

# Conveners Corner

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## **A Time to Every Purpose under Heaven**

**By Michael Dunne, Former New York Chapter Convener**

As I sat down to write this reflection article, what came to mind are these well-known verses from Ecclesiastes:

*To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven:  
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that  
which is planted;  
A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;  
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away;  
A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
A time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time for peace.*

It is with a great degree of sadness that I share with you that Man Matters Spirituality, the corporate name for the New York Chapter, is in the process of dissolving. This decision has been in the making for over two years. It has been a heart-wrenching time for many and has brought forth many conflicting feelings. I share this with you in hopes that existing or emerging chapters may gain some insights and learn from our experience.

Prior to Illuman, when we were still under the wing of the CAC, three men—Lenny Sclafani, Joe Prato (deceased), and Rich Gilligan—came together with the intention of wanting to bring the Men’s Rites of Passage to New York after their personal experience of the Rites at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. Filled with much fire, enthusiasm, and connections from other ministries, they worked tirelessly, and New York held its first MROP at Frost Valley YMCA in September of 2006. That first MROP hosted just over 100 men!

About a year later, I assumed the role as convener of what was then known as the “Northeast Region.” Armed with 100 from our initial Rites and a group of men that I was connected with, we held an in-person event to gather men about every other month. We had a few groups meeting regularly throughout the region, in northern and southern New Jersey, Philadelphia, Long Island, and New York’s Hudson Valley. Men were engaged, participation was strong, and we held our next Rites in 2008.

With the concentration of involvement in the New York Metropolitan area robust, we continued offering events where we knew we would get solid participation. Often we

would be contacted about holding events in other parts of the region, and, at the time, my response was that we could support the event with advertising, emails, and financial resources if needed, but that the local areas needed to plan and run the event. The rationale was that, in order for an area to build a strong community, there needed to be a “buy-in” from the locals. It’s one thing for a team to show up, run an event, and leave town; it’s another to shift the commitment to the local community for planning, recruiting, advertising, and financing an event. Often, this suggestion was met with resistance and “pushback.” It seemed that nobody wanted to invest in a grassroots support system.

As with any organization, men come and go, move away, recover from addiction or divorce, and their needs change. The core base of men that I relied on and who were actively involved, shifted and changed, due to their own personal circumstances. They grew and were healed by what we offered, then they moved on. Isn’t that one piece of wisdom the Rites imparts: to become whole from our brokenness? I believe in Illuman’s five Touchstones; Centering, Gathering, Connecting, Releasing, Serving. Many men that crossed our path were doing these things, just not all the time in an Illuman circle or sponsored event.

For some reason, we just could not seem to get sustained involvement or commitment from more than just a few men. I found that when this happens, burnout is next and then we lose contact altogether. As any convener or MROP coordinator knows, putting on the Rites is an enormous responsibility and requires dedication by a wide circle of men with varied talents and gifts. It also requires a substantial financial commitment. Twice we had MROPs scheduled and—both times—we needed to back out weeks before the event because our enrollment was insufficient and we were not willing to take the financial gamble. As convener, I made the decision that I did not want to be responsible for putting the chapter on the “hook” for nonrefundable deposits and deplete our meager financial reserves.

Instinctively, I knew that it was time for me to step down as convener. I was out of ideas, we were not drawing new men, growth was stagnant. It was time for new “management” and fresh ideas, an enlivened energy. After an extended period, Dominick Bencivenga stepped up and was named convener in 2016. He too tried breathing new life into our local organization, but found many of the same issues I had experienced.

In early 2019, the core team met and, after a council gathering, made the decision to officially dissolve the organization. This gathering was not without opposite points of view and a robust discussion. A few men from the chapter attended Soularize 2019 and were asked to “pause” the official dissolution until after the new year in hopes that something unexpected would emerge and we could see our way to move forward. Then, suddenly, in March 2020, the coronavirus struck.

I place no blame, nor point any fingers. We had a good run: a solid ten years, with three added years of instability. So, I end with where I began: “To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven.” I have no answers and do

not know how the next chapter of this story will read. It is a mystery, navigating these days, and I trust that when a shift occurs and an opportunity is presented the leaders will emerge and change will happen.

In closing, I ask for your prayers. Hold us in your hearts and spirits, and lift us as we transition to something new!

Ho!