

**Small Church Communities: Breathing New Life into the Church**

**Report on the 2009 National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into  
Communities (NAPRC) Conference**

By Xavier Thelakkatt, Belza Ramos, Caroline Adams and Joseph Healey

The National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities (NAPRC) annual national conference was hosted by Our Lady of Mercy Parish, Harborcreek, Pennsylvania (USA) from 23-25 July, 2009. It was in the countryside of Lake Erie where one could see many beautifully landscaped vineyards and inviting wineries.

In a letter addressed to the NAPRC conference participants, Msgr. Gerald T. Richie, Pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Parish, stated, “Small Church Communities (SCCs) have been instrumental in the growth, vibrancy and success of this parish. Over the years, these communities have brought hundreds of people together for social services, educational, formational and spiritual opportunities.” He went on to state, “Friendships have been born and nurtured; bonds of faith, hope and love have been strengthened; holiness has been inspired; outreach has been embraced; and communal worship has been enhanced.” This is the life that SCCs bring to parishes all over the world.

The parish of Our Lady of Mercy had just celebrated its 20th anniversary of having small communities. The communities are very strong in this parish and are called “Small Faith Communities.”<sup>1</sup>

**New Wine in New Wineskins: “We are wineskins of the Church filled with the nourishing and refreshing wine of Christ”**

This conference began with registrations at 2.30 p.m. on Thursday, July 23 and a few pre-conference workshops with dinner at 5.30 p.m. We had an Opening Prayer followed by Welcome and Introductions by Father Art Baranowski, who officially opened the conference. Father Art Baranowski, who is from Detroit, Michigan (USA), is the founder of NAPRC. He spoke on why Small Christian Communities are important to the Church.

One of the most significant accomplishments of the conference was bringing together of nearly 300 lay and religious men and women interested and enthused about Small Christian Communities. There were opportunities for participants to meet and interact with each other

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<sup>1</sup> Around the world many different terms and names are used for this “new way of being church.” Small Christian Communities (SCCs) is the most common “umbrella” term. A background paper for the “International Consultation on Rediscovering Community” at Notre Dame, Indiana, USA in 1991 compiled over 3,000 different names, titles, terms and expressions for SCCs. See pages 7-8 of *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment*. Edited by Joseph Healey and Jeanne Hinton (Orbis Books, 2005 and Paulines Publications Africa, 2006).

so that they could pool their resources in view of this new Pentecost in the Church as a way of life.

We had roundtable discussions after certain talks. We also shared the Word of God and how it relates to our daily lives. We shared how we build trust with one another, giving us the courage and strength we need to breathe New Life of Jesus Christ into our Church. We not only breathe New Life of Jesus in our Church, we also breathe New Life in our homes, workplace, and community and in our international outreach. We become new wineskins so to speak of the “Church filled with the nourishing wine of Jesus Christ.” Our Small Christian (Church) Communities become a way of life, not a movement within our Church.

**Keynote Speaker: Bill Huebsch ([www.ThePastoralCenter.com](http://www.ThePastoralCenter.com))  
The Early Church, Vatican II, and Evangelizing Parishes**

Bill Huebsch is the author of numerous books including *People of God at Prayer*. He gave an overview of Church history from the founding period of Jesus Christ to present day. He stated that in the early church, as the scriptures were being written, our faith was shared by personal witnesses of Jesus’ presence in their lives. From the early centuries the focus has been on the Mass, Baptism, the Diaconate, and the Universal Call to Holiness, that we be ONE in Christ, Ecumenism, and the Catechumenate -- the call to Community Life. The Catholic Church emphasized faith through the structure of the church.

Under Constantine, and the Reformation of the Church, the focus changed to a less personal faith, Baptism with no formation, increasing membership, rapid growth in ever-larger parishes and minimum obligations.

Pope John Paul XXIII and Vatican II introduced a new vision: an ecumenical spirit and scope filled with hope. They called for the return to the spirit of the early Church, a call to holiness for all the baptized, active community liturgies, lay diaconate, adult Christ-centered Church, with conversion the aim, to be known by one’s community with lifelong learning (formation being the aim), which would lead to the transformation of the world.

As noted on Bill’s slide presentation, the turning point of Vatican II was:

- ✠ “Our understanding of grace—a free gift from a loving God, experienced as energy or power, helping us be the persons we are created to be,
- ✠ Turn to the Gospels,
- ✠ And really ALL of the *New Testament*,
- ✠ The power of Community Life,
- ✠ Renewal of Adult Faith Formation.”

(Note: Information taken Bill’s slide presentation -- slides 15-26).

Bill stated that then Catholic Church makes a shift to focusing on lifelong faith formation and the important role Small Christian Communities can play in assisting in the development of this formation. Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul XXIII, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have stated in their writings that Small Christian Communities are the hope for our future church.

He emphasized certain elements that work in a parish and are important to meeting the needs of lifelong faith formation:

- ✚ “Grow Small Communities,
- ✚ Coach Parents to form their own children
- ✚ Focus on the core work of the parish
- ✚ Do sustained pastoral planning”

(Note: Information taken Bill’s slide presentation -- slide 45).

He also noted that the Core Work needs to do the following:

- ✚ “Help people deepen their communion with Christ,
- ✚ Help them grow and sustain the excitement of that communion within their parish,
- ✚ Leading to works of justice and charity,
- ✚ Flowing from and leading to Small Community Life,
- ✚ Then: invite others to deeper communion”

(Note: Information taken Bill’s slide presentation -- slide 53).

He encouraged us to “focus in” on our parishes’ Liturgy, music and devotions; Pastoral Care and Outreach; Retreats and Encounters; Stewardship envelopes and buildings; Formation, Sacramental Preparation and RCIA; and Small Church Community Life. He went on to say that it is important to create a parish with small community life that focuses on theology and vision of the Church, principles developed in our parish reflecting this vision, to include practices and methods, using resources and different programs that will bring the vision of our parish through to fruition.

For more information go to [www.ThePastoralCenter.com](http://www.ThePastoralCenter.com). You can order this power point presentation as well as *Parish Vision 2009* free from this website.

**Workshop: SCCs Global Website—an Exciting Online Experience by Fr. Joseph Healey, MM, (Kenya), Father Xavier Thelakkatt (Minnesota-USA), Belza Ramos (Texas-USA), Caroline Adams (Ohio-USA)**

There were many empowering workshops provided at this conference. The workshops encompassed different aspects of the new vision of the Church. It included two workshops on the SCC Global Website. We presented an exciting interactive online experience of the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, its purpose and use, future plans, and a calendar of SCC events. We shared updates and concrete SCC stories and articles from the six continental sections: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin American, North America and Oceania. We shared practical “how to” tips on navigating our website and information on SCCs Twinning.

The attendees at our workshop participated in our online poll. The poll consisted of the following choices:

The best part of my Small Christian Community is...

- Connected to my parish.
- Friendliness of members.
- Helps me to connect the Bible and everyday life.
- Seeing Jesus Christ in others.
- Healing prayers for members.

Both workshop groups voted for “Helps me connect the Bible and everyday life.” We invite you to go to our website and vote and review the workshop presentation at:

[www.smallchristiancommunities.org](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org)

### **Attendees of the SCCs Global Website, an Exciting Online Experience Workshop**



*Front row: (Left to Right) Glenda, Dan, Joe & Sister  
Back row: Fr. Xavier, Belza, Fr. Joe, Caroline*



*Front row: Margaret, Bruce, Debbie, Fran, Nick  
Back row: Fr. Xavier, Caroline, Fr. Joe, Belza*

### **Father Art Baranowski: Pastors and Pastoral Staffs in a Restructured Parish**

Another empowering workshop was given by Father Baranowski, who is the founder of National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities (NAPRC). He is the pastor of St. Christopher’s Parish in Marysville, Michigan (USA). He discussed how a parish structured into SCCs can lighten the load for the Pastor and Pastoral Staff giving them renewed energy to do the work they are called to do. We are to be an Evangelizing Parish

He stated we are to be “ordinary people helping each other connect everyday life and faith, regularly. As evangelizing parishes of lay people, we help each other find God in our lives because God walks in the lives of each person. The value to our parishes is how the members

help affirm who we are and how God works in our lives. We, as baptized persons, are the Church. We are called to holiness.”

From this workshop we concluded that in our parishes we can help ourselves and others find God in our lives as we:

- ✚ “Break open” The Word of God,
- ✚ Reflect on what The Word of God means to our lives and
- ✚ Share our reflections with one another

Small Christian (Church) Communities offer a special time to get to know Jesus Christ as we break open the word, reflect on how God’s word relates to our lives, and share reflections with one another. Our gatherings help sustain continuous conversion of heart to follow Jesus’ teachings in our life experiences and all are uplifted in the sharing.

The Erie conference was the occasion of the Book Launch of *Akamwani: the Challenges of Bible Sharing in Small Christian Communities* by Sister Rita Ishengoma, STH. The Publishers & Printers is Old East Africa Ltd, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 2009. The book is 132 pages. It costs US \$10 and can be ordered from Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities, 467 Bloomfield Ave. Bloomfield, CT 06002 USA

<http://www.sccquest.org/PDF/ritaishengoma.pdf>

### **National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities takes great care of participants**

The board members of the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities (NAPRC) took great care to provide every individual participant with a great experience of the conference. Accommodations, conveyance, food, etc. were all superb. Most of the credit went to Sister Nancy Fischer of Erie Diocese and her team. Many volunteers from Our Lady of Mercy Parish worked hard behind the scenes to provide lunch, dinners and snacks, transportation from and to the airport, and even hosted some participants in their homes. At the end of the day there was a social with cheese, crackers, and wine tasting. We were able to share more about what Christ was doing in our parishes through Small Christian (Church) Communities. During one of the socials Father Xavier spoke with one of the participants who commented to him, “Wow...the talks we heard today were a shot in the arm for me; how about you?” He responded, “Indeed, you’re right.” He stated, “The socials provided a great networking opportunity for us to meet and learn what others are doing in their parishes, and take this information to share with my parish members.”

### **Victorian Princess Dinner Cruise**

Some participants took part in a Victorian Princess Cruise on Lake Erie on the second day of the conference. It was a beautiful, relaxing tour of the busy shore line. The crew on this cruise served a delicious dinner during the two-hour cruise. Everyone enjoyed the scenic route, dinner and sharing our experiences.



*Caroline and Bruce with representatives from his parish, Sacred Heart, before boarding the cruise.*



*Fr. Joe and Diane enjoying the scenery on the Victorian Princes.*

The city and the lake, both called “Erie” derive their name from the tribe of the same name. The word actually means “raccoon.” This city with 103,000 people has a very sizable Catholic presence.

### **Prayer Sessions: An Added Blessing**

The prayer sessions were beautifully organized with scripture, music and symbols of planting, growing and harvesting. Bishop Donald Trautman from Erie Diocese, Pennsylvania (USA) concluded the conference by celebrating Mass that was attended not only by the participants of the conference, but also by a good number of parishioners. The social following provided an opportunity for the conference participants to meet with parishioners of Our Lady of Mercy. On Saturday, July 25, 2009, at 7:00 p.m., there was a banquet with a lively local sing along musical entertainment that concluded the event.

Many new relationships were started and hopes for a new Pentecost in the Church were rekindled. We offer a big thanks to the earnest efforts of the NAPRC Board and to Our Lady of Mercy Parish for hosting it.

“Small Christian Communities is the way of being Church in the future;” that was the message heard on the hallways. The 2010 Annual Conference is planned for St. Petersburg, Florida (USA) and will be promoted through this website.

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