

## **Parish and Small Church Communities**

*The vast majority of members are deeply satisfied with the experience.*

By Robert K. Moriarty

Like little green shoots, small church communities are emerging all over the Catholic parish landscape. They are one of the more promising pastoral initiatives at work in U.S. parishes today. In an individualistic and consumerist culture, whose spirit in some respects infects the very way we do parish, S.C.C.'s are an appropriate response to the challenges of doing parish in our time. Small church communities, or small Christian communities, as they are also known, represent an effort by harried and tarried American Catholics to reweave or strengthen the ties that bind-to God, to one another and to the larger common good.

Whatever similarities there might be to related efforts in other parts of the world, small church communities are as indigenous to North America as they are elsewhere. Commenting on the global development of S.C.C.'s at the 1999 International Consultation on Small Christian Communities in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Ian Fraser of the Iona Community in Scotland suggested that S.C.C. development might be understood as the result of "the spontaneous combustion of the Holy Spirit all over the world."

People close to small church communities in the U.S. church in recent years have known in their bones that the energy for this movement is located in the parish. The evidence for this is no longer merely anecdotal. Under the auspices of the Loyola Institute for Ministry in New Orleans - and with the assistance of the Lilly Endowment - Bernard Lee, S.M., and colleagues have recently given us the most thorough empirical study of S.C.C.'s in the United States yet available. The data, theological interpretation and pastoral reflections arising from this work, conducted between 1995 and 1998, are now reported in *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (Paulist Press, 2000).

### **Who Belongs and Why**

The research identified 37,000 small Christian communities, of which between 75 percent and 85 percent are parish-connected. Since the original census in 1995, communities continue to be identified. Lee now estimates that there are between 45,000 and 50,000 S.C.C.'s throughout the country. Strikingly, he also reports that 44 percent of the communities identified in the census were three years old or less. S.C.C. development, he notes, shows no sign of peaking.

The communities identified were classified into four categories: general small communities (G.S.C.), 24,000; Hispanic/Latino communities (H/L), 7,500; charismatic communities (Chr.), 4,800; and about 100 small communities either related to Call to Action or identified as eucharistic-centered communities (C.T.A./E.C.C.). Attention here concentrates on the two largest categories, i.e., the essentially parish-connected S.C.C.'s.

The study focused on "that sort of community that meets often enough to create a relational structure that provides a context within which people find their faith and lived experience interacting." Thus, analysis concerned itself with groups that met at least monthly and that engaged in faith sharing, the reading and discussion of Scripture and prayer.

The S.C.C.'s that were studied average in size between 13 and 17 members, with an average community including eight women and five men. The majority of members are middle-aged (over 40), but about 25 percent are between the ages 18 and 39. Over 90 percent of the G.S.C. communities are largely Caucasian. Among all the communities studied, 2 percent are African-American and 20 percent are Hispanic/Latino. Most communities meet weekly or biweekly. With the exception of H/L communities, S.C.C. members are generally more affluent than the general Catholic population. About half are in an annual income bracket of at least \$50,000. Prayer and family are issues of overwhelming importance to S.C.C. members. The vast majority are deeply

satisfied with the experience, and this satisfaction is rooted in the fact that their professed concerns are being addressed.

In contrast to what the study identifies as the general Catholic population's 32 percent weekly participation in the Eucharist, 93 percent of G.S.C. members attend weekly, along with 88 percent of H/L community members. Forty-eight percent regard the S.C.C. experience as a "new way of participating in parish life"; 34 percent suggest it gives them a "new sense of responsibility for parish, neighborhood." S.C.C. members are more likely than non-S.C.C. parishioners to participate in a variety of parish ministries. Commitment to church membership among S.C.C. members is higher than it is for Catholics in general. When asked which way they tilt in making decisions (either toward church teaching or toward experience), G.S.C. and Chr. members are considerably more inclined to lean in the direction of church teaching than is the general Catholic population. On the spectrum from conservative to moderate to liberal on matters both political and religious, there are no glaring differences between members of G.S.C.'s and Catholics at large.

The desire to learn about God and the need for the support of others are the ranking reasons people give for joining a small Christian community. What keeps them in the S.C.C. is the quality of the relationships that develop. In this regard, however, Lee observes that no opposition need be read between community-based motivations and religious desires. The communal setting provides exactly the kind of support needed for engagement with Scripture and the life of prayer.

### **What Small Church Communities Do**

Prayer, Scripture study, faith sharing and spirituality are the four most frequently identified S.C.C. activities. Prayer may be prepared by members in rotation, by the leader or by reliance on the resource materials used for the sharing of Scripture. "Prayer," says Lee, "is directly addressed to God, Jesus or the Spirit and draws on the images, symbols and texts of the Catholic tradition and on members' experiences of God." Prayer unifies the community and strengthens people's bonds to their Catholic heritage. Members' prayer focuses on their lives, families, neighbors and the world.

Faith sharing involves people making efforts to help themselves and one another to establish solid connections between faith and everyday life. "If people do not have regular time with a group that is known and trusted," suggests Lee, "this kind of sharing-this way of creating meaning by which to live-is far less likely to occur." The Sunday Scriptures offer the ordinary lens through which small communities look at their lives and the world. S.C.C. living room conversation does not exhibit itself, says Lee, as "a sustained critical approach to Scripture," but the exposure to biblical images and stories "forms imagination and sparks thinking about S.C.C. members' lives and worlds." Members do exhibit a strong desire to deal with Scripture more deeply.

While spirituality emerged from the study as the fourth most highly ranked S.C.C. activity, members do not address it as an activity distinct from others. Rather, notes Lee, spirituality functions as "the category that captured the intention and tone of all the activities in the group."

### **Two Pastoral Challenges**

The Loyola/Lilly study raises two areas of pastoral concern: the social commitment of S.C.C.'s and leadership formation. As an ecclesial community, the S.C.C. represents a people both gathered and sent. But, observes Lee, the gathering seems to be a lot easier than the sending. On this issue of mission, it should be noted, the particular concern of the study has to do with drawing S.C.C.'s to involve themselves not just in works of mercy, but in systemic issues of justice and peace. While the experience of this pastoral practitioner suggests that S.C.C. members are among the most deeply invested people in the life and mission of the parish, the study's challenge to broaden the missionary agenda is well founded.

The research data give clear indications of positive attitudes, values and concerns among S.C.C.

members with regard to social issues. However, notes Lee, there is not the kind of follow-through that would have them making a real difference in this regard. Eighty percent say that helping others is important; over 50 percent indicate that the environment matters, and 25 percent say that political issues are very important. When asked, though, what is actually done at every meeting, only 8 percent indicate that they are speaking about social concerns on a regular basis. In response, Lee under- lines the need for S.C.C.'s to develop a far more methodologically self-aware and deliberately disciplined process of theological reflection and social analysis."

In addition to developing skills of social analysis and a deeper engagement with Catholic social teaching, however, there is another condition of possibility that needs to be activated. No individual S.C.C. is ordinarily going to be any more effective in affecting systemic issues of justice and peace than any single individual acting alone. If we are to move S.C.C.'s to influence the systemic common good, we must be dealing with S.C.C.'s themselves systemically. We cannot afford to be thinking of the groups singly; we need to think of them as connected multiples. Theologically, ecclesialogically, we must treat them as organically related living cells in the larger body of Christ poised for mission. We need to be imagining networks of S.C.C.'s linked across urban and suburban lines for the sake of evangelizing the culture, for the sake of impacting the common good regionally. To that end, we need to activate the leverage potential inherent in the interconnected nature of parish, deanery and diocesan structures. Ecclesial connectedness for the sake of synergy-this is the name of the game. For the sake of the common good, the sleeping Catholic giant must awake.

As for leadership in S.C.C.'s, the research identifies a pattern of "rotating leadership and revolving responsibility." What underlies this pattern is the ordinary practice of small communities moving from home to home, with the host or hostess of the evening usually facilitating the session. It is not so much formation of individual leaders that concerns Lee, but "forms of organization that address leadership roles." This prescription is on the mark. Just as with the social commitment of S.C.C.'s, dealing with leadership formation calls for a systemic approach.

While a number of national S.C.C. organizations - including Buena Vista and the North American Forum for Small Christian Communities - effectively provide resources for the movement, the proposal of the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities (N.A.P.R.C.), founded by the Rev. Arthur Baranowski of the Archdiocese of Detroit, is particularly helpful in this matter of leadership formation. Its approach to strengthening the parish as a whole operates from a simple vision for parish expressed in terms of "ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly." Implemented along two lines of development, the N.A.P.R.C. approach not only promotes small church communities as basic building blocks for parish; it just as deliberately promotes a particular reflective and relational approach to every parish program and activity. Critical to the N.A.P.R.C. vision is its structure and process for the formation of pastoral facilitators, whose overriding function is to network the S.C.C.'s with one another through the ministry of the pastor for the sake of rooting them in the life and mission of the entire parish. The regular gathering of pastor and pastoral facilitators has precisely to do with offering both support and challenge to S.C.C.'s in each of their constitutive dimensions: word, community, worship and witness.

### **The Pastor and Small Church Communities**

In noting what he describes as a flattened leadership in S.C.C.'s, Lee observes that there is perhaps an otherwise unaccounted for expectation of leadership from the larger parish. This is exactly right. Typically, parish-based small church communities are eager for a strong, active relationship with their pastors.

The insufficiently studied aspect of the Catholic experience of small Christian communities in the U.S. context is the role of the pastor in S.C.C. development. The Loyola/Lilly study's one mention about the role of priests reports reflections from a few priests who speak of the need for priests to learn to let go of the need for control. There is an issue here. However, the larger task is rather

one of helping pastors actively connect with S.C.C.'s. While priests are increasingly discovering the potential of small Christian communities, many stand at a distance from them. They may do so for a variety of reasons. If S.C.C.'s are approached simply as one more nice program for individual personal development, the often already-exhausted pastor is likely to say, "If you want a small Christian community, fine; just don't expect me to be involved."

Just as it is the case that not every member of the parish is going to be-or should be expected to be-a member of a small Christian community, neither is every pastor going to be ready, willing or able to invest himself in S.C.C. development. Many pastors are sensing, however, that our present experience of parish is not as effective as it needs to be. They feel the need for a more dynamic, relational approach to parish. When they imagine S.C.C.'s not as another program but as a systemic way of building a more relational parish, they look for ways to begin. Caught in the hectic pace of parish life, many pastors who are already promoting S.C.C.'s need and are looking for assistance. From priests who have discovered the S.C.C. potential, fellow priests need to hear how the development of parish-based S.C.C.'s has contributed to a deepened sense of personal satisfaction with, and effectiveness in, their pastoral ministry. The diocesan challenge here is to provide priests and parish leaders the sustained support they need by way of vision development and practical resources.

Small church communities are essentially a by-their-fruits-we-will-know-them enterprise. At this juncture, says Lee, "overall S.C.C.'s appear to be making a signal contribution to the movement of the U.S. Catholic Church into the third millennium." Dealing with the implications of the parish-connected character of the vast majority of S.C.C.'s is the key to maximizing that contribution. The little green shoots will thrive best. They "I mature and bear the greatest fruit when they are cultivated through a marriage of effort by pastors and people working intentionally together. S.C.C.'s are a promising development in North American parishes precisely because parishioners themselves are strengthening everyday faith in one another, and in so doing are strengthening the life and mission of the whole parish.



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