

Focus on Welcome and Inclusion: an experiment

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In this article the author outlines a project, Focus on Welcome and Inclusion (FWI), being developed in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane which aims to support parishes to develop intentional practices in welcome and inclusion. Disability perspectives are included in the project which also takes in broader concerns. The Australian Bishops pastoral statement, I Have A Story and the Archdiocesan resource Confidence and Capacity provide the framework for FWI. This is a pilot project which is in the first year of operation. The project will be rolled out in the Archdiocese over the next three years. Details of the aims, process and progress are provided. As an experiment in developing inclusive practice it is the subject of ongoing evaluation and revision.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane held a Synod in 2003. One of the priorities that emerged for the local church from the Synod was that parishes are experienced as “welcoming and inclusive communities to which people are drawn and have a strong sense of belonging.” The Ministry and Community Life (MCL) team of the Archdiocese has key responsibility for assisting parishes and deaneries to implement this priority across the Archdiocese. MCL has six team members and each has a shared responsibility for this priority as well as having a particular area of special focus. This article outlines a project called *Focus on Welcome and Inclusion (FWI)*, which represents this team’s response to the implementation of that priority. My focus within the team is on disability awareness in parishes and deaneries and disability awareness is one area of focus for this project.

FWI is a pilot project. We will work intensively with each deanery in a two year process. We have selected two deaneries to work with this year in the active planning and formation stage. By the end of the year we hope that the deanery will have developed some plans for addressing questions of welcome and inclusion. After the planning and formation stage we will offer intensive support through the first year of implementation while starting two other deaneries in phase one of the project.

One of the beliefs that guide this process is that inclusion is an intentional activity. People with disabilities, or others, may not be included in the full life of the parish and

diocesan community if someone does not discover what their needs and hopes are, through processes of listening, plan to connect people with disability with the life of the parish through key community connectors, and raise the awareness of the whole parish community that welcome and inclusion is not only the task of “hospitality team” or “greeters” but of the whole community.¹ FWI is essentially about community development and not the provision of services to people with disability. The focus is on assisting parish communities to have the confidence and capacity to know and welcome people with disability.

Background

FWI came into being as a result of the convergence of three elements; the desire of the Synod to acknowledge that parish communities need to plan to be welcoming and inclusive, the reorganisation of the Archdiocese into thirteen pastoral units or deaneries and the third element being the existence of Parish Disability Connections (PDC) groups in some of the parishes of the Archdiocese.

The Synod recognised that within the theology and spirituality of communion was the foundation for inclusive community. The Church understood as a communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Second Vatican Council and the key to understanding its sixteen documents.² We are Baptised into Christ and we are therefore parts of one another (Rom 12:5) each of us are part of his body which is the Church (Eph 5:22). By definition and in its very life the Church is the image of inclusive community *par excellence*. This understanding of what it means to be in the Kingdom of God, of which the Church is a foretaste, had a profound impression on the Christians of the New Testament era. Through Baptism into Christ the Holy Spirit had transformed them into a new people of God a Kingdom and priests to serve God (Rev 5:10) and a living Temple (1 Peter 2:5). They were conscious that barriers that had once divided them were no longer in place “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) This is the basis for the Church understood as a communion in which all are welcome and all included. Every woman and man, whether or not

¹ FWI includes perspectives other than disability, as will become clear in the article. We do not want to create the impression that the work of people in welcoming people to Mass, handing out newsletters and hymn books etc is to be undervalued. A welcoming team is an excellent idea, and so is providing regular hospitality with a cup of tea after Mass, but this is greeting only and this strategy cannot bear the burden of inclusion. The whole parish has responsibility for inclusion.

² Extraordinary Synod of Bishops 1985, *Final Report* St Paul’s Publications, p 35

they have a disability, are parts of the one body of Christ and therefore parts of one another.

The Synod produced a document of outcomes and a pastoral planning tool called *Let Your Light Shine* which expressed the idea of communion and inclusion thus:³

Synod Vision: Build Communion with God and Others

The Gospel leads us into a real communion – with God in Jesus Christ and the Spirit, with our brothers and sisters in faith (past, present and future), with all men and women, and with the whole of creation.

Synod Priority: Welcoming communities

That parishes are welcoming, inclusive communities to which people are drawn and have a strong sense of belonging:

If the parish is really the sign of the kingdom that it is meant to be, its life, vitality, friendship of people at worship, and care and concern will attract those who have lapsed in their faith and those who have no faith.

The redevelopment of the deanery structure, following the Synod of the Church of Brisbane in 2003 is the second element that presented new possibilities for working toward inclusive communities. The Archdiocese had deaneries prior to the Synod of 2003 but these were mostly informal networks for clergy and we not viewed as a tool for collegiality and coordinated pastoral planning. After the synod the Archdiocese was divided into thirteen pastoral units for the purpose of developing coordinated pastoral planning and common projects utilising the combined resources of several parishes. At the time of writing the deaneries are still very much at the infancy stage of developing into coordinated pastoral units but their existence still provides a new opportunity for approaching the common need for the development of inclusive practice.

The opportunity provided by the new deanery structure was that the idea for common projects had now been seeded. Each deanery was faced with the question of how it would implement each of the nine Synod priorities, including that of welcome and

³ *Let Your Light Shine: Vision, priorities and planning for a vibrant local Church.* Archdiocese of Brisbane 28 July 2004 p15 This resource is available from Archdiocesesan website <http://www.bne.catholic.net.au/lyls/index.htm>

inclusion. As a team we now had a means to present the idea of a project for welcome and inclusion to an audience beyond the local parish but which was comprised of members of local parishes. Deanery structures assisted the dissemination of ideas and provided a critical mass which might be needed to supply sufficient energy and interest at the local level for welcome and inclusion.

The third element which assisted the development of FWI was the existence of PDC groups in a number of parishes. PDC groups were established in several parishes using processes developed in the Archdiocesan resource; *Confidence and Capacity*.⁴ *Confidence and Capacity* is the program which was developed to assist parishes to know and support people with disability. Current PDC groups, which have commenced operation in one parish in each deanery, had raised the possibility of developing a deanery focus for their own groups. Each of these groups felt that the parish level was not sustainable in order to resource local communities, even though each parish ultimately has to respond to needs. It was recognised by members of these groups that the deanery might provide a wider source of support for disability awareness. PDC groups constituted a nucleus of people who were in the local area and already willing to support efforts for greater inclusion not only of people with disability but others too.

Process

The MCL team wanted to develop a strategy for supporting parishes to address the priority about welcome and inclusion. Two resources were significant in developing what would become FWI. The first was the Australian Catholics Bishops pastoral statement "*I Have a Story: people with disability and their families participating fully in parish life.*" In this pastoral letter the bishops point to a key reality in developing welcome and inclusion in parishes for people with disability; that what ever is done to be welcoming and inclusive of people with disability can have impacts on the way we welcome people from different ethnic groups, the elderly and people with young children.⁵ In the process of learning to welcome people with disability the parish communities can learn other skills for being welcoming and inclusive and find new capacities for openness. The second resource was *Confidence and Capacity*. MCL hoped to use the processes outlined in this resource and widen the parameters to a broader agenda of welcome and inclusion.

⁴ *Confidence and Capacity: parish communities knowing and supporting people with disability*, is available from Faith and Life, PO Box 282 Brisbane 4001 or mcl.fl@bne.catholic.net.au

⁵ I paraphrase the bishop's statement here but the full quote may be found in *I Have a Story*, p14.

Initially the MCL team decided to include three perspectives in the wider agenda of welcome and inclusion; people with disability, refugees/migrants and interchurch families. These three corresponded with key responsibilities of current MCL team members. One member of the team had a disability focus, one on migrant and refugee perspectives and another on ecumenism and interfaith perspectives. Later we were able to co-opt the support of an indigenous education officer who would support an indigenous perspective. As we develop the process over the years it is hoped that we might be able to provide resources for other perspectives.

We are conscious of the need to maintain a number of elements in balance. The first of these is the balance between universal principles of welcome and inclusion and specific needs. We recognise that there are principles and processes that can be applied to a number of contexts in welcome and inclusion. Universal principles should not exclude concern for specific needs of people with disability or refugees or interchurch families who seek to be fully included in the life of local communities. Another element that needs to be kept in balance is the parish and deanery. The deanery is a useful structure of communion for promoting and supporting inclusive practice but it is at the level of the parish that the inclusion must happen. Finally a distinction needs to be kept in mind between service and community development. FWI is about developing the capacity of the community to be welcoming and inclusive its purpose is not to provide services for parishioners.

Combining the resources of the team and the adapted *Confidence and Capacity* process the MCL team developed the concept proposal and process as outlined below.

Purpose

The purpose of Focus on Welcome and Inclusion (FWI) is to:

- ❖ Develop and deepen an understanding of *koinonia* in the Body of Christ as the foundation for inclusive communities.
- ❖ Live more richly the *Jesus Communion Mission* vision presented in the Synod outcomes through the processes of developing an inclusive community.
- ❖ Develop a sustainable group of people in supporting parishes to be inclusive, welcoming and life giving communities.

- ❖ Raise awareness of the presence of people with disability, refugee, migrant and inter-church and other experiences in parish communities.
- ❖ Develop strategies for the inclusion of people with disability, refugees, migrants, inter-church families and others in the full life of the parish and local community.

Proposal

We proposed to investigate the possibilities for the development of a Deanery Focus for Welcome and Inclusion. We developed a pilot project centred on the Brisbane West Deanery and Redland Bayside Deanery. There would be scope in this process for looking at broader issues of inclusion e.g. migrants and refugees, young parents and children, youth and Catholics who no longer feel connected to the Catholic community. *Confidence and Capacity* can function as a model for developing a broader inclusiveness as indicated in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference pastoral statement; *I Have A Story*.⁶

Whatever is done to improve the ways people with disability are assisted to participate fully in parish life, will also improve access for other people in the community...people of different cultures, diverse backgrounds, elderly persons parents trying to manage young children at Mass.

MCL is developing resources and a program to address this broader aspect of inclusion other than disability. Disability in the rest of the document could be substituted with any of the other topics in order to read the intention of the project in its broadest possible frame of reference. For the sake of economy in expression we use disability as the example below.

Outline of the proposed project

1. Contact the Dean and the Deanery Pastoral Council or equivalent to outline the proposal and assess levels of support for the proposal and review the process with the PDC groups. We have selected these deaneries for the project because they have a core of a PDC team in the parish of each Dean and the groups have suggested to *MCL* that a Deanery focus is a direction that they would like to explore. **July and August 2005**

⁶ I Have a Story, p14

2. Awareness raising phase. Over a period of several months members of the current PDC groups or others from parishes participating will speak briefly at the end of Sunday Masses or other time as negotiated with pastors, to promote some awareness of the needs for inclusive practice with regard to people with disability within parishes. **August to December 2005.**
3. Organise and promote a deanery education and formation event at the end of this period of awareness raising. This event may be for 3 to 6 hours and have a focus on inclusion as an aspect of communion/koinonia: What it means to be a welcoming and inclusive community. *Let Your Light Shine, I Have A Story* and *Confidence and Capacity* may provide the basis for workshops and group discussion. People with disability, parents and carers, clergy, pastoral associates, members of parish pastoral councils and parishioners would be invited to attend. **February or March 2006.**
4. Using *Confidence and Capacity* processes commence the formation phase with a small group of volunteers drawn from the deanery education event. Commence **March or April 2006** and aim to conclude by June i.e. monthly meetings. If the groups decide, a shorter time period could be considered i.e. fortnightly meetings.
5. Looking around phase would commence a fortnight after the conclusion of the formation sessions and aim to conclude within one or two months as decided by the group.
6. Into action meeting. The meeting to process the Looking Around data and to develop some specific strategies may take place on one Saturday from 9-3pm and develop a plan for action for one year. The plan would contain some general achievable goals and a few specific and achievable actions that parishes may adopt. The same people invited to the initial formation day in February would be invited to attend this planning day. This may occur in **August/September 2006**, depending on the time frame for the formation meetings.
7. The groups once established would need to develop an acceptable meeting plan for the year. A suggestion is for four meetings per year each of 2 hours and each with a specific purpose. Groups may wish to develop their own meeting schedule and purpose that is different from what is proposed here.
 - i. Review proposals for the following year.

- ii. Two meetings to consider how we are going and what needs to be done.
- iii. One meeting to plan for the next year.

8. Groups would have ongoing support from the *Faith and Life, Ministry and Community Life Team*.

Developing support material

MCL has developed a range of support materials which are to be trialled with groups before being made available next year as resources on the Archdiocesan website and as a package of print resources. These resources form part of the experiment with the trial group which will be used to evaluate the content and usefulness of the resources. Some of the resources developed to date include:

- A statement *Focus on Welcome and Inclusion*, which provides an overarching statement linking welcome and inclusion to the Synod, koinonia/communion and practical consequences.
- Ten one page reflection resources on themes related to *Focus on Welcome and Inclusion* that can be used by parish pastoral councils and other parish groups as a formation resource.
- Thirty bulletin inserts with quotes from Church documents and practical tips to be used by parishes as they see fit.
- A list of potential seminar topics that MCL might be able to provide to parishes that are relevant to *Focus on Welcome and Inclusion*.
- A list of organisations and resource people that parishes may be able to draw on to resource themselves for *Focus on Welcome and Inclusion*.

Progress

FWI is at the workshop stage where some of the vital work of raising awareness is beginning to take place, which is point four of the process. The timeline has had to be stretched as we encountered clashes with Lent reflection groups and Easter liturgy preparations. Some of the attendance at workshops has been disappointingly small especially in one of the deaneries in the experiment group. Partly this is due to

communication and promotion difficulties and the fact that many of those who volunteered to take part as the key drivers of the project in their deanery are already so committed to many other things. We are entering the phase where we need to form the volunteer group to do the looking around, gathering data, reflecting and planning for the future.

The MCL team needs to evaluate the first phase of the project and look at the strengths and weakness of the current model. As an experimental method, we have to admit that we are relying on the trial and error design, in many ways. We hope to monitor each stage and ask for written evaluation and suggestions from participants in order to continue to refine the project. We do not aim for perfection, in the sense that if it is not perfect, it is not worth doing. We prefer to work by the rule that if a thing is really worth doing, it is worth doing badly. It may sound facetious but it is true when looked at in the right perspective. Improving the full, conscious and active participation of the parish in welcoming and inclusive practice is worth striving for. If we were to wait for the perfect tool and the perfect process we might never achieve anything while we wait. With St Paul MCL could say “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead I press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13-14). So we set out in joyful hope as we wait for the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness while we participate in the foretaste of it through the Church here on earth.

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