



Gatherings

Gatherings...

Small Church Communities: Joyful Pilgrims



Fr. Ron May (St. Patrick, Collinsville)

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Fired by the Spirit



Cormac Murphy-O'Connor

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Shaping the Church of the New Millennium: St. Monica Hosts NAPRC Conference

Against a backdrop of images created by the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand," St. Monica hosted the annual conference of the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities, July 24-27. The theme of the conference, "Shaping the Church of the New Millennium: The Spiritual Roots of Small Church Communities," was evident in the many earthen vessels - both whole and broken - that decorated the center and the church and reminded participants that all of humankind is at one time or another whole, broken, or in the process of being recreated. Participants from 17 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada worshipped together, heard speakers, attended workshops, and worked together at tables to learn more about how small church communities help parishioners connect faith and life on a regular basis. [More »](#)

Small Community
Happenings...

Parishes in Action

On Saturday, October 4, the Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities will be co-sponsoring with the Office of Urban Affairs and a number of other diocesan offices an archdiocesan-wide conference for all who share in the work of social ministry. This joint effort will replace our usual annual fall workshop for core teams, coordinators and facilitators. The conference will be focused on animating, empowering and organizing parishes for systemic impact in the state of Connecticut. A special workshop for small church community members has been built into the structure of this conference. Mission is an essential dimension of being church, both big and small.

This time together will offer us an opportunity to engage this call more deeply and in a cooperative way throughout the archdiocese. Members of small communities: Please join us for the day and encourage fellow parishioners to do so as well.

Alliance Parish Gathering

Hosted by the core team from Assumption, Manchester, the next gathering of core teams

Parishes in Action: Journey of Hope, Call to Discipleship

An Archdiocesan-wide conference for all who share in the work of social ministry

Saturday, October 4, 2003, St. Thomas Seminary, 8:30am - 3:30PM

Conference fee: \$12.00 (includes continental breakfast and box lunch)

Plenary Addresses: John Carr - Social Mission and Message: Challenges for Connecticut Parishes

Myron Orfield - Connecticut Metropatterns: A Regional Agenda for Community and Prosperity

A variety of related workshops including a special workshop for small Christian communities

To register: Call the Office of Urban Affairs at (203) 777-7279.

Worth Repeating

Communities are not only an integral part of the communion which is the Church.

They are also an important spur to renewing the mission of the Church.

Cormac Murphy-O'Connor

Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster

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Small Church Communities: Joyful Pilgrims

While I have been involved in small church communities for the past 4 years, I've been attracted to the vision for more than 9 years. As a seminarian at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore back in the 80's I was attracted to the overall vision that the Seminary was presenting. It was not called small church communities, but clearly following the lead from the Vatican II documents, it pointed me in the direction of small church communities.

Vatican II teaches that as a result of our baptism all of God's people are called to use their gifts and talents to build up the Church. This was highly emphasized at the Seminary. That had been my actual experience of church as I grew up at St. Peter's Church in New Britain. There I found a lot of support and encouragement to be an active part of the parish. I felt called to be involved in almost every ministry in the parish. I was an altar server, lector, usher, Eucharistic minister and member of the parish council. About the only thing left to do was to become a priest.



As a result of my parish community's support I grew to appreciate greatly all the various gifts and talents of my fellow parishioners. Through my years in seminary and subsequent summer assignments in parishes I grew to appreciate the giftedness of each individual even more. Even

next gathering of core teams from Alliance parishes will take place on Saturday, October 25. Information will be forthcoming shortly. (The Alliance effort regularly brings together parishes that have been a part of intensive core team development in recent years. Assistance to begin core team development in any parish is just a phone call away. For information, call the office at (860) 243-9642.)

Publications

Recent articles written by Bro. Bob Moriarty, S.M. can be accessed on the department website: www.sccquest.org. "Small Church Communities and the Pastoral Formation of the Seminarian as a "Man of Communion" appears in mid-September in Seminary Journal. "Imaging Initiation in Small Church Communities" will be appearing in the fall issue of Catechumenate magazine.

assignments in parishes I grew to appreciate the giftedness of each individual even more. Even before I was ordained, I knew that my priesthood would be greatly enriched by the people of God and that my vision of priesthood would be greatly determined by my past parish experience.

The call to preach, teach and sanctify is central to priesthood. That is a given. How one accomplishes this call is another matter. Certainly, the priest must center his life on the Eucharist so that he authentically preaches, teaches and sanctifies. While the role of the priest is unique and distinct from that of the laity, it is paramount in my vision that priest and people are dependent on one another. As the presider at the Eucharistic Assembly I must lead, but I must also listen to the stories of the laity. Together all of us are transformed in the Body of Christ.

The priesthood faces many challenges today. The scandals of the past year have greatly affected many priests including me. The declining numbers of priests and the greater expectations by people and the diocese place a great deal of pressure on priests to do more and more and to do it well. This kind of pressure is not unique to the priesthood. All across our society workers of all kinds are expected to be more productive and work longer hours. What is different, and what is hopeful for me, is that as a priest I have the ability to lead people to a new vision of Church where productivity is not the issue, but relationships are. We need to get back to the basics. It's a matter of helping people to make the time to reflect on their giftedness and to put their faith into action.

As a society we are terribly broken and fractured. The ideal family is not the norm, but the exception. But family is fundamental. In the family our individual stories are shaped, affirmed and find meaning. In the parish, small church communities are a place to shape, affirm and deepen our stories of faith. My experience of small church communities is that they are places not only where I can tell my story, but where I can let the stories of others impact my life.

Recently, I attended the annual conference of the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities (NAPRC) in Indianapolis. The NAPRC promotes a vision where small church communities are key to building the parish. Gathered with people from many parts of the country, I experienced a rich sense of church. It was a wonderful affirmation of my belief that helping each other to connect faith and life on a regular basis is not only how one grows personally, but a way for us to build up the church. The conference affirmed the unique giftedness of every individual and the blessings of hearing each other's stories. It deeply affirmed my faith.

In the several years that we have had small church communities in my parish of St. Patrick in Collinsville, I have seen the sense of parish change. In the past, people always looked to the pastor or staff for direction in everything. Now, people are being empowered. They take initiative. Recently, I heard about a member of one of our small church communities who heard about a person who had lost almost everything in a fire. Within a week, her small church community went into action. They supplied the woman with many articles for her home. Many members of our small church communities are directly involved in our parish outreach to a church in Haiti. With the help of these small communities, we have built a school and maintain it. We have also begun a feeding program.

Realistically, I know that not everyone will accept this vision of church and join a small church community. Many in the parish do not want to be involved except to attend mass on the weekend. However, the vision calls for all people to become more reflective. That means that whenever people gather at the parish, there should be an opportunity for them to reflect on their faith and life. I already do that at wedding rehearsals, parish council meetings, wakes, parent and teacher meetings, etc. Recently, I have been using reflection questions at the beginning of mass and during the homilies. Slowly, but surely that will have an impact on the lives of those attending mass and beyond. As they say, "Rome was not built in a day". This vision of church will take time. The key is to be consistent and persistent.

persistent.

In summation, small church communities offer a vision of church that empowers individuals. It gives them a wonderful sense of church - as people sharing their stories on a regular basis; making sense of life based on their faith, and calling others to God. This is the vision of church set forth in Vatican II: together, we are a pilgrim people heading to the kingdom. And we do that with a great sense of joy!

Questions for reflection and conversation

- How is your parish different because of its small church communities?
- How has the small church community experience empowered you as a person of faith?

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Fired by the Spirit

by Cormac Murphy-O'Connor

The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster is convinced that small Christian communities hold the key to parish renewal. This essay is reprinted here with the permission of The Tablet: www.thetablet.co.uk

The French Dominican, Fr Yves Congar, with his groundbreaking work on the laity, made a huge impression on me as a young priest in the late Fifties. In his book *Lay People in the Church*, Congar stressed the need for basic Christian communities. These, he said, allowed people to rediscover the Church. For many of his contemporaries, he explained, "the Church's machinery, sometimes the very institution, is a barrier obscuring her deep and living mystery, which they can find, or find again, only from below". Through "the living reality" of "little church cells wherein the mystery is lived directly and with great simplicity", it was possible to experience the Church as it most truly was, the hierarchically structured people of God "to whose life all its members contribute and which is patterned by give and take and a pooling of resources".

I believed Congar was right then; and nearly 50 years on, I still believe him to be right. He was touching on an important truth, which is that renewal in the Church has come about, time and time again in its history, in and through the inspiration of small communities - monastic, evangelical, missionary, lay communities, communities of women - all fired by the Holy Spirit. They have been enormously diverse, but all fit Congar's description of "basic Christian community", and they all mirror, surely, that description of the earliest church community who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2: 42).

My first experience of the force of Congar's observation came when I returned to England from Rome as a newly ordained priest, full of zeal and enthusiasm. For the first nine years of my priestly ministry (1957-66), I was the curate in two parishes in and near Portsmouth. In those years I experienced both a sense of frustration, and of discovery. I felt frustrated because I found that my enthusiastic approach to ministry had to be tempered to the reality of people's lives in the parishes where I served. There was no quick way to



tempered to the reality of people's lives in the parishes where I served. There was no quick way to bring people to greater commitment to the love of Christ and the mission of the Church. But this frustration was itself tempered by the discovery that the renewal and flourishing of faith in the parish for which I hankered was not going to come about by any words or initiatives of mine, but by the manner in which the Spirit of God became fruitful in people's lives.

Towards the end of my period in the first parish, a group of people invited me to join their monthly meetings. They met together in different houses to pray, to read a passage of the Gospel and to reflect on the circumstances of their daily lives. It was my first lesson in the value of a basic Christian community.

In my next parish I helped to form 10 of these basic communities and, before long, out of a parish of 1,000 or so practising Catholics, about 200 people were meeting regularly. It was in these faith clusters, or communities, that a whole mix of people - married, unmarried, young and old - discovered a new and deeper experience of faith through prayer, Scripture, community and service to others. Those communities brought something new to the parish, which became, in a very real and tangible way, "a living parish".

I believe that small Christian communities are a source of great hope in the Church today, and that their contribution to renewal in the Church is increasingly recognised. The Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1987 noted "with great satisfaction that the parish is becoming a dynamic community of communities, a centre where movements, basic ecclesial communities and other apostolic groups energise it and are in turn nourished". Pope John Paul, in his letter on the new millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, emphasises the theme of communion and the promotion of "forms of association, whether of the more traditional kind or the newer ecclesial movements which continue to give the Church a vitality that is God's gift and a true springtime of the Spirit".

The influence of the Church on our culture is most tangibly felt through the actual witness of the people of God. The authenticity and effectiveness of that witness is in turn dependent, at least in part, on our continuing to grow and mature as people of deep spirituality and holiness. Within smaller groups, where a greater degree of trust and confidence can be built up, people are encouraged and inspired to go further and deeper on their journey of faith than they might otherwise. People begin to discover, and then to share more openly, their relationship with God, with each other, with the whole of creation. Out of these kinds of reflections a greater conviction of the importance of putting faith into action can develop. Justice and peace issues take on added urgency and significance. So too can a desire to become more closely involved in the liturgy, in youth work, in catechetics and in other aspects of the pastoral, spiritual and social life of the Church. Also important in our own time is the sense of belonging and being accepted, and the radical change that occurs in people's lives when they begin to lay their own life down alongside the Scriptures.

For the vast majority of Catholics, the parish is the place where we come together to celebrate in Word and sacrament what it means to be members of the Church. The parish community, the parish liturgy, and in particular the Sunday Eucharist are the visible signs of our communion with the rest of the Church and with each other. This communion is not limited by time or place; the Eucharist unites us with the Church past, present and to come, because as Vatican II notes (*Lumen Gentium* 11), it is "the source and summit of the Christian life".

So, of course, renewing our Church will mean renewing our parishes. And, as Congar points out, so much of that renewal - spiritual, liturgical, pastoral - must flow from the communities which form and meet in the parishes.

There will be some people who look beyond the parish for spiritual nourishment, and there is