

Small Christian Communities in the U.S. Catholic Church

Carol Zieba



Carol Zieba has been a member of Bread of Life CLC in Baltimore, MD, for ten years and is a member of Emmaus CLC in Silver Spring, MD. She is a teacher in Anne Arundel County public schools and is on the core team for Disciples in Mission in her parish.

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are the future of the Church. Of course we in CLC know that, but it was such a blessing to attend the Convocation of Small Christian Communities in San Antonio along with so many from all over the United States, who share that belief with us. Randomly seated around tables, participants heard talks by Dr. Robert Bellah, Dr. Scott Appleby, Dr. Michael Cowan, Dr. Patricia O’Connel Killen, Evelyn and Jim Whitehead, Fr. Art Baranowski and Dr. Jeanette Rodriguez. There was lots of time for small group discussion and at the end each group reported its hopes and recommendations for the future networking possibilities of Small Christian Communities in the U.S.

What is the profile of SCC members in the U.S.? According to Bernard Lee’s research, there are an estimated 45,000 to 50,000 Small Christian Communities in the U.S. Of the twenty million Catholics who attend Mass on Sunday, one in twenty belongs to a SCC. Members of SCCs are more active in their parishes than the average Catholic. The majority of SCC members are white, middle class and were born before Vatican II. They have a better understanding of tradition and are more apt to recognize the teaching authority of the magisterium than succeeding generations. Younger adults desire spiritual experience but their participation in organized religion is based more on what they can get out of it rather than loyalty to a church community. Thus there are relatively small numbers of young people in SCCs.

Dr. Robert Bellah addressed the question: “Why are American SCCs better at being gathered than being sent?” He suggested that many members of SCCs are hurting and in need of the group’s support. They are unable to reach out to others according to Catholic social thought because they are focused on their own pain. He recommended that the groups work toward finding the source of their pain and they will recognize that it usually comes from outside the group. When they come to understand that the same forces that devastate the poor also cause pain for the affluent, they will be more willing to work in solidarity with the poor to make systematic changes that benefit both. Since everything is interconnected, they need to think globally. People need to change their focus from one of self-interest to one of solidarity with the entire human family. In our individualistic society, it is difficult to come together in community to discern solutions to public problems.

Dr. Scott Appleby addressed the importance of SCCs in the Church along with the challenges and responsibilities of SCCs. He talked about the institutional crisis in the Church in recent years: fewer priests and religious; pastoral challenges posed by diversity; theological pluralism and secularization of U.S. society and culture. There is a need for people to move away from “sacralization of subjective experience” and reconnect with their Catholic tradition. According to Appleby, small church communities can fill this need and are “indispensable to the future of Catholicism in the U.S.” because they provide a sense of Catholic community that people cannot get in larger parish settings. Laity can be better formed and sent out by a small church community as was done in the early house churches described in Acts.

Working in small groups, convocation participants made several recommendations as an outcome of this assembly. The networking of SCCs and their organizations had a high priority. They recognized that Latinos have a lot to offer and should be full partners in

planning future convocations. Gaining the support of bishops and pastors was a top priority for parish-based SCCs. Organizing for public life and social justice, including youth as equals in planning and developing leadership and materials were also priorities.

CLC members attending this convocation could easily see the benefits of working with this type of networking group. I left with a better understanding that the problems that we face in CLC are shared by many faith-based small groups. However, I could also sense that we have a lot to offer others. Our sense of mission, which grows out of the scriptures and the Spiritual Exercises, seemed to be missing from many of the groups. We are working toward becoming an apostolic community and have a long CLC tradition dating back to the original Sodalities. We have a global vision because we act in solidarity with members in fifty-four countries and experience leadership from the national and world levels. Other groups lacked this graced history and sense of mission that we hold dear.

A formal organization of SCCs does not exist. This convocation, which was sponsored by Buena Vista, The National Alliance of Parishes Re-structuring into Communities and the North America Forum for Small Christian Communities drew about six hundred people from many SCCs across the U.S. The CLC members who attended it felt at home with them and at the same time knew we were unique.

We left the event convinced that steps should be taken to:

- 1) recognize officially that the U.S. communities of the World Christian Life Community are members of the wider population of Small Christian Communities in the U.S., and
- 2) establish a liaison committee to develop a closer relationship with other SCCs in the U.S.

We would like CLC liaisons to be authorized to participate in and co-sponsor programs together with any convocation of SCCs. We have so much to share and so much to learn.

CLC participants were Fr. Paul Kenney, S.J., Pat Carter, Betty and Fred Leone and Carol Zieba. We have petitioned the National Coordinating Council requesting that they implement these two first steps.



Celebrating Fred Leone's 80th Birthday on the River Walk in San Antonio.



CLC participants at the Convocation of Small Christian Communities (left to right): Pat Carter, Fred Leone, Betty Leone, Carol Zieba, Paul Kenney, S.J.

Questions for Discussion

1. *Have you personally become involved in trying to rectify a "...force which might devastate the poor...cause pain for the affluent..."?*
2. *Did your "sense of mission" begin/develop by your membership in CLC?*
3. *Would you like to add another suggestion for implementation to NCC regarding Small Christian Communities and CLC?*