

# NORTH AMERICAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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LIVING AS a Christian has often been described as a journey. A journey implies movement and change, hopefully within the parameters of some sense of direction and some continuing guidance. Willingness to journey spiritually can produce exciting new insights and also confirm truths which never change. Therefore reflection must be an integral part of the spiritual journey if one hopes to understand better the truths experienced along the way, share these truths with others, and find direction for the next leg of the journey. For me a large part of that journey, since 1969, has been the experience of Christian community.

During the past two years many of us who have shared this journey locally and nationally have been reflecting personally and together on our experiences in Christian community. Some of this reflection has been an attempt to continue to understand how we are a part of the larger, global work of renewal which we perceive God to be bringing about. We have also felt it necessary to understand the changes we have experienced and to remain faithful to God who called us to this journey. It is a time of asking many questions without always having clear answers. It is a time of being shaken to find out what are the unshakeable things of the kingdom of God.

The questions for reflection are basic and practical and yet very profound theological ones, such as: what does it mean to be a Christian community? What is the purpose of Christian community today? How does Christian community express itself? What renewing, recreative role can Christian community play in the contemporary Church? And what is the task of Christian community in conversion and liberation in North American society?

My reflection on these questions will be based primarily upon my personal and pastoral involvement for the past fifteen years with Christ's Community, an inner-city church in Grand Rapids,

Michigan, and secondarily upon my leadership involvement, since its beginning in 1975, with the Community of Communities, an ecumenical network of North American Christian communities. It is my hope that these reflections and insights will stimulate similar reflection for those with experience in Christian community and also some general reflection for all who feel challenged by the vision of Christian community as a means of renewal in Church and society. It is also my hope that such reflection on these experiences can contribute to the discussion, begun in Latin America and continued around the world, about a new ecclesiology—a new way of being the Church. I believe that the experiences in Christian community being analyzed and reflected upon globally have much to teach us about the shape and task of the Church at the end of this century and the beginning of the next one.

One of the first questions which begs an answer is: what do you mean by Christian community? Rather than attempt a systematic, theological definition at this point, I will try to clarify how I am using the term by sharing about Christian community from a more historical, experiential approach. This fits better with my desire to define Christian community as broadly as possible while also giving attention to several ways in which it is being expressed today. While I think it is possible to arrive at a clearer understanding of the nature and task of Christian community through this reflection, I think it is inappropriate and even foolish to attempt to define narrowly how it will appear.

Christian community is and always should be primarily a creative expression of the Holy Spirit bringing the daughters and sons of God together in Christ to love, trust, hope, pray, study the Scriptures, share, and serve together. Wherever this is happening, Christian community in its broadest sense is happening, regardless of the presence or absence of form, definition, or even self-understanding. I am convinced that Christian community at its best almost defies institutional formulation and structuring. It is by its very nature an organic expression of Christian faith and action between and flowing out from the people of God in a specific historical context. It is usually a serious attempt, through renewed biblical obedience and discipleship, to regain something which has been lost within the life and ministry of the institutional Church. It is some new breaking in of the Kingdom of God which, though

assisted by theological formulation and social constructs, is never wholly dependent upon or bound by them.

There have been many ways in which this communal experience of God's presence has manifested itself historically and shaped expressions of Church and Kingdom activity. For the sake of our reflection, I want to work with three broad categories of Christian community with which most of us are very familiar. They are intentional communities, local parish churches, and base ecclesial (Christian) communities.

Historically, intentional communities have included monastic communities, religious orders, Hutterite communities, and perhaps some mission societies, sodalities, and other para-Church organizations. Usually such groups are very intentional in purpose, discipline and structure and would not conceive of themselves inclusively enough to represent an expression of local Church, open to include any and all baptized Christians in full membership.

Local parish churches, while not usually defining themselves as communities, often have within them small lay conventicles, sharing and prayer groups, Bible study groups, and service or ministry groups which experience varying degrees of community. It seems that most attempts at parish renewal are begun in this way, and while accomplishing some personal and group renewal, are seldom able to bring the whole Church to a deep and lasting sense of community.

Base Christian communities, originating in Brazil, have emerged during the last twenty years as quite a unique phenomenon of Christian community. Pope Paul VI said of them, 'Theologically they signify a new ecclesiological experience, a renaissance of very Church, and hence an action of the Spirit on the horizon of the matters urgent to our time'. Leonardo Boff, in *Church: charism and power*, calls this phenomenon 'a true ecclesiogenesis, the genesis of a new Church, but one that is not apart from the Church of the apostles and tradition, taking place in the base of the Church and in the grassroots of society, that is, among the lower classes who are religiously as well as socially deprived of power'. Or again, 'People, especially the poor, are organizing themselves in order to live their faith in a communal way. They are not repeating the past nor are they reforming present structures. A new future is dawning, something unforeseen during the past centuries of ecclesial rule. We are dealing with a true ecclesiogenesis, that is, the genesis of a Church that is born of the faith of the people'.

Against this backdrop, I want to reflect specifically about my experiences of Christian community, both in the local setting and in the larger network of North American communities. It is immediately obvious that the Christian communities in North America arose in a very different context than those in Latin America. The North American experience was not a movement originating out of the desperate need of oppressed people at the bottom of society. It was basically an attempt by educated, middle-class people to change their experience of Church and the way they practised their Christian faith. This attempt was inspired mostly by a desire for personal and corporate spiritual renewal and a desire to live a life which was different from the predominantly self-centred and violent culture of our society. In most cases the original motivation for forming contemporary Christian community was more similar to that of traditional religious orders than the base communities of Latin America. Although deemed necessary as a way to encourage and nurture biblical faithfulness and the survival of a true and historically relevant Christianity, for the most part they did not arise out of the same life and death struggles against poverty and oppression which characterize the base communities in many third-world countries. Our only historical point of reference, in terms of understanding our group experience, was intentional communities such as contemporary religious orders. Therefore, in the midst of our attempts at Church renewal, either within existing Churches or as the nucleus of a new Church, we thought of ourselves as intentional communities. In fact, at one point we deliberately sought contact with more traditional religious communities. The resulting conference brought a fertile exchange of ideas and encouragement for the more traditional communities who were dealing with dwindling numbers, and many internal changes, and for those of us who were trying to understand some of the life-cycles of Christian community, and such things as the role of community founders and the change brought by their departure.

However, in our relationship to Church, family, and society our experience is much more similar to that of the base community. We were very committed to being a renewed expression of the Church in our local setting. We were attempting to practise our commitments and life-styles as natural families, often with the addition of others in an extended family setting. We were committed to active social, political engagement and resistance as an

expression of our Christian faith and life. As such, we were grappling with a radical incarnation of the gospel which presented a direct challenge to the individualistic, affluent, and militaristic culture around us and also to any ways in which the institutional Church had become entrapped by and subservient to cultural norms.

In our early stages of development we were not concerned about the development of a rule of life or highly structured spiritual disciplines. Our basic interest and expression of life together was faith sharing in the context of small group bible study and prayer. Personal and social needs, related to the fragmentation of personal and family life in our society, were the focus of many of our early discussions and ministries. In this context, our faith was expressed through creative use of individual gifts in music, drama, dance, and the arts. As in the base communities, worship became relevant and alive. Sharing of celebration and hope matched the sharing of pain and brokenness.

In terms of our goals, although we often spoke of our dedication to Church renewal, our experience again was much like what has been happening in base communities. It was more than renewal in the sense of making a few changes. It was a rebirth, a recreation of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit and the challenge to allow change not only in our personal lives, but in the corporate life of the Church. It was a new experience of the relationship of laity and clergy sharing ministry fully and equally. It was a new experience of Church leadership being submitted and servant-like instead of hierarchical and authoritative. It was a new experience of the equality of women and men in social relationships and Church participation. It was a renewed effort to be a local expression of the body of Christ which liberates people from the bias of race and class. It was a new attempt to understand the prophetic implications of the injustices discovered in our pastoral work and the pastoral implications of the prophetic call to justice in our neighbourhood and larger society. It was a deliberate attempt to incarnate the gospel in the lives and ministry of a people; to witness and evangelize through being a deeply knit spiritual family with a new way of living rather than only verbal testimony or a new Church programme. It was a serious attempt to unmask the principalities and powers through confronting them and challenging them where we lived and worked rather than only in our theological pronouncements. It was a new willingness to identify with the

suffering Christ in solidarity with those who were not reaping the material benefits of a 'God-blessed', capitalistic system, but were falling through the cracks of the system and experiencing a drying up of the trickle of benevolence. It was also an unexpected opportunity to feel the wrath of the system, even in the institutional Church, when we refused to play the numbers and success game for the sake of increased funding and credibility.

Upon reflection, in many ways I see the Christian community involvement which many of us have experienced as being an important bridge, both historically and culturally, to express a pioneering, renewing aspect of the Church's life. Christian communities of all kinds have always attempted to call the Church to renewal. This has been true throughout the history of the Church. When the Church has forgotten some part of its original vision or calling, invariably renewal movements (often in the form of Christian community) have sprung up to recall the Church to its earlier commitment. Sometimes such renewal has taken place from within the established Church. Many times such renewal chose or was forced to operate outside the established Church. Whatever the case historically and whatever the outcome of the base community movement today, it is important to see our experience as standing as an historical link in that great renewal purpose of God. Not that renewal is always limited to communal expression, but as such it often has a more incarnational and corporate witness to the Church and society than more theoretical statements or individualistic programmes of renewal.

It seems especially important to recognize the important role we played in North American society, giving Christian expression to the interest in peace and justice concerns and in community life which arose in the 1960s. It was our challenge to make the gospel relevant to the needs and interests of that era and to demonstrate that there were biblical principles which could guide our way both with regard to social ethics and communal life as the people of God. Although renewal efforts proliferated in the Church, many never got beyond a personal spiritual renewal which was also highly individualized and offered no significant biblical critique of our personal and national way of life. Most efforts at renewal fell far short of any serious reflection about ecclesiology or social ethics and remained either fortified against or triumphal about involvement with secular realities. Even though the concerns raised in North America during the 1960s have remained alive for many

reasons in third-world societies, our North American sensitivities were largely dulled again during the late 1970s and early 1980s. A return to the investments and securities of success, wealth, and power of the 'good old days' has swept our nation. This has left many Christian communities standing like slowly eroding islands in the midst of the swollen, glutted streams of consumerism, individualism and nationalism. The allure of the surrounding culture seems to be a returning temptation for many after years of sacrifice and commitment in Christian community.

In addition to this historical bridging, I believe our experience can also provide an essential cultural bridge between what renewal means in the industrialized, powerful societies of the northern hemisphere and the impoverished, oppressed societies of the southern hemisphere. Christian community has been a place for us to begin to commit ourselves voluntarily to biblical disciplines and a way of life which are not simply optional for most Christians in the southern hemisphere. We have committed ourselves in various ways to a more simple life-style, to more accountability to others both locally and globally, to continuing conscientization and conversion, and to seeking justice and making peace. This commitment often developed more out of simple biblical obedience or even a vague spiritual intuition than out of astute social, economic, and political analysis and discernment. However, gradually through continuing dialogue with others and among ourselves, we have made more and more of the connections between our biblical faith and vision and that of Christians in the third world.

As we have done this the national and global implications of our vocation and ministry have grown and we begin to realize the unique way in which God has been converting us and deepening our faith. The fact that we can claim to be an important bridge to participants in base communities around the world is underscored both by the amazement and the hopefulness such Christians express upon learning of our journey. Their response and reflection indicates that base communities are as necessary for us as for them—for the sake of the repentance, conversion, and liberation of the members of an oppressive nation. Our solidarity with these sisters and brothers and the poor and oppressed in our own society is emerging as the most profound and enduring reason for our calling to be part of renewal communities.

In this light, other reasons alone for continuing our journey are wearing thin and begin to appear for what they really are—ways to serve our own self-interests, whether they are spiritual, emotional, or material. Such awareness further exposes the potential of Christian community itself becoming an idolatry. As such it becomes our ultimate hope for fulfillment, security, and healing or our ultimate disillusionment which we often end up totally rejecting. It then becomes easy to project our disappointment and disillusionment upon the vision of Christian community, its leaders, its members, or even God. I believe that Churches, communities, and fellowships which we create or lead as educated, middle-class Christians, regardless of our best intentions to have them serve the poor, often end up serving our own ideologies and special interests more than empowering or liberating the poor. Community *for* the poor, even radical intentional community involving total economic sharing, still allows us to dominate and set the agenda, shape the institutions which emerge, and interpret the scriptures from our own perspective.

True participation and partnership with the poor and oppressed of our cities and our world is better described as community *with* the poor or even community *of* the poor in which we participate as servants. As such servants we must be willing to have our very lives shaped and transformed by the lives of the poor and the new meaning which we discover together, in the scriptures, for our context. Only such participation and partnership can liberate the oppressor as well as the oppressed from ideologies and cultural values which enslave us all. These ideologies and values must be examined and challenged by contemporary realities seen anew in the light of the scriptures and by the scriptures seen anew in light of the contemporary realities such as poverty, homelessness, violence, and any form of oppression. We may know some of this in general, theoretical ways, but the deep conversion of our own ideological perspectives requires not only ongoing contact but also community with the poor in which we give them the power to be God's instruments to change our lives and institutions, even ecclesiastical ones. I am convinced that this is the only way the Church will survive with any relevance and faithfulness into the twenty-first century.

This movement toward community with the poor is also reflected in the mission statement which emerged from a Community of Communities conference in early 1987. It was agreed that, although



our previous statement of purpose was very clear about our necessary relationship to the oppressed, 'we have come to a deeper awareness of the profound impact which this view from the bottom of our national and global society must have on our understanding of the gospel and its application in our history'. We further stated, 'It is, in fact, our relationship with the poor which must shape both our communities and their mission'. In conclusion we stated,

We are deepening our commitment to the liberation of the oppressed and the oppressor. We continue to believe that such a commitment must be based in a vigorous, local community of Christians who are standing in solidarity, and community where possible, with those who experience oppression. To this end, we are encouraging the formation and development of Christian base communities throughout North America. We believe there is no better way to be responsive to the cry for liberation which arises from oppressed people around the world and to be faithful to God's call for justice beginning in our own lives and neighborhoods. We must be continually converted as disciples of Christ and allow our cultural, racial, and national biases about life and the Christian faith to be changed. The local Christian base community, however small or unofficial by ecclesiastical standards, is that discipleship band united with Christ, with the poor and oppressed, and with the specific historical realities which the gospel must always address. It is the place of Bible study, prayer, and worship; the place of love, healing, and conversion; the place of service, incarnation, and solidarity. The local Christian community is the beginning experience of God's kingdom, the participation in Christ's death and resurrection, and the presence of God's transforming and empowering Spirit.

We found that this deepening commitment to racial minorities, women, and other oppressed groups in our society was challenging and changing old visions, structures, and expectations in all our communities. We also decided that it was important that our national fellowship, just as our local fellowships, be shaped not only by our own needs but also by our sense of vocation and mission in our context. Little did we realize how soon this would indeed affect the structure of the Community of Communities! Within about six months we began a process of mutually deciding to dissolve our formal network of some twelve years standing.

Although there are many responsible factors, I believe this decision reflects several important things:

- (1) The challenge of using time, energy, and monies spent in maintaining a national network and fellowship in more faithful ways such as forming community with the poor.
- (2) The challenge of finding new resources and fellowship by forming coalitions with other local and regional groups with similar commitments and thus encouraging and strengthening a grass-roots revival movement in North America.
- (3) The challenge of looking to the poor and oppressed in our context for the support, stimulation, vision, and accountability we used to get from each other.

As hard as the change or death of organizations and institutions are, I believe this can be one of the healthiest signs that the Church is truly following the Spirit of God. 'Losing our life to find it' is as true for institutions as for individuals if they are going to be transformed. Although many different forms of church and community seem to be agents of God for renewal, such 'institutional death' may well be a necessary paradigm in itself in this time of necessary reformation and transformation of the Church in modern society. The challenge to experience truly community with the poor may well be the catalyst for the most sweeping changes seen in the institutional Church since the Reformation.

Changes in the Church resulting from community with the poor may well be resisted and seen as a threat by some segments of the institutional Church. At present it seems the serious work of liberation with the poor and marginalized in North American society is still too new to have much impact upon institutional structures and power. The ideas and rhetoric may be present, at least in the more progressive Churches, but for the most part the Church does not yet seem to be taking seriously the call to community with the poor as a necessary faithful expression of the gospel. Needless to say, this is very challenging and threatening to the very style of personal and Church life which is ascendant in our culture. Community with the poor will call us to a simpler, less consumptive lifestyle and to new forms of servanthood and suffering. All the while, most television evangelists and many others with 'successful' ministries in the mainline Churches are following a contemporary form of gnosticism or a 'cheap grace' theology which is empty of the biblical realities of incarnation, suffering, and the cross as parts of Christian discipleship.

As much as suffering and the cross are a part of community with the poor, I am sure there are also many blessings and graces of 'costly grace' that we have yet to experience. Not only will we experience new biblical insights and application for the gospel but also new fellowship and guidance for the development of our Christian life. Too often people with education and power see themselves as guardians and guides for the poor. But who will be our guides? Who will help us to turn things around? Who will see to our salvation? Who will point out our deeply inculturated assumptions and ideologies? Evangelization must be seen as a two-way street. The poor who have involuntarily born the burden of oppression and poverty for so long have much to tell us about the liberation we still need. Given the chance they can be our teachers and guides and liberators.

For this to happen it is important that the poor be full participants in the dynamic make-up and leadership of the Church itself. They must be allowed to speak for themselves so that truth can emerge from the bottom of our society. Otherwise they are always recipients and a mere throng of clientele or customers for our services. Such treatment does not dignify, empower, or liberate gifts for service in the kingdom of God. More than anything else the poor must know they have something to give. The recipients of much social and spiritual welfare must have opportunity to experience the blessing of giving which Jesus reminds us is greater than receiving. People are dehumanized by the various ways they are objects of pity, charity and service. What greater joy for them and for us than to be full participants and partners in *koinonia* and liberation together?

While intentional communities and local parish churches containing many different kinds of renewal groups and fellowships have found significant expression in the Church of North America, it is the expression of a type of North American base community that may yet be awaiting a fuller and clearer expression. Not that Christian base communities here should be modelled after or try to duplicate those in the third world. They must arise out of their own context and their own struggle to be faithful to the gospel amidst their own social, economic, political and spiritual realities. They must be a faithful grassroots expression in this culture and society of what it means to 'be together following Christ'. They may be encouraged and offered resources by both intentional communities and renewing local Churches, but I believe they are

a necessary form of renewal in this time. It seems that they must be very ecumenical at the local level, but in the broadest sense—hopefully cutting across denominational lines and openly dialoguing and working with people of other religions or no formal religion who share the same concerns about liberation from oppressive political, social, and economic realities. It also seems that these base communities must be very indigenous—reflecting the ethnic, racial and class realities of local neighbourhoods, but not bound or limited by any imposed barriers or biased attitudes. At their very core are bound to be many of the biblical principles of Christian community life and ministry which some of us have been learning in other contexts and now will be challenged to offer in a new setting where they can affirm and help articulate what is emerging. This may well be a liberating setting for the use of experiences and gifts which need fuller expression than were ever possible in intentional community or the local Church. We may be able to serve a new expression of the Church which is demonstrating increasing and remarkable versatility and vitality throughout the world.