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Small groups said to personalize a church too large for relationships

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- Believing that small, intentional communities have the power to revitalize the life of the larger church, about 275 people from 25 states and 13 countries spent four days here exploring ways to promote small Christian communities within the church and help them have a broader impact.

The National Joint Convocation on Small Christian Communities, held at the University of St. Thomas Aug. 9-12, was the fifth such meeting since 1990. The bilingual event brought together associates of three small Christian community organizations and two Hispanic organizations.

Marianist Br. Robert Moriarty, one of the event's organizers, estimates that as many as 50,000 small Christian communities meet regularly in the United States. Moriarty directs the Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities for the Hartford, Conn., diocese.

Most groups comprise fewer than a dozen members, often from the same parish. They meet regularly -- usually weekly -- to pray, read scripture and reflect. For some, it can become a long-term commitment. Some groups have met for 10, even 20 years. Over time, many small Christian communities become active in social issues and volunteer together in the community.

The intimate nature of small Christian communities offers parishioners a more personal way to live their faith in the world and, as a result, revitalize the life of the larger church, said Ronaldo Cruz, the retired executive director of the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"The church is so large that personal relationship is difficult," Cruz said. "The more personal need to understand, reflect, pray ... can be done so beautifully in small Christian communities."

Tanzanian Sr. Rita Ishengoma said small Christian communities are "transforming the church" in the Dar-es-Salaam archdiocese, where she works. The archdiocese supports

more than 2,400 small Christian communities, said the Sister of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus.

The convocation was sponsored by the Small Christian Community Connection, the North American Forum on Small Christian Communities, the National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities, the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs and the Mexican-American Cultural Center.

-- *Emilie Lemmons*

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