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Parish Renewal Through Cell Groups

by Michelle Harrison

For the last twelve years, my husband, James, and I have been part of a team seeking to bring renewal to our local parish church, St Joseph's, in Guildford. During formational years as members of Cor et Lumen Christi community and Holy Trinity Brompton (where James attended before becoming a Roman Catholic) the Lord gave us a heart for parish renewal. When we moved to Guildford, the obvious starting point seemed to be to run an outreach course but instead the Lord led us to form a small group – somewhere for people to come for fellowship and formation and to be as a family. From the outset, the vision was to bring about a renewed parish rather than the group being an end in itself. Through giving people the opportunity to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and continuing their formation it was hoped that through them the ministries of the church would be renewed making the parish able to provide more for both parishioners and the town beyond.

Over 100 people involved in ministries within and outside the parish

We have seen growth as the initial group of four has swelled to well over a hundred people involved in ministries within and outside the parish. Belonging to a small group, or home group as we call them, is the norm for many Christians and we have found that belonging to one is, along with Sunday Mass and personal prayer, essential for our Christian walk. A previous article (*see below*, from Good News Jan/Feb 2006) outlined how the groups developed. The key has been to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in the next step forward and to develop team ministry. The verses in Acts 2:42-47 have become

foundational. They show a snapshot of the early church and help us to remember first principles, one being the need to meet together regularly.

People often say to us 'that could never happen in my parish' but the truth is that God can do anything! (Mt 19:26). We have a responsibility to share what we have received through Baptism in the Holy Spirit and can have a faith vision for what God can do in our parishes. This doesn't mean it will be easy and at times it can almost feel impossible! Remaining focussed and being prepared to make sacrifices can help through difficult times. It's often been when I've felt most discouraged that our two daughters have reminded me of all God can do! Encouragingly, through us speaking at conferences, most notably giving seminars at Celebrate, there is now a network of people in parishes across the UK and Europe wanting to see renewal of their parishes and doing something about it. Some of them, through using home groups as a starting point, are seeing new life and real signs of hope. It needs to start with us

There are numerous reasons why renewal is not impacting our parishes as it could. Some people are reliant on their priest, feel burnt out or are unaware of spiritual warfare. Often there is a lack of vision and the question 'what's in it for me?' is asked rather than 'what can I give to my parish?' Sometimes people are not prepared to try new initiatives or they insist on doing things their own way. But we can do 'all things through Him who gives us strength' (Phil 4:13) and we can take encouragement from other Christian denominations who have seen great renewal; they show us it is possible.

The bottom line is that it needs to start with us. We can start right where we are and ask the Holy Spirit to equip and inspire us.

Find one person to start praying with

Not long ago someone called me saying she was desperate to see renewal of her parish so I suggested she find one other person with whom to start praying. She did not feel that she knew anyone who she could approach to pray in this way so I recommended that on the following Sunday at Mass she ask the Holy Spirit to show someone to approach about praying together. She rang me excitedly to say that she had done just that and, led by the Spirit, approached someone she hadn't met before. She found they too were desperate to see renewal of the parish. Similarly, someone contacted us saying they felt called to run the Alpha course but did not feel they had resources to do it on their own. I suggested they link up with another parish locally that ran Alpha, for support. They assured me there was no one in the vicinity but I encouraged them to pray and ask the Lord to provide. They called back saying they had bumped into an Anglican clergyman and getting into conversation it transpired he had been longing to start Alpha too. Together they ran a very successful joint course which was a blessing to many. If we trust God and ask Him to provide He will never fail us but it does usually require some action on our behalf!

No programme or event is as attractive as community

A renewed parish is easy to imagine but much of what we hope for is peripheral and a conversion of heart needs to come first. Each individual needs to know God as Father, Jesus as Saviour and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Everything else – service, giving, evangelization etc – flows from this. No programme or event is as attractive as community. We need to show others Jesus by our lives and by our relationships. We need to make sure that we are praying, fasting, discerning and serving as these elements will make a firm foundation for building and sustaining parish community. There then needs to be outreach, continued formation in small groups and ongoing training.

Becoming involved in others' lives can be time consuming and demanding and building God's Kingdom can involve unglamorous tasks! People say to us 'I don't know what my gifts are' but often through serving, others recognize our giftings and the Lord is able to use us if we are prepared to do anything for Him. Choosing to find time to serve is contrary to the current culture that tells us to indulge ourselves and sticking at it is even harder. The Holy Spirit, however, helps to sustain us through our difficulties so that we bear long term fruit for the kingdom of God...

Home groups include people from many different walks of life

At St Joseph's our home groups are charismatic and include people from many different walks of life. The groups are arranged to each include younger and older people, male, female, married and single and this reflects God's family. Alpha and CaFE courses have been our main sources of outreach and led to the groups multiplying. Growth is essential if we are to include others even though it may feel more comfortable to remain as we are.

We are accountable to our parish priests and our current priest is a blessing and supportive of the work we do with other parishes. A core team is responsible for planning programmes, sourcing material, training new leaders etc., and a wider team of leaders are responsible for organizing and leading meetings in the homes. The home groups meet fortnightly and each meeting includes teaching, praise and worship, ministry and refreshments. We all meet together twice a term for an evening with an outside speaker and have social events, prayer breakfasts and evenings of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. There are also teams for intercession, worship and PA, prayers for the priests, church cleaning, meal provision, prayer ministry and social action. Some of us are Alpha advisors and work with other churches in Guildford on various projects. We have no formal commitment to one another but we ask members of the home groups to pray the novena to the Holy Spirit daily and to fast on Thursdays for the parish.

We are very grateful for all that God has done here so far but know there is more to come! We recently visited St Eustorgio's Catholic Church in Milan which has received Vatican recognition for the parish cell system of evangelization. Here we met Don Pigi the parish priest. It was wonderful to hear their story of renewal and development in the parish through the cell group system and how small

groups remain at the heart of everything they do. Someone in our groups recently wrote ...being part of the Home Groups is a lifeline to my faith, because it keeps me learning, encouraged and accountable - and equips me to do the same for others. It transforms community from a buzzword into a reality' and if that can be true for more people then it is indeed a work to pursue.

If you have been touched by this article and would like to know how to set up a parish cell, please contact: 01483 820833

Michelle and James Harrison are parishioners of St Joseph's in Guilford, and part of the leadership team for the Parish Cell System network.

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Parish Renewal

Michele Harrison tells how after they were baptised in the Holy Spirit as students, she and her husband James have felt called to dedicate their lives to renewal in their local parish and the role cell groups have played in this.

My husband, James, and I have been involved in bringing renewal to our local Catholic parish for the last eight years. We were both baptised in the Spirit while students sixteen years ago during a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit at our university. We witnessed many friends coming to Christ, being baptised in the Spirit and starting to use the charisms. I was a Catholic and while many of the other students that made a commitment to Christ were also, I was the only one who remained in the Church. Although I was sorely tempted to join more charismatic fellowships on Sundays, I found myself week after week at the local (very dry) Catholic church - I just knew in my heart that that was where the Lord wanted me to be. I feel the Lord used my daily prayer of 'take me where you want Lord and do whatever you want with me' to actually leave me exactly where I was!

On leaving university, James travelled the world for a year and I moved to London to join the Cor et Lumen Christi Community - a lay community committed to prayer and restoring

the gifts of the Spirit to the Church. Later, James moved to London and made his home church HTB and was part of Nicky Gumbel's Home Group taking part in the first Alpha course he ran. Despite the obvious blessings and attractions of being part of such an amazing church he had a conversion of heart about the Real Presence and felt the Lord asking him to become a Catholic. James joined the community and having always been 'best friends' we fell in love and married six months later remaining members of the community. Living in community taught us many things. It gave us an understanding of authority and obedience, commitment and radical living. It called us to move ever deeper into Christ and we realized the responsibility we have to each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord. We learnt the disciplines of prayer, fasting and tithing and gained a love for the Church.

"Taking what we had learnt in community to parish setting"

A few years later, the community had to leave the house they were renting and spread out to wait until a new property was found. We fully expected to stay with or near the main house and prayed about where the Lord wanted us to live meantime. As we prayed we began to feel a real prompting to move to Guildford but it didn't seem to fit with the community location. The Lord also seemed to be laying on our hearts a desire to take what we had learnt and experienced in community into a parish setting and to work to bring renewal in the Spirit into a local church. I felt I needed further convincing about this seeming change of direction and I asked the Lord to give me some clear guidance. During one prayer time I saw a map of the British Isles and a flashing light to the south west of London. I have a reputation of not knowing where anywhere is so I announced to James that the Lord was in fact sending us to Croydon! James, knowing my deficiencies in all things geographical, asked me to point on a map of England to exactly where I had seen the light and yes it was Guildford! Obviously, we confirmed our discernment by asking others to pray and discussed the move with our spiritual directors. The Lord gave us two clear pictures about the house we should buy, we prayed for the money and the deal was done! We moved to Guildford and received several prophecies about what the Lord wanted us to do there. We were prayed over and sent out by the community to embark on the next stage of our walk with the Lord. In Guildford there are four Catholic churches which work together to varying degrees and we became part of the town centre church with an average weekly Mass attendance of 650 people. The Lord deepened our desire to bring renewal to the local church and we felt He gave us a faith vision for a fully-renewed parish. This would be one where:

- o Each member of the parish would know God as their Father, Jesus as their Saviour and live in the power of the Holy Spirit using the charisms
- o Each member of the parish would have a personal prayer life, read the Scriptures, receive the sacraments and belong to a fellowship group.
- o Each would be involved in some form of service, works of mercy, paying tithes, fasting and evangelisation

"Intercession and fasting for many years had taken place"

We linked up with another couple at the parish church who had been in renewal for several years and found that God had been preparing the ground. There had been much intercession and fasting for the Lord to pour out his Spirit upon the parish for many years and we were incredibly encouraged by all that we therefore inherited in the Spirit. There had been a charismatic prayer group and this had resulted in a very successful monthly Pentecost Mass which attracted people from all over the county and beyond. Those responsible for organising the Masses received a word from the Lord to stop them and to send the people back to work in their own parishes to bring about renewal. This they did - a very brave response when it would have been tempting for them to continue organising such a popular event. Those involved realised that the prayer group and the Masses, blessed as they were, had not centrally renewed the parish and that a different model, particularly one that would facilitate community, was necessary.

"Starting a Home Group"

So the four of us began meeting to pray and fasted weekly to discern the way forward for our parish, excited by all the Lord was going to do. We felt called to start a "home group", based on the model found in so many renewed churches of other denominations, knowing that the Home Group would not be an end in itself but a means by which to renew the parish and town community beyond and something which could embrace those who had done a 'Life in the Spirit', Alpha or similar course. We based ourselves on the verse Acts 2:42 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' and wanted to return to New Testament values. Gradually quite a few others came to join us - some already renewed in their faith and some receiving Baptism in the Spirit as a result of coming along. We aimed to be open, challenging, accepting and encouraging. Commitments were not to be prescriptive or legalistic but rather each person was encouraged according to their individual situation. Our aim was to be faithful to the teaching and tradition of the Church and to live

the sacramental life honouring Mary while also bringing the grace of Baptism in the Spirit and the charisms to the parish. From the outset we made ourselves accountable to our parish priest - regularly meeting with him and giving him updates about everything we were doing.

"Prompting to clean the church"

All the while we felt the Lord wanted us to run an Alpha course but we were not permitted to do so by the priest at the time so we continued to pray and ask the Lord for guidance. One thing we felt was to start meeting for ten minutes after each Sunday Mass to pray for our parish and within three months the Lord had sent us a charismatic priest! He still felt the timing was not right for Alpha and so we went to prayer again only to feel prompted to commit to cleaning the church once a month. We obeyed this prompting and as it was deemed 'by their fruits you shall know them' we were invited to run the parish's first Alpha course (five years on we still clean the church!). From then on we have continued to run Alpha courses and the home groups concurrently so that people newly baptised in the Spirit can then join the groups. We have recently run some of the CaFE courses which have also been a huge blessing to the parish and attracted people who would not have come to an Alpha course. As a result the home groups have grown to include about 70 people and multiplied from one to four.

"Home groups an expression of God's family"

The groups are charismatic and have a termly programme of teaching, praise and worship and ministry and meet all together regularly for joint meetings and socials. The groups are made up of young and old, male and female, single and married - truly an expression of God's family. They are overseen by a core team and each group is run by several leaders. We have developed teams for intercession, worship, church cleaning and cooking for those in need in the groups and formed prayer rotas to pray for our priests in the town.

We run a leadership training course each year to train new leaders and this year had the blessing of sharing with some nearby parishes who are planning to start a home group system.

We have also held away days for the groups and many individuals serve the parish in other ministries. So has it all been plain sailing? - far from it! With any pioneering work there is major attack from the enemy. This has been particularly strong in the last couple of years both with people struggling with personal difficulties and the groups facing difficult issues. The sacrifices have been great in terms of time, energy and finances but more difficult than that has been the pain of being rejected at times by people whom we love but who think differently than we do! Perhaps one of the biggest problems we have faced in our growth is with authority. In the absence of officially appointed paid leadership, if someone does not like the programme, disagrees with the structure, doesn't get asked to do what they want etc they can sometimes leave.

As leaders we have had to learn to accept that we will sometimes upset people, but we must not be so worried about our popularity that this causes us to compromise over what we think is right. On the other hand, along the way we have to accept that we will get things wrong from time to time. Finding the correct balance between organising things and letting the Spirit have free reign is a difficult one! I believe, however, that if teams are allowed to operate correctly and freely there should be room for those hurting to be cared for while not compromising the vision.

"Importance of team ministry"

Developing team ministry is essential to a work such as this. We are thankful to be part of a wonderful team of people. Organising so much and dealing with so many pastoral issues can get very exhausting! James has a very demanding job as a chartered accountant and we have two young daughters. I also have a health condition which means that many days I am in severe pain and it can all feel too much sometimes but that is when we can turn to the promises that the Lord has given us and the many prophecies that have been confirmed time and time again and stand firm on His word while remembering that none of us is indispensable!

Do you want parish renewal for yourself or because you love the people?

A major turning point for me in our work here came when the Lord asked me why I want to see our parish renewed. Is it because I want charismatic worship at Mass or a flourishing parish for my children or is it because I love the people in the parish with the Lord's heart desperate for them to have the opportunity to meet Him as I have? I'm on a journey to having my motives purified as I would indeed like to have all the things associated with a renewed parish but if the Lord is going to use me most effectively it will be because I have His heart for His work - whether I get to be blessed by it long term or not. I'm learning that it's about what I give and not what I can get out of it!

God is faithful and true to His word but His work is dependant on His people saying 'yes' and only time will show if we have got what it takes to keep moving forward. The cell group models that have been adopted in Milan and Ireland in the Catholic Church have truly

brought great blessing both for the parishes concerned and beyond. Please pray for us that we will continue to push on and that the flood gates would open for more parishes to receive the renewal in the Spirit that the Lord so desires for His people. We give thanks for the affirmation and encouragement we have received from those in leadership in the renewal and for our parish priest, Fr Ian Byrnes. We have been encouraged and supported in prayer by other churches in Guildford.

We have been very blessed by being able to share what the Lord has done with us through giving seminars at Celebrate for the past three years and are beginning to form a network of those parishes wanting to implement home group systems. If you would like to get in touch please do contact us c/o the Goodnews Office.

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More:

0321uk on www.stucom.nl: CELL GROUPS A Key to Parish Renewal? - Fr Michael Hurley

Goodnews archives, May/June 2004, <http://www.ccr.org.uk/archive/gn0405/g011.htm>

International site of parish evangelization cell system <http://www.cells-evangelization.org/>

Nederlands: www.stucom.nl/parochie, document 0220, 0302 en andere.

Deutsch: 0216de, 0217de auf www.stucom.nl.

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