

Essential Elements of Community

Thomas Kleissler

There are five essential elements or signs of communal life: sharing, learning, mutual support, mission and prayer. These elements express a spirituality that acknowledges complete dependence upon God for the creation of community. The use of these elements also helps to assure the growth of vital community while providing a structured format for meetings. They are intended to convey a sense of movement – the dynamic of small Christian communities is living, ever-growing and always deepening.

1. **Sharing** – means talking freely about God and about life experiences and reflecting on these in the light of Scripture and tradition.
Often this sharing results in more profound insight and in strengthening the belief of others in the small community. As the realities of people's lives are brought forth they are measured against the Word of God that becomes a two-edged sword demanding new hearts, attitudes and actions.
2. **Learning** – because SCC are part of the wider church they are called to an ever fuller knowledge and understanding of the gospel, of the Catholic Church and its teaching on faith and morals, and of the relationship of that teaching to the circumstances and issues of their members' lives.
SCC members are aided in their journey by the teaching of the church that offers an authoritative guide as they search the Scriptures. The very nature of SCC also calls for members to have a clear understanding of their role and connectedness with the larger parish, diocese, and universal church. As Christian people journey together to maturity in faith, learning also provides the means for discovering and developing gifts, discerning how gifts are to be used for others, and recognizing the diversity of roles that God has given, so that the Body of Christ can grow to full stature. Commitment to learning acknowledges that the Christian is a seeker after truth which affects all their decisions for action.
3. **Mutual Support** – because the believer needs a community that is supportive of Gospel values; the SCC encourages fidelity to the gospel and challenges all to a more profound and authentic commitment to Christian living.
Some parishioners who desire to grow spiritually realize they can do this best in a SCC where they have the support of others. Mutual support flows very naturally out of prayer and sharing in a SCC. It expresses itself in friendship, commitment, caring and service. Mutual support speaks to our human longing to be loved, encouraged, needed, respected and challenged.
4. **Mission** – means the community will work for compassion, justice, reconciliation, and peace within the group, in the family, in the workplace, in the neighborhood, and within the wider society.

The purpose of forming a SCC is to help people live more like Jesus. He both preached and lived a message that had social implications. He said that his followers would be known by their works, by how they love one another. Jesus' own example challenges us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted, and be life-giving to others. A SCC journey together includes reaching out and serving the needs of others. SCC will probably be judged more than anything also by their success (or failure) in carrying out mission.

5. **Prayer** – means emphasizing the centrality of God's active presence in each SCC member's life and in the life of the community itself.

As people open their hearts in prayer, they often seek a deeper relationship with the triune God and with others. Prayer is an honest acknowledgement of our dependency on God's grace and of our inability to create community and carry out mission by ourselves.

Small Community **Leaders** need to:

1. have the vision of God's plan for community
2. lead others to join the community
3. recognize the gifts of each member of the community and delegate responsibilities
4. maintain God's order in community and set the stage for growth in faith
5. inspire in the community a zeal to evangelize, serve and grow
6. strengthen the unity of the members of the community with each other by praying for God's grace and fostering a "continual interaction" among the members of the community (from Presentation Ministries)
7. welcome and be hospitable to members
8. be sensitive and caring, good and active listeners
9. be clear about the community's relationship with the parish and larger church
10. be persons of deep prayer and humility

(Kleissler, Thomas. *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003)

This text was given by sr. Maureen P. Colleary, FSP, RENEW International Service Team (www.renewintl.org) as a contribution to the Pastoraal Congres on SCC's 2008 (0193 on www.stucom.nl). She highly recommends *Vision of Hope* by Msgr. Thomas Kleissler as reading for the priests. It has been revised again as of 2002 – still available from Paulist Press: <http://www.paulistpress.com/bookSearch.cgi>

Other documents on Renew in Dutch: 0197 and 0200 on www.stucom.nl
Other documents on Small Christian Communities and parishes: www.stucom.nl/parochie

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