

State of the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) at St. Brigid Catholic Church, San Antonio, Texas (USA), June, 2021

By Belza Ramos, Lay Volunteer, SCC Coordinator

To my USA and Global SCCs Brothers and Sisters: “I am sharing the following report/evaluation that I made to my pastor in San Antonio, Texas with you, knowing that we all faced and are still facing the challenges that COVID-19 brought to our Small Christian Community lives, not only health-wise, but in fulfilling our mission as a SCC Model of Church. My prayer is that you all are doing well, individually and as SCCs. Also I hope that you will be called to share your own experiences during these trying times, on this website, so that we can learn from each other. God be with all of us. To do this, contact your Continent or National Information or SCC Stories Networkers listed under “Contact Us” on the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website (<https://www.smallchristiancommunities.org>).”

During the pandemic with its mandates, I contacted most of the SCC Leaders at St. Brigid Catholic Church, San Antonio, Texas, USA, to assess how the SCC members were coping, and whether the internal and the external life of the SCCs was surviving. Just at the beginning of the pandemic there was a transition of the Core Team Leadership back to me (by default). I only wanted to be SCC Coordinator temporarily until the pandemic mandates were lifted. This is because I recognize we need younger, more energetic leaders to provide longevity to the communities. My desire has always been to train others to replace me.

This was the purpose of identifying and training a new coordinator and I assisted by transitioning all information that I had developed and documented in the formation of the SCCs at St. Brigid. From experience at a previous parish in Dallas, where I had helped the Pastor form 42 “Faith Sharing Groups” and which all disbanded shortly after I left Dallas ten years later, I emphasized how important it is that the Pastor and a lay group continue to nourish and network the groups. Joining a SCC should be long-term commitment, lifelong if possible. I offered to continue to be a resource to them and gave them the names of others that had been instrumental in “walking” with newly formed SCCs. This consisted of helping with training new members in the various roles played in SCCs, then meeting with them at least three times, or more if the SCC requested more time to fly solo, to present the first three sessions of “Twelve Steps to Building Small Christian Communities” from presentationministries.com. This served to train the members to present the other nine sessions. After that the SCCs were encouraged to have a commitment ritual to continue meeting for at least a year and consciously renew it periodically thereafter. We gave them several suggestions as to what this prayerful commitment ritual might look like. The new core team proclaimed us SCC Ambassadors and invited us to join their meetings. The other two were Susie Bayne and Graciela Zavala (deceased, RIP).

Good news is that of the 23 existing communities, 18 fared well and even thrived under enlightened, persistent leaders and supportive members. Some even took on greater community service to meet the emerging needs created by the epidemic and surging immigration needs. They

continued to meet utilizing various social media venues, and to participate in various ministries, (Ushers, Eucharistic Ministers, Altar helpers, Lectors, etc.), or participate in at home in the live streamed Masses. About 50% attended live Masses, even with the social distancing and masking protocol. Some even met outdoors in their homes, a park or in front of the church. At the very least they continued to communicate with each other and minister to their members if needed. Overall 17-18 of these were mature communities that had been meeting since 2003-5 when we first formed and 4-5 had formed later but had met for at three years or more. One of these had formed from RCIA with leaders from the RCIA Team.

Some were forced to choose new leaders due to illness, deaths, moving out of St. Brigid or San Antonio, and "retirements" at least once in the two years when I was not the Coordinator and two or more times during the pandemic. Most SCCs were touched by COVID 19 personally, in close family members and friends. Those with children and/or still working were impacted economically through job furloughs and/or having to supervise their children whose schools closed and had to continue their classes online.

However five SCCs did not survive. Reasons for this cannot be ascribed entirely to the pandemic, though it created the greatest obstacles. There were three communities that had just formed by "branching out" from one SCC that had grown to almost 27 adults and 23 children in four years and several couples with children waiting to join. Though the original SCC had formed from a Parish ALPHA course, during which they sat at a table of which I was Table Leader, for the 12 weeks of the course, and then had been meeting for over four years. The three new branches were struggling to "bond" with new leaders and each other. Personal business growth, online schooling for themselves or their children was given as an obstacle. All three had added new members that were on a waiting list. Another two which did not survive: one was a new community that had formed from a parish course and only one member was willing to host even before the Pandemic. After that, there was little interest in participating in on-line meetings. The second group that stopped meeting was The Tuesday Morning Group, which was incorporated into the SCCs, though they meet at church and not in homes. They also did not attend Masses or live streamed Masses. The Leader stated he did not try to set up internet meetings or keep communicating with them, though he did hear that some of them had lunch together in small numbers. All are very elderly who rely mostly on friends and relatives to drive them or use Via Assisted Transit.

The Core Team also disbanded after about a year and half into the Pandemic, which is why I contacted the leaders. The leaders of communities that did not survive, seemed to become animated to try to re-form their SCCs when I talked to them and to contact the members to see if they wanted to at least start meeting on line and then in person. I am currently training two new leaders who requested my help, at my home, and I will include them when we can continue to meet at church. I will follow up with all the SCC Leaders, and share this report with them after meeting with my Pastor, Father Gilberto Vallejo and Debra Schneider, our Adult Faith Coordinator. Discussion points I plan for the meeting:

1. Discuss what happened to the SCCs during the pandemic, so that we can support them better in the future.

2. Going Live and reviving the casualty SCCs: all are willing to try to re-form.
3. What happened to the new Core Team?
4. Offer training sessions: All members would be invited. I will recruit 4-5 SCC members to help me. Training points:
 - What an SCC is and is not: What the internal life of the SCC looks like and actions in their external life
 - Guidelines for leaders, hosts, members and facilitators.
 - What does the Core Team do? (Form New Communities, Nourish and Network Existing SCCs, Communicate and Implement Parish Initiatives and Directives.)
 - Try to form a new Core Team from those attending.

NOTE: Belza Elia Ramos born in a Texas, USA small border farming community, attended high school and Nursing school in Corpus Christi, TX. Life changes spurred her to forge two other careers as an electronic manufacturing entrepreneur and a human resources professional and executive. Throughout her professional life, she advocated for social justice, human rights and equal opportunities for all, but especially for minorities and women. She has been active in her communities and parishes since she assisted her mother in preparing children for First Eucharist soon after she received hers, at eight years of age. She is retired and now lives in San Antonio, TX.

After experiencing and surviving cancer twenty years ago, she became a writer and a poet, and at 80 years of age just published her first book, “Reflections on My Journey of Faith” released by Xulon Press and distributed on Amazon and Barnes and Noble. She is a single mother of two, grandmother of four and recently became a great grandmother. She has been involved in forming SCCs for thirty years in two parishes and cities. She was active in the inception of the smallchristiancommunities.org website and in developing and presenting workshops in the USA at National SCC convocations on its use.

Contact at:

Belza Elia Ramos

Email: beram_4027@att.net

Phone: 1+ 210-415-1540

Facebook and SKYPE: Belza.Ramos

Website: <https://smallchristiancommunities.org>

23 June, 2021