

FOUR STAGES OF COMMUNITY

There are four different stages of community. As you begin to do life together, you'll begin to see that there is a natural progression. The tendency will be to stop at Stage 2 when conflict arises, and either leave the group or retreat to Stage 1. If however, your group matures to Stages 3 and 4, you'll see how God designed community as His provision for us.

Stage 1: Honeymoon

This stage is primarily characterized by a fun sense of “us.” Since the members of the group are just getting to know each other, the relationships will be somewhat shallow. This shallowness is perfectly acceptable for this season.

Similarities between the members of the group will be highlighted and will be the first step in moving toward a deeper sense of “togetherness.” Typically during this stage there is uncritical acceptance of everyone in the group.

Members might think other members are “quirky” or have personality traits that seem a little odd or different, but these thoughts are usually not verbalized and are not brought into the light.

Members who are “new” to community and members who struggle opening up their lives to others will most likely love this stage of group life. Members who have had a good experience with authentic community or are very comfortable opening up about the details of their lives will most likely struggle with this stage and want to move “deeper” as quickly as possible.

The key to this stage is to make sure the group finds similarities upon which to move forward. During this stage it's good to ask what each member wants most out of a community group. Most likely, members will mention their desire for a “safe” and/or “accepting”

environment. This is a great similarity to build upon as the group moves forward.

Stage 2: Differentiation

This stage is primarily characterized by recognition of the difference between each group member. As the group spends time together, differences will naturally arise which impact each member uniquely, depending on their personal experience with handling conflict.

For those members who are comfortable engaging in conflict, these differences will be seen as a natural hurdle to overcome as the life of the group progresses. For those who are not comfortable engaging in conflict, these differences will be viewed as a threat. For those who feel threatened by the differences, there is potential for members to develop a “win versus lose” posture and start to doubt whether or not they are going to fit in and whether or not this group is going to be successful.

The key to this stage is to make sure the group understands that it is at a critical juncture. Path one is to go back to the honeymoon stage of lighthearted fun. Although this may seem like a good idea, understand that this is a step backwards and will not produce the experience of community that they desire in their hearts. Path two is to develop a biblical standard of conflict resolution that will enable the members of the group to safely and maturely deal with their differences and draw the group closer together. Path two is really the only option if the group desires to continue moving forward into real community.

Stage 3: Acceptance

This stage is primarily characterized by each group member realizing the value of the group's diversity. As Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 12, diversity among

the body of Christ is essential and is to be valued and respected. The group benefits by each member having different strengths and weaknesses, especially when they have unity of purpose.

Hopefully, during this stage the group will understand that the one similarity they all share in common is their brokenness and need for Jesus.

The key to this stage is to successfully practice the conflict resolution standard and stay engaged despite differences. This will help build trust and help members grow in their appreciation of the group's diversity. As the group continues to progress, intimacy will continue to deepen and the members' love for one another will continue to grow.

Stage 4: Community

This stage is primarily characterized by each group member sacrificially loving one another. As the group practices the conflict resolution standard and intimacy in the group grows, the group will move to a point where each member is mutually submitting to the others out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). Each member of the group, out of love, sacrifices for the other member without expecting anything in return (Philippians 2:1-11).

The depth of the trust experienced in this stage is special, and the love shown to one another is Christlike.

The key to this stage is each member's acceptance of personal responsibility for each relationship. This stage is what everyone's heart long for when it comes to community.