The Parish, Small Church Communities, and the National Ministry Summit

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What makes for excellent parishes? This question has been asked again and again over the years. Some significant research has likewise been done over the years. The most recent effort stems from a collaborative effort of six national ministry-focused organizations: the National Association for Lay Ministry, the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development, the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators, the National Association of Diaconate Directors, the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association, and the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

The Emerging Models Project

With a major grant from the Lilly Endowment, these organizations have been conducting the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project (www.emergingmodels.org) for several years now. Building on the results of prior research efforts, the Emerging Models Project conducted surveys and symposia to collect data on parish vitality. From April 20 to 23, 2008, in Orlando, Florida, the project held a National Ministry Summit to consider what has been learned from the research thus far and to begin to develop recommendations for action. Among the 1,300 participants, four of us were from the Archdiocese of Hartford: Deacon Bob Pallotti (Office of the Diaconate), Father Tom Sas (Ministry Enrichment for Priests Committee), Mary Marsan (Office of Religious Education), and myself. Deacon Bob and Father Tom also serve on the advisory board for our Pastoral Department for Small Christian Communities.

The Survey

To begin with, a project-related general survey conducted by the National Pastoral Life Center identified 32 indicators of parish vitality for the purposes of testing. One of these 32 touched on small church communities: "Parishioners experience spiritual growth through involvement in *small faith-sharing communities* and/or parish-based pastoral movements like RENEW, CHRP, etc." (Italics added.) Survey respondents, typically pastors, ranked these indicators on a 1-7 scale from "not at all descriptive" to "very descriptive" of their parishes. The results were drawn from 928 useable returns.

The five indicators of parish vitality that pastors identified as *most descriptive* of their parishes had to do with:

1. preaching that connects Scripture to daily life
2. attending to the sick, homebound, and bereaved;
3. having a pastor/staff energized and enthusiastic about ministry;
4. liturgies that are prayerful, reverent, and spiritually moving; and
5. engaging in outreach to the poor.

The five areas that pastors reported as *least descriptive* of their parishes, starting with the lowest ranked, include:

1. emphasis on the renewal of adult faith;
2. parishioners receiving training for leadership and ministry;
3. having youth and young adults involved in the parish;
4. "having parishioners experience spiritual growth through involvement in *small faith-sharing communities* and/or parish based pastoral movements like RENEW, CHRP,

etc."(Italics added); and

5. having parishioners eager to be involved in parish leadership and ministry.

Reporting and reflecting on these findings, David DeLambo (*In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, available on the Emerging Models Web site) comments on these five areas where pastors report the lowest level of pastoral excellence: "Few would quibble with the opinions of pastors here. Most would concur that *these are areas of challenge in the majority of Catholic parishes.* Indeed, in other research associated with the Emerging Models of Pastoral Excellence Project, lay and ordained pastoral leaders indicate that *these five areas are critical to the future of vibrant parish life.*" (Italics added.)

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The Symposia

In addition to the survey, the Emerging Models Project also conducted symposia in 8 regions throughout the country. These gatherings of a range of folks with a variety of ministerial backgrounds served to collect additional data in a more narrative style. While an extensive report on these symposia is in the works, the initial reports by David Ramey on the several symposia are posted on the Emerging Models Web site. A review of the executive summaries that conclude these reports reveals one or more references to small faith sharing communities in each of the 8 reports. They appear in the context of reporting pastoral leaders' anticipation of key elements in the "composition," "structure," or "leadership" of the parish in the future.

The generation of all the research material was intended to lead to a National Ministry Summit, the goal of which was to be the development of recommendations for action to further excellence in pastoral leadership. The Summit was to be organized to focus on six areas around which the Emerging Models research project was designed:

1. Pastoring Multiple Parishes

2. Parish Life Coordinators and Sacramental Ministers
3. Young Adults: The Next Generation of Parish Leadership
4. Implications of the Emerging Models Studies for Human Resources
5. Implications of the Emerging Multicultural Diversity for Pastoral Leadership
6. Best Practices for Parish Leadership.

Particular organizational interests of sponsoring partners may be easily, and understandably, discerned in these focus areas.

Research Reports Online

In anticipation of the Summit, the Emerging Models Web site exhibited research reports on each of these six areas. Participants were invited to download and review this material prior to the Summit gathering. These reports continue to be available on the site.

The Best Practices report makes explicit mention of small church communities. In this paper by Marti Jewell, the Emerging Models Project director, and David Ramey, a project research associate, there are two particular references to *small faith communities*. The second of the two, interestingly, is found in the final sentence of the last paragraph of the report.

The first reference comes in the report's mention that "seven structural models of parish leadership were identified through the symposia process." Across these structures, it is asserted, pastoral leaders are giving birth to new models of leadership through:

1. intentional planning and visioning processes in their parishes,
2. innovative approaches to clustering parishes and inter-parish collaboration,
3. intentional formation of lay leaders, and
4. *concentration on small, more intentional faith communities within the parish, providing outreach to individuals and families (italics added).*

In the final paragraph of their paper, Jewell and Ramey report that the symposia identified "a vibrant and creative undercurrent of parish revitalization and formation." These emerging communities of pastoral excellence, they continue, are celebrative, welcoming, collaborative, and inclusive. The report concludes: "These communities are very often mission focused in serving the church and the world and more deeply intentional in the faith formation of individuals through small

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faith-based communities, deep-seated in prayer and sacramental life, and a rock bed foundation in the Eucharist as the center of all parish life and ministry."

The National Ministry Summit

The very notion of a National Ministry Summit intrigued me as soon as I learned of it last fall. Given my own and our archdiocesan investment in the development of parish-based small church communities, I was keen to see how they figured in the research and how they would play in the context of a major gathering of pastoral leaders from around the country.

The National Ministry Summit began on Sunday evening, April 20, the day Benedict XVI was presiding at Eucharist at Yankee Stadium. Of the 1,300 attendees at the Summit, 45% were clergy (bishops, priests, deacons), 55% were lay people (including women and men religious). With the Emerging Models research as background, the Summit's task was to develop recommendations for action based on the research that has been done to date. Conducted basically over the course of two and a half days, the Summit unfolded as a series of keynote presentations and smaller group work. People were assigned to tables for conversation in response to the keynotes, guaranteeing a mix of persons connected to the several organizational partners at each of the tables. Most of the keynote presentations are available on the Web site.

Bishop Blase Cupich (Diocese of Rapid City) led off on Monday morning with some orienting theological, sacramental, and ecclesiological reflections about the overall Emerging Models project. The bishop serves as the episcopal advisor to the project. Marti Jewell, the Emerging Models Project director, followed Cupich by presenting major findings of the project.

Identifying Recommendations

The heart of the Summit's work, identifying recommendations for action, began on Monday afternoon. People were free to attend whichever of the six focus area sessions (cf. above) they wished.

Given the attention to small church communities in the Jewell/Ramey paper, I chose to participate in the section focused on Best Practices of Parish Leadership. Hundreds of folks made the same choice. It was the best-attended session of the six. Jewell and Ramey began by offering a presentation on the project's findings in this regard. They then facilitated a process that had each table of eight identify their own *best practices* recommendations for action. Jewell concluded her setup for the process by asking, "What must we do to ensure that parishes are vitally alive and spiritual?" Each person was to propose one recommendation. After some time for individual work, people shared their recommendation at their table. After general conversation, the table's assignment was to select two recommendations that were to be entered into a specially designed program at a computer that was situated at each of the dozens of tables in the hall. (Computer geeks roamed the room to assist the technologically challenged.)

Yours truly proposed the following recommendation: "Promote and support the development of small church *communities centered on the human, intellectual,*

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*spiritual, and pastoral areas of formation a*s basic units of the parish in a long-range plan to realize the life and mission of the parish." A variety of other recommendations were also proposed. After the initial hearing among us at the table, the small church community recommendation was quite quickly and spontaneously accepted as the first of the two recommendations to be made by our table. It was then modified to include the italicized words above that were part of another table member's recommendation on formation for parishioners.

Summit leaders had arranged for a team of people to sift through the hundreds of recommendations that came in from all the tables in each of the six focus areas. They sorted out doubles, combined others and boiled them all down to 72 recommendations across the six areas. The sifting committee worked past midnight to sort out the recommendations. Their report was sitting on the tables in the general assembly when we reconvened on Tuesday morning.

There was no effort to rank the recommendations we were advised. The report was to be taken simply as a list of the recommendations that were finally distilled from the many that were submitted. The recommendation my table presented on small church communities survived the sifting in tact and appeared in the list as number 72, the last recommendation of the overall set.

Voting on Recommendations

The Tuesday morning session began with another keynote, "Being an Effective and Responsible Agent for Change." It was delivered by Sister Terri Monroe, RSCJ. The general table discussion that followed focused on the 72 recommendations. No further refinements or decisions were meant to come from this table conversation. It was meant for general exploration of the recommendations for action.

In the afternoon, however, the six action groups met again. Folks were back at their respective tables—again with a computer at each table. The assignment now, after another general table conversation about the recommendations, was for each individual to choose his or her top three recommendations in each of the six focus areas and his or her top ten recommendations overall. Each person entered votes into the specially designed computer program. Each also responded to some general background questions on gender, age range, ministerial role, ethnicity, race, and what focus group he or she attended.

The Voting Results

Copies of the complete compilation of all this data were waiting for us at the tables on Wednesday morning. Curiously, of the approximately 1,300 who were registered for the Summit, only 831 people participated in the voting. The group was about evenly divided by gender. 70% were between the ages of 50 and 69. Over 90% were Caucasian; 8% were Hispanic/Latino. Other races represented, including those identifying as Black or African, were no more than 2%. 22% were priests. Eleven bishops were in attendance, but only one bishop participated in the voting. 28% were lay ecclesial ministers. 12% were deacons. 21% self-identified simply as Other. 36% participated in the Best Practices in Parish Leadership action group. In sharp contrast, participation percentages in each of the other five action groups were only in the teens.

In the order of the six focus areas initially named above, the top recommendation in each of the action areas can be summarized as follows:

1. Develop comprehensive training for ministry in a multiple parish environment.
2. Define clearly the role of parish life coordinators vis-à-vis other clergy to whom they relate.
3. Encourage training/implementation of technological tools that young adults use in communication/networking.
4. Provide formation for those in church ministry in leadership, administration/management.
5. Recommend formation/orientation for foreign-born priests coming to U.S. parishes.
6. Create a culture of accountability through performance reviews for all ministers (clergy and lay).

This last area, of course, was that of Best Practices in Pastoral Leadership. The recommendation on small church communities ranked sixth of 12 among the recommendations in this area.

The Top Ten and Beyond

In the ranking of the top 10 overall recommendations, the top five may be summarized as follows:

1. Develop comprehensive training for ministry in a multiple-parish environment.
2. Define clearly the role of parish life coordinators vis-à-vis other clergy to whom they relate.
3. Provide initial and ongoing formation for all in church ministry.
4. Create a culture of accountability through per-

formance reviews for all ministers (clergy and lay).

5. Develop more consultative pastoral planning processes when considering clustering, twinning, merging, and closing parishes.

Four of these top five overall recommendations were the top recommendation in their respective areas.

With 831 people having 10 votes each (for a potential total of 8,310 votes being marked) in the overall recommendation category, the breakdown was such that the top three mentioned above (with 345, 296, and 281 votes respectively) received 4% of the votes. The next two (4-5) received 3%. The next five (6-10) received 3%. With a range of votes from 176 to 118, the next fourteen (11-24), with the small church community recommendation tied at 22nd, received 2%. The remaining 48 recommendations, with votes ranging from 114 to 8, received no more than 1% of the votes each.

The Wednesday general assembly featured a panel of responders to the Summit as a whole and a concluding keynote by Father Robert Schreiter, CPPS. Schreiter's presentation offered something of a synthesis of the Summit talks and recommendations "in the context of the Gospel call to a global church."

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It is now up to the partner organizations that sponsor the Emerging Models Project and the Summit participants in general to take the recommendations developed at the gathering and follow up accordingly. A second phase of research, to be supported by an additional grant from the Lilly Endowment, is in the works.

The Meaning of It All

So, what does one make of it all? In a sense, while some key issues do emerge, the recommendations are in a certain sense all over the place. And it is really unclear just what weight is to be given to the results. How one follows up on the practical pastoral ground is a bit up in the air. The second round of research will hopefully deal with these matters.

On the personal level, I would associate myself with a thought expressed from the floor during a closing open forum. One participant put it this way: "There were flaws in the process and the time for conversation was inadequate to the task, but the overall experience was great!" The room's resonance with this expression of appreciation was palpable.

The simple fact of the Summit is a witness to the potential of pastoral collaboration, first among the sponsoring partners and then among the Summit participants. The coming together of the six organizations created something that no one of them could accomplish alone. Both the collaboration among the partners and the sheer number of participants are clear witnesses to how keen the interest is throughout the country about attending to the vitality of parish. The atmosphere throughout the four days was positively charged. People were caught up in the event and enthusiastically so. My tablemates at both the general sessions and in the sectional group meetings easily engaged with one another in quality, focused conversation. It was a great experience!

Implications for Small Church Communities

But what are the implications of it all for small church communities? Let me first make a comment about language, specifically about the terms *small faith communities* and *small church communities*. Throughout these reflections, variations of the former term are regularly used in the context of the research, the latter, when I have been speaking for myself. This juxtaposition of terms calls for some comment and clarification. To wit: I regard the former term as a rather unhappy and inadequate description of what small church communities are all about. The small faith communities term is infelicitous, because it opens itself to the running joke that these groups are for the people with *small faith*. This is a minor point, perhaps. The term is inadequate, however, because *faith-sharing* does not explicitly capture the full range of meaning of these communities—grounded as they are in the four essential dimensions of church, word, community, worship, and witness.

The term small church communities has the advantage of immediately lifting up the ecclesial character of these groups. As "basic units" of parish (cf. *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium,* USCCB), small

church communities are essentially more than what might in some quarters be described as merely *nice little faith-sharing groups for people who are into that kind of thing*. In short, there is a richness in the image of small church communities that the term small faith communities just does not carry. I do realize that there are those who use the term small faith communities who would claim the larger vision which I attach to the term small church communities. For me, however, the term small church community immediately suggests that what is at stake here is something considerably more than *my* small faith sharing group. "A rose by any other name may smell as sweet," but words do make a difference.

But back to the point of the implications of the Emerging Models research and the Summit experience for small church community development. Happily, small communities were considered to be enough of a marker of parish vitality to be included in the survey to begin with. Unhappily, but not surprisingly, it emerges that the development of small communities are (along with adult and young adult faith formation and empowerment) among the "least descriptive" characteristics of the parishes represented in pastor responses to the survey. Given our growing realization since Vatican II of the preeminent importance of building a fully adult church, it is simply stunning that these five elements rank as the "least descriptive" characteristics of the parishes in the NPLC survey.

At the risk of posing an outrageous question, how much of a difference are the five "very descriptive" characteristics of parish really making in people's lives and in the parish overall, if those characteristics centered on adult/young adult formation, renewal, and empowerment actually make up the five "least descriptive" characteristics of parish?

While David DeLambo observes that our five "least descriptive" markers of parish vitality in the parishes surveyed are "areas of challenge in the majority of Catholic parishes," he also notes that other aspects of the research see that "these five areas are critical to the future of vibrant parish life." The combination of seeing these areas both as a *challenge* to the majority of parishes and as *critical* to the future vitality of parish needs to be more deeply probed.

Confronting the crux of the busyness and noisiness of contemporary life and the extent to which they cut us off from ourselves, from each other, and so from a sense of the presence and action of God, is, I believe, the critical factor constituting the challenge we, both pastors and people, face in the development of small

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church communities and "vibrant parish life."

All is not at a standstill however. It is quite encouraging to read the Jewell and Ramey note that across seven structural models of pastoral leadership identified through the symposia, pastoral leaders are giving birth to new models of leadership that include "concentration on smaller, more intentional faith communities…" Their Best Practices report closes with a note of strong affirmation when they tell us that symposia identified "a vibrant and creative undercurrent of parish revitalization and formation." These emerging communities of excellence, they conclude, "are very often mission focused in serving the church and the world and more deeply intentional in the faith formation of individuals through small faith-based communities…" We need to be in touch with these parishes and learn from their efforts.

The fact that each of the eight regional symposia report that small faith communities are referenced as key elements in people's imagination of the parish of the future points to the presence not just of a regional, but also of a country-wide intuition about the importance and potential for small church community development. That the regional reports variously lift up the import of small church communities in the threesome of "composition," "structure," or "leadership" in the parish of the future cannot be underestimated. It is not just a question of getting more people in more small groups (1). It is a matter structuring parish in this more relational way (2). And it is, above all, a matter of pastoral leadership and parishioner leaders committing to each other to move this direction for parish together (3). Number 3 (leadership) moves number 2 (structure); numbers 3 and 2 move number 1 (composition).

Given that the Emerging Models research and the Summit process were set up to focus on six focus areas (centered on organizational interests proper to the partners, and these are indeed serious issues in their

own right), it is no surprise that recommendations from those six areas would rise to the top. With all that, however, it is noteworthy and heartening that a recommendation on small church communities manifests as visibly, if modestly, as it does in the assembly's ranking of the recommendations overall. One can only wonder, where it is appropriate, what some concerted lobbying might have accomplished in terms of moving the recommendation on small church communities into a higher ranking.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Given DeLambo's observation about both the challenge we face vis-à-vis small church community development (along with adult/young adult formation) and its critical import for future parish development, what are we to do to engage the challenge of realizing the potential of parish-based small church communities in the "majority of Catholic parishes?"

A hint may be found, I suspect, in the fact that the theme of small church communities is embedded with the other four "least descriptive" characteristics identified by the pastors in the survey—each having to do with adult and young adult faith formation, renewal, and empowerment. Small church communities and adult/young adult faith formation and empowerment! What splendid bedfellows! Renewal of adult faith, formation for leadership and ministry, involving people younger and older in the parish and leadership and ministry—this is precisely what small church communities are about. Lifting up the small church community as a container, a crucible, a vehicle to address each of these other four areas may be exactly the way to move these five areas together to the point of being more typically very descriptive of Catholic parish life in the United States.

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For instance, large numbers of young adults, we hear, are not into religion or church, but, we are told, they are into spirituality and community. Done right, the small church community can be a point of connec-

tion meeting them at the level of their interest in spirituality and their desire for community. The experience of small church can mediate or deepen the connection to big church. Our current experience with small church communities in Catholic campus ministry settings seems already to confirm this.

The Emerging Models Project and the Summit experience themselves project a way to realize the potential of small church communities to build a "vitally alive and spiritual" parish. What it will take on the parish and diocesan levels is precisely the kind of collaboration at stake in the overall Emerging Models Project. When the focused energy of pastors (parochial and episcopal), deacons, lay ecclesial ministers, pastoral planners, young adult leaders, and parishioners at large is brought to bear in a committed, collaborative investment in building parishes centered on ordinary people helping each other to connect life and faith regularly, we will meet the challenge of animating "vibrant parish life."

To that end, small church communities must come to be more deeply appreciated, not merely as nice little faith sharing groups for people who are into sharing, but rather as "basic units" of parish, as the coming together of adults, younger and older, and families to make a mutually evangelizing difference in each others lives and faith. Small church communities need to be appreciated not just for what they can be for individuals, but also for what they can mean for building parish corporately, for building a more reflective and relational parish for the sake of a more relational world that anticipates the reign of God. Building the excellent parish of the future begins now. We have no time to waste. We have our work cut out for us. It is, of course, ultimately God's work. But we know, on earth, God's work must be our own.

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