COMMUNION AND MISSION: A GUIDE FOR BISHOPS AND PASTORAL LEADERS ON SMALL CHURCH COMMUNITIES (1995)

By the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs

Small church communities are an indication that the church is developing new structures to "allow its inner life to flourish. As communities of faith and mission, they give witness to a renewal of the church's inner life." However, "small church communities must not be seen in isolation. They are not another church, but part of the one church," says a statement issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs. Titled "Communion and Mission: A Guide on Small Church Communities for Bishops and Pastoral Agents," the statement's release was approved by the NCCB Administrative Committee. Among Hispanics, small church communities are a place where "religious and cultural identity is affirmed," says the statement. It says that "the strong sense of family which Hispanics retain in their daily living is strengthened" in these groups. The strength of small church communities "comes from a concerted effort to delve more deeply into Christian life on a more personal level, while at the same time remaining intimately linked to the church's universal mission," it says. The group's smallness, the statement insists, "encourages concentration of church life and mission, not separation from the larger church community." The statement includes 75 questions for use in self-evaluation by small groups, covering such points as use of the Bible, leadership, links with the wider parish and commitment to the poor. The statement is copyright 1995 by the U.S. Catholic Conference and appears here with permission.

Preface

"Communion and Mission: A Guide for Bishops and Pastoral Leaders on Small Church Communities" is designed as a tool for bishops and their pastoral ministers involved in the new evangelization. Given the uniqueness of the relationship between faith and culture in the diverse communities that comprise our church in the United States, this statement seeks to shed light on the potential that small church communities can have in the efforts to promote the new evangelization, particularly in meeting the challenge of making evangelization new in its ardent, methodology and expression.

In response to the popularity of small church communities in many Hispanic and non-Hispanic communities, the bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs has developed "Communion and Mission" after several drafts and over several years. The recommendations of experienced pastoral ministers as well as the theological context and the relationship of small communities to parish life have been major variables in developing a statement that responds to the many pastoral challenges faced by the church today.
Small church communities have been present in our country for many years, but in different forms and at times separated from the parish community. Perhaps this occurred because there has been little ecclesial information developed in the United States as to how to foster them, respond to their presence or work with them in our parish communities. In recent years, however, small church communities have developed significantly. Several books and articles have been published that show how they are established and how they function within the parish community. In addition, there are well-organized diocesan, regional and national gatherings of small church communities every year. In some dioceses, small church communities are also part of the diocesan structure and are vital to the evangelization process.

Given the diversity of the church, small church communities are different by nature. They respond to the pastoral needs and realities of the communities of faith that form them. "Communion and Mission" underscores the common elements that are important in preserving and strengthening the Catholic identity of these communities as well as in fostering their identity.

"Communion and Mission: A Guide for Bishops and Pastoral Leaders on Small Church Communities" and the accompanying bilingual discussion guide and video, "Comunidad," can be excellent resources for the new evangelization.

Small Church Communities: A Source of Hope for the Church

Since Pentecost, the Spirit has guided the church in each age so that it can credibly proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. In our time, and under the inspiration of the Spirit, a new ecclesial reality is emerging -- that of small church communities -- through which we can see the creative grace of God at work. Small church communities are a source of great hope for the whole church. Steadfast, active church communities linked with the larger parish community should be encouraged and promoted. These small communities are the responsibility of the bishop, who is called to be a living sign of unity in the particular church entrusted to his care. At this historical juncture, the bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs offers the following reflections to assist the diocesan bishops and their collaborators as they offer leadership and guidance to the small church communities in their dioceses.

Among Hispanics, small church communities are becoming an important and useful vehicle for the new evangelization to which the church is being called. They are a place in which the religious and cultural identity of Hispanics is affirmed. In addition, the Christian household is a privileged place in which persons relate a faith journey, find nurturing support and focus on missionary efforts. The strong sense of family which Hispanics retain in their daily living is strengthened in the small church communities.
When solidly rooted in Scripture, church tradition and Hispanic religiosity, small church communities constitute a new moment in the church's self-understanding, epitomizing the celebration and proclamation of the church. These gatherings of the people of God are integrally linked to the parish, and through it, to the diocesan and universal church.

Today's active communities are works in progress. They have yet to reach their full potential to become authentic community centers of evangelization. This great potential exists, however, since small church communities already engage in personal relationships of faith through fellowship, evangelization, liturgy, mission and service.

The experience of Hispanic Catholics in small church communities throughout our country can also be a model that can be utilized by other Catholic communities seeking to develop small church communities.

Hispanics and Small Church Communities

For Hispanics, a predominant Catholic presence in the United States,(2) the Catholic faith is closely linked with cultural manifestations of their identity. Small church communities help to affirm the Hispanics' faith-cultural identity on a personal level and provoke a communal evangelical mission. In this way Hispanics continue to contribute as a religious force to the church and society.

Through small church communities, Latino Catholics are finding a way to preserve and share the rich cultural and faith expressions and family values that help them face the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Small church communities strengthen Hispanic religiosity -- a homespun spirituality that enables them to take responsibility for their Christian way of living. The church respects this emerging spirituality as a reflection of Hispanic cultural and spiritual identity, and recognizes that an attack against this identity is an attack against their Catholicity.

Small communities fortify a centuries-old tradition of faith. Affirmed and strengthened in their identity as Catholics, Hispanics can better serve the larger community. Yet, while small communities serve to preserve a vibrant faith, they are not simply warehouses of religious and cultural traditions. They are truly the expression of an emerging spirituality.

In the last few years they have made significant strides in the religious, educational, political, economic and social areas of our society. Hispanics are more visible in church leadership as bishops, theologians and lay leaders. They have become a visible presence in this country's political, economic and educational systems. Nevertheless, they still rank among the poorest Americans on the economic scale. They are represented disproportionately in the numbers of high school dropouts, pregnant teen-agers and persons in prison.
While many Latinos have not yet found a home in our society, they have generally found one in the church, especially in small church communities. Many Hispanic Catholics are more comfortable with small communities where people know one another and can interact with their priests and ministers on a personal level. Hispanics look to these communities for a credible experience of evangelization, where the Gospel is preached and truly lived in daily life.

Communion and Mission

The origin of the church lies in the mission of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son. In him and through him, the life of the Trinity is communicated. The community of disciples saw themselves sent by God into history with the mission of Christ in the power of the Spirit.(3) Thus, the small faith-communities model is taken from the church's foundation, the primary community par excellence -- the Trinity. As church, the small communities are "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."(4) At the heart of this unity is the church's mission of bringing the promises of God to fulfillment.

Since the beginning the church has recognized itself as communitarian (Acts 2:42). A small church community, by nature, is a communion with a mission. This belief is grounded in the truth that the mystery of God and the mystery of salvation are inseparable. God's self-emptying love, which draws us into life with the Trinity, is lived out in his saving deeds among us. It is a way of living the mystery that is the church. As groups with a mission, small church communities realize the Trinitarian relationships and God's saving activity among us.

The triune God invites us to communion. Jesus Christ incarnates this invitation, initiating the reign of God among us. Some reject this invitation, while those who accept it share in God's glory.(5) Small church communities respond to this invitation through their efforts to form authentic communion as church and through their mission of fostering the reign of God. The Spirit enlightens them so that they can understand Jesus' message. This Spirit reveals to them the true identity of Christ and empowers them for the mission. Since this communion also invites them to include others, giving preference always to the rejected, marginalized, abandoned and forgotten, the church is renewed in its self-expression as communion for all. This basic sense of communion enables the church to authenticate itself by seeing itself in a new light.

Partaking of life in the triune God has dramatic consequences. It means entering, in the most profound sense, into God's saving project for a new humanity. Living in communion with the triune God calls members of these communities to enter into a life of love and communion with all their brothers and sisters. In this sense, small communities -- communally and prophetically -- live out the call as artisans of the coming reign of God.
Integral evangelization is at the core of the faith life of the small communities:

"There is no gap between love of neighbor and the desire for justice.... The evil inequities and oppression of every kind which afflict millions of men and women today openly contradict Christ's Gospel and cannot leave the conscience of any Christian indifferent.

"The church, in her docility to the Spirit, goes forward faithfully along the paths to authentic liberation.... But a vast number of Christians, from the time of the apostles onward, have committed their powers and their lives to liberation from every form of oppression and to the promotion of human dignity. The experience of the saints and the example of so many works of service to one's neighbor are an incentive and a beacon for the liberating undertakings that are needed today."(6)

In their efforts to bring God's providential plan to fulfillment, small communities are confronting obstacles to communion with God and with one another, dictating a reordering of life at all levels. They work to triumph over the social, political, economic, racial, gender and environmental relationships that humanity creates as tools for destruction and death. This struggle against the obstacles that are contemporary society's idols of death serves to renew the small communities, which are not set up for themselves, but for mission.(7)

Small church communities should not be isolated from the rest of the church's life. The church is not simply a community of communities. It is an organic whole that expresses itself in ways such as small communities. While these structures are local and particular, their reality is universal and truly Catholic. So is their thrust. As realizations of the mystery of the church, small church communities do not exist separately from the apostolic ministry of the bishops. Small communities ultimately attest to the faithfulness of God's relationship with us and with our world.

Characteristics of Small Church Communities

The following constitutive elements are common to many authentic small church communities throughout the country. These characteristics can serve as a guide in working with newly formed church communities or in getting to know those communities already in place. It is our sincere hope that by supporting all church communities they will continue to mature and bear fruit.

1. Composition

Small church communities allow their members to relate to one another at a personal level, sharing in their common journeys of faith. Their small size reflects an attempt at a qualitative, rather than quantitative, approach to faith development. This allows greater
emphasis on a person's lived experience as seen through the lens of church tradition, sacred Scripture and the Hispanic history of suffering and hope.

The smallness of the group allows for concentration of church life and mission. It is not an effort for separation from the parish. The strength of the small groups comes from a concerted effort to delve more deeply into Christian life on a more personal level, while at the same time remaining intimately linked to the church's universal mission. In a small group the experience of God's daily effect on life stands at the center of the group's activities. Knowing firsthand the needs of its members allows participants to experience a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with their co-journeyers. The small gathering enables a more direct faith formation and personal sharing of stories of God's saving deeds.

2. Communitarian Life

In a society plagued by individualism, separatism and a general disregard for the well-being of others, small church communities reinforce the communitarian nature of church life. By calling their members to make the connection between faith and daily life, small ecclesial communities can credibly live out the church's preferential option for the poor through their close links with the homeless, the poor and those suffering at the bottom of the unjust social pyramid.

The essence of church life in the Christian community is to become one with the Trinity through communion with one another. Living in community is to live in communion with the triune God. God is present where there is authentic communion. A life of communion and love with our brothers and sisters is the path to divine life.

The sharing of faith stories reinforces the experience that Christian life is communitarian. Reading and meditating upon the sacred Scriptures in community helps us to understand the meaning of Scripture with the mind of the church, thus avoiding individualistic and erroneous interpretations. This leads to a renewed link with the Christian tradition and a deeper understanding of the church as "koinonia."(8)

Through a communitarian life all members are challenged to a shared vision of the life and work of Jesus Christ and the call to imitate him with a view of service to the world. The group aims for authentic community, which is centered on life with God and the mission of bringing the world to full unity in him. Although the Christian community is called to be of one mind (Acts 2:46), differences and conflicts are bound to arise. Living in community, however, calls all to deal creatively with tensions in obedience to the unfolding plan of God. Overcoming difficulties brings new life and depth to each member of the community.
The communitarian life of small church communities invites its members to full life and growth in God. These communities are not simply associations for intimate self-disclosure and emotional support. They promote their members' growth through the experiences and processes in which they discover and accept their God-given vocation. In keeping with the mission of the church, they become artisans of their own destiny.

In communities people come together to authenticate their interactions and to share in the struggles of their journeys. The communitarian lifestyle, however, poses challenges for its members. In our busy society, small groupings become reflective environs, raising the question of God's saving deeds in our lives and our world. The challenge of living in community is to enlarge a person's vision of God's saving plan without undermining one's development and growth. Individuals can feel accepted, welcomed and invited to maturity.

The community does not close in on itself, but rather integrates families of grandparents, parents, sisters and brothers. It promotes strong interpersonal relationships based on faith, love and unity. Members share their daily lives, their basic problems, their joys and their struggles. All feel welcomed there -- integrated and co-responsible -- with a fundamental equality, even if there is a diversity of function. Members of the community demonstrate a mutual, profound, caring, loving and committed partnership that brings them together in solidarity.

Small ecclesial communities can avoid the trap of being self-serving through a grounding in their mission and through interconnection with other levels of church. The communitarian aspect strongly emphasizes this unity as an essential element of being church. This unity forms a bridge with other communities, allowing the mission of God to flourish.

The communion that God desires does not end with the small church community. It reaches out to other levels of church life, including the parish, the diocese, the region and the universal church. Small ecclesial communities are in communion with these other elements as well as with their legitimate pastors. They participate in a strong "pastoral de conjunto."(9)

3. Ecclesial role

Small church communities are a communion of God's people living out the mission of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. In these communities new and effective ways of living the mystery of the church are being formed. This phenomenon challenges us to look at ourselves as church. Since it is still too early to know where this movement of the Spirit will lead us, we can only point to the reality and offer constructive direction.
The numbers of small church communities emerging within parishes indicate that parishes are providing pastoral leadership and fostering credible structures. For this we are grateful to their pastors and pastoral leaders, and to God, who gives the growth. Other parishes could also benefit greatly from the presence of small church communities. Without parish support and proper leadership, small groups could arise but lose direction. Furthermore, fundamentalist groups could easily move in to fill a vacuum.

Small church communities must not be seen in isolation. They are not another church, but part of the one church. Their major contribution is the new expression of Christian life. They offer the church a new inner life. Small communities are not a new movement in the church. Nor are they simply neighborhood subgroups of the parish structure. They are the church itself. They are a smaller expression of the universal church. As such, the church is developing new structures to allow this inner life to flourish. As communities of faith and mission, they give witness to a renewal of the church's inner life. Where this will lead depends on the Spirit.

Pope John Paul II has called for new parish structures for the Christian faithful. He calls for "adaptation of parish structures according to the full flexibility granted by canon law ... in promoting participation of the lay faithful," and sees small communities as "true expressions of ecclesial communion" when united with their pastors.(10) These vibrant small communities allow Catholics to regain their universal momentum at a local level.

Small church communities understand their ecclesial nature as they strive to balance their inner life with their missionary thrust. Without this effort they run the risk of losing their credibility as ecclesial communities. Evangelization in all its dimensions enables the communities to blossom and remain on the path of constant renewal in faithfulness to Christ.

4. Prophetic Mission

Our God is a God of life. As prophet, Jesus announced and initiated God's life as the rule of his coming reign among us. Small communities are called to make as their own Jesus' prophetic vision of the coming reign. Like Jesus, they must stand in solidarity with all who suffer. Thus it is important that these communities study the church's social teachings and remain open to living in solidarity with the poor. As small prophetic communities, they exist in the concrete realities of daily life, announcing the reign of God's new life.

In their commitment to fostering the reign of the triune God, small church communities experience the mystery of God and the mystery of salvation as inseparable. As prophetic communities their task is to examine human reality from the perspective of God's purposes so that their efforts are connected to God's designs for a new humanity.
Small church communities critically investigate the root causes of the idols of death, which are the obstacles to God's plan. They also interpret the signs of the times from the view of the mission of Jesus. Therefore, when small communities discuss, plan and focus on what direction to take, they begin and end with their commitment to the task of the coming reign of God. In this way these church communities become faithful to Christ's mission by refusing to give idols of death a place in history. As prophetic communities, they confront sin as an annihilation of communion with God and with one another.

Since God's plan for us is communion, small church communities are seen as countercultural in a society torn by division. The profound alienation felt in today's society is tied to the root cause of sin masquerading in the form of injustice, marginalization, abuse, abortion, drugs and violence. The communities' task of integral evangelization is to view people in all of the dimensions affecting their lives: spiritual, political, cultural, economic, social, educational and environmental, among others. In this way they can proclaim Christ as true Lord of all creation.

Bonding together under the banner of the God of life, small communities can critically examine the prevailing culture. They support an alternative way of life in a materialistic and consumption-driven society. The tendencies toward individualism and separatism and the disregard for the good of others are challenged by the presence of prophetic communities. Small communities invite and help people to be different in society, calling them to a conversion to the ways of God. This leads to communion.

As prophetic church communities, these groups attest to the possibilities of a new life with the triune God, bearing witness from the very place where the Gospel is lived. They profess communally that God is for us. Small communities affirm the faithfulness and truthfulness of God's relationship with us and with our world. For this reason we can call them communities of hope. As such, they proclaim that the God of life is victorious over all the forces of destruction that threaten true communion between sisters and brothers, among themselves and with the triune God.

Latinos resonate with the prophetic dimension of small church communities because they have often lived as strangers in their own land. Yet they have remained united by a profound faith and hope in the providence of God. In spite of historical obstacles, faith is at the center of their lives. Hispanics are experiencing a reawakening of cultural identity which is, at the same time, a rebirth of faith identity. Small faith communities affirm what is inherently good about being a Hispanic Catholic, while at the same time challenging members to grow in light of the church's universal mission.

5. Liturgical Life

The life of the church is directed to the worship and praise of the living God. Worship and praise are, therefore, an essential part of living in small church communities. In this
worship, the eucharist is the heart of their life and their essential link with the unity of the whole church. Life in service to the reign of God is connected intimately with praise of God. The eucharist celebrates the paschal mystery -- the communion of God with his people -- and anticipates the table of the new humanity where all will be one in Christ (Jn. 17). It is the summit toward which all is focused and the source of all new life.(11) The eucharistic life of the small communities is inseparable from their commitment to partake in the mission of God's saving plan. The members bring to the eucharist their lives as Christians to offer as a part of worship. They become renewed in their commitment to begin again as agents of the reign of God.

These small assemblies gather as a people of praise and lift up to God key moments in their common journey of joys and struggles. They celebrate in prayers of thanksgiving and petition. While they share in personal devotions, community prayer unites the group with the prayerful chorus of the whole church. As assemblies of praise they are centers for celebrating the gift of faith and the promise of new life.

In light of their evangelical mission, it is important for small worshiping communities to develop prayer lifestyles and forms of communal reflection in keeping with the church's tradition and practice. In so doing, the Bible is primary among their sources. Special sensitivity must be given to the inclusion of the faith traditions and customs of all the members present. Inculturation is indispensable in order to make the people's faith-expressions a part of their prayer life. In this way people touch the mystery of faith in their own language and through their own symbols. They are thus led to a renewed commitment to Christian living.

Hispanics tend to view all of life as sacred and have generally developed a profound sense of the divine in daily living. This is evident in their popular religiosity. Unfortunately, liturgical celebrations reflecting the Hispanic life of faith and other events that are dear to them such as Guadalupe celebrations, "posadas," processions and "quinceaneras" are often not incorporated into the worship life of the parish. In small communities Hispanics find support to retrieve this sense of popular piety and to reaffirm the values contained in these celebrations. As a people of praise, Latinos have a profound sense of celebration, or fiesta, and view life as a victory of grace over sin. Fiesta celebrates a moment of God's presence among us and anticipates the joy of the coming reign of God.

6. Missionary Thrust

As the Father has sent me, so I send you (Jn. 17:18). Small church communities are fundamentally missionary agents of the reign of God. The Second Vatican Council stressed the notion of the church as missionary to the world. In more recent times, Pope John Paul II emphasized the right of all peoples to hear the good news and called the church to a new evangelization in preparation for the third millennium of faith.
Small church communities engage in evangelization as an ongoing process, with life in a missionary community calling the members to constant conversion. This implies an encounter with Christ and an openness to allowing the reign of God to penetrate and guide one's whole life. To remain faithful to any evangelization effort, missionary church communities need to make solidarity with the poor a priority. This helps the community endure and retain sight of its ultimate goal of communion and mission. A community matures by being missionary; otherwise, it becomes self-serving and self-destructive.

Missionary communities assess how best to concretely live out their evangelical mission by critically studying the causes of alienation, emptiness and suffering. They question why society supports obstacles to God's plan. As missionary church communities, they challenge the causes of individualism, separatism and death-dealing ideologies that masquerade as being for the good of others. Small church communities protest all that attacks the coming reign of God. They plan as a group, within the framework of a "pastoral de conjunto," to more effectively respond to the needs of the people with whom they live. Their efforts attest to God's activity to eradicate sin and death, and form a communion where all are brothers and sisters in union with the triune God.

7. Ministerial Role

Small church communities are ministerial because they are made up of baptized persons who are called to be collaborators in the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

"Christ, the high priest and unique mediator, has made of the church 'a kingdom, priests for his God and Father' (Rv. 1:6; cf. Rv. 5:9-10; 1 Pt. 2:5, 9). The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly. The faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his proper vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet and king. Through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation the faithful are 'consecrated to be ... a holy priesthood' ("Lumen Gentium," 10.1)."(12)

Through the church God calls forth its ministers and forms them into ministerial communities. They exercise their role by linking the new evangelization with efforts to manifest among us the saving work of Jesus Christ, the high priest. Seen from this perspective, communities call their members to assume their rightful role in the mission of the whole church. In this way, the laity will move from seeing themselves as simply father's helpers to seeing themselves as responsible collaborators in the life and mission of the ministerial community. The more the faithful fulfill their work in the home, the parish, the neighborhood and the world, the more they make present the saving work of Christ, the high priest.

While all members belong to the ministerial community through baptism, confirmation and eucharist, not everything that the community does is considered ministry. The community engages in authentic ministry when its members' activities are carried out for
the sake of the reign of God and in the name of the church. Ministry is directly tied to the saving work of Christ. For this reason, communities should offer their members proper and adequate training and formation. Ministries will flourish and new ones will emerge as long as members creatively collaborate with their pastors, so that all ministry is done in the name of the church.

"A rapidly growing phenomenon in the young churches ... is that of 'ecclesial basic communities.' ... They ... become leaven of Christian life, of care for the poor and neglected, and of commitment to the transformation of society. Within them the individual Christian experiences community and therefore senses that he or she is playing an active role and is encouraged to share in the common task. Thus, these communities become means of evangelization and of the initial proclamation of the Gospel and a source of new ministries."(13)

In affirmation of the hierarchical nature of the church, small communities foster a discipleship in solidarity and equal responsibility. According to their proper call and mission, all ministers have the duty to make present the vision and work of Jesus Christ, the priest, prophet and king.(14)

Ministry is a call, a vocation. Small church communities call their members to promote vocations for all the church ministries. Members involved in ministerial activity are not volunteers who simply help the church or the clergy, but are responsible disciples participating in the ministry of Christ, the high priest.

Conclusion

The elements outlined above are not an exhaustive list of the characteristics of small church communities. Others will emerge as these communities continue to bear fruit. We single these out simply to highlight certain characteristics of church life that will bind us as one church. In these basic elements we see factors that renew the church in a way that makes all of us more credible and at the same time faithful to the Lord. We offer guidance to help small church communities mature as an integral part of the universal church, especially in light of the new evangelization.

Ultimately, communion and mission are a gift of the triune God. It is the Father who offers us this gift in the person of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Spirit. It is the triune God who brings into life these small communities and who sustains them. It is this Spirit of the living God who again calls the church to credibility in communion and mission, bearing witness to God's faithfulness to us and to our world. As Mary was present at Pentecost with the original church community, may she, model of faithful discipleship, continue to challenge and inspire the small ecclesial communities to bear much fruit.
Questions for Evaluating Small Church Communities

The following questions can serve as a guide for small church communities. They may be used for the self-evaluation that each community should conduct from time to time. They may also be used by the pastor (or bishop) when he makes a pastoral visit to a community. Finally, the questions may serve as a guide in the formation of new communities: The questions can be addressed as the community develops each of its constitutive elements.

1. Composition

The small size of communities allows their members to relate on a personal level and help to develop interconnectedness and belonging. The smallness of the group encourages concentration of church life and mission, not separation from the larger church community.

a. How do members get to know each other in community?

b. How do members become integrated into this community? Is it by an evangelization retreat or a personal invitation? Are they part of a neighborhood grouping or a section of a parish?

c. What is the composition of the group? Who is included (youth, elderly, etc.)?

d. How do people experience a sense of belonging in this small community?

e. How do members get to know the needs of the persons in the community and in the larger parish community?

f. How committed are the members to each other?

g. What type of sharing occurs in the group? Is personal faith shared? Is it focused on Christ and his mission? Do members tell stories of God in their lives?

h. Who is the facilitator? How is this person selected? Is the selection done in consultation with the pastor and parish council?

i. How are the members helped to articulate their personal faith journey and their call to participate in the mission of Christ to build the reign of God?

2. Communitarian Life
The communitarian aspect of small communities reinforces a strong tradition of community in church life. A communal lifestyle challenges the members to a shared vision of Jesus' life and work.

a. How do the members help each other understand the group's role in the mission of Christ?

b. How do the community's members relate their faith to their daily lives?

c. How does the group help each member become a mature adult Christian?

d. How does the group help its members discover a common purpose in applying Gospel values to all aspects of their lives?

e. What values does the group hold in common?

f. How are the members called to deeper faith?

g. How is the Bible used in the group's gatherings?

h. Is there an environment in the community that encourages ongoing conversion and constant refocusing on the group's mission?

i. How does the community demonstrate care and concern for the needs of its members?

j. Who participates in the "pastoral de conjunto"?

k. How are the gifts of the members being used to strengthen the life and work of the community?

l. How does the community resolve conflicts among its members?

m. How does the group deal with diversity?

3. Ecclesial Role

Small communities are church and should not exist in isolation from the parish and diocese. They are not another church, but are part of the one church, offering new expressions and new inner life.

a. How is the small community linked with the parish community?

b. How does the group share its experiences with other communities?
c. How are the bishop, pastor, parish pastoral leader and parish council connected to the small community?

d. How many times do the parish/diocesan leaders visit the community?

e. Are the parish leaders members of small communities?

f. What type of relationship does the small community have with other parish groups?

g. What type of leadership does the group need?

h. How does the group express its openness to the movement of the Spirit in the church?

i. How is the small community a sign of the presence of Christ in the world?

j. Give examples that show how the community is maturing as church.

k. How are the group members contributing to the life and ongoing renewal of the church?

l. Are members clear about their mission? What is the group's understanding of the mission of Jesus in today's world?

m. How are activities coordinated? How does the group handle evaluations of its members and the group's mission efforts?

n. How do the members promote the domestic church?

4. Prophetic Mission

Small church communities are prophetic when they proclaim that God's ways lead to communion with God and one another. They are prophetic when they give witness to the possibilities of new life with the triune God.

a. What are the community's efforts toward integral evangelization? How does the community evangelize?

b. How does the group witness as artisans of God's new humanity?

c. How are the members enabled to articulate Gospel values for themselves so that each gives witness to God's coming reign?

d. How does the community plan to give direction to its prophetic stance as a countercultural community and servant to the reign of God?
e. How does the community analyze problems in the neighborhood or city in light of the mission of the church to foster the reign of peace and justice?

f. How are members trained to critically assess any obstacles to God's plans?

g. What efforts are made to reach out to the alienated Catholic, to the marginalized in society, to rejected members of society?

h. What type of formation is offered to members regarding the social teachings of the church?

i. How does the community make present the saving work of Jesus Christ?

j. How does the community offer hope to the world?

5. Liturgical Life

Life in service to the reign of God is connected intimately with praise of God. Inculturation in the liturgy is instrumental to express the Hispanic sense of the sacredness of daily life.

a. How does the community relate its mission to its worship?

b. What is the prayer life of the community?

c. How does the group incorporate the Hispanic popular religious traditions into its prayer and worship?

d. Are services celebrated in Spanish? If necessary, are the services held bilingually?

e. How is the community sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of its members, and how is this expressed in worship?

f. Do all members of the community help in the liturgical preparations for special occasions such as "quinceaneras," weddings, baptisms and "posadas"?

g. Does the community participate in the sacramental preparation of its members: baptism, first communion, marriage?

h. What provisions are made to incorporate children, youth, the elderly and the physically disabled in the prayer life of the church?

i. Does the community have an appropriate setting for prayer ("altarcitos," religious symbols)?
j. When does the community gather to celebrate and pray with other communities? With the larger parish community?

k. How does the group prepare to participate in the parish's liturgical life?

l. What type of Scripture reflection is used in the small community?

m. When does the group have fiesta?

n. How often does the community go on retreat?

o. Who organizes the calendar of celebrations for the community?

p. How are members helped to discover the sacredness of life in ordinary life experiences?

6. Missionary Thrust

Small communities are missionary agents for the reign of God. They make the church's option for the poor a priority in their missionary efforts.

a. How are the members called to conversion? Retreats, workshops, missions?

b. In what way does the community relate conversion to Christ with the mission of Christ?

c. How is the group in solidarity with the poor?

d. How does the community reach out to those who have not yet heard about Christ?

e. How does the community plan and formulate goals to give direction to its missionary efforts?

f. How does the group assess its faithfulness to Christ?

7. Ministerial Role

Small communities foster the active participation of their members as collaborators in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. The main thrust of all ministry is the reign of God.

a. How are the gifts of the members called forth in community?

b. How are the gifts of the community placed at the service of the neighborhood and parish?
c. How are the members trained to be ministers and leaders? In the community, in the parish, in the diocese? What type of training is being offered?

d. Do all ministers work in collaboration with the pastor and parish pastoral leaders?

e. What efforts are made to foster vocations to the priesthood, religious life and to all other parish ministries?

f. How is the role of women in the communities respected?

g. What is done in the community to develop a serious commitment to ministry?

h. What is being done in the community to help members move from an attitude of being simply Father's helpers and parish volunteers to being responsible collaborators in the life of the church?

A Suggested Model For Gatherings

The structure for these gatherings varies depending on the region of the country, the liturgical season, the number of years the group has been together and so forth.

Welcome.

Prayer of praise and hymns.

Scripture reflection or a teaching.

Group sharing on the reflection or teaching (as it applies to their faith journey in light of the church's mission).

Prayers of the faithful.

"Our Father."

Announcements and other community concerns.

Closing prayers and hymns.

Hospitality.

Notes

(1) The experience of small communities among Hispanics/Latinos in the United States is different from the Latin American experience of "comunidades de base." In the United States, Hispanic Catholics are a
minority in a Protestant country, often experiencing cultural and linguistic alienation. Since U.S.
Hispanics have forged intimate ties between their self-identity and their faith expressions, small church
communities serve to affirm their faith and cultural identity.

The rich Latin American experience of small base communities called for in Medellin, Puebla and Santo
Domingo will continue to enrich the discussion and formation of the church in the Americas.
Furthermore, the experience of Hispanic Catholics in small church communities can be a help to others in
this country in the formation of these communities.

(2) National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment"
Hispanic Ministry (1987).

(3) Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 2-4; Eph. 2:18.

(4) The expression is from St. Cyprian's "De Oratone Dominica" 23: "Patrologia Latina" 4, 553 and is
quoted in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 4.

(5) "He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept
him he gave power to become children of God" (Jn. 1:11-12).

(6) Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation (Vatican

(7) Paul VI, "On Evangelization in the Modern World" (1975). In No. 58, Paul VI calls the small
communities to be in solidarity with the church's life, nourished by its teachings and united with its
pastors.


(9) National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, 9-17.


(13) John Paul II, "Redemptoris Missio" (1990), 51.

(14) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1268.

MARGIN NOTES TO COMMUNION AND MISSION: A GUIDE FOR BISHOPS
AND PASTORAL LEADERS ON SMALL CHURCH COMMUNITIES

QUOTE FROM A PAST TEXT OF CURRENT INTEREST:
"The mobility of our population, the stresses of the society in which we live and often the size of parishes are factors leading people to want to participate in the church's life and ministry on a smaller scale.

"Small church communities take shape in various ways. Sometimes people are drawn to them through a parish renewal process or through one of the lay movements and associations, which often provide for their members the experience of Christian community. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults can lead members of a parish to become a small community which invites and catechizes those who are considering joining the church. Still other small communities are organized in neighborhoods or are rooted in various natural groupings that may exist within a parish.

"Small church communities not only foster the faith of individuals, they are living cells which build up the body of Christ. They are to be signs and instruments of unity. As basic units of the parish, they serve to increase the corporate life and mission of the parish by sharing in its life generously with their talents and support.

"Drawing upon the thorough discussion of small communities which took place at the 1987 synod on the vocation and mission of lay faithful, Pope John Paul II has urged local ecclesiastical authorities to foster these 'living' communities for they are 'where the faithful can communicate the word of God and express it in service and love to one another; these communities are true expressions of ecclesial communion and centers of evangelization, in communion with their pastors' ('Christifideles Laici,' 26).

"In all cases, authentic small Christian communities are characterized by: obedience to the word of God; common prayer; a commitment of time to one another for building personal relationships; meaningful participation in the life of their local parish; some form of apostolic mission to the wider society; an adherence to the Catholic faith; and an explicit relationship of communion with the church.

"The growing Hispanic/Latino and Asian presence in our country, as well as the influence of other ethnic groups, has been a creative impetus in the formation of small Christian communities. As our church becomes increasingly multicultural, these small communities can enable lay people from different backgrounds to come to know one another in a trusting way, creating bonds of solidarity, a commitment to mission and new lay leaders....

"1. Pastoral leaders should feel challenged to serve the 'laity by helping them to develop and sustain small Christian communities -- including those based on careers and professions. Laity, too, should take a leadership role, working with their pastors to develop these faith communities, bringing their own gifts and wisdom acquired from family and work to renew our church. In no case, however, should small church communities forget their rootedness in the family -- the first and most basic form of the church -- or sever their links to the larger faith community present in the parish and diocese.

"2. The laity are called to participate in a 'new evangelization.' This means sharing the good news of Jesus personally through the witness of our lives. Moreover, the new evangelization is 'directed not only to persons but also to entire portions of populations in the variety of their situations, surroundings and cultures' ('Christifideles Laici,' 34). Its purpose is to challenge, through the power of the Gospel, those values, judgments, patterns of behavior, sources of inspiration and models of life which are inconsistent with the word of God and the plan of salvation (cf. 'Evangelii Nuntiandi,' 19), and to affirm the ways God is working in the world today.

"3. Small church communities offer an important and unique means of formation for the new evangelization. They strengthen their members to persevere in their faith and mission, providing both inspiration and practical support. To be involved in the new evangelization, however, requires that
members of such communities be as ready for engagement with the world outside their community as they are for deepening their relationships within it."

(From "Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium," the U.S. bishops' November 1995 pastoral letter on the laity, in Origins, the current volume, quoted material on p. 412.)

The text of "Christifideles Laici," Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation on the laity, appeared in Origins, Vol. 18, pp. 561ff (the edition dated Feb. 9, 1989). He quoted, in No. 26, from one of the 1987 world Synod of Bishops' propositions, which said that "small, basic or so-called 'living' communities where the faithful can communicate the word of God and express it in service and love to one another" should be fostered, and that "these communities are true expressions of ecclesial communion and centers of evangelization in communion with their pastors."

The special Synod of Bishops for Africa, held in Rome in 1994, spoke of small ecclesial communities in its final message (Origins, Vol. 24, pp. 1ff, esp. p. 6). It said:

"The church, the family of God, implies the creation of small communities at the human level, living or basic ecclesial communities. In such communities, which are cells of the church as family, one is formed to live concretely and authentically the experience of fraternity. In them the spirit of disinterested service, solidarity and a common goal reigns. Each is moved to construct the family of God, a family entirely open to the world from which absolutely nobody is excluded. It is such communities that will provide the best means to fight against ethnocentrism within the church itself and, more widely, within our nations. These individual churches as family have the task of working to transform society."