solutions. There are many ways to reach an outcome, including consensus, recommendation, and decision. In the fictional NCA case study small groups were asked to make a recommendation, from the perspective of community #4, using a scale of 1 – 5. All numbers were noted and a recommendation by the group reached. (*specifics of recommendations are outlined in the session summary.) This process provides the NCA LT with a fuller understanding of community #4's perspective, their rationale and ultimately their willingness to explore a common formation model for NCA.

Next Steps: Given the fictional case study the following next steps for the NCA LT are also fictional and follow the case study premise to conclusion. The NCA LT, as decision maker regarding whether or not to explore a common formation model for the NCA, will participate in a next level discernment. In this discernment they will review the feedback provided by all communities of NCA. Following the communal discernment process they will each receive the information and personally discern their leanings then meet as a group and together discern next steps. Presumably they would take community #4's input, along with community #1, #2, #3, and look for additional questions, concerns, themes, and fresh ideas. NCA LT would then discern themselves as a group taking into consideration all input in discerning an answer to 'should we explore an NCA-wide formation model? (*Session 4 Small Group Responses outlines what emerged for community #4 as key areas for clarification. Some of these include the distinctions between initial and ongoing; clarification on the idea of a 'house of formation', a need for engaging all in the 'how', identifying all formators NCA-wide, considering a task force approach, etc.)

Once NCA LT reach a conclusion they will share the decision and next steps with the whole of NCA. If the decision is not to go forward in exploring a common formation platform they will communicate the decision, share the rationale, and reiterate the current approach to formation (both ongoing and initial.) If the decision is to further explore a common formation model they will communicate the decision, share the rationale and outline next steps for ongoing dialogue with communities about the process. This case study set up the NCA LT as the decision-making body seeking input from communities and using feedback from all NCA communities provides them with good insight to make the decision on behalf of the whole NCA.

Women at the Well Dialogues Project Team in Sessions 4 strove to invite participants to play with using a communal discernment model in ways that inform future practices for CCA and her member communities. We created a fictional case study, mirroring some current realities in CCA, however we cautioned small groups to be careful not to conflate the case study with real-time considerations for CCA. Working with a case that has practical and pragmatic dimensions further drives home the efficacy or value of using communal discernment in real-time. As we share the process and the Session 4 summary – we remind all that this was an exercise and opportunity to work with a communal discernment model.

Summary of Session 4 Small group Responses

Regarding shared initial formation program – No one was in favor of a separate ‘house of formation’ as proposed in *Cor Orans* or of sisters spending more than a few weeks a year outside of their home community. Clearly, the preference was for the main locus of formation to take place within the ‘home’ community. Bonding with the sisters within the culture of one’s own community in addition to quality time with their formators was a strongly-emphasized value. Formation was affirmed as much more than an intellectual process with the ‘home’ community seen as the primary ‘formator.’ While virtual/on-line meetings via Zoom were preferred for more regular meetings, periodic in-person meetings - including visits to different NCA monasteries - were suggested as an important means of fostering much-needed peer support.

A shared initial formation program would also provide support for the formators in sharing the burden of the work while utilizing the expertise of the sisters in different communities. A consistent quality of formation was seen to be a strength for the whole NCA Association. Concerns included who and how the formators would be chosen and whether all the communities would agree with who was chosen and how formation topics were presented.

Regarding both initial and on-going formation – The sisters saw this as a potential means of renewing and deepening the charism among the NCA communities. They also saw a shared formation plan as meeting the expectations for formation presented in *Cor Orans*. This new form of collaboration was seen as a positive way of supporting the NCA Carmels; transitioning from an individualistic mindset to that of being a community among communities. While some expressed concerns about the energy needed to develop a shared formation program and wondered if it’s already too late to do something like this, others recommended that it would be beneficial to the NCA to try new approaches, beginning with small steps and seeing what may evolve.

Suggestions for the NCA Leadership Team

- Assign a task force to study the possibility of a shared initial/on-going formation program taking into consideration the questions raised above.
- Explore already existing formation resources, both virtual and in-person, that the NCA communities could take advantage of. Possible resources might be:
 - o CTU formation programs for formators etc.
 - o Online classes available at several Catholic universities
 - o Shared discussion of common DVD’s, talks via ZOOM
 - o Shared speakers on topics via ZOOM

Parking lot suggestions for topics other than formation that could be shared among the NCA Carmels via ZOOM included:

- o Planning for the future
- o Leadership development
- o Development of formators
- o Technology
- o Sharing on contemporary topics such as immigration