

Ken,

The following article is the first of three on the subject “Belonging or Believing?” to be printed in the next three editions. Whether you want to make this the Editorial or place it elsewhere in the ECHO is your decision.

BELONGING OR BELIEVING?

*“People come to church for many reasons, but stay primarily for one – **relationships!**”* We need to continually remind ourselves of this fact.

As Christians, through the way in which we welcome and develop a relationship with new people, we are to be an expression to them that this is how God welcomes them and wants to relate to them.

Sadly over the past year, three young families have left our parish for “greener” pastures. Two of these families said that “a lack of a sense of belonging” for some members of their family was the main reason for not wanting to stay. There are other families on the fringe – ready to move in or ready to drop out of the scene – can we help them move towards a meaningful relationship in our church life? What can we / I / you do to help people feel and know that they belong?

Following is the first of a three-part series in the ECHO on the importance of meaningful church relationships.

RKF

Which will come first in the 21st Century . . . BELONGING OR BELIEVING?

by Gil Cann

Recent research amongst new Christians in the United Kingdom reveals a trend which 21st century churches must take very seriously. Most people who have become Christians there in the last five years said they 'belonged' before they believed.

This is a reversal of a long-time pattern in which, for the most part, Christians have believed before they belonged. In the past it has been typical for a person to be converted through attending an evangelistic event, reading a Bible, being led to Christ by a Christian friend (ie believe) and then seeking out, or being introduced to a church to which they could belong.

Nowadays it is common for people to 'belong', i.e., be loosely associated with a church for several years before coming to personal faith in Christ. It is very important that churches consider the implications of this change. Evangelical churches in particular, ironically, have not related easily to the 'fringe dweller', the undecided, the long term enquirer. We have felt uneasy about such people. We like clear-cut situations, things to be 'black and white', people to be in or out. The presence of such an uncommitted 'fringe' makes us feel there is something wrong with them, or even worse, something wrong with us, or our message or methods!

Furthermore having uncommitted people associating with us long term can be an embarrassment. We are not really geared up, as churches, to relate to them. We don't have a 'department' for them! We may find ourselves wishing they would make up their minds one way or the other, so that we can 'get on with the job' of winning people who are either more desperate or more decisive.

Most disturbing of all is that the presence of such people 'on the edges' of our congregation, groups, and ministries to the community suggests they are looking for relationships. This is exactly the case. Sometimes this is what we fear the most! Also, they want to observe us, at close-range, month after month. And ask deep, searching and personal questions about our

own relationships with God and these people with whom we may feel we have little in common might want to become our friends. All very disturbing!

It is not hard to find explanations for this wistful hunger for some form of welcoming 'extended family'. Amongst these people the divorce rate is approaching fifty per cent. Families are shattered, broken relationships are almost the norm. Consequently loneliness, isolation and depression prevail even amongst people living in busy suburbs and cities. In Melbourne, the average dwelling occupancy rate is only 1.9 people. If the present trend continues, by 2006, there will be more people living 'solo' than in any other family or social grouping. Our population levels are static. The birth rate is falling, and now 30% of Australian women declare they do not wish to have any children at all.

- Gil Cann <gilcann@start.com.au> (Used with permission of Gil Cann)

SPIRITUAL CLASSICS

This month (April), we commence a new approach to preaching and teaching in the Parish. Home Groups and the themes for Sunday services will be using a devotional book *Spiritual Classics* as the basis for spiritual development (formation).

Richard Foster, co-editor of the book writes elsewhere:

***The Abysmal Ignorance.** Spiritual life and growth in our life ... does not happen automatically. There is a process that brings us into conformity to the image of Christ, and most of us have an abysmal ignorance of these God-ordained means of transforming the human personality.*

In general, we today lack a theology of spiritual growth. And this lack is not just in this church or that one, in this denomination or that one. No, it is a universal problem found in every group and in every place regardless of the theological stripe or geographic location.

It is my intention that growth into the likeness of Christ is placed at the heart of our parish's life. If you at present you are not part of a home group, and you desire to engage in the journey of your life, you can contact the following people and they will ensure that you can come along to their group and see what takes place.

Most home groups have a time for learning, sharing, worship, fellowship and a cuppa.

Barbara Bullard 6327 8968 Kaye Gregory 63319723

Marie Igglesden 6327 3993 Marilyn Jordan 6327 2968

Judy or Ross Flint 6331 5845 (Home) 6327 4742 (office)

Ross' Diary for April:

Sat 6 Wedding at Strathmore

Wed 10 Evening meeting in Hobart

Thur 11 Mission Support Officers' meeting – Hobart

Mon 15 – Tue 16 – Visit to the N.W. Coast as MSO with Laurie McKintyre (Bishop's Chaplain)

Wed 17 Diocesan Ministry Council – Hobart or Consultancy Training – Longford