

THE NEW PARISH PRIEST

I want to invite participants to do it *all* for themselves. That, to me, is what open space is for... discovering that we can do it for ourselves... that we have the bullet points, the artful sketch, the passion, the responsibility, the vision and the action within each and all of us.

Michael Herman

1. THE SPIRIT AND STORIES OF A PARISH

In most organizations, the spirit of an organization is ultimately as important as the balance sheet – and is usually given far less attention or support.

General knowledge and experience suggest that organization spirit is really carried by stories. Thus it was long before printing came along. Oral tradition - for perhaps as long as man has been around - passed on stories and spirit, and still does. And the Catholic Church, as much as any other religious tradition, is beholden to the stories of its culture, its parables, its heroes and heroines (saints), its great leaders, its history (good and bad), its people doings and even its parish gossip.

So, if stories carry spirit - as is being suggested here - this writing is an attempt to share something of the spirit of just one suburban parish, a parish moving from its past to its future, a parish engulfed in change from within and without, a parish with its own stories over half a century of time, but a parish with now and new stories to share, stories which are the making of the tomorrow church which it is becoming.

These stories are offered not as prescriptions for how a parish should or could be, but as a way of understanding the need for every parish to have and grow its own story and share that to the best of its ability - within its own ethos - so that spirit will grow and prosper along the lines of the real mission of the church – to spread the gospel of love and peace amongst all people. And, perhaps, a way of understanding how this parish - using Open Space Technology and self-organization theory which especially focus on spirit - has started to bring itself into today's and tomorrow's world where things are becoming, and will certainly continue to be, different.

Some see the church as a separate and different organisation from the business and corporate world. That is true in a way, a bit like how government and commerce are different, but it is not entirely true.

As church documents and scripture suggests, the Church has to live **IN** the world but not be entirely **OF** the world. But living **IN** the world means having to work with the systems and expectations and stresses and disappointments and successes that are part of the world we are and

the world we are making. As a missionary body – which is what church should be mostly about - our task is to work at changing the world to be a better and more loving and more peaceful place, a place where people work together more easily, where people connect with each other better (though never perfectly), where misunderstandings get to be worked through and understood, where help and assistance is available and applied when needed, where caring and loving are the more real signs of success than budgets and balance sheets – which will always come to be OK if the spirit is right and shared effectively.

That, in effect, is what this set of stories is about – and hopefully will be appreciated and not copied, but emulated in the way that most suits other such bodies in the Church and in the world.

2. THE SCENARIO

In my 38th year as a priest, at the age of 66, I was appointed as Parish Priest of St Scholastica's parish, Bennettswood, a mid-suburban parish in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. I had never been a Parish Priest. The date of appointment was November 25, 2004.

An Administrator had been in place in the parish for some weeks – Fr Lynh Tran – and the Parish Priest, Fr Rom Murphy, had retired earlier than he had planned due to health problems which were increasingly disabling.

I had studied the Position Description (PD) of the Parish with some care before confirming my application for the appointment.

I responded to the call happily enough, but only later found out what the cost of that response amounted to. In due course, it became obvious that most of the detail in the PD was not quite as it was written, and some was simply wrong. As the local Bishop exclaimed when I mentioned this: “What else would you expect?” I had foolishly thought that the Church would be perhaps different from the world of management in which I had worked so much and which always “gilded the lily” in such matters. Clearly the PD was intended to tell things as they might be rather than as they were in reality.

3. THINKING AT THE START

In the previous position as Assistant Priest at the next-door parish, there had been some thinking about how a parish could be operated differently from the traditional model.

From my management studies and research over many years and from working as an organization change enabler in so many different sorts of organizations – including other parishes and catholic schools and

Dioceses in a number of countries – I had often wondered if it might be possible to develop parish life and organization along the lines of a “SELF-ORGANIZING-SYSTEM”, using Open Space Technology as the vehicle (or operating system) to implement this.

In brief, this meant reducing reliance on the dominant top-down traditional model which is so well-known and well-used in Church systems (and elsewhere), and embarking on an enabling model or system which would encourage the application of Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius XI’s “Principle of Subsidiarity”, so well-known and taught in Catholic social teaching, and somewhat less-than-applied in most organizations, including the Catholic Church itself.

This teaching is utterly consistent with “Open Space Technology”, an organization intervention process which I - and a multitude of others across the world – have been working with since the mid-80’s of the twentieth century with considerable impact, but which has never been consciously applied in a parish system, so far as can be ascertained.

During my before-dawn walks, I had kind of dreamed and wondered for years as an academic about what an “Open Space Parish” would or could look like, how it could work, how to help it get going and keep going, how to be present without being obviously dominant and commanding, and how a Parish Priest might simply “hold the space for the parishioners” rather than be the controller and obvious decision-maker to whom everyone had to refer and defer. One Cardinal Archbishop told me, after I had facilitated a series of Open Space programs in his Archdiocese, that his work was now vastly much easier because people just got on with things instead of absolutely everything having to come across his desk. He was now free to give proper and appropriate consideration to the major decisions facing the Church in his country.

I wondered how an Open Space Parish Priest might handle the objections of people who would want everything to stay the same and keep everything “as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be”, and how he would evoke an exciting sense of “mission” or “passion” to eclipse the sense of “maintenance” and “control” which seemed the norm. And how he would avoid the disease of “twentieth-century-managerialism” so as to promote the “transformation” to better pastoral presence of the Church in the twenty-first century parish.

The transformation I saw as so seriously needed in parish life was a movement from “control” to “service”, a shift which I had helped happen in many of the organizations I had worked with so effectively in parts of Australia, in Asia, in Sweden, and currently with other powerful world-wide agencies.

So, to some extent, this might well be both a “First” and an experiment.

4. THE FIRST STEPS : OPENING SUNDAY AND BEYOND

How to introduce this different way of being – and myself - from the very start?

It seemed to me the simplest way would be to just attach a copy of my C-V (curriculum vitae) to the weekly Newsletter, and to invite anyone who cared to make any comment or ask questions or whatever. And if they didn't, we would just get on with the Mass.

They did ask questions, with real interest, and the questions ranged from "I've heard of priests studying theology and philosophy and art and even ethics; but Management??" to "You travel a lot – will we ever see you?" to "What is your plan for youth?" to "Will you be visiting people?" Trying to stop the questions after they got going was the challenge.

As I remember, there were practically no questions about the parish school – which carried a serious message.

So I was able to add comment (rather than answers) about these and lots of other questions raised – and then asked the people if they enjoyed the session and did they want me to keep informing them about what goes on each week – to which there was a resounding "YES".

At the end of every weekend Mass, I have tried to do a 1 or 2 minute "What's happened this week?" segment, which seems to continue well received. When it is omitted, people notice and ask the reason why.

Within a couple of days of arrival, I had a letter from the Dominican Fathers who supplied one Mass every Sunday that they could no longer do so because of personnel shortages. And, at the same time, the coordinator of the monthly Italian Mass said he could no longer find a priest to say that Mass. Some change had to happen, obviously.

Consistent with Open Space, it was possible to invite all Mass-going parishioners to complete a preference form – handed out at all Masses – to see what times would be most supported, given that one Mass now needed to disappear from the weekend schedule.

Pleasantly, a majority of active parishioners voted and a clear decision about Mass times emerged and was then implemented. There were now four Masses each weekend instead of five, no Italian Mass, a monthly Vietnamese Mass, and the new times were generally acceptable. So far as can be ascertained, we lost one elderly couple from the Mass attendees.

Some time later, the Vicar-General of the Diocese asked me "What have you done?" – and I then asked "About what?" He told me that he understood that I had changed Mass times, reduced the number of

Masses and removed the monthly Italian Mass, and the Cathedral had received no letters of complaint – how come? My response, of course, was that “I” hadn’t made the changes but the parishioners had, so “no complaints” was the result of that. Though I suggested I could perhaps arrange some complaint letters if he needed, he was utterly delighted with the outcome and the way of helping things happen.

5. STAFF RESOURCES

From Day 1, it was viable to introduce an accomplished Business Manager into the staff of the parish. The aim was to ensure someone other than the Parish Priest would be on site to attend to the day-to-day administrative matters in terms of maintenance, office systems, accounting and budgeting, financial reporting, staff supervision, equipment updating, project management, school administrative interface, kindergarten management and interface, staff administration and such – matters which I believed were specialised and for which I would/should neither have time nor appropriate competence. And the person available had excellent experience in church administration and finance and politics. An amazing blessing to happen.

In a number of parishes in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, USA, I had suggested this strategy and it had made a huge positive difference in those parishes within the first six months, getting tasks in place, addressing the finances professionally, and allowing the pastor to be much more available as pastor rather than being preoccupied with administration. It seemed the right thing to do here and now.

The office staff, three part-time ladies, were functioning well, it seemed. Hopefully, the new Business Manager would find ways of helping them improve their contribution and become much more a part of the parish. Even on Day 1, it was possible to streamline some of the accounting practices for the Kindergarten – making things easier and more accurate for all concerned as will be explained later.

6. PARISHIONER ATTITUDES – INITIALLY

Initially, active parishioners approached the new P.P (me) with the question: “Fr Rom (previous Parish Priest) did things this way – what do YOU want us to do?”

Consistent with Open Space modelling, my response was “What do you want to do?” which was almost always followed by “We’ll do whatever you say, Father”. To which I responded : “Yes, but what do you think would be best?” Often enough, this script was played out several times before people gradually got to understand that they were the best ones to decide and then implement what they reckoned was the best solution. And that I was not going to make any decision on such matters.

After a few months, the question disappeared. People started moving from “What do you want us to do?” to “This needs attention”. And such people generally found themselves taking the matter to the Business Manager for appropriate action – which, they discovered, always happened.

7. CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

Many parishioners figured something needed to be done to maintain the Church since, like the Parish House, almost no attention had been given the building for a lot of years, they said. Although this was not quite accurate or correct, it is what people said.

These next stories tell something of how the changes have emerged and happened.

At no time have I ever talked of the parish as “my parish”. Perhaps “our parish” – but the emphasis has always been on my role as servant of the parish and the parishioners, not controller or manager or authority. I believe “service” and “servant-leadership” are the better and truly Gospel ways of seeing and being Parish Priest consistent with a self-organizing-system.

8. THE PIANO(S) STORY

There was an upright piano in the choir area, used occasionally. And I was told it was a gift to the parish from the just-retired Parish Priest. There was no record of this, so I wrote him and asked for confirmation so that the parishioners could be advised and a plaque placed on the piano and his gift and memory honoured properly. A verbal message was returned saying that this was all correct.

Two days later, a member of his family rang to say the family would be coming to pick up the family piano and could we arrange a convenient time, please? Which is what then happened.

The following Sunday, I mentioned that people had perhaps noticed that there was (but now wasn't) a piano in the church and explained, with a grin, what had happened. I then asked if anyone could perhaps see clear to donating a good piano – or perhaps a baby grand piano or donate enough money for same. After the 9.00 a.m. Mass, to my astonishment, a senior couple told me they had been thinking of getting rid of their very good upright piano and had now decided this donation would be the best thing to do.

Then, after the 5.30 p.m. Mass, another younger lady asked if she could loan her baby grand piano to the parish for a couple of years, please. In

due course, both pianos have become part of the music program in the Church. Amazing. And periodic tuning is arranged by the Parish Office.

9. THE CHURCH A/V SYSTEM

Still looking at the Church, the first item on the needs list emerged as the sound system - which was seriously inadequate, no matter who was asked about it. A short open-space type meeting was initiated and people seemed certain this would be a good development.

Once engineering and audio plans were in place, parishioners were all invited to an evening session to explore whether these plans were the right way to proceed. Some 33 persons arrived and the engineer/contractor was invited – in a circle - to talk about how it would work and what changes it would mean and how much it would cost.

Once given the opportunity to explore all aspects of the project, a more senior Italian parishioner exclaimed : “Fr Brian, this is a beautiful project, this a beautiful explanation from the engineer, this is a beautiful price – so let’s get on with it – all those in favour clap our hands”. Which they did. Of course, another more serious member insisted on a proper show of hands which unanimously confirmed the hand-clapping. The installation of a state-of the-art sound and video system then proceeded quite quickly.

10. CHURCH ENTRY ACCESS

Some attention was also given to the steps at the front entry of the Church. With some deft activity by a concreting contractor, these were removed. It was funny to watch people come to the door and “step up” and then realize they didn’t need to. This persisted for quite a while until people got into the “new habit”.

Wheeling and carrying coffins in and out of the Church has now become less hazardous as has disabled access to the Church. And brides now find the entry easier to navigate. Another Occupational Health and Safety (O H & S) hazard has been eliminated.

11. THE NEW YEAR – NEXT STEPS : THE PARISH OPEN SPACE EVENT

Once Christmas was over, it seemed important to have some kind of gathering to invite parishioners to consider what was needed for the future of the parish and what priorities they thought should be given to “the things that needed doing”.

An invitation was spread through the whole parish – Mass-goers, Mass-non-goers and School families – to be part of a one-day Open Space

Event on Monday, March 14, 2005, which was a public holiday. 66 people fronted and stayed all day, pretty much, though a couple of seniors came for the morning to have their say and then left because tiredness took over – understandably. Predictably, almost no youth appeared; and no school officials were present, either; but the rest of those present stretched across the whole age spectrum.

It seemed best to have an independent person to open and hold the space for the day, and Andrew Donovan did this with great finesse.

As with any Open Space event, there were plenty of surprises – including a very fine lunch - and people found they had lots of common ground in the group topics which were examined. The energy and the engagement was simply serious – and people, and even the caterer, remarked on how everyone was involved.

In the closing stages, decisions emerged about things that people wanted to happen and who would start work on same. A parish dinner. Getting started on a new hall for the parish and school. Changes to the Thanksgiving program. Catechetics initiatives for the youngest parishioners. Changes to the Church and the Parish House. Youth initiatives. Closer relations between school and kindergarten and parish.

One senior parishioner, in the closing review circle of the day, expressed great disappointment because from his professional experience he knew that “the boss” always said at the start of such days that the program belonged to everyone and all were free to contribute – and, by lunchtime, you found out what that really meant and what he really wanted to happen. The disappointment was that “this hadn’t happened here at all – we really don’t know what the new Parish Priest wanted, and it seems he really means it when he says it is ‘our parish’; and look what we have come up with”.

Almost all of the initiatives set in motion at that gathering have been moved along or completed as a result of parishioner activity and involvement in that initial Open Space event.

12. FINANCE COMMITTEE FORMATION

There was no Finance Committee in place in the Parish. Which needed addressing.

I mentioned the matter to the Parish Accountant and he flatly rejected any such initiative. “Look, Father, we can sit down and work things out without all of that”, he said. Haven’t talked with him since that conversation, in the light of current Diocesan Regulations and Canon Law mandating the establishment of a Parish Finance Committee - and the need to involve parishioners in all such matters if a self-organizing-system was to emerge.

“Been here forty years” said John. “Here at the very beginning. And we had the contacts and the skills and the energy and the ideas to do everything that was needed. And we did it. And look what we’ve achieved. Good, isn’t it?”

“Terrific” says I. “And what’s this conversation about, really?”

“Well, I think you are thinking of forming a Parish Finance Committee.”

“I am” I said.

“And I think you are trying to work out who should be invited to be on it.”

“I am”, said I.

“And I reckon it’s pretty important NOT to have oldies like me or people who were in at the beginning on this new body because they will want to talk endlessly about why they did it the way they did, and how well they did it, and how much they saved, and how we have to be careful, and all that”.

“What’s needed now” he said “is younger people with energy and drive (like we were back then), people who’ll take risks (like we did) and have vision of how it could and should be (like we did) and will carry the parish forward into the next forty years.”

“Thanks hugely for that insight, John” says I.

“And I think that might help you work out who should be part of the new Parish Finance Committee” says John.

With brilliance, he was right and marvellously clarifying.

Within a day, an invite was extended to four parishioners, all in the age group John suggested targeting, all professionally competent, all active persons in the parish – more or less - and they all accepted the challenge .

The first couple of meetings involved getting to know one another better, with the Business Manager (and the Parish Priest), and since then they have really taken off and set in place a huge number of programs and options for the parish, most of which will be mentioned later in this paper.

There is yet to emerge effective budget planning or satisfactory financial reporting in an efficient fashion. None of this existed for the parish in 2004. And changing over to more effective computer packages takes a deal of time for staff to cope with properly. But all of this is now on the way, mercifully.

That accountant was gently advised that his services were no longer needed, thank you, and a new auditor – the accountant also acted as auditor!! – is now in place.

13. PROPERTY AND ASSET MANAGEMENT

Exposure in the parish I came from included supporting their Finance Committee's negotiation for the sale of a quite large retirement village, set up by that parish some decades ago. At its foundation, it was intended to provide lower-cost retirement facilities for parishioners (and others) who might need such help.

Only a few parishioners were now part of the village and the looming costs of major re-modelling to comply with new government regulations and new competition made it highly difficult to see any real way forward without major parish investment in the village – which was unacceptable to both the Parish Priest and the Parish Finance Committee.

Eventually, a way was found to sell the facility and still protect the rights of current residents – and to allow the residual funds to be invested on behalf of the parish for its future needs. This experience was vital to asset management options in the new parish.

For a long time, there were two houses adjacent to the parish property owned by the parish and rented out, one at something like market rate and the other at way below market rate to ostensibly help migrant families. The parish seemed to know about these, but there was no effective accountability involved or available, and virtually no records.

There was also a convent owned by the parish and built when teaching sisters were in plentiful supply – but now occupied by one senior Nun who helped with pastoral matters around the parish in various ways, though refusing to see herself as a Pastoral Associate.

These properties were a gross drain on parish finances, it seemed, even though rental return happened from the two houses. The Finance Committee examined these assets and suggested that, since the parish owned all three assets outright, selling both the houses would initially allow investment to be available to service the future salaries of perhaps Pastoral Associate, Youth Leader, and other staff who could not be funded from current income or borrowed funds. Diocesan approval was sought and obtained and planning for the sales begun.

But before this could be finalised, the Provincial of the Order of Religious Sisters whose nun occupied the convent, contacted the parish to discuss their “already advised” plans to withdraw their nun from the parish convent – for a whole lot of good reasons – ageing, concern about the lady being alone and not getting help should it be needed, security for the lady, and the need – as ageing occurred - to bring her closer to the Order rather than leaving her out on her own. The nun was not happy about that, it transpired, but the provincial knew it was the right way to go. Details of such options were not known to anyone in the parish and there was no record of any correspondence; so it was a significant and positive surprise to suddenly have the convent as vacant property.

After consideration, sale and investment seemed a better option than investing funds in the property and hiring it out for university student housing or whatever – as some people suggested. The university inside the parish boundaries was clearly a market for such accommodation. But the parish simply didn't have reserve funds to do this.

That is the path that the Finance Committee advised and then implemented – with the appropriate Diocesan approvals.

The funds accrued from the three property sales were invested in the Diocesan Catholic Development Fund, yielding market interest rates.

This has proven to be a very effective path to have pursued and the interest yield has allowed appropriate employment and support for the Pastoral Associate (see later) and for other developments in the parish. It has also been seen as an effective way of protecting the patrimony of the parish, so carefully built up by the founding Parish Priest and parishioners.

14. PARISH HOUSE MAINTENANCE

The parish house was in need of serious attention and maintenance, and the regional Bishop had been at pains to “instruct” me to attend to this so as to establish part of the Parish House which was public as the Parish Office and an area which was personal/private.

Pretty much nobody in the parish was particularly aware of the house condition as almost no one spent time in the house itself. Every cupboard in the place was jammed with papers of some kind. One of the shower recesses was simply filled with tiles which had broken as they fell off the walls. Painting (all timber was coloured Mission Brown), carpet, storage, kitchen facilities, heating, electrics – a complete makeover seemed vital if it was to function effectively into the coming decades. And the parish office was clearly in need of major re-siting and upgrading. Probably the first major decision for the proposed Finance Committee to address.

After inspection by the Finance Committee, and after inviting whoever wanted to come to visit and inspect the building and its condition, funds were borrowed from the Diocesan Catholic Development Fund to begin renovation of the Parish House and Office.

Initially, the parish staff were involved in working with the builder/architect to determine the kind of office accommodation that would suit them, moving their office to the opposite end of the house, nearer to the Church, and with their own independent office entry. Walls were removed, as many as 13 doors were taken away, and parishioners just visited the continuing works at any time to see how they were going. Many came to visit, and lots came several times to see the

progress. Praise and approval was constant. "It's about time something was done to the house" many said; "It's just been let go for such a long time".

Part of that development involved upgrading computers and software, new telephone lines and internet services and intercom systems, new photocopier systems and improved security systems.

Once the office changeover was completed, the residence area was commenced - and progressed well inside budget. The result has been a Parish House with reasonable facilities and modern kitchen equipment, furnished adequately, re-carpeted and re-painted, lit effectively, and suitable for most tasks for which a Parish House gets used.

Much of the final interior treatment and fittings were set in place on the advice of competent parish members, and the result has been warmly greeted by parishioners who now like "their house".

School students also visited the house "to see where Fr Brian lives" and were amazed, they said, at "how clean it is". One student was heard saying "I'd like to have my room and house clean like this, but my Mum wont let me". Well..... Which was a well-received story at Mass the following weekend.

15. PARISH OFFICE ARRANGEMENTS

Many times, in the first few months, there were complaints about data in the weekly newsletter being wrong or omitted. The complaints were right.

To address this, the suggestion of getting closer to the office staff and letting them know what should be written and giving them the right details beforehand.

Helping this happen meant getting the office staff to drop in from time to time on functions during office hours in the Community Centre and the Gathering Area, AND inviting the staff to see if they could re-arrange their hours to give better access and coverage. They worked out a system that now provides office presence from 9.00 a.m. till 3.00 p.m. four days a week, and most people know that detail. No one much comes to the parish house on a Monday any more.

And the miracle is that it is now very rare to find details wrong in the Newsletter. And the staff work out their own hours to suit their personal needs and leave requirements and yet keep the office available. More self-organizing.

On arrival, it was interesting to note that the Parish Telephone was a party line – anyone could lift a handset and listen in. And the fax line

was strung through a number of rooms to reach the machine. Replacement of the whole system was necessary to increase the number of handsets and the quality of switching and the accessibility of the whole system to make the place a friendly place. This has all been addressed and is generally working well, though with some computing delicacies from time to time.

Photocopying facilities have also been upgraded and new computer systems installed to ensure accessibility by all office personnel.

16. PARISH SCHOOL

On the very first day in the parish and immediately after meeting the parish office staff, my next stop was the office of the School Principal where I learnt that I was “the second Father Bainbridge I have worked under”. My immediate response was that I would be “working with”, not “over” the Principal and the school.

The appointment of a Deputy Principal was in process and the Principal wanted to know if I intended to be part of the interviewing – to which I answered I thought the Principal would know best what was needed for the school, and I would be delighted to be introduced to whoever she chose from the candidates. Which is what happened – in accord with this new way of organizing the parish, of course.

From previous experience in another parish, and learning from that Parish Priest, I suggested a regular meeting with The Principal, myself and the new Deputy Principal on a fortnightly basis during term time. These gatherings began and continued for the first year or so, and the Business Manager was included.

It seemed useful to bridge the gap between school and kindergarten by also inviting the Director of the Kindergarten – who came only twice but felt she had no place in such a gathering. This was a clear indication of the delicacy of Kinder/parish/school relations.

School/Parish relations seemed well enough, but there was, to my eyes, not much substance to it all. Schedules were set and sometimes adhered to, programs were announced and added to diaries, but there was little or no attention given to matters like parish/school connectivity, school catholicity, enrolment patterns and policy, changes imposed from the Diocesan Education Office, funding patterns and processes, creativity, behaviour factors, sociological needs, parish support requirements, etc. For whatever reason, these meetings failed in 2006, an indication of a regrettable change of attitude in the school and a change of interface with the parish.

Employment contract arrangements for The Principal had apparently been changed before my arrival. I was eventually told that the Principal

had planned to take early retirement prior to my arrival, but that she now felt she had to stay on to enable the new Parish Priest to find his way into the system – and I was not told that until nearly 18 months after arrival.

In the current Diocesan Church structure, the Parish Priest is the employer of the Principal, but a choice was now made by the Principal to submit her resignation and notice of early retirement directly to the Diocesan Catholic Education Office and, by chance, the parish found out about that some weeks later when a Catholic Education Office official called to commence the process of searching for a new Principal. Of course, in a self-organizing system, this would be acceptable behaviour, but in the current situation, it was seen as an inappropriate understanding of the current structure and, more importantly, a complete neglect of the need to keep those involved informed of significant actions undertaken. Self-organizing-systems still require people to act responsibly.

The fall-out from that has been awkward – more about that when considering the Principal Selection Panel below under School Board.

Regrettably, relations with the school became static, not dynamic. Quite foreign to the principles of a self-organizing-system. I asked for guidance from the Catholic Education Office about the role of the Parish Priest and his responsibilities in and for the School. A meeting with the Area Manager simply suggested I could do anything I liked, as it was “my school”. Strange advice, it seemed.

It then emerged, by chance, that the student numbers in the school had been dropping for seven years, losing one class a year for the whole of that time. The Principal claimed this was “just demographics”, but research from a number of sources showed that births in the area remained stable, that baptisms for the same period were slightly increasing, and that the national census showed that the number of Catholics in the area were not declining. There had been no mention of this matter at the Executive meetings nor at the School Board Meetings, nor in any detail prepared by the Principal in her time of occupancy. Some major action had to happen to either contain or reverse this trend if the school was to survive.

17. SCHOOL BOARD

Introduced by the Principal a couple of years before my arrival, this body meets about eight times a year, and seems to advise the Principal on appropriate matters.

On the face of it, its major real task was to set up occasional Working Bees to address grounds maintenance. The no-go areas for the Board’s consideration seem to be substantial and rather limit its contribution.

Though some requirements are placed on the Board by its constitution, these seem not to have been observed under the then school administration.

The Board was invited by the Parish Finance Committee to consider – and excellent work has been done – how to increase the real income of the school so as to fund the planned School Hall (see later). The energy and competence the Board brought to this matter is shown by the gradual changing of the fee structure over a two-year schedule in a way that will yield adequate funds to service the loans required for this development – and others that may come along.

A circular outlining these changes was sent to all school families and, to the Board's credit (and surprise), no negative responses were forthcoming – the planning had been done excellently well, hand-in-hand with the Parish Finance Committee.

Another instance of self-organizing at work.

Three members of the School Board were also invited to be part of the Search Panel for the new Principal, though one of these, a school staff member, found it necessary to withdraw as a result of pressure from various vested interests. The contribution of all three was highly esteemed. As it turned out, the Panel recommended that the current Deputy Principal be appointed the new Principal.

The Board has also commenced preparation of an effective maintenance plan for the long-term care of the school buildings and property.

18. SCHOOL ACCOUNTING

Most of the detail of school accounting seemed to rest in the hands – understandably – of the school accountant (the man who had also been “looking after” the parish accounts). No method was in place for the Principal to know very much about such matters, and no reporting of same was ever presented to the School Board or the new Parish Finance Committee, in spite of Diocesan regulations requiring same. Gradually, these omissions are being addressed so that both those bodies are equipped to make proper decisions and advise as required.

From observations in other parishes, it was suggested and agreed that any families whose financial situation created problems in paying school accounts should be referred to the Parish Priest and – where appropriate – funding would be made available from the parish instead of the school having to find this out of its own budget. It seems, however, that the school has not been able to address this matter in the way agreed – for some reason – and no requests have been received. Further work to be done once the new Principal takes over.

19. SCHOOL MASSES IN THE PARISH

Some initiative was expressed by the new Deputy Principal – also Religious Education Co-ordinator – to program school Masses on occasional Sundays with children taking special parts in the Mass. This began to happen, but seems to have fallen off for some reason.

Masses were programmed (and happened) for First Communion commitment, Confirmation commitment, Confirmations, First Communions, for close of year and Grade Six graduation, and for staff and School Board “Commissioning” (at the start of each year). These were all well attended.

An initiative is also being introduced by the Deputy Principal to have one class at the 11.00 a.m. Mass on Wednesdays, just to experience an ordinary weekday Mass. That is starting to happen, gradually, though not yet reliably. Quite correctly, attendance depends on the class teacher making the necessary scheduling arrangements. And the people love it when the Celebrant just talks with the children at sermon time.

20. SCHOOL CAMPS

In previous parishes, I had always been invited – in place of the Parish Priest if he was not available – to visit school camps when they happened and say Mass with the students and staff and parents helping at the camp.

Even at Father-son camps and Women’s camps and Dads-n-Kid’s camps, this has always been a feature – and on one memorable occasion, a number of non-catholic men on a Parish Men’s camp were astonished that the only viably useful base for an altar at Mass seemed to be an esky portable fridge! Covered up appropriately, of course.

Clearly camp Masses have not been a tradition in this parish, and I was not even invited to visit the first school camp after my appointment until the very last minute; and then only to drop in, not to say Mass. A lost opportunity since these events always carry a lasting impact with the students and bring the option of Parish/School connectivity into some better focus. In time, this may change, perhaps.

21. KINDERGARTEN AFFAIRS

On Day I in the parish, one of the office staff excused herself to complete the Kindergarten accounts which, she said, were always difficult. Asking why, I was told there were two sets of reports to be prepared – one for the Kindergarten Committee to show that there was no money available, and one for the parish accountant. The difficulty for

the staff member was to keep them both clear in her head so that people didn't get the wrong report.

Immediately I asked if it would be easier to just prepare one report and let everyone have the correct and same information – which suggestion was greeted with great joy by the office staff.

The Kindergarten Committee Chair, appointed to that task by the retiring Parish Priest to keep things going OK, objected that “they will spend the money if they know it is there”. My answer, with simplicity, was “Whose money is it?” And although there was argument, the single set of accounts has prevailed, and the Committee now has control of its own destiny, whatever way that may go.

22. KINDERGARTEN/PARISH CONNECTIONS

These had become delicate, apparently, and the appointed Committee Chairman was not getting anywhere in terms of improving same, even though deterioration had been arrested. The retiring Parish Priest had not formally resigned as “Operator/Licensee” of the Kindergarten and the government authorities were at pains to bring it about that his resignation would be obtained and the new Parish Priest licensed in his place.

With no training and no expertise in Kindergarten operation, I considered this a non-option. Eventually, the Parish Business Manager found a way of taking on this task in the name of the parish.

In time, the Directress found it impossible to continue in the light of parent and Committee concerns and resigned. Finding a suitable replacement was a longer task than expected, but the need to fit in with parish and primary school were critical factors for the future appointee.

At no time, it seemed, had the Kindergarten paid rent or maintenance to the parish from its budget. This was one of the first adjustments made by the Business Manager.

Kindergarten relations with the school improved markedly with the resignation of the Director and have continued to improve with the new school Principal and new Kindergarten staff in place.

A part-time Administration Manager then took up the task of getting records up to date, managing fees and accounts, promoting the Kindergarten more widely, approaching parents in the parish with younger children to invite them to consider enrolment and be part of Kinder Open Days, initiate the God-Start program to reach all families with children baptised in the last couple of years, and upgrade the administrative structure and support for the kindergarten. This has worked well and will work better yet.

23. LITURGY COMMITTEE & PASTORAL ASSOCIATE APPOINTMENT

Another critical function was to see if a Liturgy team could emerge and contribute energy needed in this very important part of parish life. Several parishioners responded to the invitation and energy was applied, mainly to do with Easter and Christmas services. For a first-time set of responsibilities, great things were achieved – and the 2006 Good Friday service was widely voted as perhaps the best ever.

Attention to music and music-making created all sorts of waves, but the emergence of a folk choir and a Samoan choir for a number of Masses on various Sundays aroused real interest and support in the parish.

At the same time, the Liturgy Team undertook the task of finding/hiring a Pastoral Associate to be added to the Parish staff, preferably full-time. The task proved a lot harder than just a hiring. Advertisements yielded one good applicant – who then accepted another position in the meantime. And other candidates were deemed – after interview – not what was needed.

By some miracle, it was suggested we might do better by going to the institutions which trained such people and see if someone might be “coming through the system” who would be viable for this parish. After some exploration and interviewing, that worked out very well. A part-time youngish ex-accountant was interested, interesting, energetic, amiable, faith-filled, and seemed very right for the parish. He was happy to work two days a week until completing his studies and then see what might emerge. Contracts were completed and work begun, and he became a key contributor in the Liturgy area, as well as other activities. As with most self-organizing systems, it has probably worked out better than ever dreamed.

In one way, the Liturgy Team is now starting to find its feet and get along with making an even more real contribution to parish life, rather than just organizing events. They have initiated new choir arrangements, training of Readers and Eucharistic Ministers, after-Mass cuppas on most Sundays at the 9.00 a.m. Mass, exploring liturgy preparations and better tying in with the school, re-emergence and re-setting of Children’s Liturgy and faith learning, re-arrangement of the Sanctuary (for a start), Youth ministry, and setting up a parish half-day retreat, to mention just a few of their initiatives.

In time the PA role actually became somewhat redundant as parishioners took on the enabling roles needed. The PA was then replaced with a part-time coordinator who serves and supports the needs of those working in this very important aspect of parish life.

Self-organizing at work well and truly.

24. ELECTRIC WIRINGS AND CONTROLS

In both the school and the church, newly contracted master electricians refused to handle any changes until and unless the switchboards in both places were upgraded and replaced. The experts advised major risks were present in the way the wiring had been damaged over the years, the load distributions across the phase availabilities, and the uneven and – in some cases – quite illegal loadings that were on circuits. And few, if any, circuits were equipped with safety switching and most were still using old-fashioned porcelain fuses instead of circuit breakers as required by current regulations.

The expense in both locations was considerable, but the fire risk involved was so substantial that there was really no choice for the Finance Committee but to approve such changes.

The absence of an effective major maintenance plan or process for school and church and the ineffectiveness of any periodic examination/approval was manifest.

Once the switchboards were re-designed and installed with up-to-date monitoring and testing facilities and proper emergency lighting arrangements, other developments could then proceed – lighting in the Church, lighting in the school quadrangle, air conditioning in the school, computer room fit-outs in the school, heating/cooling in the Parish House and school, improved security lighting and monitoring around the whole property, and some initial planning for the new School Hall.

Lighting on the Church spire was re-connected and has been improved such that the spire stands out at night – as it should.

25. CHURCH LIGHTING & RE-PAINTING & NOTICES

Quite early on, it became obvious that the overhead lighting in the main part of the Church was in need of attention. The fluorescent lights installed in 1965 were inaccessible, many didn't function, and some industrial factory lights had been installed to try and compensate but only reached the centre sections of the church.

With borrowed funds – used to finance this and the A-V system mentioned earlier – a series of different options were trialled and eventually a decision reached to install high-powered overhead lights at a different height from those installed in 1965, and able to illuminate the whole of the church seating area.

Once installed, they were greeted with considerable approbation from parishioners of all ages.

Some people noticed the “new” ceiling fans in the Church – the electricians had cleaned them as part of their service and people liked the “new” appearance of these cleaner and more efficient fans.

Mention has already been made of the repainting of the wall area – a kind of reredos – immediately behind the altar. The colour chosen by the colour consultants ended up being like the colour that it was when built – a light blue. The light blue had apparently faded over the years to a dull/dirty grey.

Improved lighting of the Crucifix and the renovation and professional cleaning treatment of same has brought the whole sanctuary to a better visual presentation. And all the statues have been professionally repaired and refurbished. People notice these things, of course.

The exterior of the Church needed major attention – so all doors and woodwork were re-painted in a different colour, and all varnished timbers been re-treated. People watching also suggested re-painting the name sign on the front wall of the Church in blue – which was done. Some commented on “what a good idea to put a name sign on the front wall of the Church” – it has been there unnoticed since it was built, it seems.

New blue signs have replaced every other sign in the Church grounds, and a new major sign prepared and placed at the front of the Church property, facing the main highway.

The roof and guttering on the church remained challenging tasks for the times ahead and have received some maintenance attention.

26. THE LAKE UNDER THE CHURCH

For some years, I was told, one of the storm-water drains from the property was running water permanently. When asked, the caretaker (since retired) mentioned that he knew about it and had pushed a stick up the pipe, but that “hadn’t stopped it”.

Water has to come from somewhere, of course, so a plumber was engaged and discovered that it was coming from underneath the Church. Seemed an interesting marketing opportunity – maybe it was a spring and we could bottle and sell “parish holy water” to aid finances. Not surprisingly, electronic sleuth plumbers found it was a copper water pipe which had not been suspended/bracketed properly when installed, that the copper pipes used were welded (in those times) rather than extruded (as in more recent times) such that the welding had broken as the pipe sagged, and the whole of the area under the Church was now a lake! They announced that you could hear the water spraying if you just put your ear to the floor of the church and listened – which was true. Just that no one had actually done that test!

Many days after the pipe was sealed off, the water started to go brown and then stopped running. Then, a few months later, more water from under the Church – this time flowing out of the ground-level ventilators. Another pipe break – this time a larger pipe. Repair and replacement of the whole pipe system was needed and implemented. Almost two years later, the ground was still gluggy. It did dry out over about three years and the possibility of long-term damage to the floor of the Church did not eventuate, mercifully.

27. CHURCH CARPET MAINTENANCE

Seemed important to keep helping things happen in the Church building, and not just elsewhere in the parish. People need to see changes moving along.

The shabbiness of the carpet in the Church Sanctuary and in the main body of the Church was obvious. No one could remember when/if they had been steam cleaned before. When asked, people thought that might make a lot of difference.

Carpet cleaners were consulted and stated that they would not touch the sanctuary carpet because they feared it would fall apart – but the main carpet in the Church would likely recover somewhat. Contract was signed, but the cleaners didn't appear as scheduled. It was later discovered that they went to the next-door parish church, and cleaned the carpet there. The Business Manager was, at that time, managing both parishes and the Parish Priest there was interested to learn that an arrangement had been made by the Business Manager and he had obviously missed out on that information – as sometimes happens. So he opened the church and the rest, as they say, is history.

A message from that Parish Priest was very appreciative that his neighbouring new Parish Priest had arranged carpet cleaning for his church.

In due course, the “right” church carpet was cleaned, of course, and came up quite well – to the pleasure of the ladies who notice such things quite closely. In time, the whole of the church carpet has been replaced.

28. CHANGES IN THE CHURCH SANCTUARY

Some possible improvements/changes in the Sanctuary were talked about, especially among some of the younger parishioners. The altar is very high up above people, the steps up and down are distinctly dangerous – as the local Bishop had found out when he tripped on them, the altar is a longish way from the people, and the whole area is – as the architect described – somewhat cluttered.

A gathering to talk about this was convened in the Church, and although most present were interested to explore the options, some noise about expenses and “where the money was coming from” and “what right has the new Parish Priest to make such changes” emerged and held loud sway. The assumption seemed to be that the decisions were already made and why is it all happening anyway.

With such attitudes in the air, it seemed obvious that there should not be any going ahead – self-organizing systems work that way. And this was reinforced in subsequent days with quite serious “attacks” from some of the more senior parishioners who saw no need for any change. It was right when the church was built in the 1960’s, why should it be changed now?

Given those attitudes, no real progress could be envisaged – in a self-organizing-system. But, consistent with Open Space thinking, when there are delicacies or divergent opinions, one of the best things is to then give more space so that things can be sorted out. In this case, more space simply meant allowing more time before seeing whether the attitudes may have changed.

When the sanctuary change was first mooted, one senior lady announced that she was utterly in favour of such a change, “After I die!” To which I responded “How long are you sticking around?” Which elicited “That’s not a proper question to ask a lady!” Some twelve months later, the same conversation emerged, but this time it was along the lines of “And it’s about time we got going with that, you know, and we are looking forward to how it will turn out!” Time – in terms of creating more space for people - is the great change-agent in a self-organizing system, it seems.

In time, the heat of the matter seemed to dissipate – though not totally disappear, especially as some effective re-painting of the back wall behind the altar was undertaken and the result transformed its appearance.

At the same time, the main crucifix above the altar was re-furbished and spotlighted from above, and all the other statues and sacred vessels were re-painted or re-plated to bring them up to standard. And the tabernacle – as a result of a bequest – was also re-plated and restored to its original appearance.

The Vicar-General of the Archdiocese was invited to say Mass one Sunday morning and to meet with the new Liturgy Team which wanted to chat about the appropriateness and propriety of the changes that the architects had now drawn up as options for the Sanctuary. His approval was total – and I asked later what process we should undertake to seek formal approval. He replied that we now had that approval, and if we

needed a piece of paper to that effect so as to wave it at people, just let him know and that would be forthcoming.

Approved in due course by the Finance Committee, the project was eventually funded. In accord with self-organizing, the Liturgy Team simply moved along with the process of planning and consulting, and action followed at the right time. Clearly, the achievements of the other changes which have been implemented weighed in on the positive side of things and encouraged most parishioners – but never all – to be comfortable and excited and interested in such developments in the parish church.

29. SCHOOL PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM

One response to spreading flyers about the Parish Fete to the houses in the neighbourhood: “We know the school is there and we can’t help hearing almost everything that goes over the loud speaker system as though it was in our backyard, even though we are several blocks away. And we’ve written and asked a number of times for something to be done and haven’t even received a reply to our letter!”

The Principal’s response was along the lines that “there are always going to be people who complain”.

On examination, the speakers on the outsides of the school were not focused into the grounds of the school but pretty much pointed to the sky and the total neighbourhood, and were speaker horns with long reach characteristics rather than local sound distribution. Engineers advised replacing them with equipment which would simply put sound where it was needed. That was done, though with some delay as the exact speakers were not readily available.

A letter to the concerned family told them of the delay and of the change that was planned and would be implemented. They later advised their gratitude to the parish and its new administration for dealing with something that had been a long-running sore. Their peace and quiet was no longer invaded the way it had been. The Nike logo “Just do it” had been applied again – and self-organizing by the engineers and the Business Manager added to people’s happiness and the parish reputation as a good neighbour.

30. LOCKS AND SECURITY

Security, in one form or another, seems of increasing concern in most parish structures. In this parish, the school seemed to have a reasonable arrangement in place, but the parish had keys and key keepers all over the place.

The school mastering system was functional. To bring the parish into a properly secure system meant establishing a key register, getting keys mastered and all locks reset to match the master program and the appropriate sub-mastering. The hardest part was for the office to find out who had keys and what the keys opened. Gradually, this was all gotten in place and – in time – people understood the better arrangements and the need to carry no more than just one key.

Now, it is very unusual for someone to come and have to ask for keys - which was epidemic in the first stages of the new administration. The system just works itself along in today's parish – and better security is guaranteed by knowing/registering all those who have keys.

The security system in the Parish house was re-set to meet the changing needs, and new monitors were set in place in the church, which, for some reason, appeared to be (and still is) a stand-alone system. Security codes there remain one of the several mysteries in the place.

The school is better organized, of course, though when given a master key and security code, it was interesting to find that the Parish Priest was registered in the system as “Cleaner”. Maybe self-organizing-systems take little note of status, which is probably just as it should be. It is whether the system functions that matters.

31. CHRISTMAS EVE MASS

The first Christmas Eve came round quickly enough after arriving in the parish and it had apparently been decided that it would be the last and farewell presentation Mass for the retiring Parish Priest, if he was well enough.

Many hundreds apparently just come to this Mass, and flyers are distributed around the local neighbourhood to advertise the event. On both of the first years, there was huge wind, not good sound, not much sense of Christmas, no Christmas play or set up by or for children. and no involvement of the school in any way, apart from using portion of the school grounds.

The Liturgy Team, the Pastoral Associate, and a pulpit appeal did something about this “work in progress” in the following years and the whole event was re-located to the Church – with considerable success.

Another opportunity for self-organizing-system initiative.

32. PARISH MONEY-COUNTERS

A group of senior-ish men and women meet on Monday mornings to count the weekend Mass moneys and arrange banking, etc. As the presence of direct-credit and credit-card contributions has increased, there is a little less work to be done.

Of course there was always banter and chatting, and on one Monday, one of the counters voiced “Where is all the money coming from that he is spending?” Another counter, a retired bank manager, said “A parish without a debt is a dead parish”. To which the first counter replied “May well be, but where is all the money coming from?” The retired bank manager, typically of same, raised the voice a little and said “Didn’t you hear me? I said ‘A parish without a debt is a dead parish’, and this parish is now really coming to life – which is just great”.

No idea what the further response was, if any, but the concept of a live parish – in financial terms – was now clearly in place and going somewhere, at least in the eyes of the retired bank manager, and many others.

And although the counting team has a little less to do, they are increasingly taking the initiative to do things better, make different money transfer arrangements, and handling their own staffing and security even better as time goes on.

33. St VINCENT de PAUL CONFERENCE

Already established and functioning, with a largely senior parishioner membership, the group asked if I would continue to support it.

From experience elsewhere, their work is vital and I said so. And have tried to be at as many of their weekly meetings as possible. They are a group that just gets on with what they see is needed, help whenever anyone asks for help, are tightly committed to the parish, are deep faith people – how could one do otherwise than support what they do to the fullest possible extent? A real self-organizing entity.

The “Vinnies” traditionally sponsor a monthly collection of dry foods to help with distributing food parcels to people in need. This works well and has great support from parishioners.

The Conference also promotes what has traditionally been called “The Poor Man’s Masses” on the weekend in June nearest to the feast of the Sacred Heart. That’s a special appeal and obtains commendable parishioner support.

The school, along with most Catholic schools, has a special appeal about this time for the same purpose – to help the needy. The new Deputy Principal set out – with the strong support of the Vinnies – to transform this into something more meaningful for the students and to

be more effective in helping the work of the Vinnies. The collection of food and such was focused now on "THE HELPING HAND MASS" – arguably a more meaningful term than "Poor Man's Mass" in the children's language, and much effort went into encouraging the students to understand who they were helping and how they were helping and how much was needed to just keep a needy family going. Their response has been remarkable and has continued so.

Competition became the name of the game. A "Helping Hand Shield" was presented by the Vinnies to be awarded the school House which won the "Helping Hand's Mass Food Line" competition; and the humour and joy and energy – and product yield – was a sight for sore eyes. The food lines stretched many many metres into the school yard. It also meant the Vinnies were able to do even more than previously, and the children got a better understanding of what "being poor" really means. And the depleted pantries in their homes meant parents had some part in both the contribution and the learning.

34. LEGION OF MARY ACTIVITY

Holding two (and sometimes more) gatherings each week, these senior citizens distinguish themselves by almost daily Mass attendance, organizing Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament (prayer time), reciting the Rosary in the Church, and – especially – being amazingly faithful to visiting the elderly and sick and incapacitated. And arranging an Anointing of The Sick Mass each quarter of the year.

Their first thought was to ascertain whether the new Parish Priest would continue supportive of their activities. "Yes" was my answer. How could it be otherwise? And they continue to keep information flowing about the people they connect with.

35. MARIST LAY ASSOCIATES

A group of reasonably senior parishioners, committed to deepening their commitment and spirituality in the ways set out by the founder of the French Marist Order.

The group meets regularly, invites presenters and speakers to lead them in improving their understanding of the Marist charism and ways of praying. Their work continues and is to be encouraged heartily. Like the Legion of Mary, the ageing of members has impacted on the group's survival and it has now disbanded. Another example of self-organization at work.

36. CATECHESIS OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

No serious program was in place for pre-school faith formation, apart from a regular Sunday Mass Children's liturgy which appeared to be more token than depth.

One parishioner – a super-energetic lady – asked about setting in place an Atrium (code for “local branch”) of The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, an international program using Montessori methodology to reach pre-school children and help them learn about the Catholic faith and how to live it.

In proper Open Space methodology, it seemed that this would be a good thing to try – if it works, fine; if not, fine. And whatever support was needed would be made available.

Much energy went into making the teaching aids and other objects and furnishings needed – involving lots of parishioner volunteers. And when the time was right, the first gathering of the Atrium was blessed and work commenced in the back corner of the Community Centre. There were empty classrooms in the school (mentioned below), but, for whatever reason, there was “no way” they could be used for these purposes, according to the school authorities.

In the event, the whole program has blossomed. Numbers of children in the sessions have grown way beyond expectations, trained staff have increased, and – miracle of miracles – the whole program was then ensconced in one of the spare school classrooms and later located in a dedicated lower section of the new School Hall. And it is gradually “infiltrating” the school's RE program. The faith and spirit of those involved and the energy and enthusiasm and passion they exude simply thrives in a self-organizing (Open Space) environment. And the faith growth and understanding emerging for the children in the program is astounding.

37. CHARISMATIC PRAYER GROUP

“Would you have any objections if we tried to start a charismatic prayer group?” I was asked. And, in the spirit of self-organizing, my answer was that if it is God's work, it will prosper. If not, we will find out. So, go for it.

It has worked well, and is contributing new initiatives to the parish e.g. women's and men's breakfasts, music input, youth program encouragement and leadership and support, etc. And a parish mission/conference aimed at evangelization.

38. PRAYER GROUPS

A plethora of other prayer and reflection groups continues to operate, and have done so for quite a time, it seems.

A Novena group met over some years on a Wednesday evening and prayed before the Blessed Sacrament. Other groups are sponsored by the Legion of Mary on Saturday mornings and First Fridays and most Wednesday mornings and at other times, often with quite large attendances.

Those involved are mostly senior people, no youngies. And the wondering is where these groups will lead in time.

39. OTHER RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION PROGRAMS

Catholic children in government schools or catholic schools which see the task of sacramental preparation belonging to the parish are gathered by a retired teacher in a series of home-style classes which provide excellent sacramental preparation for Reconciliation, First Eucharist and Confirmation.

They are usually out of school hours, are closely tied in with the preparation program at the parish school and serve a special need in the parish. This has been happening for some years and just continues on as numbers keep growing substantially. Self-organizing-systems at work.

40. BAPTISM ARRANGEMENTS AND CONVERTS

Parish tradition is that Baptism(s) are normally immediately after the 11.00 a.m. Mass on any Sunday, provided that a “booking” has been made at the Parish Office.

No apparent program was in place by way of any “Preparation for Baptism” course. It seemed simply that people just had to turn up and all would happen accordingly.

In addition, the Baptism Font that was built into part of the church wall simply didn’t work properly. The plumbing wasn’t effective and so water had to be handled separately from the font itself. And a huge glass-mirror display had been installed behind the built-in font which dominates that corner of the Church. And, if there were more than one Baptism – there are often three or four, the crowding effect was huge such that people couldn’t see what was happening very well.

An approach was made to the artist who built the original font to see whether a “mobile font” could be built in similar style so that the ceremony for two or more candidates could be in the centre of the Sanctuary. That is now the preferred place for Baptisms to happen, even

if there is only one child. People like it much better – one of the results of self-organizing systems.

Up till now, no work has been put in to Baptism Preparation, though it is on the “to-do” list of the Liturgy Team. A printed manual has now been made available to all new Baptism families well ahead of the date, and a new updated Registration Form designed by the Office. The content of the handbook is very good, people say. Most questions to the office revolve around the timing of the ceremony, the kind of persons to be Godparents, and where to get a Baptism Candle and/or Baptism shawl.

And, when it suits the family better, Baptisms can now be arranged through the Parish Office at pretty much any time, as well as after the 11.00 a.m. Mass on Sundays. People like the freedom of choice.

An Adult Instruction In The Faith (A.I.F.) program has been in place – sporadically – over some years, and continues helping a gentle trickle of people find their way into full Church membership.

41. RITES OF PASSAGE

Weddings, Baptisms and Funerals fit this item, and Baptisms have been mentioned above.

There seem to be very few weddings at the parish church. The numbers are rising a little – very little. Seems the place was seen as not that “bride-friendly”, with no clear driveway entry for wedding cars, and – up till now – a fairly ordinary sanctuary and altar with everything “up there and out of reach of the congregation”. The changes in the sanctuary area in late 2006, the improved vehicle access to one of the main front doors, the sound system upgrade, and the general sprucing up of the interior of the Church may well be a positive attractor for local brides. The Parish Office manages bookings and ensures that rehearsals are fitted into the schedule to suit everyone.

Currently, most of the parish weddings are elsewhere, and the Parish Priest is often invited to celebrate same – which is just fine. And he also gets invited to be Celebrant for marriages for people from previous parishes in quite some quantity.

Funerals are a different matter. Some are celebrated by visiting priests who have connections with the bereaved family and this works out nicely for the parishioners concerned. Again, the new A-V system, the improving appearance of the church, the better vehicle and cortege access, have all made things much easier for the families and friends involved.

Provision by the engineers of video coverage of the Church into the Gathering Area at the side of the Church has been a godsend at a

number of funerals where substantial overflow congregations have gathered. And there is now the facility to present video/DVD footage relating to the life of the deceased and to video-record the whole funeral service as well.

There are not effective follow-up pastoral programs in place – perhaps as area for the Liturgy Team to pursue whenever it is the right time.

The Parish Office is increasingly becoming aware of their pastoral role in these matters, helping people find the right assistance, guiding for times and suitable arrangements, ensuring any catering requirements are addressed, and making sure the Parish Priest or visiting Celebrant is aware of all the necessary details.

The Italian custom of having a “Month’s Mind Mass” is something the Office is also managing and facilitating.

42. BEFORE/AFTER MASS VISIBILITY

From past experience, to be visible and approachable before and after Mass on weekdays and at weekend Masses is a strong message of “presence” to parish members. Being there at least ten minutes before Mass and for as long as it takes after weekend Masses (which can be a while) is a way of “holding the space of the parish” which is part of the role of the Parish Priest. Any priest or minister who does this knows how important is this “just being around” at a time when people can connect.

One Parish Priest described this as the “Sacrament of being seen”, and the follow-on activities that arise are always surprising, and always important to that person. Nothing terribly new about this, but it has probably been more traditional among non-catholic churches than in the catholic suburban parish. It certainly applies in country parishes, except where the priest has to rush off quickly to reach some other Mass location – an inevitable side-effect of the reducing numbers of clergy.

The advantage of being around is the avoidance of the sense or perception of “being too busy”. People often preface their conversation with “I know you are very busy, but....” To which my answer is always “I’m never busy – how can I help?” Maybe this is another of the leftovers from the Parish Priest being so involved as manager of the parish with so many things to be doing and attending to – matters now being handled in this parish by the office staff and other personnel. Amazing how most people (though not all) relax when addressed in this way.

43. AFTER MASS CUPPAS

Every Wednesday, after the 11.00 a.m. Mass, there has always been a “cuppa tea or coffee” in the Community Centre and now in the Gathering Area. And it keeps going and a proportion of those at Mass stay for the connecting.

After the 9.00 a.m. Mass most Sundays, the same has been introduced in the Gathering Area attached to the Church. This initiative emerged from the Liturgy Team, is managed by the Knights of the Southern Cross and involves various groups around the parish taking a turn to run the event. Numbers seem to keep growing. More self-organizing-system working.

44. PARISH VISITATION PROGRAM

Before coming to this parish, my visitation program was significant – reaching as many as 600 or more homes in a year. Since arriving here, that number has plummeted to as low as 250 and less.

In previous parishes, there were not visitation programs as had been happening in this parish. In a parish as a self-organizing-system, it seems important that the visiting program should be operated mainly by parishioners, not just the Parish Priest. And this is what is now happening.

But even in a self-organizing-system, it feels important for the Pastor to connect with as many parishioners as possible, and this has happened substantially with dinner invites, visits to seriously ill people, anointings at home, house blessings, before-Baptism connection with families, hospital visits to in-patients from the parish, and connection with office-bearers of the various committees and working groups as appropriate – as well as people calling at the Parish House.

There was an attempt in 2005 and 2006 to visit the following year’s Prep families, but then it became obvious this was already being done by the Prep teachers – which is very good. Duplication seemed a waste of time.

None of these visits are set as any kind of programmed plan – many have been in response to particular occasions or events – responding to ad hoc invitations to drop in after a Baptism or First Communion or Funeral, and often being able to respond to a Wedding reception invitation.

There has been a considerable increase in the number of people coming to the Parish House either to “see the priest” or to connect with the Parish Office. The staff there are as much and as important a part of the parish pastoral structure as anyone, and it has been vital to keep them aware of happenings and developments and plans so that they assist people in the ways they need – with or without contact with the priest. The staff are part of pastoral care in the parish, too. Regular briefings of

staff happen and occasional staff lunches reinforce this sense of contribution and belonging.

There is also a continuing stream of people looking for food or financial help, most of whom are not prepared to contact the St Vincent de Paul Conference for one reason or another. They, too, are helped either by the priest (out of hours) or by the staff, and appropriate food parcels and supermarket vouchers are accessible to the office staff for this purpose provided by the Vinnies. Team-working in this fashion is another characteristic of a parish as a self-organizing-system.

A senior priest/mentor once said: “If you ever become a Parish Priest, get to know a few families well and keep in touch with them. That way you’ll know what is being thought about and happening in family life. Trying to get to know large numbers is really not going to be feasible for most people and you’ll never get the depth that will happen from continuing contact with a smaller number of families.”

45. MASS ATTENDANCE

In this Archdiocese, a “Mass Count” is mandated every May – for all the Sundays in that month, and the average is then “reported” for all to see.

In the first May I was present, this number rose from the previous year by just two persons – from 1001 to 1003. The grace of that number is that it wasn’t going backwards.

In the 2006 count, this number fell by about 20%. Presuming that the counting was as reliable or unreliable on both occasions, this was quite a surprise and a matter of concern. If that trend continued, the parish would collapse in a short time. By 2009, however, the number reversed to a little over 1000.

So far, nothing has been done directly to address this development. There is no doubt that almost all the school families - perhaps 85% - do not get to Mass with any regularity. The ageing members of the parish are the backbone of Mass attenders.

The Liturgy Team is working to develop more “attractors” for Mass with changes in music and choirs, and perhaps themes for the Masses. The school is gradually working at enticing school families to be present for special occasions and for class Masses, but the school-family attendance has changed very little.

There are virtually no college or high school children at Mass – in part because the schools involved have rather given up on parishes as meaningful places for students to come. They say that “The school is the Church for these kids and we have to make the best of that we can”. And parishes, including this one, have done little or nothing to address

that. There is virtually no contact at all between the local Catholic High schools or Colleges and this parish. Nor does anyone appear to have any idea of how this could be improved at all, either from school or parish viewpoints.

46. THE AGEING PARISHIONER POPULATION

The 2006 Australian Census registered Catholic families within the parish, but it has to be well over 2000. But the active parishioner population is dominantly in the 60-and-over category.

As senior people vacate premises, new families are gradually moving in. And at least two new housing developments are planned – and will eventuate over the coming 10-15 years or so – which will inevitably contribute population to the school and parish.

The “maintenance” pastoral work of the parish needs continuing attention and energy among those more senior people. But the “mission” pastoral work among younger and new families has not yet begun with any clarity. The appointment of the Pastoral Associate did not move this along. Clearly, extra resources will be needed to make any real impact and effect on parishioner participation numbers in the coming decade or so.

Unless self-organizing action emerges in this matter, the parish is likely to fade away.

The “GOD-START” program, focusing directly on families with newly baptized children, the Playgroup initiative, and the improved attractivity of the Kindergarten and school marketing will doubtless be part of these energies.

47. MEMORIAL GARDEN/WALL MANAGEMENT

A team of three (calling themselves “The Three Amigos”) was in place looking after arrangements for interment of ashes of deceased parishioners in the Memorial Garden and the more recent Memorial Wall adjacent to the front entrance of the church. The story was that the garden was “pretty much full” and most interments would now need to be in the Memorial Wall.

Gradually, details seemed to emerge. The only parish record of people whose remains had been interred in the memorial garden were plaques placed on a wall inside the foyer of the church. There was no record at all of where ashes had been placed, though there were standard roses planted in the garden, most of which were not identified in any fashion. Charges for interments were apparently decided ad-hoc by the Parish

Priest and were amazingly small compared with other places of interment.

Consultation with the three men involved resulted in appointing them as “The Memorial Gardens Committee”, one of the first formal appointments made after coming to the parish, and this was announced to the parish.

Their task was to arrange a clear protocol to be followed in the process of interment, to set up a proper and appropriate scale of charges, to interface primarily with the Parish Office which would care for whatever records and arrangements needed to be made, to engage the Parish Office in preparing plaques to record interments or cover the places in the Memorial Wall, to be available at any interment and arrange sealing of placements in the Wall, and to look to the expansion of the Garden in due course. And to ensure effective records are developed and preserved, including the option for people to reserve places in the Memorial wall.

The team progressed all these goals. Protocols are now in place and the distress so often felt by parishioners at these delicate times has been eased considerably. Charges are now much more realistic and some planning for the expansion of the garden was begun.

The Principle of Subsidiarity worked just fine, and the team is moved along with appropriate care and sensitivity for all concerned. The Parish Priest is not directly involved in any of these developments. More recently, there has been change to the4 “three amigos” due to health limitations, but the work continues in a no-fuss fashion with new people.

48. PARISH THANK-YOU GATHERING

In many parishes, some kind of “appreciation for the work you have done” event occurs annually. A team was gathered in 2005 to see if this could be initiated, and it happened on December 11 that year. And has each year since then.

A blanket invitation was issued to all for anyone who had done anything in the year to be present – and let the office know so that catering could be properly arranged. People were also asked to nominate anyone they thought had done something “outstanding” to be given a “Parish Service Award”.

One week beforehand, only a few attendees had registered, though quite a number of Service Award nominations were in hand. The team decided Awards should only be given to people who were present, obviously enough, and on the night nearly 250 people arrived – some unannounced, of course. “Whoever comes is the right people”, as always.

Seniors seemed to sit on one side of the quadrangle and less-than-seniors on the other, and there was great mixing, even so. Some seniors said they came because they suspected that many of the “youngies” might not come and that wouldn’t be good. Some “youngies” said they came because they suspected many of the seniors might not make it. But all seemed to enjoy the evening and the presentations.

A special plaque award was presented to one family leaving the parish who had made huge contributions over the years they had been there – and the plaque was exactly along lines suggested brilliantly by the then school Principal. This has continued as an annual award.

Afterwards, some comment from seniors in terms of being embarrassed that people received awards for doing what they would do anyway, and that some deserving people were not given awards. Pleasing everyone is impossible, but those who received awards were very proud of same.

49. CHRISTMAS CRIB

The setting up of the Crib in the church ahead of Christmas had somehow become the prerogative – or increasingly difficult duty – of a couple of senior parishioners, gradually struggling to manage the task.

A pulpit appeal and a couple of direct approaches yielded a couple of younger people to help and things started to be a bit more manageable. And all the crib statues/pieces were sent to the refurbisher for restoration and came back looking brand new. The siting of the crib was now placed in a corner of the church instead of on the sanctuary, and new lighting was installed. A vast improvement on the part of this newly emerging team.

50. SCHOOL PARENTS & FRIENDS

Tradition in most schools determines that a P&F (Parents and Friends) Group or Committee will emerge and support the school financially and socially.

This has been part of the tradition in this parish, and a “PnF” group was particularly active in 2005-2006, raising considerable funds for the school, and getting available parents together in a way that can only help improve the sense of community so important to every school. Ost schools, pThe committees/teams involved have been startlingly effective in recent years. Changeover happens as team members move on and their children leave the school. But the task keeps being addressed.

As with Part of their success has been promoting the sense of community with lots of different functions which bring parents together – and, co-incidentally, raise some money. Their skill has been to place the focus on this sense of community-building. And it has worked well, measured by the involvement of considerable numbers of parents and by the amount of funds raised. The two go together, but the priority on “community-building” is especially remarkable and effective.

Transforming that sense of community into something connecting with parish and church is a harder nut to crack, it seems. But the recipe elements are there to be built on when it is the right time.

51. PASTORAL PRESENCE IN THE SCHOOL

This was – and remained – a mixed bag until the initiation of the new Principal.

Statements have been continuous about “you are welcome any time”, but it’s a bit like saying “We must have lunch”. With about the same result.

Whenever invited for any function, I have been mostly present and happy to be so. And, when invited to be in a classroom for any reason, ditto. And there is often time in the schoolyard, just being there and being seen and being around during recess and lunch time.

Using the principle of subsidiarity, the teacher is the primary pastoral carer of the students. The pastor’s role is, it seems, to support that in any way viable and appropriate. Important, therefore, not to supplant the influence of the teacher, and important that anything the pastor does is seen as supportive of the teacher, not intervening or delaying or messing up a planned schedule.

On a number of occasions, the Principal has chatted – in passing – about some deeper involvement with staff, but that again appears to have been passing comment. “I’d love to see what you do with Open Space with a school staff” is the phrase.

I have opened space with staff at a number of other schools, both Primary and Secondary, with quite remarkable results. And that has now eventuated in this parish too. For various reasons – including the delicate connection of school with parish – not much follow through seems to have yet occurred. It may come at the right time.

52. PRESSURE ON SCHOOL TEACHERS

A teacher’s task is always very demanding, in both primary and secondary levels of education. Juggling sets of competing priorities and

still managing to bring about effective growth in learning – that’s what the job is about.

In recent times, extraordinary pressures/demands have been imposed on school staffs from “the system” as a result of some apparent political deals with government, supposedly with the carrot of improving funding for Catholic schools. The improved funding has not eventuated – though it still may do so, perhaps.

The Director of Catholic Education at the centre of these deals has now resigned and gone elsewhere, but the pressures have had to be carried by the school staff, with very little educational advantage obvious.

The defence from the Principal was simply that “I have no room to move on these matters”. Very hard to reconcile with the statement that “I am really here to care for and look after and protect my staff”. Unlike this State of Victoria , catholic teachers in several other States simply said “No” to these demands. In hindsight, the changes that have been implemented are now done, but the pressure on staff has been insidious. As a caring institution, we have a lot to be answerable for in such matters. And absolutely no discussion was entered into with this Parish Priest (and many others) about these impositions. All is decided within the Catholic Education Office.

53. PLAY GROUP

This has begun, sort of under the aegis of the Kindergarten. It aims at giving young mums (or dads) with very young children, the opportunity of being together, chatting, having the children looked after, getting out of the house, and doing something different for one morning a week.

In just a couple of months, it has attracted a considerable number of families, is growing in numbers, is cherished by the families who come, and was using the Kindergarten at a time when it was not otherwise used.

Its success will clearly help feed into the enrolments in the Kindergarten and school in due course. The requisite arrangements – insurance, access, cleaning, security, police clearances – were negotiated with the Business Manager, but the initiative came from a couple of Mums who saw this as a real value for some people in the parish and acted accordingly. More evidence of self-organizing-systems at work. More recently, Participant numbers seem to have pretty well peaked, still leaving goodly percentages of eligible but not involved families.

54. SCHOOL MARKETING

With the Principal retiring, numbers dropping, the need to recruit a new Principal, and the option of a new school/parish Hall in the wind, the School Board established a Marketing Group to see what could be done about school image and attracting new and more students, regardless of who the new Principal might be. Again, a self-organizing event.

This group sought expert advice and input from around the parish – which helped a lot – and then set out to see what changes could be made in the existing ways of doing things. They started by giving attention to a whole range of aspects including school tours, new street notice boards (soon to be in place), visits to local kindergartens, newspaper articles and advertisements, brochure designs, composite class make-ups, outreach to new families and families with pre-school-aged children, improving connections with the parish kindergarten and Playgroup to promote better on-enrolments, sample-bags for prospective students and families, front-desk appearance and welcoming, closer connecting with before and after school care services – among other items.

This is work in progress and, as a self-organizing group, involves parishioners other than School Board members bringing their expertise to bear. Immediate results are perhaps too much to expect, but the proof of their work is that numbers appear to be gradually increasing rather than continuing to sag.

55. SCHOOL RENOVATIONS

Maintenance in the school had been a continuing and awkward headache for the school authorities, I was told. Rightly or wrongly, it seemed all decisions in this sphere had been dependent on the Parish Priest and no clear capital maintenance budget existed in any form.

In the parish accounts, a substantial amount had been retained for the School Building Fund – and the Principal said she had no idea of whether there was money in that account or how much money was available. Its possible use and access was entirely dependent on the decision of the Parish Priest, she said.

In accord with the principle of subsidiarity and self-organizing systems, these moneys were immediately made accessible to the school for major on-going maintenance projects – school painting, school carpeting, safety glazing, and major electrical re-wiring, for a start. The Principal found it difficult, initially, to cope with this responsibility, and was upset at my suggestion (I was told) that she was not good at spending money. Her claim was that it just takes a bit of time to get going on such matters – arguably so. Much of that work has now been completed, though more remains to be addressed. Though such maintenance may be costly, its continuity has a major impact on the

attractiveness and image of the school – and therefore on its enrolments.

Plans have been prepared for upgrading the administration segment and entry area of the school, allowing for proper office accommodation, improved visitor reception, and better proximity of personnel. The final approval of these will be dependent on the views of the new Principal, advised – presumably – by the School Board and the Parish Finance Committee.

A school Master Plan has also been prepared, though further work will be needed for it to be used as an effective guide, and School Board and School Staff input will be essential.

The recent – mid-2009 – Federal Government funding initiatives have kind of built on this school masterplan, though now with no parish involvement and little obvious effective consultation with staff, school board, families, students or parishioners. Much of the funds will be expended on the administration and library resources with classroom environments pretty much unchanged.

56. THE PARISH DINNER

One outcome from the 2005 Parish Open Space was the running of a Parish Dinner – not as a fund-raiser, but simply as a community building event. A Working Group gathered and set about just that – with great success. To my astonishment, a theme was added to the evening, marking about twelve months since I had come to the parish. And all the school children had been involved in forming a huge “tapestry” to decorate the hall that was hired in a neighbouring parish.

Some of the key comments about the evening were along the lines that “Our parish hall (see later) will be better than this, won’t it?” - in terms of sound system, warmth, acoustics, room, comfort, toilets, kitchen, and such matters. Self-organizing systems always create great expectations – which are generally met as a result of the passion that people bring to bear.

The Dinner appears, even so, to have been a one-off event.

57. THE PARISH FETE

After many years of great success in terms of financial return and community-building, the fete seemed in a kind of run down, given the declining numbers in the school which was both its main supporter and beneficiary.

2005 was an OK event, but felt tired and exhausted for those involved in running it, and perhaps a last gasp. Though a good community-building happening, the financial return was not there like it used to be, and some people were getting to the end of their tether.

So, for the 2006 Fete to happen – and it has – new ideas and new initiatives and new people would be needed. The prevailing theory was that working families simply are very pushed for time and don't have time available to do as previous years demanded. The alternative of applying a simple levy to school fees was floated but has not been supported.

In addition, the new draconian local government health regulations imposed on such events make it almost impossible to provide food services and cake stalls and drinks in a way that is conducive to people actually enjoying doing that. The health authorities who make these rules have clearly never participated in an effective and well-run fete event. Hence the sense of community building suffers at the hands of nonsensical regulations.

But the sense of community gathering and celebration and reinforcing seemed still to be a carrot in having something happen. Eventually, some new people and some experienced people came forward and set their mind to focusing on community-building as the primary task. The Parish Priest has encouraged same, as distinct from organizing (as some Parish Priests do) or requiring it to happen to support the finances of the system. If community building happens, the finances will look after themselves.

The 2006 fete was a moderate success, so much so that a team began immediately with preparations for next year. This sense of community and celebration are primary qualities of a self-organizing system, drawing people into the enthusiasm and energy and achievement such systems always evoke.

By 2009, however, it has now been decided to re-calendar the Fete into Autumn rather than Spring – hence no Fete for calendar 2009.

58. COMBINED PARISHES CAR RAFFLE

For some years, a number of parishes in the area have run a combined car raffle to raise funds which are then shared among the parishes proportionate to each parish's participation.

In this parish, the raffle has been handled by one family couple on behalf of the parish for a number of years. They have the appropriate computer programs, the timetables, the network access, the connections with the promoters, and the confidence of the parishioners.

On my arrival, they asked if that was to continue, and received the only answer viable “What do you want to happen?” It has continued with a minimum of fuss, has extended its connection with the school through some parents there, and continues to be a reliable income source for the parish. The Finance Committee is and remains most grateful. Just another self-organizing function in the parish.

59. CREDIT CARD REGULAR GIVING

Evidence elsewhere in the Diocese suggested that credit card and direct debit contributions to the Parish Thanksgiving (Fundraising) program come in regularly, whether the person/family go to Mass or not, and hence cash flow becomes more stable.

There were maybe four parishioners using credit cards for the Parish Thanksgiving Program in November 2004.

The Finance Committee figured that, with a little bit of attention over time, some improvement could be expected.

A “Mini Thanksgiving Campaign” was introduced in April-May 2005, and included a serious invitation to contribute by credit card or direct debit for all contributing parishioners. The previous campaign had occurred not long before I arrived, but had been hampered by the sickness of the Parish Priest and the non-appointment of a working committee and the difficulty of then getting parishioner support and involvement in the campaign.

The Parish Office had to make substantial changes to its mode of operation to allow for this, but by 2009, the number of electronic contributors has risen from 4 to more than ????. And this has positively impacted the overall income stream for the parish. It has also meant improved security for the money-counting team who now get their work done more quickly on a Monday morning

More self-organizing, this time by the Finance Committee. And the trend continues.

60. FINANCIAL BORROWINGS

These have been largely managed by the Business Manager on behalf of and with the approval of the Parish Finance Committee.

Loans outstanding, at the start of this administration, were not too substantial for a parish this size. Cardinal Clancy of Sydney once said in a TV interview: “Let me know of any parish that hasn’t got substantial debt, and I will address that quite quickly!” which rather startled his interviewer.

The Catholic Development Fund of the Archdiocese – of which I was Executive Director for five years – provides loans to parishes and church agencies to meet their continuing and growing needs. It is very professional, very well managed, and very supportive of parishes.

Since arrival, there have been a number of loans arranged for the parish and the school, all within the notional limits applied for such a parish. They have enabled the installation of a new A-V system in the church, new switchboard and new lighting in the church, improved security lighting around the property, improved vehicle and pedestrian access to the front doors of the church, re-siting and remodelling of the Parish Office, renovation of the rest of the parish house, setting up of improved computer facilities in the school, and completion of lighting in the school quadrangle.

The major loan needed to finance the School/Parish Hall is now in place and fully drawn down. Further loans for refurbishment of the rest of the school remain in abeyance until viability emerges within the school economy.

61. PARISH ANNUAL REPORT

The Parish Finance Committee considered it important to issue some kind of initial Finance Report to the Parish, without going overboard.

It was decided to do this as part of an “ANNUAL REPORT TO THE PARISH”, and the various groups and entities in the Parish were invited to write 100 words or so of what they had been up to. To report just the financial situation without these other items seemed very one-sided and conveyed the message that the parish was mainly about finance.

Putting together and illustrating the report was brilliantly handled by the Parish Office staff who are increasingly self-organizing. Subsequent “Annual Reports” have simply got better and better as they report improvements and new developments.

The resulting booklet was warmly received with the comment that “we didn’t know so much was going on”. It established a precedent, of course, and has been very useful in letting new parishioners know about life around the parish.

62. PARISH GROUNDS AND PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

On arrival, this was largely handled on a part-time shared basis with the school. The delicacy was that whenever the school wanted something done, the caretaker was always “working for Father”, and whenever the parish wanted something done, he was always “working for the school”.

Standards were a real question, and – eventually – the Business Manager found it important to start contracting out parts of the job that were not being done properly. Lawns and Church cleaning were dealt with in this way. Electrical repairs and replacements followed.

In due course, the caretaker was encouraged to retire and take his long-service leave in a package which was more favourable than remaining in the job. Within a little time, a replacement was found to work less hours and get lots more done – a self-starter person whose contribution and energy and enthusiasm is perfect for the job. Unlike his predecessor, he sees things to be done and gets on with what is needed. One of the signs of people working in a parish as a self-organizing-system.

People even notice and comment on how nice the place is looking now – high praise, and pride in their parish church and property.

63. CHURCH VENTILATION

When the Church was built in the 1960's, some 26 ventilation outlets/inlets were installed in the walls, just above head height – to conform to the then current building regulations, presumably. They were made of metal, and could be closed or opened at will. They allowed air in and out – and noise from trams and traffic which has increased significantly over those years.

Forty and more years later, the mechanisms in the ventilators had all rusted and most were locked in the “open” setting, unchangeable and letting in wind-carried dirt and soot and great gulches of cold air during cooler months which did great things for/against the heating system in the church and for noise pollution.

Architects were consulted on whether building regulations required that the ventilators be retained and the answer was negative. Other ventilation in the church is, they told us, more than adequate.

In due course, they have been replaced with glass bricks which allow some light into those areas of the church, allow no noise or wind, and – maybe – break the rigidity of the brick-wall solidity which pervades the major area of the church.

64. THE CHURCH SACRISTY

So far, nothing too major has happened in the Sacristy – the area that looks after the altar.

A new Sacristy coordinator has emerged. A flower account was then set up with a local florist to provide fresh flowers from time to time. A highly competent parishioner/florist has undertaken to do the flowers for major

special occasions – Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, First Communions, and Confirmation. Some plastic flowers have been purged.

An almost complete set of new vestments has been acquired and a couple of special vestments for the great occasions in the year – Pentecost, Confirmation, Christmas, Easter and other special feast days.

And much plumbing has been improved.

Storage is a major limitation and much of the linens used at Mass were actually stored at one senior lady's home – and hence not readily accessible. The system worked, but could be managed a lot better – which would mean a fairly major re-design of the rooms to increase access and storage and perhaps make a little more room for vesting, etc. And provide proper safe-keeping for the sacred vessels which currently just sit on shelves.

This is still “work in progress” and, so far, there has been no great passion from those involved to make any improvements. That may well come in time – at the right time.

65. THE SCHOOL/PARISH HALL

“The kitchen in the Community Centre is inadequate, too small, a health hazard, unsafe, unable to be cleaned properly, has inadequate storage, and would be condemned by an occupational health & safety inspector. So something has to be done about it.” One of the findings at the end of the Parish Open Space event mentioned elsewhere.

Given the size of the area – a little over the size of two classrooms, the “hall” was seen as too small for any real use by the school, too small for most social functions in the parish such that those occasions always had to be “somewhere else”, had inadequate toilet facilities which were primarily built to service the Church, did have a Disabled Toilet, and – as the note above said – had woeful catering facilities for today's health standards and new regulations and which – if retained – would need major attention.

After the Open Space, a working group took up the task along with the Business Manager, and suddenly a major project emerged. Expansion of the building seemed an obvious need and sketches and notional layouts were prepared in an amateur fashion – for starters, only. Doubling the size of the Hall itself seemed the seminal option, and would allow enough room for a proper kitchen and kitchen facilities.

These ideas went to the Parish Finance Committee who examined them and proceeded to turn them down – astonishingly. Their figuring was that if we were going to have a hall, it should really be a hall, and just doubling the existing size would still be inadequate for the school and

for any major social function. So, in their eyes, it should move ahead rapidly, but by at least trebling the size of the existing hall area and providing adequate storage, catering facilities, toilets, and meeting areas. And the cost difference in trebling the size versus doubling the size would be not that serious.

This rather amazed the working group which included parish people and the school Principal. But they were delighted and set to work to hire architects and seek the necessary approvals within the parish and from the appropriate diocesan and local municipal authorities. An architect was hired on the basis that he had done good work in the parish I had come from, but with the proviso and promise that the cost overruns which had occurred there would not happen here!

The working group found it essential to plan and name the building as a "School Hall" since the authorities advised this would enable major interest subsidies. A timetable was set and agreed to by all parties. In time, unfortunately, it became obvious that the architect was unable to meet these agreed time requirements and fell further and further behind the schedule. And then he announced that the projected costs involved had simply blown out by more than half a million dollars in what started as a notional \$1.5m project. Such additional expenditure was outside the possibility of Finance Committee funding forecasts. Something had to change.

In the event, the school Principal suggested a different architect whom she had had dealings with in another parish. The response was immediate and professional and sensitive. The first architect was dismissed – at a cost – and real work began – again.

Municipal Council approval came along a little earlier than expected in the light of no neighbour objections. It had been suggested that the Parish Priest might visit the neighbours and let them know about it before they received the formal notification from Council. This was done, and no objections emerged.

The initiatives of the SCHOOL MARKETING GROUP mentioned elsewhere were vital to ensure enough enrolments to support and pay out the loans involved for the new building.

The project has now (2009) been pretty much completed, though with extraordinary tangles in getting building defects identified and attended to by the architects.

The building is now almost universally seen as a huge asset to the school, though it has yet to generate sufficient hiring income to meet loan repayments. Marketing initiatives in this regard are currently in hand.

The new facility will also allow dedicated space for the pre-school religious education program – Catechesis of the Good Shepherd – which now has excellent support in the whole parish.

66. ALTAR SERVERS

There seems not to have been a strong or continuing recent tradition of young people being at Mass as Altar Servers. Most don't come to Mass, so that is that.

The Deputy Principal made an appeal through the relevant school grades and a few students responded. It seems parents aren't that keen on allowing any commitment as they would then be required to be at Mass – which they are not prepared to do, apparently.

Even so, a small number of altar servers has now been trained and have become quite loyal to the task. Training has been nicely effective, and new pride on the part of some parents, at least, is emerging. The training is managed by a couple of senior parishioners who have the time, the knowledge and the interest in this ministry. Hopefully, family's and children's interest will flourish better in times ahead – though this is not yet apparent.

67. STATUE OF St SCHOLASTICA

Donated to the parish by the Italian community with lots of celebration and panoply, this excellently carved statue was sort of lost in the “clutter” of the sanctuary. It is arguably the best piece of art in the Church.

Work has now been completed to pick it out with lighting and with a backdrop colour change to give the statue of the patron of the parish due and proper honour.

68. SPECIAL MASSES AND OTHER PASTORAL COMMITMENTS

On the first Wednesday of each quarter, there's a special Mass for Anointing the Sick – who come from all over for that Mass. It has been in place a long time, it seems, and continues.

A Vietnamese Mass happens one Saturday evening a month, except on odd occasions when a Vietnamese priest is not available, usually around Chinese New Year. Numbers in attendance vary, but it serves a special purpose for some of the Vietnamese community.

There is also Mass at one of the large local shopping malls and the Parish Priest is on the roster for these, maybe a few times each month.

Chaplaincy at Epworth Eastern Hospital is led by a Uniting Church Minister of great value, and the Parish Priest has been added to the list of those able to be called on in emergency for Catholics at that hospital. Sometimes three or four times a month.

Inter-Church Ecumenical connections were in place and continue with the energy of a small and dedicated core of parish people. Their dedication is exemplary and the connecting with other church clergy is a kind of reality-check. Most other Catholic clergy don't support the movement very much, it seems.

In the absence of any real Youth Ministry, at least there was a Youth Mass, maybe five or six times a year, to which alumni of the Parish School over the last couple of years were all invited. Maybe this might become the basis for future development among the youth of the parish, and maybe not. Like a lot of youth initiatives, it will only live if the young people themselves take ownership and responsibility for it – which seems not to have happened.

A Seniors' lunch happens most months on the first Tuesday. Patronage waxes and wanes, but real effort goes into enabling people to come by arranging appropriate transport and entertainment. Another tradition that has been in place a while.

A Knights of the Southern Cross group meets regularly in the area and is one of the Order's stronger groups in terms of numbers. Their camaraderie is good and they arrange dinners and Masses and other activities which become important to many more senior men and women. They also undertake some serious lobbying on political matters and raise substantial funds to help education of seminarians and priests. And, as mentioned elsewhere, they have set in place morning tea after the Sunday 9.00 a.m. Mass.

A small Monday Activity Group for seniors and others has also been in place a long time in the Community Centre – cards, sewing, knitting, embroidery and various other activities seem to happen in the few hours involved.

AA – Alcoholics Anonymous – met weekly in the Community Centre and is now in the Hall Meeting Room and gets on with the excellent support and assistance only they can provide.

Local community exercise groups happened in the Community Centre twice weekly, attracting people from all walks of life – though mostly ladies. With the building program for the school hall, they migrated elsewhere.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation/Confession is normally programmed for Saturday mornings, though the time changes when supply priests are involved. The flow of people seems constant though fairly limited.

69. PARISH PRIEST ABSENCES

On the first Sunday in the parish, one parishioner looked at the provided C-V and asked “Are we ever going to see you – or will you mostly be away?”

My response was that I hunched that I’d be absent from time to time on teaching and facilitation and conference programs in various places around the world, depending on invitations, and would undertake – if that was acceptable – to make sure people know where I am and what I am doing and get some feedback when I return. And was that alright? It was fairly obvious they were interested in what I might be doing.

Since that time, there has been substantial travel overseas and interstate, sometimes for as long as five or more weeks. Mostly these travels were for teaching commitments in university management schools or Open Space development and training conferences or Open Space facilitation tasks with all sorts of organizations.

An itinerary has generally been made available the weekend before departure, and always some reporting back at weekend Masses after return. And always some parishioners have wanted to explore one or other aspect of what has been mentioned in that reporting back.

One real advantage, as it happens, is that parishioners get to meet and listen to and pray with priests supplying from various Orders and Congregations, and from different countries and cultures. A “sense of Church” that is wider than just one man saying Mass the same way all the time is a serious positive awareness of Church that could not happen any other way. One Order priest brought with him a Deacon who had just been ordained and preached his first sermon at that Mass. He was from Angola – and people were horrified to learn, just a few weeks later, that he had died in a freeway accident not far from the parish. Having a sense of the wider church brings home these events tragically sometimes.

And there has always been some kind of “Glad you are back” welcoming on return. One such message added that “Your sermons are much shorter than those we have been hearing while you were away!”

All “supply priest” arrangements are managed by the Parish Office, and sacristans are kept informed of those details.

70. LOCAL UNIVERSITY CONNECTIONS

Deakin University has a large campus which is mostly within the boundaries of the parish. A Catholic Chaplain has been appointed there for some time, and good connections exist with her and her office. During term time, many students come to the 5.30 Mass on a Sunday afternoon, and some have joined in supporting the singing. Many are from other countries and disappear back to their own countries during the long summer vacation.

Talks with the Chaplains move along, but it is unclear what – if any – pastoral initiatives are needed. It is work-in-progress and will grow as a self-organizing system if it is to really make any contribution. The key is to be pastorally active and servicing rather than proselytizing, according to the Chaplain.

71. OTHER PARISH PRIEST INVOLVEMENTS

These include membership – by election – of the Senate of Priests of the Archdiocese (now the ACOP – Archbishop’s Council of Priests) where some new research was undertaken to see if/whether any improvement can be made to make that body more contributory. It means about 12 extra gatherings each year. The research, however, had little to show in concrete improvements.

Connection with the Regional Bishop (now retired) was maintained informally, and was very helpful in terms of advice and support, a kind of mentoring which was not only appropriate but most desirable. The new Regional Bishop has quite a different personality.

And occasional house guests from overseas or from other parts of Australia are also very welcome and find the newly renovated quarters more than satisfactory, they say.

72. OVERSEAS TEACHING/CONFERRING

Invitations appear to teach as guest lecturer at a number of universities in the United States and Europe.

Conferences as a member of the Western Academy of Management and the International Open Space Community have also been important parts of overseas travel commitments.

Contracts to open space for various bodies around Australia and overseas keep coming along, for some reason. Probably due to notoriety and perhaps some competence. Some are for Church agencies like Dioceses or Catholic Missions or the National Catholic Education Commission, and some are for agencies like The World Bank, international advertising agencies, unions, and a variety of corporates.

All are seen as part of the mission of the Church to try and bring peace and better harmony and understanding into the lives of people by helping them become more self-organizing.

So far as is known, there is but one other priest working in these spheres, based in Poland and belonging to the Order of Priests known as SAC – Société Action Catholique or Pallottines, founded by St Vincent Pallotti.

Serving the needs of the Open Space Institute of Australia is also a commitment – an occasional newsletter, running training programs, maintaining membership and account listings, handling a little bit of banking, enabling occasional overseas visitors to Australia and scheduling their programs, hosting one International Open Space on Open Space (with a team, of course), and helping enquirers find Open Space practitioners around the country when needed. The number of people in Australia using Open Space who have done these trainings is growing substantially and trainings are now replicated in Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania. And maintaining connection with the International Open Space LIST and community.

73. SOME FURTHER REFLECTIONS:

A : Future Open Space Events

Mass attendance by youth is just one among a number of such major matters which could/should become part of an Open Space event, IMHO, for people who have any interest in such a matter to do with the future of this – or any – parish. Diocesan youth ministry authorities and specialists seem more concerned with bringing together young people away from the parish, which may be very laudable. But no energy has gone into looking to find better ways of having these people play a part in the local church. Maybe they are right – but.....

Along with a number of other “major themes and concerns” - like street kids, homelessness, poverty, migrant mistreatment, family pressures, under-age alcohol problems, youth drug problems, families with both parents working, faith for young people, aged care facilities and funding, church presence in universities, local youth groups – these may well be topics which will be part of the Open Space events likely to emerge in the parish in the coming periods. These may gather under a heading called “Social Justice” or something more modern like “Church/Society Issues”, or “Our Future as a Parish”.

So far, this initiative has not emerged.

B : Letting-go

Most organizations hiring a “facilitator” expect that person to be in control of the target group, to run the program, to keep everyone happy as much as possible, and to prepare an outcome report or evaluation or set of recommendations. And most facilitators address these requirements.

The hardest thing for a “trained facilitator” to do in an Open Space event is to stop doing all of the above – and help the sponsoring entity to be OK about that and encourage the participants to undertake same.

Open Space, as the text books and writings show, works at engaging people – not controlling them and telling them what to do, works at encouraging them to follow whatever they see they have passion and energy and responsibility for in order to address the theme of the event so as to make the agency or organisation better at what it is doing and can do.

“Letting-go” by both the sponsor and the facilitator is so profound a change that many are unable to cope with its opportunities – the possibility of new ideas, the options for change, the stopping of processes and programs that are non-productive, and a commitment to do better as a personal rather than a corporate-induced outcome.

The stories where this has eventuated are huge in number, and, for many traditional managers unable to let go of their traditional ways of control, these stories are unbelievable. Managers who have this incredulity, of course, are not at the cutting edge of change in organisation thinking and are simply not at a sufficient stage of readiness or development to be able to use Open Space Technology.

The successful facilitator, in today’s world of new explorations in organisation structure and development, will help organisations find the balancing between control and service. Traditional organisation training and thinking and university management studies have put so much emphasis on this “control” process and its measurement that it is very hard for graduates of such programs to do anything different. They appear condemned to remain in their own awkward and not-going-anywhere-much morass. And they will continue to use “non-letting-go” facilitation processes.

But “letting-go” doesn’t mean there is no structure and no process or just a free-for-all. In ordinary language, the opposite to “control” is not a free-for-all but “service”. And “letting-go” is the way this is achieved.

The structure of an Open Space event is as firm as any other program around; the difference is that this structure invites and encourages responsibility and engagement at a personal level and requires/enables participants in such an event to work effectively and quite quickly through the actual things that need to be done to better the situation. That’s how they will identify and access the resources and energy

needed to implement same – usually in accord with what the participants themselves can make happen or help make happen.

Unless there is “letting-go”, none of this can happen effectively, and someone else has to take responsibility for making the change needed.

One of the signs of this quality, says Harrison Owen, is to keep working at “doing one less thing” – so different from the modern business school graduate who is taught to be always trying to get more done - and measure it. Doing less rather than doing more is one of the signs of an organisation which is working at self-organizing, and letting-go is the way to bring that about.

C : Managerialism

This is perhaps one of the greatest and most damaging “-isms” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, still being professed and preached in most business schools and management training institutions throughout our world.

At its most obvious, it aims to rule out uncertainty by promoting certainty of both process and outcome, to measure and minimize all risks and hence limit creativity. KPO's and all kinds of performance measurement have their place, of course, but they have become masters of systems rather than servants in systems.

The advent and globalization of computerisation in most of its forms has made the application of this focus on certainty and measurement even more prolific and endemic.

Recent studies and insighting into nuclear physics and the advent of an understanding of chaos and chaos theory fly very much in the face of traditional “managerialism”. But no self-respecting manager in today's business elite finds it possible to talk about such matters at Board meetings or Shareholder's meetings. All espouse the forecasts of bottom line performance, of profit margins and share price factors, with major focus on traditional control mechanisms like governance and accountability.

While each of these dimensions has their place, until and unless the process of coping with uncertainty, creativity from within the organisation, invitation, passion, and spirit – all of which are embraced in any Open Space event or process – will continue to be seen as threats rather than the opportunities they are.

Most traditional organisations also talk of responsibility in terms of “who to” and “what for”, seldom in terms of individuals “taking responsibility” or “exercising responsibility”, except when there is blame to be laid. Such attitudes always limit the input of organisation

participants to what they are supposed or required or paid to do, rather than what they think ought to happen and that can be helped/made to happen.

The last twenty years or so has seen a plethora of approaches like Open Space – Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Conversation Café’s, to name a few – but the weight of tradition still rests with the “as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be” of business school teaching.

The change has well and truly begun, however, and the impact of these new ways of thinking and doing – which are actually very ancient and natural and much more in line with long traditions across the world than the contrivances of modern managerialism – is starting to be felt and understood and appreciated. There’s a distance to go, but the road is now being travelled more, not less – even in schools and parishes and such traditional bodies as religious institutions. The number of Catholic Religious Orders and Dioceses which have made use of Open Space, for instance, is huge across the whole world, suggesting that the Church and its entities are at least at the forefront of such change and advancement, though never given credit for same.

And the parish which is the subject of this writing is at the vanguard of local application of such understandings. And the changes are from a “control/ administration/management knows best” mindset to a “pastoral/service/caring/ supporting” way of being, much more consonant with the teachings of the Church’s founder and great leaders over the centuries. Clearly there is balancing required in a continuing fashion, but the recent practice in Church and most other organisations seems to have overlooked the need for this balancing.

And my work with The World Bank in recent times – helping them to relate better to the populations of tomorrow rather than just the power-brokers of today’s political leadership in the countries of South East Asia and the Pacific - now has the potential of significantly broadening the scope and contribution that institution will be able to plan and put in place in a new cooperative fashion over the next decade or so. One of the trade unions in Sweden which I worked with over a number of years has already achieved this incredible “service” ethos in what it now does.

D : Conflict Management

This is one of the more common challenges facing facilitators, and the use of a circle of seating (as is always so in Open Space) rather than the traditional “I versus them” conference seating mode, is often enough to help people realize the need for working together to do things better. The United Nations, however, still uses the traditional seating arrangements with the traditional confrontational outcomes in the General Assembly.

When conflict is more deep-seated and serious, opening more space for the conflict and the conflict-ees is perhaps the only and best way of helping progress emerge, even if it is only an agreement to differ.

Key to all of this, in an Open Space event or organisation, is non-intervention. The facilitator will never intervene, but may well suggest that the matter should be on the agenda wall and talked about by those who care to do so.

Often, the best way of opening more space is simply for the group not to make a decision and to just take more time before taking steps on that matter. Amazing how a cooling-off period will make major difference and allow tempers to cool – nothing startling in all of that, except that such periods are a way of opening more space – as Harrison Owen generally suggests in major conflict situations. Even an overnight sleep can change things immensely for the better. And no experienced Open Space Facilitator has not experienced the wisdom of this way of acting, regardless of whether some Chief Executive or Union Executive want the matter solved (often my way!) here and now.

In the parish story, delay on projects where there has been disagreement has meant a serious shift in general commitment to the nature of the action taken and the way in which the project then proceeds.

E : Living The Spirit of Open Space

Many of those who come to Open Space Trainings start out intending to acquire just another package to place on their shelf of processes they can offer their clients. And this has its own value.

For a few, however, Open Space touches a nerve which enables them to shift Open Space from a “package” to an “operating system”, something that then underpins their way of doing and approaching the bulk of their work as facilitators or consultants – and their life..

This does not mean they will always use Open Space with clients, regardless of the client need. Rather, they will know and see how well Open Space can and does apply in lots of differing situations and that their thinking about organizations will take on the self-organizing-system philosophy and practice. In effect, they will see the shift from the traditional way of organization thinking and find this new way challenging, verifiable, and remarkably relevant. Often, they will find themselves doing their main thinking in Open Space terms.

For some people, this can seem quite frightening. But for people who manage to see things this way, there is efficiency, clarity, deep achievement for the client and the participants, as well as remarkable outcomes which people take responsibility for and then go ahead and

implement, with or without further connection and checking from the Open Space practitioner. From experience, this expectation becomes normative.

Of course, not every opportunity for programming is relevant for Open Space. Unless the basic conditions outlined in the training and the handbooks are met, then some other way should be used – not Open Space. And there are plenty of practitioners around who can help with “other ways”, of course.

But when those conditions are in place – as is the case in the Parish which this document talks about, or in some of the other agencies mentioned – the long-term impact and results are literally unbelievable and enormously surprising.

The future of this parish is likely to be one of those very agreeable surprises, and the developments already in place are arguably just the beginnings. Watch this space.



F : PARISHIONER COMMENTS :

I congratulate you for all the beautiful work you do – it’s all nice, and especially the renovation on the altar – that blue paint feels like heaven. If possible, preaching after the gospel should be done from the altar – I can’t follow well, and I can’t hear.

Angelina La Sala

When Fr Rom retired, we were fortunate enough to acquire a new parish priest and remain a stand alone parish – unlike several of our neighbours.

It was a period of adjustment, no doubt on both sides – there were whispers about the “new broom”, some indeed from those whose mode of transport might well have been an old broom; but no one actually uttered the Plantagenet curse.

There were irrational reactions to the rationalisation of Mass times, but “the more things change....”, and every Sunday Mass is now well attended by a congregation who rejoice in their love of God and one another.

In our parish, we are indeed fortunate to have been served by three such parish priests – in terms of horse racing, what a trifecta!

Frances J. Murray

We were blessed with the arrival of Fr Rom Murphy after the retirement of Fr George Maltby. But the strain of running such a large parish adversely affected his health.

Fr Rom retired from the parish due to his declining health and after a short period of administration, Fr Brian S Bainbridge was appointed parish priest. He arrived on November 25, 2004 and, like a whirlwind, was introducing significant changes in the parish. These changes have caused some divisions within the parish. However when you step back and look at the changes, they are designed to fit in with Fr Brian's style of saying Mass – which is different from his predecessors.

They are also designed to ensure the workload is shared. Several committees have been formed to assist in this regard. However, Pareto's Law of Optimality applies in that you cannot make something (someone) better off without making something (someone) worse off. These changes, I suspect, were being made for the good of all parishioners.

A further aspect that came to light shortly after Fr Brian's appointment was that he had academic commitments that took him away from the parish. This is somewhat disconcerting, but the parish has coped to date, largely as a result of the committees that have been set up and the appointment of a business Manager, John Grace.

We are indeed fortunate to have Fr Brian as our parish priest.

John Ovens

I've been a member of St Scholastica's parish for three and a half years. Before I moved here, I was still in the parish I grew up in. I come from a large family, we took up a whole pew, and I guess the parish watched us grow. I felt like I knew everyone, and even the people I didn't know knew me, for my grandmother broadcast our achievements far and wide.

When I got married, I moved into my husband's house in Burwood. I didn't know a soul in the area and it stayed that way for at least a year. It was a lonely time for an extrovert like myself.

Going to Mass in a sea of strangers didn't feel the same as celebrating with a community of people I know, so I developed a strategy. I would connect with people during the sign of peace and then try some casual follow-up conversation after Mass. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before I realised with dismay that this plan was only going to work if people actually made some kind of eye contact with me – and they didn't. Perhaps they could smell my desperation...

I can remember one time shaking hands with a young couple behind me who were not much older than me. I spent the whole of the parish notices working up the courage to say hello after Mass. I bravely turned round, wearing my most winsome smile, only to discover that they had already left – never to be seen again!

When Fr Brian arrived, things began to change. I gradually discovered that there actually were other young people in the parish, I just hadn't realised because they were hiding in the back pews and arriving inconspicuously (read : late). Not only did Fr Brian point out the existence of said persons, he started feeding them pizza and doughnuts

after Mass, which meant they hung around long enough to work up the courage to say hello.

What's more, Fr Brian brought about great change with three words, wryly spoken: "Now, with a smile, let us offer each other the sign of peace".

It seems that was all the permission the parishioners needed. What was once a dimly brief affair, the sign of peace now involves me warmly shaking hands with everyone in reach and smiling and waving to those who aren't.

I guess when people talk about the most significant changes during Fr Brian's time at St Schols, you would hear about the great sound system and the renovations to the building, the finance committee and the engaging homilies, but for me it's something more intangible. These days, when Mass is over, I can hardly get to the door without having half a dozen different people grab me by the elbow to catch up. And I grab plenty of elbows myself. I used to scour the parish newsletter for relevant ways for me to get involved in parish life; now, every week I read all sorts of initiatives.

It might seem like something simple, but I cannot begin to explain what it means to feel like I belong. Perhaps in the grand scope of things, this is the greatest thing a priest can give his parishioners.

Thanks, Fr Brian: I don't know how you did it, but I'm glad you did!

Kate Solly

As a member of this wonderful parish for 40 years, the church, the parishioners, facilities are first class and of course your great input to parish life.

At a parish on The Gold Coast, everyone wears a name tag and everybody knows everyone by name. I would only know by name a dozen people – it is a very inexpensive exercise.

The overhead screen is a good idea but when used the wording is incomplete in many cases and the operators don't know how to use it, obviously. They need some instruction in its operation.

It is very sad not to have music at our Masses. I used to play but it seems that some person or persons have canned me – and I am quite able to play for some Masses. Some ask why I don't play and I can't tell them why. Maybe we can do something about that. I've been invited to play at another parish, but I love this parish too much and I can't let down one of the parishioners whom I drive to Mass.

Thank you for the opportunity of penning my thoughts on parish life and wishing you every success in your parish ministry.

Arthur J. Hamnett

G : THE AUTHOR

Described sometimes as a “Boundary Rider”, and often at the cutting edge, Fr Brian Bainbridge has walked with a large number of groups developing change in their workplace, their company, and their world.

He has qualifications in philosophy, psychology, ethics, and theology. And the distinction of being the first Master of Business from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, researching organisation change.

Ordained in 1966, he worked in parish ministry for one year and was then appointed the first full-time Catholic chaplain to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He worked in Campus Ministry for nine years. As Senior Australian University Chaplain for some of that time, he established professional links with the United States, Europe, and Asia.

His work in the mining industry in north-west Australia was groundbreaking in focusing on Supervisors and their part in bringing change into workplace productivity and industrial relations. He also produced several hundred hours of television, some of which was religious programming, and some of which probed the first training applications of interactive video.

Much of his work has been with other-than-Church organisations - private, government, corporate, and institutional, including a number of significant international assignments. He has also helped change the direction of several Dioceses inside and outside Australia, as well as the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and a number of Religious Orders.

After some sabbatical time at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Management in 1985, and some Tavistock exposure, his focus has homed in on group change and the application of open systems thinking as the way forward and the model for tomorrow’s organisations.

Brian has taught and teaches in universities in Australia and the United States, keeps close to thinking and research in group methodology, and has strong contacts with Swedish thinking in these areas.

He is widely known for his use of OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY, developed by Harrison Owen of Washington, and is a leader of the Open Space Institute of Australia. Open Space facilitation helps groups find ways forward into new and better organisation life by co-operation and interaction rather than by competition and confrontation. And it helps release the initiative and spirit that is always present in the people of an organisation. These are the qualities and commitments which will characterize the organization of the third millennium.

In addition, he has worked – since May 1995 – as Assistant Priest in parishes in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia. And since November, 2004, as Parish Priest of St Scholastica's, Bennettswood.

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