

Volunteers: a reflection

I grew up in a home where voluntary church work was a way of life. Apostolates supporting marriage, family and parish life¹ oozed out of every pore of the home. Spirituality programs, files and correspondence were stacked in the kitchen and under the beds (until the back room was finally converted into an office). At times the garage was so choc-a-block with seminar supplies that the car wouldn't fit.

Our living room was a constant gathering place for planning teams and prayer meetings. Late night coffee around the kitchen table was a favourite 'debriefing' site and, for a while there, every Sunday night ended in an impromptu party. A regular juggling act of surrendered bedrooms and fold-out mattresses catered for visitors from afar, and it wasn't unusual to stumble out of bed in the morning to find a new face at the breakfast table (Oh, so you're from... the Philippines?).

All this voluntary activity was worked around the daily schedules of an ordinary household: secular jobs, school, university courses and sport, not to mention all the usual challenges of family life: sibling rivalry, teenage rebellion and parent-child tensions.

Funny, I don't ever recall thinking of ourselves as 'volunteers'. We were Catholics and this was just our way of life. 'Church work' was a

seamless extension of an intricate, grassroots network of relationships: good, generous, faithful people who shaped the story of the church in Australia in subtle and brave ways. Community fed the mission and the mission fed (and extended) the communion.

I can understand that, to some, the whole scenario may sound like a nightmarish invasion of privacy! And, yes, it had its moments. But for the most part I look back on those years as an extraordinary training ground which, created as it was from blood and friendship ties, no pastoral ministry course could hope to emulate. Here I learnt first-hand the evangelizing power of family life—the guts, the glory and the school of hard knocks. Here the Vatican II summons to mission became a reality to be grasped. I learnt that you didn't have to wait for the glacier-like movement of the institutional church; you could effect positive change right here, right now, using whatever gifts and resources were at hand; for even the most ordinary homes held powerful graces.

It is difficult to find the words to describe the 'inside' experience of a home where voluntary church work is a way of life, however no doubt many people will be reading this with a knowing smile. They've been there. They have their unique story to share. For, without denying the legitimate role of church offices and employment structures, the Christian mission

is essentially a grassroots and voluntary undertaking. In every parish that has ever been touched by a lay movement or association (Family Groups, Marian groups, Lenten groups, Antioch, Alpha, Cursillo, Evenings for the Engaged, St Vincent de Paul... the list is endless), the 'open house' generosity of ordinary families has left its mark and shaped its history.

The Olympics did us all a favour in bringing to the fore of our consciousness the contribution of 'The Volunteer'. Freely sharing one's time, skills, possessions and living space for the greater good is what community is all about. Perhaps, though, the term 'volunteer' doesn't quite capture the gospel perspective. How about 'Christian' or 'apostle'? •

