Spiritual Leadership Meets Transformative Learning: A Story Out of Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to help illustrate the integration of spiritual leadership and transformative learning theories. The intent is to suggest how this integration promotes the process of human inner development leading toward actions that contribute to a better world. After offering key points from the two theories, the essay presents the author's narrative on learning to employ the theories for educating and training non-profit leaders, including assisting with the creation of a modular training program for Catholic sisters based in Kenya. Finally, brief narratives illustrate how that program's input, practices, and processes positively and sustainably impacted several sisters' leadership and, through them, their organizations.

Keywords: Spirituality, leadership, transformative learning, adult learning, inner-work processes

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At this critical juncture in human history, many people seem willing to admit that humanity faces a global leadership crisis. Veldsman (2016) attributed this global crisis to five primary sources: unable, unintelligent, immature, immoral, and/or destructive leaders.

At the same time, some scholar-practitioners are proposing leadership models that will address at least one major crisis – climate change – by promoting what Redekop (2024) calls environmentally sustainable leadership. However, an initiative out of Sweden promoting Inner Development Goals (IDGs) reportedly was motivated by the slow progress globally toward the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Mubtaker (2024) explains that the IDGs "emerged as a response to the growing recognition that external goals like the SDGs require a parallel internal transformation" (p. 2).

Such thoughts as the above form the impetus for this essay. Patricia Cranton (2012, 2016) has declared her interest in exploring a more integrated or unified theory of transformative learning. This author's interest moves toward examining spiritual leadership and transformative learning theories for a more unified theory of what it means to be a human being evolving interiorly on a fragile and endangered planet. As Wahinkepe Topa (2022) remarks, "…all one has to do is look around at what we do to one another and to Mother Earth to realize we have forgotten how to be human beings" (p.198).

Spiritual Leadership: An Emerging Theory

In an address to campus ministers, Parker J. Palmer (n.d.) states, "Spirituality, like leadership, is a very hard word to pin down. These are probably two of the vaguest words you can find in our language, and when you put them together you get something even vaguer." Palmer's suggestion noted the following points may help make linkages between spiritual leadership and transformative learning theories and help support notions about the work of fully becoming human beings. The

material presented is drawn from the author's experience as a student of spirituality and spiritual leadership within the United States and the Christian tradition for more than 40 years.

The spirituality movement in the United States emerged in the 1960s alongside the feminist and ecology movements. Reasons for the movement's emergence and resulting definitions of spirituality both are varied and beyond the limits of this paper (See for example, Sheldrake, 2013).

Eventually, growing interest in spirituality led to the trend referred to by some authors as "spirituality at work." Spiritual leadership is an emerging theory within leadership studies related to this trend. Samul (2024) notes that research into spiritual leadership has been developing since the 1980's and is drawing more and more attention (p. 10).

Doohan (2007) suggests that leadership development today is not about "adding on" to one's "administerial know-how" but about "journeying inward and discovering values in one's own heart" (p. 12).

To be sure, the attempt to bring spirituality into the workplace is hampered by the question of just what is meant by spirituality and how it differs from religion. Peters (1993) objects: "…when the talk turns to the spiritual side of leadership, I mostly want to run."

Fry (2003) addresses Peters' concern:

A key reason for excluding questions of workplace spirituality from leadership and other theories of management practice to date appears to be due to the confusion and confounding surrounding the distinction between religions and spirituality…Spirituality is broader than any single formal or organized religion with its prescribed tenants, dogma, and doctrines (p. 705).

Steve Taylor (2018) also speaks to the contrast between spirituality and religion, with implications for a connection to the processes and impact of transformative learning:

It's important not to confuse spirituality with religion. In the purest sense of the term, spirituality doesn't have anything to do with prayer, holy books, heaven, priests, or even with God (in the normal sense of the term). Spiritual traditions like Buddhism, Yoga and Sufism (amongst many others) are *transformational* systems (Ch 15, para. 7).

As Taylor notes, ancient spiritual traditions as well as contemporary researchers offer descriptions of the various stages of transformation one passes through on the spiritual journey. In general, these stages involve a progression from a self-centered or ego-consciousness to one that is other-centered or, as some call it today, an "eco-consciousness." Capra (1991) defines spirituality as "the mode of consciousness where we feel connected to the cosmos as a whole" (p. 58).

However, as Andersen (2024) notes, the various stage theories allow measurement and categorization, but they do not provide insight into processes for growth:

What is striking…is that so many brilliant people have described ego-development under a number of different names, and nobody has been able to come up with any concrete, useful tool or method that can ease the process or effectively promote such development (p. 249).

Transformative learning theory also speaks to personal transformation, a changed worldview, and the potential for new behaviours, but also to processes and strategies with the potential to stimulate such transformation. We now turn to a summary of those salient points.

Salient Points from Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory emerged in the 1970s through the research of Jack Mezirow in a study of adult women returning to school (Taylor, 1998). The theory historically has dealt with the educational setting. Brown (2004) provides an accessible overview of the theory:

Transformative learning changes the way people see themselves and their world. It attempts to explain how their expectations, framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions, directly influence the meaning they derive from their experiences (p. 84).

Echoing Doohan's (2007) comments on spiritual leadership noted above, transformative learning goes beyond acquiring knowledge and/or skills. Like spiritual leadership theory, transformative learning engages learners at the level of meaning and understanding, thereby inviting growth and change.

Geller (2009) suggests the theory offers organizations "a conceptual framework for developing requisite leadership capabilities for the twenty-first century" (p. 178). Geller further says:

It suggests a learning process for developing socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers who use critical reflection to challenge assumptions (their own and others'), increase their understanding of complex situations, question conformity, embrace change, and align their actions toward the betterment of society (p. 178).

Cranton (2016) adds that transformative learning "has to do with making meaning out of experiences and questioning assumptions based on prior experience" (p. 7). Cranton and Taylor (2012) list issues with the theory: the role of context, rationality, and affect; the role of relationships in transformative learning; the place of social action; and the educator's role in fostering transformative learning (p. 22).

Regarding strategies for promoting transformation, Cranton (2016) suggests: "Any strategy that opens up new perspectives, challenges existing assumptions, or presents information from a different point of view has the potential to encourage reflection and transformation" (p. 107). Her suggestions for such strategies include questioning, consciousness-raising experiences, and journaling.

The author's own experience of integrating spiritual leadership and transformative learning theories is presented now to add to the conversation and to illustrate the effectiveness of some of the strategies noted by Cranton.

Author's Narrative: Bringing Two Theories Together to Form Leaders

I recently heard John Grim of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology say, "I don't have expertise in this area, but I have a story." I claim that caveat as well. Mine is a story of experiences, reflections, learnings, and inner transformations eventually prompting a journey from Chicago to Nairobi where, in part through my interventions, spiritual leadership and transformative learning came together in a program of leadership development for Catholic sisters serving in leadership positions within their organizations.

One very significant transformative moment came on a day in the early 1980s. I was walking along the edge of a wooded lane near my apartment. With a growing sense of despair, I noticed a great deal of litter lining the grassy bank of the lane. Observing this, there arose within my consciousness a recollection of decades-old campaigns like "Keep America Beautiful." I began to ponder why such mainstream messages were clearly so ineffective.

As I continued walking, an idea began to take shape: Could it be that people *never* will stop littering because they are *told* to do so, but only will cease if something changes in what they believe about themselves and their relationship with others and the planet? From that point on, the process of personal transformation became a passionate study interest that eventually informed my choices regarding my personal life and professional career.

A second transformative moment came a few years later as I started working in non-profit organizations. I had thought I was entering a sector where leadership and staff were dedicated to creating peace and social justice in the world. I was disappointed to often discover a total disconnect between the goals of justice and non-violence and colleague behaviors. I experienced what felt like violence in the way people were treated at meetings. I witnessed anger being expressed inappropriately or disagreement being expressed disrespectfully, with individuals even being brought to tears by the hostile comments thrown at them. Frankly, there also seemed to me to be a good deal of injustice, often rooted in patriarchal assumptions of power and authority.

Again, I was faced with how to respond to this unanticipated reality. The experiences motivated me to become involved not only in studying personal transformation but also studying leadership and organizational development.

Later, at a career juncture, I began telling people, "I don't know what I will be doing next, but it will have something to do with the relationship between leadership and spirituality." That focus led to my being invited in 1994 to serve as executive director of a training center for spiritual directors in Chicago called The Institute for Spiritual Leadership (ISL). Spiritual directors are persons who companion others in the process of discovering and integrating their life journey in a religious or spiritual context. The elements of the ISL training program were based on the journey of personal transformation found in the works of the Swiss psychologist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung and Christian spiritual writers such as Teresa of Avila (*The Interior Castle)* and John of the Cross (*The*

Dark Night of the Soul). The program participants were mainly Catholic sisters and priests. I took special note when told by a staff member that many of the people who studied at the center never became spiritual directors but often became elected leaders in their organizations.

In 1999, I attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, South Africa, with Brother Wayne Teasdale and other faculty and students from DePaul University. From Teasdale I learned of his deep frustration that, though the second Parliament in Chicago in 1993 had produced "The Global Ethic," a consensus document which states that "Earth cannot be changed for the better unless the consciousness of individuals is changed first," nothing is said about how a person *becomes* ethical. Teasdale (1999) subsequently studied those he felt truly lived as spiritual leaders and synthesized his research into a list of seven characteristics. First on the list is "a mature self-knowledge" (p. 105-06).

Shortly after being influenced by Teasdale, I read Zohar's (2000) *Connecting with Our Spiritual Intelligence*, which offers a list of what a "highly developed" spiritual intelligence looks like. Like Teasdale, Zohar's list includes "a high degree of self-awareness" (p. 15).

In the summer of 2000, aware of his writings, I invited Dr. Parker J. Palmer to speak at a series of events during ISL's 25th Anniversary celebration in Chicago. "How do we create the conditions under which people will begin to take the inner life more seriously?" was the question with which Dr. Palmer began a dialogue with ISL staff and graduates during one event.

Eventually, I integrated the ideas of these and other authors with my own observations to develop a model of spiritual leadership to illustrate the interconnection of the three elements I had been investigating (See Figure 1):

- self-awareness,
- personal and relational effectiveness,
- organizational and social effectiveness.

Figure 1: Spiritual Leadership Model: Showing Cyclical Dynamic of Growth and Transformation

My experience and study have convinced me that within the spiral process of transformative growth, self-awareness is the critical starting point. In my courses and trainings, I enrich the spiritual leadership model by including activities that support growth in self-awareness, such as self-assessment, journaling, and small group work. For a sample list of the content and practices central to my courses in relation to my spiritual leadership model, see Figure 2.
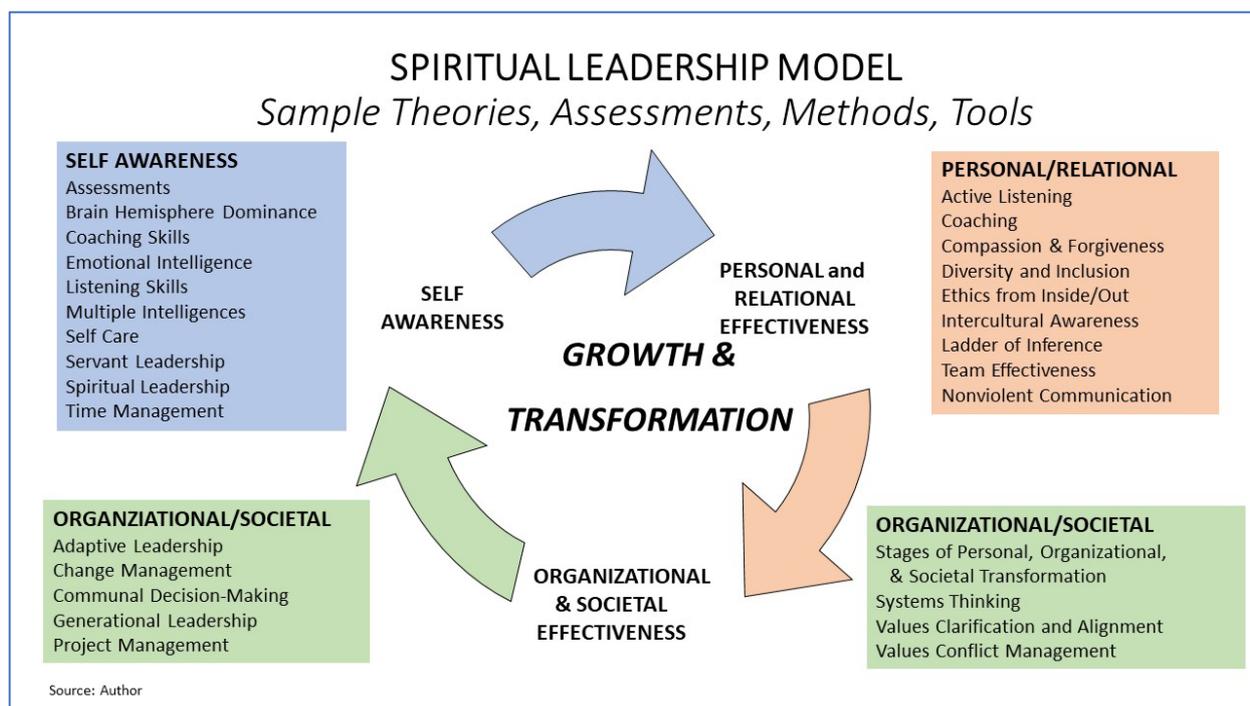
SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP MODEL
Sample Theories, Assessments, Methods, Tools

SELF AWARENESS
Assessments
Brain Hemisphere Dominance
Coaching Skills
Emotional Intelligence
Listening Skills
Multiple Intelligences
Self Care
Servant Leadership
Spiritual Leadership
Time Management

PERSONAL/RELATIONAL
Active Listening
Coaching
Compassion & Forgiveness
Diversity and Inclusion
Ethics from Inside/Out
Intercultural Awareness
Ladder of Inference
Team Effectiveness
Nonviolent Communication

SELF AWARENESS

PERSONAL and RELATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

GROWTH & TRANSFORMATION

ORGANIZATIONAL & SOCIETAL EFFECTIVENESS

ORGANZIATIONAL/SOCIETAL
Adaptive Leadership
Change Management
Communal Decision-Making
Generational Leadership
Project Management

ORGANIZATIONAL/SOCIETAL
Stages of Personal, Organizational,
 & Societal Transformation
Systems Thinking
Values Clarification and Alignment
Values Conflict Management

Source: Author

Figure 2: Spiritual Leadership Model: Sample Theories, Assessments, Methods, Tools

In February 2008, I was invited to become the director of a leadership development project at DePaul University. The ongoing purpose of this project is to carry on the extraordinary leadership legacy of Saint Vincent de Paul through education, training, and networking. It is not possible here to go into Vincent's story in detail, but what attracted me to the position was learning that before Vincent, "transformed social service in France in the 17th century," as I was told, he himself was transformed. Through experiences, relationships, and processes that cannot be detailed here, Vincent grew from a young seminarian who later admitted to refusing to welcome his father for an unannounced visit because he was dressed like a poor peasant, into a renowned servant of the poor. I immediately knew I could use Vincent as a role model for spiritual leadership.

In 2016, I was asked to assist with developing a training program based in Nairobi, Kenya, for Catholic sisters serving as leaders in their organization being funded through the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation Catholic Sisters Initiative. In June and August, I travelled to Nairobi and led week-long workshops for the sisters who would design the program and serve as its trainers. The workshop topics were selected from my online leadership courses in which some of the sisters had participated.

My role in the Professional Development for Congregational Leaders (PDCL) program since 2016 has been to offer periodic train-the-trainer sessions in person and online. In February 2021, Catherine Marienau, a DePaul colleague, joined our online training days to offer input on adult learning pedagogy. It was she who introduced us all to transformative learning theory. To me, the theory seemed to align with the ideas behind my spiritual leadership model. For example, in a dialogue with Jack Mezirow, John Dirkx suggests that "the act of learning [is] inherently a spiritual act, at least in potential" (Dirkx, et al., 2006, p. 130). Dirkx adds that transformative learning experiences "may challenge at a deep and fundamental level our existing ways of thinking, believing or feeling" (p.132).

In June 2023, back in Kenya for another train-the-trainer session, I planned to offer presentations on facilitating transformative workshops. I first asked the 24 sisters – all of them past program participants – to each say how the PDCL program had been transformative for them personally, how that transformation had impacted their leadership approach and actions, and how this ultimately, if at all, benefitted their organizations.

When they finished, I was so impressed with their stories that I asked if they would be willing to write down what they said. Written comments from several sisters eventually were forwarded to me

by the program co-coordinator, Sr. Vicenta Javier (personal communication, September 13, 2025). Some of their comments are shared here following a description of the program and the context in which the women lead, an important element in transformative learning theory.

Transformative Impact of a Leadership Training Program

The PDCL program consists of three five-day modules. Information on the module themes and current content is listed on the program website (https://pdcl.tangaza.ac.ke/services-activities/). Sr. Loretta Brennan (personal communication, June 12, 2025), CSB, the initial coordinator, summarizes the program in a 2020 evaluation report this way:

> The modules are designed in such a way as to take the participants through their leadership journey. It begins with the sisters' own development as leaders followed by the primary task of the leader which is to build a faith filled community among her sisters and finally for the leader to appreciate and fulfil her role in calling the sisters for mission.

The module topics are taught in a workshop format and include the use of several strategies Cranton names as integral to transformative learning as well as others: input, small and large group conversation, journals and diaries, role plays, dilemmas, critical incidents, film discussion, and rituals.

Though some of the sisters are originally from other countries, those who serve as trainers in the various module workshops all are or have been serving in East African countries as leaders in their own congregations. The importance of facilitators being sisters who themselves serve in leadership was noted by Sr. Loretta Brennan, who pointed to the impact of one facilitator:

> [She] identified with the women's experience in such a way that it was like looking into a mirror of their own experience. She did this with such self-deprecating humour that the women were drawn into the process without fear of judgment. This enabled them to reflect on their own experience and learn where change was possible (personal communication, June 12, 2025).

Sister Leaders in Context

Globally, congregations of Catholic sisters exist in two forms: 1) local congregations that culturally are relatively homogeneous; 2) international congregations, which increasingly are seeing even their local groups composed of sisters from a variety of cultures.

Congregations in many ways deal with the same issues as most non-profits, such as personnel, management, finances, and strategic planning. In other ways, however, these congregations are unique, particularly in that the sisters not only engage in ministries together (e.g., found and run schools, hospitals, clinics), but they also often live together and view themselves as having made a commitment to moving into the future together as a whole. These additional dynamics mean that, beyond the day-to-day challenges of overseeing a non-profit organization, sisters in leadership are responsible for overseeing and promoting the spiritual and relational dimensions of their congregations (Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1997).

It is also worth noting that many of the sisters come into their leadership roles by election without prior leadership experience or training. Their membership may select them more for their personal and relational qualities and/or perceived depth of spirituality than for any evidence of leadership capabilities and experience. They also, in many cases, belong to congregations wherein the longtime approach to leadership is one of "command and control"; one which the sisters willingly admit has served neither them nor their congregations well.

Real Life Impact

Comments from sisters on the transformative impact of the PDCL program are arranged below according to the elements of the author's spiritual leadership model: how the program transformed their self-awareness and their self-image as women religious; how this impacted their relational effectiveness (how they acted as leaders), and finally the impact on the effectiveness of their congregations. These sections are introduced with insights from transformative learning theory.

Transformations in Self-awareness

As Mezirow, Dirkx, Cranton, and others suggest, transformative learning can impact one's sense of meaning, worldview, and capabilities. One sister expressed how the program initiated this change for her: "When I started PDCL I was having a personal crisis regarding the meaning of religious life: for me, for the world. PDCL has showed me the future: women coming together from different congregations, backgrounds. This is light. This is life!" Another sister reported a similar change: "The PDCL has helped to reorganize myself in a way that I feel unique and special. The purpose of my existence is realised." For a third sister, PDCL fostered a transformation that helped her to overcome fears and bolster her self-confidence:

> Before I went through the modules, I was feeling very insecure of myself and afraid of the responsibility entrusted to me in the Africa Regional Council. PDCL equipped me with tools and skills to deepen my self-awareness and grow in self-confidence. I have grown in many areas and feel that PDCL has empowered me as a person and as a consecrated religious woman.

For another sister, growth in self-awareness helped her to "discover my giftedness and my strengths and weaknesses; hence accepting myself for who I am." This change in self-image was very important to her leadership: "[I was] able to deal with my past hurts [and] moved from the victim mentality to a liberated person."

Transformations in Leadership Behaviours

Transformative learning goes beyond helping individuals change their attitudes and beliefs about themselves to potentially impact how they view others – even their leadership role itself. One sister briefly noted that the program "helped me to change my attitudes and views on the Other different from me." Another sister was able to describe in more detail how the modules helped her "to understand how to engage with people by accepting them and allowing them to be where they are." She added: "The program has opened my eyes to be a compassionate leader towards the sisters and the people I work with and fanned into flame the potential within me."

One sister described the connection between her own growth in self-awareness and her effectiveness as a leader in meeting the needs of others:

> I have grown much in being aware of myself as a leader and this has helped me to be conscious of the needs of the sisters in my congregation. I am now able to understand my members and try to help them without making any judgement. The sharing of my experiences during the modules has helped me to be more open and listen attentively to others. When I did Module 1 some growth was quite visible in my leadership and many sisters discovered how I started handling their issues was different. They feel well understood and have become very free with me. They are able to openly share their personal issues freely with me (personal communication, September 13, 2023).

Transformations in Organizations

The following comments by the sisters affirm that the PDCL program, with its inclusion of inner work practices and processes based on an integration of the spiritual leadership and transformative learning theories, can have a profound impact not only on their inner development as leaders and but also on their ability to move their own and other organizations toward greater health and effectiveness in promoting social change.

One sister shared that her improved level of interaction and dialogue with many of the sisters has impacted the community positively, influencing others. One specific change she described is learning to use, "the technique of asking deeper questions."

Another sister described taking what she learned about teamwork, charism, and discernment to several other congregations and reported that "they too are experiencing change in their communities and apostolate." She also "conducted a workshop for community superiors on servant leadership, and they are gradually implementing it."

The sister also experienced a transformation that is key to the future of religious life:

I have discovered and experienced the beauty of networking with sisters of other congregations. My view of differences in Charism has changed from threat and competition to appreciation and collaboration for the Kingdom of God (personal communication, September 13, 2023).

A sister who belongs to an international congregation described the changes to her own Kenyan community as well as others with whom she shared her learnings:

My Kenyan Delegation is different from the time some of us came to (the program), as many can attest by our way of life and ministry. It has helped us to live this mission with a purpose. I have shared the materials gained from (the program) to our sisters in different countries which has been so helpful to them and those they empower (personal communication, September 13, 2023).

Finally, two of the sisters were able to place their leadership in a global context. One sister said, "I feel happy to work with courage and respond to the needs of our world today." Another sister explained how the deepening of her own understanding of her congregation's charism affirmed in her a desire to lead her congregation toward meeting the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of the topics of Module 3:

I became more aware of the values and the indispensable elements of the Charism of my Congregation. I established a personal relationship with our Founder. I am more affirmed in the mission regarding the care of our common home, through the SDGs (personal communication, September 13, 2023).

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to help illustrate the impact of the integration of the spiritual leadership and transformative learning theories by presenting narratives drawn from the author's life experience and the experience of several Catholic sisters who participated in a leadership development program based in Nairobi, Kenya, designed in part using these theories. Their stories as learners and leaders support the assertion by Geller (2009) that "Transformative learning provides a process to develop leaders to become more self-aware, able to foster stronger relationships with others, and consider both the short-term and long-term impact of decisions. It is an approach to adult learning that 'makes a difference' to the individual, the team, and the organization" (p. 198).

Transformative learning theory provides insight into how to make the inner work suggested by the spiritual leadership model presented here "stick." It helps to provide lasting change in leaders' self-awareness and self-perception, in turn positively impacting their leadership behaviors, and ultimately impacting the vitality of the organizations they lead.

The transformative learning that takes place through the program in East Africa also has been a powerful motivator for continued engagement by the 24 sister-leaders providing and promoting the program to new audiences. First offered in Kenya in 2017, the program now has expanded to sites in Tanzania, Uganda, and Eritrea. It also should be noted that the sisters who serve as workshop facilitators are so convinced of the transformative nature of the program and its beneifts that they are willing to form teams to offer the three modules in these countries all while continuing to serve in their very demanding leadership roles.

Finally, the sisters' context and narratives suggest a unique locus for further research into the integration of spiritual leadership and transformative learning theories. One focus might flow from Cranton's (2016) suggestion that Transformation can lead to conflict in a person's life – within the family, community, and culture. Moving out from under constraints or oppressive states calls into question that which led to the oppression in the first place, and that can be anything from a person's own family through to complex social and power structures. (p. 136)

The sisters, particularly those in African countries, seek to lead "under constraints or oppressive states" on many levels.

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