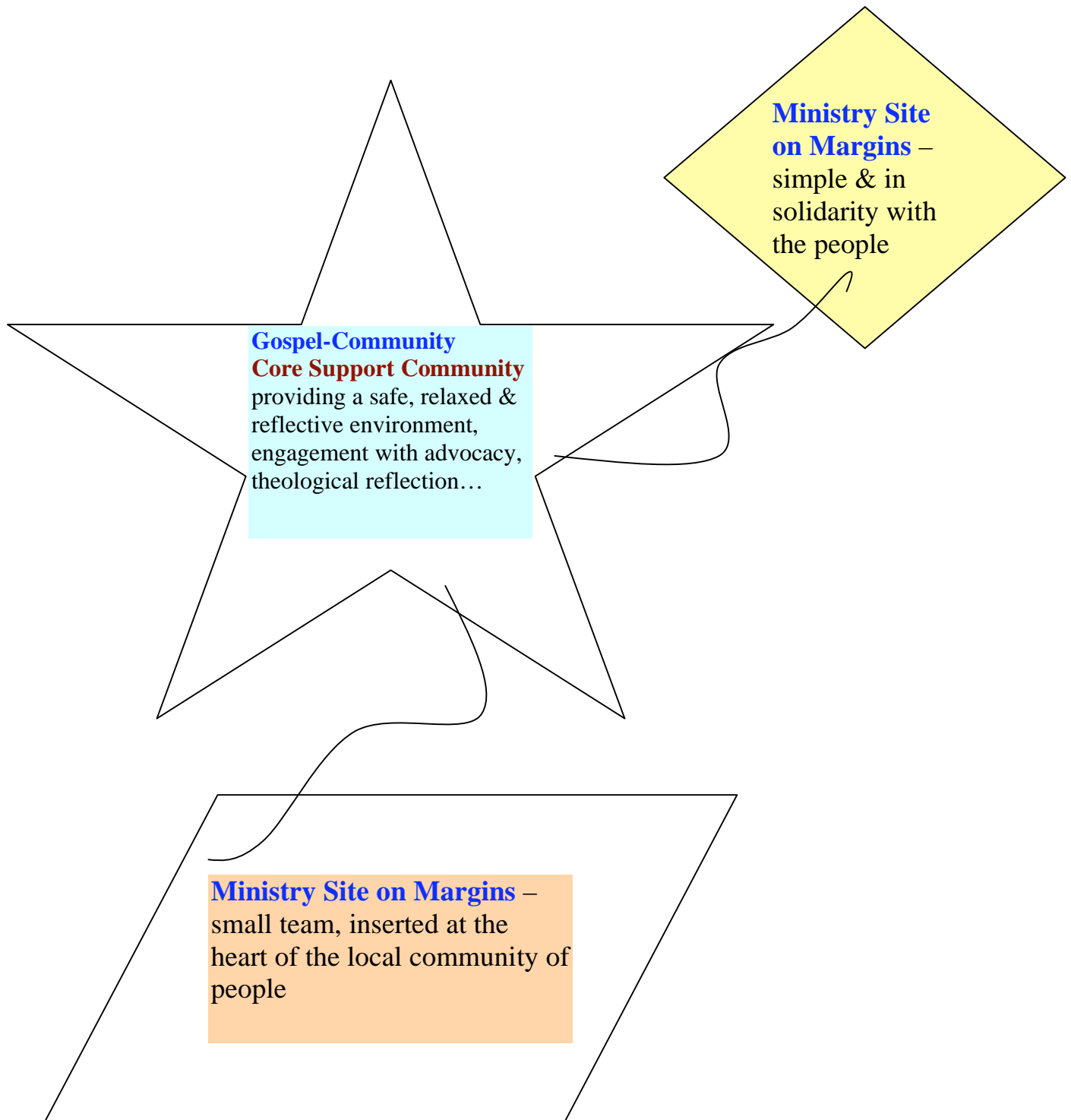


A Model of Gospel-Communities - Star and Sparks



Models of Community Formation

The Traditional Model

Over the past 200 years communities have been formed within the Congregation of Christian Brothers in response to particular needs. Always practical and in touch with the grassroots of society, communities have been formed to serve the expressed educational requirements of those most disadvantaged by the prevailing social structure. The Province leaders would choose brothers with necessary the skills and talents, find a suitable house or monastery to house them which was usually on the actual site of the ministry. This model for establishing communities has served the Congregation very successfully for over 200years.

This model is still used throughout the world by Province leaders but in some emerging areas of mission, in response to the imperative of the 1996 and 2002 Chapters, there are signs that a different model of community formation is required.

Brothers are now opting to work with 'the poorest of the poor' and want to become an integral part of the families and communities in which they minister. They desire to walk with those they seek to serve and like Jesus, live among them. To do this with respect and due reverence for those who are marginalised and excluded, they need to embrace a life-style that is commensurate with their working situation. The previous model of community formation would require that the brothers had a life-style in keeping with their status in society as educated professional people. This meant that the brothers' house would be generally larger and better furnished than the majority of local family homes. This living-situation tended to create a need for security and so the construction of high fences and electronic alarm systems which tended to separate the Brothers from their neighbours. For safety reasons this lead to physical separation and exclusion.

What then might be a more 'neighbour-friendly' model of community formation? Is there a way by which the brothers can live in solidarity with the poor.



An Alternative Model – Star and Sparks

Experience has taught us that brothers who opt to live 'on the edge' need high quality personal and pastoral support as the ministry is very demanding and often quite confronting and un inspiring. To create communities of brothers among poorer people without appropriate support, leads to personal suffering, community tensions and in some cases total collapse of communal life. Brothers ministering in these demanding situations need to be able to take regular breaks from the intense close-living situation required of those who share the mantle of the poor. Periods of relaxation and reflection are needed to recuperate and restore the soul and spirit. How might this be approached?

The Model I would like to propose could be titled the 'star and sparks' method of community formation. The home or core community is the central 'star' in the constellation. This is the base to and from which brothers move into ministry. The 'star' (home-base) is well set up to meet the professional and personal needs of the brothers (and perhaps volunteers). Spiritual journals & books, newspapers, TV, computers, prayer space, quiet areas, internet access etc would be readily available. Some of the brothers in the community would be competent in spiritual accompaniment, counselling,

theological reflection, community development, social analysis, finances etc. These brothers would provide support to those who were actively engaged in ministry at the margins. They could regularly visit the ministry sites to get a deeper understanding of the needs of the brothers working there and the desires and dreams of the local people.

The brothers ministering directly on the margins would live for extended periods in a simple dwelling among those they serve. Here are the new 'sparks' of the spirit coming to flame - being true brothers to those suffering in our earth community. As the 2002 Chapter Insight says 'through the dislocation that comes from regular contact with poor and marginalised people, our hearts are transformed as we deepen our shared reflection of this experience in the light of the Gospel.' These brothers would return to the home-community every couple of weeks to debrief, share their experiences and stories and endeavour to make faith-sense of their lives.

This method of community formation allows the more 'senior' brothers to play a vital role in the care and nurture of the younger members of the Congregation who would generally to be the ones working directly with the poor on the ministry-sites.

One home-community could support and provide sustenance to a number of ministry site teams each including a small number of brothers working at the margins with the 'poor at our doorsteps.'

Such a model would require specific formation and training of brothers both to undertake the new roles needed to support the ministry to the marginalised and to be able to live simply at the margins.

This may be a way by which the new wine of our mission to the poorest will be refined and matured through the natural transforming action of being poured and decentered into the fresh wineskins of living a simple lifestyle among God's poor.

Peter Harney on behalf of the Congregation Renewal Team 2006

Please send comments to email: ptrharn@aol.com

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