

## **After College What? Developing Alumni Zoom Small Faith Communities**

By Joseph G. Healey, MM

In interviewing students who participate in university and college Small Faith Communities<sup>1</sup> -- most of whom are young women -- a question emerges: After college what? After a positive experience of participating in a wide variety of campus Small Faith-sharing Communities and Small *Bible* Study Communities, how can young adults find a similar experience in their parishes and other pastoral and spiritual settings? Our research indicates that a large number of graduates cannot find a good fit/a spiritual home in Catholic parishes in the USA.<sup>2</sup> Parish-based SCCs especially for young adults are few and far between. Some graduates continue in Alumni SCCs of different kinds. Some graduates connect with the various new ecclesial movements in the Catholic Church. Some graduates gravitate to Small *Bible* Study Groups in Protestant Churches.

As we read the signs of the times in the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, Zoom and other social media platforms offer new opportunities for online/virtual/digital faith sharing. Here are four Case Studies:

1. Katie Maransky (Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA, Class of 2019):

During our time at Georgetown, two of my friends Kevin and Mary Joy started a Small Faith Sharing Community in January, 2018. In this community, I was an active member. We read Matthew Kelly's *Choosing Happiness* together and our conversations circled around the chapters we read every week. This was a group of 10 students, all in the sophomore -- senior age

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<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Healey, "What Catholic Young People Really Want to Talk About?" in Kevin Ahern and Christopher Derige Malano, (eds.), *God's Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018). The chapter can also be found online on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website at: [http://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/what\\_catholic.pdf](http://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/what_catholic.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, an organization of Catholic lay and clergy leaders, is training college students to move into church leadership roles the moment that they graduate with a program called ESTEEM (Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission). The program is designed to keep young adults from drifting away by giving them the knowledge, confidence and skills to change and improve their churches -- right after college when they're still revved up and raring to go. ESTEEM is now a church leadership development program at 20 public, private and Catholic colleges and universities nationwide. It is hoped that clusters of ESTEEM graduates can meet together physically especially in big cities. Zoom and other social media platforms offer new opportunities for online/virtual/digital faith sharing. <https://www.faithandleadership.com/esteem-prepares-catholic-college-students-church-leadership-now>

range. Kevin and Mary Joy are both very involved in the Catholic community today -- Kevin works for *America Media* and Mary Joy works for Matthew Kelly.

After our first small community went from January, 2018 to May, 2018, we broke for the summer. Upon returning to Georgetown in the Fall, 2018 Kevin and Mary Joy started to grow more Catholic Faith Communities in conjunction with the Campus Ministry Program to reach more young people. They asked if I was interested in leading a group starting in August, 2018. I agreed to lead with my friend Dan who was part of our first Small Faith Sharing Community. Dan and I wanted to cater our conversations to the interests of the group. We were lucky enough to have a community of ten seniors (six young women, four young men). In our first meeting our small community discussed key topics we were interested in learning more about such as: joining the corporate world and living a Christian life; evil; grace; combining discipline and happiness; and others. Dan and I typically would meet three days prior to our community session to find a reading or an article to give to the group on the topic we planned to discuss. We came up with various “prompts” we thought would spark conversation in our upcoming small community session.

Our Fall, 2018 small community continued through the Spring Semester, 2019 consisting of a similar core group of members, while gaining a few and losing a few who were lacking commitment at the time. We conducted our small community in the same manner, collecting topics of interest and diving into the topics week by week. We stopped meeting before graduation in May, 2019.

Now fast forward. We were eight Georgetown Alumnae who got together over the 2021 Lenten Season to continue our spiritual journey together online. It started when my friend Mary Joy and another Georgetown alumna Emma reached out to me to see if I was interested in joining a Zoom-based Small Faith Community. We were all in various parts of the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic so it worked well to hold a Zoom session every week. The group consisted of these young alumnae from Georgetown and one from Villanova, my roommate in New York City, where we met from 9--9:45 pm on a weekly basis (typically Mondays or Tuesdays). During this season, we followed Matthew Kelly's *Best Lent Ever Journal* as the basis for our weekly discussions. We watched his two minute videos on a daily basis that mostly focused on prayer. Through discussion we found we all were struggling to watch the videos on a daily basis and usually had to binge watch all of the videos prior to our weekly meetings in order to properly participate in the discussion. We combatted this by rotating through a daily schedule where one person would send a small reflection about the daily video and the link to the video in our Small Faith Community text box. This was a helpful way to keep up with the videos on a daily basis. We eventually concluded these gatherings of our Zoom Small Faith Community at the end of the Lenten, 2021 season.

2. Stephanie Luna (California State University, East Bay, Oakland, California, USA, Class of 2017):

This is great! I graduated about four years ago and I was so afraid of losing touch with my faith and my campus Catholic Club Community. Some of our community members were still connected locally, but most moved out of state and out of country for grad school and jobs. The

pandemic gave us the opportunity to reconnect and get everyone back together virtually. We were 13 alumni (10 young women, three young men) who met once a week for about six months. At the beginning of the Zoom gathering we would give everyone the chance to check in (or touchdown) about anything that was going on in their lives. For most of us, the pandemic created a lot of anxiety and grief and we were having a hard time coping. Luckily we had this weekly commitment to lay down our crosses and share our suffering.

After the initial check-ins, our California State University Campus Minister would open up the Zoom gathering for faith discussion. She gave us the autonomy to bring up any topic. We talked about racism, political polarization and the climate crisis -- all through the lens of our Catholic faith. A burning question now is how many Catholics, especially young adults, will return to participate in physical masses in our parishes? We still connect once a month, and it has been a great joy to come together and share a piece of ourselves and to hold each other in prayer. I'm so glad that Georgetown University alumni are also doing the same, and I hope our sharing can inspire others to build communities of loving relationship within their own university alumni.

### 3. Vivian Cabrera (college graduate living in Toronto, Canada):<sup>3</sup>

The only reason I joined a *Bible* Study Group as a freshman at my Catholic college in Texas was because one of the leaders had a Hispanic last name. I figured that maybe she also spoke Spanish and we could be friends. She did not, but we became friends anyway. Looking back now, I recognize what I was hoping to find in the group. I was not only looking for God in Scripture but also longed for community and real connection. What first-year student doesn't? Luckily, I found it with that small group of women, and I became close with all of them over the following four years.

When I graduated from college, I moved to Toronto, Canada where I did not know a single soul. And I found myself yearning for the same thing: a community, a family. Transitioning from a life full of family and friends into one of solitude was difficult. Not only did I have to deal with the culture shock of a new country, I had to figure out how to nourish my faith on my own and in English, my least preferred language to worship in.

So I searched for a [spiritual] home in the most logical place: my parish's young adult group. And it was...fine. They offered the sacraments and adoration and the occasional praise and worship session that are all beautiful experiences. They offered lectures and fellowship at the local pub—again, perfectly fine evenings. But I was looking for something more. I ended up dreading those weekly events even while recognizing that those were the only times I was engaging in any sort of fellowship. Even now, I wonder why “young adult” gatherings elicit cringes from me. But a new survey of young adult U.S. Catholics, to be released this Fall, 2021 by the [Center for Applied](#)

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<sup>3</sup> The full article is Vivian Cabrera, “Being Family: What Latino Catholics Can Teach the rest of the U.S. Church About Community,” *America* Magazine, October, 2021 America Media Website, downloaded on 26 September, 2021, [Being family: What Latino Catholics can teach the rest of the U.S. church about community | America Magazine](#)

[Research for the Apostolate](#) (CARA), touches on what I now realize was missing from these groups: a safe space where one can be vulnerable, be honest and feel at home.

One of the things the survey does is highlight differences between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Catholic faith groups. The responses suggest that Spanish-language groups are perceived as warmer, more familial, intergenerational and relationship-driven. English-speaking groups are seen as more goal-oriented and individualistic; they are more likely to be organized around a liturgical season, or to be defined by age, political or cultural interest, or anything else that can divide Catholics. From my experience, this rings true.

We often discuss the problem of young people leaving the church. I wonder what would happen if, instead of focusing on numbers, we focused on building lasting relationships and cultivating the church family to be just that: a family where everyone is welcome, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, language, or marital or immigration status. To get there, the English-speaking church in the United States could learn a lot from Latino Catholics.

As the CARA survey indicates, Hispanic faith groups, like almost all Hispanic groups, operate on the principle that *estas en familia* (“here you are family”). Latinos pride themselves on the deep relationships we cultivate with our family members and the *extranjeros* we can welcome into the fold. Even when I am away from my own family, I am welcomed by Latinos I encounter in public (like food service workers), in my church community and at work. We are *en familia* wherever we go. I struggled to feel this “at homeness” in the English-language faith groups I attended. They skewed more intellectual. This is an important aspect of our faith life, but when we focus more on the intellectual, we tend to want to “do things right” or “win” at being Catholic. This frame of mind leads to more division and judgment. And it leaves little room for the Holy Spirit.”

Following up on Vivian’s reflections, Zoom and other social media platforms offer many opportunities for *estas en familia* (“here you are family”) Small Community Faith Sharing.

4. See this post on the CCMA (Catholic Campus Ministry Association) Facebook Page ([CCMA \(Catholic Campus Ministry Association\) | Facebook](#)):

**ALUMNI on ZOOM?** A priest and friend of CCMA who works with Small Faith Sharing Groups has asked. If your campus has alumni who meet for *Bible* studies or faith sharing, please email or DM (Direct Message sent online) Fr. Joe [Joseph G. Healey](#) who is working on an article about campus ministry alumni and Zoom: [JoeHealey@jghealey.com](mailto:JoeHealey@jghealey.com)

Then I posted my own message:

“Remember the famous line from the musical *The Sound of Music*: "When God closes

a door somewhere God opens a window." When the Covid-19 pandemic closed the door of in person gatherings on college campuses, Zoom opened the window of virtual/online/digital gatherings. Thus college students began using Zoom to meet and reflect together and Alumni began using Zoom to meet and reflect together. Please share your examples.

Here are some responses:

1. Nora Bradbury-Haehl who works in Campus Ministry at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in Rochester, New York, USA: "Thanks so much for these resources! We're starting Small Christian Communities on campus but hadn't thought of them for Alumni! Wonderful!"

2. Meghan Larsen-Reidy works in Catholic Campus Ministry in Pittsburgh Diocese, Pennsylvania, USA and currently does campus ministry at California University of Pennsylvania, Washington and Jefferson College, and Waynesburg University in Pennsylvania. She writes:

My advisory board for my ministry organized a virtual Lenten retreat for alumni. We did it via Zoom and the theme was "Life in the Desert." We reflected on the challenges of spiritual life in a pandemic. The majority of alumni who attended were recent graduates. We had a Franciscan priest lead the reflection and various members of our advisory board led Small Group discussions and prayer. During Lent, we also held a weekly study on Henri Nouwen's book *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Alumni met via Zoom to discuss it. The Advisory Board will meet soon to plan a virtual retreat for Advent to allow alumni to get together and reflect on their faith.<sup>4</sup>

3. Diane Magliocca works in Catholic Campus Ministry in Pittsburgh Diocese Pennsylvania, USA and currently does campus ministry at Slippery Rock University (SRU) in Pennsylvania. She writes: "We have experienced some of that! An alumni prayer group resurfaced and we did a combined student/alumni event on Zoom!"

On our Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website (<https://www.smallchristiancommunities.org>) we have an interactive Poll (changes every two months) that states: "The best part of my Small Christian Community is ..."<sup>5</sup> followed by six choices. In the past two years some of the choices (alphabetically) have been:

Adapts to the Covid-19 pandemic situation.  
Alumni Online Small Christian Community.  
Digital SCC.  
Experience of synodality.

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<sup>4</sup> Meghan Larsen-Reidy's email to the author dated 28 September, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> We could just as easily have asked: "The best part of our Small Christian Community is:..." Both statements can have different answers. Using "we" and "us" expresses better the spirit and practice of the SCCs Model of Church.

Gathering online to celebrate our faith together.  
 Going digital during Covid-19.  
 Hybrid Small Christian Community.  
 Online faith sharing.  
 Online Small Christian Community Ministry.  
 Platform and context to deepen the issue of synodality.  
 Virtual SCC.  
 WhatsApp SCC.  
 WhatsApp social media exchange.  
 Young Adults Small Empowerment Community.  
 Young People Small Searching Community.  
 Zoom and other online platforms for Gospel Sharing and Reflection.  
 Zoom Small Christian Community.

The top vote getters have been “Online faith sharing” (167 votes) and “Zoom and other online platforms for Gospel Sharing and Reflection” (140 votes).

Three other important resources on University/College Small Faith Communities are:

1. Kevin Ahern, “Young People Are Leading a New Approach To Campus Ministry,” *U.S. Catholic*, September, 2021. *U.S. Catholic* Website, retrieved on 11 September, 2021. <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202108/young-people-are-leading-a-new-approach-to-campus-ministry/> This article can jumpstart a new appreciation of our Orbis Book [\*God’s Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond\*](#).

Kevin insightfully describes the challenges to campus ministry with practical examples, in particular: the explanation of the Small Faith Communities (SFCs) Model of Church; how in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, student faith groups are demonstrating a dynamic sense of resiliency; and Pope Francis’s call for synodal models in youth and young adult ministry (so relevant as the worldwide Synodal Process begins in October, 2021).

2. Another important book on campus ministry is Randy Young, *Catholic Campus Ministry: Fifteen Profiles in Achievement*, New Jersey, 2020. Ebook and paperback, Amazon Website, retrieved on 11 September, 2021. [Catholic Campus Ministry: Fifteen Profiles in Achievement - Kindle edition by Young, Randy. Religion & Spirituality Kindle eBooks @ Amazon.com](#). It documents a wide variety of Small Group Ministries/Small Faith Communities Ministries on college campuses such as Faith Sharing, *Bible* Study and Lectionary-based Reflections.

3. For many pastoral and spiritual resources for campus ministry visit the Catholic Campus Ministry Association (CCMA) Website <http://www.ccmanet.org>:

Join an Affinity Group that is a fancy phrase for "group learning". Different from an online course or a support group, a mastermind meets virtually once a week via Zoom video conference calling. Groups are made up of 6-9 people and all are campus ministers. An Affinity

Group provides accountability and encouragement and can often lead to breakthroughs in ministry, faith and in life. It provide campus ministers with:

- Weekly Zoom video conference
- Leadership study guide
- Guest speaker slide-decks
- Growing your professional network

One helpful module is: “The hybrid group coaching and leadership development program for Catholic campus ministers.”

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