

A Pastoral Approach to Strengthening the Parish as a Whole

(The complete paper more fully develops the several points of this summary and includes a number of amplifying footnotes and critical references.)

The vision proposed in this paper offers itself as a substantive and credible approach to strengthening the parish as a whole. This perspective is meant to stand in contrast to other approaches that might be regarded as "the one and only way to do parish" or "just one program among others."

The parish, not the small church community, is the central focus of this vision. Parish is the ordinary experience of church for most people who are connected to church. The parish in the United States has many accomplishments to its credit. At the same time it faces substantial challenges.

- The parish of programs and activities delivers a great deal of service, but also threatens burnout for priests, members of the pastoral staff and parish leaders.
- The decreasing numbers of available clergy coupled with an increasing Catholic population make it imperative for us to find ever more effective ways to strengthen parish as a whole.
- A major challenge to the parish comes from the culture: the hectic pace of life, the consumerism and individualism which infects so many of us as American Catholics and often influences the way we approach parish.
- At the same time there are indications from within the culture itself that a rugged individualism is not really satisfying and adequate for a full human life. The overwhelming growth of the support group movement in the United States as documented by sociologist of religion, Robert Wuthnow, indicates a strong desire in the majority of Americans to connect with people in a small group experience.
- The recovery of community is one of the principal challenges that faces us in this culture and in our church in this culture.
- We need a compensatory shift in our approach to parish. We need a shift from a one-sided emphasis on the multiplication of programs aimed largely at the delivery of service to individuals as individuals, and the cultivation of an emphasis on the communal, on building up the parish as the corporate body of Christ.
- We need a major focus on parish as parish. Parish is to diocese as family is to society. Parish is the basic unit of diocese. The health of the diocese is directly correlated to the health of its parishes. Parish is not just the sum of the individuals who make it up. The overall strength of the parish as parish depends significantly on the development of the parish communally.

Given this overview of our cultural and ecclesial situation in these United States, the work of the department is not simply focused on the development of small groups to meet individual needs. It is focused rather on an overall effort to strengthen the parish as a whole. In explicit response to the situation of parish in the U.S. socio-cultural situation, the work of the department is focused on helping priests and people to develop parish in a way that draws ordinary people to help each other to connect life and faith regularly. Each phase carries particular meaning:

- Ordinary people: This pastoral initiative is focused not so much on the super-involved and the deeply invested but rather on an approach to the broad base of modestly to minimally involved in a way which meets them where they are and draws them into relationship with one another and so with the parish as a whole.
- Helping Each Other: Our effort in this regard is directed to helping priests and people to focus parish ministry not so much in terms of doing things for people - as on drawing

people to do things with and for each other, i.e., to help each other make connections between faith and life.

- **Connect Life and Faith:** The concern here is to help people to slow down, to notice their lives, to discover God's presence in the midst of the stuff of life and to make stronger connections with the great Tradition of the church – by beginning to look more deeply at their lives through the lens of scripture.
- **Regularly:** In a world whose values so frequently run counter to those of the gospel there is little support for people of faith. Our efforts here are to help develop a system of support for faith and Christian life that makes a sustained evangelizing difference in people's lives and sends them out to make an evangelizing difference in the world around them.

Two Key Structures for Strengthening Parish as a Whole

What qualifies this vision as an approach to strengthening parish as a whole is its focus on the promotion of two key structures for parish. One has to do with an approach to doing everything differently in parish and the other on the development of small church communities.

1.) Doing Everything Differently

This line of parish development pursues the objective of doing the whole range of parish activities in a deliberate effort to make people make an active difference in each other's lives and faith. It implements a specific methodology in the various activities of parish. Whenever people gather, they are offered an experience that offers them:

- Some time of silence to give people a chance to notice their lives.
- An experience-based reflection question often related to scripture.
- An opportunity in a threesome to say something to each other about their lives and faith.
- Some concluding words of prayer that offers the experience to God.

This process of doing things differently is a modest, respectful address to parishioners at large. It is a simple process that is easily introduced at any appropriate point in a given activity. While it can be a meaningful activity whenever done, the long-term benefit comes from the cumulative impact of consistently doing things differently in the whole range of parish activities.

2.) Small Church Communities

The second structure in this approach to strengthening the parish as a whole has to do with a sustained effort to invite people to try a beginning small group experience that has the possibility of growing into a continuing small church community. Small church communities are not isolated self-contained ends in themselves. They are called to be rooted in the parish as living cells of the larger body of Christ, strengthening and building up that body of Christ for its evangelizing mission in the world.

Small church communities are not merely devotional groups or groups focused simply on individual needs. Small church communities can not be one-dimensional. They are called to activate the four dimensions of word, community, worship and witness:

- **Word:** The small church community offers people an on-going opportunity to look at their lives through the lens of God's word and to connect their lives more securely to the great Tradition of the church.

- **Community:** Gathering together on a regular basis creates a setting for mutual support in life and faith. In deepening the ties that bind, men and women of faith (and families) become ever more organically related as "members of one another, one body in Christ"
- **Worship:** There is no vibrant faith without prayer. As members of small Christian communities cultivate a listening disposition in their gatherings, they open themselves more fully personally and communally to listening for/to God. The lectionary-based gathering orients and prepares people to enter more fully into the Eucharistic worship of the church celebrated with the full parish.
- **Witness:** The energy generated in the small church community is meant to spill over to enrich personal and family life and the life and mission of the parish. It is meant to animate people to the accomplishment of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy and the work of justice and peace.

Finally, small church communities are also called to cultivate the Catholic dimensions of connectedness and accountability by being actively linked with one another and to the larger parish through the connection of pastoral facilitators and parish pastoral leadership.

An Approach to Strengthening the Parish as a Whole

Taken together, the two structures of doing everything differently and developing small church communities work in a mutually reinforcing way to realize a vision for parish focused in terms of ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly. Naming this overall effort as a substantive approach to strengthening the parish as a whole then, does not stem from a perspective which anticipates that everyone in a parish will be a member of a small church community, but rather on the complementary development of both dimensions outlined here.

Pope John Paul II, and the U.S. bishops after him, have spoken of small Christian communities as "a source of great hope for the whole Church." Already in our own local church, in the words of our own priests and people, we can see the ground of this hope:

What can a parish offer that does not just duplicate social services and programs available elsewhere? Through small church communities the parish offers people the opportunity to share faith. With pastoral responsibilities increasing, the link with the small Christian community facilitators allows me to have a closer connection to the parishioners' lives.

Fr. Thomas Ptaszynski, Our Lady of the Lakes (New Milford)

Setting aside one hour and a half each week to reflect in small Christian community on the upcoming Sunday scriptures; listening to other members; learning from their wisdom; turning inward to reflect on my life; listening to God's work and hearing my call to go out into the world: This has become a discipline I depend on and which colors everything I do during the week.

Anne Sharkey, Sacred Heart (Southbury)

As a priest I have been blessed in many ways. Being involved in forming a core team for small Christian communities has been one of those blessings. The members of the core team are a blessing to me and our parish of St. Patrick.

Fr. Ronald May, St. Patrick (Collinsville)

Small Christian community has taught me to listen and has given me a greater understanding and appreciation of everyday life and faith. It has also brought me closer to the parish and to say, "Here I am, Lord; use me." At St. Michael's small Christian communities help to make us family, friends - no longer just parishioners in passing.

Harry T. Lawrence, St. Michael (Hartford)

I believe that the heart and soul of any parish family is the small, prayerful communities of faith within that larger community of faith. In my view, none are more vibrant than the small Christian communities within this parish of St. Bernard. More often than not, they are the people who get things done.

Fr. Thomas Flower, St. Bernard (Tarriffville)

As a newcomer to Connecticut and the Catholic faith, small Christian community helped me become acquainted with others who love the Lord and want to work for him, with others who are comfortable in life of prayer and service. Our group has helped us all know we are not alone with our problems and joys. We are all part of a larger picture.

June Pratt, St. Aedan (New Haven)

It is hard to believe that it was only two months ago that 58 people signed up to form small Christian communities at St. Mary's. These groups have already brought forth in concrete ways the love, care and support that was already present. Many of the people involved have expressed how they feel they are growing spiritually, in greater knowledge of themselves and in their desire to reach out to the larger community. We have only just begun.

Fr. Robert Kwiatkowski, St. Mary (Union City)

I've only been to two meetings so far, yet these two have made me stop and reflect on things. A major problem of mine is slowing down and reflecting. Everyday distractions tend to get in the way. And I find that when I do slow down, I concentrate a lot better, understand better and feel closer to God overall. I look forward to going to more meetings and participating more.

Eileen Shea, St. Stephen (Hamden)

While not the be all and end all, this approach to the strengthening of parish as a whole is one proportionate attempt to face the challenges of building up parish in this culture in our time. It takes on the individualism of the culture and calls people into ecclesial communion, a communion which is meant to issue into solidarity with the suffering of the world and active participation in promoting the common good.

The most effective realization of this overall approach stems from a marriage of effort between pastors and people. Neither can achieve it alone. To this end the most important work of the department has to do with the on-going resourcing of priests and parish leaders in the common effort to cultivate these lives of development for the sake of drawing ordinary people into helping each other connect life and faith regularly.

A vision is one thing, implementation is another. There is nothing magic or automatic about this approach to strengthening parish as a whole. Nor is it an all-or-nothing-at-all proposition. It is not a vision that will be realized overnight. It is not a vision that can be imposed. Its effectiveness will over time be determined according to the principle of by their fruit we will know them. (Cf. Matt. 7:20).

The Diocese: A Communion of Communities

This vision for strengthening church is not only focused on building up parish as "a community of communities"; it is also an effort to strengthen the diocese as "a communion of communities." As such, it is an effort to realize ever more effectively the evangelizing mission of this local church to the region of southern New England. This parish-based effort to develop small church communities and the doing of every program and activity differently ultimately serves the cause of building a more relational church for the sake of a more relational world, a world that advances the reign of God.

RKM
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