



ression is ecclesial because we prayerfully hope that God will enable it

That doesn't necessarily mean the new community's members would start coming to the existing parish church on Sunday. More likely is that the community would emerge as a new congregation *linked* to the parish church, or sometimes as a new church in its own right (perhaps on a new housing estate).

To be "ecclesial" the new community must be recognisably Church in its life, which includes being strongly connected to the wider body. But what makes a community recognisably Church?

One way of thinking about this is to say that the essence of Church is four overlapping sets of relationship, all founded on Christ. These relationships are:

- With God directly in prayer, worship and study.
- With the outside world.
- With the wider church.
- And within the new community itself.

Take the church at Corinth, for example.

- It experienced God directly (1 Corinthians 12. 7-11).
- It connected to other Christian communities: members read Paul's letters, looked up to people in the wider church (1 Corinthians 1. 12) and provided financial support to other parts of the body (2 Corinthians 8. 10).
- It engaged with the outside world (1 Corinthians 14. 23-25).
- Members interacted relationally in worship (1 Corinthians 14. 26-31).

These four sets of relationships, which can be expressed in myriad ways, are equally important because Jesus is central to each. They make the Church unique; no other institution or community combines these four particular sets of relationships.

What about Scripture, the sacraments, leadership and disciplines (such as meeting regularly and giving)? Are they not fundamental to the Church?

One answer is to distinguish between the *essence* of the Church and what is *essential* for the Church. The two need not be the same.

Referees are essential for football, but are not the essence of the game. A legal document is essential to be married, but is not the essence of the

relationship. In the West a knife and fork are essential for eating, but are not the essence of the meal.

The four overlapping sets of relationships are the essence of the Church, while Scripture, sacraments, recognised leadership and disciplines (generously understood) are essential for Church.

Just as a referee serves the match by helping it to proceed smoothly, so the essentials serve the Church's relationships by being means for the Spirit to build them up.

This understanding of the Church is faithful to recent ecumenical statements that see the Church as a community, in which relationships and certain practices (such as the sacraments) are fundamental. It fleshes out a widely held view.

As it is with individual discipleship, fresh expressions may start some way off from their ultimate destination, but through the leadership, God's Spirit grows these new Christian communities to maturity – a blossoming, fruitful Church.

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