

Convener's Corner: Illuman of Illinois M.A.L.Es

By Bob Colaresi, Convener, Illinois M.A.L.Es

Illinois M.A.L.Es was born of loneliness and searching. In late 2005, Richard Rohr was speaking at Loyola University in Chicago. The planning group needed men to help and sought out initiated men in the area. I had made my MROP in August in Minnesota. Excited to be asked, I met a lot of men who followed Richard, as well as other men who had been initiated in other areas. Stephen Picha was coordinating and asked a few men if they would found a local M.A.L.Es group. It struck a chord. A month later, Bill McElroy, who would become our first convener, asked me about joining such a group.

Seven of us started meeting in early 2006 to form Illinois M.A.L.Es. We had all made the MROP experience and were looking for other men to share, talk with, and listen to; men who would understand and help us awaken to what was happening to us. The joy of sharing a common deepening experience opened us to our mission to share that with other men.

It wasn't an easy birth. We had our struggles, realizing in humility how much we had not changed despite the powerful inner experience we had tasted. As we got to know each other, understanding, mutual respect and brotherhood emerged. We first invited the 141 initiated men in our Midwest area. A larger group than expected came for a Saturday. Most wanted to be with other men to talk, listen, and be inspired. We were all lonely, longing and searching for brothers or other men on the journey. The hope was exciting.

We knew that we had to create programs to gather men, including the ambitious task of hosting an Illinois MROP in 2008. Focusing on MROP themes and other issues of the male journey—from spirituality, sexuality, shadow work, grief, intimacy, woundedness, etc.—we were surprised how many men came. We averaged eight programs a year. The hunger was real; authentic sharing was ennobling and humbling. Men brought other men. Our 2008 MROP had 80 men attending. With Richard Rohr and Stephen Picha serving as weaver and ritual elder, we were nervous. Fearful of the theophany and overwhelmed by the details of organizing an MROP, we exhausted ourselves with excessive meetings.

It was a powerful experience, but we lost \$4,000 on that MROP and figured we would never do that again. In good honest stewardship, we promised

Richard and the CAC we would pay that debt. This challenged us to develop ways to spread the message and make some money. We brought in speakers from the CAC wisdom group and other local speakers. The participation was great and energizing, and so we continued. We paid off the debt to the CAC and had money to bring in other speakers. We were on a roll for about 10 years. Our "success," I believe, was because we stopped philosophizing about things and just did it—trust the men and the Spirit.

Within the seeds of success are usually the seeds of its decline. On reflection, everyone pitched in but a few strong guys took the lead to get the programs organized. As a tight band of brothers, our monthly Elders meetings were times of great sharing, listening, learning, and inspiration, but less on our mission for our Midwest brothers. Unknowingly, we came to rely on a few people to get things done. Some Elders had to withdraw for different reasons. We invited in new Elders. We also knew we had to trust the gifts of the men of the region more and invite them to lead and share their wisdom and gifts. Why did we think we had to do everything?

In March 2015, the Elders had a weekend reflection meeting, honestly reflecting on what was happening, even recommitting and dividing up responsibilities. It seemed like a new start, but within 18 months we were back in the old situation—our energy had dissipated. Fewer programs were being offered, with lower attendance. Some guys had personal issues limiting their commitment.

We restructured the Elders Council. We focused on new small group meetings, but with limited success. It had never been our strength. From 2008 through 2018, we hosted seven MROPs with great energy and participation. So, the Journey of Illumination for Illinois M.A.L.Es had many peaks and some low valleys—even times of darkness.

But the spark and hunger does not die. COVID-19 stopped us for a while, but we are creating new virtual means of gathering men around significant topics. Illuman Illinois M.A.L.Es is restarting even as the world is reopening.

I strongly believe the Chapters and Regions are where Illuman actually exists—the boots on the ground, not just a national organization, but groups of men carrying out the mission of Illuman in our own unique but similar ways. And, as of this moment, we are still optimistic we can host the MROP this August 12–16. We need a few more men to register for the event to take place, so please contact us [through our website](#) ASAP if you are interested!