

## **Paul's churches and Passionist Family Groups**

Scripture scholars suggest that Paul's letters were written between 50 AD and 61AD, before any other New Testament writings. They were written to different churches (groups of Christian people) addressing diverse and particular needs. Some of the letters credited to Paul were in fact written by 'disciples' rather than by Paul himself.

In the areas where Paul took the Christian message time, many people were attracted by the idea of a 'universal brotherhood and sisterhood', and many small groups formed to create a sense of belonging and to assist in charitable works. They were not 'A family for all'. Rather, most formed around a particular interest. There was a general disenchantment with traditional religions. Some people were attracted by the 'mystery' religions from the East, others wanted a more strict adherence to traditions. There is a clear parallel to the searchings of people today and the sense among many today that religion is irrelevant, and the related rise of the 'New Age' philosophies and fundamentalism.

It helps to see that the communities Paul established were part of a wider movement and need. His letters and the Acts of the Apostles mention that he encountered various cults. Paul had undergone a conversion in Damascus, probably in 37AD. Prior to this he had vigorously resisted the spread of the new Christian movement. Three years later, he met with great hostility when he returned to Damascus and preached there about Jesus. Some Christians helped him escape (2 Cor 11:32). He made his way to Jerusalem where he received a cool reception, obviously because he had not convinced everyone that he had really changed. Barnabas used his influence to have him received into the group.

Paul stayed with Peter for two weeks and James was the only apostle he met, perhaps indicating the others avoided him. He then spent 10 years working in the Provinces of Syria and Cilicia (350kms north of Jerusalem) and he underwent all sorts of incredible difficulties there (2Cor 11:23-29). During this decade, the church began to undergo change. Samaritans were added to the Church by Philip the deacon and Peter had baptised a Roman centurion named Cornelius, along with his family. This highlights the fact that the Jerusalem centred church had begun to include pagans and this created some challenges. Early persecution of the church led to disciples fleeing to various cities where they started to make convert.

Syrian Antioch was built on the Orontes river and had a population of around 750,000. Religious toleration was a matter of civic pride and here the 'followers of the Way' were first nicknamed 'Christians'. Word of conversions reached Jerusalem and the apostles sent Barnabas there and he took Paul along with him. This was to become Paul's missionary base.

When the Passionist Family Groups first spread outside Terrey Hills in Sydney in 1982 after 10 years in that one place, it signalled the beginning of significant change which was to become evident within five years. How this developed and the effects it had, has many parallels to the early church development.

### **Paul begins his missionary work**

Paul and Barnabas went from Selucia by ship to Salamis (200kms) on the island of Cyprus. This was Barnabas' own country and they preached in the Jewish synagogues there. There were Jewish Christians already there but no Gentile Christians. At Paphos 130 kilometres away at the other end of the island, the Roman governor became a convert.

Paul now seems to have become the leader of the team which included John Mark, a relative of Barnabas. They sailed to what is now mainland Turkey, arriving at Perge in Pamphylia 260 kilometres away. The main Greek speaking cities were the first places where new ideas and change were encountered so it was logical for Paul to establish the Gospel there and leave the new Christians to take it to the surrounding countryside and smaller towns.

People travelled on the excellently Roman constructed roads of this era more than people of any time in history, until the nineteenth century. As a result, the roads were busy with a wide range of people such as government officials, traders, pilgrims, letter carriers, sightseers, fugitives, runaway slaves, prisoners, athletes, artisans, teachers and students. This great mobility of people ensured that new ideas would spread far and wide. Many people migrated to Rome from eastern cities. In the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Romans (Ch 16), he sends greetings to twenty-six people there, although he had never been to Rome himself. It is estimated that a person could travel about 160 kilometres a day by ship, 40 kilometres a day by horse (as official letter carriers did) and 20-30 kilometres a day on foot as Paul often travelled. Paul travelled about 16,000 kilometres on his missionary journeys.

After Perge, Paul and Barnabas headed for Antioch in Pisidia. This was a difficult and dangerous journey of about 90 kilometres. John Mark decided to return to Jerusalem. In Pisidia they were invited to speak in the synagogue. Pagans were encouraged by Paul's words but the Jews expelled them. This experience was to be repeated, and was to lead to Paul's changed strategy to 'go to the pagans'.

They made their way 150 kilometres due east for Iconium, where many Jews and Greeks would later be converted, but again they were driven out. They fled 50 kilometres south to Lystra. Here, Paul converted a young man named Timothy, whom he was to choose as his secretary on his next journey. Some Jews from Pisidian and Iconium came to Lystra and encouraged the people to turn against Paul. He was stoned, but not killed. He and Barnabas went off to Derbe, 50 kilometres south east. In Derbe things were quieter and more successful. Despite his rejection in Lystra, Paul revisited there three times!

They had spent five years away. Even though Paul's home town of Tarsus was only 250 kilometres away and it would have been easier to take this short trek home, Paul and Barnabas decided to revisit their churches. This indicates they saw themselves, not as itinerant preachers, but as founders of churches, and they saw support and follow up as vital. They revisited the same towns from which they had been expelled, and delayed long enough in Perge to establish a church there, which was later to become prominent. They arrived back in Syrian Antioch and related what had happened to the whole community.

In September 1983, the first Passionist Family Group missionary team headed 1100 kms north from Sydney to Bardon in Brisbane. Five years later there were 62 other parishes that had established Passionist Family Groups in Brisbane as well as far away places such as Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart, Canberra, Western New South Wales, and New Zealand. Within ten years of this 'founding' in Bardon there were Passionist Family Groups in almost 300 parishes, as well as in other churches and in a jail in USA. Over those years, professed Passionists in some areas visited every six weekly meeting of group co-ordinators to ensure there was proper support and follow up. In time they trained regional lay leaders to undertake this ministry.

Things were quiet for a while in Antioch until a dispute arose concerning the now-Jewish Christians. Word had filtered down to Jerusalem that Paul and Barnabas had not required pagan converts to be circumcised nor to follow the full law of Moses.

Titus, an associate of Paul's, became a focus for debate. Some dedicated Jewish Christians who were also Pharisees, travelled down to Antioch to see for themselves what was going on. They proclaimed that 'unless a man is circumcised in the tradition of Moses, he cannot be saved'. Paul was fierce in his opposition to this, citing Peter's baptism of Cornelius as an indication that Peter agreed with him. His recounting of his argument with Peter about this issue clearly highlights both his character and his total conviction of the message of Jesus regarding the pagans (Gal 2:11-12).

The church in Antioch decided to send Paul, Barnabas, Titus and some others to Jerusalem to discuss the problem with the apostles and elders. To make their point, the group travelled through the pagan towns of Tyre and Sidon, and through Samaria. The Jerusalem Council was a turning point. Delegates were sent back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas with a letter from James approved by the Council (Acts 15). It declared that the Law of Moses had prepared Israel for the coming of Jesus, but now salvation was found in him, not the Law. Had this not happened, the churches would no doubt have become sects of Judaism, and the gentile communities would have become a diversity of cults, lacking unity and a common founding.

### **Another mission**

After spending about a year instructing people, Paul decided it was time to undertake a second major mission. Silas who had come from Jerusalem after the Council, became Paul's companion and scribe. Barnabas and John Mark went off to Cyprus. Paul and Silas headed north to Derbe and Lystra where they recruited Timothy. They visited many towns and passed on the good news from the Jerusalem Council. They went north through Phrygia into Galatia where they were to break new ground. They then travelled west into what was then called Asia and came to Troas on the Aegean sea about 650 kms west of Iconium. They then decided to take their news to Europe, beginning in Philippi, an important Roman city in Macedonia, 250 kilometres north west of Troas. The Jewish community here was very small. A woman there named Lydia, who was impressed by Paul, was baptised, along with her family, and she insisted the missionaries move into her home, which became their church.

Paul first went to the synagogues in a new town. Since it is estimated that there were 5,000,000 Jews living outside Israel at this time, and they formed 10%-15% of the population in most cities, it was natural to seek out 'one's own', through the synagogue. The cities were densely populated and privacy was minimal. This meant that that household neighbours soon heard or saw what was happening. Paul gave attention to households as a method of conversion, and in most cases he was able to stay with 'a household'. Not surprisingly, he recommended hospitality as a primary Christian virtue

In Philippi, Paul was imprisoned because he silenced a possessed girl who was a money maker for those promoting icons to pagan gods. Paul's jailer and family were baptised. Paul then travelled 100 kilometres south to Thessalonika (now Salonica) which was a large commercial city. He made a number of converts within a few weeks, and once again this roused hostility among the Jews. Because of this he headed 70 kilometres south to Beroea. He found the Jews here more open minded and there were many converts, but the opposition he had met in Thessalonika followed him to Beroea and he fled again, this time finishing up, almost by accident in Athens 250 kilometres south.

Paul was astounded by the idolatrous nature of Athens. He took to street corners and market places to debate with people. Some philosophers invited him to speak to them. After an unsuccessful attempt to explain his message in philosophical terms and with no Jewish converts and only a handful of Greek converts, he left for Corinth 30 kilometres south.

Corinth was a thriving trade and port city with a large number of immigrants and a large population of Jews. It was notorious for its immorality. Founding the Church there was to be Paul's most difficult, but greatest achievement. He changed his message here to the 'stupidity of the cross'. He was despondent when he arrived, but fortunately he made friends with Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They were later to travel with him to Ephesus where they became renowned for their home of hospitality. They shared Paul's tent making profession and he lodged with them. They told Paul of the church in Rome, where they had come from. This enabled him to write to the Romans before visiting there.

After the Jews in Corinth turned against him, Paul declared that he was now free to go to the Gentiles, since the Jews had rejected him. He moved into a new abode with Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue! Paul preached for a further eighteen months and many came to believe, including the synagogue president. He then travelled by sea to Ephesus 400 kilometres east. He took Aquila and Priscilla with him and they remained there. He promised to return and set out almost 1000 kilometres east by sea to Caesarea. From there he went up to Jerusalem to greet the church, and then he went back to Antioch.

Paul had sent Timothy to Thessalonika from Athens, because he was concerned for his converts there. Timothy reported to Paul in Corinth and it was from there that Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Thessalonika and a few months later, his second. Timothy's report was encouraging for Paul, mindful of their difficulties. This is clearly expressed in Paul's letters, together with words of instruction they had sought, and suggestions probably resulting from Timothy's observations. These letters are the first writings of the New Testament.

This style of sending helpers and writing letters is mirrored by the visits made by Passionists, Directors and Regional Co-ordinators to explain the nature of Passionist Family Groups and assist with difficulties during their early growth. Through the founding months and years of the various Family Groups, there were many gatherings of leaders, and prior to emails and cell phones, many letters were written to parish Co-ordinators and group leaders. Reports on progress were shared at regular meetings of those responsible for establishing the Passionist Family Groups. Paul did the same thing, although he did not have the advantage of modern forms of travel or communication.

Paul did not stay in Antioch for long. He made a systematic visit of Galatia and Phrygia giving encouragement to the churches he had founded, rather than starting new ones. His journey ended in Ephesus, where he stayed for several years with Aquila and Priscilla. Ephesus was a city rivalling Antioch for prominence in the Eastern Mediterranean area so it was important for Paul to establish the church there. The city was decadent. Magic was rife. Artemis, the many breasted fertility goddess and her temple were central to life in Ephesus. People from all over the central part of modern day eastern Turkey (called 'Asia' in Acts), visited Ephesus and so would have been able to learn of the Gospel.

The silversmiths made their trade from making images of Artemis, and Paul became a serious threat to their trade, with a lessening demand for their wares. The threat of trouble led him to undertake another journey to consolidate the churches he had founded. Paul set out with a band of co-workers to Troas and then to Philippi where he met up with Luke and Titus. Apollo, a Jew from Alexandria had arrived in Ephesus before Paul had. He was very gifted but did not know the full truth of the message so he was corrected by Aquila and Priscilla. His enthusiasm in Corinth had led to factions. Some were 'for Paul', others 'for Apollo', others 'for Peter'.

The threat of division caused Paul great anxiety and he wrote firmly to the Corinthians from Ephesus to avoid this. Following this, Titus reported to him that things were going well in Corinth. Leaving Philippi, Paul spent three months visiting the churches that he had established some years previously in Greece and finally arrived in Corinth. On the point of departure for Syria to take money he had collected to Jerusalem, he learned of a Jewish plot against him. This led him to travel north returning the way he had come, reaching Philippi and sailing for Troas. It was here that the famous incident of the man falling asleep and dropping from the window ledge occurred.

From Troas, Paul went by road to Assos. He knew if he went to Ephesus he might not reach Jerusalem in time for Passover, so he stayed at Miletus and summoned the church leaders from Ephesus (100 kilometres north) to meet him there. His departure from there was filled with sadness as he warned them they would never see him again (Acts 20:19-38). From Miletus Paul sailed to Rhodes and to Patara. They found there a ship bound for Phoenicia. On their way they sighted Cyprus but sailed on to Tyre in Syria where they spent a week.

His departure recreated a similar scene to that at Miletus. They spent a day with the community at Ptolemais and went to Caesarea, where they stayed with Philip the deacon. Paul was warned not to return to Jerusalem which at this time was filled with violence that was to lead to its destruction in AD70. The country was in economic decline, lawlessness flourished and there was heavy taxation. Famine added to the misery of the people. There was political division, largely separating the pro-Roman wealthy from the poor.

Paul had been given the same advice at Miletus and Tyre, but explained that he had to go to Jerusalem. He received a warm welcome from the church there and met with James and the elders where he gave an account of the work he had accomplished. They suggested Paul undergo a ritual to help disarm his critics about his non observance of Jewish law. Paul agreed to this. Unfortunately this exercise finished in a riot and Paul was mistaken for an Egyptian who had led a revolt against the Romans and was taken prisoner. Great confusion occurred as to why he was on trial and he was brought before the Sanhedrin. Here Paul created greater confusion by causing the Sadducees and Pharisees who had opposing ideas on the resurrection, to begin arguing among themselves. Amid this near riot he was taken away, and following his request to have his case heard in Rome because he was a Roman citizen, he was taken away to Caesarea.

His first trial was adjourned and he spent two years in custody with free visitor access. A newly appointed procurator then heard the case. Following an appearance before King Herod Agrippa who found him undeserving of imprisonment, he was sent on to Rome, because he had appealed to Rome. Paul knew from Aquila and Priscilla of the church in Rome and that the relationship between Judaism and Christianity was the principal danger to unity. He had given great thought to this and he wrote a long letter to the Romans which had been despatched through a deaconess named Phoebe.

On route to Rome, Paul was allowed to disembark and visit friends where the ship stopped at places Paul knew. The ship struck fierce winds and was wrecked off Malta. Everyone reached safety. The governor of the island extended the group his hospitality for three months before setting off in the spring. Paul was allowed to spend a week with the Christians in Puteoli two hundred and fifty kilometres from Rome. On arriving in Rome Paul spent at least two years in lodgings where he was able to welcome people and proclaim the gospel. Since nothing is recorded after this, it seems that Luke, the writer of Acts saw Paul's work accomplished in bringing his vision, to the church in Rome. During this time either he or a disciple wrote his 'captivity' letters (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon).

## **Ekklesia**

This reasonably detailed description of Paul's travels and activities highlights that as he travelled throughout the Mediterranean, Christian communities sprang up, consolidated and multiplied. In preaching the message of Jesus that bound men and women to one another and to God, he led his converts into a personal relationship with one another. For Paul, to embrace the gospel was to enter into community. He uses the word ekklesia sixty times in his letters and it is his favourite way of referring to his communities.

In Acts 19:21-41 there is an account of an incident in Ephesus where the word ekklesia is used to refer to the meeting of silversmiths, so the word had a common usage for meetings or assemblies of people. He would have called a Family Group 'the ekklesia'. When he refers to his Christian assemblies (ekklesia) or churches, it is clear that Paul always refers to a local church or to churches in a local area, (eg "the churches in Asia" (1 Cor:16-19)). He understood all these churches as having a unity.

It seems that 'the church' in Ephesus met in the house of Paul's co-workers, Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor 16:19). Paul mentions (1 Cor 14:23) that "the whole church (in Corinth) came together". This suggests that this didn't always happen and that the people usually came together in smaller groups. Unlike Paul's other letters, the letter to the Romans is not addressed to 'the church'. This suggests that the Christians in Rome did not have an identity as a 'church'. Perhaps in Rome, where guild membership was strong, domestic or work groups as well as house-churches existed and they did not come together as one church. That different types of churches existed is evident, because they were founded by different apostles or missionaries. Paul did not visit and work among churches that had been founded by others, except on his final 'visit' to Rome.

It was customary for groups of the time to rely on patrons, or wealthy people to support them. From Paul's writings it is clear that the early Christians met in homes and it was to be 300 years before special buildings were constructed for Christian gatherings. Even when they were built they were modelled on the type of room into which guests were received, in the typical Roman and Greek household. Normally this would have limited attendance to about thirty people. Presumably, the house churches in Paul's communities were even smaller than this. Sometimes, when a household converted, some members would have made their decision to retain 'solidarity'. This resulted in there being different levels of commitment within families and communities. There were some groups formed in households headed by non-Christians. Converts were joined to an existing household and it is clear that there were different households within the one city. Paul emphasised that the members were to become a family. He saw outsiders as potential insiders.

Paul initiated and encouraged contact between local churches. His emphasis was however, on building personal relationships, rather than creating something with an institutional character. This bonding occurred through the exchange of letters from their apostle (2 Cor 4:16), visits of individuals to other groups (Rom 16:1), sending financial aid (2 Cor 8-11-13), praying for one another (2 Cor 8:14) and passing on news and greetings (1 Cor 16:19; 2 Cor 13:13; Phil 4:22).

These same exchanges have been occurring within our Passionist Family Groups for many years. During the first decade, a regular publication, 'The Family Connection' was sent regularly to local parish co-ordinators. Letters from the Directors have been sent to local leaders. Passionists, Directors and other co-workers have established groups, visited parishes, attended meetings and addressed or spoken with groups of co-ordinators.

Directors have undertaken the same work begun by Passionists, and with the generous help of others in different regions, the support of people in one church from other churches, is continuing. Many people have contributed to the establishment or support of Passionist Family Groups in new parishes. Because bonds have been created, some people have made hospital visits to people from other regions and attended funerals in other parishes. Some even now share holidays together. Regularly, and especially at annual formation weekends, people exchange helpful ideas and stories. Parishes have been invited to accept responsibility for the financial assistance of this ongoing work among their people. Securing adequate finance to sustain his mission and to support the poor was a concern for Paul.

The emphasis in Paul's letters is on people meeting together. Only twice in his letters does he talk about the Eucharistic meal and he makes no mention of an official celebrant (priest). This might seem strange, considering the emphasis the church later gave these matters. Paul did highlight the importance of proclaiming the Lord's death worthily' each time they celebrated Eucharist. Since the early Christians and Paul himself, continued to attend temple worship, it can be presumed that the early Christians followed the Jewish custom of the host of the household presiding over the meal. In some cases the host would have been a woman.

It is clear that Paul would not allow the common meal to become a source of disunity as had happened in Corinth, and he gave firm directions to avoid this. Eucharistic and other common meals were not the only meetings that the churches held. Throughout Paul's letters there is mention of various meetings, such as building up the community (1Cor14:12;26), sharing gifts (Acts 20:7-12), disciplining (1 Cor 5:4-5), settling disputes (1 Cor 6:5f), praying during a crisis (Acts 12:5) and gathering leaders (Acts 20:17ff). The structure obviously varied from meeting to meeting and from one church to another, though traditional formula, psalms and scripture readings had their place (1 Cor14:26; Col 3:16; Eph 5:19; Rom 1:3-4).

Paul's sense of order came from the attitude of the members towards one another rather than from an imposed common structure. The cohesion of his groups was achieved through personal contact, not corporate organisation. Paul called on the Jerusalem church to avoid division (Gal 2:1-10), and he asked the Gentiles to support the Jerusalem church (and to acknowledge that they had started it all). At the same time, the other churches were not subservient to the Jerusalem church nor controlled by it.

There are three dimensions of Paul's communities that highlight how they fitted in to the emerging communities of that era. First, they were voluntary associations with regular gatherings of like-minded people. Second, they took their character from the household unit where one experienced personal identity and intimacy. Third, they had a vision of universal and eternal fellowship which was central to Jesus' message and vision.. Despite the advantage of this over other community models, Paul did not see the church gatherings as more religious in character than any other Christian activities. That there is only a secular word (ecclesia) used to describe them, and that they met in ordinary households, gives evidence to Paul's appreciation that every part of life is 'religious'.

For Paul, it is through meeting, that the community comes into being and is continually recreated. So often we have tried to get people to appreciate this same reality in regard to Passionist Family Groups. Some point to them as being 'social' or non-religious, instead of seeing that the relationships between the people are sacred. The three dimensions of Paul's communities seem to accurately describe a Passionist Family Group.

People join voluntarily, the groups are based on an extended family model which allows for intimacy and bonding, and they are formed within a Christian environment which promotes the kingdom of God.

There is evidence in Paul's letters that his communities experienced divisions and threats of schisms. He says he had heard of this happening in Corinth (1 Cor 11:18), Rome (Rom 16:17-20) and Colossae (Col 2:16-19). Paul suggests that it is more often lack of care, rather than doctrinal or lifestyle differences that lead to schism. However, he is clear that if behaviour causes schism then the community should disassociate itself from the person involved.

There have been occasions when Family Groups within a parish have experienced divisions. Even sometimes a strong personality such as a pastor or a Passionist Family Group Co-ordinator has wanted to break away from the wider Movement, refusing to accept some of the simple guidelines or the agreed arrangements. On some occasions the behaviour of particular individuals has led to confrontation and a need to remind them of their communal responsibility. A common focus for these issues has been finance. In some parishes where money has been poured into the Catholic school system or into parish buildings, there is an unwillingness to finance the gathering of people into community and training people to sustain it. Paul experienced such obstacles too.

Some Passionist Family Groups do not hold an annual group Eucharist which is unfortunate, since this is when a small 'church' can truly celebrate its life. Understandably, there should be concern for the feelings of non-church goers or those of other traditions, but Paul's households were able to hold their common meals in such an environment. Eucharist is not a church going action, it is a 'being church' action. It is one activity among others, that allows the Family Group to celebrate its meaning.

As with Paul's communities, the structure of meetings is left to the individual groups, and they vary greatly. There is a need for planning meetings, celebrations and family outdoor gatherings. Many group co-ordinators who would have preferred to discipline non-attenders or exclude them, have had to try other methods. As Paul found, it is lack of care and courtesy that threatens the unity and harmony of a group and the issue of 'fringe' members needs to be addressed at some time by most Passionist Family Groups.

Paul mentions that there are a variety of gifts within the community. Some of them he mentions are directed towards a growth in understanding of God, of the community, outsiders, and the world. The gifts of prophecy, teaching, exhortation, discernment of spirits and interpretation of God's word, involve having knowledge, but they also require practical action. Gifts directed towards social well being, such as harmony of the group, he considers important. These pastorally oriented gifts, such as ordinary acts of kindness and assistance to people in need, help the psychological needs and social cohesion of the church. The physical welfare of the group, such as providing financial aid and healing, was also considered vital for the fellowship of the members.

These gifts encompass all aspects of life, because the individuals within the group are affected by the relationships, obligations and structures around them. The nature of Paul's churches obviously appeared to be quite secular or 'everyday' in as much as these gifts are in the main 'ordinary'. Above all these gifts, the most important underlying principle for Paul, is love. He makes several references to this, He considered it essential that people be allowed to contribute their gifts, have a healthy sense of their abilities and allow these abilities to be assessed by others, because of the loving attitude of members towards the community.

Paul saw that where people exercised gifts without love, there was chaos, unfruitfulness in understanding one another, and derision from outsiders. This range of gifts, and the attitudes towards their use, also apply within a Passionist Family Group and within the parish structure of the Movement. There are many gifted people who can begin to contribute their talents when encouraged to do so in the smaller environment that a Family Group provides.

Those with gifts which require knowledge, also exercise these gifts in positive action. There are continual opportunities to assist the well being of others through acts of kindness and concern. This builds the relationships within the group and the parish. While insisting upon equality at one level, Paul recognised legitimate national, social and sexual differences at other levels. This allowed for great diversity in his churches. There was no distinction between priest and laity, since the cultic priesthood had disappeared and priestly actions were recognised as any religious, apostolic or charitable activity. It was not until much later that separate terms for laity and priest began to be used and Paul did not work with a sacred/secular dichotomy. More and more we are coming to appreciate that this division of priest and laity is most unhelpful. It has alienated many clergy from their people and exaggerated their gifts to the detriment of other gifts which the community needs.

With the exception of some pastoral letters, Paul did not address one person, but the whole community. He did not presume that only one part of the group had responsibility for the general organisation of things. He urged the members to look after each other's interests. He highlighted the members' responsibility for one another's welfare, even in disciplinary matters.

Passionist Family Group leaders are formed in this awareness. Members must see themselves as equal contributors, and the coordinators are called to promote a sense of responsibility for the life of the group with each person, as well as gently lead people to recognise the appropriate action they might take to respond to particular needs. When there is a need to address a serious matter, each member is entitled to contribute towards a solution. Of course while the group is still young and not properly bonded, such involvement will be hard to solicit, and care must be taken that the dominant members of the group, or the 'fixers', are not the only voices that are heard.

It is clear from Paul's letters that some people (e.g. Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor 16:19); Dympha (Col 4:15) shared the workload or were more spiritually minded than others (Gal 6:1). Some laboured among the people (1 Th 5:12), gave aid or were called upon to admonish others. Apostles, prophets and teachers exercised significant ministries (1Cor12:28). Other people exercised 'lower' ministries such as administrators, healers and helpers. Paul suggested that those who preach the gospel should be paid for this work (1 Cor 9:14) and he reminded people of the debt they owed to the Jerusalem church and to himself for receiving the good news.

Paul began his work as an assistant to Barnabas and then became the senior partner. After they separated, Paul chose Silas to work with him and later he recruited Timothy and others. Paul was a part time missionary, working at his own trade to support himself and his co-workers. The number of his assistants who needed support grew in number, and at times when he was travelling or imprisoned he could not work, so he was grateful for the assistance given him by some of the churches. It seems there were at least forty people who were actual or potential sponsors for his work whom he thanked for their generosity in his letters.

Other people from various churches, including women, travelled either temporarily or permanently with Paul and participated actively in his work. Among others, Paul mentions a character named Epaphroditus from Philippi who had been working with him in various places, and for whose ministry he was most grateful. Priscilla and Aquila were significant. They had been exiled from Rome by Cladius' decree in AD 49-50. They apparently were hosts to the infant church in Corinth and became itinerant co-workers among other churches. Paul says they risked their life for him and that he "and all the Gentile churches give thanks for them" (Rom 16:3-4). He mentions many others who helped him, and at times he asked the local churches to welcome his co-workers warmly and be willing to learn from them.

There are many parallels between these helpers and the Passionist Family Group helpers in Australia and New Zealand. Priscilla and Aquila can be paralleled to Rob and Lynn Hill, who began their Family Group experience in Paeroa in 1988 and have travelled all over New Zealand during the past eighteen years and have exercised the role of Directors since 1992. Regional Co-ordinators and others from various parishes have worked in different regions and been regular itinerant helpers especially in the years when new parishes were being established. Now, new Directors are assuming new roles from those they have previously exercised. Much like St Paul's missionary band, coming from diverse areas, these teams have shared a common task but not a common life.

Paul and his team tried to nurture the small communities they founded and help them get properly established especially by personal contact. Some visits were brief and others lengthy. Writing letters in response to particular difficulties was one way this personal contact was maintained. Special delegates were sent to support and assist new churches, and Paul frequently mentioned that the communities were constantly in his prayers.

Paul's fellow-workers or 'labourers' were those instrumental in founding a church or maintaining personal contact with him. Establishing a church seems to have depended upon a prior cell, much like the way the Family Groups have been established within existing parishes. People like Epaphras obviously established the church in Colossae (Col 1:6,7) and maintained contact with Paul about its progress. Passionist lay teams have repeated this kind of activity. In some churches, people were designated to take news of the community's progress to Paul. Sometimes they took financial aid to him or to Jerusalem so that the ministry could continue (eg.Phil 2:25).

The position that Paul's helpers had in the communities they worked for was not guaranteed by anything other than their work itself, and obviously in some cases they had to earn the respect of the local community. Paul sent Tychius to Colossae, Timothy to Philippi and Thessalonika and Titus to Corinth on a temporary basis and asked that they be accepted.

This strategy ensured sound support and follow up for the communities and provided personal, rather than structural links between the various communities. It sought to individually develop groups through missionary service, rather than build an organised super structure. Paul strived to encourage his communities in a fatherly tone. Sometimes he indicated that further faith education was needed (eg 1 Thess 4:13ff). In writing to the Thessalonians, Galatians and Corinthians, Paul adopted an authoritative tone. He did this because he wanted to correct serious departures from basic gospel teaching, and because disunity had developed. Sometimes he gave clear directions to the communities (1 Cor 11:34; 16:1) but generally he 'urged' or 'appealed', rather than commanded.

The Passionist Family Group Directors, together with their team of Regional Coordinators, have been exercising their ministry in a similar fashion to Paul and his team in this respect. Regional Co-ordinators convey relevant information about local parishes back to the Directors. As new Directors take up the role in local dioceses, they will remain in regular contact with one another and with the national Directors and the Passionists. They attend an annual Directors meeting in New Zealand to assist and support this process and delegates attend an annual Directors meeting in Australia.

A large number of people have assisted in the founding of Passionist Family Groups by speaking at Sunday Masses, to pastoral councils, or other groups. Some have spoken at Masses, or conducted the set up information session. Others have assisted by briefing potential parish or group Co-ordinators on their roles. On set-up day, people have come from other parishes to share their experiences and offer assistance.

Some have assisted in an administrative capacity, making telephone calls, writing letters or sending correspondence, arranging travel, booking venues for activities, buying and preparing food for leadership formation weekends and much more. This band of helpers has enabled the Family Groups to spread and be maintained throughout New Zealand. Passionists, lay Directors and a range of other co-workers are carrying out similar work throughout many dioceses in Australia.

As with Paul's communities there are difficulties that arise, but with so many generous labourers, the groups have been able to negotiate such things. At times in the 'quick fix' age some people look for instant solutions. In Paul's day travel methods did not allow for this to be expected, and it might be good for us to learn something from that lived reality and not only lessen the demands made on the Directors and their Regional Co-ordinators, but learn to live with less than perfect situations.

There will always be challenges. At one time, a key concern was the tension between extending into new areas of New Zealand because people wanted to join the Passionist Family Group Movement while there was a need to offer proper support to those already established. Some criticism was made in Australia when Passionist Family Groups first went to New Zealand in 1988, and the Movement could not have spread to 80 parishes throughout New Zealand in six years, if many people had not been prepared to extend themselves. Historians today question whether if Paul had not undertaken his incredible journeys if Christianity would ever have expanded beyond a small Jewish sect.

Structures need to be continually assessed, so that the work load is spread, and that people are not overburdened. For the first few years it was necessary to call on the assistance of people who were heavily committed. Their generosity has enabled this wonderful work of God to continue. Many can quite rightly claim to have been missionaries.

Paul had an extensive band of helpers. Jesus, too had such a band. Apart from 'the twelve', there were seventy-two others he sent to towns ahead of him, and others, including women, who travelled with him. Surely this model teaches us something. Gifted people can assume responsible roles freeing Co-ordinators and to concentrate primarily on their own parish groups.

It took years for Paul to return to some communities he founded, and imprisonment prevented him from many visits that he wanted to make to his churches. Some of his letters would have taken weeks to get to their destination. People had to manage with the little structure he gave them and that they developed, and the envoys Paul sent in his place were crucial to the support the local churches needed.

It used to be common to hear comments like 'We need to see a Passionist'. People don't say, 'We need to see the Pope more often'. They realise that such a demand is not practical. Not seeing the Pope does not mean it is impossible to be encouraged and supported in one's faith journey. We need to encourage the work of those envoys who are carrying the Passionist Family Group spirit to different areas, and recognise that the vitality of our enterprise depends on more people picking up and sharing that spirit. In this era of diminishing and ageing clergy we have the opportunity to model an effective way of carrying out lay ministry.

After Paul died, the churches carried on his work. The time will come when those of us undertaking this work at present, will be unable to do so. We need to actively encourage the lay ministry that is already so alive in this Movement, by seeking younger people to be involved at every level.

The missionary aspect of Family Groups will continue and the shape of the groups themselves is likely to stay much as it is. Personnel in the groups will continue to change as people come and go from local parishes. Leadership formation will remain imperative. Some parishes will not have clerical pastors and many local parish communities will be amalgamated. Hopefully people will come to recognise more clearly how they are 'being the church' by belonging and contributing to Family Group life within local parish communities.

Appreciating similarities between the early Pauline communities and the Passionist Family Groups might be one aid to remaining open and positive about the future.

Antioch was the third most important city in the Roman empire at that time. The church there was founded as a direct result of the stoning of Stephen when disciples fled Jerusalem. It began in the synagogue, but soon spread to include gentiles, so it became the first mixed community. When word of this got back to the mother church (Jerusalem) officials were sent to 'check it out'. Barnabas was sent and the two churches maintained a close relationship despite differences in applying rules. Antioch became the springboard for the major missionary endeavour of the early church under Paul and others.

Corinth was a densely populated port and a meeting place for traders and sailors. It was a 'Kings Cross'. The church established there was poor and we know a great deal about the problems they encountered because of two letters from Paul that are preserved. Being surrounded by such a strong immoral life we come across questions from the Corinthian church about moral conduct, liturgical meetings, appeals to civil courts, eating pagan sacrificial food, finance, favourite preachers and many other issues. Church members in Corinth included the city treasurer, two synagogue rulers and a scribe. Many of the church members travelled to other places, as Paul's letters indicate.

Philippi was a Roman colony, so the people were grateful for their status. It was one of the principal cities of Macedonia because it was a junction for trade between Europe and Asia. Paul's friendly letter indicates he was very grateful to the people who he visited three times and he was fond of them. He encouraged them to keep building the bonds of harmony by continuing to think of each other. These people supported him generously. His letter indicates his passionate missionary commitment, their closeness to one another and their affection and support of him.

Ephesus was the next largest city after Antioch. Merchandise from East and West poured into the port. It had a famous temple to goddess Artemis, and was host to a multitude of cults because of its central location.

No doubt because of these contesting cults, Paul wrote to the Christians there encouraging them to see the cosmic reality of Christ and to ensure equality between Jews and Gentiles. Paul left Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus to take care of the church and later sent Timothy to be their guide.

Thessalonika because of its location on Rome's trans-Macedonia highway, was a central location for commerce, culture and politics. It was the most important city in the northern Aegean. Paul arrived there to speak to the Jewish community but he won over many Greek converts. Some orthodox Jews expelled Paul. He sent Timothy back there to strengthen the church and wrote two letters that we still have, to them. These are the first writings of the New Testament. A major concern Paul addresses in these letters is that some people in the church have died before Jesus' promised return which had not yet eventuated.

All of these Pauline communities were different. Churches founded in other places by the apostles and their helpers reveal other differences. The early church was not like a series of KFC or McDonald stores which looked identical to the observer. Each of them was different and they were forced to make many adaptations as they developed their own theology, ritual, leadership and fellowship.

A rower gliding through the water must look back, not ahead. By looking back to Paul's churches we may gain a more accurate sense of where we are going, because we know where we have come from.

Passionist Family Groups too reflect the healthy diversity of Paul's churches and their 'taking root' in various places with the help of 'apostles' and co-workers is very similar. They may help us renew our understanding and appreciation of 'church'.

Certainly, it would be comforting to know that people said about the Family Groups, what they said of this new sect, "See how they love one another". In all our searchings to understand our place and how best we can support local parish life and the individuals and families who comprise it, let us be primarily concerned with this fellowship based on the example of Jesus who sustains all life and love.

Brian Traynor CP,  
Revised January, 2007