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# Global Learning Partnerships

*Margaret Leonard*

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**T**he title of this section is profoundly significant to those of us who have experienced global partnerships. Our experience has revealed to us that there is a profound organic integrity to these five words, Transnational, Social Change, Learning, Networks, and together they are revelatory of an emerging future we are stretching to envision and realize in the twenty-first century.

In this brief essay I would like to share with you five core experiences of global learning partnerships that I have had over the past half decade. From these experiences I have learned volumes about the organic relationships of these five words. The experiences have transformed my thinking; expanded the contours of my heart; invited me to become a citizen of a global world; gifted me with an emerging consciousness of our relationship with and responsibility for the sustainability of our sacred environment and planet; and lastly, challenged me to explore with others how we might act collectively to structure our world differently at local, national, and global levels.

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## **International Religious Congregation**

My initiation into a global world view was in the late 1950s when I made the decision to join an International Congregation of Women Religious (of the Roman Catholic Tradition). The Little Sisters of the Assumption, the congregation that I joined, shared a primary commitment to families living in poverty throughout the world. Living in their neighborhoods, becoming neighbors and family with them, joining them in

*Sister Margaret A. Leonard, L.S.A., Executive Director, Project Hope, whose mission is to partner with families as they move up and out of poverty. Since her appointment in 1985, Project Hope has grown from being an Emergency Shelter serving eight homeless families, to a multiservice center with an array of educational and economic empowerment programs serving families in the North Dorchester/Roxbury neighborhoods. Sister Margaret has long served on the boards of the Pine Street Inn, Homes for Families, and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. In 2008 she received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from her alma mater, Assumption College, for her lifelong commitment to improving society — one person, one family, and one community at a time. In 2009 she received honorary degrees from University of Massachusetts Boston and Tufts University. She was also selected to be a Barr Fellow in 2009.*

efforts to get the resources needed for survival, we collaborated with them to create a more just, equitable, and loving world locally, nationally, globally.

This primary allegiance was truly transformative. It called me to belong to a global family consisting of the members of my religious community and the families with whom they are engaged throughout the world. This “belonging” gradually challenged me to transcend an “I” consciousness defined as “my family, my neighborhood, my nation” and move to an ever-widening “We” consciousness in what was becoming my rapidly expanding world. The operative word for this transforming journey is to rise — to transcend the limits of one’s consciousness, and to discover the limitless possibilities that open up with new ways of thinking, belonging, and acting. Such a journey requires openness, receptivity, respect for diversity, conversion, and a commitment to mutuality. Mutuality is the belief that the power of growth is in relationships where we all become givers and receivers, the belief that diversity is a gift, and that ultimately we are all on a journey toward unity and communion.

In this so-called transnational laboratory it is evident that I learned much about what it means to be transnational, and what it means to live a process of continuous learning and conversion, but I also learned much about social change and networking. Our collective mission called us to see the world through the eyes of the poor, and equally to be committed to change this world of injustice and inequity wherever we were. But we had a profound advantage — we were an international entity — and we were networked to twenty-six places of the world. We had regular structures for ongoing communication and dialogue, and international meetings where we reflected together on what we were living, analyzing the economic, political, social causes of what we were seeing, and making collective choices to share our resources more equitably among ourselves. But equally, we made decisions to act in collaboration with other networks to try to right the global wrongs, such as famine in Ethiopia and Apartheid in South Africa. We joined with others to issue Corporate Responsibility Resolutions to influence the action of corporations in Latin America. In summary, this transnational belonging led to conversion and transformation, and then to a commitment to network both internally and externally to affect change on the global scene where the poor were being unjustly oppressed.

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### **Place-Based Experiences: East Harlem and Roxbury**

In the 1960s to 1970s, I lived in New York City’s East Harlem during the beginning and aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. In the mid-1980s to the present, I have lived in the Roxbury Community in what was one of Boston’s poorest neighborhoods. In both of these experiences I lived and worked with a global community. These two neighborhoods were peopled with individuals and families from many different places: Puerto Rico, Latin America, Central America, Africa, Cape Verde, Haiti, and Ethiopia

and they were connected to their countries of origin.

We were and are a multicultural community with diversity of race, color, and creed. The common denominator has been that all of these families were struggling with the effects of urban poverty in deteriorating, forlorn, neglected places slated for gentrification; many were sharing their limited resources with family back home.

A widening support network of individuals and groups partnered with these families. They were concerned individuals and groups: human service organizations, community-based organizations, faith-based groups, civic groups, health facilities, and those engaged in educational institutions. Yearning for social change was the driving passion for this cadre of partners who journeyed with these families.

Our collective journey to mutual partnership was paved with pain, misunderstandings, struggle, and conversion as we transcended our own limits, engaged in a mutual discovery of one another, made leaps from offering charity to seeking justice, and learning to embody the critical dynamics of “power with.” Together we encouraged the community to dream of what could be, to create a plan for change, to organize, network, evaluate, and continue to move ahead. And so much change happened: closing down the Mafia-run drug drops in local bars in Harlem; closing down the trash transfer stations in Roxbury; repairing the 100 Worst Buildings above 96th Street in New York City, with the commitment, resources, connections of people in the churches below 96th Street; and obtaining control of the land through the principle of eminent domain and building affordable housing. These were place-based transformative social-change experiences that were lived by a diverse global community.

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### **Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR)**

From 1975 to 1985, I was my religious community’s congregational leader for our United States Province. In this capacity I became a member of a national group called the Leadership Conference of Women Religious whose members were the leaders of religious congregations of women throughout the United States. Many of these congregations were international like ourselves, and national congregations sent members to the Third and Fourth world. They were open to a global world view.

I was privileged to be part of this powerful group of women leaders. They were well-educated, articulate, deeply rooted in the spirituality of Vatican II and committed to justice. There is a phrase from a Church document that in my experience best describes this group and that is: “the pursuit of justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.” These leaders understood the prophetic dimension of Apostolic Religious Life and reinforced the preferential option for the poor and the commitment to social justice.

During these years they created learning opportunities for their membership, enabling them to see the world through the eyes of the poor, and, through praxis and social analysis, to name the causes of poverty and injustice in our own country and globally, and thus to network and to act. The national lobby network of Women Religious and also the Center of Concern were partners in this process of social change.

This network is clearly an example of how the local is global. LCWR is a national organization with a global view of the world. Their commitment to education and the training of their membership was significant; its ripple effect in schools, human service agencies, health institutions, and faith-based institutions was truly amazing.

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### **Expanding Global Partnerships: Israel and Brazil**

I was offered the opportunity from 2006 to 2009, to visit Israel and Brazil on learning journeys that enlarged my world and brought me new insights and learning. On both of these transnational learning journeys, I was in a community of individuals like myself, leaders of nonprofit organizations in the Boston Area. I went to Israel as a guest of the Jewish Community Relations Council, and I went to Brazil because of a fellowship given to me by the Barr Foundation. I could write volumes of the learnings from these two wonderful experiences, but I will touch, very briefly, on each. But first, I must say a word about mutuality. Being open to a relationship characterized by mutuality is having an attitude of openness, of being receptive to the diversity and gifts of other peoples and their cultures, and to learning the art of receiving and giving.

The co-learning Boston–Haifa experience was significant. I was profoundly moved by the emerging nonprofit sector in Haifa and its commitment to be as inclusive as possible from the onset, bringing into the circle Jews (orthodox, conservative, liberal), Arabs, Ethiopian and Russian Jews. Second, I witnessed their commitment to create a nonprofit sector equally committed to social change. These two insights have deeply influenced me and my practice here in the United States and this exploration together continues.

As with Israel so with Brazil; the learning grasped at a moment in time continues every day and into the future. In Brazil I understood in a more palpable way that the solutions to the sustainability of the environment and to the eradication of endemic poverty must truly be global. I was struck by the community groups we met on the ground, by connections with the networks of Asoka and Berkana groups, and by the communities of Little Sisters and their partners in mission in the remote areas of Bahia. These transnational experiences reinforced my belief that we must seek to discover new ways of networking globally to create the kind of world we all desire.

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## International Commission on the Laity

What I learned from my experiences of Israel and Brazil reinforced what I was learning through my international religious congregations. When our systemic analysis identifies the causes of poverty and the deterioration of our environment, we all converge on the global economy. Long-term solutions to the problems of the poor and the environment require global solutions. Networking across national boundaries is a vehicle for this kind of change.

I am currently engaged in building networks to effect such change with my religious congregation. For ten years now, we have had a Secretariat for Justice and Peace and the Sustainability of the Environment; however, we are taking this work to an advanced level. Our efforts were augmented by networking with members of a sister congregation that has communities in thirty-four countries of the world. With this congregation, we share a similar spirituality and world view. Together we have begun a partnership with an international NGO at the United Nations called VIVAT and we are in dialogue about partnership with them. We have identified an area for action: immigration. We are networking our congregations and the people in mission with us to create a channel for education, for sharing of information, and for lifting up and sharing the experiences of individuals and families — at a global level.

I am also chairing an International Commission of our Congregation exploring a partnership with all those who share our collective DNA and are engaged in mission with us throughout the world. We have begun to design a network for ongoing communication and dialogue, and we believe that these two networks will merge into one.

Both of these initiatives have taught us volumes about how to network for social change and transformation across the world.

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## Conclusion

In this brief article I have shared with you how various transnational experiences have moved me more decisively to a “We” consciousness in an ever-expanding world. These learning experiences have moved me with others to explore and promote networks that are vehicles for social change and transformation in our local, national, and global world.

Many years ago I was captivated by a book entitled *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* by Marilyn Ferguson. In this book she spoke about an underground grassroots network of small groups working to create a different kind of world. She suggested to her readers an image of small groups proliferating around the world and eventually converging and becoming the catalyst for global change. This kind of thinking was reinforced for me when I was exposed

to Meg Wheatley's insights emerging from quantum physics, chaos theory, and evolutionary biology and how they are changing our understanding of the universe.

My own experiences in Haifa, Brazil, Latin America, Central America, Ethiopia, and Africa give credence to the reality that a multiplicity of grassroots groups are at work across the world bringing a new vision of the world, and a commitment to transformative change. One of the strongest contemporary voices to describe this new emerging future, beckoning us to create and grow Transnational Social-Change Networks, is that of Paul Hawken in his masterful book, *Blessed Unrest*. "This is a movement that has no name, leader, or location, but is in every city, town, and culture. It is organizing from the bottom up and is emerging as an extraordinary and creative expression of people's unstoppable need to re-imagine their relationships to the environment and to one another" and, might I add, to the world and the planet.





