



## People of God: Four Models of Church

### *What the Small Communities Need to Know*

1. Small communities need to grow in their understanding, awareness, and appreciation of the meaning of Church, its various models and descriptions.
2. There are real advantages to understanding models of Church since a model is a fairly simple visual or verbal representation developed to help us grasp or understand a situation or concept that is usually considerably more complex. Models are also useful, open, fitting, and stimulating. They “explain a large quantity of data and allow for exceptions [*useful*]...[are] invitations and challenges to further refinement and clarifications [*open*]...logical, consistent, neat [*fitting*]...have the capacity to arouse the imagination and thus to contribute to further and deeper understanding [*stimulating*].”<sup>1</sup>
3. The model of Church as a community of disciples is prevalent in the New Testament (occurring more than 250 times there). The early Christians realized the importance of living out this model of Church, as evidenced particularly in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47), and small Christian communities have greatly furthered it. These communities have “enabled believers to develop a more profound union with God and one another. They have also been a means for renewing and expanding the Church. They offer greater hope than ever that Christians will deepen their love for God, for one another, and for all of creation...”<sup>2</sup>
4. Small community members should be encouraged (personally or in meeting within their group, or with other parish groups) to learn more about the following aspects of the Church:
  - a) One important contemporary image of the Church, employed by both the Second Vatican Council and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is the Pauline image of the Church as the new “people of God,” that is the people of the New Covenant united by baptism into Christ as children of God and of Abraham (Galatians 3:26-29).
  - b) Four models of Church include:<sup>3</sup>
    - **Church as sacrament.** “The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people.”<sup>4</sup>
    - **Church as herald.** This model emphasizes the responsibility of the Church to communicate the Good News of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
    - **Church as servant.** This model emphasizes the responsibility of the Church to work for a more caring, just, and peaceful world. The transformation of society is seen as an expression of Jesus’ liberating and saving power working through the presence of the Holy Spirit.
    - **Church as community of disciples.** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the Church as the unity of members that results from their personal union with Jesus (789).

5. It would be helpful for small Christian communities to talk with parish and/or diocesan/archdiocesan staff for additional ideas on the topic. Also, there is a workshop on “People of God: Four Models of Church” that can be downloaded from [www.ParishLife.com](http://www.ParishLife.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, by L. J. Luzbetak, pp. 136–37. Copyright © 1988 by Orbis Books. Used with permission of the publisher.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21<sup>st</sup> 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](http://www.paulistpress.com), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: Expanded Edition*, (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)*, 1.