

Catholic

UPDATE

C1707A

JULY 2017

We Are Today's Apostles

AN INVITATION TO SMALL FAITH COMMUNITIES

WILLIAM BISCHOFF



ISTOCK

Our Church is in a constant state of transition, some of which isn't welcome by all Catholics. In the last decade alone, we have had three popes, alterations in the wording of the liturgy, a shortage of clergy, and a decline in religious communities. Laypeople do their best to adjust to the ever-evolving life of the parish, but the numerous changes in the Church have left many Catholics feeling spiritually

shell-shocked and seeking comfort in their roots. Amid the changes and accompanying challenges, many Catholics remain Christ-centered in small faith communities (SFCs) where they find a sense of peace and feel welcomed. SFCs are rooted in the life of the Church, as stated in the Book of Acts: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Today's small faith communities resemble those of the Catholic Church in South America of many years ago. They took the model described in Acts and used it to create a foundation for communities. In the poorest slums, members of these communities gathered to grow in their faith and challenge the institutions that denied fundamental human rights to them. Some even became effective tribunals to mediate tribal and ethnic conflicts. What were marks of the early Christian community became the same examples that led to the renewal of the faith among the poor in South and Latin America.

In his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, commonly called the Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis (center) wrote, "Church institutions, basic communities and small communities, movements, and forms of association are a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up by the Spirit for evangelizing different areas and sectors. Frequently they bring a new evangelizing fervor and a new capacity for dialogue with the world whereby the Church is renewed. But it will prove beneficial for them not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the particular Church" (EG 29).

Inspired by this model, today's SFCs define themselves as established communities of Catholics who gather regularly for the purpose of linking faith and life using the word, sharing and actively living out their faith in involvement with the parish and the greater community. Group names vary. They are sometimes called small Christian communities (SCC) or home-based communities (HBC), but the core identity is *community*. Groups are formed by invitation rather than the parish sign-up list. Members following the example of the early Church and of the apostles invite others to become involved by starting a group or joining an existing group. The invitation is not designed to corral others, simply to help out; it's designed to ask them to become members of a community for their own spiritual benefit and growth. The invitation is rooted in Jesus' example of calling his followers, so the invitation is always open. Consider Hebrews 10:24-25 "We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works. We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near."



Formation of an SFC takes time, patience, and a good sense of humor. The community is not another parish or Church organization like the altar society. The goal is to allow group members to get to know each other on a faith level and experience a sense of listening that leads to sharing. Like a family, an SFC community is never finished—life makes sure of that. Faith experiences, life-forming events, family life, children, sacraments, and other aspects of Catholic parish life will cause it to grow and adapt to new circumstances.

Take Bruce and Sharon. Bruce, a non-Catholic, was invited to a parish event. There he met Sharon, and they clicked. Sharon invited Bruce to her SFC to meet her "other family." He did, and then he continued to attend SFC gatherings. He entered the parish's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults process, and SFC members became Bruce's sponsors. All fourteen stood with him at Pentecost for his reception into the Church, confirmation, and first Eucharist. Later that summer, the entire SFC witnessed their wedding. Bruce and Sharon are still active in the SFC and parish life.

As SFCs grow by the act of invitation, their active presence in a parish grows as well. This unveils one of the greatest blessings and challenges for SFCs: inclusivity. Everyone *is* welcome, but in a rapidly changing Church, does everyone *feel* welcome? Communities must be open to diversity in marital status, age, ethnicity, and other matters. Yet not every group will be diverse. Some people invited to one community may discover they're more comfortable belonging to a more mature group. Others might prefer to join a young-family group to be with other parents who uphold the same faith and values.

An interesting link developing in some parishes is an RCIA/SFC relationship. The RCIA is the process for becoming a member of the Catholic faith community; an SFC is a specific

Continued on back page.

