



# Pastoring Small Community Leaders

## Reflection

Pope John Paul II has often spoken about the importance of small Christian communities as a source of hope and strength. In his apostolic exhortation, *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)*, he said: “It seems timely therefore to form ecclesial communities and groups of a size that allow for true human relationship. This will make it possible to live communion more intensely.... 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Building these communities involves careful pastoring of small community leaders in ways that reflect the God who shepherds, guides, and sustains us. The vision of the parish as a community of many small communities will thrive where leaders are encouraged to turn to Jesus often as the one who leads us to streams of living water (John 4:14–15). The efforts involved in regular care for leaders will yield fruit in the deepening growth of parish-based small communities. When leaders experience support, the words of Isaiah will apply to their groups: “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters... come to me; listen, so that you may live” (Isaiah 55:1, 3).

What does pastoral support mean? Very simply it means caring attention to the needs of others. The biblical image of shepherding (Psalm 23) becomes a model for the Parish Core Community whose primary responsibility is to provide caring pastoral service to the small communities, especially through their leaders. Leaders need affirmation and encouragement as volunteers, plus access to all kinds of resources. They need prayerful personal care that is built on dependable two-way communications. They need learning opportunities about Scripture, faith-sharing skills, the social inquiry method, and ways to foster growth-filled behavior in small groups.

The Core Community can also give direction by planning and coordinating ongoing formation and training for small community leaders. Such offerings should also model and strengthen faith sharing, prayer, scriptural meditation, and action responses. Our efforts put a high priority on formation because “The more we are formed and the more we feel the need to pursue and deepen our formation, still more will we be formed and rendered capable of forming others.”<sup>2</sup> The vision of building small communities is an organic one, and caring for leaders is like sending out ripples on a pond. In this way, both Core communities and small group leaders provide a vital link between the small community, the larger Church, and the world around us.

Needs and goals that leaders may want support in attaining:

- To grow in an understanding of their Catholic faith, which includes approaches to Scripture, prayer, and service;
- To grow in the ability to share their own faith and to facilitate group sharing, especially within the context of a small community meeting;
- To appreciate and foster the communal nature of Christianity and of service at all levels within the Church;
- To deepen an awareness of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in their lives;
- To grow in the ability to respond to people with difficulties and needs that can affect the life of the small community;
- To integrate the social and spiritual dimensions of their faith into daily life, for themselves and their communities.

The way we pay attention to these needs and the concerns of the leaders is at the heart of building small communities in the parish. It is by this that we model Church and dispose ourselves for God to create the New Jerusalem flowing with life-giving water (Revelation 7:17). Leaders become strengthened as guides and shepherds who bring others to the streams of living water within the Church. The way we care for leaders can help them imitate Jesus in caring for their groups with humility, concern, and skill. Then, in

turn, group members are also inspired to care for family, friends, and associates in ways that reflect the vision of the Good Shepherd.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)* (January 22, 1999), John Paul II, 41.

<sup>2</sup> *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People (Christifideles Laici)* (December 30, 1988), John Paul II, 63.