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STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY IN CHURCHES:  
A PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION APPROACH

by

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B.S., University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, 1975

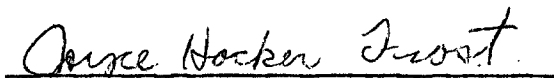
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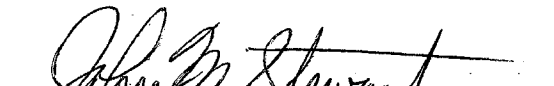
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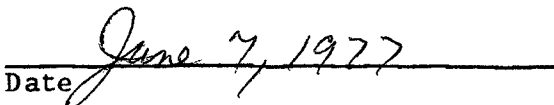
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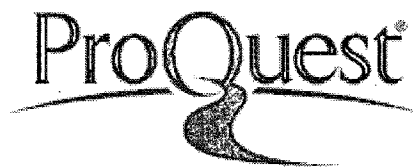


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## PREFACE

This paper explores the development of community in churches. Community is operationally defined as the degree of mutual sharing, concern, and responsibility present in a group. The primary focus of the study involves discerning the major stages of community development and listing specific examples of behavior characteristic of each stage.

The apparent quest for community in the United States and the author's interest in promoting community is the motivation for the present study. The rapid increase in the number of communes in the United States manifests this demand for community. Thousands of persons have embarked on communal experiments in hopes of finding intense community.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section explores the quest for community. The communal movement is briefly surveyed and the community building potential of communes is analyzed. This writer concludes that communes have generally proved ineffective at promoting community for an extended period of time. The argument that traditional institutions be investigated for community building potential is then forwarded. The church is suggested for study because 132 million Americans now belong to religious groups as reported in the April 11, 1977 edition of U.S. News & World Report.

The next section describes participant observation and gives the rationale for utilizing participant observation in the present

study. Data gathering techniques used in the study are also outlined.

In the third section the six stages of community in churches revealed by the data are listed and explained. The six stages included:

1. Initiation
2. Basic Commitment
3. Limited Community
4. I-Spirit Community
5. We-Spirit Community
6. Intense Community

The final section discusses and summarizes the implications of the results for persons interested in promoting community in churches. Future research directions are also suggested.

## THE QUEST FOR COMMUNITY

### Definition of Community

The word "community" is often heard in conversations. The following statements are common: "We sure have a fine community;" "We've lost the community spirit;" "There are strong feelings of community here;" or, "I'd give almost anything to be part of a community like that!"

Sociological literature distinguishes two types of community. The first use places emphasis on locale as the basic component of analysis (Bernard, 1973). Physical groupings of people--cities, towns, villages--are communities in this sense. The second emphasis on community has social interaction, which focuses on how people feel about and act toward each other, as the primary component (Bernard, 1973). Commitment, cohesion, and continuity which arise from the communicative behavior of members are key variables. Other phrases describing this type of community include, "common loyalty," (Gustafson, 1961); "mutual support," (Delespesse, 1968); "shared goals and values," (Hedgepeth and Stock, 1970); "we-feelings," (Kanter, 1972); and "we-spirit," (French and French, 1975). Using the preceding contributions, community will be defined in this paper as the degree of mutual sharing, concern, and responsibility present in a group. A group with little or no community would be characterized by members motivated primarily by personal self-interest. Little effort would be devoted to promoting group unity and developing a supportive environ-

ment. A group with a moderate perception of community would find members displaying a genuine concern for the problems of others. Members would make sacrifices of time, energy, and resources with the group in mind. However, much activity would be motivated by the quest to fulfill personal needs. Groups with high levels of community are rare. Here members actively share resources and talents with one another. Actions are carried out for the benefit of the entire group, not solely to satisfy individual interests. Problems are shared and members do all they can to enhance the need fulfillment of fellow members.

#### Searching for Community

Many Americans are active in the quest for community. This demand for community can be attributed to several factors. A major reason involves the disintegration of the "extended family" (Toffler, 1970; Gordon, 1972; Barlett, 1976). At one time it was common for families to be composed not only of parents with sons and daughters, but grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins as well. The result was a large, interdependent support group comprised of all ages. However, as America became more industrialized and the populace more mobile, these family clusters began to crumble. And as Toffler reported, "such families are hard to transport and transplant" (1970, p. 241). As individuals became more isolated alternative types of "extended families" were sought to provide community type support.

The search for community is also a response to loneliness (Bouvard, 1975; Barlett, 1976). As society becomes more mobile, we



increasingly confront environments where we are the "stranger." Community is sought to counteract the pains of isolation.

Hedgepeth and Stock (1970) and Bouvard (1975) observed that many people feel they lead an aimless existence. In a sense people become increasingly reactive, less proactive. Many feel helpless in that they perceive little control over institutions and decision makers (French and French, 1975). Kanter (1972) argued that people are forced into narrow roles which hinder self-expression and the full development of their human potential. Communitarians hope fuller community experiences will capture the meaning that has been lost.

Many persons believe community is the key to recapturing the values which characterized early America (McBrien, 1969; Hedgepeth and Stock, 1970; Melville, 1972; Bouvard, 1975; Barlett, 1976). The desirable ideals have been replaced by a highly mechanized society. Many persons now perceive a general absence of authenticity in American life. Relationships have become superficial and depersonalized to the point where many long to develop genuine, intense interpersonal relationships.

A final reason is obvious, yet important. People need to be supported and affirmed (Gustafson, 1961; Bouvard, 1975). We cannot function very long without people being concerned about us and empathizing with us. With support from others we can grow and develop as persons.

The quest for community is a response to the loneliness, aimlessness, and meaninglessness which characterizes the lives of many

Americans. People are searching for support groups to replace extended families. This search has led many to experiment with communal living.

#### Communal Attempts at Community

The communal movement is indicative of the quest for community (Kanter, 1970). Thousands of persons have abandoned traditional lifestyles to pursue community. In 1958 only a dozen intentional communities existed; since then, tens of thousands of communes have been established (Houriet, 1971; Bouvard, 1975). While the magnitude of the recent communal movement is unprecedented, there have always been some who preferred communal living arrangements. Communal experimentation was common in the United States during the nineteenth century. In fact, there is much continuity between those experiments and the communes of today (Gordon, 1972; French and French, 1975). Then, as today, feelings of community were being sought. Many were looking for a utopian environment where they could live or worship as they pleased and where unfulfilled needs could be satisfied.

Of the numerous nineteenth century communes, a few have generated much interest. Robert Owen established the New Harmony Commune in 1825. Owen invited everyone to share in this experience. Unfortunately, many of those who obliged Owen were unwilling to work and share responsibility, which resulted in the commune's demise in 1827. From 1825 to 1840 Owen's ideas inspired a dozen communal ex-

periments (French and French, 1975).

Of the 40 communes established in the 1840's, many were inspired by the writings of Charles Fourier (Kanter, 1972; French and French, 1975). Fourier believed that a social unit he called the "phalanx" was the key to communal success. The ideal phalanx would contain 1,800 people, equally divided between the sexes. No one was to spend more than an hour per day in work or play with the same group of people. Fourier contended that these varied interactions would enable people to fully experience their human possibilities (French and French, 1975). However, these groups enjoyed only limited success although the North American Phalanx was active for 13 years (French and French, 1975).

Perhaps the most interesting commune of the 1800's was the Oneida Community which prospered from 1848 to 1881. Oneida is most remembered for the practice of "group marriage." Sexual relationships were allowed between all members as long as both parties consented. These practices were ultimately responsible for the collapse of the commune as members were constantly harrassed by the broader society.

The Hutterite settlements first appeared in 1874 and still flourish today. The Hutterites are a strong religious group of the Anabaptist tradition who follow a strict autocratic model. Their high degree of commitment and loyalty is evidenced by the fact that in 1974 there were 21,000 Hutterites in 229 colonies across the United States and Canada (Boldt, 1976).

The great majority of nineteenth century communal experiments

ended in failure. People were not willing or able to make the sacrifices and generate the effort necessary for survival. Kanter (1972) and French and French (1975) concluded that unsuccessful groups were characterized by persons who sought only personal interests (I-Spirit). Mutual sharing and responsibility (We-Spirit) was evidenced far less frequently.

#### Reasons for the Communes of Today

Conditions causing persons to seek community were discussed earlier. Communes are viewed by many as excellent places to nurture community. Numerous social scientists and journalists have reported on the communal ventures of recent years (see Hedgepeth and Stock, 1970; Houriet, 1971; Kanter, 1972; Melville, 1972; Bernard, 1973; Jackson and Jackson, 1974; Bouvard, 1975; French and French, 1975; Barlett, 1976). These authors share communal successes and failures as well as describe what people hope to gain from communal living.

Many people feel that communes will provide an environment of love and concern (Bernard, 1973). Communitarians are seeking support. They hope that living in close contact with many caring people will prevent isolation and the loneliness so characteristic of the broader society.

A commune is also viewed as a "society" of manageable size (Hedgepeth and Stock, 1970; Bouvard, 1975). Many people have been frustrated by the vastness and the unresponsiveness of modern society. Decision makers are perceived as not responding to the demands of

the public. Therefore, by building their own society, communitarians feel they possess the capability to change structures and practices as they please to promote community.

For many people a commune encourages experimentation (Bouvard, 1975). People hope to try out new ideas and roles. Many hope to practice a lifestyle which is non-polluting and characterized by low-consumption. In many communes men perform traditional "women's work" while women tackle jobs usually assigned to men.

Barlett (1976) observed that many people believe communes afford the opportunity to start all over again. Many are challenged by the possibility of building a society not beset by the problems threatening broader society. If previous mistakes can be avoided they feel strong feelings of community will be developed.

The preceding illustrates the benefits people hope to derive from communes. Simply stated, communitarians hope to experiment with a new and refreshing lifestyle while being loved and supported. Given these visions of communal benefits, attention needs to be focused on evaluating how well communes fulfill the dreams of communitarians.

#### Problems with Modern Communes

Just as the nineteenth century communes were beset with problems, so too are the communes of today. French and French (1975) argued that today's communitarians have repeated the mistakes of their predecessors. They contended that once again we had a preponderance of "I-Spirit" rather than "We-Spirit" communes. A great number of

communes were typified by a "complete inner focus" (Bouvard, 1975, p. 14).

Many recent communes have folded due to the absence of well-defined goals (Bouvard, 1975). And, if goals were established, little effort was directed to developing workable plans to accomplish desired goals. Communes which lacked direction usually crumbled. French and French stated the principle well: "Intentional communities with 'structured' structures can last; groups with 'unstructured' structures by and large cannot" (1975, p. 79).

Many communes were missing a real sense of purpose (Bouvard, 1975). People were often trying to escape the pressures of society, rather than making lasting contributions or making serious attempts at developing community. Once the novelty of communal living had waned, many found little to challenge them. Building projects and food production provided only temporary reprieve. Bouvard contended: "Most people need more to capture their interest and imagination than building a pleasurable, non-polluting, and self-sufficient existence" (1975, p. 14). Thus, many communes fizzled because participants no longer saw a reason to continue.

Another frequent weakness has been enclavism (Bouvard, 1975). Many communal groupings have forgotten broader society completely. Bouvard (1975) snidely observed that a commune may come to resemble a middle class suburb. Another problem resulting from isolation was that many of the useful contributions of the broader society were neglected. This is particularly vital when one considers problems

with disease and food production which have plagued several communes, eventually causing collapse.

Many communes contained members who were idealistic about building community, but at the same time lacked the necessary practical skills needed for survival. Enthusiasm alone was not enough without additional skill, knowledge, and hard work. This point was dramatized by Barlett's discovery that "only a fraction of the total commune population produces more than bare subsistence for its own group needs (1976, p. 50).

Another weakness (which illustrates poorly developed community) was that in many communes differences were not resolved (Bouvard, 1975). Dissenters either quit the commune or quit dissenting. Thus, many communal groups were unable to accommodate a variety of interests. Many people found such an environment stifling, which caused them to leave communes after minimal exposure.

Many communal groups sought to reduce conflict by distributing goods and services equitably. It was not difficult to divide food, clothing, housing, and pocket money equally. However, it was much more difficult to handle the unforeseen envy and unhappiness cause by the unequal distribution of power (Kinkade, 1974). Thus, problems arose from the inability to distribute intangibles effectively.

#### Promoting Communal Survival and the Nurturing of Community

All of the above problem areas hinder communal survival and

hence the development of high levels of community. Much can be learned from the mistakes of these communes. Following are three principles essential to communal success which can be used by future communal groups and to some degree all groups in efforts to promote community.

Identification and clarification of basic goals is necessary.

Frost and Wilmot contended that "people are more likely to get what they want (separately and together) when they can identify what they want" (1978, p. 134). Too often communal goals were vague and unclear (Bouvard, 1975). Many communitarians were seeking "utopia" or the "true meaning of life." Such generally stated goals were difficult to achieve. It would have been more productive to state operational goals (Johnson and Johnson, 1975; Baird and Weinberg, 1977). A goal is operational if there is some basis for relating it to group activities that will achieve it (Johnson and Johnson, 1975, p. 101). Operational goals can motivate members and guide the group. They provide a means to measure goal attainment as well. A group should also attempt to specify "do-able" goals (Frost and Wilmot, 1978). Group effort can then be directed to accomplishing goals which can be achieved.

The development of "We-Spirit" greatly enhances communal survival. French and French concluded that "communal success depends on the abandonment of individualism in favor of a sense of wholeness of the group" (1975, p. 79). Struggling communes were often composed of members who were more concerned with what they could gain from the communal experience as an individual rather than what they could con-



tribute for the group. Communal success was contingent upon great amounts of sharing and personal sacrifice (Bouvard, 1975). Kanter (1972) declared that groups characterized by the "I-Spirit" were not willing to make the necessary sacrifices; "We-Spirit" groups were. For communal experiments to be successful (in terms of group survival) the group must come before the individual. The great amount of sacrifice needed becomes apparent when one considers that the "We-Spirit" approach runs contrary to the supremacy of "individualism" in American society. "We-Spirit" is necessary to develop the strong bonds between communitarians needed to provide protection from internal and external threats to survival. The stronger the "We-Spirit" the more willing members will be to work out conflicts and tension (French and French, 1975).

#### The Limited Utility of Communes

The utility of the communal movement as a means of developing community has been briefly surveyed. Examples of communal success can be cited; however, for the most part communes have satisfied the needs of very few persons (Bouvard, 1975).

Even if communes effectively promoted community, communal life doesn't appear to be feasible for many people. Many have numerous ties with society or have no desire to seek community outside of traditional institutions.

Toffler relates this point well:

Communal experiments will first proliferate

among those in society who are free from the industrial discipline--the retired population, the young, the drop outs, the students, as well as among self-employed professional and technical people. Later when advanced technology and information systems make it possible for much of the work of society to be done at home via computer-telecommunication hookups, communalism will become feasible for larger numbers. (1970, p. 246)

Simply stated, most Americans are not yet ready for, nor do they perceive communal living as a viable means of nurturing community. Therefore, assuming that the need for community must still be satisfied, it becomes imperative to investigate traditional institutions to determine which are most suited to promoting community.

#### The Church: A Potential Builder of Community?

The church is just one of several institutions which might be considered for the purpose of promoting community. Schools, neighborhood organizations, or the many voluntary associations might also be studied. However, given the vast numbers and various groupings of people that attend church services, an investigation of community development in churches is most pertinent. U. S. News and World Report discloses that 42% of all American adults attend church in a typical week (April 11, 1977, p. 56). Membership lists contain persons of all ages, economic groups, occupations, and ethnic backgrounds.

There are many other reasons for studying churches. First, the literature on communes clearly points to religious ideals as a major determining factor toward communal success (Kanter, 1972;

Bouvard, 1975; French and French, 1975). Therefore, churches would seem to possess the potential to develop high levels of commitment and the nurturing of community. Churches (in theory) are committed to supporting and helping others. Such activities are vital to community.

Secondly, churches seem potentially capable of contributing to persons all the benefits most communes can, while at the same time they are institutionalized enough to avoid the problems common in many communes. Churches devote much energy to survival (Diehl, 1976). Since most church groups belong to a larger denomination or group, financial support can be obtained to insure continuation. As a support group churches can provide economic, emotional, and spiritual support for persons.

Third, churches of nearly all denominations are located throughout the country. In theory, churches potentially provide a nationwide series of support groups consistent with an individual's personal theology.

Finally, in recent years there has been a gradual trend toward increased lay involvement in churches (see Diehl, 1976). If people are more interested in taking an active part in church activities they undoubtedly will require greater amounts of support from each other. This being the case, churches may be ready for the development of intense community.

### Objectives

This investigator hoped to discover how community develops

in churches. The major purpose was to list stages in the development of community. This has entailed differentiating the various levels or degrees, of community. Although a primary objective of this study did not involve evaluating the effectiveness of churches as a means of developing community--that question awaits another study--the author will attempt to utilize the results of this study to conjecture how church leaders might better promote community in their congregations.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participant Observation Outlined

Social scientists have utilized participant observation to study human behavior since the 1920's (McCall and Simmons, 1969). Participant observation has been used extensively by anthropologists to study primitive cultures and sociologists to investigate numerous social groupings (Lofland, 1971). However, very few communication researchers have employed these methods (Shuter, 1976). Recent articles have demonstrated the relevance of participant observation methodology to the study of communication behavior (Rushing, 1976; Shuter, 1976). Rushing observed that "increasingly, scholars in the communication field are recognizing the utility of a research methodology which not only allows the subjectivity of researchers in observing and analyzing their data, but requires it" (1976, p. 1). Shuter contended that participant observation can lead to the discovery of "new variable relationships and a more in depth analysis of the communication process" (1976, p. 5).

Participant observation (PO) is a blend of several data-gathering techniques (McCall and Simmons, 1969; Lofland, 1971; Bogdan, 1972). PO incorporates varying degrees of direct observation, informant and respondent interviewing, along with document analysis. This approach involves an "extended period of interaction between the researcher and his subjects in the milieu of the latter" (Bog-

dan, 1972, p. 3). Research projects generally last months at a time, even years. The researcher leaves the laboratory in hopes of capturing natural patterns of interaction (Shuter, 1976).

The chief aim of participant observation is not theory testing, but rather discovery (McCall and Simmons, 1969). The researcher does not attempt to verify preconceived hypotheses. Rather, the participant observer allows "categories" or patterns to evolve. The researcher attempts to determine reality from the perspective of the subjects being studied. Thus, the researcher does not impose perceptions of reality on the subjects; instead, the investigator attempts to determine what is meaningful for the participants. Everything the subjects say and do becomes potentially important to the researcher. As the patterns emerge the researcher attempts to cross-validate the information with further interviewing and observation. Categories in turn lead to explanation and the generation of hypotheses.

To promote discovery, participant observation is intentionally unstructured and flexible. The researcher is given the freedom to move about the system in directions determined to be most fruitful. If initial "hunches" are proved incorrect, they are abandoned and the relevant relationships sought. Participant observers change research direction often. Interviews will always suggest new observational opportunities, and observation always generates new questions.

Participant observation is appropriate for this study for

several reasons. First, the major purpose of this study involves discovery of the principle stages in the development of community in churches. Specifically, the study entails delineating the varying degrees of community and listing specific examples of behavior characteristic of each stage.

Second, capturing reality from the perspective of the subjects is a key concern. Participant observation places emphasis on isolating the experiences the subjects feel are important in the development of community. This approach then presents a clear and accurate description of how the subjects experience and promote community.

Third, participant observation allows the investigator to study the development of community in a natural setting. Such a setting exposes the participant observer to concerns or events or happenings which inhibit the development of community. Hopefully, barriers to the development of community as well as structures and events which promote community will be identified. Complementing interviewing with direct observation should promote discovery even more.

#### Data Collection Procedures

The author spent three months as a participant observer at a small Lutheran church (100 members) of which he has been a member for one and a half years. During this period, 12 church services plus the accompanying social hours, eight Sunday School meetings,

four Church Council meetings, four potluck dinners, two adult fellowship gatherings, and one special congregational meeting were observed. Twenty-five members of the Lutheran congregation were interviewed, 15 of whom had no previous affiliation with a Lutheran congregation. Twelve persons from other religious denominations were interviewed as well.

During Sunday church services, the author solicited volunteers to be interviewed in their homes. The respondents were told that the researcher was studying the development of community in churches and would like to ask them questions about their experiences in this and other churches. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours in length. Notes were taken at each interview, with extensive notes being written following the interview. The interviews were loosely structured (each interview branched in different directions), although an interview guide was used to make sure that all respondents addressed similar questions (see Appendix for a copy of the guide). The author sought to have people compare as carefully as possible differences in experiences in their present and previous churches. Respondents were asked to describe as fully as possible their first impressions and how they felt about their initial visits to a new church. The author sought to have the persons discuss experiences they had interacting with other church members. Respondents were also asked to provide examples of when they felt other members had particularly showed concern and times when they felt they had been neglected or had concerns go unnoticed. These prompt-



ings elicited several examples of sharing and concern. Invariably people discussed the degree to which these experiences had fulfilled needs. Finally, respondents were told to envision the ideal church. They were asked to describe the types of interaction that would occur in this church and give specific examples of behavior.

## RESULTS

### Stages of Community

The individual interviews and direct observational experiences revealed six distinct stages of community development in churches. These included:

1. Initiation
2. Basic Commitment
3. Limited Community
4. I-Spirit Community
5. We-Spirit Community
6. Intense Community

The intensity of community (based on the degree of mutual sharing, concern, and responsibility) increases with each stage. These stages will be delineated below using statements made by respondents.

### Initiation Stage

The initiation stage begins with a person's first contact with a church group. The visitor gains some knowledge of how the group functions and how well people get along with each other. During this stage a person will attempt to assess how well the church meets his needs and how closely church practices and rituals align with his personal style and theology. The interviews revealed that people seeking a church can be divided into two basic categories:

those who know what they are looking for in a church, and those who know the type of church they want to avoid based on previous experiences. The following statements indicate the various demands potential members place on churches:

I wanted to find a church that stressed love rather than do's and don'ts.

We wanted a church that offered something for the entire family.

I wanted to find an informal church that wasn't bogged down with rituals.

I looked for a church oriented to my age group.

We wanted to find a church where our contributions would be valued.

I was looking for a group of people who were persons who were really open and caring.

We wanted a church that cared about us as persons and didn't just want our money.

We wanted to find a good church for the kids.

These statements illustrate some of the specific needs people seek to fulfill from church experiences. A person entering the church environment with such specific demands can usually tell within a short amount of time if a particular church has enough to offer. However, not everyone is certain of what they want a church to provide. Other people are led to seek a new church due to negative experiences in other churches as the following statements illustrate:

Our last church never did much for us as persons.

I went to church when I was a kid to make my mother happy. But most of the people didn't take their religion seriously after Sunday morning. I got sick and tired of churches that were homes for hypocrites.

I was tired of churches where people cut each other down all the time. I got tired of women complaining about their husbands all the time.

I grew up as a Catholic and didn't feel love there. I wanted to be loved.

I got tired of churches I grew up in because nothing exciting ever happened.

We grew tired of our last church because it became unresponsive to our needs.

I've been to a lot of churches, but for some reason I could never stop feeling like an outsider.

If visitors were happy with the new church environment and felt it satisfied enough needs they would join the church. If this was not the case they would continue to look for one that did. One young woman revealed that she had visited ten churches during the period of a year, yet had been satisfied with none of them. Eventually she happened upon a church which provided her with the kind of personal concern she was seeking and became a member.

From observations the author found that it usually didn't take many visits for a person to determine if a church could satisfy enough needs. During the three month period of the study the author talked with seven persons who were visiting the Lutheran church and said they were "shopping around for a new church." The three people who came again decided to join the church. The others didn't

return and undoubtedly decided to check on other churches.

### Commitment Stage

The commitment stage is marked by a decision to become a member of the church and support it financially. The reasons people gave explaining their decision to become members can be divided into three categories:

1. They were impressed by the people of the congregation,
2. They saw the opportunity for personal growth resulting from the experience, and
3. They approved of the church's theology.

The following comments demonstrate the impact the people of a congregation have on a visitor's decision to join a church:

The people here made me feel comfortable.

I liked this church because the pastor and people were really concerned about what was happening to me.

I liked the church the first time. The people made me feel comfortable and welcome. They accepted me as I was, there was no need to be something different.

I liked the way people reached out to me.

I liked it that people were as accepting as they were and didn't tell me exactly what to believe; they let you make up your own mind.

The people made me feel involved in the church right from the beginning.

I liked it that people really care about each other and try to help each other.

I joined the church because people were very accepting about things (drinking, etc.). I liked it that they didn't seem hypocritical, they were out in the open.

We were impressed by the fact that these people were making a real effort to put Christianity into their lives.

I had doubts about being a Christian, but I couldn't get over how these people were. They were genuine people who meant what they said.

I joined the church because the people made me feel good about myself.

I joined because of the overwhelming love people had for each other.

I liked it because people weren't out to condemn me. They wanted to meet my needs.

Others cited personal growth opportunities as reasons for joining:

I saw a real chance for me to get involved in the church. It seemed small enough and manageable.

I liked the church because of the heterogeneous mix of people. It would be a good learning experience for me and my daughter.

I liked the church because it was relevant to my daily needs and interests.

I wanted to meet some people and the church appealed to me because it was small and easy to get to know the people there. I felt accepted right away; in fact, on the first day a couple invited me to dinner.

I liked it that people were able to be frank and open about doubts. If you had doubts you didn't have to feel inadequate like other churches make you feel.

Quite interestingly, only three people stressed reasons based on theology:

I joined because this church was preaching the true word of God.

I was impressed with the Lutheran church in that it preached a God of love. The Baptist church preached damnation.

I felt comfortable because they stressed love and not all the do's and don'ts.

In this section the author chose to report many statements to demonstrate the various reasons people give for joining churches and to highlight the great importance apparently placed on people as the major reason for joining a church.

Every church which survives has obviously developed community to the basic commitment level. It is after this stage where differences in the community levels of churches become more obvious. The next four stages provide good examples of how community is expressed in the behavior of church members. With each increasing level sacrifice becomes greater and emphasis moves from individual to group concerns.

#### Limited Community Stage

If people have little interest in commitment beyond making a financial contribution to support the church group, the prevailing spirit can best be described as limited community. The interviews revealed that participation will generally be limited to activities

which require little sacrifice of time or energy. Contact between members is usually restricted to worship services. People do exchange greetings with each other, but for the most part relationships remain at the surface level. People will tend to keep problems and doubts to themselves and do not actively seek help from other members.

The respondents related many experiences which characterize limited community. An analysis of responses revealed that some people felt comfortable with limited community while others were frustrated by it and desired community of greater intensity. The following selections lend insight into reasons for desiring limited community:

Sometimes people know too much about each other.  
There should be more privacy.

I feel it's better if you mind your own business.  
It's better when you don't get involved with everyone.

I guess I don't want to leave myself too wide open. I don't want everyone to know what is going on in my personal life.

I feel uncomfortable sharing problems or doubts with others. I guess I've always felt I should be able to handle everything myself.

It might be good to remain superficial; then there is no pain when you have to leave.

Others viewed limited community less positively. One couple provided several examples of how people act like they are concerned about you without getting involved and being really concerned.



They pointed out that many people give others a "warm fuzzy" (statements which sound good, make you feel good for a while, but in essence provide little help to people). Some of their favorite examples included: "Gee, I'm sorry; things will be better tomorrow," or, "Now don't worry, everything will be okay."

The apparent distance between persons coupled with statements of implied concern lead some to view limited community relationships as being superficial. Consider these experiences related by two women:

I didn't like it that someone would ask you about something and act all concerned, and then a friend would tell you later that the person had begun to gossip about you as soon as you left.

I went to this church and the pastor told me that he was really glad to see me and that he would be glad to call on me, but he didn't. And when I called him he didn't seem the least bit interested.

Two men were frustrated by limited community in that they felt it restricted activity on the part of the congregation. One said, "I didn't like churches which only talked about loving people or serving Christ, it was so hypocritical." Another observed, "Many people are really involved more with the secular side of their life. We talk about putting the religious side first, but we never seem to be able to do it."

Another man pointed out that often only safe topics could be discussed. He complained that people really "don't want to deal with the important issues or say what's really on their mind."

The limited community stage is an extremely key phase in community development. Some persons are comfortable and feel secure at this level while others desire greater levels of community. The vital point is that a person may leave a church if individual community needs do not align with the prevailing level of community present in the church group.

#### I-Spirit Community Stage

At this stage members take an active concern and interest in what happens to other persons in the church group. One woman stated it well when she said, "We are concerned about other people in the church and we know that other people think and care about us." People are involved with each other (at least in thought) throughout the week. People feel comfortable discussing problems and raising doubts. They are not afraid to disagree with each other and value the inputs of other members. In fact, meetings are structured to encourage input from all members. The following statements further illustrate this stage of community:

People feel comfortable with each other. Concern is genuine. You can tell it by watching the children. They're not afraid to sit down with almost anyone. This says a lot because kids can tell very quickly if you're phony or genuine.

I found I could discuss problems with every person from the young teenagers to the grandparents.

I feel that I can go beyond superficial relationships with people in our church and disagree with them, yet at the same time still respect them.

I feel good about the way we make decisions here. We can say where we're at and not feel like we're putting somebody down.

I like it that the atmosphere is such that the pastor can share his anger and frustration. It makes everything more real, since in real life all is not rosy and coming out beautiful all the time.

The people here accept you as you are. They can like you even if you're weird.

Another characteristic of I-Spirit community is that people attempt to practice the ideals they discuss. Consider these statements:

I like it that we don't only talk about ministering to the outside world. Some people here take it seriously and do it.

I see many models in the congregation of people who actually put Christianity into their lives, and don't just talk about doing it.

At this church there was some involvement during the rest of the week. It was hard to only be a Sunday Christian as people were reaching out to you to get involved in other programs.

Two persons related excellent examples of I-Spirit community in action. One man observed that recently he was having serious doubts about his church. He wasn't sure if he was using his talents or his financial resources well in supporting the church. He pointed out that:

It wasn't until two members of the congregation were concerned enough to come over and spend several hours discussing my doubts that I was able

to deal with what was bothering me and work it out. Those people cared enough not to let me drop out; they really wanted to help me.

A young woman related the trying experience of the extended illness and eventual death of her father. She had only been a member about a month and couldn't believe the support people gave her. "They didn't just say I'm sorry," she explained. "They sent cards and letters expressing real concern and beautiful messages and even sent money for a plane ticket."

These examples demonstrate that community is well developed. People are certainly concerned with others. However, this stage still resembles the "I-Spirit" of many communal experiments in that although people take a genuine concern for others, it is balanced by personal interests and demands from other groups. One woman's complaint summarized this point well as she said, "People in the church are always trying to get you to help; well, I want to get more involved, but you've got to remember that I've got a family, a job, and a social life, and they take time too." Also, members will tend to choose areas of concern rather than being open to all needs. The major focus will be on helping others in a time of crisis, rather than developing and maintaining a continual response to the needs of others.

#### We-Spirit Community Stage

The We-Spirit stage differs from the I-Spirit in that the group is truly placed above the individual. Needs are responded to

routinely and immediately. Little thought is given to the impact responding to others has on an individual's time and resources. At this stage another major concern of members is building and maintaining community. Much effort is devoted to activities which will benefit the group and not only the individual. A great amount of attention is given to nurturing relationships between members throughout the week. The author had the opportunity to visit a "cell group" composed of six families. This group met every Tuesday evening for study, devotion, fellowship, and support. The leader said that the people had become "very intimate" and were able to share much with each other. The concern the members had for one another became evident as the meeting progressed, as they shared numerous instances of members helping each other over the past several months.

Community as intense as We-Spirit community is difficult to achieve and based on the author's experience quite rare. Only a few of the persons interviewed had been involved with church groups characterized by We-Spirit. The following comment made by a young woman portrays We-Spirit community well:

I was amazed at how the people were sensitive to my needs. It was as if I didn't have to say anything, but people would still reach out to me and get actively involved in helping me out, even calling me and seeing me throughout the entire week.

A married couple related an experience indicative of the level of sacrifice evident in We-Spirit community. Somehow people in the

congregation had discovered that they were having some temporary financial problems. Soon a young man came by and offered them a few thousand dollars that he had been saving to start his own business. The couple was truly amazed for they knew this young man had the opportunity at that time to become involved in a business that he had wanted for years. However, he offered them the money instead. Later that day a young couple came by and offered them all the money they had deposited in a savings account. Although it amounted to only \$200.00 the first couple was deeply moved, since it was obviously a great sacrifice on the part of the young people since everyone knew at the time they had limited financial resources.

Though most people could not speak of direct experience involving We-Spirit community, many envisioned it well in responses to the questions concerning the ideal church:

Things wouldn't get in the way of commitment, we'd do the things we talk about.

It would be common for people to go out of their way to help others.

We'd have lay support groups. People would consider it important to be part of a renewal group.

Church would become an extended family; it would give you the support you needed.

People would take an active part in what was going on.

There would be a great amount of caring and involvement on the part of all people.

Everyone would be concerned with cultivating and

maintaining love for one another.

Needs would be responded to immediately.

Things of the world wouldn't keep us from helping people.

Our lives would be characterized by doing Christ's thing first; man's second.

The congregation would be thought of as a group rather than all of us as individuals.

Social ministry would be characteristic of the entire church, not just a committee of a few.

The We-Spirit stage of community closely resembles the "we-feelings" which typified many of the successful communal experiments. Members value community and do all they can to foster and maintain high levels of community.

#### Intense Community Stage

The final stage of community to be identified from the interviews is intense community. Community of this degree had not been experienced by any of the respondents directly. However, many spoke of it as the ideal type and a few persons desired to someday live in intense community. Intense community would find members pooling financial and material resources as well as openly discussing personal problems and doubts. Each member would be actively involved in the community building process and supporting and affirming other members. A few respondents alluded to the early first century Christian communities described in the Bible as being the ideal type of community which they would strive for.

The means of promoting community would distinguish intense community from We-Spirit community. Intense community would find persons living together, striving to build community. They would live together to focus emphasis on this particular group. In We-Spirit community other groups may have primary group status as well for individual members. Sacrificing and sharing to benefit the group would become a way of life. A young woman touched on intense community when she envisioned that "We'd be as concerned about others as we are about ourselves," and "Life in the group would be a continual renewal process."

Given the great amount of individual sacrifice necessary to maintain such a high level of community, intense community is of course rare. Though some persons desired community of this intensity, most admitted that they would not be willing to make the needed sacrifices.

#### Additional Patterns Related to Community

The interviews together with observations revealed other interesting results. As mentioned earlier, the interviews showed that people have varying needs for community. The amount of community that people desired was evidenced in their behavior toward other congregation members. For example, the members of one congregation took a "seventh inning stretch" halfway into the Sunday morning service. People used this time to greet one another and share concerns or relate experiences of the previous week. The author care-



fully observed those persons who stated they desired greater community and those who indicated little concern for it. Invariably, the people who said they had little interest in intense community tended to remain close to where they were sitting. They did not circulate among the group to initiate conversations. On the other hand, the intense community seekers moved around the congregation; some even made it a point to make contact with everyone.

Another apparent trend is that persons expressing interest in promoting community were more willing to share feelings with the entire group. One pastor allowed people to respond to his sermon with questions or comments. With few exceptions the persons who took advantage of the opportunity to respond were those who said they sought strong community with others. Those with less interest in community had little desire to share what they felt in public; they preferred to keep feelings private and closely guarded. Some people admitted that they felt threatened when people shared concerns in public.

There was also some evidence, though not consistent, for a person's expressed desire for community to be related to the presence or absence of an "extended family" in the person's life. Those with families that were far away were much more likely to talk about the value the church had for them, and how they viewed it as an important support group. Those who had close family nearby or who found strong support in other groups (e.g., professional colleagues, neighbors) didn't look to the church for community.

## IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### Implications

In the previous section the stages of community delineated by participant observation techniques were listed and explained. Attention will now be directed to a discussion of the implications of these stages for persons interested in promoting community in churches. Three key points related to the data will be analyzed:

1. The impact of the prevailing community on visitors;
2. The promotion or blockage of community; and,
3. Maintaining community.

The initiation and basic commitment stages revolve around a person's initial visitations and decision to join a church body. The data indicate that the first visit a person makes to a church is very important. Generally people want to feel welcome and not be neglected. They want to be recognized and not feel like a stranger. If these conditions are not met, chances are the person will visit another church. Given the importance visitors place on initial visits, if churches want to encourage new membership, it becomes necessary to make visitors feel welcome and comfortable in the church environment. If possible, it is best that the entire congregation assumes responsibility for greeting new visitors, rather than an appointed committee which may appear too formal and superficial to the visitor. It will be much better than a handshake at the exit from

the pastor. Such an approach will also be valuable to visitors as they will be able to determine more quickly how well the church can satisfy their needs from the combined effects of conversations from several members.

Perhaps the key stage of community identified in the study is that of limited community. At this stage community development is either thwarted or promoted. The data reveal that some persons found intense levels of community to be positive and vital to the congregation, while others view intense community as unnecessary. The preceding information is crucial to persons interested in promoting community, for it explains the failure of many programs designed to promote community. If people do not view community as important and necessary, there will be little commitment to building community. Therefore, rather than launching a major community building program without prior consideration of how church members view community, it becomes imperative to discover the perceptions people have of community. These perceptions should play a major role in decisions regarding appropriate community building interventions. Only if people begin to see positive aspects of community will there be much chance of promoting community.

As a church group moves into the advanced stages of community, there is increased sacrifice and sharing between members. It is important that members support and affirm each other in order to maintain high levels of involvement and concern. If this support is not sustained, community levels may regress to the limited community

stage. Therefore, it is important to structure experiences that will maintain community. One church sought to promote and maintain community by using the seventh inning stretch and occasional gatherings in the homes of church members. Another church promoted community by forming cell groups which met during the week to provide support and personal growth opportunities. These small group gatherings provided the opportunity to share doubts and frustrations in a caring environment. All of these means of community maintenance were effective, based on the statements of the respondents. However, it should be stressed that the people who felt positively about such practices valued community. In churches where community is limited, a cell group may have little effect (at least initially) if people do not find them valuable and worthy of time and commitment.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study generate many questions and suggest future research areas. For example, the data might be used to develop an instrument to measure levels of community. A well constructed instrument could give the researcher or church leaders a good indication of the intensity of community in the congregation. This information could in turn be used to design interventions to promote and maintain community.

Another project could involve studying the effect of the communication behavior of the pastor on the community levels which emerge in the congregation. One respondent mentioned that by and large

the congregation takes on the personality of the pastor. Following this reasoning, one could expect community levels to be much higher in congregations served by a pastor who actively sought to promote community by his actions. It would also be interesting to correlate a pastor's use of community concepts in sermons with the level of community in the congregation. For example, does it make a difference if the pastor addresses his congregation as an entire group or as a gathering of individuals attempting to issue challenges to the individuals rather than the entire congregation?

Future research should also be directed at discovering methods of changing or maintaining various levels of community. Possible research questions include: What changes can be made in church services to promote community? What are some of the specific barriers which block the development of community in a church? When is community building appropriate and inappropriate for a church body? How can a church leader best accommodate church members with varying demands for community?

Finally, the present study was conducted in a relatively small church which had several members who were only temporary residents of the area. It would be worthwhile to duplicate the present study in a large church which had a fairly stable list of long-term members for comparative purposes. Such research endeavors could increase the ability to generalize these findings to churches in general.

## APPENDIX

### Interview Guide

How does your present church compare with other churches you've been associated with?

How do people make you feel?

How do the people differ from those in other churches you've attended?

What were some of the reasons for joining your present church?

What are some of the things you particularly like about your church? Dislike about it?

What would the ideal church be like? How would people get along? What would go on between the people?

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