

these matters point. The formal community itself stands as a sign of what our passing experiences of closeness suggest. And rather than distracting us, these experiences of wider beckoning may ultimately be a means by which the living God calls us to fuller immersion in the community of faith that is both our home and our place of ongoing growth.

SPIRIT INVITING

One morning I met with a small group of leaders who bore wide-ranging responsibilities in their community of faith. These eight people were intimately linked with every phase of their community's life: its care network, its financial maintenance, its education, its outreach to new lives, its worship life, its attentiveness to needs on its doorstep and faraway. I asked them a single question: "How would you characterize your life together?"

The oldest member of the group, a woman with several decades of history in its membership, gave her answer: "We've been rediscovering what God can do among us." After a slight pause, a young man seated next to her added, "We're rediscovering; and at this point, I don't think we can stop."

These words came not as a boast but as a description. Nothing more, really. And certainly nothing less. I found it instructive that the eldest and youngest members of the group shared the response. They possessed an obvious unity on the matter, as did the others seated around the table.

For a time we probed the two halves of their answer. What did they mean by "rediscovering what God can do among us"? Their responses here were down-to-

earth, undramatic, deeply felt. The group members were, one said, "actually talking about God again." They were growing more open in their prayer life. As leaders, they had been fostering a spirit of mutual encouragement throughout the wider body. In times of conflict and on tough issues, they sought to guide the community with greater openness, honesty of speech, and deeper listening. The community as a whole was giving renewed attentiveness to the quality of its worship life and to those places where it was being stretched for others in their need. None of this had happened overnight, nor had any particular direction reached its fulfillment. Still these leaders and their community were rediscovering new levels of life together in Christ.

"And at this point, I don't think we can stop." Why? What attracted the group members? What kept drawing them on? The answer here proved more elusive. First responses included, "We're finding too much just to stay where we are" and "There always seems to be more for us to explore." Experientially these were wholly valid answers even if they didn't quite give the full picture. Finally one answer seemed to embrace the other answers and tie them to their root: "We can't stop because the Spirit keeps inviting us further."

I believe that last response describes the experience of many contemporary communities of faith. The Spirit is inviting, inviting us to overcome our shyness and to discover anew what community in Christ is really meant to be. The Spirit is inviting us to set aside our idealized images of community, because true community in Christ involves us in all the realities of human relationships.

The Spirit is inviting us to attend once again on faithful practices and on being stretched and on our steady, prayerful need for grace in the life we share together. In essence, the Spirit now bids us to enter a form of being and acting that has no limits. It is calling us to grow in our life with the community that is both fashioned and led forth by the Living Christ.

This invitation comes in the context of much need. "We must live in community because God wants us to respond to the unclear longings of our time with a clear answer of faith," wrote Eberhard Arnold in the 1920s.¹ The words are still pertinent today. I am convinced that our quiet, steady, imperfect efforts to grow in community will do far more for the renewal of the church of Jesus Christ and for the world Christ came to redeem than will all our anxious critique and all of our perpetual efforts at bureaucratic reorganization. The steady living of love's way is desperately needed. It is this that will speak faith's message to the unclear longings of our time.

The invitation to enter further into Christian community comes as fresh forms of common life are emerging and as old forms take on new life. A small group meets regularly for prayer and mutual support. A congregation previously limited by narrow vision begins to explore its neighborhood, its prayer life, and the ways its members can talk honestly with one another. A retreat center starts playing host not just to individuals but to groups that come seeking to grow closer in the life they share. Such seemingly small beginnings take place about us almost ceaselessly.

The small beginnings, while easily overlooked, are

vital. We cannot say what form Christian community will take 100 years from now. Much is changing for our parishes and congregations, for religious orders and for all our institutional expressions of community. But wherever we now respond to the Spirit's invitation, wherever we care faithfully for what is emerging among us, there we are letting Christ form us for the goodness of community that will be.

The invitation to give ourselves further to the gift of community in Christ is, ultimately, a persistent summons to become one with the mystery of God's healing work. Where we honor Christ in our communities of faith, we take part in that work. Where we open ourselves to the wider beckonings of God's movement in the world around us, we sense the all-embracing vastness of this mystery. And where in small, steady ways we give ourselves to the growth of community in Christ, we let ourselves become both pattern and sign of God's ceaseless yearning, known both among us and around us

as a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in him,
things in heaven and things on earth.
—Ephesians 1:10



REFLECTION AND MEDITATION

1. Where in the past have you sensed the Spirit's invitation to enter more deeply into community in Christ? Where might you be sensing that invitation now?