**Community and PFG’s**

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche communities has frequently said, “the secret to community is the love of difference”. Some people see ‘difference’ as a threat, whereas; differences are what enrich a family or a community. Different gifts and personalities assist communities to appreciate goodness in a variety of ways.

We know in personal relationships as well as in chemistry that opposites are attracted to each other (introvert and extrovert etc.). Some psychologists suggest that what attracts us to another person can be unfulfilled or underdeveloped needs or gifts in ourselves that we recognise (sometimes subconsciously) in others. Despite our differences as humans, we discover that we have much more in common with others than our differences. We find this in our Passionist Family Group’s (PFG’s) as we face all the challenges, benefits and gifts of being part of a community.

Some of us remember what the general make-up of a typical Family Group just twenty-five years ago. There were a lot of people aged between 35-55 and their children. There were a number of 55-75 year olds and a handful of those who were older. Of course, this reflected the typical of Mass attenders at the time.

A typical Family Group today is different. It is more likely to be made up mainly of people aged between 65-85. Again, this reflects the typical Pakeha Mass attenders. Many groups have no young families – so, no children. The ‘grandparent to baby’ ideal is still real, but rarely the case. In very recent years many parishes have begun Family Groups for ‘young families’ and mostly, these have worked well. We have strived to invite and include migrant families for whom a PFG would provide a family of belonging, but despite the increasing numbers of such families in our parishes, most have not joined.

Faced with such significant change, and confident of the many benefits PFG’s can offer people in our parishes, it can be helpful to reflect on the effect of ‘exponential change’ that has taken place over the past twenty-five years and the effects this change has had on PFG’s, our parishes, our church and of course society in general.

**Older members**

Today, of those who live to 60 years of age, 90% survive past 65 and 66% live past 85 years of age. This means more and more people will experience the physical, mental and social changes that come with ageing. One woman has noted how her ageing has affected her place in her family. “I’ve become an observer of the family; I’ve lost my place of importance and relevance.”

Research undertaken in New Zealand by the ‘Herald on Sunday’ in April this year showed that nationally, 30% of nearly 37,000 seniors assessed in 2017 reported they spent eight hours or more alone during the day and 22% felt lonely. 8% admitted they had been distressed by a decline in their participation in social, religious or other preferred activities.

Otago university research in 2017 revealed similar statistics and identified that Asians (23%) were the most likely ethnic group to be lonely. Research in the UK found 200,000 older people had not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month.

Social disengagement involves a gradual turning inward and withdrawing both psychologically and socially. This is quite common in old age, especially among aged ‘single’ people, although it is not inevitable. This experience is often imposed on older people by their own physical limitations or by society ignoring them, as ‘has beens’. Living alone or having few connections with people, contributes to a sense of isolation. We see family members and friends growing get older. Some of them become frail; some lose their spouse; some face decisions about aged care; some thrive during retirement; some travel more than ever some volunteer in the parish or community; most are involved with their grandchildren.

Although most people in the 65-80 year age bracket are active. Yet, as we know some are not. Medication allows the majority of people to function well, but as a result of the effects of ageing most function at a different ‘pace’ from their earlier days, and late nights are not common. This can mean older members prefer daytime or ‘early night’ activities. This is not what most younger or middle-aged members prefer, and we have to take account of this reality.

PFG’s have proven over the years that they can and do provide belonging, companionship, acceptance, caring and being cared for; celebrating; practical Christian living; a sense of community. Most PFG’s are comprised of members who have been together for more than 20 years and they want to continue ‘being’ a family and not all of them are old or aged.

If younger families join an existing PFG, there are challenges to find activities that everyone can engage in and adjustments to each other’s expectations are needed. This is a normal experience in families as they change from the time when children are young to when they grow into adolescence and again into to young adults. There are some different needs, wants and expectations called for from family.

**Younger members**

We can lament the ageing of members and the lack of younger families, but that reality starts in our parishes and there is a ‘new normal’ about the church and parish life that we have to accept and work with. Initiatives to attract younger families to PFG’s and to place them in similar aged groups have been very well worth it and we have to continue seeking to do this.

People under fifty years of age argue that they are ‘time poor’. Trying to invite them to ‘waste time’ with a look-alike family, is less attractive to many of them than being on Facebook (more about that later). Another new normal will develop and it may change their attitude, but for now we are wasting our energy hankering for the past, and expecting ‘grandparent to baby’ Family Groups, will be normal.

In parishes where there are young families, the attraction, need and value of PFG’s is as strong as ever. By having them participate in combined functions, the young and old can gradually get to know one another and extend their sense of community. Acceptance is a great teacher because it is aligned to us being different from each another.

Some young PFG’s use WhatsApp or a Facebook page to organise activities and share regular communication. These are new ways of building community and connections for busy people and we should fully support this.

**More diverse cultures**

Involving people from different cultures remains our biggest challenge, because the New Zealand church is already multi-cultural and will be more so in the future. We are seeing this already happening all over the country, in both urban and rural parishes. Some of these cultures (e.g. Pacificas, Filipino etc have a marvelous sense of community).

We want to benefit from their experience and invite them to something beyond a monoculture, which is not part of the modern world. For some members of migrant families, their level of English creates embarrassment or fear about mixing with others. We have to understand this but also do what we can to welcome them and make them feel at home. We have to appreciate that there are many differences in cultural attitudes. Since food and meals are a great way to break down barriers, PFG’s have a great way of ‘breaking the ice’ and allowing those from other cultures to share their food, and then share themselves and through this mutual sharing to find belonging and acceptance.

**Busy lives**

Even those who are retired ‘complain’ of life being so busy. Even young people are speaking of the sense that life is racing by. This means many people feel they have less time to get together and to stay in personal contact. As a result, gatherings tend to be briefer or more spaced out. We need to respect this reality without losing the regular basic human connections and the time it takes to make them that enable Passionist Family Groups to be “a matter of the heart”. Building and developing relationships takes time - time to listen, laugh, tell our stories and just be with others.

**Changed sense of commitment**

At every level and for a variety of reasons, many people today withdraw from a prior commitment. It might be because something more important or more attractive has ‘come up’. Trying to plan a year’s activities as was once recommended, seems fanciful for many younger couples.

**Technology**

Technological change is happening at an ever-increasing pace. This can be noted at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8lBMFw2xFA>

In an interview in May 2017, the head of Mercedes Benz, Dr Dieter Zetschesaid Mercedes’ competitors are no longer other car companies, but Tesla which specializes in electric vehicles, energy storage and solar panel manufacturing.

Google, Apple, Amazon etc, are greater threats because software will disrupt most traditional industries in the next 5-10 years.  Zetsche pointed out that Uber is a software tool. They don't own any cars, but are the biggest taxi company in the world.  Airbnb is the biggest hotel company in the world, although they don't own any properties.

In 2016 a computer beat the best Go player in the world, 10 years earlier than expected. IBM Watson is a question answering computer system that can provide basic level legal advice within seconds, with 90% accuracy compared with 70% accuracy when done by (human) lawyers.

Dr Zetsche predicts there will be 90% less lawyers in the future. He points out that IBM Watson helps diagnose cancer more accurately than doctors, and that Facebook has pattern recognition software that can recognize faces better than humans can. He highlights that computers are becoming increasingly intelligent and robots are appearing in increasing new industries. People can have a voice activated ‘slave’ to close the curtains, advise them of tomorrow’s weather and wake them in the morning.

3D printing process turns a whole object into thousands of tiny little slices, then makes it from the bottom-up, slice by slice. Those tiny layers stick together to form a solid object. Each layer can be very complex, meaning 3D printers can create moving parts like hinges and wheels as part of the same object.

In 2015 a 57 story building in China was completed in 19 days! The price of the cheapest 3D printer came down from $18,000 to $400 within 10 years and in that time became 100 times faster.

This printing allows printing to be done locally – where and when needed. Major shoe companies have started 3D printing shoes.

<https://www.sculpteo.com/blog/2017/10/31/3d-printed-shoes-how-3d-printing-revolutionize-the-footwear-industry/>

From 2020 onwards people will begin to not need to own a car anymore. They will call be able to call a car with a smartphone. It will show up at their location and drive them to their destination. They will be able to do other things while being driven and they will not need to park it.

As a result, it is estimated that cities will need 90% less car parking space. If you can work while you commute, people will be able to move further away to live in a nicer neighbourhood. Traditional car companies will try to build a better car, while tech companies (Tesla, Apple, Google) will take the revolutionary approach and build a computer on wheels!

The Khan Academy is offering free video tutorials on the Internet providing wonderful opportunities for children and others to learn. The cheapest smart phones are already sold for $10 in Africa and Asia.  It is estimated that by 2020, 70% of all humans will own a smart phone, which will give those people wide access to education and information.

**Social media**

Social media and technology have radically changed our lives. Face-to-face communication is increasingly being replaced by digital communication with far away family and friends.

Facebook claims that their average user has 155 friends. How can genuine friendship and a sense of family be sustained with so many friends? The Book of Proverbs (6:6) written nearly 3,000 years ago, suggests, “Let your acquaintances be many but your advisor, one in a thousand”. The quest for social media ‘friends’ seems to be more about making connections with others rather than with any real sense of community. It assists in the drive to gather information and to consume, rather than knowing and developing relationships with people. Many people rejoice that people can be connected regularly with people on the other side of the world but as writer, Nick Bilton asks, “are we meant to be that kind of global community?

It is sobering to realize how recent some of our communication tools are. The Internet was first made available to the public in 1995 and email about two years later. Google was released in 1998. Facebook was launched in 2004. The iphone was first released in 2007. These and other resources have enabled us to gain access to immediate information that would have taken years to gather in the past.

Google responds to 3,500,000,000 searches per day. Incredible amounts of private and public information are shared instantly, often accompanied by images or videos. Virtually everyone we know is benefited from this information technology. However in terms of living healthy community lives, not everything is so positive.

Many former Facebook executives are publicly articulating the perils of social media on both their families and their social network. Tim Cook, the C.E.O. of Apple has advised his nephew not to use social media. Writer, Nick Bilton has expressed the belief that Facebook is in real trouble because many people are abandoning it. He says “almost everyone I know has deleted at least one social app from their devices and Facebook is almost always the first to go”. Mark Zuckerberg has said, “the world feels anxious and divided and Facebook might be contributing to that”.

Bilcon suggests that people are removing themselves from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other applications because they invade their privacy and because they are tired of being engaged in arguments with a long-lost cousin or over Donald Trump or a news item that is biased or fake.

Bilcon says, “In the past five years it seems more and more people have felt compelled to express their opinion about what they like or unlike on every conceivable topic. This has caused viciousness, harassment and close mindedness. We deserve more”.

It was fun to connect with old friends and sharing holiday photos with everyone, but it has become more clicks, more time spent on the site, more likes, more people, more connections, more hyper-personalized ads. Facebook paid US$19 billion for What’sApp in 2014, which now has 1.5 billion users. Its reach grows greater and greater. Some fear that Facebook knows more about them than they know about themselves!

In March 2018 research firm Nielsen reported average Facebook usage had dropped in December by 24%, meaning people are spending less time. The number of users has also dropped. Younger people prefer Snapchat and Instagram, which offer features for sharing photos and videos that disappear. As with most technological advancements, the benefits are very clear and then the costs start to become known. The global connections and rapid communication social media provides has astounding advantages and benefits. However as Nick Bilcon suggests we do have to ask, “What if we were never meant to be a global species?”

When we observe passengers on public transport engaged with their devices and not the people around them, or restaurant patrons dining at the same table each connecting with people who are not at the table, we have to ask ‘what has become of human contact?” Are we prepared to swap personal touch and sight for remote contact and photographs? Is that a risk for our Passionist Family Groups? Can we use social media to improve communication between members without losing personal contact with them?

**The essence of community**

Jean Vanier has suggested the secret to true community is the love of difference. Social media risks us losing that gift as people become intolerant of those who disagree with them and their ideas matter more than their hearts.

Every human is unique, but we each have a heart that wants to love, and a spirit that seeks to be appreciated and accepted. Looking into another person’s face tells us infinitely more than looking into their Facebook profile. Vanier suggests, *“I think everybody must be part of a community, and community is somewhere really wanting to see other people growing, respecting them as people, loving them as people, not seeing them first as a function. Resurrection is not just a belief that Jesus is risen, but in our L’Arche communities we have seen people move from death to life, and when you have seen this in other people, and you’ve seen it in yourself, then there is hope for the whole world”.*

In a community we can allow people to belong, to be accepted, to contribute, to love and be loved. We tolerate each other and celebrate our differences because we are not afraid to see others develop and respond to opportunities that come their way. In a true community other’s success is a gift to us as much as it is to them.

**Community & PFG’s**

The PFG motto is ‘a family (community) for all’. This motto expresses a hope that every person can find a place in a Passionist Family Group. Our hope is that in parishes where both newcomers and old timers might be strangers, that both can find a place of belonging and acceptance. We know that in a simply and easy way, they can become ‘a people in common’ – a community.

The massive and rapid changes in society and the church in the past twenty years have resulted in changes to the Movement; but movements expect that. The ‘ideal’ extended family model still works, but it is rare and a ‘grandparent to baby’ family has been replaced by great-grandparent to baby, since we now have four generations living side by side.

Many parishes have amalgamated; some have closed. A huge percentage of active Catholics have disappeared from the 30-60-age bracket. Since they are no longer regular worshippers, it is difficult to attract them to parish based PFG’s.

Among the older members there is not a great keenness for leadership roles, so there has to be shared responsibility. This moment in our history is just that. We are making our way in this time of transition and while the excitement of hundreds of families becoming involved has been replaced by something much less, our belief in what the PFGM has to offer is as strong as ever. Those people who, over many years have cemented family-like bonds with fellow parishioners and sometimes with members of other faith traditions, deserve the best attention we can give them, to help make their coming years wholesome and satisfying. No matter their age they need and deserve our support.

In an article entitled ‘The coming of the Fourth Church’; Fr Joe Grayland of Palmerston North suggested that the church in Aotearoa has experienced four waves. The first was the marae based missionary church of the French to Maori, which was generally pro-Maori and anti-English. The missionaries travelled extensive distances.

The second was the English speaking and Irish in culture ‘Settler’ church. This became the dominant model including catholic school education with a compound including the church, presbytery, convent and school. The third is the Polynesian church, which became strong in locations where immigration and employment opportunities created local worshipping communities and is not spread equally across the country. This church has a strong cultural identity and includes a strong emphasis on family, music and community.

The fourth Church is Asian and Indian. It is a church that comes from vastly different cultural contexts including strong traditions of popular piety developed over centuries of Catholicism.

Grayland proposes that each of these churches has had to confront the secularism, which is at the heart of New Zealand’s national identity and culture. The emergence of each new church has seen the decline of the others. The remnants either become subsumed into the emerging church, or stand apart from it.

How will this latest wave integrate or be integrated, not just into New Zealand culture but into the New Zealand church? `

The PFGM is in a unique place to contribute to this integration. How can we help? What might we have to consider?

Our PFG’s will continue to thrive if we celebrate difference and if we don't close in on ourselves. Jesus called us into community and it is there we live and celebrate true faith. We need to continue searching for the best ways to make community happen so that we recognise the kingdom of God is amongst us. That is why we are doing it!

*“If you can’t be the oak on the hill, be a fern in the valley below, but be the best little fern there is” (Kevin Light)*

Brian Traynor CP

May 2018

**Prayer**

***God of all seekers, bless our gathering and bless we who are seeking to live and enrich the Passionist Family Group Movement.***

***Help us to explore what enriches us as a community and how we can support one another, in times of personal need, sorrow and joy.***

***Prompt us to be thoughtful.***

***Prod us to be generous.***

***Inspire us to be giving.***

***Guide us to be loving.***

***Call us to be inclusive,***

***so that together, we become a true family for all. Amen.***