

The Nazareth Dance: it's not about the money

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Introduction

For many years academics and consultants have written books and articles purporting to reveal the secret of sustainable business success. We have written some and been influenced by many. At Telos Partners we work with our clients to create sustainable success, but it remains the case that few businesses enjoy outstanding success over very long periods and there appears to be no silver bullet, magic potion or simple rubric to deliver it.

Those organisations that have lasted and had the most sustained success appear to be driven by passion for a purpose beyond profit, the pursuit of a higher, immutable, purpose – a mission they must fulfil. These organisations are often explicitly, though not exclusively, 'not for profit', they are often driven by a moral motivation, sometimes inspired by a religious commitment. This is the story of how a religious order, The Congregation of the Sisters of Nazareth (the Sisters) has, since 2006, taken on the challenge of working towards sustainable success by balancing fulfilment of purpose against pursuit of the profit necessary to sustain the organisation for future generations. The order, founded in Hammersmith over 150 years ago in London, engaged in a process designed to enable it to survive and thrive for another 150 years. It has made impressive progress. This paper considers the process and its outcomes, the impact of 'business best practice' thinking, the challenges thrown up and, crucially, what other organisations can learn from the Sisters. This is a story of Mission in Business, the Nazareth Dance – but it is also the story of a remarkable group of women.

Cabinet Government: Primus Inter Pares

The General Council of the Sisters of Nazareth was elected at the 2006 General Chapter (the Sisters' governing 'parliament') with a brief to take the Congregation forward for the next six years. The new leadership team comprised the Superior General, Sr. Mary Monaghan, and four Councillors, Sr. Catherine Higgins, Sr. Patricia Enright, Sr. Rita O'Shea and Sr. Rose Hoye. Between them, the Sisters had worked in every Region of the Congregation – America, Australasia, Ireland, Southern Africa and the UK – over the years. On taking up office, these Sisters decided that they needed to utilise the skills of others both inside

and outside the Congregation in order to carry out the responsibility given to them by the Chapter. When we met them the Sisters were looking for help with what appeared to be a somewhat daunting task. As they told us later, 'We just knew we had to do something, but we didn't know what exactly to do and how to go about it.' These Sisters have many skills and much experience but it is their faith and commitment to Nazareth that is most important to them and proved such an invaluable resource in the process we undertook together. Each Sister has a story about how she came to know Nazareth. One was visiting a grandmother who had just moved to a Nazareth House. As she walked in the door, 'Straight away I knew I wanted to be a Sister of Nazareth and I have never wanted anything else.' This is the spirit and commitment which allowed the five Sisters to find the courage to embark on a journey of change and to adapt many of the operating practices that had underpinned the Congregation's ministry since its foundation.

The spirit of community and understanding of collective engagement is critical to this story, but so is the courage



of the individual leader. Sr. Mary would robustly claim that the collective discussion, coherence and, sometimes lengthy deliberations and prayers of the General Council were the key to their progress. We can attest to the truth of that – but would also urge recognition that in any collective journey, one individual must be brave (or foolish) enough to take the first step. In this story, that individual is Sr. Mary who has led the General Council – truly a first among equals.

The Sisters

The Congregation of the Sisters of Nazareth is an international congregation of Roman Catholic religious women that provides care for the poor and needy. The Sisters undertake their mission in a world that has changed enormously from that which saw the birth of the order. Like many organisations of similar background they have been

struggling for some years to adapt to external changes including increasingly wealthy populations and, in some countries, competition from the nationalisation of social and health care provision. Their traditional business model has been sorely tested. By 2006 they found themselves facing substantial challenges to the survival of their care ministries.

The early years of the Sisters of Nazareth saw dramatic growth. Founded by Victoire Larmenier, the mother House in Hammersmith was built in 1857. Victoire Larmenier, of Breton origin, appears to have been a woman of exceptional determination and though she died relatively young, her Sisters have been imbued with her energy and entrepreneurial spirit. By 1878 (the year of Victoire's death) they had opened eight Nazareth Houses in the United Kingdom and by 1924 the Sisters had Houses and ministries in Ireland, Southern Africa, Australasia and the United States. They continue to operate in all these Regions.

The heroism and achievements of the early Sisters are astounding. They arrived in South Africa (1882), Australasia (1888) and America (1923) knowing they would not be able to return home. They toiled in heavy black habits in the heat of these countries, receiving no funding and enduring the long delays in communication with Hammersmith, the mother House, because of the distances involved. They built ministries of care on the basis of their own thrift, diligent labour and the generosity of supporters. The Sisters cared for the poor and needy through many different ministries regardless of colour, race or creed. The Sisters of today are both professed and professional, still pursuing active ministries, and involved in a wide range of ministries utilising the many and varied skills of each one.

Reaffirmation and Reformation

By 2006 the story of growth and energy had become one of challenge as the Sisters faced many changes both in religious life and in the ministries in which they were working. There were, at this point, 299 Sisters managing 37 Houses across the five Regions. There had been 800 Sisters at the high point just after World War II – recognised historically as a 'boom' period in terms of numbers entering religious life. Now, in line with trends in religious Congregations generally, the average age of the Sisters was rising and fewer new vocations (recruits) were choosing religious life as their lifelong commitment.

Care of the aged was, and continues to be, the principal focus of the mission. The Sisters provided an excellent service but faced a number of challenges which could not be ignored.

The Congregation has always depended on the initiative of the Sisters and Houses have operated largely

autonomously; this autonomy extending in some cases to individual sections within the care homes. In 2006 it was recognised that this operating model would not ensure a positive, sustainable future for the ministries of the Congregation. Although a number of lay professionals had been employed to help manage the care operation there was no consistent application of the good business practice needed today to support the Sisters' undoubted quality of caring – care expressed through technical, emotional and spiritual activities – for body, mind and soul.

For a generation, the default strategy for dealing with the challenge of declining numbers of Sisters and increasing operational costs was House closure – shrinking the organisation. Over their history the Sisters have opened a total of 80 Houses across the world. Each House consisted of a convent for the Sisters with an adjoining care home and/or residential care for children. By 2006 the total number had halved. No meaningful reporting mechanisms for assessing the worldwide organisational performance existed. At the same time external changes such as more demanding regulations, the imposition of higher care standards and increases in resident expectations were driving increases in the cost of care provision against a backdrop of static or very slowly rising fees. A high percentage of the buildings in the UK and Ireland were aging and not designed to meet modern standards although some Houses had been extensively refurbished or rebuilt. In South Africa an innovative programme to build retirement villages had allowed the care homes to be refurbished and improved. In America and Australasia, a number of Nazareth Houses were upgraded to meet market demands thanks to a combination of generous donations from supporters, accumulated funds and government based initiatives for raising finance for capital projects.

The high level of local autonomy, arising historically from the distances involved, had the effect that the Houses were lacking in common standards, information and controls, physical, technical and management infrastructure and were getting few, if any, benefits from the scale of the organisation and its accumulated knowledge. For example, in all Regions, each House ran its own payroll, often using different processes, not all of them computerised.

Although the situation varied significantly between Regions, and indeed between Houses within Regions, the Congregation was not collectively generating sufficient income to meet the rising costs of day to day operations let alone accumulating the capital required to make necessary investments in maintaining and upgrading facilities to meet increasing standards. These financial constraints created a further risk to the survival of the Congregation. No organisation can sustain itself in the face of continuing financial losses and these had to be addressed whilst at the same time maintaining the Spirit of Nazareth – the values and beliefs that create the identity of the organisation. In the face of the great challenges facing the care industry the organisation was not well placed to make a coherent, strategic response.

As this is written in 2011, the picture is very different. There has been a renewal of hope – the Sisters are looking positively towards the future. The management model still maximises autonomy at the Regional and House levels but at the same time the organisation is working collaboratively to agreed, common standards and a shared plan for the Congregation. In business terms, the introduction of a solid management infrastructure and the development of new systems has placed the care operation on a sounder financial footing – and allowed it to be measured and reported in a real way. The Council is now in a position where it can review the financial performance of the whole organisation, can manage and support the weaker Houses and make informed and effective choices about investment of trading surpluses to support and grow its mission.

Ringling the Changes – the Substance to Intervention

In working with the Sisters we brought to bear our *convictions* about the factors that need to be addressed to create an effective organisation and about the *process* required to make sustainable and appropriate change. In the former case we based our approach upon an understanding of the organisation as a dynamic system, using Stafford Beer's Viable Systems Model. In particular we shaped our working around 'The Trialogue', an element of Beer's thinking adapted and developed by Dr Peter Dudley. This model asserts that a viable organisation, one which is capable of adaptation in conjunction with its environment, must carry out three tasks simultaneously: it must *manage its present*, *create its future* and *nurture its identity*.

Where we are going
Vision, strategy, renewal and succession

If absent:
Short-termism, unlikely to achieve full potential, lack of direction

creating
the future

Who we are

If absent:
Lack of passion, displaced energy, inappropriate behaviours

nurturing
identity
Purpose, values, behaviours, policies, standards, 'brand' etc

managing the
present

What we do
Allocation and management of resources, optimising performance

If absent:
Great ideas, no action! Lack of available resources to implement, disappointed investors

Source: Dr Peter Dudley - after Stafford Beer and W Ross Ashby

The organisation must be efficient, making good use of all of its resources, but also effective, focused on fulfilment of its agreed purpose and recognising that profit is only one element of the balance of objectives to be achieved to ensure viability. It must have the capability and capacity to 'scan the horizon' and understand changes in its environment. To remain viable it must co-evolve with that environment to meet the needs of tomorrow as well as manage the tasks of today. The choices thus involved are difficult to make as they depend on appropriate and accurate information and fine judgement – judgements which are driven by values and beliefs. The decisions must not only be rational they must also be consistent with the identity of the organisation, with its understanding of its purpose and values, with the fulfilment of the reasons for its existence. Overall viability, the sustainability of the organisation, is a function of its 'fit' to the needs, demands and opportunities of the business environment, and the balance and performance of its internal capabilities and skills in matching those needs – financial, human and organisational.

Approaching the assignment with this perspective enabled us to engage directly with the Sisters' concern to safeguard their mission and their distinctive ethos in a way that appealed to them and to relate the 'business' issues to the mission in a way that made sense to them. As one Sister put it 'We don't want to be too businesslike. Our priority is caring for people, not making money.' The Trialogue became a useful way of holding it all together, of exploring the Nazareth Dance.

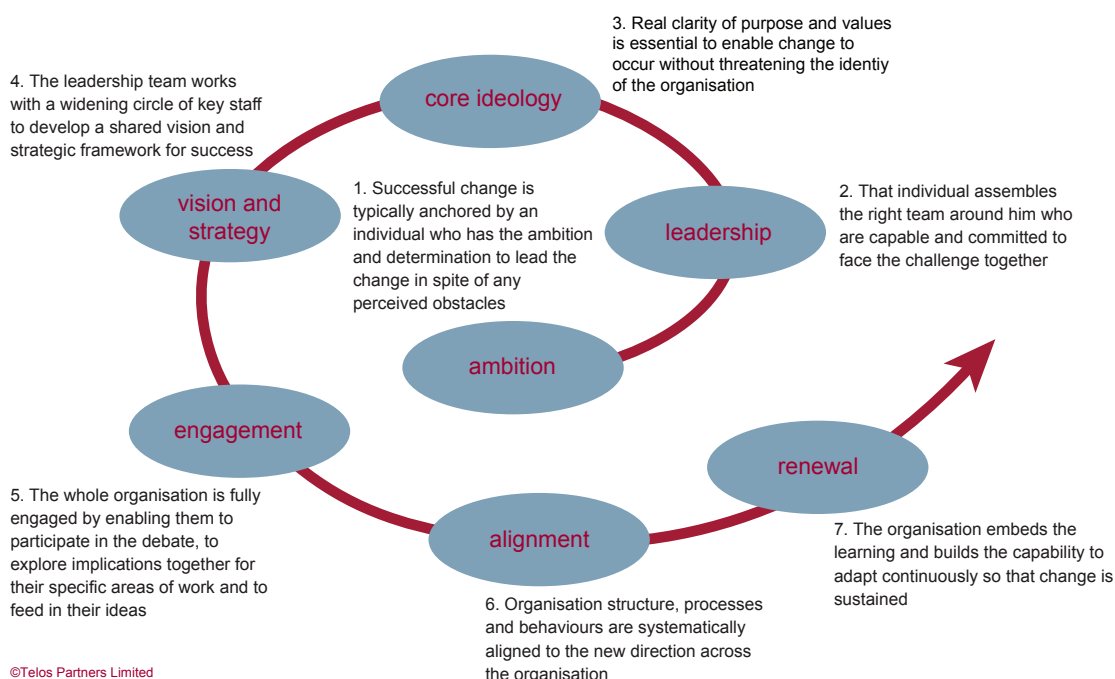
The *process* Telos offered to the Sisters is one developed through reflection upon our experience of the steps necessary to ensure that change is both appropriate and 'owned' across an organisation – and, therefore, likely to result in sustainable success. We call it 'The Swirl'.

Leadership

The first element in the swirl and the critical trigger in the Trialogue is leadership: if no-one leads, the whole will collapse. We have discovered time and again that successful change depends on one person (ideally the leader of the organisation) having the ambition to make it happen, working with a team of people who share the commitment.

If Sr. Mary has anchored the process she has been able to count on the total commitment and support of the leadership team (General Council) throughout. Nothing significant has happened without discussion and agreement within that group and the unity of the General Council has been essential. A critical contributor was a policy of complete openness and sharing of information and challenges within the Council. Decisions on issues likely to cause dissension have been deferred until the passage of time, new information and reflection have made agreement possible. This could be frustrating at times but it gave the group great strength and authority and once agreement was reached the group closed solidly behind the decision. Sr. Mary was always accompanied by at least one member of the Council at all the many meetings held over the three years between 2007 and 2010. Their presence was an important affirmation that the programme of change was not Sr. Mary's hobby horse or flavour of the month but the considered intention of the Congregation's entire leadership.

Their determination and commitment were demonstrated in the remarkable fact that two of them personally attended over 80 meetings in a single year, involving three rounds of visits to each of the Congregation's Regions. Their presence signalled the importance of the process in an unmistakeable way and demonstrated solidarity with both Sisters and staff. This was critical in enabling them to think and act differently. It was they who invited the Sisters to



'launch out into the deep' and they who articulated the philosophy that allowed the Sisters to move (spiritually, physically, and emotionally) – to engage in the 'Nazareth Dance' a dance in which mission leads but business is the partner and without which there is no dance. Yet at the same time they have made few decisions and have not offered 'the answer'. Rather, leadership has been expressed by creating and maintaining a process that allowed the questions to be pondered and answered together.

Another absolutely vital factor was the unfailing support and commitment given by the five current Regional Superiors and their predecessors in post at the outset. The enthusiasm and work of these Sisters in making things 'happen' in their Regions ensured the success of the process.

We have spoken of the Sisters' courage. This was epitomised in the leadership team who were both brave and humble enough to seek help and seek it in quarters not usually explored by leaders of religious orders. They recognised that they needed the support of people with appropriate professional skills and experience. First they engaged Andrew Pitt of London & Bath Ltd to research and understand the financial position of the Congregation in every Region. They then engaged Telos Partners to help the Congregation develop a strategy for the future and John Gatward to be Clerk to the Council and subsequently CEO of the Care Operation. Understandably enough, all this did prompt concern among the Sisters about the 'men in suits'. We believe these concerns have been largely allayed.

The Sisters feel strongly that the success of the process rested heavily also on the 'right fit' between those involved. This included not just trust, a common agreement on goals and on the path to these goals and a tangible empathy for who the Sisters were and their history and achievements, but also a spirit of mutual respect and friendship.

As the initial contact, Andrew Pitt paved the way for the process as he sensitively opened up the ideas of new possibilities for the Congregation's future. John Gatward has helped develop many of those ideas and brought them to life in the Congregation. His experience and expertise have been invaluable during the process. In working with the leadership team, John has shown all Regions that Sisters and senior lay management staff can work closely together to achieve their goals. The third side of the 'right fit' triangle, according to the Sisters, was Telos Partners who started by embracing the spirit of the Sisters and their way of working and wove the process around that core. The experience of the past four years or so have shown that, for the Sisters, the relationships they have on a consultative and/or ongoing basis have been a vital ingredient of the success of the process.

As the process continued it became clear that the theme of 'right fit' was important at every level of the organisation. The provision of excellent care, in the 'Spirit of Nazareth', depended upon the Sisters and other, lay,

care professionals sharing an ethos and developing close and trusting relationships.

The Telos approach is to question, advise, and guide a process. We were not there, as both we and the Sisters were often reminded, to tell them the answers but help them find them – a Socratic rather than Sophist approach to consulting. The relationships of friendship and trust developed between us were vital to the success of the process and contributed to our finding this the most satisfying and enjoyable of assignments.

Trust the Process

Sr. Mary and the General Council began by developing a proposition about the Congregation's identity, that is, its purpose and values. This was essential because change will be resisted if it cannot be demonstrated that a proposed strategy is consistent with the organisation's



understanding of itself. The Congregation's constitutions were the starting point for this and the General Council reflected deeply upon their meaning.

The Sisters noted that their stated purpose is not to provide aged care but to help the poor and needy. They remembered that in the early days the Sisters had helped the homeless. This reflection liberated their thinking and allowed the contemplation of different ministries. The General Council quickly decided it was right to continue to focus on aged care, but with a new sense of energy and of positive choice.

The vision for 2012 included the following:

- Our staff will be imbued with our spirit and core values and become increasingly our partners in our mission
- We will have a reputation as centres of excellence. This will include:
 - Excellent buildings and facilities
 - Excellent staff
- Sisters will have new roles to play:
 - Pastoral, professional and other
 - Trustees
 - Guardians of the Sisters of Nazareth vision and values
- There will be new services. In many parts of the world this will mean increasing emphasis on day care and nursing services and specialist dementia and palliative care units

The strategy included the following:

- We will create plans on a Congregational level and in each region that will be designed to realise the vision for 2012
- We will strengthen the life of the Congregation:
 - Develop a programme of spiritual renewal parallel with the business planning process
 - Nurture life-giving communities: this means looking at the sustainability of communities, including their size, as well as the quality of their life
 - Support Sisters in adapting to new roles
- We will establish a new 'model' for our care operation with the following features:
 - Houses managed by lay personnel
 - Each Regional Superior will be supported by:
 - A full time business manager
 - A Regional Board containing Sisters and lay people with valuable professional skills

The next step was for the Council to develop an initial vision – a view of what the organisation would look like in 2012 – and a strategy – the key initiatives proposed to realise that vision. The leadership team then set about sharing this hypothesis about the identity and future of the Congregation's ministry with all the Sisters. The key idea in this stage of the process was engagement. The Sisters were invited to think the challenge and Vision through for themselves just as the Council had and to comment on the General Council's conclusions. The whole Congregation was invited to assess and add to the General Council's thinking and to begin to consider what it would mean to them as a group and as individuals if the Council's hypothesis (revised as it might be) was adopted.

This all took place through an extensive series of two day meetings in every Region in the second half of 2007 and early 2008. These were highly interactive meetings which required the participants to respond absolutely as they wished.

As it turned out the General Council's proposals, both religious and business, proved generally acceptable, and it was noticeable that confidence about what could be achieved in the future grew as the process went on. If the

emphasis at the outset had been on surviving, at the end it had shifted to thriving. Each meeting built on the outcomes of its predecessor, ensuring a continuing development of the collective thinking – a factor which built on continuity of facilitation by the leadership team and ourselves.

In many aspects, this was a new way of working for the Sisters. Decisions about the care ministry had generally been left to individual Superiors supported by the Sisters in their respective Houses. The lack of a co-ordinated process across Houses and Regions contributed to the uneven quality of the organisation's response to changing needs. The engagement process empowered and involved all the Sisters, utilising all the talents and insights available to them – this not only enriched the process and allowed Sisters to accept change but also modelled how the organisation planned to work in the future being created.

The process was generally welcomed:

'I feel very positive about the future – there's a good direction, we're keeping together and we're kept informed.'

But there was some caution:

'In spite of all that has been said, there is still a feeling that the Congregation is going to be taken over by seculars.'

By mid-2008 the Congregation had an agreed statement of purpose and values and a vision for 2012 with a basic strategy to support it and some clarity about the behaviours that went with them. At the heart of the vision was a new partnership with lay staff which would allow the mission to continue, in the Nazareth Spirit. At the same time a resolve developed to do the utmost to renew the Congregation and attract new vocations.

The opportunity the process afforded to reconnect with the Congregation's purpose and values was particularly welcomed. One Sister experienced a new sense of:

'Fire in the belly'

Another remarked that:

'We have become more aware of the Glory of God in our lives.'

Most welcomed the opportunity to put aside the uncertainty of recent years and think positively:

'Keep on dreaming, reach for the stars, and don't be little worms!'

Though there was one Sister who took a look at all the things the Congregation was committed to and observed that:

'We will be great girls to manage all that!'

The next stage was to develop the strategy into a series of plans to guide action and to create a 'golden thread'

running through every level of the organisation. A second series of meetings was held to stimulate planning at Congregational, Regional and House levels in the second half of 2008. As the plans came together a third series of meetings presented the results to Sisters and lay staff in late 2008 and early 2009. This was a significant stage in the process as it was the first time in the history of the Congregation that lay staff had been engaged in this level of decision making and it marked a growing recognition by the Sisters that this partnership would not only be critical to future success but was a major current asset.

Into action

The next phase, alignment, saw the plans adopted and action taken to put them into effect, each playing an important part in the transformation that has taken place.

The Sisters have created a new governance structure that is both safeguarding the distinctive 'Spirit of Nazareth' and ensuring more efficient management. It is intended to allow the care work to benefit from the skills and knowledge of people with professional skills without losing the distinctive ethos created by the Sisters. As a significant first step the care ministry ('Nazareth Care') was separated from the Congregation and set up to deliver a viable operation.

Perhaps the most significant change is the way the Sisters have redefined their own roles. Essentially this is a shift from acting as managers to acting as owners. Of course many Sisters continue to contribute to the day-to-day work in a number of ways but nearly all the Houses now have lay managers with full executive responsibility.

Each House has a Sister Superior – the local 'owner' – working with a lay manager. Each Region has a Regional Superior who works in a similar partnership with a Regional Director (now Regional CEO) – a relationship similar to that between a Chair and a CEO in a company. The Regional CEO is answerable to a Regional Board of Trustees, chaired by the Regional Superior. The Board has a built-in majority of Sisters but allows Nazareth Care to benefit from the knowledge and skills of a number of lay members as well as the Sisters. Each Region is working to deliver its business plan and each House has a House business plan that dovetails with it. There is also a Congregational CEO who reports to the General Council and a Congregational plan within which the Regional plans are consistent.

The Regional Superiors and House Superiors, working with the Regional CEOs and House Managers, are charged with delivering improvements in care and business performance designed to deliver business sustainability. There is also a commitment to a process of renewal and strengthening of the religious lives of the Sisters. This is something to which the Sisters can now commit more of their time, and crucially, through a programme called 'Mission Alive' they are able to share their mission and values with lay staff, residents, relatives of the residents and their many supporters.

These changes have encouraged collaboration and communication, while building accountability into the fabric of the organisation. It has allowed the development of common standards and ways of working and encouraged Regional level initiatives such as the development of common IT platforms, care software solutions and group purchasing. Houses are sharing the task of resolving problems, some of which have existed for a long time. Managers now set their budgets in agreement with their Regional CEO and are managing to them. Staff appraisals take place and according to common standards and formats. There are many new staff, especially at senior and mid management levels, but, across the Regions, there has been at least as much emphasis on developing the capability of the existing workforce.

Each Region has run a leadership and management development programme for both Sisters and key staff. They worked together, as full partners for the first time, in a programme designed to embed the new roles and practices and develop the skills required to support them such as financial understanding and management. The



new roles and relationships that had been set up required new relationship management and team-working skills. The programme had a common structure (intended to reinforce the sense of being part of the larger organisation working collaboratively) but was tailored to meet the particular needs of the Region.

One way of describing what has happened would be to say that the Sisters have adopted some of the practices typical of good businesses and many other third sector organisations. It is also true that the scope for improvement was significant and that making the improvements was, at one level, not difficult. But to emphasise this would be to underestimate the achievements made and the challenges met – powered by the Sisters' openness and determination to progress to this point – and the amount of work involved in getting to the point where change could take place.

Reflections

It is clear that the Sisters had lessons to learn from the world of business. They have learned a great deal about what sustainable success means and how to go about making the changes required to achieve it. They have benefitted from the support of lay managers and from process and system improvements. They have learned how to be more efficient and more effective – and the difference between the two. Wisdom that has its origins in the commercial world has been applied to advantage. The challenge, of course, is to do this without sacrificing the 'Spirit of Nazareth'. The Congregation has designed the new ways of working to achieve a genuine combination of mission and business effectiveness but the Sisters and their lay colleagues will need to remain vigilant and determined to ensure the balance is maintained appropriately.

One of the most striking features of the change process has been the way that Sisters who do not have a business



background – and who may have been in the Congregation for many years – have embraced the change required. Clearly the strong sense of threat to the survival of the organisation has played its part but we do not believe we would have seen such positive results without the sense of mission and purpose that animates the Sisters and keeps them young in mind and spirit. However committed they may have been to former ways of working they have been able, for the most part, to see the benefits of doing things differently and accept them as necessary for the renewal and continuance of the mission. Change is necessary to allow the Sisters to maintain the work entrusted to them by God. This trumps everything, opens up all the doors.

The Sisters' focus is on their Christian motivation and on the quality of their care. Their faith is, naturally enough, at the centre of everything they do. They had developed their way of working over 150 years and for many of those years it was successful. Change was not always immediately welcome, especially change that might appear to elevate 'business' above mission. When we started working with

the Sisters we discovered that the commitment to mission contributed to some of the problems. For example it is important to the Sisters that they care for the poor and needy as well as those who can pay for themselves. As a result, fees tended to be set at a level that allowed anyone to pay them, putting the Sisters in the difficult position of then trying to charge top-ups from those who could afford them. Our suggestion that the price be set at a higher level and the less well-off offered bursaries and discounts did not receive immediate acceptance. In general, decision-making could tend to be both emotional and tactical; the Sisters did not always respond warmly to solutions that focused on better management and good business practice and were deeply concerned about anything that they saw as threatening to compromise the mission and values.

One effect of this was to reinforce a commitment to the business model which depended to such a large extent on the initiative and labour of the Sisters. Only the Sisters could be trusted to 'do it right' and to preserve the mission and spirit of Nazareth. Another challenge was that the Sisters tended to be sceptical about both the possibility of a better future and their own ability to achieve it. This was partly a lack of knowledge and skills, partly a sense of commitment to a way of working that was believed to be 'right' but running out of road. The dependence on God's providence that had been accompanied by an entrepreneurial energy in earlier years was now linked to a reluctance to take the initiative; either God would provide or he wouldn't but the Sisters could not change it. This was, of course, partly a natural consequence of the fact that so many of the Sisters had operated in a certain way for so many years. When we met the Sisters for the first time we were delighted by the energy and humour of even the oldest members of the community. Many are active in their eighties in a way that puts many younger people to shame. Nevertheless it is not easy to find the energy required to change a lifetime's habits and embrace a number of different notions. That the Sisters have been able to overcome these ingrained ways of thinking and working speaks volumes for their commitment and courage.

'But WE are a business!'

What did we learn from the Sisters? What can other organisations – especially commercially driven businesses – learn from them?

Secular organisations cannot appeal to God's call as a driver of improvement, but all organisations exist for a reason, have a purpose. This is what creates direction and energy within the people that constitute the organisation. A sense of purpose is a precious resource that can provide the impetus for positive change, but it is a resource that is often misplaced or not capitalised upon.

In the NHS, for example, efficiency and effectiveness is sought largely through an apparently endless round

of structural changes, such as the separation of commissioner and provider functions and the creation of an internal market. No-one seems to pay much attention to the fact that many people work in the NHS out of conviction and a sense of mission. The way the NHS works, the constant changes, far from capitalising on this, suppress and erode it. The NHS might do well to focus rather more on nurturing identity and sustaining the sense of purpose that allows change to be embraced *because it is necessary for the continuance of the mission*.

As this is written the collapse of a major commercial provider of residential age care has been in the news. That is a story that appears, at least, to demonstrate what can happen when the balance of the relationship between mission and business has been compromised. A highly financially driven business model may not provide the best basis for providing long-term care for vulnerable people. The Sisters' story suggests an alternative model, in our view likely to prove both more appropriate and more resilient. This model is of a caring organisation characterised by a strong sense of purpose and a not-for-profit ethos augmented by growing 'business savvy' – a social enterprise that recognises the need to be a successful enterprise in order that the social commitments can be met.

In fact, many other explicitly 'caring' organisations – and indeed many organisations whose Mission is not about 'care' at all but about customer service and commitment to excellence – might benefit from focusing the minds of management and staff on the purpose to be achieved rather than just the procedure to be followed or the gains to be made. There are many organisations that might do well to adopt their own version of the Nazareth Dance.

A second key factor in the Nazareth story is the leadership brought to the process. This is partly about the personal qualities of the Sisters in the leadership team and the ambition that has anchored the process. It is also about the whole way the leadership of the organisation is structured. The hierarchical distribution of leadership had become a problem in some ways: Houses had become isolated and the benefits of collaboration and common working had been lost. But on the other hand the willingness to maintain autonomy at Regional and House levels meant that the leadership at the centre had the time to focus on creating the future. The administrative load of managing the present and 'business as usual' often borne by leaders at the headquarters of highly centralised organisations was, and remains, highly distributed. The organisation is designed to flex and adapt to local needs and initiatives whilst holding true to a core of beliefs and values – and the commitment to the care of the poor and needy – whatever that means locally. Attendance at 100 plus meetings worldwide over two to three years is not only remarkable because the five Sisters chose to do it but also because they *could* do it. They have been able to devote an enormous amount of time to being there, affirming the process, engaging the Sisters, listening to people. This has been critical to the success of the process and constitutes a serious challenge to those leaders who pride themselves on their long hours, full diaries and hands on management style.

The third inspirational feature of the Sisters' approach was the focus on engaging every Sister. The leadership team was adamant that this must mean every Sister, so even those too infirm to attend meetings were met individually or given personal worksheets to complete to facilitate their consideration of the issues and proposed solutions. This is a far cry from the email communications which have become the dominant feature of strategy development and change programmes in many corporations. Time and trouble was taken over eighteen months or more to take every Sister on the journey; however for Sr. Mary, Sr. Catherine, Sr. Patricia, Sr. Rita and Sr. Rose no other choice was conceivable given the nature of the change envisaged.

Of course, not everybody agreed about everything, and a point came at which decisions had to be made and implemented even when some continued to have reservations. Other organisations would benefit from recognising the long-term value of a process that may seem time-consuming and expensive, particularly when



change seems urgent. The story of the Sisters might encourage us to believe that sometimes at least, it is better to get everybody truly on board with the change than to act quickly and see the change frustrated by resistance and misunderstanding.

The Sisters have achieved a rare combination: an organisation composed of highly motivated people, pointing (for the most part) in the same direction, acting in a concerted fashion, to realise a better future. In the first instance the priority was to stop the attrition. Now, with the Congregation achieving a functioning platform for its mission, minds are turning to the question of what comes next.

We have encouraged the organisation to think as soon as possible about what it hopes to achieve in the next twenty years and to use that vision to build a plan for the six years after the next General Chapter in 2012. We see no reason why Nazareth cannot recapture the spirit of its first fifty years and enjoy a new period of growth. In particular,

we encourage the Sisters to develop a new approach to motivating women with vocations to the religious life to join them. We recognise that most religious orders are seeing few new vocations but we see the possibility of offering women with a genuine vocation an exciting opportunity to combine religious life with a number of new professional roles in the developing organisation.

For both John Gatward and the leadership team the immediate focus is on embedding and consolidating the changes that have taken place. John Gatward observes that 'The Regional Boards are not fully effective yet. Part of the next phase is developing and understanding the role of the Boards so that they become a focus for strategy and growth.' For the General Council it is vital to start a new phase at the 2012 General Chapter. As Sr. Mary says, 'It is important to maintain the momentum for Nazareth Care but, even more importantly, we, all the Sisters of the Congregation, need to keep strengthening our religious lives. We have spent much time on the ministry. Our Nazareth Care mission has, as its core, the spirit and values of the Congregation. These come from who we are as Sisters of Nazareth and we must continue to animate the ministry by our faithfulness to who we are and who we are meant to be.'

After the Chapter the hope is to see the Congregation put the focus on the potential for growth, both in religious life and in the care ministries. There are some encouraging signs already in each Region. In the words of one Sister:

'We must keep the fire alight.'

