

## **Identifying a Core Team: A Pastor Takes the Plunge with the Help of the Diocesan Resource Person**

Pastors often have a general sense that the development of small Christian communities would be a good thing for their parish. At the same time, many hesitate, not sure of just how to go about introducing them to the parish. Some years ago, one such pastor, wondering why he was "afraid to pull the trigger", captured his hesitation by saying, "I know why, I don't want to fail." A few months later, he called me. He had changed his mind and changed his metaphor. "I want to take the plunge," he declared.

He suggested that he would host an evening social at the parish, that I come talk about small communities with the hope that from that evening a few groups would form. I suggested in turn that what was most needed was putting in place some leadership group with which he would work to provide some basic structure of support to promote and develop small church communities as part of an overall effort to strengthen the parish as a whole.

As our conversations developed, I wanted to find an approach that would help him, as well as his parishioners, to feel their way step by step into the possibilities of developing small church communities as basic building blocks for long term parish development. With him in mind then, I designed what has become the ordinary way I now resource pastors wanting to introduce small church communities to their parishes.

This core team identification and formation process essentially involves two sets of two meetings that lead to the selection of a core team. The process is set up for by identifying a wide group of prospectively interested parishioners who might be drawn into this special effort aimed at strengthening the parish as a whole.

The initial step involves the pastor and possibly a few others (associates, deacons, staff members, parishioners) identifying a group of between 40 and 60 parishioners who might be drawn into exploration of his hopes and dreams for strengthening the parish as a whole. The basic criterion for identification of these names is that they be the kind of people, who, if 8 to 10 were ultimately drawn to serve in leadership for the realization of this vision, would make it happen because they are the kind of people who get things done. Secondly, the prospective group of 40-60 has to be half men. Thirdly, included in this group, there must be a significant number of younger adults, men and women, in their late 20s or early 30s, singles or couples. The rationale for this is clear. The effort here is not aimed simply at developing a few more nice small groups for people who want to share. The aim is to develop a long-term approach to strengthening parish as a whole. That being the case small church communities, and the overall effort, has to be developed in a way that is attractive, not just to women over forty, but to men and to younger adults.

Having identified this group of 40-60, the pastor drafts a one-page letter in which he expresses his hopes to deepen the experience of community in the parish and to strengthen the parish as a whole. He invites the addressee, as one he knows cares about the parish, to join with him in an effort to explore some possibilities. He mentions small church communities and me as a resource for this exploration, and then asks for a modest commitment of time. He asks for the addressee to give him two evenings and he names the dates and time for these gatherings. He asks the addressee to respond personally to him by calling the rectory. Each of the 40-60 people previously identified receives an individually addressed, hand-signed letter.

In addition to sending out the letters, it should be noted, an announcement of plans for these meetings is placed in the parish bulletin. The gist of the letter appears in an appropriate format. The letter serves the purpose of reaching out to a number of parishioners with an explicit request for participation. The announcement serves to express a general welcome to others who may be interested in participating.

## The First Set of Two Meetings

The conduct of the first set of two evenings to which people are asked to commit uses the diocesan office person as a resource, but is centered on the initiative of the pastor and those he may initially have associated with him in this effort. Thus, the first session unfolds as follows:

- An icebreaker designed to give the participants a chance to mix it up with their fellow parishioners.
- A welcome by the pastor, an opening prayer; some simple tone-setting reflections, reiterating the gist of his letter, i.e. an expression of hope to find ways to strengthen the parish as a whole and his need to be in conversation with them about this effort.
- Introduction of the diocesan resource person who will open up the exploration by some reflections on parish life today and the contribution small church communities can play in an overall effort to build up the parish. An initial presentation exploring issues of parish life, culture and the need for the recovery of community in both follows. A twenty-minute presentation culminates with two questions for reflection: How are you encouraged by what you are hearing? How are you challenged by what is being said. Several minutes of silence then follows.
- A fifteen-minute break with refreshments.
- Re-gathering of the group, reiteration of the two questions above and a couple of more minutes of silence. The group is then invited to some conversation about the questions in threesomes.
- A second twenty minute presentation follows which is focused on parish vision for drawing ordinary people into helping each other connect life and faith regularly. Two lines of parish development are proposed in support of realizing this vision: 1.) Doing every parish program and activity in a way that: a.) invites people to notice their lives in silence with b.) the aid of an experience based focus question, and c.) the opportunity to speak to one another in a threesome; 2.) The initiation of beginning small groups in a way that might lead them to becoming longer-term small church communities.
- Conversation in threesomes about the possibilities of this vision strengthening this parish.
- A time for feedback and questions.
- The pastor expresses his thoughts in response to the evening, his hope that the vision being explored can make a contribution to their parish. He acknowledges that what he asked of people was a two evening commitment, but expresses the hope that some among the group will be interested in going further in an effort to realize this vision for strengthening the parish.
- One of those collaborating with the pastor, a deacon, a staff member, or parishioner then explains that between this evening and the next gathering, each one present will receive a phone call from the pastor, or one of those working with him on this effort. These people are named. The purpose of the call is to give people an opportunity to offer their thoughts thus far on the issues being explored.
- The pastor thanks those present for their support and participation and expresses his eagerness to gather again with them at the next session. He or one of his collaborators offers a closing prayer.

In between the two meetings then, the telephone calls are placed; specific notes are taken on the calls. The diocesan resource person meets with the pastor and those who may be working with him to explore the kind of feedback that they are receiving.

The second meeting takes place within a week or two or three at the most, of the first gathering. It builds on the first and on the feedback that was received in the phone calls. The second session unfolds as follows:

- An ice breaker that affords another opportunity for parishioners to connect with one another
- A welcome by the pastor, opening prayer, some tone-setting remarks that focus the meeting along the lines originally outlined.
- Reports from the several people who made the phone calls. Without reference to names, an effort is made to give a pretty comprehensive sense of the calls even allowing for a certain repetition.
- Re-introduction of the diocesan resource person. Picking up on the issues, questions and concerns raised in the calls, I recapitulate the basics of the vision and extend it further. The additional remarks go to the issue of strengthening parish for what? The focus here is on the issue of mission.
- Showing a short video developed by a parish to promote small church communities. Using clips from classic movies, computer-generated graphics, this 10-minute video captures the basic vision. It also features several beginning small groups that are just finishing their first phase of being together and looking forward to continuing.
- A fifteen minute break with refreshments
- Re-gathering for some reflection and conversation around the gospel for the upcoming Sunday. The pastor leads and facilitates this experience. He invites people to form themselves into threesomes. He distributes a sheet with a brief commentary on the gospel and several focus questions. He explains the process. He reads the gospel, calls for silence. After a couple of minutes, he invites people into conversation. Following several minutes of conversation, he ties the experience together by inviting people to pray together the Lord's Prayer.
- A fifteen-minute presentation by the diocesan resource person explains the leadership effort needed to promote the proposed approach to strengthening the parish as a whole. An overview of the role of a core team and its tasks is explained.
- The pastor once more expresses his hope that there are some among the assembled who find themselves energized and intrigued by this overall vision. He acknowledges that it is a lot to ask for people to sign on the dotted line as member of the core team at this point. He asks rather for people who find themselves sufficiently drawn to the possibilities of this vision to express themselves by committing to attend two additional sessions that will then result in identifying a core team.
- A form containing two statements, one of which is to be checked off, is distributed to each. The first statement reads: I am interested in being considered for membership on the core team and I am willing to attend two more sessions leading to the selection of the team. The second reads: I am unavailable to serve on the core team. An additional note on the paper invites any additional comment a person wishes to make.
- Time is allowed for people to write. The papers are collected.
- The pastor thanks those gathered for their support and participation in these two evenings. He or one of his collaborators offers a closing prayer.
- Those who are willing to attend the two additional sessions caucus with the pastor for a few minutes to check arrangements for the next two meetings.

### **The Second Set of Two Meetings**

The second set of two meetings is more fluid in their structure than the first set. The dynamics that develop among the participants are allowed to help shape these two meetings. There is, however, a general structure to these meetings. The first of these is structured as follows:

- An icebreaker serves to draw these people into an initial informal interaction with one another.
- The pastor welcomes the group and offers tone-setting remarks that build on the previous meetings.

- The diocesan resource person serves as a facilitator inviting from the participants expressions of why it is that they are willing to explore further their participation in a leadership effort to promote this approach to strengthening the parish. Building on what people say, the diocesan resource person recapitulates the basics of the vision.
- A fifteen-minute break with refreshments.
- The pastor leads the group through a time of reflection and sharing over the gospel of the upcoming Sunday as in the previous session.
- The group engages in a brainstorming session to generate whatever questions members feel they need to ask. The operative question is: What do I need to know to help me decide about serving on a core team? These questions are listed on newsprint. Dealing with these questions in detail, it is explained, will be the focus of the next session
- The pastor expresses his appreciation for the investment participants are making in this conversation along with his hope that 6 to 8 to 10 people will be willing to work with him as members of the core team. He concludes the session with prayer.

The second session in this set of meetings is designed around responding to the issues and questions raised by the group during the previous session. Between the first and second sessions the diocesan resource person organizes the questions into related groupings and plans a response to them in light of the vision as a whole. The second session unfolds generally as follows:

- The pastor welcomes the group and sets the tone for this meeting in the context of his hopes for strengthening the parish as a whole. He leads the group as previously in a time of reflection and sharing over the gospel for the upcoming Sunday.
- The diocesan resource person responds to the questions generated in the last session in related groupings and engages members of the group in clarifying conversation as needed.
- A fifteen-minute break with refreshments.
- Additional conversation around the questions identified as needed.
- A presentation of the basic tasks of the core team is considered.
- A presentation of first steps that a team will take for its own formation.
- The pastor asks for commitments from those in the group who are willing to serve on the core team.
- The newly identified core team sets the time for its first gathering.
- The pastor thanks all who have participated for their support of this effort to explore possibilities of strengthening the parish as a whole. He concluded the meeting with prayer.

This two-stage process has led to the initial establishment of a core team in each of the parishes in which it has been conducted. Some parishes have done better than others with the on-going development of these teams. Some are doing very well, but core teams continue to function at various stages of development in each of the parishes that have experienced this process. The diocesan resource person continues to be available to each of these teams and has served their further development in each case in a variety of ways.

The strength of this process is that it provides both pastors and people the opportunity to feel their way gradually into the possibilities of this overall vision for strengthening parish as a whole. It lays the foundation for that marriage of effort between pastoral leadership and parishioner leadership that offers the best hope for realizing a vision for parish centered on ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly.

Robert K. Moriarty, S.M.  
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## Appendix

### Core Team: Beginning Formation/Implementation Tasks

- Set in place a pattern (frequency/length) for core team meetings. Identify chairperson.
- Do at least a portion of the Come As You Are beginning small group program for the purposes of team building among yourselves and to be able to speak from actual experience as you begin to promote it with parishioners.
- Read and discuss Fr. Art Baranowski's *Creating Small Church Communities: A Plan for Restructuring the Parish and Renewing Catholic Life* (St. Anthony Messenger Press). Also available through the Small Christian Communities Office. Suggestion: Have different members of the team offer a short summary of each chapter prior to discussion of the several questions which are found in each chapter.
- View and discuss the video: *20/20 Vision for the Parish: A Clear Direction for the Future*. (Available from the NAPRC or through the Small Christian Communities Office). A study guide accompanies the video to guide a process of conversation about this three part video.
- Invite Bro. Bob Moriarty, S.M. to do an a mini version of the Called to Be Church workshop (i.e. Friday evening, Saturday morning and afternoon) with you on the basic implementation of this vision for parish.
- Work out a time line for beginning to implement the two structures (1. Doing all programs/activities differently; 2. getting beginning small groups started) for this vision for parish.
- Invite Fr. Bob Beloin to sit down with you to talk over his experience of implementing this vision for parish while he was at St. Barnabas, North Haven.
- Visit Fr. Tom Ptaszynski and Vicky Miller (pastoral staff coordinator for small church communities) and core team at Our Lady of the Lakes, New Milford to see this vision being actively implemented in that parish.
- View and discuss the Joel Barker video: *The Business of Paradigms*. Explore the connections between Barker's application of dealing with paradigm shifts in the business world to the paradigm shift involved in developing this new vision for parish.
- Plan to participate as a full team in the Called to Be Church two and a half day workshop (Thursday evening to Saturday, 3:00pm) the next time it is offered for a group of parishes (at least five) in the archdiocese.

(These several items are presented in an approximate sequence that would be helpful to follow. Local circumstances may call for some adaptation.)