



PLANS OF HOPE

HOUMA-THIBODAUX PARISH PLANNING

DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: ADULT FORMATION

CHAPTER 11

SECTION 9



HOW?

Small groups: Why are they the heart of the process?



Excerpts from Fr. James Mallon, *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Missional Parish*
All following text are excerpts from Fr. Mallon, even if not in quotations.

Universally, churches that are healthy, growing and making disciples embrace a model of the local church as a “community of communities.” These smaller communities gather together as one community for Sunday Eucharist. Many distinguish between small groups of eight to twelve people and mid-size groups containing 25 to 35 people. For healthy churches, involvement in a small or mid-size group is not considered optional, but is an integral part of the life of that local church.

We have already examined how post-moderns experience conversion and transformation primarily through their experience of belonging. That it is not easy for us as Catholics to reach the unchurched and the fallen away through creating experiences of belonging is no surprise. This creates a challenge for those who have been brought to a personal life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, whether they were a part of the Church or outside of her. At the point of conversion or awakening, they became aware of their need for meaningful community, a place where they will be known, loved, challenged and supported.

This community must be a safe place within which the good work that has begun in them can be brought to completion. (Philippians 1:6) These kinds of relationships are key to a healthy Church. Six of Gallup’s twelve “me” statements, which measure engagement, speak of this experience of community:

- In the last month, I have received recognition or praise from someone in my parish.
- The spiritual leaders in my parish seem to care about me as a person.
- There is someone in my parish who encourages my spiritual development.
- The other members of my parish are committed to spiritual growth.
- Aside from family members, I have a best friend in my parish.
- In the last six months, someone in my parish has talked to me about my spiritual growth.

How can an experience like this be possible in an average Catholic parish? Traditionally, it was the parish priest who would give people praise and recognition, care about parishioners and encourage and ask about spiritual growth. This may still work in a small parish where there is a very small priest-to-people ratio, but this is not the case in most parishes today. The bigger a parish is, the smaller it must become. Providing opportunities to experience authentic community must be a priority.

The culture that dominates most parishes presents a challenge in making this a reality. Many Catholics place value only on ministry done by the priest, and consider themselves to have meaningful connection with the parish only if they have a strong personal connection to the pastor. If the priest is unable to be at all the gatherings of a committee, team or group, at least he should drop in once in a while. The problem is that if we remain bound to this value, then the number of meaningful communities in a parish will always be limited. This would work in a small parish, but only in a parish that was not healthy. A small parish, if healthy, will grow. If it grows and continues to grow, sooner or later it will be large, and the model will have to change.

In a large parish, healthy or unhealthy, this model is already profoundly limiting. This is a question that haunts me at night when I am trying to sleep. For me, it is not an abstract question, but one that has faces and names attached to it. Sometimes I will think of someone I have not seen in a while, and think, “What happened to her? Where is he? Who is looking out for that person?” It is just so easy for our people to get lost in the crowd and to fall through the cracks, even those who have had authentic experiences of the Lord.

I think of the many participants who have come through RCIA in my different parishes, and of the high number of newly baptized and confirmed who have gone AWOL. We bring people to the Sacraments of Initiation through a small- or mid-size group experience. It is transformative and supportive. Participants experience exactly the kind of community reflected in the statements used in the Gallup “me” survey, but then the Easter Vigil happens. The culmination of a lengthy process results in most participants being released into the general population with a slap on the back, a “welcome to full membership in the Church” and a “good luck.” Is it any wonder that we have huge casualty rates? The solution is staring us in the face.

The very process that brings candidates to faith and to the sacraments is the process that is essential to nourishing the ongoing life of the Church. Meaningful community cannot be part of a program – it must become a normative part of the life of the Church, and the life of the Church must become the program.

“But what are they among so many people?” (John 6:9) I am also haunted by the question of how the people of my parish can be sufficiently cared for. With so many tasks and responsibilities, with so many staff to lead and guide so that some meaningful degree of ministry can happen in proportion to the number of people in the parish, how can I ensure that parishioners are cared for? If we wish to move beyond the therapeutic model of pastoral care that dominates most parishes, we will need not only alternate structures, but alternate values. If a parish priest with just 2,000 families in his parish were to spend ten hours a week visiting families for one hour each, it would take about four years before he could return to continue the conversation. This kind of situation is an unacceptable standard of care.

In reality, short of a major catastrophe hitting a family, in most parishes the priest is unable to appear at the door of his parishioners. Caring therefore needs to become the job of all, not just of the pastor. Only then will a Church become healthy. Only then will parish priests be freed from an impossible burden and be able to see it happen.

A kind of surrender needs to take place for this to happen, and it is a painful one. I have struggled so much with feeling like a “bad priest.” Often on weekends, by the end of the third weekend Mass, I have seen 1,700 people in church and have greeted hundreds, and still have one more Mass. Dozens of parishioners will ask for prayers for loved ones, and many, on their way out, will say things like, “I know you’re busy, Father, but just in case, my husband is in the hospital, on the 7th floor, Room 46.” Parishioners give me updates on their health, and their loved one’s health, and often communicate out of a presumption that I know exactly who they are and remember every detail of what they told me three weeks ago. Listening and responding is part of my job as a Father of the parish, but how can I respond to all of it? By 1:00 p.m. on Sunday, I feel like my brains are oozing out of my ears, and the people keep coming and coming and coming. A very real part of me wants to cry out and say, “Stop! Please stop! I cannot carry this burden. I cannot bear the burden of fearing that a moment’s inattention or fatigue may hurt even one fragile person.” Too often, I feel that I have been sucked dry, with nothing else to give.

One day, after a weekday Mass, I came home and wrote this in my journal:

From the back of the church today to the vestry, grabbed a dozen times to hear about nephews’ dying dogs and brothers with cancer, illness, sickness. People need to be heard, but is it my role to do so? I didn’t become a priest to comfort little old ladies, but to lead people into mission to win the world for Jesus, so that every little old lady can have someone to comfort her in the name of Jesus.

I hope I don’t offend anyone by these words, which were written in anguish. It is not my intent. The truth is that if we are to become a Church where everyone is cared for as they should be, we must acknowledge that this is not the job of the priest. Priests must have the courage to communicate this to their people, and the people must have the courage to communicate this to their priests. It is my conviction that the formation of small and mid-size groups can provide the answer to this dilemma. The good news is that there are many examples of how such a system in a church can operate, even if these examples are not always found in a Catholic context.

At Saint Benedict Parish, we are trying to implement a system of mid-size groups called connect groups. The model we use comes from Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), the Anglican Church in London that created *Alpha*. When *Alpha* is done right, usually at least 50% of the participants desire to continue in some experience of community. HTB originally attempted to meet this need for community by establishing a network of small groups. *Alpha* small groups would become church small groups. Over the years, however, they found that small groups would ultimately get smaller and smaller. People would move away or fall away, and the intense and intimate nature of a small group makes it impenetrable to new members that allow it to be repopulated and to continue. Furthermore, when a small group was not working for a new believer, they would often be so embarrassed and self-conscious about dropping out of the group that they would drop out of the church as well.

The solution was to create broader mid-size groups of 25 to 35 people that were both small enough and big enough. They were small enough for people to be known, cared for, loved and called forth. They were big enough for people to sit at the back and not be put under the kind of pressure that might exist in a group of eight. They would be big enough to admit new members and grow. This model, used by HTB and many other churches, allows the movement of parishioners and non-churchgoers from the experience of *Alpha* into an ongoing community where they will continue their faith development, and, most importantly, not be lost and not fall through the cracks.

These connect groups are led by lay people. Groups meet twice a month in the homes of church members. Each evening consists of a shared meal, a time of singing and praying, a talk by a member and a time of praying for and with one another. The group does not gather as students around a few teachers; instead, all members take a turn to present on a topic or to share their testimony. For many, it is a safe place to give their first talk or to lead prayer for the first time. In this way, members are encouraged, equipped and called forth to exercise their gifts.

The members of the leadership at HTB meet regularly with the lay leaders of the groups and invest primarily in them, equipping them to lead each group so that everybody receives the care they need. HTB has a weekly attendance of over 5,000 people (the average age is 27 years), and has hundreds of connect groups up and running in the homes of their parishioners. In the HTB model, connect groups are also the locus of missional outreach – either evangelistic outreach or work with the poor and marginalized. On the weeks when the connect group does not meet, members meet in small groups that have a specifically catechetical focus, as opposed to the caring and calling forth focus of the connect groups.

At Saint Benedict Parish, we introduced connect groups shortly after our second season of *Alpha*. After we had finished our first courses, many people had come to faith in Christ for the first time, many had come into personal relationship with Jesus for the first time, and many had had an experience of the Holy Spirit for the first time. But no matter where people had been spiritually before they took the course, those whose lives were touched all experienced a new form of Christian community, and once they tasted it, they wanted more. I had tried to introduce connect groups at my previous parish, but it had not been successful. This time I was determined to make it happen. We have made our share of mistakes, and are still far from getting it right, but less than four years later we now have over 300 parishioners in ten different connect groups.

We started with four connect groups and slowly added to them as we brought more people through an experience of *Alpha*. We ask that all who seek to belong to a connect group go through the experience of *Alpha* first. This is the only way that members can have a frame of reference for the degree of support and connection that we seek to establish. It was not and is not the only option for people who come through *Alpha* at Saint Benedict. We encourage the continuation of catechetical formation through a wide variety of adult faith formation programs. These programs, however, are terminal. The groups disband. Parishioners often move from one program to another, but are still left without an essential caring community at the end of the day.

It is obvious that we need to care for people by providing temporary community-based faith formation and permanent groups where people truly belong and are cared for. Once one of our connect groups grew beyond 35 people, our task was to identify, call forth and equip new leaders and split the group into two. Some of the current ten groups are based on age, some are mixed generations, and some are “family friendly,” with children and parents gathering together. The best thing about this is that it all happens in the homes of parishioners. People often ask us how we fit everyone in, and the truth is that it is organized chaos, but a load of fun. It is no different than having a party at your house. People do it all the time. The beauty of the model is that it works. I do not have to be there. Over the last three years, I have visited only two connect groups, but every week I meet parishioners I do not know who tell me they are in a connect group and last week gave their first talk. I love it when I have no clue about what God is doing in my parish. This is the way it should be!

How can I even pretend to control the working of the Holy Spirit in a parish of this size? The Spirit blows where he wills, and the job of the pastor is to get out of the way. At the same time, however, there is a line of accountability to me as the pastor. There has to be. Several of our parish staff meet regularly with the connect group leaders (each group is led by two couples) to coach them and care for them. They report to our parish Director of Evangelization who, in turn, reports to me. All names for potential connect group leaders are vetted by me. Is there a risk that something may happen that may not be totally right? Of course there is, but this is infinitely more desirable than nothing happening at all. As I once heard Pastor Rick Warren say, “Leaders of a Church will either be risk takers, care takers or undertakers.”

There is always risk in giving up control. It may not be done properly, or, the more common fear, it may not be done as “properly” as I would do it! But low control is a necessity if the act of caring for one another will become an embodied value and not just be the task of a few ministering to a few more. It is necessary, but it is not enough. The counterpoint is high accountability. (I will be saying more about this principle in Chapter 7, when I speak about leadership.) With regard to connect groups, however, the key is to choose the right people to lead, to trust them with real responsibility, to set them up for success and to constantly be in communication with them. I am amazed and thrilled to see that more than 15% of my parishioners are well protected from falling through the cracks. Our goal is that by 2018, five years after we started, 75% of our parishioners will belong in a connect group, and that such an experience of community will be so normal that no one will think twice about it.



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RESOURCE C



How to start and grow small groups in your parish

TO BE USED BY Parish Implementation Teams, Adult Formation Teams or Parish Staff

PURPOSE The following resource is meant to serve as a guide to help with starting small groups in your parish. It is meant to help you know what things you might want to consider along the way. This resource will offer specifics for beginning the *Art of Living* video resource, which is being developed in and for our diocese, to intentionally assist people in walking through the Formation Life Cycle (“the five”), however the same principles would apply if your parish has discerned using a different resource.

STEP ONE. ORGANIZING AN ADULT FORMATION TEAM

Some parishes may have a staff member whose role is to oversee ministries and efforts of discipleship within a parish. If this is the case, they will most likely be the person your pastor has assigned to initiate and guide this process.

Most parishes, however, will need to bring together a team of people who will serve as an Adult Formation Team. This team may consist of those persons who attended the *Parish Missionary Disciple* training that was led by Catholic Leadership Institute and perhaps a few others that may need to be added to the team.

The ideal number for an Adult Formation Team be around 4-6 people. Ideally at least one of those people would have good administrative and organizational skills. A charism of administration will be most helpful as groups are being organized and kept track of. Additionally, administrative gifts will be needed to understand and coordinate intentional scheduling or calendaring as well as considering processes to be put into place to bring new members into groups, and move group participants into leadership roles. From the beginning this is good to consider, that your team has at least someone with this skill set and charism.

STEP TWO. IDENTIFYING HOW MANY SMALL GROUP LEADERS ARE NEEDED

The next step for your parish is to determine how many small groups leaders you will begin to pilot the *Art of Living* in the fall of 2018. This may be based on the number of small groups your parish is aiming for. For example: let’s say you’ve determined you would like to begin five small groups, therefore you need five group leaders. Or, perhaps you have taken steps to identify how many small groups leaders and that in turn determines how many small groups. For example, you have taken the time identify that ten people who would like to lead a small group

STEP THREE. RECRUITING SMALL GROUP LEADERS.

The next step is to recruit potential small group leaders. Small group leaders help organize the group, provide encouragement to members, offer communication (reminders about meeting, etc.), and help facilitate the discussion. A small group leader is not a teacher or theologian, simply helping the discussion “move” so to allow the Holy Spirit to “move” in the group.

STEP FOUR. IDENTIFY NAMES OF POTENTIAL SMALL GROUP LEADERS AND CONTACT THEM

Identify the names of people you would like to ask to consider being a small group leader. Reach to them with a personal phone call or face to face conversation to set up a time to share in detail what you want them to consider. Remember, at this point, you are not asking for a commitment! You are simply asking them to agree to hear about the vision and what they are being invited to consider.

Share the vision and let them know what you want them to consider. You may want to consider doing a “pitch meeting”. It is important to be able to share the overarching vision and specifics of adult formation in the parish with each person being asked to consider being a small group leader.

You may want to organize one large meeting, inviting everyone who was asked to consider being a small group leader. This way they are all hearing the same thing at the same time. Or, of course, you could have a series of individual meetings.

Possible agenda for a “pitch meeting”

Please consult with your liaison if you need further details

- I. The big picture, the diocesan vision. Share with them an overview of strategic planning
- II. Vision for your parish in regards to small groups: becoming a “community of communities”
- III. Details of the *Art of Living*
- IV. Details of a schedule
- V. Be clear of what is being asked of them:
 - they will first pilot the group, go through it themselves
 - they are being asked to find a host (someone who might want to provide hospitality)
 - they are being asked to discern if they will be a small group leader
- VI. Set a date to receive an answer. Commitment should be clear as to how and to whom you want them to respond

STEP FIVE. RECRUIT HOSTS.

Decide how you would like to recruit small group hosts. A host will work alongside the small group leader. A host is someone who has a natural gift for hospitality. They may open their home for a small group to meet. They provide a welcoming environment and organize any food or refreshments for the group (either providing themselves or organizing that with the group).

You could either have the small group leaders take the responsibility for finding and inviting the hosts to come on board. Or, your Adult Formation Team may identify specific people that you notice would have this gift, and invite them.

STEP SIX. ORGANIZE PILOT GROUPS.

You may want to begin with one semester of “pilot groups”, where all small group facilitators and hosts “go through the group process together.” For example, let’s say you have eight small group leaders and eight hosts. That’s 16 total people. Let’s say you are using the *Art of Living*, you may divide up into two groups of eight and go through the first semester of *Art of Living* together. This becomes a learning experience to become familiar with the material.

STEP SEVEN. RECRUIT SMALL GROUP MEMBERS. After finishing the semester of the *Art of Living* with the “pilot group”, small group leaders and assigned hosts will begin recruiting parishioners into their small group. This may be a group of six to eight people, perhaps friends or family or perhaps some names given to you from the parish.

STEP EIGHT. LAUNCH SMALL GROUPS.

At this point, (based on the previous example), you would now have eight small groups starting in the parish. The leadership of your Adult Formation Team should be regularly checking in with the other small group leaders, to encourage them and to see if they are needing any assistance.

STEP NINE. CONSIDER THE NEXT STEPS.

You will want to consider if and how new groups will start in the future. For example: perhaps three or four people who just finished semester one feel called to lead their own small group. They would then break off and begin new small groups.