



Charting the Course: Forming the Parish as a Community of Small Communities

Reflection

It was the first word of his direction to the disciples that must have stunned them, “Go....” It must have caused their hearts to beat more rapidly, and their minds must have raced in circles. “Go!” But they had just come through so much in order to be together. They had nearly lost their pastor, their leader, their friend. Why was he telling them to “Go”? He had sent them out before, but never alone. Still, his words were clear and unmistakable, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always...” (Matthew 28:19-20). He sent them out to share his message. This community of believers had been gathered together in order to share. They had been formed in order to “Go.”

The great commission of Jesus recorded in Matthew’s Gospel undergirds the direction of the journey of each parish community. But how is the course charted? Where are we going as a parish community? How are we going to get to our destination? What do we need for the journey? The answers to these questions can provide the navigational tools needed for every parish community to chart the course for its parish life.

Small Christian communities within the parish are the context in which the journey is best traveled. Research has shown that 99% of the people involved in a small Christian community within their parish have been encouraged to think about, talk about, and act upon their faith more.¹ Small Christian communities are natural vehicles for travel when a parish community is moving toward becoming an evangelizing community of faith. The parish, as a community of many small communities, experiences continual renewal through the ongoing development of the small faith-sharing communities. As these small communities build up the life of the parish, the parish community, as a whole, is strengthened to be a power and presence for good in the larger context of society.

The direction, “Go” was given and heard by Jesus’ disciples. Where do we as a parish want to go? Jesus does not give details about where. He simply exhorts a very inclusive, “Go” to all, to every nation. In deciding where we are going in the parish, we articulate a pastoral direction. This is a vision that inspires and motivates all and is expressed in the practical guides of long-term goals, objectives, and a concrete plan for implementation.

With a plan for where we are going as a parish community, the question of how are we going to get there follows. In strategizing the “how,” there are two significant tasks for a parish community. First, establish the relationships that will be needed in order to begin and to continue the journey. Second, establish where the parish is beginning from: the strengths and weaknesses of the parish, the current structure and shape of the parish, the level of involvement and commitment to small communities in the parish. These will indicate the stamina and strength available and needed for the “how” of the journey.

Ready to go, the question arises: what will we need for the journey? The parish community that remains nourished and refreshed will sustain the journey most successfully. A steady intake of nourishment through prayer, good materials, and support will provide the strength needed for a healthy parish life. As the community of many small communities grows and develops on the journey there will also be need for planned times of rest in order to remain healthy. Times of prayer and times for rest, recreation, and play are significant ways to re-energize.

Sent out, with a direction, and with the tools and supplies needed for the journey, the parish community is readied to stay the course. With the course charted, the Church is empowered and equipped as a community of many small communities to “Go” to all nations to share the Good News.

¹ *Faith Communities for the 21st Century, RENEW 2000: Survey of Participants and Leaders, Summary Report*, July 1999, conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University.
http://www.renewintl.org/NewsEvents/Pages/CARA_Study.htm (See also:
<http://www.renewintl.org/NewsEvents/Pages/RptFndgs1.htm>)