

DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY WITHIN OUR ENVIRONMENTS

Recommended time: 35 minutes

I. Orientation

This talk has been renamed Developing Christian Community Within Our Environments from Christian Community In Action to make it clear that this talk is a continuation of the Study and Evangelization of Environments talk. The witness in this talk is the speaker's participation in a Christian community that changed an environment, not what the Christian community has done for the speaker

Everything that has been presented from the beginning moments of the Via de Cristo weekend (a loving God who saves us by His grace), points to the fact that Christianity is communal as well as personal. God did not create us to live in isolation. As Christians, we need the strength that comes from being part of a Christian community. The purpose of this talk is to present the importance of Christian community as we grow in faith and share the message of Christ. Our Reunion Group encourages our spiritual growth (sanctification) and supports us as we live out our Christian faith in our environments and witness to others. By sharing our authentic personal experiences, we show that we need not walk alone. God created us to be in a community that acknowledges Him and serves Him. From the beginning of salvation history, God has not just chosen individuals, but people who are members of a community. Jesus did not minister alone but gathered a group of disciples around him.

Words from the service of Holy Baptism in the Lutheran Book of Worship support this concept: "made members of the church which is the body of Christ" (page 121), "members of the priesthood we all share" (page 124), "into the Lord's family...as fellow members of the body of Christ, and workers with us in the kingdom of God." (Page 125)

The main points of this talk are:

- We are to form Christian communities in our environments.
- Our mission is to transform our environments into living Christian communities.
- The purpose of Christian community is the evangelization of the world.
- God gives the community what it needs to accomplish this goal.

II. General Comments

There are three steps in creating the backbone of Christian life: developing leaders (the Leaders talk), helping the leaders find their place in the mission (The Study and Evangelization of Our Environment talk) and linking them together to work more effectively when evangelizing their environments. This talk explains the third step. The group encourages, supports and helps Christians to grow in faith and to desire to do God's will in their lives. This prepares the participants for the message about Group Reunion and Ultreya in the next talk. We are more effective leaven in society when we help each other reach out into our environments and balance each other's weaknesses and strengths.

The remaking of society can only be accomplished through the building of self-giving Christian communities. Introducing new life into the environment--a grace-filled and self-giving Christ-like life--will transform people and, through them, the whole environment. These communities are channels of God's grace into the environments -- channels through which God can heal and help people realize their God-given potential.

All groups of Christians, whether they be families, small groups, congregations, or Christian organizations must function as channels of God's grace. A Christian community is a group of people working together to bring the world to Christ by spreading God's love, forgiveness and encouragement to others. It reflects the self-giving, the joy, the spirit of Christ. Its aim is a living, working group formed by the Spirit of God. It is Christ living among the ordinary people of the world transforming the world. This is the vision of the Via de Cristo movement.

III. Atmosphere

The talk on Developing Christian Community within Our Environments bridges a very wide gap. It transports the listeners from thinking of themselves as isolated individuals to seeing themselves as part of a small, closely-knit group of Christians living out their lives as part of a larger evangelizing community -- the Church in the world. In this talk we get specific about the ideas presented to us in the Apostolic Action and Leaders talks. We give examples of what we can do and how we can do it. In the talk The Study And Evangelization of the Environment, we heard how to witness about Christ in our particular circumstances. Here we are impressed with the idea of working as a group - the body of Christ.

The biggest hurdle to understanding this talk is our culture's long history of "rugged individualism." We are taught that mature people are independent. The truth is that we all are interdependent. We need positive relationships to flourish as individuals and to be fully ourselves. Only in true community can we feel loved, unconditionally accepted and free to develop into what God created us to be. It is only in community that God's love and grace can fully develop and be experienced.

IV. Suggestions for Writing this Talk

If you are part of a group that is transforming an environment, the talk will fall into place. If you have not had this experience, you will have more difficulty understanding the outline and the purpose of this talk. As you begin thinking about this talk, ask yourself: Do I really believe in the Via de Cristo method? Have I lived it? Do I walk the talk? The only witness pertinent to this talk is an example of an environment being transformed by a group -- a practical example and living story of Christians working together and changing the spirit of an environment. If you have not experienced this yourself, use an example of a group that has. The story begins in section II D by briefly revealing what the environment was originally like. In III D describe the development of the Christian community that penetrated the environment. In IV B describe the development of the Christian Community within this environment. In section VI B show how relationships in the environment are different and how the Christian community became the catalyst for change, making the total environment more Christ-like (self-giving).

DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY WITHIN OUR ENVIRONMENTS OUTLINE

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Why is each of you here?
God called you by invitation from the Christian community.
- B. These members of the greater Via de Cristo community were changed by God's unconditional love and grace.
 - 1. They found Christian friendship with one another.
 - 2. They have a sense of mission to change their environments to be more self-giving (Christ-like). (Matthew 28:18-20)
- C. How wonderful if all of our environments could be like this weekend!
 - 1. Everyone would live surrounded by love and grace, able to develop to their full potential, living in the freedom and security of God's love and grace.
 - 2. Christ would be present to all and within each of us.
- D. Our mission: transform our environments into living Christian communities.
 - 1. Definition of Christian community: A Christian community is a group of people working together to share Christ in the world by spreading God's love, forgiveness and encouragement to others.
 - 2. It is achieved by introducing new life into an environment.
 - 3. Three steps toward that mission:
 - a. Develop leaders. (Leaders talk)
 - b. Help them understand their place in the mission. (The Study and Evangelization of the Environment talk)
 - c. Link them together to work more effectively. (this talk)
 - 4. We can more effectively impact our environments through small Christian communities working together as the body of Christ.

II. NEED FOR COMMUNITY

- A. Our society teaches us that in order to be successful we must be self-sufficient. However, reality is:
 - 1. People need people. Loneliness and fear of isolation are two of mankind's greatest fears. The need for relationships with others is a basic human need.
 - 2. People cannot fully develop in isolation. We inevitably form into different kinds of groups. Some groups are short-term, some are long-term and they have a variety of purposes. They all show our need for sharing life with others.
- B. Society is made up of groups such as family, vocational, cultural, social, recreational, political, etc. Each group has a purpose that influences the atmosphere of the group. List several types of groups. (See clarification.)
- C. Most of these groups (environments) do not provide for our basic needs. Even many church groups never become a close community. They tend to be centered on the specific purpose of the group rather than centering their lives and purpose in Christ.
- D. Briefly describe the environment you will use in your witness as it was before being influenced by the Christian community.

- E. To effectively bring Christ to the world, we must form small Christian communities in each environment. For true Christian community to form, Christ-like loving, self-giving, and prayer for one another must be present.

III. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

- A. Christianity is based in community. It is God's plan. God gave us a family. We are baptized into a church family and the family of God. Scripture confirms God's plan for community to accomplish our mission. Thus, to enter into God's plan, Christians form communities where the mission of Christ forms a common bond. The nature, purpose and spirit of a Christian community are unique. (Matthew 18:20, Ecclesiastics 4:9-10, 12, Acts 2:44-47)
- B. Pastors and laity are partners in Christ's work. The pastor is the shepherd charged with enabling laity and guiding them in their walk with Christ and their attempts to reach out to others. (Malachi 2:7) Clergy and laity need to work together.
- C. Characteristics of a Christian Community
 - 1. Only one center: Jesus Christ and His mission.
 - 2. Living friendship with Christ.
 - 3. Guided by the Holy Spirit.
 - 4. Common idealism, spirit of self-surrender, trust, self-giving love.
 - 5. Desire to share Christ with the world
 - 6. Praying together. (I Thessalonians 5:17)
- D. Briefly describe the Christian community that was formed to influence the environment described in II D.

IV. Process of Becoming Christian Community

- A. Developing Christian community among believers.
 - 1. Personal encounter.
 - 2. Sharing concerns and joys. Feeling understood.
 - 3. Forming friendships.
 - a. Giving of self to one another.
 - b. Based on our common love for Jesus and each other.
 - c. True friendship is the key to Christian community. In true friendship, animosity is not present.
- B. Developing Christian community in the world. Helping others become part of a Christian community.
 - 1. Identify other Christians in the environment who are also called to witness.
 - 2. Form a Christian community with them.
 - 3. Together saturate the environment with a sense of the gospel by living out the Christian ideal.
 - 4. Respect the personal freedom of each individual to respond to the gospel. Remember, conversion is God's work.
 - 5. Briefly illustrate the development of such a Christian community in the environment.
- C. Teamwork -- working together
 - 1. Recognize our mission. Teamwork is one of the keys to apostolic success.

Coordinated, planned, intentional action is better than haphazard, individual action. An isolated Christian is a paralyzed Christian.

2. The Christian community transforms the environment.
 - a. Know the environment, its leaders, and what will be necessary to change the group for Christ.
 - b. Work with fellow Christians. We must be aware of our own gifts and those of others to effectively work together.
 - c. Form Christian groups that share the ideal of spreading God's love in this environment.
 - d. Influence environments by living the Christian ideal and sharing Christ with others.

V. THE VIA DE CHRISTO METHOD IS A MEANS TO FORM CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

- A. We must establish a Christian community in each environment if we are to bring the world to Christ. We cannot hide our faith. We have to share the treasure of God's grace with others. Make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ. This is our mission. It is not an option. It is a requirement of following Christ.
- B. The method to begin, form and sustain small groups of Christians:
 1. Get to know one another.
 2. Share your joy, pain and concerns.
 3. Grow in friendship centered in Christ.
 4. Receive the love and grace of God.
 5. Give your idealism, self-surrender and spirit of charity
 6. Depend on the power of God.
 7. Pray together.

This weekend, as you experienced this at your table, a Christian community was formed.

- C. God-given characteristics needed to achieve this goal.
 1. Generosity.
 2. Depending on prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 6:18, Matthew 10:20, Mark 9:23b, Proverbs 3:5-7)
 3. Love and humility to work as a team.
 4. Sense of responsibility. (Matthew: 10:16)
 5. Dedication and initiative. (Luke 14:18-23 and 26-27)

Briefly illustrate these characteristics as they developed in the Christian community that influenced the environment you described earlier.

- D. Stages of community development. Forming authentic Christian community is not easy. Community develops as members learn to trust each other, become vulnerable and are honest about their feelings, even negative ones.
 1. Honeymoon stage. We are idealistic and committed and develop a bond with each other.
 2. Disillusionment stage. Problems among members emerge. Often the group falls apart at this stage. As a group, we must persevere in order to work through the problems that arise. We should reach out to each other in a spirit of encouragement and love.

3. Reality stage. The group works through its problems together. True community begins.

VI. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS APOSTOLIC

- A. Christian community reaches out to others. It is not turned in on itself.
 1. Jesus sent his disciples out two by two. (Mark 6:7)
 2. The first Christians knew the value of community. (Acts 2:46-47; 4:31-32)
 3. We must create our own communities as living witnesses of Jesus' love both locally and globally.
 4. Christian community exists as long as its love reaches out to the entire world. (Galatians 3:26-28, Luke 10:25-37)
 5. This example of Christian life answers humanity's deepest needs.
- B. The purpose of Christian community is the evangelization of the world.
 1. Through teamwork and the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians can influence all environments for Christ, thereby influencing society.
 2. Christians are called to be the salt, light and leaven of the world.
 - a. Called to bring the good news of salvation to our environments, beginning with our families.
 - b. Called to stir up other groups of Christians who can, in turn, influence others in many areas of life.
 - c. Called to challenge the world's ideals that contradict the gospel, to become more Christ-like. (in social, economic, political, religious, education, health care, etc. environments) (Isaiah 42:1-4)
 - d. Called to be Christians who live the life we have presented. We need to "walk the talk." Will we present the real world to them or a caricature?
 3. Every Christian should be part of a vital community that, through its actions, is the source of Christian influence in the environment.
 4. The witness of how we live our lives is only the beginning; at some point we must proclaim the Word.
 5. As the final part of your witness show how the apostolic Christian community transformed the environment described earlier.

VII. CONCLUSION

- A. Authentic Christian community is a true extension of Christ's hands into the world. He has no other plan. (I Corinthians 12:12) As part of the body, we all use our God-given gifts. All gifts are needed.
- B. The pain of the world is very real and very deep. People are crying to God for an answer, sometimes not even knowing they cry. God heard their cry and sent His son Jesus. We are sent to bring His message to the world, beginning where we are. This challenge is real. If we all give to others what we have experienced this weekend, our environments will take on the spirit of Christ. It begins with our families and extends to all our environments, even those that seem to be the most challenging. Thus, the world will become more Christ-like. The Church will be the people of God, the body of Christ, the light of the world. This may seem overwhelming to us as individuals, but we have the support of a Christian

community and God will give us what we need for the task. Our confidence is not in ourselves, but in Christ! (John 16:33)

CLARIFICATION OF THE OUTLINE DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY WITHIN OUR ENVIRONMENTS

This talk brings together the mission message of Via de Cristo and makes clear how all of the previous talks fit together. By this time participants should have a clear picture of the need for apostolic action and the kinds of things that need to be done, as well as a clear picture of the importance of being a living, witnessing member of the Church. In this talk, all these points are brought together in order that the participants see that the problems in environments and the problems in remaking the world can only be solved through the building of self-giving Christian communities. These communities are the channels of God's grace into the environment, channels through which God heals and raises people to their full potential. All groups of Christians—families, small groups, congregations or Christian organizations--must function as channels of God's grace. This talk gives a picture of HOW to do it--how we can structure Christian community. Community is presented as groups of Christians working together to spread God's love, forgiveness and encouragement to others for the purpose of bringing the world to Christ. At the end of the talk, participants should genuinely desire to work with others to make Christ's love present in their environments.

The talk leans heavily on the themes of the Layperson As Church In The World and Apostolic Action talks, showing how people need to work together to bring Christ's love to their environments, proclaim the kingdom of God, and be the Church in the world.

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. This opening part of the talk asks the participants to contemplate their response to the weekend so far and the role of Christian community in the weekend.
- B. The participants are aware of the closeness that has developed at their table and of the role of the team on the weekend. Few realize that the team is only a small part of the Via de Cristo Community which made the weekend possible. The people in this community have experienced and been transformed by God's love, are part of the Via de Cristo community, and share in the vision of Via de Cristo—bringing Christ into their environments.
- C. Many wish they could bring this feeling of closeness home with them. This talk shows them how to develop close, loving Christian communities in their lives, while at the same time carrying out the apostolic mission of sharing Christ with the world.
- D. The mission of Via de Cristo is transforming our environments into living Christian communities.

1. Christian community is defined.
2. This concept was introduced in The Study and Evangelization of the Environment talk.
3. The three steps of providing the backbone are:
 - a. Develop Christian leaders who are directing their whole lives to God, growing in faith and sharing Christ with others. This was explained in the Leaders talk.
 - b. Understanding one's place in the Christian mission is explained in The Study and Evangelization of the Environment talk. Each person must return to his/her own situations motivated to exert a Christian influence in them. S/he is not asked to take on anything new, but to change the environments in which s/he is already participating.
 - c. The third step is explained in this talk. Christian leaders are linked together to work more effectively. The purpose of the Christian community in this context is meeting together to encourage, support and help one another carry out the Via de Cristo mission.
4. We need each other in order to fulfill this mission.

II. NEED FOR COMMUNITY

- A. Personal independence, rugged individualism, is one of the values inherent in the development of this country. Being independent with an "I can do it myself!" attitude is a norm in our society.
 1. The result of this is a fear of being dependent and a feeling that we don't need anyone. Out of this comes a fear of loneliness and isolation, emotions common to all of us in varying degrees. They result from the absence of self-giving in the environment. The cry of loneliness is the most common of all emotions. Community is the opposite of isolation. Relationships give our lives meaning and purpose. We need others to talk to, to affirm us, and to reassure us of our value.
 2. Since we are social beings, we form ourselves into groups of all types, including family, vocational, social and special interest groups. Some groups are short-term and some are long-term. The importance of groups shows our need to interact with one another.
- B. Society creates groups of all types. Each group meets periodically for a purpose. God Himself created the family. Business and professional people develop associations. Workers form unions. Those with like political ideas form political parties. People with all kinds of special interests and hobbies form clubs such as the golf club, swim club, bridge groups, ham radio club, etc. Each group has a purpose that influences the atmosphere of the group. For example, the spirit of the group in a bowling league will be different from a Bible study even if the same people are involved.
- C. Communities are essential to all people, including Christians. We are social beings and other people must meet many of our needs. Most groups do not meet people's need to belong. There is little giving to each other, even in church groups.

People do not develop in isolation. Every environment has people who are

lonely, isolated and who need others to help them grow. They need to be loved, affirmed, and forgiven by others. In true Christian community, people are cherished and encouraged to grow in faith and develop their God-given gifts.

- D. Briefly describe the environment you are using in your witness as it was before being influenced by the Christian community.
- E. Successful Christian communities are a prerequisite to sharing Christ in the world. We need the support of others to fulfill this mission. Christian communities fail when the members do not give themselves to one another.

III. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

- A. Christianity is based on community. The level of self-giving, trust and caring among the people who make up the Christian community determine the maturity level of that community and reflect the power of Christ within the group. The Christian community's nature, purpose and spirit are unique. Its nature is to be one with God, sharing life in Christ. Its purpose is to be the channel of God's grace to the world. The spirit of the Christian community is the spirit of Jesus living in people attempting to direct their lives to Him and to discern His plan for their lives--Jesus with skin on. There are diverse expressions of this spirit, but a feeling of community and a unity of motivation and purpose are necessary.
- B. Pastors and laity are meant to work together, especially in the congregation and in groups within the congregation. Pastors are to be leaders who provide the spark and direction for the community. No matter what our calling or vocation, clergy and laity have one mission--bring Christ to the world. It is important for pastors and laity to work as partners, cooperating with one another to further God's kingdom.
- C. Characteristics of a Christian Community
It is the attitude of the members of the community that makes it Christ-like and self-giving.
 - 1. One center -- Jesus Christ. Christian community is confident in God's power to change the world. Jesus provides the power and direction for each person's apostolic action to be effective.
 - 2. The motivation comes from living an authentic relationship with Jesus. His love propels us.
 - 3. The Holy Spirit leads the community. Allow time for study, meditation, sharing and discerning God's will.
 - 4. The Christian community embodies and models the Christian ideals of self-surrender, trust, and self-giving that we want to share with the world.
 - 5. The community has a common mission -- sharing Christ with the world. Its purpose is not to keep people safe, quiet and content but to be a force for transforming society.
 - 6. Pray together first, last and always. Pray without ceasing. (I Thessalonians 5:17) A vulnerable community trusts God to bring Christ to the world. God works through our faith and in spite of our weaknesses.
- D. Describe the Christian community that influenced the environment you previously mentioned.

IV. THE PROCESS OF BECOMING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

God's plan is that environments exist for the good of the people within them and to encourage each person to grow and mature. The level of self-giving, trust and caring among the people who make up the community mark the maturity level of the community and the power of Christ in the group. People cannot develop without communication with others. Studies have shown that babies die without human touch. Likewise, only persons touched by God can reflect God and relate to each other in a community attitude of truth, life and love.

There are different processes in developing Christian community among those who already believe and those who do not.

- A. Developing Christian community among believers,
 1. We begin with personal encounters. Make a friend.
 2. We then share on a more personal level. We also encourage our friend to share and we truly listen so that our friend feels heard and understood. Be a friend.
 3. Friendship forms groups on a human level.
 - a. Regular contact with one another deepens and strengthens the group. As we begin to share our concerns and joys and to feel understood, friendships deepen. We begin giving to one another in many ways.
 - b. What makes a Christian group unique is the common love for Jesus and each other. We share our love for Christ. We also share a common mission that, obviously, is not present in other groups and environments.
 - c. Trust, self-giving and love are lived so that each person can develop into his/her full potential. When we accept each other unconditionally, animosity is not present.
- B. Forming Christian community in the world has a different purpose -- to share Jesus with others and bring our environments to a more Christ-like ideal.
 1. We need our Christian community to encourage us in this work.
 2. Jesus sent his disciples out two by two, knowing that they would need each other for support and encouragement. We, also, are to form Christian community with other believers. By living the Christian ideal--directing our whole lives to God--the atmosphere of the environment will change. This is the purpose of the Via de Cristo movement. A handful of Christians become community. This draws others who are then drawn into the community at various levels of understanding. Gradually, the whole atmosphere of the environment becomes one of self-giving, an atmosphere which promotes harmony in the group and spiritual maturity in its members. The environment remains true to its original purpose, but now it serves the people within, instead of the people serving forces from without.
 3. As the gospel influences the environment through the Christian community, the members of the community begin searching for God's purpose for them in the environment. This does not necessarily mean that every person is converted. What is important is that God's love is now active in the environment. Each person lives in an atmosphere where they are respected. In an attitude of self-giving, this handful of Christians, now a Christian

community, knows the source of its strength.

4. It is also important that we, as Christians, respect the freedom of each person to respond to the gospel as s/he see fit. We are called to be obedient, not successful. We can prepare ourselves and pray for others to open their hearts to hear and accept the gospel. We cannot make anyone believe. Conversion is God's work.
5. Illustrate the development of the Christian community in the environment you are describing in your witness.

C. Teamwork -- working together

1. It is important to have the support and encouragement of a group that shares a common mission. We have others to help plan the apostolic action and to share in the successes and failures we encounter when carrying out the mission--bringing the group to accept and follow Christ-like ideals. A single individual Christian in the environment can easily be dismissed as a unique and unusual individual. A whole group of Christians working together and reflecting God's love is more difficult to ignore or ridicule.

An isolated Christian is a paralyzed Christian. An image that might be useful: In a wood fire logs placed together produce a fire. If one log is pulled out of the fire, it will burn a short while on its own, but the fire will go out. The log will become cold even while the rest of the logs in the fire continue burning.

2. This handful of Christians in the community witnesses to the others.
 - a. Who are the leaders in this environment or group? It is important to influence the leaders first. They may be either positive or negative leaders. If the leaders become Christian and/or accept Christ-like ideals, and become more self-giving, they will influence the rest of the group.
 - b. As we plan our strategy, we must be aware of our gifts and the gifts of the others in our Christian community in order for us to work most effectively. Each person should work within the community using his/her spiritual gifts.
 - c. We become a small Christian community in this environment that purposefully reaches out in love to others.
 - d. We influence the environment first by our way of life so that others who see us begin to ask questions. Why are they like that? Why do they live this way? What or who inspires them? Note that this is all plural. The witness of the group shows that this is not unique to one individual, but that it is possible for life to have a fuller meaning. At this point we can begin evangelizing, sharing our faith in Christ.

V. THE VIA DE CRISTO METHOD IS A MEANS TO FORM CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

- A. This is a restatement of the purpose of this talk and the Via de Cristo method. Via de Cristo provides a way to bring together and sustain small groups of Christians. It is a method of getting to know one another by sharing and giving ourselves to each other. This is how friendships form. These friendships are centered in Christ and share in His love.

- B. This is the HOW of forming Christian community. A handful of Christians first become Christian community.
1. We must get to know each other on a deeper level.
 2. This happens by being willing to open up and become vulnerable to one another, sharing our joys, our concerns and our pain.
 3. Our relationship with one another deepens as we have a better understanding of who we truly are, not just the social facade we want most people to see.
 4. Only as we are open to receiving God's love, grace and forgiveness can we pass it on to others. We must be continually growing in faith--on-going sanctification.
 5. This equips us to share with others in a spirit of idealism, self-surrender and love.
 6. We know we can not do this in our own strength. We must depend on God to give us what we need for each task.
- C. God gives us what we need to accomplish His work. These gifts are present in the individual and also in the Christian community.
1. Generosity. Self-giving in true friendship is generously giving to others. (Apostolic Action talk)
 2. Faith. It is the Holy Spirit who strengthens our faith as we turn to God in prayer. (Piety talk)
 3. Teamwork. Working together in love and humility gives a stronger witness.
 4. Responsibility. Our mission, evangelizing the world, is not an option. It is given to each person who answers God's call to follow Him. We are to bring the gospel to the whole world, beginning at home. (Matthew 28:19)
 5. Dedication. Each person must see his/her mission within each environment—to live and witness in such a way that his/her environments become Christian communities. Christ is our common denominator.
 6. Briefly illustrate these characteristics of the Christian community that influenced the environment you described earlier.
- D. Stages of community building.
This concept is introduced in this talk and will be expanded later. It should be presented with little or no further comment.
1. Honeymoon stage.
We are committed and enthusiastic. We develop friendship and love for one another.
 2. Disillusion stage.
The handling of this stage is crucial to the formation of true community. Enthusiasm wanes. Members are more reluctant to share or even to take the time to meet. Do not give up or let the group fall apart. Reach out to one another with love and understanding, even if your feelings are hurt. Persevere!
 3. Reality stage.
This is possible only when everyone in the group is directing their lives to God and also seeking God's will for the group.

VI. CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS APOSTOLIC

The Christian community reaching out and giving of itself is not done in our power, but in Christ's power. We must continue to reach out to remain a viable Christian community. When the community stops giving, it turns inward and loses its mission and eventually dies. It is no longer an effective Christian community.

- A. The Christian community reaching out and giving of itself renews life.
 - 1. Jesus knew that in sending out his disciples by twos they could support and encourage one another in difficulties and share in the joy of success. Jesus promises to be present whenever two or three are gathered. He is present to us as individuals, but His presence in the group can propel the group to do things that would not be possible for them to do on their own or in their own strength.
 - 2. The early Church went to the temple each day (Acts 2:46), and by agreement met in Solomon's portico (Acts 4:32). They were of one heart and mind (Acts 4:32). They were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke God's word with confidence (Acts 4:31). The result was that men and women in great numbers became believers. As in the early Church, we must create communities as living witnesses to Jesus' love.
 - 3. As each Christian community reaches out where it is, it becomes a witness of Jesus' love locally and globally in ever-widening circles.
 - 4. The world needs the call to freedom that the Christian community presents. It is not license to do your own thing as the world often interprets freedom; rather it is the freedom to become a whole, mature person. If this freedom existed in every environment, each environment would provide opportunities for growth and the kingdom on earth would be realized.
 - 5. This example of Christian life answers humanity's deepest needs. It will not be scorned or rejected once people have felt and experienced the authentic power of God's love--first from the Christian community and then, as they reach out to God, from Him directly. We each need to live out this Christian community in our own environments and to encourage others to start Christian communities where they are.
- B. This section applies the Via de Cristo strategy to our mission in the world.
 - 1. It is God's desire that every environment should be a Christian community. In today's disconnected world, most groups are not even a community, much less a Christian community. With the emphasis on the individual in our society, we have lost the art of sharing our lives with each other. Most conversation is either social or business-related. We need to go to a deeper level of sharing in the Christian community. We can begin by sharing our piety, study and apostolic action with other Christians in the environment in such a way that they begin sharing their lives with us.
 - 2. This core group of Christians, then, becomes the salt, light and leaven in the environment as the witness of their lives influences those around them.
 - a. Our life of grace is complete only as we work to draw others to share in this life, beginning with our families and those close to us.
 - b. We all must share in Christ's mission to reach the world. The person who accepts Christ's love and grace must then share it with others. This

is the test of Christian community. No matter how much love is shown among members in a group, no matter how much they share how God is working in their lives and no matter how much they share love and joy among themselves it is not a Christian community if the group does not reach out to the world.

- c. The world's ideals are likely to be in opposition to the Christian ideal, but we need to work at helping others be more Christ-like, even among people who don't accept Jesus.
- d. We need to be genuine and actually live what we "preach."
3. We will have an evangelizing Church when we have small evangelizing Christian communities in numerous environments.
4. At some point we have to share God's Word. Our living witness of a Christian life is what provides the opening. What do you have that they want in their own lives?
5. Briefly witness about the Christian community described earlier that transformed the environment. Show how the Via de Cristo method of evangelizing an environment worked. How is the environment different now?

VII. CONCLUSION

The pain of the world is real, deep and often despairing. People are crying for an answer, not even knowing that they cry. God has heard their cry and sent us to listen and love them. This is God's challenge. It may seem over-whelming to us as individuals, but through the support and encouragement of our Christian community, we have the power to do it.

The kingdom is here! Christ has overcome all! How will we respond?