

A Soft Place:

Program for Returning Catholics offers a safe place for them to land

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The Catholic Church can boast that it has the largest number of members in this country.

It also has the dubious distinction of being related to the second largest religious group in this country: the 20 million inactive Catholics who no longer attend Mass or are involved in parish life.

Landings is an attempt to help those 20 million "find their way back home." Begun by Paulist Father Jac Campbell in 1989, the program has spread throughout the country. Several parishes in the Austin Diocese have the program, and two seminars will be offered this year to parishes interested in beginning Landings (see box below).

The program is effective because it helps people "understand what it is to be church," according to Tom Johnson, who serves as coordinator of the Landings program at St. Thomas More Parish in Austin. "Both active and inactive Catholics find themselves becoming more involved in other parish activities" after becoming part of Landings, he explained. "We are all learning more about our faith-and what it means to be church."

The program's concept is simple. Catholics interested in returning to practicing their faith are invited to join a group of parishioners for six to eight sessions. The lay parishioners lead the two-hour sessions, which follow a format. All attending the sessions are asked to keep what is shared confidential to the group.

"It is not a program about theologians teaching Catholic doctrine," explained Johnson. "It's about trained lay people sharing their own faith journeys and every one realizing that they can talk about their faith in an open, constructive way."

Hearing other people's struggles with their faith was what drew Michele Kinsman back into the church. "Even the 'good Catholics'-the ones who had stayed- had struggles with their faith," she said. "I didn't feel like I was the only one learning."

Kinsman had quit attending Mass even before she divorced an abusive husband, and she felt stigmatized by her choices. "I just felt like I didn't belong in the church," she said. "and Landings helped take the guilt away for me"

"In the past, I think the church made you feel guilty about your feelings,?' but that has not been her experience since returning to St. Thomas More, Kinsman said. "I wish people wouldn't be afraid of the church. It is a safe place to go, especially St. Thomas More. The community is so loving, They care about people-and worry about your sins later."

Listening to and respecting returning Catholics' faith story is critical to Landings' success, Johnson said. Parishioners involved in the program tend to be "caring, prayerful members of the parish trying to live their faith."

Seeing other Catholics talk about their difficulties with some of the church's teachings gives returning Catholics a way to deal with their own conflicts, explained Jesuit Father Steve Ryan, associate pastor at St Thomas More.

Father Ryan initiated Landings at the parish because he saw the benefits of having a lay ministry for inactive Catholics, he said. "It's often much easier for people who are hurt or angry with the church to express those feelings to fellow lay people, rather than to someone with a collar," he explained. "Landings lets people-whether we've been 'faithful church-goers' or otherwise-to know it's okay to be struggling with your faith."

That sense of welcoming drew Matt Mullin into the church, after he had decided to overcome alcoholism. After seeing his father recover from alcoholism through Alcoholics Anonymous, Mullin said he knew he would "be on a spiritual search. So I decided to start with the church" instead of looking to AA or other self-help programs.

Father Ryan recommended Landings to Mullin, who said it was "a wonderful experience. It really was a soft landing to come back to the church."

The fellowship he experienced with others in his Landings group encouraged him to seek spiritual direction, and several members of his Landings group continued with a book study after the Landings sessions were finished.

'Landings is evangelization, but not in the way I use to think of it," Mullin said. "It made a profound difference in my life."