

Bonding: Priest and Community

The chart explores the movement in the early years of the relationship between priest and the parish community. The movement parallels what we see in basic group and system dynamics but focused in this case on the relationship between the primary priest of a parish church (rector, vicar, priest-in-charge, etc.) and the community that makes up the parish. In each phase those involved are working out how to accept and engage one another as symbols and as persons. The priest is both symbol (presider, sacramental person, Father/Mother) and person; the community is both symbol (e.g., Body of Christ, People of God) and persons. The temptation is to escape the paradox by fleeing into either the personal or into the symbolic.

Phase	Typical Characteristic, Dynamics, Issues	Group Development Theory: Leadership Issues
Inflated Hopes Common in years 1-2	A kind of adoration; much like infatuation. The priest may trigger fears, hopes and longings about which we are only vaguely aware. There may be illusionary thinking that assumes the priest will always be available, compassionate, competent, trustworthy; able to solve your problems. It's a fantasy that the priest will be the best of the past without the pain of the past. The priest may have comparable illusions about the parish. If challenged the initial response is likely to be denial that that is what is being expressed. In this phase – the priest and the community do not know each other as persons.	Dependence – The group and leader come together; gather initial impressions of each other, make initial judgments. A new group is being formed. There is usually a time of tentativeness and uncertainty. The leader and members of the group are concerned about being accepted by the other and what the cost of that acceptance will be. The relationship is superficial. Anxiety increases as different styles of working and making decisions begin to become evident. The leader is expected to deal with the group's anxiety and the ambiguity of the situation. This stage will be managed more or less smoothly depending on 1). The degree of working style similarity between the leader and key group members; 2). Their tolerance for ambiguity and 3). The leader's ability to stay present as a person and at the same time as the leader.
Disappointment Common in years 3-4	This is a time of disillusionment. The priest is not all we hoped for; the congregation is not all the priest hoped for. The priest and the community may both find themselves wanting to escape the frustration and disappointment that comes now. They may back away from each other; develop a kind of resignation to the situation. Or they may have very powerful negative emotions, e.g., despising, disgust, anger. In this phase – the community experiences more of the role the priest is in; the priest is doing many things in a way that fits his/her own personality and hopefully, in ways that bring the ways of the wider church to this local expression of the church. The priest may also be disillusioned with the parish, e.g., "This isn't what the parish profile said."	Counter-dependence – The group and leader experience a time of tension over influence and control. There are more disagreements (some real, some manufactured). People may get more aggressive in attempts to gain influence; others may withdraw. People may begin to focus on differences in order to reestablish their individuality. There is a negative reaction to the feelings of earlier dependency that emerges. There may be a lot of "testing" the leader (or the leader testing the group); initiatives by the leader are commonly resisted. This process continues until the leader and key group members begin to act in more independent and interdependent ways. Beginning to listen carefully, and to offer reasonable suggestions to resolve issues, are critical factors in the group's ability to move beyond this stage. The degree of struggle and conflict involved usually needs to be contained if the group is to be productive. But this phase is both inevitable and necessary if the leader and the group are to negotiate ways of dealing with power and decision making. Attempts to escape this stage will cause a cycle of moving between the two stages of dependency and counter-dependency.
Realistic Expectations & Relationship Common in years 4 – 6 and after	This is a period of mature community acceptance of the priest and of the community by the priest. If they manage to stay together and to work out ways of communicating, making decisions, expressing acceptance of their differences, and focusing on common goals – they may experience a sense of mutual respect and mature stability. A feeling of affection may emerge in time; a kind of realistic love. In this phase the priest as symbol is still there but the community comes to know the person. For the priest the community is still the Body of Christ, a glorious mystery; while also being individuals with their own stories.	Interdependence – Leader and group sort out roles and processes for communicating and deciding. Norms emerge for how we will treat each other and work together. There is more collaboration and a focus on the work to be accomplished. There is a lot of functional behavior that contributes to the task and maintaining good working relationships. A sense of belonging emerges; an acceptance of each other with strengths and weaknesses. Trust is stronger. At higher levels of functioning there is a strong sense of interdependence; of the value of the leader and the member's differences in temperament and skills; of deep appreciation and even affection; and of high productivity.

The dynamics involved: There is no avoiding the phases. The priest and parish may move through the phases more or less quickly; may get stuck at a phase, e.g. disappointment that never gets worked through. They may cycle back to earlier stages -- there may be times of regression when the parish and/or key leaders are experiencing a period of high anxiety, threat or helplessness; the recycling may bring deeper insight, increased spiritual and emotional maturity, and closer bonds.