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-- Greg Tarczynski

Members of a small Christian community meet in Pleasanton, Calif., Sept. 16.

Getting deeper Getting smaller

Small Christian communities revitalize faith, strengthen parishes, participants say

By EMILIE LEMMONS

Two Friday nights a month, Tim and Trina Wurst meet up with four other young Indianapolis couples in one of their homes. They're not there to unwind with a movie and a few drinks. Instead, they read scripture, pray, share their faith journeys and plan service projects.

At a glance

In the Aug. 31 issue of *NCR*, reporter Emilie Lemmons wrote about the National Joint Convocation on Small Christian Communities held Aug. 9-12 at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn. The bilingual event, the fifth such meeting since 1990, was sponsored by three small Christian community organizations and two Hispanic organizations and drew about 275 people from 25 states and 13 countries. Here, Lemmons delves deeper into the stories of people who make small Christian communities a part of their lives.

It's not an easy commitment, considering that the couples are busy parents who have 12 children among them. One night, they might arrange for babysitters. Another night, they take the kids along, and one of the adults skips the meeting to look after the youngsters in another room. A

few times a year, the children join their parents in an intergenerational meeting.

“We’ve been doing it since before we had kids,” said Trina Wurst, a mother of three who joined the group in 1999. “We’ve just been very flexible and had to adapt. ... The idea of us not staying together is harder to imagine than figuring out a way to stay together.”

Half a continent away, in suburban New Jersey, another small Christian community gathers every three to four weeks -- more frequently in Lent and Advent. Composed of mostly middle-aged and retired Catholics, the group doesn’t worry about babysitters or school schedules; in fact, they don’t all have kids. They’ve bonded in different ways.

Longtime friends and occasional political activists, some had protested the Vietnam War together in the 1960s. Others had formed a food co-op in support of César Chávez and the Farm Workers movement. Even now, they tend to be politically active, although they’ve disagreed on issues ranging from immigration to the Iraq war.

“We’ve had conflict. We’re not all the same political persuasion,” said Mary Ann Jeselson, 68, who has been a member for 13 years with her husband, Stephen. “[But] I have such a deep respect for these people that I’ve got to believe that they have arrived at their decisions and their opinions in an honest way.”

Across the country and around the world, a small but fervent cross-section of Catholics have been meeting in small Christian communities, some for decades. While the majority of Catholics look to their parish as the center of their spiritual life, those in small communities say their groups add a level of support, intimacy and nurturing that are hard to find at the parish level.

Further, they say, reflecting on scripture and discussing its application to everyday living makes them feel more accountable for how they live out their faith in the world. Some proponents say small Christian communities have the power to revitalize the face of parish life and the larger church.

Stories and service

Small groups have long been gathering in parishes, but the groups of previous decades were usually connected to outside programs instead of rising from parish life organically.

“Those [programs] are invaluable experiences ... but the thrust of small communities is to root the small communities in the parish instead of making them parallel to the parish,” said Marianist Br. Bob Moriarty, who leads the Office of Small Christian Communities in the Hartford, Conn., archdiocese.

As many as 45,000 to 50,000 small Christian communities may exist in the United States today, and there are surely at least 37,000, according to “Small Christian Communities in the U.S. Catholic Church,” a study funded by the Lilly Endowment and conducted in the late 1990s. William V. D’Antonio of The Catholic University of America headed the research, which was then compiled in book form by Marianist Fr. Bernard Lee, vice president for mission and identity

at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, a fellow researcher on the project. Lee is a coauthor of the 2000 book *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (Paulist Press), in which researchers posit that Catholics' thirst for sharing their faith at an intimate level goes back to the home-based gatherings of the early Christian church ([see related story](#)).

The communities have several defining elements that set them apart from prayer groups or Bible studies: meetings that focus on scripture, faith-sharing and prayer; service to the greater community; a long-term commitment to community building, and a support network that many members describe as being as tight as family. Most groups comprise fewer than a dozen members, often from the same parish.

"If you're not in a small Christian community, how do you get to know what people are feeling with regard to their faith?" asked Jeselson. "It doesn't come out in other ways that I know of," such as the workplace or a cocktail party.



-- Craig Kmlcick

Mary Ann Jeselson with her husband, Steve

Jeselson's group, whose members belong to the Church of the Presentation in Upper Saddle River, N.J., drew closer after one of their members, Rita Gillen, died in an accident while on vacation at the Grand Canyon six years ago. She was hit by a van while she and her husband were walking up a road on their way to breakfast.

"Instantly when we heard, we got together that night," Jeselson said. They prayed and swapped stories about their bubbly, active, generous friend, whose husband, Jim, still is a member of the group. "That's what people do in small Christian communities," she said. "They share stories."

For a while, the group lit a "Rita candle" whenever it met. "Rita is still a part of our group," Jeselson said. "Woven in the group is her prayerfulness, her witness to what her life was like."

In addition to scripture, faith-sharing and prayer, most small Christian communities incorporate a

service element -- efforts to reach out to the larger community. For some, this takes the form of participating in parish projects to help poor and homeless people around the holidays, working in a food pantry or volunteering in some way in the community.

Jeselson's group in New Jersey, which calls itself Sojourners, cooks meals in their parish kitchen and delivers them to soup kitchens in New York City or Newark.

Wurst's group of busy parents has volunteered at a St. Vincent de Paul warehouse and helped a local man run a food pantry. She admitted they don't do as many service projects as they'd like. "We try to do something once a year, at least Advent and Lent," she said. "But it doesn't always happen."

Family gatherings

Finding the time to meet regularly can be difficult, especially for couples with growing children. Groups have met that challenge in different ways.

Wurst's group, whose members belong to St. Monica Parish in Indianapolis, picked Friday nights to meet.

"Most school activities are during the week," Wurst said. "And if we go out of town for the weekend, we usually don't leave until Saturday."

Arranging for child care can be trickier. "We've tried a lot of different scenarios," Wurst said. "None is perfect. Having them with us is a good option, but sometimes we need more grown-up time. We just try to find a balance."

For Amy Sluss' small Christian community in Pleasanton, Calif., the solution is a group that includes all members of the family.

Sluss, 49, a mother of three, had been involved in adult faith-sharing groups in the past. Her husband, Gene, was active in their church, and their children were in religious education classes. All that changed about 10 years ago.

"We were feeling very scattered," she said. "And quite a number of our activities that took us away from each other were church-related."

She started talking to people, gauging support for a family-based small Christian community. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the group started meeting in early 1998. Today, the group has seven families: 13 adults and 17 children, four of whom recently left for college but are still considered members. The youngest member is now 10, and the oldest is 53.

Creating programs that appeal to all ages poses its own challenges. Sluss' group planned activities that balanced fun with community-building, Bible reading and discussion with experience-based learning. Families take turns designing each program. Kids might research information about saints or Internet faith sites to share with the group, which adds an extra

element of learning, said Sluss, who has written a book, *Family Faith Communities: Ten Ready-to-Use Gatherings* (Good Ground Press).

A lot of planning goes into setting a yearly calendar in place. The parents have two adults-only meetings at the end of each summer, just to plan. “We get out our calendars,” she said. “It probably takes us two to three hours to schedule our gatherings for the year” -- twice a month during the school year, usually on the weekends -- “and we do it all at once.”

The other meeting is devoted to picking topics for the year. Each family comes up with ideas from both the parents and kids, and the adults slot them onto the calendar. Last year’s topics included Hinduism and Marian apparitions. The group also plans a yearly Seder meal around Holy Week.

Occasionally, the adults will meet without the kids if they feel the topic calls for it. In preparation for the meeting on Marian apparitions, the parents decided to hold an adults-only meeting ahead of time to talk about their perceptions of Mary, Sluss said.

“Our adults are all over the place in terms of our faith journey,” she explained. “Some of us saw Mary as very cold. Others saw Mary as this devotional figure. We wanted to explore it as adults first, in a forum where we could talk for hours. Where we could say, ‘What do you mean?’ We don’t do that in front of the kids.”

That’s not to say the group doesn’t challenge each other or express divergent opinions in front of their children.

“We have a lot of latitude in our group for people having different thoughts,” she said. “My eldest daughter reflected that she thought she had a better understanding of the Catholic church than her peers did because she was able to have these discussions.”

Conflicts and growth

As with any relationship, small Christian communities have their share of conflicts and growth.

When a group is new, there’s a “birth phase,” a honeymoon period during which members test the waters with a sense of optimism, said Rosemary Bleuher, who recently retired as director of adult faith formation and small church community development for the Joliet, Ill., diocese.

The birth phase typically leads to the “youth phase,” where personality differences and power and authority issues rear their heads. A group is in most danger of falling apart during these early phases if the members can’t work through the challenges, Bleuher said.

If they successfully navigate the early conflicts, they find themselves in a “midlife phase,” where they realize “it’s OK to disagree, and we don’t leave the table,” she said. Members begin to accept each others’ differences, “recognizing that diversity is our greatest strength.”

The final stage of a group’s development is the “maturity phase,” in which members have

developed a sense of wisdom about their group and are able to let go of their egos -- having “learned to belong so we can give ourselves away,” Bleuher said.

Karen Jensen, a human resources director in St. Petersburg, Fla., who is near retirement age, joined an existing small Christian community three years ago. As in any group, she says, there are conflicts: Two of the men, both converts, are “almost like oil and water.” They often disagree on interpreting scripture, for example. “They’re so adamant: ‘I must be right, you must be wrong.’ There’s no middle ground. Well, in the end, they just agree to disagree.”

In Jeselson’s New Jersey community, discussions over politics can become heated.

“Not all of us agree with the U.S. bishops’ statement on amnesty for immigrants,” she said. “They have come to that through prayer and discernment. That doesn’t mean we can’t talk about immigration, but we’re very much aware of where people stand. So we wouldn’t take an action [as a group] on immigrant rights.”

Jeselson considers her ability to accept other members’ opposing views as one of the growing experiences she has taken from the group.

“When I see somebody that I really respect and love, and they express an opinion that’s different from mine ... if you believe that these people are prayerful people, I don’t see how you can fault them, frankly,” she said.

Connecting the church

That sense of acceptance and nurturing is one of the predominant gifts of small Christian communities, say many members.

Wurst, who converted to Catholicism from a Quaker upbringing, said her small Christian community gave her the support she needed to decide to complete the catechumenate. She had begun the program one year and joined the small group on the invitation of her sponsor. But she was experiencing some reluctance about joining the Catholic church.

“I didn’t want to make that big of a commitment without being sure it was what I wanted to do,” she said. “Being with my small church community gave me a little extra time to think about it and voice some of my feelings and have [community members] be supportive.”

Jensen, in St. Petersburg, also found that being part of a small Christian community eased a transition. She was reentering the Catholic church after 10 years away.

“When I was growing up, you weren’t supposed to read scripture. Only the priest was supposed to read scripture,” she said. “When I started reading scripture and started paying attention to what it said, it ... all started coming into place and into form, what happens at the banquet table.”

Certainly, small Christian communities have brought Catholics together in a church environment more intimate than traditional parish life can provide. But do the benefits reflect back to that

parish? And do small Christian communities have the power to revitalize the larger church?

Yes, and yes, say those who belong to such groups. “In the early church, the house church was the only form,” Lee, the Marianist author, said. “There weren’t any parishes. Part of the attraction, both then and now, is that you really form a community. To be a community you have to have together some shared memories and shared hopes.”

At St. Monica in Indianapolis, where one pastor oversees as many as 3,000 households, the 35 to 40 small Christian communities play a significant role in the parish, said Wurst.

One person from each small group is designated to be a “pastoral facilitator,” and they meet as a group once a month with the pastor. “These monthly meetings give the people serving as facilitators ideas for resources, ideas for dealing with group dynamic issues, et cetera,” she said.

“I think it transforms the structure of the parish in that it connects people and connects the communities so they aren’t just these little entities floating out there,” she said. What’s more, parishioners feel empowered, unlike in parishes where leadership is obviously top-down, she said.

“If they begin to belong, then they feel responsible for it,” said Moriarty. “That’s the heart and soul of this. Building a more relational church for the sake of a more relational world.”

Jeselson said breaking open scripture with a small community challenges her to be more accountable for how she exhibits her faith in the larger world.

“You are listening to the Gospel every time you meet,” she said. “You are saying to one another that the story of Zacchaeus [for example] is your story. You are saying that when the Gospel is read on Sunday, that it means something. ... Jesus comes by and tells me that he’s coming to my house tonight for dinner; that sort of humbles me.”

“We all may be saints sitting in that circle, but we are all sinners, too. And that’s what you learn in small Christian communities. That’s what you’re supposed to learn in church. But it doesn’t hit home as much as it does in small Christian communities.”

Emilie Lemmons is a freelance writer in St. Paul, Minn. Erin Ryan, NCR staff writer, contributed some reporting to this story.

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