

THE JOURNEY OF A PARISH

Kathryn Murrell, a parishioner from Holy Innocents', Orpington, shares how she has seen her parish become a place of evangelisation and discipleship over the last ten years.

My personal Faith journey began many years ago when I was 13 years old and had an encounter with the Holy Spirit. My relationship with Jesus grew and I became involved in prayer meetings and Charismatic conferences. I met my husband, Ian, at a Life in the Spirit Seminar and we both attended the Prince of Peace Community prayer meetings in Beckenham together. Life was wonderful. But when our first child was born we found that it became almost impossible to continue going out in the evenings and with three young children even going to Mass each week became quite a challenge. My prayer life went downhill and, without even really noticing, I gradually became more and more taken up with the stresses of everyday life. Our parish of Holy Innocents' in Orpington went through a time of turmoil in 2008 when the parish priest and the curate both left the priesthood to get married. This left the parishioners feeling abandoned, hurt and in shock. We were left with no priest for several months until Fr Victor Vella arrived. I was oblivious to the rut into which I had sunk until one Sunday Fr Victor announced that we were to have Life in the Spirit Seminars in the parish. I knew immediately that the Lord was calling me back to Him. During the seminars many people were touched by the Holy Spirit in a new way and were asking 'what's next?'. Fr Victor had heard about Parish Evangelisation Cells in a Catholic parish in Milan which was 'on fire' and he invited a group of 14 parishioners, including my husband Ian and me, to visit.

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We were overwhelmed by the joy, love and fervour shown by the parishioners of San Eustorgio. They had cell meetings in each other's homes where they prayed,

discussed, and listened to a teaching. They then shared their faith in between meetings with their 'Oikos' (friends, families and work colleagues etc) whom they then invited to a cell. When the cells grew too large, they divided as more people were brought in and grew in their faith. This all had a transformational effect on every aspect of parish life. Having seen it, we desperately wanted to replicate this model in Orpington. Fr Victor's approach, however, was to 'hasten slowly' so the journey from this point until the first cells coming into being took two years. During this time we began to establish a culture of prayer in the parish. This included creating an oratory out of one of the parish rooms and augmenting Eucharistic Adoration. We also moved towards a culture of coresponsibility as well as forming ourselves spiritually and training leaders. The biggest challenge we faced was how to change the deepseated mindset of clericalism, of people wanting to keep doing things as they've always been done and a deep suspicion of anything involving the Holy Spirit or 'Evangelisation'. To say that the journey towards cells has been challenging is an understatement. There has been opposition, we have lost parishioners, there have been disagreements and negativity but through God's providence and the help of the Holy Spirit we have come through. We now have six cells which meet fortnightly. Ian and I co-lead a cell in our home. We have seen in this time how people in our cell have grown spiritually. People who weren't able to before are now able to pray spontaneously. They attend Adoration and weekday Mass and are beginning to be able to talk about their Faith at work and with family members. Our newest cell member was baptised this Easter and it is such a joy to have her with us. As cell leaders we are able to take on some of the pastoral responsibility from Fr Victor to enable him to focus on other things. The growth of "Cells" has not been as fast as we had originally thought it would be but this is because other things have been happening too. When the cells were in their infancy we piloted our first Alpha course. The response was extremely encouraging and we have now run five adult Alpha courses. These have been attended by over 250 people. Some people have had a powerful conversion of heart which has resulted in them coming back to help with

future Alpha courses, joining a cell group and/or the RCIA and two have been baptised. We piloted our first Youth Alpha course last Autumn and at the weekend away many of them were touched by the Holy Spirit. One of them now comes to Mass regularly and is becoming actively involved in parish life and ministries. Several who are at the same school have also started sharing Christian songs and bible quotes on WhatsApp between themselves. My personal highlight was seeing a group of teenagers praying over each other for the first time ever. I have been privileged to be a group host for both adult and youth Alpha groups and it has been the most rewarding thing that I have ever done in my life to see people's lives changing through an encounter with Jesus. Afterwards they often have a desire to serve in the parish or help out on the Alpha course and many gifted people have emerged in this way. Fr Victor encourages people who have been touched by the Lord to share their testimony with the parish. We had a powerful and moving testimony by one Alpha 'graduate' at the Easter Vigil this year, and other testimonies have also been given at Sunday Masses since then. When I look back I can't believe how much our parish has changed over the last ten years. It was always a friendly parish but now "being rooted in prayer" is spoken about constantly and there is a great emphasis on Adoration. We have been very influenced by "Forming Intentional Disciples" by Sherry Weddell and "Divine Renovation" by Fr James Mallon which Fr Victor asked people to read so we could pray and discern how we could apply their insights in our parish. This year, for example, the parents of the first Holy Communion candidates were invited to go through the preparation journey alongside their children and to attend an Alpha course themselves. We hope that this will also happen with the other sacraments.

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When I look back I can see how the Holy Spirit has been working through everything that has happened. Losing our priests left us in a vulnerable state but this made us perhaps more open to God's plans for us. The Life in the Spirit Seminars created the spiritual hunger that led to visiting Milan and through this visit the Cells evolved. These cells in turn created more fervent Catholics who were happy to give their time to serve on the Alpha courses. The Alpha course then drew more people into the cells, as well as creating new Alpha helpers, some of whom joined the RCIA. Each parish is different and I realise there is no quick fix, no single formula, no programme or initiative which has the answer to create a thriving parish full of "Intentional Disciples". The key is being "rooted in prayer", being prepared to "put out into the deep". You also have to be prepared to make mistakes and be willing to sacrifice time, but the benefits far outweigh any costs involved. I now know that God doesn't want me to escape to a "charismatic conference" for my 'holy fix' but He wants me to be exactly where I am now. I have seen with my own eyes that it is possible for a parish to be a place of Christian discipleship, spiritual nourishment and joy; a base from which we can reach out and invite people in, to give them the opportunity to encounter Jesus. We have been very blessed with Fr Victor who had a vision for the parish and was willing to make considerable sacrifices rather than opt for an easy life. The journey has not been straightforward or easy and we have experienced pain along the way but I can truly say that my parish is now a place in which I am excited to be and lives are being changed. The journey continues...