

NOTES

THE THREE (ESSENTIAL!) LAYERS OF COMMUNITY

Introduction

One of the major buzzwords in the Church over the past two decades is *community*. Congregations talk a great deal about “wanting more community” or “growing the community,” but there is little understanding of how all communities, regardless of size, function. This module seeks to clarify and demonstrate that, regardless of size or composition, any healthy community (congregation) can be shown to have three essential layers operating in it. These three layers provide the appropriate spaces for the meeting of our human desires and needs, for knowing and loving God, as well as loving our neighbors and ourselves. We will explore the three layers of community life in a congregation, looking at how each layer is unique, how each layer functions, and what it provides. And finally we will look at the challenges congregations face when these three unique layers of community are either conflated or confused.

The Citizen Layer of Community
 (“I am part of something larger than myself”)

The Neighborly Layer of Community
 (“I am seen and valued”)

The Family Layer of Community
 (“I am known and cared for”)

The Citizen Layer of Community

The highest level of community is the Citizen Layer (CL). The CL is the largest level or layer of community providing a broad and general experience. This layer is labeled the “citizen layer” because it provides every individual with broad identity marker where a great diversity of people can experience belonging together. It helps me experience that *I’m part of something larger than myself* in the same way that a country like the United States can bring a great swath of people under the sway of an idea, or a set of shared values. You will never come to know all of the other citizens in the United States, but no matter where one is located, all citizens will have some common appreciation of freedom or liberty, despite lower level concerns as to how these apply. Another example is attending a major league baseball game. You cannot know 55,000 other people personally, but everyone present—doctors, lawyers, dignitaries, kids, the common thief who snuck in on the sly—are all united in their love for the home team. For those 3 or so hours everyone is a Yankee fan and it provides a strong sense of belonging to something more and bigger than our 9-5 identities and roles.

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The Neighborly Layer of Community

If the baseball game or the country’s ideals allow a person to be part of something larger than ourselves, the people we come into contact with causally and continually allow us to engage a vital human need: to be *seen and valued*. This being “seen and valued” is experienced in the Neighbor Layer (NL) of community.

An example: I live in a housing complex of 1800 apartments. There is a large sense of belonging and a vague generalized pride in our larger community, but it is still too large for me to feel *seen and valued* by many thousands of people in it. Not to mention the impossibility for me to see and value each of them individually. However, on my floor there are eight apartments where I have neighbors who keep and eye out for one another—we take care of each others pets; we collect newspapers from piling up while on vacation; and we borrow sugar from each other. Though we do not become deeply intimate, our proximity and continuity allows us to experience that we are seen and valued by one another. One neighbor, a retired Orthodox rabbi, will invite me in with the hope that I will turn his air-conditioner on during warm summer Sabbath days. Though we do not share deep vulnerabilities, we see and value the other with these small deeds.

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The Family Layer of Community

The final and smallest layer of community is the Family Layer (FL). The FL allows its participants another unique experience: *to be known and cared for*. The intimacies that can take place at the FL cannot take place at the NL and certainly not at the CL. Its name says it all, since the most intimate family units are approximately 6 to 12 people strong. Similar to how tight knit family functions, the FL provides the safe and intimate space for someone to share her or his deepest thoughts. The FL can grow up to 12 or so people. Any larger and it begins to impinge upon the NL, which can range from 20 to 60.

People who are engaged at this level of community life can begin to experience deep, rich and thick relationships. Much like an ideal family, the FL provides the level of intimacy where fears, joys, frustrations, and other human emotions and thoughts can be shared and empathized with. In other words, people only tend to share their deepest confidences with family members or extremely close friends. This is what makes the FL unique.

How the Three Layers of Community Function in Your Congregation

This may come as a surprise, but all three layers of community need to be active in the life of every congregation no matter its size. In other words, all congregations must have a level of community that provides each experience:

- A. "I'm part of something larger than myself"
- B. "I'm seen and valued"
- C. "I'm known and cared for"

So what, in most churches, constitutes these three layers?

The Sunday Worship Experience

The CL or the highest layer of community life in a congregation is the primary weekly worship, usually Sunday at 11:00 am. No matter whether you have 50 people present or 500 people in attendance, this layer allows all who enter to be *part of something larger*. It allows each congregant to say—regardless of how we interpret the creeds or whether we like a particular style of church—"I am a Christian," or "I want to know more about the faith practiced here," or "I believe the things these other people believe," or at the very least, "I want to believe the things these other people believe."

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Midsized Groups, Mezzanines and Other Forums

Gathering 20 or more people together for midsized events can establish the NL or middle layer of community life in a congregation. This can happen during a coffee hour after the Sunday worship experience; it can happen at an adult education forum; it can also happen as a result of volunteers showing up on a given day to distribute food at a food pantry. The person who attends one of these events will be *seen and valued* for what they contribute to the midsized group and for what the group is providing. This is the space where people can be thanked for their contribution to community life; this is the space where on-the-ground ministry happens; and, this is usually the space where people learn about the faith.

Small Groups, Prayer Circles and Other Intimate Encounters

Whether your congregation has a small group Bible study ministry or knitting circles, these more intimate settings of less than 12 people provide the FL of community where your congregants can be *known and cared for*. They are the safe spaces where people can share their joys, sorrows, hopes and disappointments. They also provide the space for a few-on-one pastoral ministry to take place (see BCP, 855, Catechism answer to, “Who are the ministers of the Church?”).

Community Dilemmas: Conflating, Confusing, or Consuming Layers

As mentioned in the Introduction, all three layers of community need to be active in your congregation for community life to function well. It has been my experience that churches—especially smaller ones—have had the tendency to either conflate the layers or eliminate one altogether. Here are some of the challenges that arise from doing either.

Conflating the Three Layers of Community

When a congregation conflates one layer of community with another challenges arise. Here’s one example: A small congregation of about sixty people in attendance on Sunday that has been in decline for several years has decided to brand itself as a “small family church.” The first confusion—and it is a tempting and common one—is that core families are not sixty people in size. In fact a major theological error in this temptation as we hear people say “my church is one big family” is that Jesus’ whole ethic, while clearly supporting intimacy of familial relations, was also deeply suspicious, and exploded kinship, in-group and tribal structures. He consistently and continually brought the marginal to the center and marginalized those who assumed centrality. To acknowledge that one’s congregation is *not* a family, no matter its size, is to protect the generalized and fluid boundaries of the CL, and to return family intimacy needs to where they can be met, at the small group or FL. This is not say one can’t feel “known and cared for” in a principal service. But this is the pastoral nature of our heavenly dual-citizenship as Paul would put it. We are cared for during a service more directly by the witness of the church, through the work of the Spirit and by the traditions of the community, all of which transcend the neighborly or family scope.

Here’s another example: I once worked with a small congregation that decided to impose nametags on all the people who walked through the doors on Sunday to worship. While nametags are not a bad thing in themselves, the worship experience is *not* the proper place for them, since

the worship experience provides the space to be “part of something larger than yourself,” and nametags may impose familiarity and rush neighborly and familial relations. Moreover, if a hurting or confused person who has never attended your service decided to walk through the doors on a Sunday to process their hurt or confusion, and sit alone in the rear pews to do so, asking that person to wear a nametag may force a level of intimacy that drives the newcomer away. In other words, the nametag request may be too much, too soon. A better place for the use of nametags might be the coffee hour following the service. That environment provides the space for people to be “seen and valued.”

Lastly, while a small congregation of 40 or so people can “see and value” one another and utilize nametags to do so, if and when that congregation grows to 250, and if at that time the nametag idea is finally suspended, the people who once “liked” the nametag idea will soon feel hurt and short changed.

Confusing or Consuming layers of Community

A healthy congregation will allow for the broadest level of belonging to all who enter it. If political, social or deeply contextual issues are addressed, the able preacher will always do so obliquely, or as Emily Dickinson said of truth, “tell it on the slant.” The Gospel has a remarkable way of penetrating us. Hence, Jesus’ parabolic teaching, He trusted that at the appointed time, the truth of his message would spring from his teachings like combatants from a Trojan Horse. So at the CL *all* people should feel invited into the mystery of God and the Gospel.

Our humanity and faith can be explored at the NL as we hammer out teachings, socialize or come to work together on an outreach project. People with affinities will bond at this layer whether it be social service or a love for adult learning.

At the prayer group or small group level we might experience each other’s hopes, fears and even occasionally their tears.

Congregational and communal imbalance happens when people seek to have needs met at layers where they *cannot* and *should not* be met. What happens when one or more of the essential three layers of community are eliminated? The layer or layers that remain are forced to pick up the slack of the missing layer(s). Thus, eliminating a layer of community has the unfortunate result of conflation.

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TLI Lab

Breakout Questions

1. Consider how each layer of community is represented in your congregation. Give examples.
2. Where and how does your congregation conflate or confuse any of the layers of community discussed above?
3. What new ministries and/or initiatives can be developed to satisfy a specific layer of community?
4. What insights might you add to this learning module?