

SHEILA KEEFE

## In from the cold

A systematic programme for bringing those who have drifted from the Church back 'home' to the Sacraments can bear much fruit – provided it is grounded in prayer

**M**ince pies and mulled wine are the perfect ending to our Christmas Mass every year; but this time the church was packed beyond the doors. This was the climax to the "Come home for Christmas" campaign we had promoted in Advent. It was heart-warming to see so many of our "occasional" Mass-goers chatting with old friends and clearly delighted to be there, in an atmosphere of warmth, friendship and celebration.

We are determined to continue our Advent campaign during Lent and hope that even more people will "come home for Easter". The campaign, organised by the Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation (Case), was a welcome spur to many parishes looking for ways to reach out to their "distanced" parishioners. It was so successful during Advent that Case is now providing its resource materials to many parishes who want to continue the campaign during Lent.

Our parish Keeping in Touch (Kit) group worked hard during Advent to involve the whole parish in making contact with their non-churchgoing families, friends and neighbours, inviting them to "come home" for Christmas. Bidding prayers were said at each Sunday Mass throughout Advent, and the Kit prayer was inserted into our missalettes. We placed invitations to the Christmas Masses in our local newspaper and on our parish website, dropped invitations through doors and personally invited those non-churchgoing Catholics closest to us to join us for the Christmas celebrations.

Our parish has two churches and we set up special candle stands in each of them. Parishioners were invited to light a candle and pray for somebody close to them who had stopped coming to church. Such was the response that on at least one occasion the candle stands could not accommodate all the candles.

Throughout the campaign, our aim was to be the welcoming face of the Church, seeking to touch the hearts and lives of Catholics who may have drifted away from Mass for many different reasons. An extended parish

welcome committee joined in the preparations, standing outside the church doors before and after each Mass at Christmas to reach out in friendship and welcome.

One of Case's suggestions is to hold a wine and cheese evening for anyone interested in exploring today's Church and their faith. We decided to hold our evening in mid-January and we gave out invitations at all the Christmas Masses and sent them to non-churchgoing parishioners who we thought might be interested. We invited those who came to join us for a few small group meetings where they would be able to ask questions, explore issues and learn about today's Church in a relaxed atmosphere. Five people are already attending small group meetings.

Our parish Kit group began to reach out to local Catholics on the margins of parish life about three years ago with a team of six parishioners. That grew to 16 when we started a programme to visit all our parishioners in their homes. The programme has helped us to update our records; but more importantly, it has helped Catholics living on the edge of the faith community to feel that they belong and that

they matter. Before we visit anyone, the parish priest sends them a letter telling them that we are planning to call – giving them the opportunity to tell us they do not want a visit. Some decline but most are pleased with the contact and happy that they are still in our parish records – and a few begin their journey back to the Sacraments.

The formula for our visits is very simple. The person we are visiting is always addressed by name; we introduce ourselves, and tell them that we have their name on our records as being Catholic; and we ask if that is correct. We establish how many Catholics live in the household in order to update the parish records, and then we ask if there is any information or help they need from the Church at this time. We take with us a blessing prayer for the home and information and contact details about the parish, and invite them to contact us at any time. This formula provides a framework, within which our aim is to be warm and welcom-

ing and, especially, to listen to anything those we are visiting may want to tell us.

Our Kit ministry is solidly based on prayer. We have a growing list of prayer sponsors who say the Kit prayer daily; we contact them to ask for special prayers regularly. One of them is a Carmelite sister who has made Kit her special interest and prays for all of our meetings. Monthly bidding prayers are said during Sunday Masses for our loved ones who no longer come to church. At each meeting, we spend time exploring a gospel passage and its meaning in our lives, before planning our work for the next few weeks. Reaching out to unknown Catholics takes us out of our comfort zone and exposes our own vulnerabilities – so our Kit prayer is not only for our non-churchgoing parishioners; it also reminds us to put ourselves with all our limitations into God's hands:

Lord, I offer you my seeking; show me the way  
I offer you my doubts; lead me to trust in you  
I offer you my hurts; heal me  
I offer you my fears; give me hope  
I offer you my loneliness; welcome me  
I offer you my heart; warm it with love  
I offer you my journey; lead me home where  
I can live in your justice, peace and love.

Amen

One returning Catholic described her reaction to the letter we sent out as like being the sleeping beauty awakened – and has been coming to Mass ever since.

Our experience at Christmas has proved to us that so many non-churchgoing Catholics are simply waiting to be invited to come back. Easter is another time of the year when many of these people come to Church. It is a time when we should, of course, react to them by being welcoming; but this is not enough. We are determined to continue to be more proactive in the parish.

■ Sheila Keefe is a member of the Portsmouth Diocesan Kit group and the Advisory Board of Case. Email: [s.keefe@bopenworld.com](mailto:s.keefe@bopenworld.com). Visit the Case website to download useful resources including a link to the Kit website: [http://www.caseresources.org/resources/resources\\_downloads.htm](http://www.caseresources.org/resources/resources_downloads.htm)

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**TO DO**  
**Find** and form a parish Keeping in Touch (Kit) team  
**During** Lent invite "distanced" Catholics to "come home for Easter"  
**Say** the Kit prayer

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