

Church Leadership Teams: Embodying Christian Community¹

Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a new community came into being. This new community, formed by the Holy Spirit, is described in Acts 2, and the new ways in which it was to function are richly described in the community of Jesus in the Gospels and throughout the letters to the early churches. These numerous accounts, descriptions and examples offer a vibrant image of a community of openness and engagement, welcoming differences and encouraging creative conflict, expressing a freedom to innovate in ways that enabled the Gospel to materialize in human relationships and community for the sake of the world.

Living as God's people is not a vague, romantic or idealized dream, but a concrete way of life which has practical and definite consequences. The New Testament's witness to the kind of community the Holy Spirit is creating in the church and calling it to embody could be expressed like this: "God's reign comes when we can regard all strangers as sisters and brothers; when we can embrace those from whom we are estranged; when we can unite in one congregation diverse racial, social, political, economic, and ethnic groups; when we can seek justice for those who are least deserving or lovable; when we are freed from private life, private property, and private commitment and led into public life, public property, and public commitment; and when the needs and concerns of the world's outcasts are made our agenda for prayer and service."²

How can this theological vision of the faith community be embodied within the organizational life of the church...within a church leadership team?

The Witness of the Church's Organizational Life. Usually when seeking to build Christian community the focus falls upon the development of various kinds of "fellowship" or small groups. Often overlooked are the many small groups that already exist, namely the administrative or leadership groups, teams or committees of the church. Little attention is given to the use of power and authority, the way information is shared, the nature of decision-making, the openness and receptivity of church leaders, the quality of peer relationships, the process of determining organizational goals, or the

¹ This essay adapted from *Organizational Concepts for Church Transformation*, created and offered by Center for Parish Development at www.missionalchurch.org. Please share with us how you are making use of this resource. Email cpd@missionalchurch.org.

² John Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community: The Church That Makes A Difference* (Harper and Row, 1985), p. 21.

manner of recognizing and affirming organizational involvement.

Yet the church is called to manifest the qualities of Christian love--compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience (Col. 3:12) in all aspects of its life and work. In fact, many teams and groups flounder because they have not given appropriate attention to organizational skills: participatory decision-making, cooperative planning, shared leadership, and the creative utilization of conflict. Within an impersonal, fragmented, and competitive world, these relational skills do not come naturally. They must be learned, tested, and practiced within a community of people who come together to participate in God's new creation: an alternative way of living and working together. In the actualization of its mission--proclaiming and embodying God's forgiving and reconciling love--all aspects of the church must be both faithful and effective, including and especially the administrative teams, staff teams and leadership groups of the congregation.

Creating a Climate for Group Development. The claim is being made that the form and style, process and content, attitudes and practices of the administrative, staff and leadership groups is a vital and creative way both to develop and express Christian community. All of these groups and teams are called to cultivate a spiritually enriching and personally supportive climate for their life and work. Indeed, it is usually within the group persons learn the organizational skills needed to develop and participate in the study, support, and service of the church. The challenge is to cultivate a trusting and supportive climate that moves beyond a defensive and competitive "business" orientation.

Extensive comparative research has identified six key characteristics of groups which release the energy, stimulate the motivation, and utilize the gifts of persons as they engage in planning and carrying out the ministry of the church.³

Supportive: The group provides an opportunity for persons to discover their gifts, utilize them in service to God's church, and have their personal self-worth and importance affirmed. All of the interaction, problem-solving, and decision-making activities of the group occur in a supportive atmosphere, even when there is strong conflict. The commitments and goals of the group are formed through an open and interactive process that involves all group members. The group leader uses leadership practices which communicate that all members of the group are important persons who can make a valuable contribution to the group. Group processes are employed which

³ These characteristics reflect the current and ongoing research of the Center that had its beginnings in collaboration with Rensis and Jane Likert and the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan in the 1970s.

encourage cooperative interactions rather than competitive ones that pit the concerns and interests of members against one another. Recognizing the importance of their work, and affirming the need for the wisdom and gifts of all concerned, group members are eager to help one another develop to their full potential.

Receptivity: The group actively seeks and uses the knowledge, opinions, concerns, experience, and ideas of all members. The group leader and each member are genuinely interested in any information on any relevant matter that any member of the group can provide. Members feel free, and multiple opportunities are made, to talk openly with the group leader and with each other about matters related to their common life and work. A climate is cultivated which enables the sharing of the diversity of histories and dreams. Receptivity is furthered in the group by continually clarifying group norms, encouraging the expression of differing views, listening and learning from one another, avoiding too-early solutions, building on partially-formed ideas, and affirming the contributions of others.

Teambuilding: Members develop a relational climate of cohesiveness, which results in a commitment to the aims, and objectives of the group. Members seek to strengthen interpersonal, group dynamics and process skills. The group has been in existence sufficiently long, and has spent enough time together, to have developed well established and relaxed working relationships. New members are intentionally welcomed and incorporated into the life and work of the group. Members identify and confront potential areas of conflict -- as opportunities for enriched learning. The cohesiveness of the group is not the result of conformity or uniformity, but of the unity which comes through exploring, sharing, growing, and working together. Members of the group are highly motivated to abide by the major commitments and to achieve the important goals of the group.

Performance Emphasis: There is an accomplishment-oriented atmosphere in which members are willing to set goals that are high. Having participated in their formation, all members accept willingly and without resentment the goals and expectations the group has established for itself. The group seeks and prizes creativity and attaches a high value to innovative approaches and solutions to its problems. The leader and members believe that each group member can grow and stretch. Evaluating their work according to their shared commitment to the mission of the church, the members of the group are highly motivated to achieve the important goals of the group.

Work Facilitation: Members of the group intentionally seek to support and help one another in carrying out their work. Members give each other the help they need to accomplish successfully the tasks and goals set by the group for each member. The style

of working together ensures that the feelings, concerns, and needs of each member are given the attention by the group which they deserve. All members are encouraged to share fully and frankly with the group all the information which is relevant and of value to the group's activities. Members are knowledgeable of and utilize communication processes in ways which best serve the interests and objectives of the group. An intentional effort is made to identify, nurture, utilize, and affirm the diverse gifts of all members.

Decision-Making: The processes of the group ensure all members fully participate in making the significant decisions that affect the group. The group generates and shares the information needed for decision-making, allows sufficient time for exploration and discussion, makes a free and informed choice, and builds internal commitment to the choices made. The group is flexible and adaptable: ideas, feelings, goals, and attitudes do not become frozen. Members expect and are strongly motivated to influence one another and are receptive to being influenced by other members. Consensus methods of decision making are used which enable the group to explore a range of options and seek to combine various persons' ideas into an optimum solution, rather than pushing for a "win/lose" vote on what may be a minimally acceptable solution.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What within the life of your church leadership team(s) might nurture, model, or enable Christian love?
2. In what ways do the six characteristics of groups reflect or contribute to Christian community?
3. What is one hope you have from this essay for the quality of life and work within your church leadership team(s)?