

Groups

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cerning synod recommendations, Father Kreckel noted: "A good number of the responses felt the rosary altar society was a small Christian community, the education committee was a small Christian community, and what was needed was to get more people in these (groups) ... It's obvious a lot of people were saying 'Help us!'"

Father Baranowski acknowledged that confusion still exists about the concept's meaning.

"The phrase 'small Christian communities' is getting to be a catch-all phrase," Father Baranowski said from his office in Troy, Mich. "It means something specific."

Father Baranowski, who prefers the term small church communities, explained that these communities consist of eight to 12 people who gather on a regular basis — generally every other week — for personal bonding, mutual care, shared prayer, reflection on the Scriptures, and service.

These groups are generally mixed in terms of age and gender, and are led by trained "pastoral facilitators" who link the groups to parishes, and hence to the broader church community.

Thus, while a number of already existing groups — from charismatics to rosary altar societies to Knights of Columbus councils — may include some elements of small Christian communities, they generally do not qualify as such communities per se, Father Baranowski said.

"We're talking about a whole new structure in the church," Father Baranowski said.

A structure, he added, that meets a growing need in churches in an increasingly secular society.

Previously, parishes had served as the center of people's lives, Father Baranowski continued. But in light of the growing size of parishes, and because Catholics are more involved in American life's mainstream, he explained, small communities help to "make the church more real and connect to people's lives."

Groups often form after a parish renewal program — such as "Renew" or "Genesis II" — during which people begin to gather to share their faith and their life experiences, Father Baranowski explained. Indeed, he often recommends that the parish initiate such a program as a first step in developing small communities.

This is the path St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Ithaca is weighing. Parish leaders are considering Renew as a way to kick off a long-term process of developing small Christian communities.

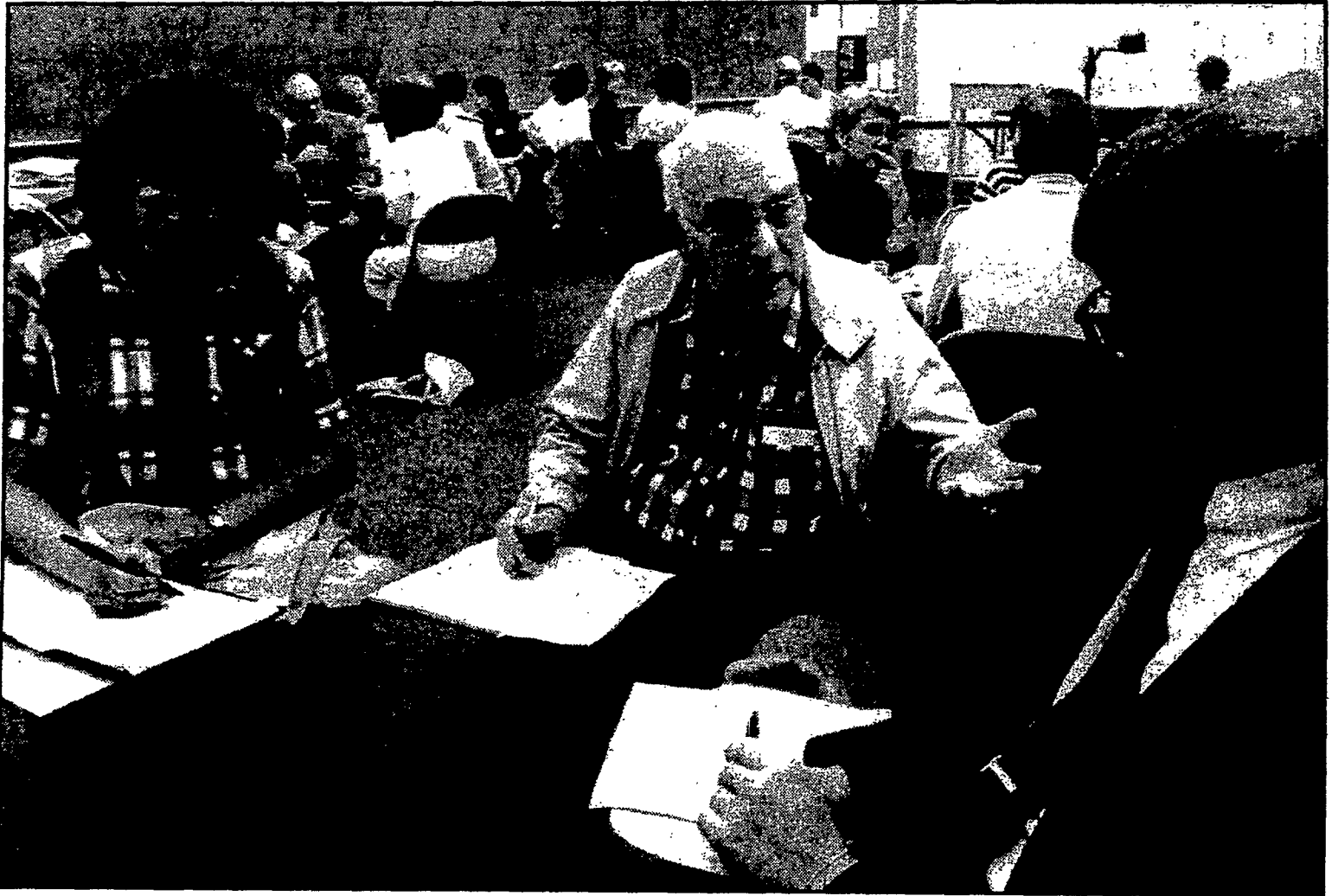
"We're looking at small Christian communities not just as an end in themselves," observed Jean Luzzi, a St. Catherine's parishioner and a Synod analysis team member. "They are there in the beginning to nurture people, then to sustain them as they go out into the world."

That world, Luzzi observed, emphasizes "rugged individualism," and that people bear their burdens by themselves. But Christianity emphasizes mutual support and caring.

"What we have to do is get to a point where we can trust our neighbors, where we can share our problems," Luzzi said. "Small Christian communities get people to tell about their problems, to give mutual support, to really care for one another."

Luzzi noted that even if people do not become involved with communities as a result of Renew, the program in and of itself will benefit the parish, helping parishioners not involved with communities to be more aware of groups' purpose.

"At least they will not look at the peo-



During a May 25 meeting at St. John of Rochester Church in Fairport, Bob Lafferty (center), a parishioner of St. Paul's Church in Webster, participates in discussions concerning small Christian communities.



Sister Diane Branch, SSJ, pastoral associate at St. Paul's Church Webster, stresses her point at a May 25 meeting on small Christian communities. The next meeting is scheduled for St. Mary's Church in Waterloo on June 6.

ple in the groups as cliques," she said.

Luzzi's own taste of what small Christian communities might be like came when she participated in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults with a group of close-knit people. Indeed, Father Baranowski pointed out that processes such as RCIA or movements such as Marriage Encounter or Cursillo can foster the development of small Christian communities.

Such was the case with Mary and Roger Wallace, members of Irondequoit's Christ the King Parish.

After completing a Marriage Encounter weekend 17 years ago, the Wallaces and six other couples began to meet every other week. Although two couples subsequently dropped out, two others have joined the group.

Mary Wallace, who also attended the analysis team listening session at St. Theodore's, said the group did not begin with the idea that it would be a small Christian community. Nor has sustaining the group for 17 years always been easy.

"It's taken us 17 years to get where we are," she said. "It's been an evolution — it doesn't happen just like that."

Initially, the group focused on marriage, Wallace said. But as members began to recognize that they had to do

more, they became involved with Cursillo. "I think it's that movement that helped to clarify what the group should be," she observed.

Members now discuss day-to-day issues, sharing experiences, providing support, studying the Scriptures and getting involved in activities in the parish or, as in the case of the Wallaces, with Cursillo.

Wallace said she has also found growth within herself. She has learned to persevere, she said, and has gained a sense of what commitment is.

In addition, Wallace said, "It's improved my spiritual life. The couples are all different, but we come together to share prayer, so I pray for things that I might not have been aware of, but now I am because of the people's struggles."

Father Baranowski noted that small communities do indeed have to develop slowly. In fact, his organization promotes a process that spans several years.

"It's not a program," Father Baranowski said. "It's a way of life for a parish."

Thus beyond the actual small communities — and he emphasized that not everyone in the parish has to belong to a community if they do not want to — all parish activities take on elements of the communities, the priest explained.

When a parish begins the process of forming small communities, all parish groups, committees and clubs incorporate time for sharing and reflection. Liturgies involve time for greeting people, and for reflecting on the homilies. Indeed, the readings for each Sunday — along with reflection questions — are included in the previous week's bulletin so that people will have already begun to relate the readings to their lives and are ready for the homilies.

"What we are talking about is a way of being church that is more personal," Monsignor Spadaro said. "The small church communities are not designed to replace the parish. These communities feed and nurture the overall life of the parish."

Dierdre Hetzler is hoping to see this take place at Scottsville's St. Mary of the Assumption Parish, where she serves as pastoral associate.

"I am absolutely convinced that this is essential for the church," said Hetzler, who is also a member of the analysis team, and who has been involved with small groups for 20 years. "We need to experience our faith at every level of our lives."

"In restructuring the parish," Hetzler continued, "the criteria of judging the effectiveness of the ministry was whether or not it contributes to the ability of everyone to help one another to wrestle with daily life issues in the light of their faith."

Father Baranowski noted that the Diocese of Rochester is much further along than most U.S. dioceses in that it made small Christian communities one of its priorities. His invitation to the ministry day, and the possibility that he will be returning to work directly with parishes here to begin the process of developing communities, are signs of this commitment.

And to Hetzler, this commitment is a sign of people recognizing the needs of the times.

"I think we are seeing in our age a spiritual hunger," Hetzler said. "We live in a high-tech society where everything is so impersonal."

But the Catholic theology, Hetzler continued, says the church is a family. Forming small Christian communities, she contends, is one way to help achieve this sense of family.

"I think this is the spirit leading us into the future," Hetzler declared.