

Community grief

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

The young couple had everything to live for, friends said later.

In their 30s, the husband and wife had developed a satisfying lifestyle in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area. Both had careers: she as a teacher, he with the government. They had one child, a 7-year-old daughter.

Because they wanted to spend as much time together as possible, the couple made it a point to work close to home. Each day they had lunch together at home.

Then one day, off course on a foggy, nasty day, an airplane crashed into their home, setting it on fire.

In that tragic instant, the young daughter was left without parents, without her home. Her life was irrevocably altered.

Shortly after the tragedy, the young girl was taken by friends to stay with her aunt, the director of a nearby retreat center. Her stunned relatives joined her there. The family stayed at the retreat center for 10 days. There they began the task of picking up the pieces of their lives.

The chaplain of the retreat house during those days several years ago was Franciscan Father Stephen Hartdegen, director of the U.S. Center for the Catholic Biblical Apostolate.

What did the retreat house staff and friends do to console the sorrowing family?

"It was hard," Father Hartdegen said, since the family members were in various stages of shock and grief. It involved sympathetic listening, he said.

But in the process of feeding and housing and listening, "we became a family," Father Hartdegen commented.

The biblical scholar explained that he always finds the prophet Tobit's example encouraging in

such difficult situations. The Book of Tobit portrays the prophet burying his compatriots even "at the risk of his own life," the priest said. He explained that the conquering Assyrians had forbidden any burying of the Jewish dead, but Tobit persisted anyway "out of his own faith and love of God."

Father Hartdegen faced the formidable task of presiding at the couple's funeral. He chose his main biblical text carefully, settling finally on John 12:24.

The passage reminds people that a grain of wheat has to fall to the ground and die to bring forth fruit. It offers hope, the priest indicated. And that day people commented that the service helped "to temper their grief and made it easier to accept the great loss they had sustained."

The experience Father Hartdegen recounted is an example of the Christian community in action, in difficult circumstances. It shows how much the community is called on to care about people.

Father Enda McDonagh is a theologian who has pointed out that the celebration of the sacraments calls individual Christians and the Christian community to be "signs of God's presence" to others. Often we do this by "gathering our resources together to respond to others' needs," he said during a 1983 lecture. He is professor of moral theology at St. Patrick's College in Maynooth, Ireland.

Father McDonagh said that in the Christian tradition sacraments are occasions when "God breaks through into human history."

The Christian community's willingness to serve is a sign of its transformation, he said. It is "the church's way of entering into the death and resurrection of Christ."

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



The parish: a community

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

"Christianity is a community event," wrote Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead in "Community of Faith" (Seabury). Christians, they added, have always believed that faith is "not a private enterprise but a communal venture."

But in recent decades there has been renewed emphasis on the meaning and impact of community. And varying expressions of community have emerged.

In Latin America and other Third World regions, the concept of "comunidades eclesiales de base," or basic Christian communities, has been endorsed by growing numbers of bishops and other church leaders. It has been estimated that there are 150,000 such communities in Latin America alone.

Not all such communities are alike. In some specific instances, their merits are debated.

But what are they in a general sense?

The U.S. bishops, in their pastoral letter on Hispanic ministry released earlier this year, offered a description:

"The 'comunidad eclesial de base' is neither a discussion or study group nor a parish. It is 'the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus, which on its

own level must make itself responsible for the richness and expansion of the faith..."

Their pastoral letter urged the development of these small communities and said parishes should "facilitate, coordinate and multiply" the groups within their boundaries.

"The parish should be a community of communities," the bishops said. "The ideal 'comunidad eclesial de base' is a living community of Christians whose active involvement in every aspect of life is nourished by profound commitment to the Gospel."

Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Alameda, N.M., is a community of communities, said its pastor, Father Ramon Aragon.

The parish, near Albuquerque, is divided into 11 geographical areas. There is a basic community

And God created

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

People tend to prize their individuality, to cherish their independence. That is good, up to a point.

But rugged individualists who profess to need no one but themselves are living in a dream world. If they didn't interact with others, people would not even become aware of their own identity.

How many people really would like to be left completely — totally — alone in the world? For a prisoner, solitary confinement is a fate almost worse than death.

The loneliness that everyone experiences in varying degrees is a sharp reminder that we do need each other — desperately.

In his wisdom, God created people as social beings. He calls people into a community; within

that community they learn to know and love him. Would anyone even be aware of what Jesus has meant for humanity apart from the community which proclaims and celebrates his love?

It has been that way from the beginning. In the first chapter of Genesis God is pictured creating not a man, but humanity. "God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them."

The same idea is expressed more picturesquely in the second chapter of Genesis, with God declaring: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him."

After the fall, when God promises eventual victory for his deluded creatures, it is to the woman's offspring — to humanity — that the promise is made.

In the course of time, God