

IN THEORY: Practicing in small groups

A growing movement is reportedly afoot to practice faith in small groups, rather than in large congregations. It's how the church began, say proponents — with small Christian groups that forgo clergy and ritual. Living-room churches or the underground church, the organic church, have for many become a new way of connecting to God, particularly among evangelicals and born-again Christians. Proponents say it's a back-to-basics form of worship. Others argue that it is simply a rejection of the growth of the "mega-church." What do you think of this new movement? This is not how the Church began. It is true that they gathered in small groups, but they gathered to do what Jesus commanded them to do. They gathered especially on Sundays to do what Jesus did at the Last Supper. It is not true that they had no leaders or ritual.

From two ancient documents, "The Didache," written in about the year 100 and from Saint Justin Martyr's "Apologia" written before the year 160 in Rome, we learn in outline what they did and we still do in the Mass. They describe how the early Christians gathered on Sundays, read the Word of God as time allowed, listened to a sermon by the president, stood to pray, took up a collection according to their means for those in need, brought bread and wine to the president, who gave thanks and praise according to his ability, gave their assent by saying "Amen" and received Holy Communion. The president did what Jesus did at the Last Supper. All this required priest and ritual. There is a big difference between private prayer and public worship. Both are important. Today we can easily tell the difference. In the Mass, we can see the presider in a special place wearing special garments. He alone says the prayer of thanksgiving at the altar. Small private prayer groups are very beneficial, and in our parish we have dozens of them. They gather each week for food and fellowship, discussion and witnessing, reading the Word of God, and giving praise and thanksgiving.

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