

2. Creative Ministries

VINCENTIANS ON MISSION

MARY O'BROIN

Ember Team

My name is Mary O'Broin; I am the coordinator of the popular parish missions team in Ireland; we have ten years experience with a lay leadership team. As a team that constantly tries to be creative and faithful to the Vincentian tradition, I am here to share our experience; what worked and what did not.

Since the early 1990's the team has named itself *The Ember Team, Vincentians on Mission*, taking its inspiration from the image of rekindling embers. Our mission statement highlights our new challenge as we go out in the spirit of St Vincent de Paul to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and work with people as they fan the gift of faith that God has given them into a flame. While the embers of their faith are still burning, the underlying reality is the need among clergy and lay people for restoration of faith and trust in the Church to which they belong.

Ireland is a First World country and the context of our mission is unique. The Catholic Church in Ireland has been rocked in the last couple of years by sex abuse scandals. Actually there has been a growing sense of anger and alienation over the last 10 years which the crisis has magnified. The sense of loss that exists is huge. People in general feel disillusioned and floundering. There is some bitterness towards the clergy, a sense of despair with the bishops, and mixed feelings about our Cardinal. There is a lack of direction among the clergy, a sense of not knowing what to do, or how to respond pastorally. This has had a negative effect on the number of missions for the team in the last year and a half. For some priests and parishes however our team is a model of a way forward given our make-up — lay/clergy and its Vincentian Way. While this is the situation on the whole island of Ireland, for Northern Ireland the impact has an extra dimension as a result of the conflict between Loyalists and Nationalists (the conflict is known in Ireland as the 'Troubles'). Catholics are putting up with Loyalists who feel vindicated in their negative views of the Pope and the Catholic Church in general.

Now a little on our background and how we work as a team. The team has been at the centre of the Apostolate of the Irish Province since its foundation in 1832. In the 1950's there were 25 Vincentian priests operating on the mission team, by the '90's there were 2. The late 90's saw the experimental inclusion of lay people on some missions with varying success. In 2001 there was a significant change in our structure. A lay coordinator was appointed and a lay coordinator has led the team since. I joined in 2006 as the only full-time member of the team which now includes 3 Vincentian priests part-time, 16 lay people who contribute depending on the needs of each mission, and a consultant liturgist since 2008.

I will give you one case study and tell you what we did and what we learned. The parish is St Malachy's in the Markets area of Belfast, an inner-city parish with active paramilitary organizations, and the area of Northern Ireland most affected by the Troubles.

The mission was in response to an invitation from the parish priest. The purpose of the mission was:

- To help prepare the parish for a major change — 2 priests will be reduced to 1. Our brief was
- Empowerment of the pastoral council
- Faith formation for the pastoral council
- Training in personal development, communication, and basic facilitation skills
- Work with the pastoral council to encourage involvement of lay people in parish
- Reach out to and build trust with 'organisations' in the parish

The early stages of planning with the parish consisted of establishing and building up trust. We listened non-defensively to the people as they told of the events in their community. In these early stages a weekend of mission was held to initiate the later launching of a newly formed pastoral council. The pastoral council has overcome almost insurmountable blocks but it took bravery and courage, faith and hope. They have launched themselves into a community that is supportive in part, but also hostile of their involvement with the Church because of historical/political reasons. The team facilitated a strategic plan for the parish on what they would like to see in place in their parish in the next 3 years. Evaluation of the 1st year takes place later this month.

What we learned in St Malachy's is that the embers are still there. People have faith. They want to hear and live the Good News of Jesus Christ. People want missions but in a new form. Of course we try and respond, e.g. St Malachy's is not an 8-day traditional mission, but a

3-year project. The most important thing we learned was to meet people 'where they are at.'

In the last four years we have had 3 main responses from priests and parishes actually — some happy, some wondering, some resistant.

Priests and parishes want our style of mission, i.e. lay/clergy:

- Training in a range of skills and faith formation were key elements in these missions
- Pastoral councils trained
- Pastoral councils and parishioners applying new learnings in their parish when the mission was over
- For example we held a sports day to bring together a divided parish
- We worked with a Women's Support Group in Derry in Northern Ireland in an area of heavy paramilitary involvement
- We brought liturgical celebrations outside the church

Priests and parishes wondering about our style of team but want to try:

- For some it was a positive and learning experience
- For others when faced with the reality of how the team worked in practice it was challenging and sometimes hard to accept

Resistance to a lay/clergy team — either by the parish or by the priest.

- In these cases there was a desire for the 'old way' and sadness at its passing
- Reluctance to engage with reality of falling numbers of priests
- Rejecting need for lay involvement

Given the circumstances of the Church in Ireland the challenge facing the mission team is huge. How do we deal with the woundedness? How do we deal with corporate disillusionment? How do we deal with disillusionment as a team when we face it? Our mission team is at the cutting edge. Well, even faced with these difficult times we have not backed down. We are faithful to the Vincentian tradition and the Vincentian Way, and continually seek to find new and creative ways to respond. As a lay/clergy team we model collaboration — a sign of hope for the years ahead.