

Dynamics of Small Groups and Christian Communities

Small Groups: 6-12 people, where personal relationship, shared purpose and shared commitment to Christ forms a small community.

Five things Christians do together:

- Celebrate the sacraments together.
- Read Scripture together.
- Pray for each other.
- Do ministry together.
- Share lives together.

The last four things are most richly experienced in small groups, rather than large ones.

These kind of small groups can be intentionally developed (there is a *lot* of good literature on this), but these characteristics also describe traditional ministries like Choir, Bible studies, Outreach groups, or Altar Guild. Though the Altar Guild might focus on doing ministry together, they can also pray together, read scripture together, share lives together. Though a Bible study might focus on scripture, they can also pray together, share lives together, and occasionally do an outreach project together.

Leadership of small groups

- *Facilitation* of discussion is usually essential (rather than a ‘teacher-pupil’ model).
- Be aware of interpersonal dynamics, and develop healthy interactions. This is the basis of Community. And pray together—this is the basis of *Christian* Community.
- Always lead in twos—for back-up and development.

Life Cycle of Small Groups:

Storming, Forming, Norming, Performing, Stagnating, Death or Re-forming

Response to Change:

Dynamic resistance to *new members* or to *new direction*

But the group themselves change anyway (at the very least, they get old and die).

Growing disconnect between activities, purpose & people

This undermines motivation, dries up mission, and is unattractive to newcomers

Strategies for healthy & renewing life cycle:

- Cohort specific: plan for long term group, and raise up leaders for other groups.
- Time limits on group life forces a natural decision time for renewal or reformation
- Mission/Task-oriented limits allows for re-shuffling when the task is accomplished.
- Intentional patterns of mentoring/discipling (structural/ministry-oriented)
 - Recruit/involved/co-chair/chair/recruiter
 - Mentor: watch me do it; Let’s do it together; do it & I’ll watch; you teach another
- Intentional growth & multiplication (organic/evangelical)
 - Mindset toward invitation, welcome, growth & development
 - Mindset toward dynamic & open relationships in group life
 - welcome & forming of new groups.

Dynamics of Christian Communities

Personality “DNA”

Parishes develop “personalities” based on their interpersonal dynamics. Churches develop a “corporate culture” just like companies—the way “business” is done, unspoken norms of values or how people relate to each other.

Does the congregation have a history of grumpiness? Odds are that they will attract grumpy people, and that upbeat, positive people will be less interested in joining. Is the congregation an active, busy place? Odds are that more contemplative people will look elsewhere, and more active people will join. A “sleepy” place attracts “sleepy” people. Thus, a congregational “DNA” keeps the personality of a place steady long after the original people have died or left.

- Knowing your history might help you understand trends in your congregation’s personality.
- Because of these dynamics, a parish’s personality is hard to change.

How to bring change in a parish? Renewed Mission

We often want change due to a crisis (good and bad): the finances are tight, a housing development is built nearby, the congregation is aging. But once we *feel* like the crisis is *starting* to be addressed, we often relax and fall back into the way we’re used to being.

True transformation in a parish comes with a deep commitment to the mission of the church

- “What we are about means life & death.”
- Transformation requires leaders whose lives have been transformed by God.
--a passion to share that blessing with others
- Starts w/prayer & discernment
- Change moves through personal relationships
- Changing the whole community often requires a separate team of dedicated leaders in concert with *official* leaders
- With patience, persistence and vision.

The example of growth:

Thus, lasting congregational growth only comes out of a deep commitment to growth as a mission priority, not as a way to fix finances.

Do you want the church to grow? (yes = passive acceptance)

Do you want to grow the church? (yes = personal ownership of the process)

Churches have life cycles like small groups

Energy in formation

This attracts more involvement

Over time, things become routinized and stagnate

Unless group renews its mission and new energy brings vitality (thus: renewal)

Size impacts congregational dynamics and vice-versa (See Size Models of Ministry)