

## LANDINGS OFFERS COMPASSIONATE WELCOME

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When it comes to religion in the United States, the only group of people that comes even close in number to the country's 40 million active Catholics is the nation's 20 million inactive Catholics.

This statistic and a philosophy of "compassionate listening" is what drives Landings, a ministry founded in Seattle 12 years ago by Paulist Father Jac Campbell to "empower" inactive Catholics to join the Church again. Recently, Father Jac trained volunteers from 16 parishes of the Archdiocese of San Francisco in the Landings program.

Father Jac, formally John P., explains his surname as "Campbell like soup." The Boston native was ordained in 1969 and from 1976 to 1980 served as chaplain to the Newman Center at University of California at Berkeley. He met the Paulists while a student at Boston's Northeastern University. At the time, the community was responsible for "almost all of the Newman Centers" serving the New England city's more than 30 secular colleges, Father Jac said.

The Landings title like its philosophy came out of listening. "We just batted the name around a lot," Father Jac said recalling the early days of the program. "We didn't want an acronym, so we toyed with people going out and coming back. One of the women who helped me write it was in the airline industry and someone else, from Seattle where we piloted the program, said, "you can invite someone over but if you don't have a slip for them to dock their boat it's almost like inviting someone home for Thanksgiving and not having a place setting for them."

Father Jac said his image was "like in old WWII movies where a plane would come in and if it didn't get shot at it would land. "When people come back and take a look at us again, if they feel warm, welcome and not shot at, they'll stay," Father Jac said.

Because Landings is based on listening, it's important that everyone gets the chance to tell his or her story, Father Jac pointed out. He noted a Methodist study on returning members that found people need "an hour visit for every year they've been away. You can't just invite them home for Christmas or have one session," Father Jac said. "They have to make some friends and start to feel at home within the community."

Volunteers learn the program by doing it. "It doesn't come alive until you sit through it," Father Jac said. "We're just trying to convince them they are holy enough and smart enough to do it and also follow the directions. If they do what we tell them, they don't get into trouble

and they have a good time. When this is over, they usually leave with the enthusiasm and wisdom and materials to start a program."

Landings is compact and fully explained on one side of a letter sized laminated sheet and an accompanying booklet, but it asks at least modest discipline from participants, be they "welcoming" or "returning" Catholics.

The meetings are outlined on the sheet with directions about what should happen and when it should happen. Meetings focus on sharing and exploring faith issues. Confidentiality is an imperative.

The nine elements of each two-hour meeting ~include starting on time. The next step, Check-in time, is for the groups - six to eight "welcomers" and no more than three returning Catholics - "to tune into each other's lives and try to bridge the time spent apart, according to the Landings booklet.

Father Jac said the schedule is important but the "key is compassionate listening. If you're always wondering what you're going to say next, you really can't listen to anyone else."

During the ten weeks of the program, participants find themselves getting "very, very close to one another," Father Jac said. The tenets of the Creed, as Catholics know it from Mass on Sunday, guide the discussions. "There's something thrilling about listening to other people talk about what they believe," Father Jac said.

The original program was planned to be a series of lectures until a group of 100 returning Catholics in Aberdeen, Wash., dwindled to seven after several of the talks. The next format of having only the returning Catholics tell their stories was a step in the right direction but not far enough, Father Jac said, explaining the process "still made them feel like outsiders."

What guided the formation of Landings as it is today was realizing what kind of information returning Catholics were after, Father Jac said. "We asked what do they really want to know," Father Jac recalled, "and realized it was how is the Church living today and who are these Catholics I'm going to be part of."

An opening prayer and one group member's sharing his or her "Spiritual Journey Story" follow. Participants may then respond to the story, remembering that hearing it puts them "in a privileged position." A break is followed by a longer discussion of a contemporary Catholic theme decided the week before.

During a brief housekeeping period, assignments for the next week such as storyteller, prayer leader, refreshments are decided. Participants are reminded that the greatness of what's being achieved should ring throughout the steps including "good food" for refreshment. A portable library dealing with spiritual and theological issues is kept available for reference.

"We're really a mom and pop store," Father Jac said. "Our agenda is to get people back to the sacraments and have them go out in the world and be Catholic images of Christ."

Landings is accepted by bishops across the country, Father Jac said, noting it's at work in 85 dioceses in the US, five dioceses in Canada and soon will be implemented in England.

"Landings promises help in finding your way back to the community that we call Church," said Presentation Sister Antonio Heaphy, director of Pastoral Ministry for the Archdiocese, the department coordinating the Landings training. "Landings works extremely well for the person who has sort of drifted out of the Church. It's a way of saying you're always welcome to come back. The door's always open."

"An important part of the Landings program is that each team helps only two or three people at a time," Sister Heaphy said. "It's | not a class. It's a very guided and personal process where the returning person is involved with six to eight practicing Catholics with compassionate and non-judgmental hearts."

Landings can also be a "starting point" for Catholics who have found themselves outside the Church due to issues such as divorce and remarriage, Sister Heaphy said. "We would not say to anyone 'Your problem is too serious, don't come to us'. Anyone who wants to come should come. If there is an issue such as divorce, then they will be referred to the appropriate person for help."

"The thing that people have to always remember is that God loves them unconditionally," Sister Heaphy said. "What we do isn't going to change God's love for us at all. What we do changes our love for God and that's what we have to grapple with. God will always love you and if everybody understood that we wouldn't have people walking away. You can't do something that is unforgivable because God's love is unconditional."

Elaine Yastishock, pastoral associate at St. Catherine of Siena, represented the parish at San Mateo County training on March 3. She said that she and pastor Father Al Vucinovich both thought Landings could benefit the Burlingame community. "Father Al and I had heard about the program and he had expressed his openness to it," Ms. Yastishock said, adding she had learned of Landings through her work as coordinator of Young Adult Ministry at St. Catherine's.

Ms. Yastishock, who holds a graduate degree in pastoral ministry from Berkeley's Franciscan School of Theology, said she's "really excited to bring evangelization" to the Church's estranged community and is "convinced" the beginnings of bringing Catholics back to the Church lies in "personal relationships." Landings will become one of several steps the parish has taken to "create more opportunities for people to know one another better," the Hershey, Pennsylvania native said.

Dan Stenson, with his wife, Leticia and 13 additional Landings team members have helped approximately 25 Catholics return to the Church since beginning the program at St.

Bartholomew Parish, San Mateo, two years ago. The parish was the site of the March 3 San Mateo County sessions with the Stensons serving as hosts.

Mr. Stenson, who completed evangelization courses with the Archdiocese's School of Pastoral Leadership, said parish listening sessions instituted by pastor, Father Daniel Keohane, revealed many parishioners thought "reaching out to inactive Catholics" was necessary. "It was evident that a lot of people in the parish wanted this," Mr. Stenson said.

An initial step of making the parish community aware of the new ministry included presenting the program to the pastoral council and staff of St. Bartholomew's. "You need the involvement of the whole parish," Mr. Stenson said. "It can all begin with a phone call, a smile or being handed a bulletin."

Mr. Stenson said he has concluded that, "You never learn more about your faith than when you have a chance to share it." He said his participation in the program has also allowed him "to study my faith in ways I could never have imagined" and "made me a better and happier Catholic."

Not everyone who starts the program finishes it, but that should not be a reflection on their desire to return to the community, Mr. Stenson said. "Some people are more comfortable in other surroundings, such as one-on-one meetings with a member of the clergy and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). "There is no exclusivity to Landings. It's just one more way to say we're glad you're here."

Mr. Stenson called the process "not easy but well worth doing" and said "a couple of people we've welcomed through the program are now team members." St. Bartholomew's Landings volunteers hope to "serve as mentors" to parishes who are new to the program, Mr. Stenson said.

Finding Catholics who might take part in the program is not as tough as it might seem according to Joan Horn, Landings' national coordinator, who helped facilitate the trainings. "They're already here," Ms. Horn said during a break from the San Mateo talks. "We sit next to them at Easter, Christmas, weddings and funerals."

Michael Adams returned to the Church through Landings at Old St. Mary's Parish seven years ago after an absence of 20 years and today helps others in the same way. Mr. Adams said his leaving the Church was a "slow process" and "involved some issues I had with the Church." Mr. Adams said he "started not going" to Mass while living in St. Louis and by the time he moved to California "did not attend anywhere" but "missed it."

"The Landings program allowed me to meet with a group of people that I could be very open with, very trusting with," Mr. Adams said before the start of the training at Holy Name of Jesus Parish on March 9. "It was that acceptance. The people in the group are still very close friends of mine."

Mr. Adams has facilitated four Landings groups during the last five years and serves at Old St. Mary's as a rector and acolyte. "The incredible experience I've had working with people doing what I did is humbling and gets me very excited," he said.

"At the end of the program, it is hoped that participants have discovered or rediscovered a Church that really loves them, the richness of their faith, and a community that will welcome them back," Sister Heaphy pointed out.

Sister Heaphy said the wider implementation of Landings in the Archdiocese is part of the evangelization process of the local and larger Church, a dimension of the faith on which Pope John Paul II focused during his visit to St. Louis in 1999.

In a homily at a principal liturgy there, the pope spoke directly to Catholics "separated from the practice of their faith" with these words:

"On the eve of the Great Jubilee of the 2000th anniversary of the Incarnation, Christ is seeking you out and inviting you back to the community of faith. Is this not the moment for you to experience the joy of returning to the Father's house? In some cases there may still be obstacles to Eucharistic participation; in some cases there may be memories to be healed; in all cases there is the assurance of God's love and mercy."

"The pope hit the nail right on the head there," Sister Heaphy said. "He made that special address to (estranged Catholics). Of all the people who were there, he concentrated on that aspect of who we are as Church."

More than 250,000 people have so far participated in Landings, half as welcomers and half as returning Catholics. Statistics indicate there are 10 potential returning Catholics for each enrolled RCIA candidate.

For more information on Landings, or to support their ministry, visit website, [www.Landings-International.org](http://www.Landings-International.org)