

# Gatherings

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## Pastors and People Together - *Building Parish with Small Church Communities*

**E**ight pastors and core team chairpersons (or representative) came together August 7-8 at Wisdom House in the beautiful Litchfield hills for two days of reflection, conversation and prayer about our shared efforts to realize a vision for parish centered on ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly. Fr. Art Baranowski (Archdiocese of Detroit), the original developer of this **Called to Be Church** vision we have been promoting, was on hand to help facilitate our two days together. The retreat was supported in part with the generous assistance from the Raskob Foundation. Reflections from participants follow. Plans for follow up conversation are in the works.



*l to r; Fr. Allan Hill and Bill Polinsky*

### **Immaculate Heart of Mary, Harwinton**

**Bill Polinsky:** I was impressed with the shoulder to shoulder

solidarity of pastors and core team chairs with the promise of continuing mutual support as we define our common goal vision for strengthening the life and mission of the parish. I was also encouraged by the frank exchanges between pastors and chairs relative to the challenges we face and the possible strategies to employ. We were reminded during this extraordinary meeting not to be discouraged because our dream is slow to develop, remembering that God probably has his own schedule.

**Fr. Allan Hill:** I was impressed by the conviction of my fellow pastors to make the vision of small Christian communities an integral part of our parishes.

### **St. Dominic, Southington**

**Fr. Ron May:** What stood out for me...is that we have to be intentional and persistent. What also struck me is that Art is re-thinking his approach and focusing on bringing people to a conversion experience and then introducing them to small church communities...The retreat was an awesome experience and it certainly has given me renewed enthusiasm to find new ways to express the vision creatively.



*l to r; Doris Hamel and Fr. Ron May*

**Doris Hamel:** The retreat helped to expand my view of what it means to *be church*. Our small Christian community endeavor is one that can embrace the whole church. Connecting life and faith on a daily basis is for all Catholics. As church, as followers of Jesus, we are to be a community of love; sharing our faith, our lives, our gifts, our joys, our doubts and our hopes, not only in small groups but in the parish at large. One strong theme discussed was persistence in promoting small church communities. God will accomplish his will in his time. Habakkuk 2:3 says it best: "For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late." This retreat served to re-energize me in many ways and my prayer is that I will be able to share some of my experience with others so that they too may be encouraged.

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## Core Team Retreat *Continued from page 1*



*l to r; Jill Kozol and Fr. John Golas*

### St. Mary, Unionville

**Jill Kozol:** I was so pleased to see the number of priests and laity committed to the small church community vision. Being with everyone was like getting a shot in the arm to increase my excitement again. One of the most helpful things I gleaned from our conversations was the importance of persistence. We must continue to promote small church communities regularly throughout the year, to keep planting seeds and not get discouraged. It was also helpful to think about people's need for a conversion type experience. It is hard to sell the idea of small church community to people who have not experienced a more personal relationship with Christ and do not see the need to share their faith with others. I was thankful to be able to attend this retreat. It was good to know that we are not alone and that others have the same hopes and fears. What an awesome group of people. Hopefully, we can do this again.

**Fr. John Golas:** My two day retreat in the Litchfield hills was a transfiguration experience. I had a sense like that of the disciples with the Lord on Mt. Tabor that, "It is good that we are here." I left with a renewed purpose and a greater awareness of the commitment that we all have for the effort to make

our parishes communities of faith that fully engage our lives. The two days of retreat will sustain us in the days ahead.

### St. Bridget, Manchester

**Fr. Steve Sledesky:** This retreat renewed my appreciation for the significance of small church communities and regular faith-sharing in parish life and the impact this vision can have in strengthening the life of the parish. Having eight pastors and core team members together for this overnight provided a unique opportunity to network, share successes and challenges, and to envision future possibilities.



*l to r; Fr. Steve Sledesky and Neal Duggan*

**Neal Duggan:** What a wonderful experience we all had. Proverbs 29:18 - "Where there is not vision, the people perish, but he that keepeth the law, happy is he." The two day retreat opened my eyes to the enormous leadership challenges faced by our pastors as they direct the day to day activities of the parish. One important benefit of a well-communicated vision of what *doing church differently* means is that people have the opportunity to connect their daily activities and faith in a deeper and richer way.

### St. Bartholmew, Manchester

**Bob Kostek:** This gathering has been *very* thought provoking. If we

continue to have such uninhibited conversations we can accomplish some meaningful results for every parish.

**Fr. Tom Sievel:** Our recent retreat with Fr. Art Baranowski and Br. Bob



*l to r; Fr. Tom Sievel and Bob Kostek*

Moriarty and the members of eight Parish Core Teams and the eight pastors, was a wonderful expression of a shared faith. In addition to coming to know each other or deepening our friendships, this overnight gave us the insight that we all face the same challenges in recruiting new members and retaining existing members of small church communities. Our networking gave us excellent ways in which we could address these concerns. We also identified ways in which we could further connect our faith with everyday parish life. We left renewed for the task again: connecting our faith with ordinary life and continuing our breaking open the bread of the Sunday scriptures together.

### St. Mary Magdalen, Oakville

**Fr. Jim Gregory:** We started off reflecting on why all of us gathered at Wisdom House for two days are involved in small church communities and trying to get our parishes to follow a more reflective and relational model of parish life. We then talked about the challenges of realizing such vision. Some of the

## Core Team Retreat *Continued from page 2*

challenges included bringing more ordinary people in the parish into the vision and helping Catholics understand what it means to be church. What spoke the loudest to me was the use of silence to reflect upon the issues before discussing them. Everyone was invigorated by the conversations. For myself, I went back to the parish and introduced some silence into the Sunday celebration that I have been ignoring.



*l to r; Fr. Jim Gregory and Mike Malfitano*

**Mike Malfitano:** I enjoyed the fellowship that was shared between pastors and small church community core team chairs. When I was growing up there was a mystique about pastors, but after spending two days with them I felt more of a connection with them as brothers in the faith. I learned more about the vision we are trying to portray to our parish and got ideas that might work. To me the vision is not just about formal meetings, but people gathering together anywhere and anytime to talk about how they connect faith to their everyday life.

### St. Gabriel, Milford

**Fr. Maurice Maroney:** The retreat experience had hints of the Olympics to it. No competition, mind you. Just

priests and people eager to be at one and to advance the cause of our church. In St. Paul's words. We're out to "finish our race." We were all winners, thanks to very giving friends and Fr. Art Baranowski's gentle guidance.

**Larry Lussier, C.S.C.:** I believe small church communities are a movement of the Holy Spirit working in our time...Twenty years of growing the small church communities from small groups to become the way a parish re-focuses itself for the mission of Jesus in our times has proven to demand strength, courage, patience and deeper insight from our priests and core teams...But we are not in it for instant gratification; we see it as our vocation...[T]his August retreat facilitated by Fr. Baranowski proved to be fraternal and insightful. It has reinvigorated me. Hearing pastors speak to personal and parish realities, reaching deep inside, praying for insight, encouraging one another in this unique calling compels me to become a *minor prophet* for the small church community movement once again. I look forward to reinvesting with the pastors and core team representatives and meeting them again to further the growth of small church communities in our archdiocese.



*l to r; Fr. Maurice Maroney and Larry Lussier, C.S.C.*



*l to r; Fr. Nick Melo and Larry O'Neal*

### St. Thomas, Southington

**Fr. Nick Melo:** For me, what stands out from our gathering, as a newbie to small church communities, is the dedication of the laity and clergy alike to continue to strengthen the church. What kept coming up over and over, was the need for a conversion experience before expecting people to engage wholeheartedly in the vision of integrating faith and life. So, with patience and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we continue the journey to effect that in our midst.

**Larry O'Neal:** The short time I was able to spend with everyone at the retreat was rewarding to me. It was helpful to see some new faces with fresh ideas to help small church communities to grow for the future. I was hoping to spend a lot more time, but because of work schedule conflicts I was very disappointed not to be there for the full two days. I wanted to share with the group more of my own thoughts on the future of small church communities. The group was looking at how to make small church communities grow for the present, but I think we really need to focus on the future. I know it seems slow presently with increasing the number of new groups, but with priests and core team chairpersons working closely together, we have the right combination to start building an even stronger church. **G**

# My Path to a Closer Relationship with God

by Cheryl Lucia

**N**ine years ago I was a normal wife and mother trying to be a good Catholic. To me that meant I went to church on Sundays, made sure my children went, and took them to religious education classes every week. Life was good. The only problem came at mass when I'd hear the homilist talk about a close relationship with God and I knew I really didn't have one. So I set about trying to obtain it. I figured that to develop a close relationship, I needed to pray more than just at Sunday mass. I started by cleaning off the chair in my bedroom, creating my prayer corner. Meditation on the bible seemed to be the best way to start, so I selected a reading at random. After a few verses I shut my eyes to think about what I had just read. At that moment my youngest child burst into the room. "What ya doing, Mom?" "Oh, nothing," I said, and quickly

jumped up. How could I let my child see me sitting there doing nothing?! Several days later no one was home except me, so once again I opened the bible and read a random passage, then closed my eyes to meditate on it. Forty-five minutes later I woke up when I heard the garage door open! This was just not working for me.

A short time later, a small announcement appeared in my church bulletin offering a way to "slow down and take time for yourself and God". A presentation was to take place in the church hall in several weeks. For the next few Sundays I looked at that invitation then finally decided to call. I like to think that was the moment I finally heard the Holy Spirit knocking and decided to answer the door.

I came home from that first presentation and told my husband, rather sheepishly, I must say, that I was going to join a small Christian community. I think his response was some-

thing like, "That's fine, dear." Once I make a decision, however, I jump in head first. So several weeks later I was hosting my first small Christian community meeting at our house. "Dan," I said, "Remember what I told you about joining a small Christian community? Well the first meeting is next Tuesday and it's at our house. You can join us if you'd like, but you don't have to." Needless to say, I got a less than enthusiastic response from him. But when the guests started to arrive, he came in to meet everyone. Next thing I knew he had pulled up a chair and joined us. The Lord sure does work in mysterious ways!

Dan and I have been part of our small church community for over eight years now. I feel like I've truly found a small church. Membership in the group has given me people with whom I can discuss my religion – something I never

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## Joining a Small Community: The Soft Sell

by Dan Lucia

**S**o, why did I get involved with a small Christian community? I don't recall it being something I woke up one morning and decided to do. Rather, have you been a victim of what I call the soft sell? Where someone drops a hint about the benefit of a product or service and then tells you they don't care if you buy or not. Well, that's what my wife, Cheryl, did to me, although I don't think it was knowingly. She mentioned to me one day that she wanted to attend one of the church meetings where small Christian groups come together. I didn't think too much about it until a couple of

days later when she said, "...and oh by the way I'm going to host this meeting at our house. You can see for yourself if you'd like, or simply keep the kids entertained for me." I knew then, I would attend...

Joe and Peg from our church were there to kickoff the meeting and did a great job helping us get started. They made us feel relaxed, and started us with getting to know and relate to our first small community get-together. This turned out to be a very enjoyable evening and one that continues today through several years of my small church community journey. As I expected, many obvious benefits began to emerge, ones I don't think would surprise anyone. Coming together with

other spiritual people looking to grow their relationship with the Lord was an obvious benefit. In the process, while I enjoyed the new-found camaraderie in belonging to a new small church community, a stronger sense of community emerged towards our larger parish, giving me a greater sense of connectedness. However, what I found most beneficial really surprised me.

You see, I learned things about my wife and her beliefs that I would never have otherwise. I learned how much more we really do have in common because of our faith. I have become much more aware of the power of prayer and have tremendously grown in my ability to pray. I draw upon the

*(Continued on page 5)*

## Closer Relationship *Continued from page 4*

had before. Together we read holy scripture and discuss how it applies to our life, day in and day out. Jesus' words become personal. The other members in my small community have become great friends and exceptional role models. They challenge my thinking and allow me to challenge them. Together we have experienced enormous spiritual growth. These things I expected, but I've also received a few surprises along the way.

The practice I've had talking about things religious in the safe environment of the small church community has given me

the confidence to talk about my faith in the larger world – even in the teachers' lunch room! Membership in a small community has given me the push I needed to get involved in other aspects of my faith. I've helped one of our members provide service to someone she was assisting through the Stephen Ministers. My group has col-

lected money for group donations and religious articles to send to soldiers in Iraq. And now I'm even serving as the chair of our small church communities core team. I know I would not have

Christian.

Perhaps the biggest surprise, however, involved my husband. We had been married for over fifteen years when we joined our small church com-

munity. I thought I knew everything about him by then, but I was wrong. Through our sharing in the small community, we've learned much more about each other. As corny as it sounds, we have become helpmates in each other's spiritual journey. It has definitely strengthened our marriage.

Whereas I originally worried about finding the time to fit two meetings a

month into my busy schedule, I now wonder how I ever functioned without this time to slow down and connect with my faith. I don't think I've completely developed that close relationship with God that I was searching for, but I'm further along the journey than I was nine years ago. I certainly know I'm headed in the right direction. **G**



*Dan and Cheryl Lucia, core team members at St. Dominic, Southington.*

been as involved in my parish as I currently am if it hadn't been for small Christian communities. My children are older now and certainly understand more, but I no longer jump when they catch me reading the bible or meditating. I now see what a great example I'm setting for them. I truly feel that I've become a better person – a better

## The Soft Sell *Continued from page 4*

strength of others in our small church community and find courage and faith in prayer that I have not until now. What surprised me even more that I never would have dreamed of, and in fact it may be hard for you to believe, was how I now felt more prepared for mass. I won't say I come to mass having done all my homework, but I will confess that the Sunday scripture have much more meaning for me. My small community meetings help me better connect my every day life to scripture - simply because we have discussed and shared our beliefs and life experiences earlier in the week at

our meeting.

Oh yeah, and the commercial you hear about "slow down and take time for yourself and God," I found this to really resonate for me. For in spite of a demanding professional schedule, I can rarely think of an occasion when I miss a small community meeting for work reasons. I have come to embrace this priority and the richness it has brought to my life – so much more than missing a meeting in search of putting some additional effort into one more work presentation at the office. The benefits have been enormous when you add

up the many "ah ha's" I have discovered over my several years of involvement. Our experience has also set a working Christian example for our children, one that we are very proud of and I think has further enriched our Christian spirituality as a family.

So that is my story as to why I joined a small church community and why I continue to be involved. I would be happy to further share my small community experience with those who are ready to hear more. So, can you find a reason not to come to a meeting and see for yourself? **G**

# A Book Leads to a Journey

by Albert Lüken



**Editor's note:** *In recent years a number of visitors from Europe have come to the states to learn about the development of small church communities in the*

*United States. A couple of years ago, for instance, the department hosted Andras Koncz (Budapest) from Háló, the Hungarian network for small Christian communities. Late this spring, we had the opportunity to receive a visit from Albert Lüken, a seminarian from the Diocese of Münster in Germany. Since his return home Albert has collected his thoughts on his visit and what he has learned about small communities here in the states.*

I am a 22 year-old seminarian from the Diocese of Münster in Germany. I completed my degree program in April this year and I am now in Rome to begin my theological studies. I spent two months in the United States this past spring (April 21 - June 22) to learn more about small Christian communities and parish life in your country.

It all began around *one* book, *one* idea, almost *one* year ago. "Have you ever heard about small Christian communities?" I had not heard about these communities before. "Read this book," said Kai Reinhold, a priest friend from the Diocese of Essen. He gave me a little book called, **Creating Small Church Communities** by Fr. Art Baranowski. I read it and I was fascinated by the content.

During my studies, I have heard about house churches or house com-

munities in the old church, little communities, who share the Eucharist and the Scripture on a Sunday. I was raised in a Catholic family. I made First Communion, Confirmation and participated in many retreats as a teenager. The questions that all this stirred up in me were: "What does church really mean? What is the center of the church? What is the church telling me?"

Throughout all the centuries and in the first scriptures, it is always the community: a community with Jesus Christ or in the name of Jesus Christ, where he is in the midst. Having read Fr. Art's book, I was really interested to see if this could really work. A small church community, facilitated by lay persons. I had to learn more about this project.

Kai Reinhold encouraged me to learn about small church communities and that was the beginning of a long journey. Without knowing him, I called Fr. Baranowski. I asked if I could visit him and his parish for a few weeks. I also called others on the east coast and in the midwest. There are many rich connections in the Catholic Church, I know now. A seminarian from Kentucky is studying in Münster, where I stayed the last three years. He knows Dominicans in New York. My seminary rector knew someone in Washington, DC. With all these connections, things worked out easily. Suddenly, I had a program for two and a half months. My journey led me first to Fr. Art's parish, St. Christopher, Marysville, Michigan, then to New York, Washington DC, Boston, Hartford and finally to Chicago and its suburbs.

It was amazing to meet so many people willing to help me understand what the modern church can be. It is a little bit like *Facebook*, only in this case, a social network of the world

church; exactly the idea of small church communities.

I was a little bit scared about getting into a deeper contact with Christians in their own parish without knowing them, but after all the phone calls I was calm. I really looked forward to meeting all these people and to stay in the USA.

So, I packed my suitcase and started from my little village, Barssel, in Germany and headed to Marysville, Michigan. An hour after I met Fr. Art, I was meeting with one of the small Christian communities. It was a new group, so it was focused on how to communicate with each other. This was very good for me on my first day in a foreign country. I had learned English, but I certainly was not practicing it every day at home. The three weeks I spent at St. Christopher's were full of these small church community meetings. I got a real insight about the whole experience. From the very beginners, up to the groups which have met for 15 years or more, every time I saw the same thing. There was a special relationship between these people. It was more than just getting together and talking about the Christian faith; there was a deep connection. Everybody knows each other. Especially on Sundays, I could see how many people were sitting next to each other and talking about their families and about their own problems. After the Sunday mass, mostly everybody was standing outside the church, chatting with each other. In Germany, or more exactly, in my home parish, only a few people wait outside for each other.

Small church communities can have a very deep impact on the life of the parish. Small communities connect people from all over the parish, the

young ones and the older ones, poor people and wealthy people, the very educated and immigrants with language problems.

Small church communities show us a new way for the global church. There are many Christians who live a Christian way of life, but they are longing for more. They want to get into a deeper contact with Jesus Christ, and they want to connect their everyday life with the church.

On my journey throughout the U.S., I saw what it means to be a Christian in this modern society. Every parish, whether in New York or in the suburbs of Chicago, invited me to be a full member of their parish during my stay. And that is the spirit of the small Christian community. It is the picture of the big church: everyone belonging to the church and a small church community represents the big global church in the local parish. The small community is in the parish. It is connected to the priests; the priests are connected to the bishop, and the bishop is connected to the Pope in Rome.

A parish cannot stay alive without the priests, but neither can it stay alive without the believers.

Every level must support the other one. And everybody is next to everybody else.

Living in a parish means connecting my own life to the church and because of that to the other people. We are one body and the body cannot say to anybody, "I do not want you!" As the whole body, we have to care for each other and especially for the poor.


A small church community cares about its members; they support each other in difficult times, in illness, maybe in a financial disaster. I was with one group, where a woman was dealing with breast cancer. She had to stay in the hospital for a few weeks. During this time, the small

community members brought food to her family. They took care of the children and supported them in doing their homework for school, while her husband was working. This is really a sign of caring. It expresses a very strong bond. They were building up this body of Christ. While one member of the body was ill, the others cared for her. Without her, the body was not complete and during this time this member of the uncompleted body needed the most special care.

Being a student and having time to travel and experience all these special moments was an opportunity for growth for me during this time I spent in your parishes. It supports me on my way to become a priest and to learn about a new idea of being church, Catholic church. I am very thankful for all people I met and for all who supported me, especially those who hosted me for a certain time. I came as a stranger, but very

soon I was no longer a stranger; I was a member of your parishes.

I am very grateful to Kai Reinhold, who got me interested in small church communities to begin with; to Father Art Baranowski, who hosted me for three weeks and showed me everything about small church communities. He also put me in touch with Bro. Bob Moriarty, who introduced me to a diocesan office supporting small church community development in the parishes, to the beginning of a core team development process in one of the parishes, and the Alliance meeting of core teams in the Archdiocese of Hartford. It was Bro. Bob who also invited me to write this article. I am also grateful to Maryrose Peters in Barrington, IL who hosted me for three weeks and introduced me to many people in Chicago and the suburbs. I have learned a lot. Thank you all very much.

The journey that book started me on continues. 



*The 2008 conference of the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities was hosted by Spirit of Christ Parish in Arvada, CO. Spirit of Christ has more than 800 people in 80 small church communities. l to r: Hartford participants at this summer's NAPRC conference: Fr. Bob Beloin (St. Thomas More Chapel, Yale), Tom Turick (St. Patrick, Collinsville), Fr. Art Baranowski (Archdiocese of Detroit) and Susan and Paul Kozikowski (St. Thomas, Thomaston).*

**Small Christian Communities**

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# WORTH REPEATING

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Fr. Allan Hill  
Immaculate Heart of Mary, Harwinton