

Faith Development: Learning from Experience
Monday 15th October
Irish Institute for Pastoral Studies
MIC St. Patrick's Campus, Thurles
(11.00a.m. to 4.30p.m.)

This one-day gathering ran from mid-morning to late afternoon and offered the opportunity to reflect on experience, taking the stories of three initiatives which have sought to connect with and listen to people's lives in a way that makes for deeper faith – particularly focusing on young parents and younger adults. We explored these stories, so as to draw out learnings about building capacity. We sought to discern what skills are required and what kind of training/formation would be most appropriate into the future.

11.00am - Setting the scene

We live in a time of significant change in the Church's landscape – declining numbers and aging clergy, an increasingly multi-cultural and secular context, issues around the provision of catechesis in schools. In many dioceses people have been asking how we can build capacity in our parishes for the work of faith development. There has been much emphasis over the years on the twin challenges of missionary outreach, especially to the younger generations, and the engagement of lay people in that mission.

New ministries are being considered – catechist, pastoral worker, pastoral care ministry, sacramental coordinator – full-time, part-time, voluntary – at parish, regional, diocesan levels. And this in turn has led to questions about what training or capacity building would be required for those roles.

The purpose of this gathering is to approach these questions in an inductive manner, by starting with an end product - promising missionary actions - and working 'backwards' to explore learnings relevant to the questions. The approach being taken is informed by what Pope Francis says in 'The Joy of the Gospel' – *reality is greater than ideas*. The day will be structured as a reflection on experience. We will stand back from ideas such as parish catechist or parish pastoral worker. We will begin with the reality on the ground, with a view to discerning how this can inform what roles and structures would be worth developing. This approach is will I hope be a hallmark of the Institute for Pastoral Studies here in Thurles whereby we take real lived experience seriously and allow it, through reflection upon it, to inform all we do.

The gathering heard three presentations. We asked the presenters to tell a story of a missionary initiative they were involved in that attempted to connect with young parents or young adults, and in some way showed promise.

We then sought to 'drill into' or 'mine' the presentations for wisdom about how best to proceed with mission, roles for mission, and formation for those roles, asking the following questions:

1. *What was the mission of this project? (Why did you take this initiative?)*
2. *What were the main tasks done by whom?*
3. *What skills did they require and what training did they receive for these tasks?*

11.15am - Story 1

Julie Kavanagh, of the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin and Francis Monaghan, who chaired the Working Committee will tell the story of the Family Picnic Day organised by Kildare and Leighlin Diocese which took place in Punchestown racecourse on 27th August 2017 in preparation for WMOF.

11.45am – Buzz

11.50am - Story 2

Fr Harry Bohan, a priest of the Diocese of Killaloe, who is Parish Priest of Sixmilebridge/Kilmurry, will tell the story of a local response to disengagement among young families.

12.20pm – Buzz

12.25pm - Story 3

Ian Brabazon and Laura Duff will tell the story of a weekly family mass in Esker church, termed a ‘digital family Mass’.

12.55pm - Small group discussion - What questions or issues struck us from the three stories in regard to skills needed for mission and the development of those skills?

1.30pm - Lunch

2.30pm - Open forum with panel of three speakers

An emphasis was placed on welcome and hospitality. It was important to be truly inclusive and in particular to ensure positivity towards children and their parents. Family is a generative issue in our culture. A priority was to achieve engagement with parents and meeting their needs. There was a freedom to see what works and let go of things that clearly weren't working. This requires humility. It is also important to always remember why an undertaking an initiative. A key aspect of pre-evangelisation is to be cognisant of how we are in relationship with others. ‘Any agenda that is about bringing people back is a backwards step’. It is also important to create things that continue.

3.00pm - Theological Reflection (Donal Harrington)

Mission requires hard work. In the midst of things falling apart can we get a sense of where God is? Mission implies starting from ‘their’ side not ours. The spirit of mission is to connect with people and be free of an agenda or be utilitarian. Let the human experience be right so that it can be a divine experience – the starting point is to connect.

Some of the skills that are required are to be able to work backwards, facilitate community development, avail and welcome the skills that are there.

The skills for a catechist may be around imagination, creativity and an ability to bring in others who have the necessary skills. A skill to unlock the skill that are there in the community, in that sense to have the skill of a door-keeper. Training and Resourcing will be cognisant of sourcing that which is local and can be used locally.

Faith and culture – how to engage with the culture is key. We need to build capacity to do something different, not capacity to ‘keep the show going’, it is not about replacing clergy with new professionals (thus sustaining a clerical, ‘provided-for’ model) but to build local capacity. This means that we shift capacity from a couple of experts or professionals to the community – of course, the paradox here is that to achieve this itself requires some expertise. A catechist will need to be an animator who can draw something out of people. There is of course still a need for a theological base, a sound theological base.

For example, catechesis of children may imply in the future that the role of the catechist is to catechise the parents so that they in turn can catechise their children and truly be the primary teachers of their children in the ways of the faith.

We need to truly listen to the experience of people and this too can be very time-consuming. In order that we can create something new, we need to allow something to die in order for something to grow, as things fall apart can we stay with a sense of God's providence? There is a need for hope in the middle of all of this.

On the one hand we need to be free of an agenda but also in a sense we do have an agenda – a sense that we are a faith community with something to offer. However, we need a new way of conversing, a new language – sometimes our language is itself problematic. Are we Church-centred or Christ-centred? Are we focused on the agenda of the other? Is ours a joy-centred agenda?

The skill of discernment is very important. We need to recognise that God is present in the world and in family life.

3.15pm - Buzz and short open forum

3.30pm - Small groups - What are our learnings in regard to

- Mission
- Required skills
- Required formation

4.00pm - Open forum to draw out learnings

Each story was able to accommodate the chaotic lives of people. In other words, each story stepped out of their comfortable cultural space into the chaotic cultural space of the people with whom they were engaging. It was also evident that the capacity to unlock capacities in others is essential.

The door to the Divine is through the door of the human.

Believe in and have faith in peoples' experience, their talents, their gifts, and then getting people to believe in their own giftedness; we are trying to open our eyes to see the giftedness of people. Launch out into the deep.

There are risks and sometimes things may not work out but we need to give permission for risk and mistakes and recognise the need to talk about such experiences reflecting upon them and learning from them.

4.30pm – Close