

ABOUT SMALL CHURCH COMMUNITIES



I. **Why does a parish need Small Church Communities?** This question is best answered with an excerpt from Arthur R. Baranowski's book, *Creating Small Church Communities, Third Edition* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press. 1996), Chapter 2: "*The Why of a Parish*" pages 2-4. Father Baranowski explains as follows (emphasis added):



... Underneath all the activities and statements of mission or purpose, **the parish is meant to foster two basic realities:** 1) an experience of **love**, and 2) an experience of **faith**. And the very first of these should be **love**.

An ordinary sense of **care and responsibility for each other** should pervade a parish. The bottom line that keeps a family together through many crises and disagreements is that members understand they are loved, and they in turn, love the others in the family. That is the bottom line for the Church, too. **Whatever else a Catholic knows, he or she must absolutely know that he or she is valued by the people of the Church.** Christ himself cites love as a top priority for the Church community: *This is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another* (John 13:35).

Love has to be specific. **I have to be known as a person.** Love is much more than the warm feeling at the Sunday liturgy where everyone may feel close for a while, or the friendliness at the coffee-and-doughnut social afterwards. The liturgy may be moving and participatory. Yet, is a Catholic noticed and cared for simply by belonging to the Church?

Many parishes care very much for their sick, homeless and broken. Catholics do respond generously to the downtrodden and to causes brought to their attention. **Nevertheless, many people get 'lost between the cracks' in most parishes**, especially if the parish staff doesn't note the needs people have. Parishioners themselves don't notice each other all that well in most parishes, except for involved people or people in critical situations. We don't manifest ordinary, every day care for each other because **parishes are not structured to help us get to know each other.** We preach caring in our programs, our religious education, and our homilies; but our **parishes don't bring people together in a way they can easily care about each other ...**

The second basic a parish should provide is **an experience of faith**. God or Jesus becomes more real for us when we share our faith – or lack of faith -- with one another because **sharing** helps us notice God and take the Lord seriously. Somehow **God has to be found in our everyday life.** Ordinary Catholics – working people, office professionals, young adults, seniors—have faith, but often they don't trust the faith that is in them. **Most Catholics need help from others who care about them and know a little about their journey of faith before they learn to trust their own experiences ...**



Specific parish groups, like prayer groups or Scripture [Bible Study] classes, may share faith in a personal way, but does the entire community? Certain motivated people, like catechists, may reflect together on their faith journeys, but is the entire parish a people listening to each other and reflecting on how God is found in their life? ...

The way we come **together as Church** is primary. That is what teaches us—not simply our programs. Faith and love are experiences. The more these experiences are shared—and this can happen **best in a small group**—the more people notice **God and God’s call to be Church for one another** ...

II. **What is the Small Church/Christian Community**, sometimes referred to as **SCC**? The following definitions will help to clarify:

A. Thomas A. Kleissler, in his book, *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope for the 21st Century* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997, revised 2003) states on page 106: "A small Christian community is a face-to-face gathering of six to twelve people who invest time with one another for the common purpose of applying gospel values to every aspect of their lives."

B. **Pope John Paul II** in *The Church in America* (January 22, 1999) said:

One way of renewing parishes, especially urgent for parishes in large cities, might be to consider the parish as a community of communities and movements. It seems timely therefore to form ecclesial communities and groups of a size that allows for true human relationships ... This will make it possible to live communion more intensely, ensuring that it is fostered not only *ad intra*, but



also with the parish communities to which such groups belong and with the entire diocesan and universal church ... In such a human context it will be easier to gather to hear the word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this word and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ.

III. **Is SCC supported by the Diocese of Calgary?** Yes, Bishop Fred Henry has approved the SCC initiative throughout the diocese. Here in Cochrane at St. Mary’s, Father Bill Corcoran also encourages SCC.

IV. **If the vision is “a Parish as a Community composed of many Small Communities“ then how that might look?**

A. The idea is to bring people together on a regular basis. When they meet in SCC, they will:

- 1) pray and Break the Word together; 2) do something together as a group during the meeting (discuss, debate, share, question, commit); 3) eventually, choose some form of out-reach activity which the group would like to do (a charity in the parish or community).

B. It is not meant to be a closed circle of “elite” Christians.

C. The agenda of the typical meeting: 1) Gathering; 2) Break the Word; 3) Coffee break; 4) Group activity (as mentioned above); and 5) Closing prayer.