

New Research on Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the USA

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

1. Shift to the Names/Terms “Small Groups” and “Small Group Ministry” in the USA Catholic Church

A background paper for the “International Consultation on Rediscovering Community” at Notre Dame, Indiana in the USA in December, 1991 compiled over 3,500 different names, titles, terms and expressions for Small Christian Communities (SCCs)/Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) worldwide.¹ New research carried out in 2015 brought the total to over 5,000 names and terms to express the rich diversity of this new way of being/becoming church and its importance worldwide.

After a visit to the San Francisco Bay Area of California, USA in December, 2015 I realized that the term “Small Christian Communities” is not well known or commonly used in America. People are using “Small Groups” rather than Small Christian Communities” as the umbrella term in the USA Catholic Church (but not worldwide) for these 5,000+ groups that we are continuing to study and evaluate based on the original Notre Dame research. The term “small group” appears 374 times and “small groups” appears 228 times in my online Ebook as of 26 July, 2018. The four main patterns during my 2015 visit and research were:

1. Rich diversity of small groups. Many, many names, terms, varieties and experiences.
2. The *Bible* is read and reflected upon in many small groups, but mainly in the style of *Bible* study. Few groups read and reflect on the Gospel of the following Sunday.
3. Optional pastoral style. Most small groups are not part of a structured and prioritized pastoral plan in the parish.
4. The most common small group is the small support group that focuses on one issue (listed alphabetically): alcohol, bereavement, cancer, divorce, drugs, overeating, etc. One classification of small groups is in a religious context with names such as: Small Apostolic Group, Small Church Group, Small Prayer Group, Small Spiritual Group and Small Religious Group.

¹ Joseph Healey, “Evolving A World Church from the Bottom Up: An Analysis and Interpretation of 3,500 Different Names, Titles, Terms, Expressions, Descriptions and Meanings for and about Small Christian Communities/Basic Christian Communities in the World with 11 Case Studies From Six Continents,” Background Paper for the International Consultation on “Rediscovering Community -- International Perspectives,” University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, USA, 8-12 December, 1991, Notre Dame: Photocopied Paper, 33 pages. Sections of this paper were published in Agatha Radoli, (ed.), *How Local is the Local Church? Small Christian Communities and Church in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, *Spearhead* 126-128, 1993. pp. 59-103 and the *Newsletter of Latin American/North American Church Concerns (LANACC)*.

In a research visit to the USA in Summer, 2018 I continued to see this same pattern. As I traveled around the USA and visited parishes I met various SCCs often called by other names that are a version of the name/term “small group”. Here are some characteristics:

1. Most do not meet during the summer months.
2. Some meet every two weeks, not every week.
3. The biggest competitor to successful SCCs is the calendar. Active Catholics live busy, busy lives.
4. Most do not have lectionary-based faith sharing based on the gospel of the following Sunday. They use prayer and *Bible* resource materials and modules produced by various Christian movements and centers.
5. The vast majority are not geographical (the church in the local neighborhood) but meet on a convenient day and place (traveling especially by car).
6. Building up mutual trust in a SCC is a slow process. It involves both openness to vulnerability and the amount of quality time/bonding time together depending on the type of community. Predictability needs time.
7. It is crucial for the pastor and priest staff to understand the vision and practice of SCCs.

During a visit to Minneapolis and St Paul, Minnesota, USA in May and June, 2018, I learned that the USA Catholic Church is continuing to shift more and more to Small Groups and Small Group Ministry. This is largely due to the growth and influence of three movements involved in campus ministry and parishes – Evangelical Catholic (EC), Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) and St. Paul Outreach.² I discussed campus ministry with representatives of these three organizations at the Catholic Campus Ministry Association (CCMA) Convention.

American layman Joshua Dart, Ministry Consultant of Evangelical Catholic (EC) stated: “The name ‘small group’ is an easy, low-key ‘entry point’ into Christianity for those who are not Catholic, for those who have drifted away from the faith, for the Nones, etc.”³ This is part of EC’s evangelizing strategy to reach out to the peripheries. On the Catholic parish level, an intern at Church of the Nativity Parish in Timonium, Maryland stated that “‘small groups’ are neutral and as accessible as possible.”

American laywoman Heidi Schlumpf’s article on the CCMA Convention was entitled “Campus Ministry Group Tries to Balance Different Needs, Agendas.”⁴ It presented two models/approaches to Catholic campus ministry in the USA:

1. Evangelical Catholic/Evangelical Voice/Catholic Evangelization Model: More traditional Catholic starting with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Emphasis

² These are called para-church organizations.

³ Joshua Dart, conversation with the author, St. Paul, Minnesota, 31 May, 2018.

⁴ The full article was published in the 11 June, 2018 issue of *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR), retrieved on 26 July, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/campus-ministry-group-tries-balance-different-needs-agendas>

on the new evangelization. More narrowly focused. Mission to serve Catholic students. Influence of Evangelical Protestants. Small groups are popular.

2. Accompaniment Model: Catholic identity in a pluralistic society. More broadly focused. Mission to serve all students. Service or justice work as an on-ramp to bring students into campus ministry.

As a concrete example of this shift in language, the workshop of American Sister Terry Ricard, OP, President and Executive Director of RENEW International, at the Spring Archdiocesan Formation Day of the Archdiocese of St Paul and Minneapolis on 24 May, 2018 was entitled “Parish as a Community of Communities: Six Key Principles for Growing Small Group Ministry.”

Another presentation at this Formation Day was by Argentinian-American laywoman Viviana Sotro. She described the experience of St. Stephen, a multicultural parish in Minneapolis with many Latinos, many Somalis and English-speaking people. 10 years ago the neighborhood was changing, the parish roster was shrinking and closure was a possibility. Then the parish came back to life in 2016 through a new approach to evangelization. This included forming “cells” — small groups that encourage faith formation and a relationship with Christ. These cells have helped families heal and strengthened the social and secular networks built on the foundation of parish life.⁵

A notable exception to the small groups trend was the [St. Charles Lwanga Swahili Community in St. Alphonsus Parish](#),⁶ Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis⁷, Minnesota, USA that offers an interesting Case Study of responding to the signs of the times. The community was started in 2010 by Kenyan Catholics who wanted to continue in the USA the SCCs experience of church that they enjoyed and appreciated growing up and living in Kenya. These African Catholics who had immigrated to the USA⁸ wanted to continue to live their community values (religious

⁵ See Melenie Soucheray, “Spring Formation Day to Spotlight Evangelization, Community,” *The Catholic Spirit*, 2 May, 2018, *The Catholic Spirit* Website, retrieved 31 July, 2018, <http://thecatholicspirit.com/news/local-news/spring-formation-day-to-spotlight-evangelization-community>

⁶ See Matthew Davis, “Swahili-speaking Catholics Hope to Draw Fellow Africans Back to the Church,” *The Catholic Spirit*, 7 August, 2017, *The Catholic Spirit* Website, retrieved 31 July, 2018, <http://thecatholicspirit.com/news/local-news/swahili-speaking-catholics-hope-draw-fellow-africans-back-church>

⁷ Based on conversions with Geoffrey Korir, Loice Sigei, Margaret Nyoike and Stella Nduta in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota from 23 to 29 May, 2018.

⁸ These African Americans are part of the “New Immigrants” that include Filipinos, Hispanics, South Koreans and Vietnamese who bring their community and family values to the USA and want to continue the SCCs from their homelands. Multicultural parishes are booming. Christ Cathedral Parish in Orange Diocese, California has Sunday masses in Chinese, Spanish (four masses) and Vietnamese (three masses) in addition to English masses. The SCCs use many languages. As an example, one Filipino American woman said that she participates in a Tagalog-speaking Small Group in her parish in Orange Diocese.

and social) from their African homelands. St. Alphonsus Parish has provided a home for these Swahili-speaking Kenyan Catholics to foster unity and community.

This community of perhaps 150 people of different ethnic groups in Kenya mainly Kikuyu and Gusii now has a monthly mass in Swahili in St. Alphonsus Parish sometimes followed by a meal and six geographical SCCs (Saints Francis of Assisi, Joseph the Worker, Kizito, Our Lady of Fatima, Teresa of Calcutta and Vincent) that meet monthly in their homes for prayer, Rosary and Gospel reflection (either the Gospel of the previous or following Sunday). One SCC animates the monthly community Swahili mass.

There is an active Women's SCC that meets one Saturday a month, the day before the Swahili Mass, in the homes of members for prayer, songs, the Rosary and *Bible* Sharing (one woman reads her favorite *Bible* Passage and reflects on its meaning in her life). The SCC has two retreats a year. The community has a Men's SCC that meets occasionally for social and fundraising activities.

Active WhatsApp groups (both the whole community and of each SCC) and an Email Mailing List connect all the members. The community provides support for children's education, baptisms, weddings, baby showers and funerals. The community has a Benevolent Fund with a Bank Account to provide financial support for members who have lost loved ones. There is a Coordinating Committee of the Chairperson, Secretary and the Leaders of the six SCCs.

An ongoing challenge is handing over leadership. The general guideline worldwide is that the chairperson can have two terms of three years – a total of six years. Term limits should be observed for the health and growth of the SCC.

These above findings were confirmed in a visit to the Los Angeles Archdiocese, California, USA area in the first half of July, 2018. When I asked American Deacon Fred Rose of [American Martyrs Parish](#) in Manhattan Beach if there are Small Christian Communities, he commented, “nothing is small in California.”⁹

One interesting small group (not called a SCC) in the American Martyrs Parish in Manhattan Beach, California, USA is called “Sunday Readings in Context” that meets every Wednesday from 7:30—9 p.m. Ideally the Sunday readings should be read and reflected on in the context of the lectionary cycle and the liturgical season. For example, the five 17th to 21st Sundays in Ordinary Time, Year B (29 July, 2018 to 26 August, 2018) use consecutive readings from John 6 about Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist (the bread of life). They should be understood as a unit.

Context is a very important term in growing SCCs. One of the five choices in the every two months Poll on the SCCs Website for July-August, 2018 is “Adapts to the local context.” <http://smallchristiancommunities.org>

This parish and other parishes in Los Angeles have many active small groups (listed alphabetically): AA, Al-Anon, Altar Society, Alzheimer Caregiver, Beginning Again -- Separated or Divorced, Bereavement, *Bible* Studies, Contemplative Prayer, Couples for Christ, Daily Rosary, Food Pantry, Eucharistic Adoration, Legion of Mary, LGBTQ

⁹ Fred Rose, conversation with the author, Manhattan Beach, California, 1 July, 2018.

Community, LinC, Moms with Tots, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Project Rachel, Rosary for the Unborn, Saturday Blessings (helping the homeless), Seniors, Singles for Christ, Silent Meditation and Twenties and Thirties.

While the *Bible* is used in different small groups, emphasis on being lectionary-based Catholics especially using the Gospel of the following Sunday is very rare. When I presented our research that 95% of American Catholics do not read the Gospel before going into church on Sunday morning, one Catholic layperson said, “That figure is low. It is more like 98%.”

Among the parishes that I visited a striking exception is [St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church](#) in Yorba Linda, Orange Diocese (in the Orange County area south of Los Angeles) that has 26 active SCCs led by well-trained facilitators. It is a very good example of “best practices”¹⁰ in Catholic parishes in the USA. The only feature missing is growing successful Young Adult Small Christian Communities (YASCCS). These specific small communities come and go based on the active Catholic young adults in the parish at a particular time. These YASCCS are hard to sustain on a permanent basis.

Over many years this parish tried different spiritual and pastoral renewal programs such as RENEW, Disciples in Mission and Generations of Faith that focus on the small groups model. But these programs were introduced from the outside, for example, from the Pastoral Center of Orange Diocese, and never fully owned by the local Catholic parishioners. So, the small groups slowly fizzled out after the renewal programs were over. In 2010 a committed SCCs core team within the parish designed and proposed a new Small Christian Communities ministry from the grassroots up to Catholics in the parish who wanted something more than just Sunday Mass and who were interested in growing deeper in their faith and community. The invitation on the parish website states:

This ministry is made up of over 300 parishioners, who have a desire to understand more about our faith, how it affects our daily life, and all aspects of Christian Community Life. We meet to break open the readings of the upcoming Sunday and prepare ourselves to embrace them at Mass. We meet in groups of 10 --12 people, in one's home, weekly or bi-weekly. Meetings, including social time, last about two hours. Friendships develop that last a lifetime. If our Lord is calling you to spread your wings and move closer to him, consider SCC your path to achieving this goal.¹¹

¹⁰ This term is widely used especially in business circles referring to best management practices or actions. It can also refer to best pastoral practices, best spiritual practices, etc. it is used more and more in relation to SCCs. The blurb on Amazon for Kevin Ahern and Christopher Derige Malano, (eds.), *God's Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018 says: “An examination of the power and potential of Small Christian Communities for Catholic college students, this book offers case studies of best practices and practical tools to create effective communities for young adults, both within and beyond academic settings.”

¹¹ Small Christian Communities, St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church Website, retrieved on 22 July, 2018, <https://smdpyl.org/small-christian-communities>

A key is flexibility. A parishioner in St. Martin de Porres can join a SCC in one of the seven geographical zones in the parish (very important because of the long driving time in California) or a special interest/shared interest small community such as (listed alphabetically): divorced/widows, empty nesters, moms-of-toddlers, newly married couples, young adults and seniors. “A SCC is intended to be a small church, providing not just faith sharing discussion, but a group of friends who support each other, pray together, study their faith and reach out to others in need. The important thing is that the group functions as a spiritual unit, much like a family.”¹² Presently the SCCs use the commentary in the biblical resource *Insights*.

Mark Jablonski, one of the SCCs Core Team Facilitators, gives this testimonial:

In the eight years we have been in our SCC my wife Kris and I have come to experience a new source of strength and comfort in our lives. Our SCC has taught us how much we value our parish community and the support they provide us. We have come to appreciate our meetings as a time when we can slow down, breathe in God’s spirit and share how the gospel applies to our lives. When we come together as “big church” each Sunday at mass, the experience is even more personal and intimate because of the time we have taken in reflecting on the readings. As one of our members has said, SCCs are “soup of the soul.”¹³

Altogether there are 62 ministries in the parish including (listed alphabetically): bereavement (Grief Support), Grace Women’s Group, Men’s Group and WINGS (Women IN God's Spirit).

While in the Los Angeles I read to Catholic friends a section of a Pastoral Letter of retired American Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles Archdiocese written in 2000. It describes an imaginary parish in the future in Los Angeles Archdiocese, California:

The readings for the coming Sunday are reflected upon in all groups and meetings in the parish, as well as in the 25 Small Christian Communities scattered throughout the many blocks¹⁴ which make up St. Leo Parish. Scripture study and faith sharing takes place in various groups throughout the parish during the week and strengthens the identity of St. Leo Parish as a communion of communities. Thus the people called together by the Word come to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday having already reflected at length

¹² “Overview” of the *Small Christian Communities Facilitator’s Guide*, Yorba Linda, California: privately printed, 2017.

¹³ Mark Jablonski, “Pulpit Appeal -- Talk on SCCs” at St. Martin de Porres Parish masses, 2018.

¹⁴ The word “block” has many meanings in English. A city block is the smallest area that is surrounded by streets. A Block Party or a Street Party is a secular/civic social event of neighbors that is very similar to a neighborhood SCC party. It expresses neighborliness and fellowship. In the Catholic context it is the “Church in the Neighborhood.”

on the readings. They are prepared for the liturgy and more deeply bonded with other members of the community who have likewise been washed in the Word throughout the week.¹⁵

Now 18 years later, everyone said this scenario has not happened yet. One Catholic laywoman said, “It is still a dream in process.”

In the Los Angeles area I visited various evangelical and Pentecostal Churches including a campus of Saddleback Church, an evangelical megachurch in Lake Forest and the Eastside Non-denomination Christian Church in Anaheim. These churches have been successful in attracting young people through a combination of lively music, social activities and outreach programs. The activities and programs include small groups, internships, retreats, weekends, hiking and service trips. While their religious services were dynamic, the focus was on the minister’s sermon that follows a four-week theme or topic, not the lectionary of the Christian liturgical cycle. But I missed the Eucharist that is at the heart of the Catholic mass and Catholic faith.

Our recent research shows a clear pattern that distinguishes between the

Small Church Community Model of Church:

1. From the bottom up, from the grassroots up.
2. Not a program or project in the parish, but a way of life.
3. The weekly *Bible* Sharing/Reflections based on the Gospel of the following Sunday and the weekly pastoral and social outreach are coordinated by the SCCs member themselves.
4. Part of the official structure, leadership, ministry and life of the parish.
5. Central “place” of ecclesial identity, ecclesial life, ministry and mission.

Small Group Model of Church:

1. From the top down.
2. Often uses the word and concept of the “cell.”
3. Use the *Bible*, but not weekly *Bible* Sharing/Reflections based on the Gospel of the following Sunday.
4. Weekly meetings often use a video based on the pastor’s sermon of the previous Sunday. See examples such as the Rick Warren approach and the Systematic Integral New Evangelization (SINE) program.
5. Optional. One of the many pastoral ministries in the parish.

While the terms “Small Groups” and “Small Group Ministry” are clearly popular in the USA, the situation is quite different in other continents in the world. For example, in Eastern

¹⁵ *As I Have Done for You: A Pastoral Letter on Ministry*, 20 April, 2000, retrieved on the Los Angeles Archdiocese Website on 26 July, 2018, <http://www.la-archdiocese.org/cardinal/Pages/letters.aspx>

Africa¹⁶ where I serve in mission, we prefer the full term “Small Christian Community” for two reasons:

1. “Christian” gives the community a Christian identity or focus. See also “Basic Christian Community” and “Base Christian Community.” This is similar to using the ecclesial word “Church” as in “Small Church Community” (see the experience of Hartford Archdiocese, Connecticut, Yale University, etc.) and the word “Ecclesial” (as in “Small Ecclesial Community”). See also the experience of Latin America that uses widely “Base Ecclesial Community.” The official name in Spanish is *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEBs). See also the experience of Philippines that uses widely “Basic Ecclesial Community.”

2. “Community” gives the name an African cultural values identity. Also worldwide it is pointed out that “belonging leads to believing.” The experience of belonging connects better with the term “community” rather than with the term “group.”

Most SCCs in Eastern Africa read the Gospel of the following Sunday in the middle of the week and connect it to their daily lives to prepare for mass on the following Sunday. We call this experience “lectionary-based faith sharing.”

We should celebrate the richness and diversity of these different SCCs Models of Church.

2. Campus Ministry and Reaching Out to Youth and Young Adults

A visit to Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, one of the 28 Jesuit universities in the USA, in July, 2018 confirmed earlier research that Christian Life Communities (CLCs) – the Jesuit name for Small Christian Communities – are strong on many Jesuit college campuses.¹⁷

But after graduation many Catholic young adults do not find a “home” in parishes and religious organizations. One commentator asked, “What is the traction point/meeting point

¹⁶ See Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press Double *Spearhead* Nos. 199-200 (Print Version 2012 and 1st Reprint 2014). 163 pages. The Online Digital Version, regularly revised and updated from the 2012 print version, is available as a free, online Ebook containing 1,048 pages as of 1 August, 2018 on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website:

<http://smallchristiancommunities.org/building-the-church-as-family-of-god-evaluation-of-small-christian-communities-in-eastern-africa-2/>

http://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Build_new.pdf

On sale on Amazon as an Ebook (Kindle Edition and other digital formats) and as a Print on Demand (POD) paperback in two volumes.

¹⁷ See Part III, Chapter 8 – “The Christian Life Communities at Boston College” by Christine Cichello – in Kevin Ahern and Christopher Derige Malano, (eds.), *God’s Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018.

for Young Adults? What is the glue that holds young people together?” One Youth Minister said if he knew the answer he would be a genius.

In my trips I met many young people who are searching. One college student told me she was a devout Catholic who went to a Catholic High School. She began to participate in Sunday Mass in her freshman year at Michigan State University. Then she began to “drift” and didn’t find mass that interesting. She joined an Evangelical Church on campus that had lively singing, a band and entertaining sermons. But after a few months she felt something was missing. She had an unfulfilled yearning, desire, hunger for something more. Finally, she discovered that she really missed the Eucharist at the Catholic Mass. So, she returned to the Catholic Church on campus and now feels very nourished by receiving Christ every Sunday in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

In our research on young people, both youth and youth adults, we continue to ask the challenging questions like “After Confirmation, What?” and “After College What? A constant challenge is to figure out how to connect with high school and college aged young people.

What are some practical solutions? One informal study shows that teenagers who have just been confirmed are more likely to continue to participate in Sunday Mass if their parents set an example of being active Catholics and make Sunday Mass a priority. American bishop Arthur Serratelli, the bishop of Paterson Diocese, New Jersey, USA says that a key is to keep the newly confirmed active in parish ministry like teaching religion to younger children.¹⁸ One wise person commented about Youth and Young Adult Ministry, “get the pretty girls to come and the boys will follow.”

Various surveys worldwide indicate that young people are attracted by:

1. Special Gatherings such as: World/National/Diocesan Youth Days; special diocesan and parish masses, retreats and meetings; *Encuentro* (Spanish for “Encounter”¹⁹)-style events; festivals; and jamborees.
2. Pilgrimages.
3. Service and outreach programs and projects.
4. Rallying around causes/demonstrations/marches/protests such as: immigration, gun control, fair trade goods, women’s rights, equality and inclusiveness, etc.
5. Forums/Gatherings (physical and online) -- especially in a safe, peer group setting -- where young people can have faith sharing experiences connected to daily life.

What is ahead? *We create the path by walking.*

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¹⁸ Arthur Serratelli, conversation with the author, Morristown, New Jersey, 4 June. 2018.

¹⁹ *Encuentro* has now entered the English language as an “exciting and dynamic face-to-face encounter or event” – very popular with young people.

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