



Gatherings

Gatherings...

Recruiting for Small Church Communities



By Mark Homan (St. Patrick, Collinsville)

I am not talking to you today about recruiting because we've got it all figured out. Rather, we have learned from our mistakes. I hope you may learn from them. Then you can make your own mistakes and maybe we can learn from you. [More »](#)

Small Community Happenings...

Called to Be Church Workshop

NAPRC workshop presenters, Fr. Art Baranowski (Archdiocese of Detroit) and Fr. Mike Schneller (Archdiocese of New Orleans) came to Hartford this past Fall to bring the Core Team initial formation process to culmination for three parishes. Teams from Immaculate Heart of Mary (Harwinton), St. Thomas (Southington) and St. Catherine (West Simsbury) participated. They were joined by new Core Team members from parishes that have previously done the workshop.

Alliance Parishes

Parishes that have engaged in the intensive Core Team formation process that culminates in the Called to Be Church Workshop continue to stay in touch with each other. These teams gather three times a year to share experiences and reflect on the vision for parish they are about. The most recent Alliance meeting was held on January 25, 2003. It was hosted by the Core Team at St. Patrick (Collinsville). This meeting was devoted to two themes: reflecting on the global research project on small Christian communities and the formation and support of pastoral facilitators.

Global SCC Research

During 2002 an informal study of small Christian communities was sponsored by the Latin American/North American Church Concerns

Small Church Communities: Why Do We Do What We Do?

Kathy Tippett (St. Gabriel, Milford)

We move today more often than we did a generation ago. We have less stable relationships and experience less control over our lives and the lives of our family. In the midst of it all, we have the good life and the real thing preached to us daily by a consumer society. In our commercial world, it becomes very easy to live day-by-day, just staying on the surface of experience, never questioning the basic assumptions of our society.

[More »](#)

Worth Repeating

To live in community is not a question of option, but one of vocation. Christianity, by its very nature, demands the formation of community.

Archbishop Oscar Romero

Recruiting for Small Church Communities

By Mark Homan
(St. Patrick, Collinsville)

(Editor's note: The reflections that follow were shared with other Core Teams at one of our periodic (three times a year) gatherings of Core Teams. These meetings serve as opportunities for mutual recruiting.)

I am not talking to you today about recruiting because we've got it all figured out. Rather, we have learned from our mistakes. I hope you may learn from them. Then you can make your own mistakes and maybe we can learn from you.

Recruiting is mainly about getting our message out there. At St. Patrick, we did not start out thinking that we could convince people who were not interested in small church communities to join. (Although, prayer and the Holy Spirit may do that.) Instead, our goal was to communicate to people who would be interested once they knew about small communities. There are many people interested in learning more about their faith and how God may be working in their lives. They just don't realize how small church communities will provide exactly what they are seeking.

Getting your message across to groups of interested people is a definition of marketing. A basic marketing course will tell you that a key factor in success is getting your message out in multiple media. Each person will react to different presentations. We have used the following:

- Letter from the pastor describing small church communities and inviting parishioners to join.

join.

- Inserts in the weekly parish bulletin.
- Presentations in church before or after Mass.
- Posters at entrances to church.
- Discussion at coffee hours after Mass.

The most powerful means to market small church communities to prospective members is personal invitation. We have asked each small community member to invite one person to an information night to consider joining. Personal invitation has consistently proven to be the most powerful marketing tool available.

Here are some of the lessons we learned from our mistakes.

Be honest; be clear - In our initial recruiting for small church communities using Come As You Are, a beginning experience for small groups, we asked parishioners to join for six sessions. We did not intend to mislead people, but some felt misled as soon as they realized that Come As You Are is twelve sessions. Our intent was only to ask for a limited commitment initially. So, while the limited beginning commitment is a good idea, we learned that we should let people know that we are asking them to commit to a part of the program with the option to continue.

Offer a view of the future - It is extremely difficult to communicate the small church community vision to all prospective members in a short time. However, it is important that people understand that Come As You Are is just the first phase in the development of a small church community. We lost some members because they did not feel that this first phase did much for them. They felt it did not go deep enough into their faith. If we had explained that this first phase is more for beginning group development, a chance to develop the sense of trust that is needed for faith sharing, we likely would have retained many of these members. That is, after all, what they wanted. And that was what was coming in the later phases.

Maintain multiple Core Team contacts with beginning groups - The responsibility for beginning groups lies with the Core Team. In our first round of recruiting, we learned it was not enough for there to be a Core Team member in the group. We each have slightly different understandings of the small church community vision. We now make sure that more than one Core Team member contacts several members of each group over the early weeks to make sure things are on track and that no issues are arising that are not being addressed. We think we lost a beginning group because issues arose and we were not vigilant enough to address them early.

Keep small church communities in front of the general parishioner - Small church communities are not just another program in the parish. They are part of a different way to be parish. If the only time that small church communities are mentioned is during a recruitment drive, then they will appear to be just one more program. We have developed a small community newsletter that we attempt to have in the parish bulletin quarterly. There is a banner for small church communities that hangs in the front of our church. We have sponsored some general parish activities (Breakfast with Santa, Nature Walk, Stations of the Cross, etc.) that allow us to regularly witness our connection to the larger parish and to mention small communities. This is an area where we can't do too much. The more active small communities are in the parish, the greater the attraction to participate. Clearly, we have identified things that we would do differently given the opportunity to do them over. However, we are not disappointed with the progress that has been made at St. Patrick's. It is just that there is so much we have to offer. We know that there are many parishioners who want to join, but we just have not reached them yet.

Questions for reflection and conversation

When is the last time you invited a fellow parishioner to try a beginning small group experience?

How often do you speak about your small church community experience to fellow parishioners who have not yet tried the experience?

group at the University of Notre Dame and the Center for Mission Research and Study at Maryknoll. The project looked at the global experience of small Christian communities by means of an exchange of letters between 42 specifically chosen communities and through information provided by 14 area coordinators. The communities were located in Australia, Malawi, Chile, El Salvador, India, Tanzania, Ireland, United States, Canada, Mexico, Eastern Europe/Czech Republic, Philippines, Indonesia and Togo. The subsequent analysis identifies similarities and differences among the communities on themes like: prayer, use of scripture, evangelization, service and transformation, as well as issues of gender and age. For a copy of the 8-page report of preliminary findings, contact the office. A set of focus questions for small community conversation about the research findings is also available.

If a curious parishioner asked you what small church communities are all about, what would you say?

[BACK TO TOP ↑](#)

Small Church Communities: Why Do We Do What We Do?

Kathy Tippett (St. Gabriel,
Milford)

We move today more often than we did a generation ago. We have less stable relationships and experience less control over our lives and the lives of our family. In the midst of it all, we have the good life and the real thing preached to us daily by a consumer society. In our commercial world, it becomes very easy to live day-by-day, just staying on the surface of experience, never questioning the basic assumptions of our society.

However, the life style asked of us by Christ and by our church involves a life based on daily reflection. This life style demand is definitely counter-cultural. How can we achieve this life style when most Catholics only experience church for one hour each week?

Somehow, we need to find God in our everyday lives. The way we come together is primary in this search for God. Faith and love are experiences, and the more these experiences are shared, the more we notice God and God's call to be church for one another. This experience can happen best in small groups.

The church has always known that by meeting in small groups, we can significantly support each others' faith and the faith of the larger community. What is unique about small church communities is that we do not remain as mere small groups. We become church at a new and more basic level. It changes the very way we come together to be church for each other and for the world at large.

Small church communities are for all Catholics, not just the super religious types. Our groups are intended to be permanent and to be involved in all activities of the larger church while keeping the parish Eucharist as our unifying experience.

Bringing people together, as God's people on mission is why the parish exists and restructuring into small church communities brings people together better. The vision is rooted in our everyday life as ordinary Catholics. At St. Gabriel (Milford) we develop small communities in three phases:

Phase 1: **Come As You Are** is the beginning experience which brings a group together. This experience helps us establish a sense of belonging to our group. The only requirement is to be willing to be yourself. We learn that God speaks through our everyday experiences. Phase 2: **Praying Alone & Together** focuses on praying both individually and in a group. The discipline of daily prayer is stressed and spending time in prayer between meetings becomes increasingly important. We learn that prayer does not always mean doing all the talking; it can mean just being available to the Lord. Phase 3: **Scripture**, is the phase that really transforms our groups into church by using the Sunday scripture readings to reflect on our lives and sharing faith with one another. The focus questions help us to experience the scripture in a personal way.

Small church communities have all of the characteristics that belong to any human community. They are small enough to allow social interaction on a face-to-face basis. Their members realize that they depend on each other in a spirit of trust and caring. They are people-centered communities in which everyone can be responsible. Small church communities analyze needs, plans for activity and finds its own ministers to meet the needs. Conscious of its Christian mission, the small church community is a community that is opened out in service to all other communities. Its common prayer life is nourished on the Word of God and expressed in the Eucharist Liturgy.