

# Small Faith Sharing Groups: Searching for Better Models on USA College Campuses

By Joseph G. Healey

In late November, 2015 I journeyed to the sunny, palm tree-lined campus of Santa Clara University in California, USA in hopes of seeing the future of the Catholic Church. I wasn't disappointed.

That evening I participated in a meeting of a small group of students on campus and listened as they eagerly explored questions about God, their faith, and its relevance to their everyday lives. The fact that exams were starting the next day posed no deterrent to this weekly gathering of undergraduates who, judging from their sincerity and candor, took their religion quite seriously. As one young woman earnestly told the group, she needed this period of prayer, reflection and faith-sharing to “ground her” for the intellectual challenge and pressure she knew awaited her in the busy exam days ahead. Her fellow students nodded in knowing appreciation.

This determined band is one of 30 groups at Santa Clara known as Christian Life Communities (or CLCs for short), each consisting of seven to ten students who meet one night during the week. Sessions are led by a senior-year facilitator and range in scope from sharing their highs and lows of the previous week to a breathing meditation, and from drawing an image of God to *Lectio Divina*. The principle of *finding God in all things* is woven through every discussion and activity.

Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school of 8,800 at the scenic southern tip of San Francisco Bay, is not alone in this targeted venture. The intimate tableaux of Catholic students around a table for an hour or two of communal reflection is repeated on other campuses across the country, from Yale, Boston College and Georgetown to Princeton, Stanford and Notre Dame. It's an admittedly modest movement that goes under a variety of names: Small Faith Sharing Groups, Campus RENEW Groups, Small Christian Communities, Bible Study Groups, Small Ecumenical Communities, and more.

But as I observed firsthand during my travels to ten campuses last summer and fall, numbers are unimportant. Small Faith Sharing Groups by any name constitute a grassroots effort whose success the Catholic Church in America can hardly afford to ignore if it holds any aspirations of remaining relevant to the lives of millions of young adults. Indeed, the steady and alarming drift of not just young people but members of all ages away from the institutionalized Catholic Church, coupled with the crisis-level shortage of priests to oversee this fraying system, makes it clearer than ever that the Church needs to come up with better models.

## European and Global South Origins

Small Faith Sharing Groups are hardly a new phenomenon. Their European roots can be traced to the Sodalties (the forerunner of CLCs) and Specialized Catholic Action

movements embracing young and adult workers (Young Christian Workers or YCW), students (Young Christian Students or YCS) and IMCS-Pax Romana as well as the Christian Family Movement or CFM. One recalls the dynamic influence of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and how the see-judge-act method is central to the reflection process in SCCs.

In Eastern Africa, where I've served as an American Maryknoll missionary priest since 1968, they've become the pastoral lifeblood of the Christian community over the past 40 years, as they also have in parts of South America (especially Brazil) and Asia (especially Philippines and South Korea). The springboard for Small Christian Communities or SCCs as they are commonly called in Eastern Africa) was the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Though not specifically mentioned in the council's documents, SCCs arose from a desire to put the communion ecclesiology and teachings of Vatican II (the awakening of the church as the "People of God") into practice. The German Jesuit theologian Father Karl Rahner, SJ, wrote at the time, "The Church in the future will be one built from below by basic communities as a result of free initiative and association. We should make every effort not to hold up this development, but to promote it and direct it on the right lines."

Fr. Rahner's prophecy came to pass in Eastern Africa which played a pioneering role in developing Small Christian Communities as a vital new way of "living" the Church. It was an unapologetic way of saying the traditional notion of the Church as a large, anonymous parish where people go once a week for an hour-long service, then retreat to their homes and private activities, was inadequate for many. Instead, SCCs became the core of parish life in the African dioceses. Today, there are over 180,000 SCCs in the nine countries of Eastern Africa (Tanzania has over 60,000 and Kenya over 45,000). SCCs are not some disaffected, breakaway faction of the Church, but an integral part of it, enjoying the full support of the Catholic bishops. Groups consist of between 10 to 15 people (they keep size in check by branching off into new communities) that meet weekly, usually in private homes in the neighborhood though sometimes in parish, school or other settings. They are small enough to be personal but large enough to satisfy members' varied gifts, tastes and needs. They interact with other Small Christian Communities every day, not just on Sundays. For many of us in Eastern Africa, they are a way of life.

As Tanzanian theologian Father Laurenti Magesa has so aptly pointed out, SCCs are "the root from which the wider church emerges. Without them, the broader, or 'catholic,' church cannot be realized in the manner that Pope Francis describes in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*."

### **Taking Hold on U.S. Campuses**

Given my adopted country Kenya's rich history with Small Christian Communities and my own involvement with Youth Small Christian Communities, or YSCCs for short, at Eastern African universities and colleges, I was excited about sharing my experiences with my young Catholic brothers and sisters in America. As I began my campus tour, however, my mission assumed an even more urgent focus: what could I learn and bring back to Africa from this dynamic campus ministry model taking root on U.S. soil.

Saint Thomas More Chapel and Center at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, afforded me a lode of material. The 14 Small Faith Communities are an integral part of the spiritual and pastoral ministry at Yale. They were described to me by students as a

powerful vehicle for their faith formation and for opportunities aimed at spiritual learning, prayer, mutual support, shared experience of Christian living and service to the Church and the community.

Groups of five to 12 students assemble on any given evening of the week in seminar rooms at the Thomas E. Golden Jr. Center. Following a welcome by the group leader and an opening prayer, members pore over readings for the coming Sunday's celebration of the Eucharist. Sometimes the conversation veers to physics or foreign policy (after all, this is Yale!), but by the end of the evening participants are animatedly discussing how to put their faith into action. Afterwards, the leader prepares a short summary and gives it to the chaplains who answer any outstanding questions or incorporate the group's insights into the Sunday homily. I found the evening's format – reading and reflecting in advance on the Scriptures – particularly laudable since it puts members in a better position to appreciate and relate to the Gospel at Sunday Mass.

These small groups are closely related to a novel program known as ESTEEM (for Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission) launched in 2011 with valuable input from the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management. It is designed as a way to harness the intelligence and unbridled energy of young people on behalf of the Church. In the course of creating its groundbreaking program, ESTEEM was painfully aware of the exodus of young Catholics – some of them potential leaders – from the Church. ESTEEM is today active on 11 campuses from coast to coast where the program's meetings, retreats, seminars and fieldwork are linked to strong campus ministry programs.

As my visits would soon confirm, each campus has inspired a different faith sharing model. Georgetown University uses Campus RENEW sponsored by RENEW International as part of its young adult outreach and evangelization programs. Georgetown President John DeGioia commented that “in our RENEW faith sharing groups on campus our Catholic students are so grateful for the opportunity to deepen their faith through discussion with fellow participants.”

At Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, the cluster of seven small faith groups is driven by a campus ministry known as Encounter Christ. This ministry is coordinated by Evangelical Catholic, a program that responds to the Church's call for a new evangelization. The spirit of that program was best captured by a freshman I met, Carlyne Manion, who said that amid an outpouring of extracurricular activities available to her at Stanford she chose a Small Faith Group to deepen her faith and Catholic identity on campus. As a way of enriching this experience at the Thursday night meetings she attends, sometimes participants write on a slip of paper a probing question about their faith. These slips are drawn randomly from a hat and discussed in no holds barred style by the entire group. Aside from a better understanding of her spirituality, Carlyne says she has developed from her small group experience close and meaningful relationships with other members. They even study together in the Catholic community center “space” on campus.

### **Small Groups as a Model for Change**

After months of interviews and attending meetings with these young adult ambassadors for Small Faith Sharing Groups, I was faced with the unavoidable question: *After college, what?* Following graduation, how can these students find a similarly rewarding

and nurturing experience in the parishes or other pastoral or spiritual settings to which they return? It's a question with profound implications for the entire Catholic Church in America given the fact young adults comprise approximately 40 percent of its population.

The answer is not encouraging. A large number of Catholic men and women graduating from institutions of higher learning are not finding a good fit -- a true spiritual and service-oriented home -- in their local parishes. Parish-based Small Faith Communities for young adults are a rarity in the U.S., as my research found. Some graduates manage to find sustenance in alumni-based SCCs. Some participate in Theology on Tap, a program of lectures and discussion on current topics of religion and theology sponsored by local Catholic dioceses and notable for its venue normally a bar or restaurant. Others connect with a variety of programs answering the Catholic Church's call for a new evangelization such as Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) and Evangelical Catholic. The ESTEEM program, for its part, prepares young men and women for leadership roles in parishes after college. Still other graduates gravitate to Small Bible Study Groups in Protestant churches.

It's interesting to note that Small Christian Communities have never truly taken hold in America. Go to almost any parish and you'll find Bible Study Groups and other kinds of prayer groups whose members meet regularly to share the Scriptures and fellowship. But these gatherings are not nearly as developed or integrated into the fabric of parish pastoral life as Small Christian Communities are in Africa and elsewhere. Despite their popularity, they remain on the fringes of the Catholic Church even though a number of parishes in Hartford, Connecticut, Erie, Pennsylvania, St. Petersburg, Florida, and San Bernardino, California are restructuring around SCCs.

Clearly more work needs to be done at the parish and diocesan levels to enfranchise a significant demographic slice of the Catholic Church. What I found in my travels is that young people want to be part of service-oriented and justice and peace-oriented groups with which they feel a strong affinity. Graduates are often drawn to alumni from their school, young married couples want to discuss their concerns and issues with like-minded couples, and when they have children they want to seek out other parents. I found embryonic signs of intergenerational groups of grandparents, parents and children coalescing into extended Christian families. In no small way, it's really about creating specialized small groups to fit the demographic need.

### **A Course of Action for the Catholic Church**

What can the Catholic Church do to promote this type of meaningful change within its present structure? Clearly, it must start with Church leaders taking a page from the book of the Eastern African bishops and recognize Small Faith Sharing Groups as an important, if not essential, pastoral option -- one that's connected to the structures, ministries and activities of the parish. I learned through my discussions that young people today are not necessarily angry with or opposed to the Church. They simply feel it's irrelevant to their lives. Instead, they're looking to share and express their Catholicism in a less institutionalized, more personalized setting -- one that's more community-oriented and service-minded. They're looking for more than traditional Sunday Mass to hone their faith.

Many people wrongly use “going to Mass on Sunday” as the litmus test of whether a person is a practicing Catholic or an active Catholic. American Notre Dame de Namur Sister Mary Evelyn Jegan, SND tells the story of her nephew who drifted away from the Catholic faith and stopped going to Mass on Sunday. Every Thursday, however, he visited an elderly man in a nursing home and gave him a shave. As Jegan put it, “My nephew goes to Mass on Thursdays.”

Small Faith Sharing Groups are successful on campuses in the U.S. because they fulfill a need. But there is a gap between the “haves” and “have not” campuses. More specifically, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Website quotes a 2003 study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) that only 28 percent of the 4,240 colleges or universities in the U.S. have a Catholic ministry presence. Granted that many are commuter campuses, but how do we reach Catholic college students at the large public universities and those “on the margins and peripheries of society” to use Pope Francis’ words? Lay theologian Kevin Ahern calls for a much needed “national conversation” that involves bishops and religious on how we target young adults in their college and post college years. “I don’t worry so much about students at the Ivy League schools or big Catholic schools,” he asserts. “I worry more about the students at community colleges, small private schools, and state schools.”

In order to respond convincingly to the institutional crisis of recent years, the Church must willingly pursue bold new ways to engage members *of all ages* in prayer, Scripture study, discussion of everyday and ecclesial problems and practical service outreach. Small Christian groups are a tried and true expression of communion and Church vitality in regions around the world. They are a vehicle that the U.S. Catholic Church, in clear need of change, should be actively courting.

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