



Growing into Christian Community: Stages of Group Development

Core Community Meeting

Aim

The aim of this Core Community meeting is to offer introductory information on group development and encouragement for communities as they experience this very normal process. Community growth, with all its changes and challenges, is a necessary part of sharing our lives and building church. Knowledge about stages helps group leaders develop the pastoral skills needed for community growth. Finally, the Core group may decide if and how this topic could be introduced to leaders of ministry groups, committees, and other organizations in the parish.

Leader's Instructions:

This Core Community meeting requires no special set-up. If you want to open with a song use one of the suggestions below or choose a familiar hymn about community or the Body of Christ. If using recorded music, remember to have an audiotape/CD player ready.

Create a prayerful atmosphere. Place a Bible in a prominent position in the meeting space. Add a plant to symbolize growth, and light a candle.

Ask someone to read the Scripture passage, Ephesians 4:1–6. Do this before the meeting so there is time to prepare. You may choose to read (or ask someone to read) the reflection. Allow a few minutes of silence after the reflection before moving on to the sharing questions.

Song (optional)

"Pilgrim Companions" (Dan Schutte, *Renewing for the 21st Century*, OCP Publications, 5536 NE Hassalo, Portland, OR 97213)

"Send Us Your Spirit" (David Haas, *To Be Your Bread*, G.I.A. Publications, Inc., 7404 South Mason Avenue, Chicago, IL 60638)

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us take a moment of silence and enter into the presence of God among us and into God's love for the small communities we represent. Jesus is indeed the Way, the Truth and the Life. May new life flourish among us now.

(Pause)

Leader: Spirit of God, open our hearts to your Word. Form us into one body. Help us become living cells within the Body of Christ. Make us instruments of your love for our small communities.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

Reading Ephesians 4:1– 6

Leader's Reflection:

Paul challenges us to focus on one faith, one God, and one hope. This hope is what brings us together in communities. This same hope may also be tested or even dashed by our experiences with one another in small groups. Paul encourages us by adding that the Holy Spirit will create a bond of unity if we persevere in building the Church. As leaders, we too can experience Paul's hope about the process of building small communities. We can foster the fruitful development of small Christian communities through awareness of the stages along the way to spiritual unity and intimacy. We can appreciate the way God's Spirit helps us grow together.

A process of growth is set into motion when people gather together over a period of time. Groups move from the initial stages of becoming acquainted through ordinary conversation and into increasingly developed stages of group unity. The growth process includes mastering significant tasks that will bring new life to the group. A community is like a child growing up and confronting the various tasks associated with becoming an adult. A group also experiences the normal ups and downs of growing into a vibrant community of adult believers.

There are useful models of the development of small Christian communities offered in Keating's *The Leadership Book*¹ and in Sofield's *Building Community*.² These models challenge us to discover the stages and struggles of a group as signs of life or "growing pains" in the natural maturation process. A list of stages begins with the *Introductory Stage* characterized by everyday conversations and getting acquainted with one another. When trust begins to develop the group moves into the *Belonging Stage*. At this stage the group is searching for identity, goals, and purpose. Continued growth brings the *Competitive Stage*, in which a healthy group learns to balance the gifts and needs of group members. This process becomes full blown in the *Conflict Stage*. If conflict is resolved or managed successfully, then the group moves into the *Togetherness Stage*, marked by mutual acceptance and a heightened potential for what the group can accomplish. The next stage is the *Sharing Stage*, in which the group supports one another through sharing. Most people are free to share on a very personal level. This leads to the *Intimacy Stage*. The sense of unity is strong but also brings the temptation to become closed to new members. The last stage is the *Separation Stage*, which can happen at any time. It is precipitated by someone leaving the group or the end of the group itself.

By knowing about these stages, leaders can help their groups grow in confidence and perseverance. They can also provide appropriate pastoral care based on an understanding of the stages of growth. The "farewell discourse" that Jesus experienced with his community of disciples in John 14 is a good example of sensitive sharing and pastoral care during the *Separation Stage*. Facilitators can be like workers in a greenhouse or farmers tending animals, since the word *pastor* is taken from the Latin root word *pascere* that means to feed, to guide, or to show the way. A group leader can combine insights about stages of development and the Good News of the gospel in order to help the members of small groups care for one another. In this way the mystery of a communal Church unfolds and becomes a more lived reality.

Faith Sharing Questions

(See Core Community Meeting Handout)

Leader's Instructions:

The following reflection questions may be discussed as one group unless the Core Community is very large and would benefit from breaking down into smaller sharing groups. Make copies of the PCC Meeting Handout available.

1. Recall my own experiences with small groups. Choose one group in particular. What did I like most and least about the way that sharing happened? What has my experience taught me about the qualities of a small community that foster growth? In what ways could a better understanding of growth stages help me?
2. Choose a small group that I am familiar with and identify the predominant stage of development in this group. Can I give an example? The stages are:

- The **Introductory Stage** is characterized by everyday conversation through which we get to know one another and develop trust.
- The **Belonging Stage** includes conscious and unconscious efforts to become part of the group, or reactions to feeling left out of the group.
- The **Competitive Stage** involves sharing our own giftedness, status, or accomplishments, often without fully appreciating the giftedness of others.
- The **Conflict Stage** comes when the needs, values, and desires of some members in the community clash with those of other members. The resulting difficulties must be resolved, or at least, managed.
- The **Togetherness Stage** is marked by a great potential for unity, but not uniformity, as the level of trust within the group continues to mature.
- The **Sharing Stage** is characterized by the joys and trials of sharing our stories. Most people in the group feel free to “recall [and share] a time, a life event, a situation, a word, a moment of grace when God touched our lives, challenged us, or spoke to us.”³
- The **Intimacy Stage** arises from successful efforts to reach a comfortable level of knowing and being known by others.
- The **Separation Stage** sets in when someone decides to leave the group, or when even the best of groups and communities comes to an end, whether by mutual agreement or not.

3. How could the members of that group care for one another at this stage?

Leader’s Instructions:

After reviewing business from the Core’s previous meeting, brainstorm ways of supporting ongoing growth and bringing an awareness of the stages of development in small Christian communities. Determine if it is an important topic for the Parish Core Community to pursue or to present to others in the parish. Who would offer a workshop and to which groups? Depending on the results of this discussion, select from some of the possibilities below.

Business Meeting Agenda

1. Review the previous meeting’s minutes and actions.
2. How would a workshop or shorter presentations on this topic fit into the parish’s overall plan for adult faith formation and spiritual renewal?
3. Possible actions to introduce this topic to small Christian communities and the wider parish community:
 - Introduce the downloadable workshop, “Growing into Christian Community: Stages of Group Development” available from www.ParishLife.com.
 - Provide a guest speaker, or offer several shorter presentations to small community leaders and/or members, to ministerial communities, to other groups in the parish, or to the parish at large.
 - How are we going to do it?
 - a. Combine small groups for one presentation?
 - b. Offer several presentations for various small groups?
 - c. Who will be hosts, sharing facilitators, and publicity workers?
 - Acquire resources on the topic to give to leaders and/or to put in the parish library.
 - Contact RENEW International about a small Christian community consultant to help organize the workshop and/or run it. Find out about related print and Internet

resources. (Contact Mike Fabian at SCCServices@renewintl.org, or (908) 769-5400)

4. After the decisions are made, assign tasks to individual members or groups. Project a time line for each of the tasks.
5. Other action items to be discussed as part of normal business of the Parish Core Community.

Closing Prayer

Leader's Instruction:

Tell everyone that there will be an opportunity for special prayer requests within the closing prayer. We will take the time to pray for the groups in our lives, and then for individuals in need. If you wish and/or if time allows, you may want to begin the prayer by having the group listen to a song. Suggested songs are offered below or you may select your own related to the topic.

Song (optional)

"Pilgrim Companions" (Dan Schutte, *Renewing for the 21st Century*, OCP Publications, 5536 NE Hassalo, Portland, OR 97213)

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Prayer for Communities

Leader's Instructions:

You may want to begin by mentioning one or two groups such as the "Thursday morning moms group" or the "group at Patty Smith's house." Allow enough time for participants to respond.

Leader: Let us pray for the small communities that enrich our personal lives. We are part of God's people and members of the Body of Christ. I invite you to mention particular groups that you belong to so we can pray with you. End your prayer petition with "**We pray to the Lord.**" And we will respond by saying together, "**God send forth your Spirit.**"

Leader: There are a variety of large and small groups in our neighborhoods and in the world community. Many of these groups are struggling to live, to grow, and to love one another. I invite you to mention some of these groups by name, and then end with, "**We pray to the Lord.**" We will join in your prayer by responding, "**God, send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.**"

Leader: And finally, we could not gather together as the Body of Christ without asking for your blessings on our loved ones and friends. Let us remember them in silence.

(Silence)

Father, send your Holy Spirit to these people and to the communities that we have asked you to touch. Fill the hearts of your faithful.

All: God, send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.

Leader: Glory be to the Father...

All: As it was in the beginning...

¹ Charles J. Keating, *The Leadership Book*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995).

² Loughlan Sofield, ST, Carroll Juliano, SHCJ, and Rosine Hammett, CSC, *Building Community: Christian, Caring, Vital*, (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1998).

³ Excerpt from *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century, Revised and Updated* by Thomas A. Kleissler, Margo A. LeBert, and Mary C. McGuinness. Copyright © 1997 by RENEW International. Used by permission of Paulist Press. www.paulistpress.com, p. 48.



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