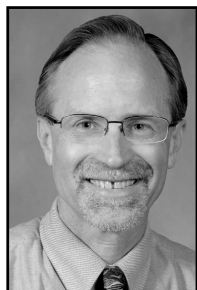


Faith and works—forming the disciple in small group faith sharing

By Barb Ernster



Ruff

For 20 years, Christopher Ruff, M.A., S.T.L., Director of the Office of Ministries and Social Concerns for the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, has organized materials for small group faith-sharing. While Ruff

believes these groups can bring people closer to Christ and one another, they don't necessarily move people to practice works of service outside the group. When a co-worker expressed a related concern that people serving on social justice committees often need more faith formation and prayer, Ruff was moved to do something.

He developed the Discipleship Series of books for faith-sharing groups to help bridge the gap between faith and works. The first book, *As I Have Loved You* (Novo Millennio Press, 2008), was test piloted in the Diocese of La Crosse during Lent of 2007. More than 1000 people in 30 parishes met weekly for prayer, reflective study, and fellowship, and devoted additional time each month for community service. Surveys showed great enthusiasm for the program and 95 percent of the people wanted to continue. More than 2000 people participated in the full diocesan program in 2008, and more are expected this Lent when Ruff's second book is introduced, *The Greatest of These is Love: Reflections from the Heart of St. Paul*. The program is spreading to other dioceses

and parishes.

The initial idea for a faith-sharing approach came to him when he heard about a challenge presented to a St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers group by Deacon Stephen Najarian at his former parish, St. Charles Borromeo in St. Anthony, Minnesota. While complimenting them on their dedication and fidelity, Deacon Najarian also challenged them to give service in some way. They began serving meals at a community center and it continues today.

"When word of that got back to me at the Diocese of La Crosse, it was like a light went on," said Ruff. "In 13 years of faith-sharing work at St. Charles, I had always focused on the three classic components: prayer, reflection, and fellowship. But that was a three-legged stool, missing the vital fourth leg of service that would take the group beyond itself in love of neighbor."

Ruff's primary goal is to emphasize that the call to love of neighbor is a call to all the faithful, not just those involved in charities and social justice. "We're each called to be the Good Samaritan in a very personal way," he said. "Sometimes people in the pious orthodoxy crowd could do a little more in terms of being aware of serving their neighbor. And people in the social activist crowd can be so tuned in to the social dimension that the spiritual dimension is lost and the need for prayer in rooting their action. People respond very well to this idea of bridging the divide, so that prayer and reflection on Scriptures and Church teaching becomes a foundation for

bearing fruit for God."

The Most Rev. Jerome Listeki, Bishop of La Crosse, wrote in the foreword of the first book, "I am seeing it form disciples in our diocese—integral and authentic disciples growing in love of God and love of neighbor ... we look forward to a harvest of apostolic works."

Gary and Rosey Asher facilitate three groups at St. Henry Catholic Church in Eau Galle, Wisconsin. Group members give several hours of service each month. In November, some members invited people that would be alone for Thanksgiving to their homes for dinner. One group started a parish library. Other members have accompanied the Ashers to New Orleans to help with the post-Katrina rebuilding efforts. The Ashers took 13 people on their first trip down, 25 signed up for the second trip, and a waiting list has been started for the next trip.

"The service component is new for some people. They don't know where to start, but they're willing to do it and do what they can," said Rosey. "Others do a lot of service and don't think much of it. It's a major part of this program. I've always been fairly service-oriented but now I'm thinking more about it, that this is what God is calling me to do. The group has helped me realize I can do more."

David Allen, a facilitator of three groups at Blessed Sacrament parish in La Crosse, said doing the service work puts a face on the sufferings of others. "We know that there are people in nursing homes, but it's different when you're sitting there and they can't find

B-13 on their card. When we've gone to serve meals, these are our brothers and sisters in Christ and it's important for us to spend time with them," he said. "Everyone has good intentions, and the group fosters an environment for people to act upon their good intentions."

Ruff was inspired by Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, in which he expressed our need to contemplate the face of Christ, return to prayer, and to love of neighbor. "This is what I wanted this faith sharing endeavor to be about, the core of the Gospel, the face of Christ," said Ruff.

He's reminded that the basis of God's judgment in Matthew 25 when He separates the sheep from the goats is not what we know, but what we do for the least of our brethren.

"We've lived through a time of great challenge to orthodoxy and a lot of us have been champions of solid teaching, and it's very important to do that. But we need to remember that that's not everything," he said. "Jesus won't say in the end, 'Come into my Father's Kingdom, you who memorized all four pillars of the Catechism,' but 'I was hungry and you gave Me to eat.' It's a challenge we have to meet. More than a challenge, it's a source of joy."

For further information about this series, click on www.novomill.com or call 608-304-1768.

"Barb Ernster is a freelance writer for 'The Catholic Servant.'"