

THE VINCENTIAN MISSION IN TOWNSVILLE, QUEENSLAND

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The Vincentian Mission in Townsville commenced late in January 2002 in response to a request from Bishop Michael Putney, the diocesan bishop for assistance in his diocese. Some six months previously he had written to many Congregational leaders asking for priests to come and minister in his diocese. In his letter he pointed out how there were only 17 diocesan priests active in ministry in the diocese, many of whom were elderly and several of whom suffered from major health concerns. There were a number of parishes in the diocese that had no resident parish priest or even retired priest and several parishes were administered by lay leaders or religious women. Whilst all were working to the best of their abilities, in many ways the foreseeable future of the diocese looked grim, especially when one factored in, that not only was it low in personnel but it was also deficient in other resource and financial areas . The bishop's letter was however hopeful in spite of what was obviously a perilous situation. By way of response, several Congregational leaders wrote back supportive but empathic letters, most promising prayer but unable to offer anything in the way of personnel. Maurice Sullivan CM replied to the bishop's letter saying that the Vincentians would give serious consideration to the needs outlined in the letter in accordance with our tradition, our commitment to the most needy and our emerging strategic plan.

Shortly after, I was given the letter to read and after reading it I replied that I would be agreeable to exploring the possibilities of ministry in Townsville. In August I met with Bishop Putney in Parkes at the

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ordination of Chris Toohey as Bishop of Wilcannia Forbes. This was a brief but fruitful meeting. I asked him straight out why the Vincentians should come to Townsville in preference to ministering in any other diocese. The immediate needs of Wilcannia Forbes had impacted on me throughout the ordination ceremony! I don't know whether he was prepared for my question but his reply was instant and telling. He invited me to ask any bishop present at the ordination which was the most needy diocese in Australia and he said that they would all reply Townsville.

In consultation with the Provincial I then agreed to undertake a visit to Townsville to see for myself exactly what the needs were. This visit took place in October 2001. It was obvious very quickly that the needs were as great as had been indicated and I prepared a position paper for the Provincial Council on the situation as I saw it. As a result of further discussion, eventually it was decided that the Congregation would make a commitment of two confreres to work in the diocese, initially for a period of two years in ministries to be mutually determined by the confreres and diocesan authorities. In January 2002 I arrived and soon after in February, Jose Koyickal joined me. Early in February we established our residence in Kirwan. This is a rental property paid for by the diocese and at the time of writing is still our community home in Townsville.

The diocese of Townsville is a large diocese, geographically larger than the state of Victoria! The main centre is the twin cities of Townsville and Thuringowa with a combined population over just over 150,000. Both collectively are known as Townsville in the wider community. Other main centres are Ingham, Ayr, Bowen and Proserpine on the coast and Charters Towers, Hughenden, Winton, Cloncurry and Mt Isa inland. All of these have considerably smaller populations than Townsville and many of the smaller settlements inland are experiencing all of the difficulties confronting rural Australia. After a period of settling and adjustment, eventually it was decided that I would work in the city of Townsville in the combined

parishes of Mundingburra and Hyde Park. Mundingburra had been administered for a few years by a lay leader with a retired resident priest available for sacramental celebrations. The resident priest had died four weeks after Bishop Putney's installation and so for 10 months Mundingburra had no resident priest apart from supply priests who celebrated Mass on weekends. The parish of Hyde Park had been led by a Pastoral Leader for 12 years with only weekend supplies and in June 2001 it was officially combined with Mundingburra. This was not without considerable pain and anxiety for all concerned and it quickly became apparent that one of the pressing immediate tasks was to facilitate an ongoing healing process for a lot of angry and broken people.

Apart from my ministry in the Mundingburra parish, I am also chaplain to the Mater Hospital in Townsville, which is not all that dissimilar to the Mater in North Sydney where I was previously ministering. This involves routine visiting one morning each week and being on call during working hours six days a week. On Friday mornings I minister as the visiting Catholic chaplain at James Cook University. The chaplaincy department at the university has been established as a multi faith chaplaincy with a co-ordinating chaplain and volunteer chaplains like myself. My other involvement with the university is as a member of the Human Research Ethics Committee which meets monthly to discuss all the research proposals presented for approval and/or funding through the university. My final area of ministry involves working with a small team to create an integrated ministry for youth, initially in the Townsville region but ultimately to other regions in the diocese as well.

A major area of concern for the Bishop was the western region of the diocese. Whilst the population is not excessively large, distances between centres are vast and prior to our arrival there were only two priests west of Charters Towers to cover enormous territory and to minister to people in remote areas and on properties. After consultation with the Bishop and local priests, Jose decided to explore the

possibility of ministering in these remote areas. Initially he went out west for about 8 days to experience for himself something of its remoteness and to talk with the local clergy about the trials and tribulations of life in the outback. After much prayer, deliberation, discussion and frank sharing Jose agreed to commence ministry as part of the outback ministry team based in Cloncurry with pastoral responsibility also for Julia Creek, McKinley, Nelia, Kynuna and sometimes Winton. As our confreres who have worked in outback parts of Rockhampton diocese can testify, life is not always easy in these remote parts. Coupled with the prolonged drought, the gradual death of some rural communities, the isolation and lack of people contact all make for testing and sometimes lonely times. I do not feel qualified to speak on Jose's behalf about his ministry out west. That is another article to be written!

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF TOWNSVILLE REGION

(These details are gleaned from the publication “ *The Townsville Region: A SOCIAL ATLAS: - An Executive Summary*” January 2003, and fuller details may be obtained from the Townsville City Council's Community Development Section, cnr Stokes and Sturt Streets, Townsville City. The information applies only to the Townsville region of the local government areas of Townsville and Thuringowa.)

Population growth

Between 1996 and 2001, the Townsville region experienced a five year growth rate of 10.0% compared with the Queensland growth rate of 8.0% and the Australian growth rate of 5.7%. It is estimated that the regional growth rate will increase at a rate of 8.7% until the year 2011.

Residential mobility

Over half of Townsville's population aged 5 years and over lived at a different address five years ago. Residential mobility in the Townsville region is higher than for Australia, Queensland, Brisbane or Cairns.

Age structure

The age structure for the Townsville region presents a younger profile than for the rest of Australia or Queensland, but the continuing decline in children aged 14 and under reflects the broader trends towards smaller family units, a declining fertility rate and the ageing of our population.

Social characteristics

The Townsville region has a relatively low population of people born overseas. In the latter part of the twentieth century, there was strong migration from Pacific Island countries.

In Townsville, the two parent family type is still the major group, but its proportion is slowly decreasing. The percentage of single parent families in the Townsville region is slightly higher compared to Australia and Queensland. It is estimated that 3800 families (16.2% of all families in the region) are living below the poverty line. This compares with 18.6% in Queensland and 16.8% in Australia.

5.1% of Townsville's population are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Of this total, 68.8% are of Aboriginal descent, higher than for Australia or Queensland.

Religious denominations in the Townsville region are dominated by the Catholic and Anglican faiths.

Housing

In the Townsville region, 29.7% of housing is fully owned, 28.8% is being purchased and 34.8% is being rented. The Townsville region has comparatively high levels of rental housing largely due to the high level of public sector workforce, in particular the high level of rental housing by Australian Defence Force personnel. Public housing has declined as a proportion of the rental market and indicates that it may not be keeping pace with demand.

Approximately half of the households receiving income less than the poverty line spend more than 30% of their income on rent, suggesting that at least 3000 households are living in rental accommodation which is not affordable in relation to their low income.

Employment

There has been a significant increase over the past five years in the percentage of the workforce employed in the construction industry, as well as the industries of mining, retail, government administration and Defence. Whilst unemployment levels have also declined over the past five years, the current level of 8.5% reflects the unacceptably high number of people seeking full and part time work.

Hopefully these demographic details assist in forming a broader picture of Townsville and its needs. I would now like to share some demographic details as they pertain to the Church of Townsville.

The diocese may be divided into three distinct sections. The coastal strip consists of Townsville and Ingham in the north and Ayr, Home Hill, Collinsville, Bowen and the Whitsundays in the south. The third region is the western region between Charters Towers and Mt Isa to the Northern Territory border. In the diocese there are currently twenty parishes, with some seven other former parishes now administered from or absorbed into them. Apart from the Bishop, there are 16

diocesan priests who are still active in parish ministry. Four of these are over 70, eight are over 60, three are over 50 and one is in his forties. There are three Franciscans currently ministering in the diocese, all of whom are over 70. There is also a priest from the Missionary Society of St Paul working here on a two year contract. He is in his 50s. As well there is a 72 year old diocesan priest on loan from the Philippines here for three years. Then there is Jose and myself, both in our 50s. Seven priests are retired and not engaged in active pastoral ministry. Seven of the priests currently ministering in the diocese have serious health concerns and some are unable to undertake ministry in a fulltime capacity.

Four pastoral leaders minister in parishes throughout the diocese.

Unfortunately, the diocese has not had anyone ordained to the priesthood for several years, neither have they had any candidates in the seminary until this year when a mature aged candidate was accepted to commence studies for the priesthood in the seminary in Brisbane.

The diocese of Townsville is a mixture of contradictions. For many years, extensive pastoral planning was undertaken and several plans emerged as blueprints for the directions in which the diocese would move. These were often innovative and even provocative. It is true to say that they never enjoyed universal appeal and even though they were produced with the best of intentions, they often resulted in creating a backlash of criticism and rejection. Divisions were deep with a vocal and entrenched ultra conservative powerful lobby pitted against those responsible for the pastoral initiatives being devised and implemented. It would also be true to say that certain of these initiatives were not properly thought through and the implementation of some led to all sorts of stories being fabricated about what was happening in Townsville. Some of these may have had some grounding in truth but most of them have been greatly embellished with the passage of time.

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The diocese is most definitely at an important crossroads as its perilous future and continued existence are constantly being examined. One of the fundamental desires of the current bishop is the active promotion of vocations. As Vincentians working in the diocese we are offering our support to the bishop in the promotion of this cause. Part of the problem facing the diocese immediately is not only the shortages in the priesthood but also a lack of energy, enthusiasm and zeal in the presbyterate. Some remain very enthusiastic about their ministry whilst others feel greatly overburdened. As Vincentians, we try to offer real support and encouragement for our colleagues in the priesthood by spending time with them, listening to them and making ourselves available to assist them in whatever ways we can.

One of the effects of all the changes introduced into the diocese, though not exclusively on account of them, has been the serious decline in people actively living their faith as worshipping members of the community. With the closure of Churches, the absence of resident priests and the removal of liturgical celebrations, many have all but abandoned their active involvement as worshipping community members. Many of the elderly who traditionally are the most loyal, as well as others have become quite disillusioned with the unavailability of the Third Rite of Reconciliation and have subsequently abandoned almost entirely the sacrament of Reconciliation. Coupled with the virtual generational loss of the parents of current school children, the diocese faces serious issues which will dramatically impact on its viability and future. It truly has become missionary territory in every sense of the word and the task of evangelisation is huge .

The challenges facing the Townsville diocese are major but possibly not all that different to those which other dioceses will be starting to experience if they are not already doing so. Many may ask the questions “why are we here?” and “is this really Vincentian work?” I believe that from whatever perspective you look at it or whatever assessment tools you apply to it, the answer to the second question is that this is most definitely ministry that can be said to be authentically

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Vincentian. We are making a substantial and significant contribution to the life and future of this diocese at a crucial time in its pastoral development. The people we minister to and with are in the purest sense of the words “poor country people” who undoubtedly would be dear to the heart of Vincent De Paul. The real and valued support and encouragement we offer to a depleted and sometimes dispirited clergy is pivotal and foundational, and is most definitely in keeping with our history and traditions.

As with all of our ministries, this mission needs to be critiqued and evaluated according to the process of our community Strategic Plan. One advantage of a mission such as this is that it is contemporary with a contract and commitment that is non long term and renewable. There is great flexibility in the delivery of our ministry and it is truly a work where we are valued not only for the men who have been provided but for the charism which underpins our involvement. In 2003, I believe our ministry in Townsville has real value, not only for the work that is done but also for the sign of hope that it has become.
