

**International Meeting of Base Communities
Tubingen, Germany / January 2013**

A Model for Use in Basic Christian Communities

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

& SOCIAL ACTION

“Gathered and Sent”

The following format is indebted to Ian Fraser and the Iona Community in Scotland, but has been modified by Bernard Lee, S.M. and Michael Cowan for use in the American cultural context. The use of this instrument does not require sophisticated facilitation, and has a far better yield than “simple common sense.” But it does take some disciplined attention! This material is especially relevant to the formation of Base Christian Community leaders.

Sociologically, the word “community” has multiple interpretations. In the remarks that follow, I take Christian community to mean a group of people who have built relationships between themselves (community as “gathered”); and the group also acts together in some ways for the good of the larger community (it is also “sent”).

First. Before thinking about strategies, we must identify clearly the social group we want to understand (an office, an institution, a religious order, a parish, a city, etc.) It may even be a smaller group within a larger institutional setting. We have to be clear precisely about the group under discussion.

Second. Each of us, each participant, identifies one or two strong points, things that have been very supportive or creative. Each thing named *must be accompanied* by concrete examples. *Stick with actual experience.* This keeps the process grounded and is *critically* important.

Third. Then we identify one or two areas that have not been supportive, or have been difficult experiences, perhaps even counter-productive. Again, each thing named must be accompanied by concrete examples. This keeps the process experientially grounded and is of central importance.

Fourth. For both the positive and negative features identified above, try to imagine *what kind of thinking* lies behind them. If each of these things named is operative, someone(s) must be thinking that they are good ideas, or tolerating them for some reason if they are bad ideas. Who? Why? Some *sense of things* normally undergirds institutional behaviors. Know that it's harder to be objective about things we identify as negative! Sometimes thinking that has negative effects is well intentioned, and the negatives are "sub-text," not foreseen or intended. And, of course, sometimes thinking is just wrong-headed, even if not ill-intentioned. This operation is sometimes called *ideology critique*.

Fifth. Where is that thinking going on for both the positives and negatives, the thinking identified in the third step? *Who is doing that thinking?* Where is it lodged? Who is responsible? If we want change to happen, *we have to know where "agency" lies*, who is responsible.

Sixth. What kinds of initiatives on our part would lend support to the positives? And what kinds of initiatives (interventions in historical processes) would be required to transform what is going on negatively? Be quite specific about these actions, and about their real chances of being successful. *What interventions of support or of transformation stand a reasonable chance of being effective?* A lot of time is wasted on ineffective interventions!

Seventh. *What kind of a power base is needed to give interventions in institutional culture a reasonable chance of success?* Religious people are sometimes reluctant to talk about power issues, as if that is somehow "unholy." But power is a neutral thing. It can work for good or evil. Anytime two or more people are engaged in any kind of social interaction, there are power issues!

Unilateral Power. When power is defined unilaterally, as the ability to make happen what someone wants to make happen no matter the relational cost, damaged relationships are likely to occur somewhere along the way.

Relational power is the rhythm of having effects and receiving effects in a dialogue of vested interests. I do not try to have an effect anywhere where I have not been affected, and can read the situation sympathetically because "I am there too." *We should always strategize in terms of relational power.*

It is frankly *very* difficult to initiate transformations of institutional culture, really to bring them off. For the most part, individuals alone are seldom effective (practically never!) in transforming large social groups. There has to be a power base, some kind of critical mass, some modicum of organization and will. In his book, *To Empower People*, Peter Berger stresses *the importance of mediating structures* in negotiating social change, which is singularly important vis-à-vis mega-structures. Naiveté about power issues quickly engenders disenchantment when "it just didn't work." *Organization* matters one heck of a lot!

Eighth. Planned transformative strategies must be carefully evaluated all along the way, and sometimes modified, based upon our evaluations of effectiveness. Sometimes our strategies are simpler and more straight-forward, e.g., how can the information needed to make a decision be communicated, and what kind of interpersonal processes will foster its critical assimilation. Many times, strategies are intricate and multi-layered and need to be carefully monitored and revamped all along the way.

Ninth. All along the way it is important to make assessments, before God, of our own motivations and of the condition of our own magnanimity. I sometimes ponder Becket's remark in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*: "The last temptation is the greatest treason, to do the right deed for the wrong reason."

Bernard J. Lee, S.M.
Professor of Theology
St. Mary's University
One Camino Santa Maria
San Antonio, Texas 78228