

**PASSIONIST  
FAMILY GROUP  
MOVEMENT**



THE WHYS AND HOWS

OF THE

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February 2008

***A BRIEF HISTORY***

The Passionist Family Group Movement began in 1973 in the parish of St Anthony in the Fields, Terrey Hills, Sydney, as a practical response to the needs of the parish. Fr Peter McGrath CP is its founder. It was nine years before they branched out and a lot of learning was done in that time. Australian parishes in various places (New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, ACT and South Australia) began to become involved in the mid-late 1980's. The Movement spread to New Zealand in 1988, starting in 3 parishes that

year (Paeroa, East Coast Bays and Wanganui). It spread to the South Island in 1992, the same year that a prison in the USA adopted Family Groups. In 2008 there are over 400 parishes (83 of them in New Zealand) with Passionist Family Groups in three of the New Zealand parishes belonging to other churches. Passionist Family Groups are also in USA, England, Ireland and Scotland.

## **AIMS AND GOALS**

**The aim of Passionist Family Groups is to model themselves on the early Christians (Acts 2:44-47) and promote community within the parish, by *sharing* Christian life and *supporting* each other, especially in times of need. The adults *give example* to the children and *involve them* in their Christian sharing.**

## **WHAT IS A FAMILY GROUP ?**

A Family Group is made up of 8-15 families. Of those families, some may be single parent families, some single or widowed, some couples with children at home, and some whose children have left home. The group will normally have around 18-20 adults and a number of children (depending on the 'profile' of the parish). Normally the Passionist team arranges the groups, ensuring a cross section of ages and a general matching of children, if this is possible. They present these groups to the pastor or his team and the local Co-ordinators for consideration or alteration.

## **IS THERE A SPIRITUAL DIMENSION?**

Some people who struggle with this question try to separate *social* from *spiritual*. Obviously the acts of kindness, the personal concern and the group sharing have a vital spiritual basis which reflects the gospel call to act.

Some church organisations or programmes encourage discussion of faith which can be productive in giving a better understanding of things. Others encourage the celebration of faith by common prayer and worship, **Family Groups see their priority as living faith in practical day to day ways.**



To fully appreciate this we need to recognise that we are called to live our everyday lives in a religious way - or, if you like, our religious lives in an ordinary, everyday way.

Just as Jesus walked the earth bringing God's presence to people, so through us God reaches out to other people. God has become human. This makes our humanity special and our *ordinariness* God's most profound way of touching His people.

***The spirit of Family Groups is the spirit of the Gospel***

### **The spirit of Family Groups is the spirit of the Gospel.**

This spirit encourages a welcome to all people and calls for a compassionate response from people to their neighbours, regardless of what they do or where they live. The hurts and disappointments, anxieties, fears, doubts, loneliness, brokenness, and the suffering and pain of everyday life are occasions when people can most profoundly experience the spirit of Jesus. This is because the Cross remains the assurance that He has *been there*, that He is present in all the pain and suffering. In taking on the burdens of others, we take on the spirit of the Cross, with its promise of victory.

Some members may not be as regular church goers as others, but the criterion for a faithful disciple of Jesus should never be based just on church going, but on church being. To do this one has to become involved in the lives of others, for that is the spirit of the Gospel. (Matt 25:40)

Passionist Family Groups can give us a whole new way  
*of knowing, understanding, and experiencing church.*

The faces of the lepers and tax collectors and the voices of the prostitutes and sinners are the faces and voices of our streets and homes. Until the message of Jesus has called a person out of themselves in loving service, to follow in the footsteps of those early Christians, it remains a comfort - not a mission in life. *Passionist Family Groups can give us a whole new way of knowing, understanding, and experiencing church.*

### **HOW DOES A GROUP FUNCTION?**

The groups normally gather monthly. Their activities include picnics, barbecues, pot luck dinners, games nights etc. Normally they have a planning meeting every 6 or 12 months to plan dates and activities in advance. It is most important when planning functions to keep in mind that the functions are only a means to an end. They are an opportunity to spend 'quality' time together as 'family', to share our lives and to care for one another.

It is recommended that there be a 50/50 mixture of adult-only functions and outings where children are involved. This is particularly important in the early days of the group, so that the adults can have a chance to get to know one another.

*The functions are an opportunity to spend 'quality' time together as 'family'.*

The best means of building cohesion among group members is through a weekend away

together. If possible, this camp should take place annually . Sometimes two groups can go away together to ensure adequate numbers, and keep costs at a minimum.

A Eucharist or service is the focal point of the weekend. Where possible the pastor or an appointed member of the group leads this liturgy. It is advisable that a Home Mass or other liturgy be held once a year and when the group wants to celebrate an appropriate occasion for the group.

**What really makes a Family Group work is what happens in between the functions.**

It has been said that you can tell if a Family Group is working if the members "*love one another*". This can only come about through one-to-one contact. When people begin to contact and support one another in response to recognised needs, then a true family spirit begins to emerge. Occasions for celebration can provide such a stimulus, as can times of stress, hardship or illness.

*It is important to structure times at some gatherings or plan specific functions which will encourage members to communicate in a meaningful way.* In order to "be" for one another we need to know one another, and this happens when people share their story.

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Simple things such as "guess who's baby photo" evenings can provide opportunities for people to share something of their story. To avoid financial embarrassment, functions should be 'low cost or no cost'

As a group grows in a true Christian spirit, there is sometimes a felt need for more faith input or education. This can be provided through various programmes or activities offered through the parish, or by the Passionist team.

***You can tell a Family Group is working if the members love one another***

**HOW PEOPLE ARE ADDED TO GROUPS**

The size of a Family Group varies between 8-15 family units, and will have around 35-45 people including children. The number of units will be higher if there are a large number of single parents or single people in the group, so that there is a good balance of families. In parishes where there is a large proportion of older people, it is common for each group to have several widows or widowers.

The parish pastor delegates to the Parish Co-ordinators the role of appointing new families to a group. **Before the allocation** of new families to groups, the Group Co-

ordinators are asked to identify the needs within their groups so that a new family might be placed in the best possible situation.

Normally a group will have room for more families to be added when it is first formed. If families leave the group or the group becomes too small as can happen in suburbs or towns of high mobility, common sense needs to prevail.

Group members may know people who would fit into a group and provided they dialogue with other group members and especially the group co-ordinators, this can be an ideal way of 'topping up' a group.

Group members are free to invite people to their Family Group functions, however it is suggested that they advise the group co-ordinators about this. Allocation remains the responsibility of the parish co-ordinators to avoid the establishment of cliques of friends in any one group. This maintains the ideals of Christian outreach for the groups. It is important that the guidelines provided do not become unbending rules, especially as groups grow and mature.

## HOW IS A NEW GROUP FORMED?

At various intervals a significant number of people have been enquiring about or might be interested in Family Groups. In response to this, the Parish Co-ordinators may advise the parish pastor of the need for a promotion of Passionist Family Groups through 'Mass talks' and printed literature which can reach church attenders and parents of school children as well as the unchurched. *Personal invitation is always the most effective means of encouraging new members, and existing members can be encouraged to help in visiting potential new members and inviting them to join.*

Families or individuals who are keen to join, should give their name to the Parish Co-ordinators, who have the task of ensuring that those joining understand the basic aims and goals, before being placed. A decision is then made, as to the advisability of beginning a new group, or adding these new families to existing groups.

**Groups can come together to actively support Parish functions.**

When forming a new group, the Pastor and Co-ordinators attempt to achieve the same cross section and use the same criteria as when the

**Personal invitation is the most effective way of encouraging and welcoming new members**

initial groups were formed. They would seek from this new group of families suitable people to facilitate the needs of the group.

## DO YOU BREAK UP GROUPS?

As a general rule this is avoided wherever possible. What might justify doing so would be the missionary action of one or more families to assist the founding of a new group. If it be deemed necessary or beneficial to ask a suitable person or a couple to leave a group in order to co-ordinate or found a new group, this would only be done after consulting the co-ordinators and members of their present group and with the approval of the Pastor or Parish Co-ordinators.

## **WHO SELECTS CO-ORDINATORS? WHAT IS THEIR ROLE?**

The Parish Pastor first selects the Parish Co-ordinators - usually they are a married couple. They work in liaison with the Pastor and the Regional Co-ordinators. It is their responsibility to keep alive the spirit and philosophy of Family Groups, as well as to oversee their development. They do this by keeping regular contact with the Group Co-ordinators. Where there are to be a large number of groups (e.g. 8 or more) a second Co-ordinating couple could be nominated.

Parish Co-ordinators ensure that Passionist Family Group functions work in with parish activities. They help to facilitate combined group activities and maintain contact with the Directors and Regional Co-ordinators, so that they receive assistance, support and direction. This also helps to maintain the flexible structure within the Passionist Family Group Movement. **The Parish Co-ordinators are appointed to a ministry of service, and as such are called to accountability in their role.**



The Parish Pastor also appoints Group Co-ordinators, who also are invited to take on this ministry as one of Christian service. The initial appointment of both Parish and Group Co-ordinators is for a one year term. At the end of this term they meet with the Pastor and/or Regional Co-ordinators to review and evaluate, then possibly accept reappointment for a further term of two years. They can continue to be reappointed for two year terms or step aside and allow a change in leadership style.

**Christian leadership is a ministry of service**

Usually Group Co-ordinators (leaders) are a married couple and their task is to co-ordinate the activities of their group while maintaining the true spirit of the Passionist Family Group Movement. They should meet at regular intervals (eg. every 5-6 weeks), and perhaps even spend an annual weekend away together with their immediate families, to support one another and share information about how to better help their groups.

These weekends are conducted by the Passionist team. They are an example of the extra time and commitment that is invested by Co-ordinators, who offer a true ministry of pastoral vigilance. Co-ordinators encourage the mutual sharing of responsibilities, talents, gifts and tasks within their group. They

follow the example of Jesus who '*came to serve rather than be served*'. Their task is to recognise individual gifts and enable group members to use them, so that the group grows in true fellowship.

The Directors of the Passionist Family Group Movement, with the assistance of others within the region, are active in supporting the Co-ordinators of the groups. They offer education in Christian lay leadership, the development of pastoral skills, group dynamics, and ways of maintaining group commitment, underlined by a sense of mission for the local church.

## **INVOLVEMENT OF CHILDREN**

In a sense, the groups are primarily for adults, but if these adults are helped to live their Christian lives in community, the benefits will flow on to their children. Children are encouraged to recognise the Christian environment they experience in Family Groups as the church in action.

**Children see adults mixing with others**, sharing, caring, talking and enjoying being together, and this becomes a significant learning situation. Children see their parents going to the aid of people in need, by making a phone call, visiting someone or preparing them a meal. They see *preaching* being *practised*.

**People can help each other** by sending cards and flowers, cooking meals, mowing lawns, doing ironing for others, fixing fences or gardens, painting walls, helping to move house, and many other practical activities. **This is Christianity in practice** and it is not lost on children.

## **TEENAGERS**

Family Groups do not solve the problem of teenager non-involvement in the parish. Many teenagers do belong to a Family Group and attend functions, but most want to go their own way. Even if teenagers are not involved, they do see their parents engaged in a concrete model of the church that actually does what 'a church' is supposed to do.

At a time when they are assessing values, it helps to recognise an environment where the attitudes and values that are spoken about are lived out. Even from the time the Family Group begins, they know that their parents did not choose the people who were in their group, but were open to whoever was allocated. This can be a powerful witness to Gospel values.

Since teenagers can be the cause of so much anxiety for parents, sharing worries within a Family Group can provide support and encouragement, and serve as a reminder to one another that no one is free from difficulties.

**Belonging to a Family Group offers a discipline of spending time with the family – a discipline that often is needed. Once a month there is a function available for the family to enjoy together. Because there are other teenagers in the group, the family functions can be enjoyable for teenagers and help bond them more in their own family.**

## **ARE THEY CLIQUE GROUPS?**

Each group remains a cell of the parish. While the most basic parish identity for members comes from their own Family Group, they remain a part of the parish. To encourage this wider belonging, members should firstly see themselves as part of the overall Family Group Movement within the parish. They should also see themselves with **a mission to reach out** and welcome others in a true sense of Christian belonging.

What they have experienced they should pass on to others. *"If you save your greetings only for your brothers or sisters, are you doing anything exceptional? Even the pagans do that."* (Matthew 5:47)

In order to signify the service of Passionist Family Groups, many parishes use one monthly Sunday Eucharist as a 'Family Group Mass', so that all of the groups can come together. Apart from taking an active part in the liturgy, members can provide a cup of tea for all parishioners afterwards. This is one way of working towards achieving the aim of promoting community spirit within the parish.

Groups can also come together to actively support parish functions. The groups operate within the parish and as such, share the responsibility for promoting the life of the parish community. Most parishes with Family Groups hold occasional functions involving more than one or all of their groups (eg. a combined picnic, sports day, St Patrick's Social, Carol singing).

Experience proves that Passionist Family Group members are a great asset to the parish, since many people become actively involved in parish life and offer their time, talent and interest. At the same time, they should not be used as a task force for Parish functions.

## **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The Passionist Family Group Movement is sensitive to every-day financial struggles, and every effort is made to ensure that groups remember the needs of each individual. There is no personal joining fee, and functions are kept to a minimum expense (eg. picnics). Visits to expensive restaurants etc. are considered unsuitable. While the facilities are usually



comfortable for the group weekend away, expense is kept to a minimum, and efforts are made to share the costs.

There is value in having a small kitty to assist in meeting some general expenses. This could be used for buying flowers for special events, tea and coffee for group functions, a contribution towards a needy family for the weekend away or photographs of the Family Group. The Family Group Movement is person centered, so money is considered secondary to the Family Groups.

**'Functions are low cost or no**

The parish accepts financial responsibility for the involvement in and support of the Passionist Family Group Movement. The Movement in New Zealand has formed a registered Charitable Trust, and all funds are administered from New Zealand. Annual audited balance sheets are available to each parish.

## **SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES & SINGLE PEOPLE IN FAMILY GROUPS**

Single parents find the supportive and caring atmosphere of Family Groups a significant change from the often unsupported life style they live. Theirs can be a lonely life and devoid of home adult company. Because many of the stresses are carried alone, the understanding and support of other adults can be a great strength.

Acceptance and awareness of the single-parent's situation is not always exercised within society – and more especially within the church community. Belonging to a Family Group provides a rare environment where single parents can not only be themselves, but be accepted and appreciated by a wide variety of people.

Perhaps one of the most beneficial aspects of a Passionist Family Group for single parents is that it puts them and their children in contact with other families. Family Groups do not solve all of their problems, but they do offer a supportive and caring *family* with which to share.

In the beginning, the thought of reaching out to strangers and becoming involved with married couples in a social setting can seem threatening to the single person. He or she can experience mixed emotions, such as sadness and anger at feeling alone in the midst of couples. This can lead to withdrawal from the group and finding excuses not to attend functions. Many single parent women experience jealous reactions from married women when mixing with their husbands at a social gathering, such as a party. It is a welcome relief to be able to mix in a Family Group with adult males who often become like brothers - without feeling this jealous response or the need to be over cautious.

Passionist Family Groups encourage this atmosphere of acceptance. Nevertheless, it is important for families to appreciate the difficulties and anxieties of a single parent, especially when he or she is attending the initial gatherings. Sometimes their children



can be suspicious of the adult males in the group, but once trust has been developed this contact can be of enormous benefit to the children.



The Family Group Co-ordinators are especially encouraged to be conscious of the single parents, and may sometimes ask a family within the group to '*adopt*' a single parent family with a view to helping them belong. This means offering transport to functions, helping them home with children after an evening function, walking them to the car and offering other practical means of support and care.

## DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

Family Groups try to emphasise that rather than doing something, primarily you just have 'to be' - yourself. You can sit down and talk and share. You can listen to others tell their story and tell your own. What 'you do' doesn't really matter. It is **YOU** that matters. This is a change from the normal pressure that people feel - that they have to achieve something to be noticed; or to acquire power, position or possessions to be acknowledged.



It takes time to develop relationships. Family Groups are Christian living groups where people relate to each other as they would in an extended family. Just as a person doesn't tell aunts and uncles everything, and just as people recognise the different degrees of intimacy within their own extended family, so it is in a Family Group.

Whatever else it may be, it is where members belong and where the others offer support in spite of peculiar ways or funny mannerisms. Family is where you can be **who you are**, not what you do.

**Passionist Family Groups are about 'being' rather than 'doing'..... they are about building relationships**

## WHAT'S IN A NAME OR A SIGN?

The basic presumption is that all members are Christian, although there are exceptions. The extended family concept has grown over the years to become a part of the philosophy of Family Groups. Because the Passionists have been responsible for developing a simple and flexible structure, it is rightly named a *Movement*. It was founded in Australia, but has taken root in New Zealand and has already extended to the USA and UK.



The Passionist Family Group sign or logo was created by some Family Group members. The heart and the people symbolise a willingness to deepen Christian love and acceptance of others. The people in the sign are of a variety of ages (grandparent to baby). Since the cross is very much within people's lives, it is the centre of the sign. The motto, '*A Family for All*', reinforces the practical reality that all members of the community are welcome to belong.

### Some 'stories' from New Zealand

*It was Family Group outing on a beach, and an elderly widower attending a function for the first time was sitting on the sand eating fish and chips out of newspaper and quietly chuckling to himself. One of the woman invited him to share the joke and he said: 'I haven't eaten fish and chips since my wife died, it is years since I've been on a beach, and I cannot remember the last time I had young children playing at my feet....and here it is all happening at once!'*



*At the sign of peace, a woman who was intellectually impaired crossed the aisle and bent down to kiss an elderly blind lady on the cheek. 'Do you know who I am?'" she asked the lady. 'I can't remember your name dear, said the lady, but I know we are in the same Family Group'*

*That's right said the younger woman...and you know I don't have a very good brain, and you can't see, but between us we've got everything we need'*



The following is an attempt to capture what was spoken by Willie, an Indonesian born New Zealander, at the end of a PFG weekend.

*I am going to talk about our lives here in New Zealand. This is my first time to talk about this , open hearted and stating my feelings.*

*We have been here for 20 years and still don't feel that we belong to the Community because of lack of English language, and people don't seem to like to talk to us because they may not understand us and vice versa like. when they are joking we can't participate.*

*At work, club or at a party we always feel that we're left behind. In my case I never give up to communicate to people.*

*I think some of you also have that feeling. At church nobody approaches us. The reason I*

*Speak about this to you is because we came here all together with the same purpose, that is to be a big family and help each other.*

*Our experience this weekend, I have felt for the first time that we belong to the Community among you. How friendly you are and how close we feel to you. I feel now like a 'bloody kiwi'*