

Creating Small Christian Communities: Introduction

Since the early 20th century, contemporary small Christian communities or small communities of faith have evolved in all parts of the globe. Ian Fraser, author, researcher, and member of the Iona Community in Scotland since 1938, suggests this development of small Christian communities “is the result of the spontaneous combustion of the Holy Spirit all over the world.”

No one can capture or control the “combustion of the Holy Spirit,” so neither can this book offer a readymade program to implement or precise plan to follow. Jose Marins, a Brazilian priest and internationally-known, small-community advisor and speaker, inspires our purpose in his observation that small Christian communities need a minimum of structure and a maximum of life. Our book aims to present potential structures and invite readers to choose the possibilities that will maximize the life of any communities they accompany and animate.

As authors, we bring to this project our experience of many small communities – those with whom Barb has worked in her years as executive director of the U.S. Buena Vista Network, the communities who participated in the international consultations through Notre Dame’s Kellogg Center under Bob Pelton’s leadership, and the many Marianist communities that Jack’s religious order, the Society of Mary, has generated. No perfect formula or program exists. People, parishes, small groups, localities, situations all vary. Every person brings to the work of forming a community diverse experiences, insights, gifts and perceptions. We have gathered wisdom from small Christian communities we know. Those who want to form small Christian communities will need to tailor the processes we outline to fit their own situations.

Small Christian communities (SCCs) form in at least three different ways.

First, parish-based communities. Many parishes initiate and in varying ways give ongoing support to small Christian communities. SCC members worship with the people of the sponsoring parish and contribute to its life. These communities may begin as temporary or seasonal study or faith-sharing groups and use resource materials that the parish designs or chooses. They understand themselves linked to the universal Church as units of the parish. People in some parish-based communities may commit to a long-term relationship, begin to take responsibility for their own life as a community, and develop Church connections beyond the parish, but at the same time stay very connected to parish life.

Second, non-parish-based communities. Most commonly, these communities of faith cross parish boundaries and don’t depend on support from one particular parish. Usually participants return to a chosen parish for Sunday Eucharist and may actively connect with that parish. These groups do not gather for the purpose of building up their parish life; rather they form around inter-parish experiences such as a Cursillo or the Christian

Family Movement or through association with a religious community and its religious charism or spirituality.

Third, communities on the margin. Also a non-parish-based model are communities that gather outside traditional parish structures. Some refer to these groups as “communities on the margins” of traditional church life. They may be ecumenical or cross-congregational. Usually these communities have no desire to connect with a parish as a group.

All these communities share commonalities of faith and structure. We who create and participate in small communities must believe in and listen to one another. We must create opportunities to bond and build community. We must be agents of action rather than objects of action. At the core of each community must be one unalterable truth: that we are of God, doing God’s work and bringing forth God’s kingdom. The concept of small church is still being born, still in the creation stage with the boundless energy and spontaneity of the Spirit very much in charge.

Whatever kinds of community you seek to form, you will benefit from reading all three chapters of this book. In our experience communities share more common characteristics than differences in their vision and practice.

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