

'We're made for closeness to God and others'

By Katharine Bird

Case 1. For some time the woman watched helplessly as her husband struggled. Then the old man went into a coma. Doctors told her there was no hope; that he was being kept alive by machines. After a while the woman began to wonder if she should ask the doctors to let her husband die. She pondered the problem and discussed it with her family. Still she didn't know what to do. So she turned to her parish. She sought out a priest to ask if the church's teachings had anything to say about her agonizing situation. She talked at length with the priest and reached the difficult decision that the machines should be discontinued.

Case 2. A newcomer in town, he was attracted to the parish first by the Sunday Masses, especially the homilies. Then, hungry for friendship, the young man joined a Lenten discussion group. Slowly he came to know and trust the other group members. He found it helpful to hear others talk about concerns similar to his. At the end of Lent, he and the other participants decided to keep meeting, reluctant to lose the support they found in each other. The group met for two years.

People come to parishes for many different reasons, reasons which can change according to circumstances in their lives. The woman with the dying husband was a longtime churchgoer who found herself "needing the church on a new level" during this crisis. A theologian, William Johnston, told me her story. He is a religious educator with Holy Cross Parish in Lynchburg, Va.

The second case history also is based on real life. It was told to me by Richard Lawless, vicar for education in the Diocese of Syracuse, N.Y. He observed that people usually join parishes first because of the Mass. But then the relationships developed in the parish become important to them.

Both educators see a role for small groups in helping people feel at home in parishes.

Lawless sees such experiences as a way to overcome the sense of isolation that many people feel. "We're made for closeness to God and others and that's hard to find" in society, he asserted.

A small parish group "offers the opportunity to focus on important issues that are held in

common" with other people. "All of us hunger for this sharing," he added.

Speaking from his experience in a Kansas parish, Lawless commented: "My perspective gets warped when I'm not in close contact with others." He feels that this sharing enables people to live their Christian values better and more comfortably.

Both religious educators commented that small groups can provide a setting to investigate the connections of faith and daily life. In Johnston's parish, this is done often by means of open-ended questions: "You've seen this scripture story. Can you relate it to your life or work?"

For more than two years Johnston has worked with adults from various backgrounds in a parish renewal program. Some 300 people were involved in the many small groups at their peak.

Often the conversations turn to practical family matters. For instance, Johnston said, one parent brought up his concern about a high-school daughter who was reading books about Satan and reincarnation.

Typically, Johnston said, others in the group then pipe up to say they've experienced a similar situation and tell what they did.

The small groups fostered reflection by giving people a "supportive atmosphere for raising questions and voicing thoughts," Johnston said. "Folks liked getting together and talking with others on the same footing." They found out "they weren't alone," he concluded.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

Community prayer deepens sense of

By Father John J. Castelot

Christian prayer is personal. But it is only private in a secondary sense.

God calls us into a community. We are baptized into the family of God. A bond unites us with the Father and all our brothers and sisters.

Think about these words from the biblical letter sent to the people in the ancient Christian community at Ephesus: "Pray constantly and attentively for all in the holy company." (Ephesians 6:18)

Those words urgently request that the people pray, as a community, "for all in the holy company" — for every brother and sister.

God saves us as members of a community. For us, to be Christian

is to be with and for others.

St. Paul pointedly reminded the people in Corinth about this. Read this sentence, keeping in mind that the word "you" is used in the plural: "Are you not aware that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16)

And in the letter to the Ephesians we read: "You are strangers and aliens no longer. No you are fellow citizens.... You form a building which rises on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. (Ephesians 2:19-20)

This sense of community seems especially difficult for many modern people to grasp. A fierce individuality is practically built into us by our culture.

Given their differences, what can people

By David Gibson

One evening recently, after a holiday together, a group of my relatives walked to the Catholic high school in a small Midwestern city to watch one of our extended family's teen-age boys play in a basketball game.

Our group included: one grandfather, 82; two fathers, 56 and 42; one young adult, 26; four teen-agers; and two younger girls, 10 and 7.

Looking at our group, an outsider might have remarked on our unity — the bonds of blood and common background that link us. Those bonds are real.

But so are our differences. The diversity of our unit that evening might have been seen in our lifestyles: apartment dweller, campus dweller, suburban dweller, small-town dweller. Or

our preoccupations and goals could be shown to vary greatly.

That's the way families are. In some ways, members of an extended family are like a parish's members. A parish's people are united, but they differ too.

You can't help being struck by the diversity among parish members these days. Seated near you during Mass is a single parent with two teen-age children. Next to you is an elderly couple, while next to them is a young couple newly arrived from another city.

A parish may include the employed and the unemployed; career women and full-time homemakers; childless couples; widows and widowers; spouses in mixed marriages; big families and small families.

Parishioners even differ in their backgrounds as Catholics and in what they seek from the parish.

People in Parishes

