

LANDINGS: Loving People Back for 20 Years

The Paulist Program of Reconciliation to invite and welcome returning Catholics

The numbers tell only part of the story: an estimated one million active and returning Catholics brought-together; 85 dioceses (including five in Canada and five in England) involved; workshops for over 25,000 people... and a staff of two:

Paulist Father Jim Moran is the director of Landings International and Joan Horn is the national coordinator for this Paulist ministry of reconciliation and healing for inactive Catholics.

That's where the real story is told-in the lives of people returning to the Church. These are the ones who show up for Christmas and Easter, for weddings and funerals, and one day are prompted to respond to an invitation like the one outside Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church in Marin County, California: "Inactive Catholics, Call Home."

Landings reaches out to inactive Catholics and empowers laity to welcome them home. In parishes, groups of six to eight active Catholics join together with two or three who are returning. Over the course of 10 weeks, group members listen to one another tell their faith stories. "The key to Landings is compassionate listening," Father Moran says. And more than just words, Landings offers the example of lived faith. The welcoming Catholics are there in the pews on Sunday, keeping company with those returning.

"It's a simple, gentle process," Joan Horn says. It proves as valuable for the welcoming Catholics as for those returning. Pat Buckley, a Landings trainer in Seattle, says, "Parishioners look at it as one of the best things they ever did. One man called Landings the 'best foot-washing experience' of his life." Pauline Gilbertson, Landings coordinator in England, reports, "One active Catholic said of her Landings group, 'The community feeling amongst us is fantastic. For the first time, I feel truly part of the Body of Christ.'" Joan Horn says, "I am surprised, over and over again at how much people love their faith and want to talk about it."

Returning Catholics often take up the role of welcomers when their Landings sessions end. "When Catholics return, they are so happy to be back in the Church they loved as children," Horn says. Jerry McMahon, who coordinates Landings in Gainesville, Florida, tells about 80-year-old Isabel who returned to the Church after 60 years, and who then agreed to share her story with her whole parish. From England, UK Landings director Father James Leachman, OSB, writes, "People who complete the program often become alive again as active Catholics, not losing their previous problems, but making stepping stones out of what were previously problems, sadnesses or difficulties."

Landings is a major catalyst in improving the whole of parish life, according to Diane Clare of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Marin County. "Many of the returning folks want more, and the parish grows as it responds to those needs," she says. Joan Horn refers to it as a "ripple effect." Faith is renewed, not only for the person returning, but also for the welcomers and for those who have been hoping and praying for their loved ones to return to the Church

For Father Jac Campbell, Landings founder, *Landings* has all the earmarks of Paulist ministry. It involves the laity at a serious ministerial level, develops lay leadership, brings peace and healing. *Landings* is celebrating 20 years of reconciliation ministry in 2009. "From the beginning," Fr. Campbell said, "Landings has been built up and spread by lay people around the country. Some say Landings works because of the stories, some say it's prayer. But really it's just loving people back - over time."

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