

# Nil desperandum

## *Time for renewal and refocus for Religious Orders*

Religious Orders face major challenges in Ireland today, with an increasingly ageing profile, very few new vocations, a crisis in Church authority and a decreasing capacity to directly fulfil their traditional missions, particularly in areas of education and healthcare.

Diarmaid Ó Corrbuí



The impact of these challenges has been quite dramatic in terms of the presence and role that the Religious Orders have had in Irish society over the past 20 years. From 1985 to 1998, the number of religious voluntary secondary schools declined from approximately 1,800 to 600. Since 1998, this withdrawal from education by Religious Orders has continued at an even more alarming pace, with Religious Orders (principally the Christian Brothers, Presentation Sisters and Mercy Sisters) planning to withdraw from the trusteeship of over 400 post-primary schools. The Religious Orders have also significantly reduced their active involvement in healthcare, with recent examples including Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, Aut Evin in Kilkenny and Mount Carmel Hospital in Dublin.

The major contribution that the Religious Orders have made to Irish society in addressing significant unmet needs in the areas of healthcare and education over the decades is widely acknowledged and appreciated. However, they are now facing the harsh reality of either withering away or undertaking a major strategic review of how best they can deliver on their mission and core objectives.

This process can be both reinvigorating and painful as some tough choices and decisions have to be made. These centre on using available resources effectively, exiting from certain core and cherished activities and exploring new models and approaches to fulfil those elements of their mission that remain viable and relevant.

In creating a strategy for Religious Orders, a number of critical questions need to be posed around areas of purpose, priority and direction. Firstly, what are the key issues and challenges facing the Order? Does the Order need to refocus or reinvigorate its mission? Is there a continuing need and role for it in this country? What are its priorities and how can it make best use and leverage the resources available? What does the Order need to stop doing or significantly reduce its hands-on involvement in? What new models of engagement and partnership with lay people does it need to develop to ensure the continued delivery of the Order's mission? How should it provide for welfare of elderly members who have dedicated their lives to the Order and are now no longer able to play an active role? What strategic goals and objectives does it need to set for the next five to ten years? And with refocused goals in place, what does the Order need to do to ensure that these are implemented correctly?

At its most basic level, the strategy development process for the Religious Order needs to define where it is today, where it wants to get over the next five to ten years and how it will get there. However, unless this process is approached in an open and honest manner, where the hard questions are asked and there is a willingness to think and operate differently and creatively regarding future roles and focus, the output from the process is likely to disappoint. A successful process will require strong and bold leadership, comprehensive consultation, thoughtful analysis, inspiring but achievable goals and a strong focus and clarity regarding how the strategy will be implemented.

Too many organisations spend inordinate amounts of time and intellectual energy debating what it needs to do and often neglect to devote sufficient time and commitment to implementation. A strategy that is not implemented is of limited value. Equally, the implementation of a poor strategy could exacerbate the problems facing the organisation. Therefore, it is important that the strategy process, in both its development and and appropriate to the needs of the Order.

The challenges highlighted above will test the resolve and determination of the Order to live their lives in accordance with the founders' mission. However, the process can also be seen as an excellent opportunity to renew and refocus their mission and to engage in potentially exciting and enriching new models of partnership with the wider lay community.

Diarmaid Ó Corrbuí is a Director in Prospectus specialising in strategy development and implementation. He has recently been involved in a number of strategy processes for Religious Orders and not-for-profit organisations.

Contact Diarmaid by emailing [docorbui@prospectus.ie](mailto:docorbui@prospectus.ie)

### Article at a glance

**Religious Orders are experiencing a dramatic decline in their active involvement in Irish society and their future existence is threatened.**

**They face a choice of withering away or using this challenge as a catalyst to renew and refocus their mission.**

**By engaging in a well-structured strategy process they can explore and identify new approaches to engage in partnerships with the lay community working together to achieve the goals of their mission.**