

***Paul's
Communities
and
Passionist
Family
Groups.....***

what can we learn ?

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Since the expansion of the Passionist Family Group Movement in the 1980's, it has made an incredible impact on modern church life. There is no doubt that it holds the key to re-establishing many of the links that people in our broken world need. More than that however, it is a vital way of being and living church, and in many ways it resembles the way St Paul founded and established churches. There has to be some profit in examining some of these similarities.

Scripture scholars suggest 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 letters credited to him were in fact written by 'disciples'. Together with the Acts of the Apostles they tell us much about the activity of the early Christian church.

THE WORLD OF PAUL'S TIME

The Romans dominated the Mediterranean region, and Greek culture penetrated the whole empire in the middle of the first century, but new trends in social organisation had begun to flourish and were attracting increasing numbers. The two traditional types of community to which most people belonged, were the *politeia*, (public life) and the *oikonomia*, (the household).

CHANGES

Changes were overtaking both of these institutions. Political power had become concentrated in the hands of a few for long periods. This led to a greater appreciation of household communities where the variety and intimacy of membership satisfied people better. These smaller communities were sometimes too narrow and restrictive and some people's position in them was forever subordinate. For this reason many began looking for a cosmopolitan order *encompassing everyone*, a fellowship that resolved divisions and created a 'universal brotherhood and sisterhood' (**'A Family For All'**).

While some saw such ideas as too idealistic and abstract, organisations that included the socially disadvantaged, started to multiply. A principle of *koinineia* (voluntary partnership) led to *people of different backgrounds* coming together in a group, rather than only people of a common geographic area, a common race, a common family or people with common ties. Not all of these new groups were open to everyone who wanted to join. Most formed around a particular interest, vocation or commitment, (e.g. artists, commercial guilds, philosophical schools, military, sports etc).

Most of the groups had some religious dimension, but their primary aims were social and charitable. They normally met once a month. People were able to find a sense of belonging in these groups that was denied them elsewhere. It is interesting that most groups consisted of about 30-35 people. That they were around this size, that they met monthly, that they began to multiply, that they met real, personal and community needs and included individuals from different backgrounds, invites an obvious comparison to the Passionist Family Groups.

'AND THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN' (Ecc1 1:9)

Another parallel that could be drawn with our times was a perceived general disenchantment with traditional religions. The relevance of the gods and the ritual of their worship was failing to satisfy people's needs. Various philosophies offered alternatives and some people were attracted by the 'mystery' religions from the East, especially because of their breadth of membership (e.g. women and varied nationalities were included) and their many secret activities. In response to this threat, some sought to demand a purity of faith, and applied ritual and law with exactness.

There is a clear parallel in these developments to the rise in our own time of the 'New Age' philosophies on the one hand, and Fundamentalism, on the other. Many people today, especially the young, complain of church ritual and teaching being outmoded or irrelevant, and they are increasingly abandoning churches. The emergence of all sorts of *small communities* within various churches is one response to a clearly expressed need to provide fellowship and face-to-face contact with one another.

That the early Christian churches should have begun appearing alongside other new communities is not surprising. The communities that Paul established were part of a wider movement. His letters mention various cults that he encountered. What is worth exploring is the extent to which these varied organisations influenced Paul, and how distinct his communities were in the way authority, worship, common practices and structures were created and maintained.

WHAT HAPPENED TO PAUL ?

Paul underwent a conversion in Damascus probably in 37AD. Prior to this he had vigorously set out to resist the spread of the new 'Nazarean' movement. Three years later, after an unsuccessful campaign in Arabia (the Nabataean kingdom) he met with great hostility when he returned to Damascus and preached there about Jesus. The Christians helped him escape (2 Cor 11:32). He then made his way to Jerusalem where he received a cool reception. Barnabas used his influence to have Paul received into the group.

Paul stayed with Peter for two weeks and James was the only apostle he met, perhaps indicating that 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).

THE CHANGING CHURCH

During this decade, the church began to undergo change. Samaritans were added to the Church by Philip the deacon and Peter baptised a Roman centurion, Cornelius, and his family. This highlights the fact that *the Jerusalem centred church broadened to include pagans and 'outsiders'*. Not surprisingly, this change created some problems. Some strife developed between the Jewish and Gentile Christians resulting in seven assistants being elected to assist the apostles in their demanding work. One of these, Stephen, was killed.

Following Stephen's death, some disciples fled to various cities including Syrian Antioch 50 kilometres away where they started to convert some Jews and Greeks. Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire, boasting around 750,000 inhabitants. It was here that the 'followers of the Way' were first nicknamed 'Christians'. Just as had happened in Samaria, word of the conversions got to Jerusalem.

The apostles sent Barnabas there. He went to Tarsus about 170 kilometres away and brought Paul back to Antioch to assist him. Paul and Barnabas spent a year in Antioch. Because of the fear of famine throughout the Empire, the Antioch Christians took up a generous collection and delegated Paul and Barnabas to take it to Jerusalem to show their support and kindred spirit. When they arrived, they found Peter in prison. James had been beheaded.

When the Family Groups first spread outside *Terrey Hills* in 1982 after 10 years in that one parish, it signalled the beginning of significant change which was to take until 1985 to become evident. How this developed and the effects it had, has many parallels in the early church development which we will consider.

PAUL BEGINS HIS MISSIONARY WORK

Paul, Barnabas, and a relation of Barnabas', John Mark returned from Jerusalem to Antioch and soon began their missionary efforts. Antioch was to remain the base of Paul's activity. They 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 in Salamis who had fled persecution following Stephen's death, but no Gentile Christians. Their preaching there met with quiet success. At Paphos at the other end of the island 130kms away, the Roman governor became a convert.

Paul now apparently became the leader of the team. They sailed to what is now mainland Turkey, arriving at Perge in Pamphylia 260 kms away. Paul began to establish the Gospel in the Greek speaking main centres and left the new Christians to take it to the surrounding countryside and smaller towns. Obviously like the Passionist Family Groups, the message spread by its own obvious appeal and the active support of local people.

PAUL'S CONCENTRATION ON CITIES

In Paul's time, cities were the first places where new ideas and change were encountered. It was the logical place to take the new movement. It was for this reason that ***Paul concentrated on the cities***. People of this era travelled on the excellent Roman constructed roads, more than people of any time in history until the nineteenth century.

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. The great mobility of people ensured that new ideas would spread far and wide.

In the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Romans (Ch 16), he sends greetings to twenty-six people, although he'd never been to Rome himself. Many people migrated to Rome from eastern cities. 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. It is estimated that Paul travelled 16,000 kilometres on his missionary journeys.

MIXED RECEPTION

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

They made their way 150 kms due east for Iconium, where many Jews and Greeks were to be converted, but again they were driven out. They fled 50 kms south to Lystra. Here, Paul converted a young man named Timothy, whom he was to choose as his secretary on his second 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 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 that *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.

THE FIRST FAMILY GROUP MISSION

The first Family Group missionary team headed 1100 kms north from Sydney to Bardon in Brisbane in September 1983. Five years later there were sixty-two other parishes that had established Passionist Family Groups in as far away places as Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart, Canberra, Western NSW, Toowoomba and New Zealand.

Within twelve years of this 'founding' in Bardon there were PFG's in 320 parishes, as well as in other churches and in a jail in USA. Great distances have been covered by teams of missionaries in establishing and revisiting these communities. As in the early church the different leaders have continued gathering to reflect on and share about these developments.

DISPUTES

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). It is worth noting the role of the church members in making decisions. *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 another mission. Barnabas and John Mark went off to Cyprus. Silas who had come from Jerusalem after the Council, became Paul's companion and scribe. They 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 in rejecting easier options, they came to Troas on the Aegean sea about 650 kms west of Iconium.

They then decided to go take their news to Europe, beginning in Philippi, an important Roman city in Macedonia, 250 kms north west of Troas. This was an enormous step in the missionary endeavour. The Jewish community here was very small. A woman there, 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'S METHOD

It seems Paul often first went to the synagogue in a new town. It is estimated that there were 5,000,000 Jews living outside Israel at this time. They formed 10%-15% of the population in most cities, so it was natural to seek out 'one's own' as converts, through the synagogue. The cities were densely populated and privacy was minimal. This meant 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, Paul recommended hospitality as a primary Christian virtue.

In Philippi, he was imprisoned after he silenced a money making possessed girl. His jailer and family were soon baptised! Paul next travelled 100kms south to Thessalonika (now Salonica) a large commercial city. He made a notable number of converts within a few weeks, and once again this roused hostility among the Jews. Because of this he headed 70 kms south to Beroea, with Silas, where he found the Jews more open minded. Here 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 kms south.

ATHENS AND CORINTH

Paul was astounded and dismayed 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 and after an unsuccessful attempt to explain his message, with no Jewish converts and only a handful of Greek converts, he left for Corinth 30 kilometres south where he changed his message to the 'stupidity of the cross'. Corinth was a thriving trade and port city, notorious for its immorality. It had a large number of immigrants and a large population of Jews.

Founding the Church there was to be Paul's most difficult, but greatest achievement. 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, where Aquila and Priscilla remained. He did not stay long there, but he promised to return. He travelled 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.

LETTERS AND ENVOYS

Paul had sent Timothy to Thessalonika from Athens, because he was concerned for his converts there who were in a hostile environment. Timothy reported to Paul in Corinth. 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 and others 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 Passionist Family Groups, many gatherings of leaders and letters or e-mails sent to parish co-ordinators, group leaders and pastors, assisted this work. Reports on progress were shared at regular meetings of those responsible for establishing and supporting the Passionist Family Groups. Paul did the same thing, although he did have the advantage of modern forms of travel or communication.

EPHESUS

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 so would have been able to learn of the Gospel.

FORCED TO MOVE ON

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 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. Titus reported to him that things were going well in Corinth. Leaving Philippi, Paul spent three months visiting the churches in Greece that he had established some years previously 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.

SAYING FAREWELL

From Troas, Paul went by road to Assos. He knew he would be delayed from reaching Jerusalem for Passover if he went to Ephesus, so he stayed at Miletus and *summoned the church leaders from Ephesus* (100 kms north) to meet him there. Many Passionist Family Group leaders have travelled long distances to meet together. Paul's departure from there was filled with sadness as he warned them they would never see him again (Acts 20:19-38).

From Miletus he 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 faithful at Ptolemais and the next day reached Caesarea. They stayed in Caesarea with Philip the deacon. While there 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.

DANGER IN JERUSALEM

Paul had been given the same advice at Miletus and Tyre, but he explained that he had to go to Jerusalem. He received a warm welcome from the church and met with the elders. He gave an account of the work he had accomplished and they gave thanks to God. They suggested Paul undergo a ritual with four other men 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. He 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 as a Roman citizen to have his case heard in Rome, 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 written a long letter to the Romans which had been despatched through a deaconess named Phoebe.

TO ROME

On route to Rome, Paul was allowed to disembark and visit friends where the ship stopped. The ship struck fierce winds and was wrecked off Malta. Everyone reached safety. The governor of the island extended his hospitality to the group for three months before they set 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 he 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. It is suggested that during this time 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 a meeting of silversmiths. It was not a special 'church' word but had a common usage for meetings or assemblies of people. 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 Aquila and Priscilla, co-workers with Paul (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. In a similar way all the Passionist Family Groups in a parish usually only meet once a year. 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.

DIFFERENT CHURCHES

That different types of churches existed is evident, because they were founded by different people (eg Paul, Peter and Apollo). Paul did not visit and work among churches that had been founded by others, except on his final 'visit' to Rome.

HOMES - THE MEETING PLACES

From Paul's writings it is clear that the Christians met in homes and it was to be almost 300 years before special buildings were constructed or made available for Christian gatherings. These buildings 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. It was customary for groups of the time to rely on patrons or wealthier people to support them.

When a household converted, some members would have done this for 'solidarity', resulting in different levels of understanding and commitment. 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. Here again there are clear parallels with Passionist Family Groups.

CONTACT WITH OTHER CHURCHES/OTHER PARISHES

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 over many years. Letters from Area Directors or Regional Co-ordinators have been sent to local leaders. Passionists and co-workers have established groups, visited parishes, attended meetings and addressed or spoken with groups of leaders.

Directors have done this same work begun by Passionists, and with the generous help of others in different regions, the support of people in different parishes, is continuing. Various people, including some of the local priests, have visited parish personnel or groups such as pastoral councils in parishes where there is an interest in having Passionist Family Groups. These people and others, have contributed to the establishment and support of Passionist Family Groups in new parishes. Some have made hospital visits to people from other regions and attended funerals of people in other parishes.

Regularly, and especially at annual formation weekends, people from different parishes within common regions, 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 this work is necessary. Finance was a concern for Paul too, so that he could sustain his mission and support the poor.

MEETINGS & MEALS

The emphasis in Paul's letters is on people meeting together. Only twice in his letters does he talk about the Eucharistic meal. This might be considered strange, considering the emphasis the church later gave this. There is no mention of an official celebrant (priest) in Paul's writings. Since the early Christians and Paul himself, continued to attend temple worship, it can be presumed that the early Christians followed the Jewish custom where the host of the household presided 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 needs at 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). Family Groups too are called to meet in similar ways. The structure in Paul's churches 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).

SUPPORT STRUCTURE, NOT SUPER STRUCTURE

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 them.

Within the Passionist Family Group Movement, it has always been important to remember and acknowledge a link between the founding Australian parishes and New Zealand, yet each area is autonomous in providing support and directing growth.

WHAT MADE A CHURCH

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 supra-temporal significance with a vision of universal and eternal fellowship. Despite the advantage over other community models, Paul did not see church gatherings as more religious in 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 this.

THE SECULAR IS SACRED

For Paul, it is through meeting, that the community comes into being and is continually recreated. It is an ongoing challenge to get people to appreciate this same reality in Passionist Family Groups. Some people incorrectly suggest that PFG's are 'social' or 'non-religious', instead of appreciating that relationships between people are sacred.

The three dimensions of Paul's communities 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 Passionist Family Groups within a parish have experienced divisions. Sometimes a strong personality such as a pastor or a Family Group leader has wanted to break away from the wider Movement, refusing to accept some of the simple guidelines or the original arrangements.

On some occasions the behaviour of particular individuals has led to confrontation and a need to remind them of their communal responsibility. A focus for some of 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. It should be no surprise that Paul also experienced difficulties because of finance.

Each Passionist Family Group is encouraged to have an annual Eucharist, which enables the members to appreciate that they are a small 'church (a community within a community)'. Understandably there should be concern for the feelings of non-church goers or those of other traditions, but Paul's households obviously were able to hold their common meals in such an environment. It is not a church going action, it is a 'being church' action. It is one activity among others, that allows the Passionist 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, social outdoor meetings and sharing meetings. Many co-ordinators who by preference would have liked to 'discipline' non-attenders or exclude them, have had to try other methods. Yet as Paul found, it is lack of care and courtesy that threatens the unity and harmony of a group and this issue of 'fringe' members needs to be addressed at some time by most Passionist Family Groups.

EVERYONE HAS A PART TO PLAY

Paul mentions that there are a **variety of gifts within the community**. Some of them 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, including 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 Passionist 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.

APPRECIATING DIVERSITY

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 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.

A COMMUNITY, NOT A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS

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 co-ordinators are encouraged to help members to see themselves as equal contributors. They are called to encourage each person to accept responsibility for the life of the group, and to gently lead people to recognise appropriate action they might take to respond to particular needs. When there is a need to address a disciplinary matter, each member is entitled to contribute towards a solution. Of course while a group is young and not properly bonded, such involvement is hard to solicit, and care must be taken that the dominant group members or the 'fixers', are not the only voices that are heard.

A BAND OF MANY CO-WORKERS

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 teaches exercised significant ministries (1 Cor 12:28). 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. After they separated, Paul became a senior partner, and chose Silas to work with him. He later recruited Timothy and others. Paul was a part time missionary, working at his own trade, generally at the places where he stayed, supporting himself and his 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 the churches. It seems there were at least forty people who were actual or potential sponsors for his work. In his letters he thanked these people for their generosity.

Other people from various churches, including women, travelled either temporarily or permanently with Paul and participated in his work. Among others, Paul mentions a character named Epaphroditus from Philippi who had worked 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 an infant church in Corinth and became itinerant co-workers among the 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 mentioned 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.

COUPLES THEN AND NOW

There are many parallels between these helpers and the Passionist Family Group helpers. Priscilla and Aquila can be paralleled to couples who have travelled all over Australia and New Zealand in the past twenty years and attended meetings to share their stories and to gain new insights and return to their mission. Many others, especially the Directors and Regional Co-ordinators have become regular itinerant helpers. Much like St Paul's band, coming from diverse areas, the team members share 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. This was done 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.

TEAMS

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 Passionist 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 of Paul's 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 mission could continue (eg. Phil 2:25). Paul sent Tychius to Colossae, Timothy to Philippi and Thessalonika and Titus to Corinth on a temporary basis and asked that they be accepted.

FOLLOW UP AND SUPPORT

This approach ensured sound support and follow up for the communities, and it provided personal, rather than structural links between the various communities. It sought to individually develop groups through missionary service, rather than by building 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 of serious departures from basic gospel teaching, and because disunity had developed. Sometimes Paul gave very 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 helpers, have been exercising their ministry in a similar fashion to Paul and his team. Support people for new Passionist Family Groups have provided help when it needed. Regional Co-ordinators feed relevant information about local parishes back to the Directors. They are in regular contact with their Passionist assistants.

A large number of people have assisted in the founding of Passionist Family Groups by speaking at Sunday Masses, to parish Pastoral Councils, or Mother's groups. Some have spoken at parish Masses, or conducted an information session at the time the PFG's are established. Others have assisted by briefing potential Co-ordinators or leaders on their roles. On set-up day, people have come from other parishes to share their experiences and offer their 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 Passionist Family Groups to spread and be maintained throughout twenty-seven dioceses in Australia and all six dioceses of New Zealand and among some churches of other traditions.

QUICK FIX EXPECTATIONS

As with Paul's communities there are some 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 look for instant repairs. In Paul's day travel methods did not allow for instant solutions to be expected, and it might be good for us to learn something from that lived reality and not only lessen the demands we make on the Directors and their team, but learn to live with less than perfect situations.

THE DIFFICULTIES WITH EXPANSION

There are many challenges ahead especially as church attenders are an ageing group. There was tension between extending into new areas while offering proper support to those already established. The Passionists received some criticism for 'over expansion' because of the risk it created of insufficient back up resources. However there was always a vision of involving laity and creating a model of priests, religious and laity working together.

At the same time, Passionist Family Groups could not have spread to so many parishes if the Passionists and their co-workers had not been prepared to extend themselves. How many people would not have heard the gospel if Paul had been unwilling to undertake his incredible journeys. Did Paul have to face criticism about expansion? He mentions the many burdens he carried on account of his churches (2 Cor 11:23-29).

FUTURE ROLES

More people are needed to assist in leadership formation in the future. 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 and seek a heavy commitment from them. Their generosity has enabled this wonderful work of God to continue. Many can quite rightly claim to have been missionaries. More people will be needed to take on roles in the future as the large burden of Directing is shared.

SHARING THE LOAD

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 leaders to concentrate primarily on their own parish groups. At every level we have to be willing to call on the help of new workers so that the Mission goes on. 'Letting go' is basic to the Passionist vocation. We learned that idea from St Paul! 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 or months to get to their destination. People had to manage with the little structure he gave them and they developed. The envoys Paul sent in his place were crucial to the support the local churches needed.

It is common to hear comments like 'We need to see a Passionist'. People don't say, 'We need to see the Pope'. 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, rather than expecting that only a professed Passionist can do this. Quite a number of people have already undertaken the week long Institute of Passionist Spirituality which has been an extension of how the Passionists have attempted to ensure a comprehensive formation for the PFGM leaders.

After Paul died, the churches continued to grow because others carried on his work. The time will come when those of us undertaking this work at present, will be unable to continue. We need to actively encourage the lay ministry that is already so alive in this Movement, rather than naively believe that only Passionists or the same few laity can sustain this work. Restructuring has been an active part of our thinking in recent years and the appointment of three new Area Directors has been a notable example of this restructuring.

REMAINING OPEN TO A DIFFERENT FUTURE

In many respects the Movement is young. It can't be said with certainty what direction the missionary aspect of Passionist Family Groups will take, but the shape of the groups themselves is likely to stay much as it is. Already in the first decade of the new century, most groups are reflecting the lack of young families worshipping in their parish. Personnel in the groups will continue to change. The style of church leadership will alter radically. An increasing number of parishes will not have clerical pastors. Leadership formation will remain imperative within the PFGM and hopefully people will come to recognise more clearly how they are 'being the church'.

PASSIONIST FAMILY GROUPS & PAUL'S CHURCHES

Appreciating similarities between the early Pauline communities and the Passionist Family Groups might be one aid to remaining open and positive about the future. What did those churches look like? Were the cities and churches anything like ours ?

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 preserved letters from Paul. Being surrounded by such a strong immoral life we come across questions 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. There were at least four household churches and 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 the goddess Artemis, and was host to a multitude of cults because of its central location. Because of these contesting cults, Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus 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 at one time 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 to them that we still have. A major concern Paul addresses is that some people have died and Jesus' promised return had not yet eventuated.

CONCLUSION

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.

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'.

A rower gliding through the water towards his destination 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.

Certainly it would be comforting to know that people said about the Passionist Family Groups what they said of this new sect, "**See how they love one another**". We are continuing to try to understand our times and how we can best support local parish life and the individuals and families who comprise it. Our primary concern must be with Christian fellowship based on the example of Jesus who sustains all life and love.

Credit is given to Robert Banks for his valuable study of Pauline communities from which much of this is drawn.

This article has been updated in 2009