By Tony DeGol  
*The Catholic Register*

Bishop Mark L. Bartchak remembers how he and his brothers learned to swim as children.

While in a boat on the lake with their father and grandfather, their grandfather simply picked up the boys and tossed them in the water.

It sounds scary, but by the time the youngsters poked their heads above water and looked around, their father and grandfather were in the lake with them to guide them.

The Bishop’s experience of learning to swim is not that different from what some might experience with the diocese’s upcoming renewal initiative ARISE Together in Christ.

“Some people are not good at swimming or they haven’t learned how to swim yet, so part of this is jumping in and getting ourselves wet,” offered the Bishop.

Unlike his swimming lessons, Bishop Mark reminded, ARISE is an invitation.

“It’s not to coerce or to force anyone into those experiences,” he added.

The first season of ARISE Together in Christ small group sharing sessions will begin in October, but the effort is already yielding great news.

RENEW International, which offers the ARISE program throughout the country, has informed Bishop Mark that, per capita, the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown has the highest participation rate of any other diocese in the nation.

At last check, at least 85 percent of parishes in Altoona-Johnstown are on board. The program is also being used in Catholic schools, Religious Education programs, college campus ministry, prison ministry, and in personal care homes.

After a flurry of orientation and training sessions this past winter and spring, the ARISE diocesan team is using these summer months to further prepare for the fall launch.

During a recent meeting, Bishop Mark offered the group a vision for the future.

The Bishop recalled the message of Pope Francis shortly after his election. The Holy Father used the Italian word, “Avanti,” which means “go forward.”

Stated the Pope: “When we stop moving, things go wrong.”

A pastoral approach to moving forward, noted Bishop Mark, is Accompaniment.

To illustrate his point, the Bishop reflected on the Emmaus story.

In the story, the risen Christ appears with two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The pair did not recognize Jesus on their journey until they sat down for a meal and He broke the bread. “Their eyes were opened,” the story goes, and the two realized they were in the presence of the risen Lord.

“It is Jesus Christ who enables and embodies this logic of the Emmaus story,” remarked Bishop Mark. “He walks alongside the disciples, He listens, and he teaches, and, ultimately, gives them His very body.”

Continued the Bishop: “When we’re gathering together in small faith sharing groups, there’s going to be moments when people are going to be very vulnerable because a particular topic about our faith is going to make them think in the same raw terms as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They’re going to be vulnerable at that moment, but at the same time within the group there’s also the strength to bear each other up on that journey. The others around the table become the person of Jesus for that person who finds himself or herself so vulnerable, so lost, so confused.”

Carmelite Community of the Word Sister Linda LaMagna, diocesan coordinator for ARISE Together in Christ, welcomed the Bishop’s message of Accompaniment.

“It pulled us together as a team to focus our attention on really wanting people to experience a relationship with Jesus Christ, an intimacy with God,” she said.

Those participating in ARISE should not view the opportunity as just a program or a series of meetings, Sister Linda stressed, but as an invitation to seek and find God at the deepest levels.

In that spirit, participating parishes will offer a formal invitation to parishioners in August, she mentioned. The parishes will have sign-up weekends on September 15-16 and September 22-23.

Also during these summer months, the diocesan team will be traveling to outlying parishes for Eucharistic Holy Hours for small group leaders – including one this past week at Saint Stephen Parish in McConnellsburg and one scheduled for August 30 at Saint Joseph Parish in Williamsburg.

“The idea is to let the ARISE teams know that the diocesan team is praying with them for the success of ARISE,” Sister Linda remarked.