

Running Landings at St Joseph's, Epsom - by Kevin McDonnell

If you live in the Epsom area and would like to find out more about Landings at Saint Joseph's please contact one of the Landings Coordinators, Sister Roseanne or Kevin McDonnell c/o the Parish Office, either by telephone: 01372 723573 or by e-mail: sjcparishoffice@st-josephs-epsom.org.uk

We started Landings in our parish in June 2003 when 3 of us, 2 lay people and a nun, attended a short introduction to Landings course at Ealing Abbey. In the weeks following the course we used the Landings literature to help us set up our own Landings programme. Our parish priest gave us the names of people that might be interested in joining our Landings team and after a few weeks we had a team of 5 lay people and a nun ready to help absent Catholics return to the church. Our lay people consisted of a Police IT support technician with a wife and three young children, a qualified teacher – currently a home maker - with a husband and three young children, a human resources manager, a retired IT manager and a retired teacher. We advertised our Landings programme to the parish with articles in the parish newsletter, leaflets at the back of the church and the occasional verbal reminder from the parish priest at the end of Mass. In September 2003, with our “advertising campaign” underway, and while we waited to be deluged with Catholics looking at returning to the Church, we ran real Landings meetings sessions each week with a Landings team member taking the role of a returning Catholic. We decided very early on that, during our Landings meetings, we would take turns in the various roles, facilitating, time keeping, telling the spiritual journey story etc. so that each of us would fully understand each role in a Landings meeting. We became quite good at Landings meetings but as the weeks passed it became obvious that there was not going to be a deluge of returning Catholics, in fact there wasn't even going to be a trickle. As Christmas 2003 passed we started to get a bit dispirited.

Early in 2004 we decided that we needed to take more action to get our Landings programme into the minds of the people of our parish. We set up a marketing programme. We posters put up in the church, we put posters up at every access point to the church, we put posters facing outwards on the glass doors of the church, we distributed leaflets, we made sure that there was a Landings page on our parish website, we got team members to speak briefly about Landings after several Masses. We talked about advertising in the local press. We prayed for some Catholics to return, even one would do! We contacted other parishes throughout the UK that had Landings programmes underway and received much guidance and encouragement from them.

As we expected, our Landings team changed with the passage of time. We lost our Police IT support man. He had shown great resilience and dedication, attending the Landings meeting and supporting our efforts to attract returning Catholics, while at the same time balancing a very demanding career and his family responsibilities. We lost our human resources manager. She took on more

career responsibility and signed up for some very time consuming higher education. But we gained a young solicitor.

By now it was spring 2004 and as the buds started to appear on the trees we got a contact! An e mail came into the parish office from somebody who had seen our poster facing outwards on the glass doors of the church. It was from a young professional man who had come from the Italian office of a multinational pharmaceutical company, to take up a role in a local office. He and his wife had been away from the Church for a number of years but were interested in looking at Landings as a route back. (An interesting dimension was that English was very much their second language.) And suddenly two more contacts. A young working mother, who, after a discussion with the parish priest, wanted to look at Landings as way back to the Church. And a university psychology lecturer who had seen our parish website Landings page, had come to Mass at our church, talked to our parish priest and was also interested in Landings as a way back. We started to set up our first real Landings meetings, deciding on the best evening on which to hold the meetings, booking a room, gathering our Landings literature etc. But just before our first meeting our Italian professional and his wife dropped out – for the time being. They decided that they needed more time to improve their level of English before starting a Landings journey. We were all disappointed but understood the reasoning and felt confident that we would meet this couple later.

At the end of May 2004 we started our Landings meetings, helping our young working mother and our psychology lecturer on their road back to the Church. For our first meeting the Landings team talked our newcomers through the Landings process and the Landings meeting structure and agreed logistics etc. We started the “real” meetings in early June. As a team we had decided that our meetings would be very informal, completely relaxed and that our returning Catholics would not necessarily be able to distinguish between the Returners and the Welcoming members of the Landings team. We all wore name tags for the first two meetings but by the third meeting we dispensed with them. Our first run of Landings continued to the end of July and was a wonderful experience for each of us. We were overjoyed when our two Returners came back to the Church. I know that each member of the Landings team was elated and that, with God’s help, felt that we had really achieved something. The finale for our first run of Landings was a private Mass in our parish church, said by our parish priest and attended by the Landings team and our two Returners.

In the autumn of 2005 we started a campaign to launch a second run of Landings. We contacted our Italian friend and were delighted when he said that he and his wife would like to join the second run. Through our web site we heard from a retired lady teacher who was interested in looking at returning to the Church. And then more contacts; a young lady who was an independent human resources consultant, a lady that had recently been widowed and a doctor. After phone calls, meetings and e mails talking these people through the Landings process, we were happy to find that we had six people ready to join our second Landings run.

We realised that having a run of Landings with six Returners would be more complex logistically because of the increased length of the Landings run and the need to cater for holidays and other absences. We were also a bit worried about losing the momentum and team spirit because of the length of time that would be involved. We invited the two people that had come back to the Church through our first Landings run to join the team. The young working mother couldn't join us because she was already heavily committed trying to set up her own business and supporting her family. However, very generously our university psychology lecturer agreed to join the team and he gave us all outstanding support and confidence. Our second run of Landings went from February to May 2005. Our first meeting was again a run through of a Landings session and we started in earnest in the second meeting. As anticipated during this run of Landings there were some scheduling difficulties and much juggling of the various Landings' roles, facilitating, time keeping, telling the spiritual journey story etc. But we all persevered and five of the six people returned to the Church. And, as with the first run of Landings, this second run was highly enjoyable for everyone. The Landing team and the Returners all said how much they had enjoyed the experience and the great spiritual uplift they got from it.

We have had one more run of Landings. This third run was to help two people look at returning to the Church, one returned and one did not.

With the passage of time our Landings team has changed. One of our original team members, the retired teacher, died in the summer of 2007. She was a Catholic convert and a very good person – committed to the Landings programme and very generous with her time. Our psychology lecturer, who travelled a long way to come to the Landings meetings, has had to resign from the team because of huge time commitments elsewhere. He came back to the Church through Landings and subsequently gave Landings great support and commitment. Our young solicitor has moved away from the area to set up his own business. These people are missed a lot. They gave so much time to help others. At the time of writing our Landings team is in "ready" mode and on standby to help anyone look at returning to the Church.

Landings can take a long time to set up and requires patience, but it brings great rewards. The Landings literature gives great help and guidance. Running the Landings programme taught us to emphasise the following aspects of Landings;

Landings is all about listening. Wear name tags for the first couple of meetings. Confidentiality is a must. Anything mentioned in a Landings meeting is confidential. Let each person take at least one turn at leading a Landings meeting and at leading each of the components in the schedule of a Landings meeting. The meetings must be very relaxed, friendly and informal, but keep to the structure. Time keeping is very important but can be difficult, given that Landings is a ministry of listening. People need only share as much of their story as they feel comfortable telling. Never be judgmental.