

Everyone Needs to Hear the Good News



When a diocese decided to explore strategies for evangelisation, the results were more positive than many had anticipated. One key discovery was the deep and neglected spiritual hunger in the general population

The general public have a need to relate to something spiritual – preferably something small and cosy rather than something big and impersonal – even if they may have lost contact with the local church.

In the spring of 2015, Bishop Philip Egan asked each pastoral area in Portsmouth to set up an Evangelisation Strategy Team. The priests and their pastoral councils in each of the six parishes in the area were asked to nominate two potential leaders from each community. A few of us met with the nominees to discern what they had to offer and share the vision in a personal and direct way.

I had personal reservations about this process but, with hindsight, it actually enabled everyone to work as a team. The more we talked about the vision the clearer it became. We finally distilled the vision to this simple statement: “We Catholics will use every opportunity to share our faith with everyone we meet.” At our first meeting we outlined a plan for the rest of the year. Our main objective was to encourage everyone in the pews to “move out of their comfort zone” in order to “welcome home” for Christmas 2015 those Catholics who had lost touch with the Church.

Everyone in my parish was given a list of the Christmas services, professionally printed on a card. They were invited to take five cards each, post them through the letter boxes of five “out of touch Catholics” in their neighbourhood, or, better still, to deliver the cards personally. Most people took to the exercise with enthusiasm. Almost immediately it was noticeable that people in the existing community were looking out for newcomers. At Christmas, I know of five people who came to the church door asking for their neighbour who had invited them to Mass.

We also asked several car park attendants to welcome people into the church grounds. This part of the initiative was based on what one member of the team told us, that she had a Catholic friend who drove into the car park five times only to lose their nerve and drive home again. Those of us who go to church regularly have no idea what courage is needed by those who want to come back to the faith.

The Strategy Team appraised the exercise and received reports from all the parishes. All six parishes did something different to welcome people home for Christmas. One parish received sponsorship to produce a high-quality Christmas card with the times of Masses on it. Taken from Coventry Cathedral, the simple and direct Christmas message ran: “We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, straight, gay, confused, well-heeled or down-at-heel. We especially welcome wailing babies and excited toddlers. We welcome you whether you can sing like Pavarotti or just growl quietly to yourself. You’re welcome here if you’re just browsing, just woken up or just got out of prison. We don’t care if you’re more Christian than the archbishop ... or haven’t been to church since Christmas 10 years ago. We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome keep-fit moms, football dads, starving artists, tree huggers, latte sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted ... We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throats as kids or got lost on the ring road and wound up here by mistake.” One priest incorporated the message into his Christmas homily. Google “Coventry Cathedral welcomes visitors with an unexpected message” for the whole invite.

The team then embarked on a year-long plan of practical ideas for outreach. These included Ash Wednesday, Mothering Sunday and Remembrance Sunday in 2016. This second exercise was far more challenging. A group of us opted to distribute Blessed Ashes on the High Street for two hours on Ash Wednesday. This had a magnificent impact: 35 people received the ashes, but the great revelation was the speed with which total strangers poured out their soul on real life issues. Much of the general population is in a poor place spiritually and the Churches need to investigate how best to make contact with these people, among the “poor” of our time.

We repeated the exercise this year at the same location. We gave ashes to 80 people and we received generous compliments from many fellow Christians in Christchurch. Again people poured out their stories without any encouragement. This response alone suggests there is a profound need for Christians to take Jesus into the highways and byways of our towns and cities. Street Angels and Night Fever are touching a great need in this respect.

For Mothering Sunday we contacted all those mothers known to the congregation. We produced a simple Mother’s Day card with weekend Mass times, with a prayer for mothers. People were asked to pass on as many cards to as many mothers as possible and we gave a bunch of flowers to all women at Mass.

For Passiontide we fixed a large wooden Cross outside the Church. We had in mind the lovely song, “Tie a yellow ribbon ’round the ole oak tree”. We explained that we had tied a yellow ribbon round the oldest oak tree in Christendom, on which Jesus had taken the blame for all our sins. Jesus has served his time. The Lord has paid the ransom. The Cross and the ribbon are signs of victory and the Lord Jesus is welcomed home. We invited people to tie their own ribbon round the Cross and we were not surprised with the reaction we got as several people tied their own ribbon in welcome.

For Remembrance Sunday we invited the families of all those who had died in the previous 12 months to Mass. The names of their loved ones were called out and, as the name was called, a member of the family was invited to light a candle and place it on the altar where it remained for the rest of Mass.

After more than two years practising outreach, it has become clear that there is a rich resource of leadership among the laity. That leadership is emerging in a natural and healthy way and the Church needs to tap into it, and to harness it for the sake of the Good News. With the decline in numbers of ordained leadership, lay leadership needs to be publicly acknowledged, encouraged and affirmed right across the denominations.

Fr Tom Grufferty is parish priest of Immaculate Conception and St Joseph's, Christchurch, Dorset.

Tom Grufferty - The Tablet