

## **ST BERNARD'S NEIGHBOURHOOD MEALS**

Len Monk, St Bernard's Parish, Belmont, Vic

Neighbourhood meals involve calling on every household on the Parish census by the Pastoral Associate. 50 to 70 neighbouring households at a time are invited to a meal; it may take several years to cover the whole Parish. The visit is not cold calling but warm calling because the people are acknowledged as part of the baptised community. The exercise is simple: the Pastoral Associate says hello and gives the householder an invitation to a meal. This encounter may lead to very brief or very long conversations – nothing forced: allow what happens to happen naturally.

The meal brings together a dozen or so parishioners who live near one another – who previously might only have seen the other in the street or the shops or heard their name somewhere. It allows these neighbours to become more acquainted with one another, to build connections and relationships. They also get to know the Parish Priest and Parish staff which facilitates a stronger Parish identity and easier parish operations. The building up of the Parish community occurs both at the meal stage, and also at the visiting stage. The visit makes an important statement – the Parish cared enough to come to the Parishioner rather than expecting the parishioner to first come to the Parish centre. Perhaps it reminds us of the God who loves us first, and who initiates first contact with us.

The Parish census includes active and seemingly non-active parishioners; it includes school and non-school families. The Neighbourhood Meal invitation to all families on the census provides many benefits. The visit identifies needs of parishioners, some of which might not have been known previously; it also identifies gifted parishioners hitherto unknown. Such connections can offer opportunities for 'like-to-like' ministry, e.g. bringing together lonely neighbours, or connecting isolated mothers / fathers with small children. The visit also welcomes any new parishioners. With experience and timing, visits find 80% to 90% of parishioners at home and this enables the Parish census to be updated.

It is said that the sacramental work of the parish should not be separated from its pastoral work. However, these two essential functions can be integrated by agency of an accredited lay minister. Face to face visiting by the lay minister who represents the Parish, gently moderates the pain of loneliness and illness, and addresses the need for someone who cares, for a community which cares, for a God of love.

Certainly, it is not easy to be present to the many, yet Pope Francis (*Evangelii Gaudium*) exhorts the parish to be "in contact with the homes and the lives of its people" (28) and its ministers to "take on the smell of the sheep" (24). "I do not want a church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures" (49).

We recall Jeremiah's words: "For both prophet and priest ply their trade through the land, and have no knowledge" (Jer 14:18). Jeremiah reminds us of the weakness of formalism in religion; he insists that there must be within the framework of the worshipping community, a commitment to achieving a change of heart in the community, which is very much a commitment to the personal and the local. Accredited lay ministers can bridge the cultural gap between church and people – they already walk the streets of the parish; they are well equipped to touch the lives of the people, to understand their situations, to develop comprehensive and mutual caring at grassroots level.

Through neighbourhood meals, St Bernard's take on this challenge of engagement with the whole parish.