

# Many seek small Christian communities

ST. PAUL, Minn. – In an age of cavernous megachurches, where parishioners sometimes outnumber pastors 2,000 to 1, it can be easy to get lost in the masses, so to speak.

Mounting evidence suggests, however, that a worldwide movement to reclaim the sense of community upon which the church was founded is taking shape. This movement has spawned a new parish model, in which parishioners regularly gather in more intimate groups for prayer and faith-sharing.

Approximately 50 percent of U.S. parishes report having small Christian communities, according to a recent National Pastoral Life Center study.

Attendance at a recent convocation on small Christian communities in St. Paul attested to how widespread this grass-roots phenomenon, which began about three decades ago, has grown.

Catholics from 23 U.S. states and at least nine other countries, including South Korea, Mexico and Tanzania, gathered at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul Aug. 9-12 to share their ideas for organizing and sustaining parish-based small Christian communities.

Father Art Baranowski, founder of the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities, told a packed room that he believes the church today is failing to transform people's lives.

"By and large, I could say that people in parishes do not have a communal way to be transformed by the mind of Christ," he said.

U.S. parishes often focus on implementing more and more programs rather than creating authentic community, the priest said, adding that small Christian communities provide an alternative to the activity-driven parish model.

"Small communities, in addition to the Eucharist on Sunday, ...get people to realize what it means to live the faith every day," Father Baranowski said after his talk.

"Ordinary people help each other do that by speaking from their life experience. That can't happen at Mass on Sunday," he added.

Father Baranowski suggested that parishes interested in starting small Christian communities appoint a core team, including the pastor or his representative, to lead

the effort.

The core team should spend up to a year researching the various programs and resources available. It is vital to plan a course of action before beginning to form groups, he said.

When the core team is ready to implement its plan, there are several ways to encourage participation. "But by and large the most important way of getting people to try a small community is by personal invitation," Father Baranowski said.

Barb Howard, the founding national coordinator of Small Christian Community Connection and coordinator of small Christian communities at Spirit of Christ Catholic Community in Arvada, Colo., offered several tips for parishes interested in starting small Christian communities:

- Introduce people to small groups during Lent. Many publishers and organizations have developed small-group programs and resources designed specifically for the Lenten season.
- Use as many tools as possible to make parishioners aware of small Christian communities. Include information on the parish Web site and in the bulletin, create a newsletter, design a brochure, have the pastor speak about small Christian communities from the pulpit and post a sign-up sheet.
- Create a kit for members of small Christian communities. Include items such as a cross, a compact disc of sacred music, a booklet of Sunday Scripture readings with reflections, a list of prayer rituals suitable for small groups, ideas for outreach, a candle and anything else that might facilitate prayer and faith sharing.
- Organize an event, such as a potluck dinner, a retreat or a movie night, for all of the parish's small groups to come together.
- Set up a small Christian communities resource room at the parish.
- Periodically touch base with small groups. However, Howard cautioned, allow groups to define themselves rather than imposing a structure on them.
- Encourage people participating in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults to join a small Christian community. "Otherwise they'll be walking right out the door they walked in," Howard said.

The history of small Christian communities dates back to the apostles, according to Howard. In fact, St. Paul's letters in the New Testament were addressed to the small Christian communities of his time, she said.

"Small communities are the most effective vehicle of adult formation that we have in

the church,” said Howard. “This is who we are. This is our history. This is where we belong.”