



Growing into Christian Community: Stages of Group Development

Reflection

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground...and the seed would sprout and grow.... The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head" (Mark 4:26–28).

Many of us hear this parable as a statement about individual growth, but small Christian communities are also planted, and they grow and mature through noticeable stages, much like the grain in this parable. They experience a normal psychological process of communal growth. Realizing this helps us be more patient and realistic in our expectations of one another. We can also become more comfortable with the challenges of each stage and more open to the kind of leadership that promotes successful growth in the life of our small Christian community.

Some may hesitate in applying psychological stages of growth to the understanding of small Christian communities. However, Vatican Council II welcomed the behavioral sciences as an aid in our growth as individuals and as communities of faith. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* states, "methodical research in all branches of knowledge, *provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws* (emphasis ours), can never conflict with the faith, because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God."¹ Psychology, when used correctly, can help us grow spiritually, and foster the evangelizing mission of Jesus. "Advances in biology, psychology, and the social sciences not only lead humanity to greater self-awareness, but provide it with the technical means of molding the lives of whole societies as well."²

Studies of small communities suggest at least eight observable stages in community growth:

- 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.

Recent authors like Bernard Lee and Loughlan Sofield encourage attention to these stages and perseverance through the growth of Christian community: "The concept of community is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition. This tradition acclaims God as the perfect community, a community of love. Life in community is the primary way in which God prepares us to participate in the divine life. The deeper we enter into community, the more we prepare ourselves for our relationship with God, both now and in the life to come."⁴ The official teaching of the Catholic Church affirms this viewpoint.⁵

Pope John Paul II also presents the image of a new springtime of growth for the Church. In the *Mission of the Redeemer* (86) and in *On the Coming of the Third Millennium* (18) he develops the idea that God is preparing a great springtime, a new advent for Christianity. Perhaps one of the first signs of this springtime in the Church is the vast number of people who have experienced small faith communities. And perhaps now is the time to pursue greater growth by persevering through all the steps to small community life. People who continue to gather have set out on an evolving journey, an unfolding experience of new life in Jesus. Embracing the stages of community life will bring an even greater metamorphosis for all the communities, their members, and the Church as a whole.

¹ *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, 36.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

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.

⁴ Excerpted from *Building Community: Christian, Caring, Vital* by Loughlan Sofield, ST, Rosine Hammett, CSC, and Carroll Juliano, SHCJ, p. 13. Copyright © 1998 by Ave Maria Press, P.O. Box 248, Notre Dame, Indiana, 46556, www.avemariapress.com Used with permission of the publisher.

⁵ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1878.