

# The Cross-Fellowship Gathering on Spirituality in Leadership for Social Transformation

Over a four-day weekend in August, 2000, twenty-four people gathered at a small retreat center to explore together the meaning of spirituality in their lives and in their leadership for social transformation. As leaders in the fields of education, medicine, business, philanthropy, the arts, and social change, and as alumni and fellows of three prominent national leadership programs, the participants at the gathering were not new to conversations about leadership. Nonetheless, many participants were profoundly transformed by their experience at the gathering. Some described the event as “a mountaintop experience.” In the words of one person, “Something very amazing unfolded among us and between us and within us ... that something was certainly beyond us as well.”

*“The deep and real experience made the connection between my inner self and my effectiveness as a leader. I realized there is no separation between my inner work and self-awareness and the qualities of leadership. Leadership is simply the outer projection of our inner evolution. This weekend was exquisite, thoughtful, profound and experiential.”*

This report tells the story of the Cross-Fellowship Gathering on Spirituality in Leadership for Social Transformation of August 3-6, 2000, and of the subsequent steering committee meeting of March 8-11, 2001. It is based on the reflections and feedback of the participants, which were solicited immediately following the gathering and then again seven months later. Their direct comments accompany this narrative, and their testimony about the continuing effects of the gathering on their lives is summarized at the end of the report.

*“I would tell the world that it is possible for a group of individuals, without significant experience or exposure to each other previously, to come together as a group and establish a deep and meaningful bond in a short time if they are truly present and share a common goal. The significance of this is that it can be a model of social transformation which cuts across sectors, economic strata and culture.”*

Written by a participant of both the August gathering and the March meeting, this report is also derived from reams of meeting notes, detailed reports, and thoughtful analyses, contributed with great care by members of the steering committee who shared a commitment to document this process from its inception so that they and others could build on lessons learned. The story is told in the hope that the integration of spirituality and leadership for social transformation will increasingly be included as an element in leadership and fellowship programs, and that spaces for bringing together inner and outer life will become more prevalent in our society.

## How It Came to Be

The idea for the Cross-Fellowship Gathering was conceived by three fellows in the Kellogg National Leadership Program – Tony Deifell, Melinda Lackey, and Carlos Monteagudo – who, through their fellowships, were

examining how personal faith values inform the public life of action. The three fellows were looking for opportunities to “connect our questions and discoveries with a broader network of people” and, finding fellows in other programs working in relative isolation toward similar goals, they came upon the concept of a cross-fellowship gathering.

*“This has given me an opportunity to connect with the deepest source of energy, my spirit. It could not have happened without a unique place in which to reflect, be quiet and make connections with people who come together for a common purpose ... I was reminded of my need for a community of support...”*

A concept paper for the gathering garnered funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Fetzer Institute, a unique funding partnership and collaboration across programs. Seven participating fellows representing the three sponsoring fellowship programs formed a steering committee charged with conceptualizing, designing, and implementing the gathering. Over the course of ten months, a series of conference calls, and a one-day planning meeting, the steering committee developed a shared vision for the gathering, chose the meeting site, created an application process to select the participants, chose a facilitator, designed the agenda, and joined the gathering as full participants.

*“One of the most meaningful things to me was the feeling of connection with others, of knowing that Others are also making this path by walking—and that we can walk together.”*

Committee members reported that the planning process exemplified the difference that spirituality makes in leadership – disagreement and diverse opinions were welcomed, there was a shared sense of the greater good, the goals of the group came before personality differences, and a sense of community emerged. Hopes were high. In the invitation letter to participants, the steering committee set its vision *“to launch an ongoing collaborative process that will ultimately help to redefine leadership by universalizing the open expression of its spiritual dimensions.”*

*“We witnessed our own needs for spiritual community as the backbone of our lives.”*

Eight fellows were invited to participate from each fellowship program. Several foundation representatives were invited as well. David Sawyer was chosen as the facilitator, and worked collaboratively with a design team from the steering committee to design and finalize the agenda. The Fetzer Institute’s Seasons retreat center, in Kalamazoo, MI, was offered — and selected – as the meeting site.

*“What was most significant for me is really how simple it all is. This is not rocket science. Some thoughtfulness, some mindfulness, some attention paid to space, a variety of learning modalities and ways to connect. Time inside, time outside. I would say that when the intention is to gather with spirit, wonderful and connected things happen. All the time. Period.”*

## **The Goals of the Gathering**

In the design and conceptualization of the gathering, the planners created two broad sets of goals. One related to the actual work of the gathering—the content goals. Equally important were the method and social implications of

*“We experienced the POWER of spirit when two or more are gathered.”*

convening people to advance work on this theme—the process goals. They articulated their goals as follows:

### Content Goals

- 1) To convene fellows and alumni from different leadership programs whose work is centered on the exploration of spiritual values in public leadership;
- 2) To identify and explore possibilities for “common work” by:
  - sharing individual work, ideas, challenges, successes, needs, concerns, visions, values, approaches and goals;
  - developing an inclusive language to communicate diverse, complex and intimate spiritual concepts;
  - exploring potential uses of spirituality as a linker of people.
- 3) To develop a mechanism for ongoing, coordinated work among participating fellows, such as:
  - a learning community that provides time, space and tools to deepen personal spirituality and its expression in public leadership;
  - a process that supports the emergence of cross-fellowship and post-fellowship activities designed to foster inner life integration with outer life leadership for social transformation.

### Process Goals

- 1) To create, test and fully experience methods for collaboration among fellows and across fellowship programs using and assessing spirituality as the vital link that makes the collaborations possible and sustainable;
- 2) To help determine if collaboration among fellowship programs offers something uniquely important and worth sustaining;
- 3) To convene fellows across diverse faith beliefs and experiences, engage them in discourse about deeply held personal beliefs and values, and then see if doing so transforms the gathered community to develop further collaborative work for the greater good—as a demonstration to consider its potential as a model for broad social transformation.

*“It is rare for a group of people to come together and quickly establish the level of trust and openness that existed in this gathering. While I knew only one person prior to my arrival, I immediately felt integrated into a circle of reflection, genuineness, and energy.”*

*“My experience was one of healing in community, of learning that the deeper I go into my own spiritual journey, the more connected I become to others, the more open I am to seeing the Other in myself.”*

*“I learned more about leadership as listening, as creating a space in which abundance can be practiced, about moving towards a seamlessness between my inner being and the outer world.”*

*“I remember being as present and peaceful as I have ever experienced. It showed me how wonderful it feels to be in that state, and what it feels like when I am there. I use that feeling as my reference point, or state of equilibrium, when I am not centered.”*

*“I was touched deeply by how other souls embraced me. I felt my spirit was accepted into the circle. I had a real experience of affirmation and encouragement to grow deeper.”*

## The Agenda

The agenda was designed around four themes:

1. Deepening Self
2. Understanding the Other
3. Integrating Spirituality Into Our Work and Our World
4. Developing a Shared Vision of Our Work Together

The first two themes were more “inner” focused, in that they involved internal reflection and sharing, the last two themes were more “outer” focused, in that they involved working with the group on common efforts toward social transformation.

The gathering was structured to be both collaborative – to capture every voice – and organic – to evoke the inner life of each participant. The agenda was crafted to foster a heightened inner-life awareness among participants who were urged to fully engage in the experience of the gathering while drawing on that experience to envision and plan for future work to engage more people.

The gathering itself was marked by an atmosphere of acceptance, spaciousness, kindness, genuineness, and inquiry. Participants told their truths and listened deeply to one another. Periods of exploration and focused attention were interspersed with time for silence, reflection, music, and outdoor walks.

In the first day and a half, the program was focused on the first three themes: Deepening Self, Understanding Other, and Integrating Spirituality into Our Work and Our World. Participants were asked to reflect upon and share with others their experiences with spirituality and leadership; their inner journeys and spiritual stories; and the intersections of spirituality and leadership in their lives. They also engaged in dialogue about the challenges of joining inner and outer journeys – of “spiritual leadership” – and their calling in the world — or “why they do the work they do.” In a section called “Re-Imagining Ourselves and the World,” the room was set up with five stations of reflection, each with a different question about the coming together of inner and outer lives. The questions included “What is your deepest yearning as a leader?” and “How is

*“We had a wonderfully designed time to be reflective individually and as a group. In this way, it furthered the journey I’ve been on. But, to be there in that beautiful space with such a creative, soul-filling, and loving group of people, was a true blessing. It is relationships like these through which I find I do my most important inner work.”*

*“The sacred space created enabled me to embrace my vulnerability and confront my inner fears about who I am, why I’ve been called and what is the potential of my role as a spiritually conscious leader and healer.”*

*“This gathering was a mountain top experience. My soul was moved by the powerful force of love that accompanied every conversation...my heart was warmed by the genuineness of every participant...my being was strengthened by the total experience. A little more goodness was sprinkled in the universe.”*

*“Telling our spiritual journeys, struggling with our deepest questions, sharing our calling, witnessing our talents and gifts, and daring to envision a spiritual integration of inner and outer life, a new way of doing and being in this world, touched my heart deeply.”*

the intersection of spirituality and leadership made concrete in your work?" After a long period of reflection with the questions, participants were asked to share their thoughts in small groups and then the whole.

*"I felt at peace. I felt loved. I felt loving. I felt joy. I felt an unbridled potential for myself and for us as a group."*

In the second day and a half of the gathering, the focus was on the fourth theme – Developing a Shared Vision of Our Work Together. In sections called "Dreaming Deep on Emerging Ideas," the participants engaged in fish bowl exercises, brainstorming, and open space technology sessions to hone in on ideas and plans for shared work. The gathering closed with agreement on a list of ideas for common work and next steps.

*"I felt a reverence for silence, a deep respect for life, safety to take risks and a freedom to be me. I am now more aware that I need to actively seek this kind of relationship and experience as a priority in my daily life."*

## Shared Work

On the last day of the gathering, the participants voiced strong interest in developing common work. Their first priority was to develop plans for a second gathering in December, just four months later – one which would expand the community of individuals engaged in the integration of spirituality and leadership. Participants imagined several ongoing, cross-fellowship collaborations. In addition to yearly gatherings, the envisioned collaborations included an ongoing community of practice, in which participants would sustain their relationships with shared work, support, field testing of new ideas, information and resources. A writing team was also envisioned—one that would produce a series of articles on the theme and circulate them among the many interconnecting networks available to the collaborators. A resource bank, an institute, a national event, a policy forum, and a cyber community were among the other ideas that received support.

*"The time we spent together filled my heart with joy and my head with magic."*

*"I was wrapped in honesty, integrity, and unconditional testimony that honored my story and affirmed my belonging with the group."*

*"This was an unbelievable opportunity to experience shared leadership at a very spiritual level. The unspoken commitment to cooperation and collaboration can and does move mountains."*

## The Steering Committee

When the steering committee met immediately following the gathering, its members realized that there was not enough money or planning time for a second gathering in December, and instead decided to host a focused planning meeting in March. Their intention was to bring together an expanded steering committee with strategic partners in order to review the lessons learned at the gathering, define ongoing common work, develop the structure for a unifying mechanism to support common work, and create a funding plan to enable the work to move forward.

*"One of the most significant aspects of this gathering was the level of heart, intelligence, commitment, and the space for collective wisdom to gather."*

*"It was sublime and unforgettable. I am carrying each participant in my heart...appearing as a new radiance, a greater stillness in me."*

The expanded steering committee was formed by adding one to two members from each program. Over a series of conference calls, this expanded steering committee designed the agenda for the planning meeting, and sought support and participation from the sponsoring programs and several other foundations. Challenged by the limitations of conference calls and email to foster long distance community-building, members of the committee found it increasingly difficult to clarify a shared vision for the meeting, and struggled over how to design an agenda that would both make room for new participants and effectively build upon the intense experience of the August gathering. Making just a half-hearted attempt to include funders in the meeting, the committee secured participation only from the Fetzer Institute, which hosted the second meeting at Seasons as well.

*"I recognize more clearly how there are many levels of my spiritual development and that each challenge I encounter is an opportunity to move to another level."*

After a flurry of heartfelt and grateful exchanges on the gathering listserv, the group communication quieted as people returned to the demands of daily life. The steering committee was unsuccessful in its efforts to form a writing team or a community of practice. Several collaborative efforts had taken place and were beginning to emerge among subsets of the August group, but the future of whole-group collaboration was unclear.

*"When we came together prayerfully and shared song, silence, music and our spiritual journeys, we found connections. There is support for you...ask for it. If we can learn to listen the world will be changed."*

When the committee re-convened in March, it was a group of ten. Without evidence of interest from funders, and having lost momentum in shared work over the past seven months, the committee members were less optimistic about the realistic possibilities for future work together. The stated purpose of the meeting was to "effectively consider existing needs, and vision and plan what next steps—if any—we can and should undertake together." As the committee reviewed the experience and lessons of the gathering, there was a new realization of how deeply the experience influenced the lives, work, and leadership of committee members over the intervening seven months. The group considered the ideas that came out of the gathering, briefly reviewed the field of spirituality and leadership, and took a hard look at the realistic possibilities for shared work.

*"It supported my belief in the need to approach our spiritual quest with reverence. It confirmed my notion that the spirit is not dogmatic nor is it a religious imposition."*

Three outcomes emerged from the meeting. First, as the committee listened in greater depth to Deborah Meehan about the Leadership Learning Community – a network of 45 leadership programs and 12 foundations that come together to share models, issues, solutions, resources, ideas, and program designs – the group realized that it could take several actions to introduce and promote the

*"I am happy, full of our time together, resolved to take this new peace and perspective into the boardroom."*

*"I know with more clarity the importance of creating space for myself that is quiet and peaceful, space in solitude and space in community, in order to better be who I am."*

interconnection of spirituality and leadership within that network. The committee saw this as an efficient and potentially powerful way to spread the concepts and practices of integrating spirituality and leadership. They decided to meet with those in attendance at the May Leadership Learning Community conference to present the history of the Cross Fellowship gatherings and engage dialogue to explore future directions. They also decided to offer the Cross-Fellowship Gathering's leadership in the Leadership Learning Community's incipient alumni network.

*"I find myself having a greater sense of direction about my own leadership."*

Second, the committee prioritized the effort to form, define and stabilize the field of Spirituality and Leadership. Committee members noted that there are many models for integrating spirituality and leadership, yet there has never been a sharing of these models — an attempt to integrate or cross-pollinate the ideas, people, and organizations. Because the committee felt that there is a great need for the people doing this work to find each other and share what they've learned, they agreed to work toward a broader gathering of participants in the field of spirituality and leadership. They planned to write and distribute a concept paper as a first step toward that end.

*"The gathering has moved me along the path of being more authentic with myself and has strengthened my commitment to be quiet, reflective, and present even when life is rushing all around me."*

Finally, they decided to produce this report – and use it as a means to gather participant feedback seven months post-gathering. The committee reported back to all gathering participants about the outcomes of the planning meeting, and invited their participation in any of the proposed activities, as well as their initiation of any of the original ideas that emerged from the gathering.

*"The gathering influenced my work by affirming the importance of leadership and spirituality—and allowing me the courage to name and claim those principles and practices even more openly, more directly, in my outer work."*

## **The Outcomes**

### **Process Outcomes**

The process outcomes were impressive. At every stage of the Cross-Fellowship Gathering — inception, design, and implementation — an unusually high level of individual commitment and community functioning were achieved in an extraordinarily short amount of time. Trusting relationships were formed and deepened rapidly. The three founding fellows initiated an open process of community building when they transformed an effort to fulfill the requirements of their fellowship into a collaboration "to live out our individual sense of calling in the world." When the group of three expanded to a steering committee of seven

*"Since the gathering I have been much more aware of my intentions as I interact with others, remaining aware of my responsibility to myself and others to be authentic in my thoughts and actions."*

*"My life has been strengthened knowing that I have a group of people that I can turn to to test out new ideas, to be vulnerable and to challenge my thinking. In turn, I feel confident that I can create such a community with others."*

and met for a one-day, focused planning meeting, it became a cohesive community with a powerful sense of collective vision for ongoing work. At the gathering, 24 diverse participants experienced dramatic community cohesion within the course of an extended weekend.

*“Since the gathering I have taken time each day to reflect on how I am living my life in accordance with the person I want to be.”*

Participants closed the weekend deeply convinced that the experience of working across fellowships was uniquely important and worth sustaining. Having gathered across diverse faith beliefs and opened in dialogue about deeply held personal beliefs and values, the participants were transformed. They were inspired about the possibilities for shared work for the greater good, and felt that they were participating in an important model for broad social transformation.

*“It reaffirmed my commitment to practice as the underlying foundation of this kind of work.”*

### Content Outcomes

The gathering achieved its goal of convening and forming community among 24 participants from three leadership programs whose work is centered on the exploration of spiritual values in public leadership. Participants identified and explored possibilities for common work. They shared stories of their work, ideas, challenges, successes, needs, concerns, visions, values, approaches, and goals – though there was much more information exchange to do before they could build shared work off a common understanding of their individual work and lives. They began a dialogue about inclusive language to communicate diverse, complex, and intimate spiritual concepts, and strongly felt the importance of developing such language. They explored, through their own experience together, the power of spirituality as a linker of people. However, they have not yet been successful at developing a mechanism for ongoing work together. While the gathering deeply influenced the participants as individuals, relationships formed over a long weekend were not enough ground on which to lay the foundation for significant ongoing work as a whole group. Several efforts at common work continue among individuals who met at the Cross-Fellowship Gathering and others might yet emerge, but the most clearly demonstrated outcomes of the gathering to date live in the realm of personal transformation.

*“I have been much more open talking about spirituality and my inner journey at work. I have shared part of my gathering experience with my team. Now, I begin my staff meetings with time for each, at their own free will, to share their gifts and burdens. I have used the stone heart [I received] at the Gathering as a touch stone and symbol of love. It is held by the person who has the floor during the sharing of gifts and burdens.”*

*“I feel more courage about inviting people to share their deepest yearnings.”*

*“I think I am more centered and more present. And when I am not there, my awareness of it and my desire to return to it has been strengthened.”*

*“I have made decisions that are allowing me to more fully make my Work my job, decisions that include moving out of the institution where I have been for over 30 years.”*

## Seven Months Later

When asked to reflect on the August gathering seven months afterward, the participants highlighted several important outcomes in their lives.

- **Relationships.** Several participants remain in contact with people they met at the gathering. Relationships were deepened or renewed, and these have been an important source of support and guidance for those involved. Several people commented that their experience at the gathering led them to change their attitude or approach to other relationships in their lives—making for deep effects at work, at home, and in the community.
- **Broadened Fellowship.** Participants felt strongly that the opportunity to develop relationships across fellowship programs deepened and extended the effects of their own fellowship experiences. They also saw this cross-fellowship community as an important resource for their ongoing development as leaders.
- **Practice.** Many people said that after the gathering they either committed to a new spiritual practice or recommitted to an old practice, and that this deepening of their practice over the seven months has been important in their lives and their leadership.
- **Spirit as a Link.** Participants were universally impressed by the extent to which spirituality connected people in the gathering, and some took that lesson with them into their workplaces and organizations. Several people began to create openings for reflection and sharing of the inner life in staff meetings, office environments, and relationships.
- **Courage.** Participants said that it takes courage to speak openly about spirituality in the context of leadership, and some found that their experience at the gathering gave them the courage they need to bring their spiritual sides “out of the closet” and to integrate their inner and outer lives.
- **A Reference Point.** In the hectic life of our modern world, it isn’t easy to maintain the kinds of openness and quiet that participants experienced at the gathering.

*“The relationships I shared with members of the gathering are incredibly supportive. With that support I’ve been able to facilitate several gatherings entitled “Healing the Male Spirit.” They have helped to inspire people and encourage them on their journey of healing to become spiritually effective leaders. After such experiences both the traditional and non-traditional leaders have acknowledged that they want more. I’ve witnessed a deep wanting of more opportunities to develop their leadership skills and grow spiritually with others.”*

*“I find myself clearer and lighter. But most importantly, I find myself profoundly accompanied, not alone. I am immensely grateful.”*

*“I come away with great energy and feeling centered. I have never been with a community as giving and committed. You touched my life in a way that moves me to new possibilities and reminds me of what is truly important in life.”*

*“I learned that this work is hard to do in the real world, and as much as we practice by gathering in this way, we can always get better.”*

However, some participants said that remembering the feeling of being at the gathering helps them to judge how far off center they have traveled, and to return.

- **Life Changes.** Many participants undertook dramatic life changes in the seven months after the gathering. Several people left their jobs to pursue work that was closer to their sense of calling. Some were able to implement significant and concrete changes in their leadership and communication styles. Two participants came to a new understanding of their calling, and made preparations to embark on new paths in life.

*“The way that we embraced our spiritual notions was with high integrity, honesty, and a commitment to respect and empathy. The group experience was intimate and respectful of the differences that we each shared. We were able to rise above our own fears and pain to embrace each other with authenticity.”*

## **Conclusion**

The creators of the gathering started with the premise that fellows within leadership programs are chosen for a demonstrated desire or capacity to work for the public good. The planners reasoned that energizing these leaders – influencing the influencers – would have a multiplier effect. They hypothesized that unleashing forces latent within individuals – such as spirituality – in community could help people recognize, value, name, express, and channel these forces in the service of the public good. In turn, they hoped to catalyze large-scale, cross-fellowship, multi-vocational, interdisciplinary, leadership activities for social transformation.

*“The gathering provided much needed inspiration for my continued spiritual evolution. I understand more clearly how embracing personal fear or sorrow, guilt or pain, are important steps in spiritual development. Since leaving the gathering my personal and work ethics include more opportunities to feel myself breathe and taking time to be still while the wind is blowing upon my face.”*

In their own words, the founders, planners, and participants learned “how a community can form quickly. We learned that this happens in an environment that creates safety and intimacy – an environment in which individual members become comfortable in revealing deep personal truths about their most personal selves.”

“We learned about the power of storytelling – the creation of myth and beauty and culture. We learned from each other about the power of spirituality as a motivator for action. We learned that we are not alone, that others share in our deepest yearnings for connection and community. We discovered hints of a universal language for these yearnings in the form of music, ritual, silence, meditation, reflection, and the creation of story.”

*“I am more committed than ever to the importance of identity and integrity in leadership.”*

“We learned about the power of community. We witnessed a synergy of motivation and creativity, a loss of fear, a demonstration of hope. We learned about the power of

celebration, the need to have fun and to be nurtured in creating sustainable collaborative relationships. We experienced a powerful sense of collective energy, focus, and momentum as a result of guiding the group to rally behind common hopes for the future -- that which we seek to create -- versus anything we might agree to oppose."

The initiators of the Cross Fellowship Gathering on Spirituality in Leadership for Social Transformation have not yet succeeded at catalyzing large-scale, cross-fellowship leadership activities for social transformation. They have, however, given 24 people a glimpse of how authenticity, courage, and spirit, when shared with community, can transform their lives and their leadership. The gathering has implications for leadership development and program models in that it demonstrates the power of spirituality in group formation and personal transformation.