By Tony DeGol
*The Catholic Register*

There is a big difference between having a discussion and sharing one’s faith.

Faith sharing, noted Carmelite Community of the Word Sister Linda LaMagna, is rooted in Divine Reading, which she describes as reading under the eyes of God and being touched by the words one hears.

“You can engage in discussion, but faith sharing allows us to hear that message,” continued Sister Linda. “When people share their faith around the Gospel, community happens. The Word of God is connecting us.”

And that, she emphasized, is the power of ARISE Together in Christ and the small community faith sharing groups that are integral to the renewal initiative.

“We’re letting the Gospel message speak to each of us personally, but then we hear how God spoke to the hearts of others,” added Sister Linda, diocesan coordinator for ARISE.

Throughout these mid-September days, most parishes in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown are sponsoring sign-up weekends for the faith sharing groups. Those small communities will start meeting in early October as the first of five seasons of ARISE Together in Christ officially begins.

Bishop Mark L. Bartchak announced the renewal effort at the beginning of this year and invited all faith communities in the diocese to participate. About 85 percent of parishes are engaging in ARISE, as well as Catholic schools, Religious Education programs, college campus ministry programs, hospital ministry, and prison ministry.

“ARISE Together in Christ is an opportunity for all of us, in every parish and place in our diocese, to have a renewed encounter with God and to share God’s love in sharing the friendship of Christ with each other,” stated the Bishop in his invitation to the faithful. “The result, the goal, the reward that comes from this opportunity is that we become more fully human; persons of body, mind, and soul who are all made in the image and likeness of God.”

Throughout much of this year, training of small group leaders has occurred at various locations throughout the diocese, with the latest sessions happening this past week.

With the official launch just weeks away, anticipation continues to build throughout Altoona-Johnstown.

“I would say the enthusiasm is above average,” estimated Sister Linda. “People have embraced it as something they want to do and as an opportunity for themselves to grow personally and to bring the Church together. Somehow the Holy Spirit is drawing their hearts to see something good.”

So far, each of the participating parishes has its own success story, including Holy Name Parish in Ebensburg.

Leading into the parish’s sign-up weekend earlier this month, Monsignor David Lockard, pastor of Holy Name, said about 20 people had generously offered to lead small groups.

“It’s a good sign,” concluded Monsignor Lockard.

Holy Name faithful have a strong tradition of enthusiasm for small group renewal activities, he added.

The parish is also extending ARISE communities to a nearby personal care home and a retirement community, noted Carmelite Community of the Word Sister Margie McGuire, evangelization coordinator at Holy Name.

Sister Margie and others from the parish routinely bring Holy Communion to residents at those locations, so having ARISE groups there seemed natural.

“Their relationship with Christ has certainly been growing and developing,” Sister Margie said of the residents. “More than ever, they need support in their relationship with Christ to face their limitations but also to see the potential for peer ministry among themselves.”

Father George Gulash, pastor of Resurrection Parish in Johnstown, also has high hopes for ARISE.

Close to two dozen parishioners committed to the small group faith sharing well before sign-up weekends, he reported.

“The Spirit is just drawing them,” he surmised. “They don’t know what the outcome is going to be, but they want to be part of it. It’s good to hear that.”

Wally Zapotoczny is the ARISE coordinator at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Altoona and a small group leader.

“I am humbled and encouraged to help bring this faith sharing and evangelization opportunity to the faithful of our parish,” he remarked. “I believe that it is a refreshing invitation in the light of some very challenging times for our diocese and the universal Church.”

Our Lady of Lourdes is offering about seven small group opportunities and created a social media venue to help facilitate communication among group leaders and others.

“I hope that our parish as a whole will gain a sense of togetherness, fellowship, and most importantly, a close personal relationship with our Lord that will remain with them throughout their life as we immerse ourselves in His Word and all of the fruits and graces that flow from sharing it with one another,” Zapotoczny said.

Bishop Mark will celebrate a Mass of Commissioning for ARISE coordinators, parish teams, and small group leaders on Sunday, September 23 at 2:00 p.m. at the Immaculate Conception Chapel at Saint Francis University in Loretto. All are invited to attend the Liturgy.

“Join us and pray that hearts will be open to have a special encounter with Jesus Christ through ARISE,” stated Sister Linda.