CHAPTER FOUR

Designing a Project

In 1980 three prominent Jesuit priests of the Irish Province decided to live alongside people in Portadown, one of the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. They deeply desired to put their commitment to the "preferential option for the poor" into effect. Ecclesiastical relationships and politics had prevented them from developing work in the North for a long time. They felt bad about this. They wanted "to be with people in the North in their suffering".

The priests decided that two of them, Fathers Patrick Doyle and Brian Lennon, should attend an Avec work-consultancy course in 1980 to think about this idea with an independent ecumenical group. (The commitments of the other priest prevented him from attending as well.) The course was very much like the one described in Chapter Three. It had two work study groups. My colleague, Miss Catherine Widdicombe, worked with Father Brian Lennon in one group and I worked with Father Patrick Doyle in the other. Other members of the group were: a Church of Ireland priest; a Presbyterian minister; and superiors of two Roman Catholic religious orders for women. Between times they discussed the consultancy sessions with their colleague and fed anything that emerged into subsequent consultations with their respective groups. (This arrangement has always worked well. Members can explore their own thoughts freely, more ground is covered and more people are consulted. Sometimes staff members talk to the team to consider what has emerged and especially any mutually exclusive ideas that arise—strangely this has rarely happened.)

The group and I worked with Father Doyle on the design of the Jesuits' Portadown project. This chapter describes aspects of the design that evolved and how we arrived at them: the story-line, therefore, is the design process rather than the consultative procedures. It concludes with an evaluation of the design by the Team five years later and a comment in 1992 by Father Doyle.

I. DESIGN INFORMATION

Using as starting points papers* written by Fathers Doyle and Lennon,

*In order to meet their circumstances the papers were based on a different outline from the one used by the Bishop in Chapter 3. The titles of sections were: looking back—what I have learnt about working with people and its implications; looking forward—aims, the new situation, opportunities and difficulties, ideas, initial objectives, beliefs; hopes for the course.
members of the group first built up a picture of the thinking behind the project, the orientation of Father Doyle to it, the nature of the working situation, the difficulties anticipated and the action already taken.

1. Father Doyle and the Project

Father Doyle had trained and practised as an industrial scientist. Gradually his interest in philosophy and theology had led him to become a Jesuit in 1954. For fifteen years he had held positions of responsibility: the headmaster of a boarding school (two years); the superior of religious communities (four and three years); the Provincial of the Jesuits in Ireland (six years). He said that being placed in these roles had always surprised him because he did not regard himself as an administrator or an authority figure. Through these experiences he said that he had learnt much about the personal care and support of individuals and had accepted in principle the vital need for planning and consistent implementation of programmes for groups but had not utilized properly or sufficiently the necessary processes involved in the latter. He said he had no personal difficulty in devolving responsibility and that he could live comfortably with a high level of uncertainty. However, he did not allow sufficiently for the effects of this on groups depending on his decisions for action. Currently he was between jobs: the clearly defined post as Provincial and the experimental project which was at the negotiating and planning stage. He expressed his beliefs and aims in the following ways.

Beliefs: My central belief is in the inseparable unity of all persons and the unique contributions each individual makes to what it is to be human. I do not become myself fully until all people become fully themselves and so this life and the next are a continuous growth and a final reconciliation of evil by the overwhelming goodness to be discovered in persons, in Christ and in the loving divinity he opens to us. Thus nobody, of whatever belief, background, race or nation can be excluded from our personal concern and love. We have to learn to relate and grow through our immediate contacts but our meaning and concern have to embrace even all those we do not know and cannot meet until the next life. There we meet, understand, forgive and love in union with Christ in the mystery of the Divine Life. This is a very condensed statement of what I think motivates my life and guides what I try to do. It is also the ground of the guilt and pain I experience as I try to avoid its implications through selfishness and general sinfulness.

Aims: I would wish people to be more aware of their uniqueness, personal worth, and capacity for continuous growth; of their unity with all people; of their need for others and the vast opportunities for co-operation and mutual support; (for Christians) of Christ as being for all people and not narrowly for church members; of Christian unity as a sign of the greater and fundamental unity of all peoples; of the loving presence of God in all lives.

2. The Team’s Ideas for the Project

With the “received approval of the Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh” they hoped to have the freedom to operate in counselling, adult education, community development, ecumenical action and similar areas of work within and beyond the Portadown Parish. They would not engage in established parish work other than to a small degree and only then by mutual agreement with the parish priest. The most valuable opportunities should arise, they said, from the fact that they would be a new and relatively free agency for undertaking new initiatives.

Initially they were concerned “to settle into the area quietly and to begin to learn from the people there.” They wanted to have the time and means to learn about the real needs that the people experience in their lives. They wanted to find out what they should do by living there and by promoting friendly acceptance and mutual trust. Two questions were in their minds: “Have we resources which could be useful? How do we make these available to people?” The “Avec approach” they said, seemed appropriate to this kind of activity.

3. Difficulties foreseen

At this stage the basic difficulty that the Jesuits faced was effecting an entry into Portadown and establishing creative relationships with all those with whom they wished to live and work. This difficulty had several inter-related and compounding aspects.

First, as Jesuits had been personae non gratae in the Province for a century, a lot of mistrust had to be overcome for the Team to be really accepted by the bishop, priests, religious and laity in the diocese. This was in addition to the traditional tensions and rivalries between diocesan (secular) and religious clergy. Over the past few years some Jesuits had been active in the North and done some distinguished work which had been generally well received ecumenically, but without official permission and somewhat clandestinely, as the Roman Catholic hierarchy had not agreed to a formal presence and groups of priests in the North. This was an undesirable situation because it could so easily adversely affect relationships.

Second, they would need to overcome the widespread assumption that they could not understand “the problems” of Ulster and feel the fears that accompanied them because they were “outsiders”.

Third, there were considerable difficulties in getting alongside the people in the deprived areas of Portadown where they intended to live and minister and establishing genuine and equitable relationships of mutual respect and acceptance. They were priests, Jesuit priests, not laity. In stark contrast to the local people they had distinguished academic careers, they were widely travelled, they had held positions of high status and they were people with

*The Cardinal was the Bishop of the Diocese in which Portadown is situated. To save confusion I refer to him as the Bishop.
influence. Father Lennon, for instance, was a lecturer in the Irish School of Ecumenics, an author and broadcaster. And, whilst they had wide pastoral experience of people with more formal education and ecumenical sympathies, they had no experience of pastoral work with the kind of people who lived in Portadown.

Fourth, because of differences of theology, ecclesiology and ecumenical stance they saw considerable problems in getting local clergy and laity to work with them according to the insights of Vatican II to which they were deeply committed.

4. Action already taken

Official agreement of the Irish Jesuit Province had been obtained through the person who succeeded Father Patrick Doyle as Provincial for the three priests to try to develop this work in Portadown. The bishop, priests and curates of the diocese in which the project would be situated had agreed to the project in principle. But it had yet to be inaugurated.

II. DESIGNING-ACTING-DESIGNING

In this section I describe a design-action-design sequence which occurred over a period of eleven weeks: getting out the basics of the design of the project related to the overall pattern of working relationships during the first week of the course (November 1980); the Jesuits going to live in Portadown; getting at the essential design and redefining purposes during the second week of the course (January 1981). Once the basics of the design became clear, effective action followed at a breathtaking speed.

1. Entering The Diocese

Aware of the critical importance of the entry into the diocese upon the viability of the project, members of the consultative group questioned Father Doyle closely about the nature of the negotiations. Whilst he was the Provincial, Father Doyle had tested out the idea of the project with the bishop of the diocese concerned personally in order that he could respond freely and privately. The bishop was convinced of the value of the Project; had he not been, the Jesuits would not have pursued the idea further. He was also convinced that the priests and curates of the diocese should be given an opportunity to decide freely and privately whether they wanted the project. So the bishop himself tested out the idea with them. They were in favour of the project but did not want to make a final decision until they had met the Jesuit team and discussed it with them. A meeting was arranged. The bishop introduced the Jesuits and withdrew to allow the discussion to take place. The priests and curates decided for the project and the Jesuits accepted the offer.

Members of the group explored thoroughly the entry into the diocese because they could scarcely believe that the negotiations could be done so thoroughly, sensitively and non-directively and because they were concerned to ensure that the project had not been imposed on the priests and curates. Three things became clearer from this exploration.

First, in this instance initial resistance of the official church to the Jesuits’ presence in the North had been overcome. Opportunities to develop new relationships had been secured. Second, the project was now set in a powerful matrix of free acceptance from “below” and “above” in the diocese and in the Jesuit Province. Third, important as this was, it was only the ecclesiastical gateway into Portadown; there were other things and relationships equally as difficult to negotiate. Father Doyle said that the next one was the physical entry into the parish—and he felt that that would be a tricky operation. At this stage we differentiated between approach, entry, work and withdrawal and this helped us to think more realistically about the initial stages in relation to the later ones. Father Doyle found this particularly helpful.

2. The Overall Pattern of Working Relationships

The next stage of the discussion in the same consultative group session was one of the most exciting, intensive and productive in which I have engaged. As the discussion proceeded I built up an untidy version of the following diagram, Figure 4:1. Doing so clarified, facilitated and honed the discussion and the ideas that emerged thick and fast. Afterwards we realized that what we had produced was a project design which modelled working relationships.

A running summary indicates the twists and turns of the discussion and how we worked on first one and then another aspect of the design and put them together. It started by members of the group asking whether the Team had any contacts in Portadown which might be growth points for creative caring and community building. They had: Father Lennon was meeting with a group of parents in an area of deprivation and had good relationships with both Protestants and Catholics of both Protestant and Catholic poor and everyone else (see the diagram as a whole and seven o'clock in particular). Establishing good working relationships with their fellow Catholics had temporarily overshadowed the need and problems of doing so with Protestants!

Three other groups now came clearly into focus with whom they needed to work: the poor, Catholic and Protestant (seven o’clock on the diagram); the
of charitable, voluntary and statutory agencies already working for
and with the poor and deprived (nine o’clock); and the Protestant
curches, ministers and laity (three o’clock). Examining what was involved in establishing
comprehensive relationships led us to see that the whole constituency, including
the Roman Catholics, comprised those sympathetic to the Jesuits and their
project and those unsympathetic and antipathetic. All too easily they could find
themselves working with the sympathetic and consequently, by default,
reinforcing faction between those sympathetic to ecumenical developments
and those not. These were developments they would regret.

Considering all this reinforced the desire and intention to work for the whole
and with as many people as they could from the Catholic, Protestant and secular
communities for the common good and holistic development. But we
acknowledged that it would be quite impossible for the Jesuits (or members of
other religious or secular groups) to work directly with some of those who were
unsympathetic or antipathetic to them. Facing this led us to underline the need
for those who can work together to do so for the common good and holistic
development, not simply for their own good. In the long term this strategy can
gradually break down mistrust and build up trust in communities where
sectarian groups have blatantly “looked after their own”.

Then we started to look at the bridging and mediatorial roles that people from
the different factions could play when they are working together for the whole.
Our attention focused particularly on the Jesuits and the Protestants. Protestants
working with the Jesuits live and work with Protestants who are not sympathetic
to the Jesuits. Clearly the sympathetic Protestants could be mediators between
them—provided, that is, that they are not marginalized because of their
associations with the Jesuits: a real possibility. An important part of the
development work that sympathetic Protestants and Jesuits could do together,
therefore, would be to think out how the sympathetic Protestants could avoid
being marginalized and how they could act as mediators. The Protestants could
do the same for the Jesuits. In fact this could be a feature of all the working
relationships. (This led to the three o’clock part of the design!) As we
discussed all this it struck Father Doyle that the women religious would make
good intermediaries.

Attention then turned to the network of charitable, voluntary and statutory
agencies and groups working with and for the poor (Protestant, Catholic and
neither). By default they could easily induce bad relationships with such
people and be played off against them if they started to work with the poor
without making themselves and their purposes known to them. They would
need to work for change with and through them as well as with the poor. (Seven
and nine o’clock of the diagram represent this thinking in the design.)

Then there was the contribution, which is discussed later, that the Jesuits
could make to development through action in relation to, but beyond the
project area (eleven o’clock on the diagram), and the other contributions
which they were making through their not inconsiderable scholarship and their
status in the Church. They were keen to continue to make these.

Reflecting on the diagram helped us to see that this pattern of working relationships could develop a wider and deeper sense of community between the Team, between workers of different denominations and agencies, between organizations and churches, and between people with different needs.

Towards the end of the session we felt that the project Team members needed to consider what had emerged and to determine the implications of any conclusions they might reach. We also felt that they needed to establish criteria that would help them to decide where to live and to work out the steps to be taken during the next phase of the project.

All this was done in just over one-and-a-quarter hours by a newly formed group!

3. Entering Portadown

Events moved fast once the Jesuits had agreed that they wanted to establish the pattern of working relationships depicted in the model above. Entry into Portadown was their next objective. They worked out their criteria for the house in which they would live and checked them with local clergy. The principal ones were that the house enabled them to live alongside a Catholic area of extreme deprivation in accommodation indistinguishable from that of local people; that Catholics and Protestants alike could visit them freely; and that it provided accommodation for three priests to live and work. Then they worked out how best to move into such a house. They thought about it from their own perspective and they tried to stand in the shoes of their new neighbours and to speculate on the possible effects upon them of three Jesuits moving in next door. Through looking at in this way they really saw and felt that their entry was a dramatic event which could have positive and negative effects. 'Three Jesuit priests moving in to a closely knit homogeneous community of deprived people was indeed a serious discontinuity!' Some would welcome them and be glad to have such neighbours. Others could feel intimidated, that they had lost some of their freedom to be themselves and that they faced censure from what was normally hidden from priests. The Jesuits got very excited about approaching their entry in this way and the challenge to make it a dramatic event of a positive kind.

Against this background they drew up these entry guidelines: establish neighbourly relationships as priests gradually and gently; invite people in as opportunities present themselves; keep a low profile; establish a parish role through helping with liturgy; explain who they were and what jobs they were doing outside the area and that they wanted to be part of this community; avoid making people feel deprived or inferior (this had profound implications for the way they furnished the house and their standard of living); get to know families; prepare people for the coming and going of priests and Protestant clergy and people to their house.

Less than eight weeks after the discussion on working relationships they were living in a house they had rented in Portadown in a block bricked up because no-one else wanted to live there which met their criteria! Settling into the community had gone well. The Jesuits said that the things which helped most were the sensitivity engendered within them by thinking of the move as a dramatic event and in the change of orientation from thinking about it as 'our entry' into their community to conceiving it as 'their reception of us into their community'—both things achieved by trying to stand in the shoes of the local people to see things through their eyes.

Now that they had successfully entered into the diocese and the local community they set about building up the working relationships they had with others.

4. The Essential Design

We now pick up the story nine weeks later during the second week of the course. Father Doyle said that he and his colleagues were following through the work done during the previous session on working relationships; they did not want any further help on that at this stage. They wanted the consultative group to work with Father Doyle on the “basics of the project” and particularly on its design and purpose. They felt the need for “crucial reference points in the surging seas of project work in areas of deprivation deeply affected by the Troubles”. They had now stated their overall purpose: to contribute to the reconciliation of the people of Ireland. We worked on the project design and then on their objectives for the project.

The Diagram on Working Relationships (Figure 4:1) helped us to identify the following basic groups of people:

Group I The local people. (Almost entirely “working class” people.)
Group II The Jesuits living in the area and working at all levels of the community.
Group III Those who work in the local area but who live outside it. (They are mainly “middle class”.)
Group IV Those who live and work entirely outside the local area but who have the power to affect what happens to it and in it. (This is a vast number of people at all levels in politics, military and para-military organizations, government, industry, voluntary organizations and in the church.)
I contributed the following diagram (Figure 4:2) to show the interaction between these groups.

**Figure 4:2. Essential Design of the Project**

For Father Doyle and the members of the consultative group this diagram powerfully depicted essentials in the structure and design of the project: we referred to it as the "essential design". It was a "disclosure model" which animated us. Poring over it led us to make the following points.

- People in the local area have contributions which they alone can make to their own well-being, development and redemption no matter how deprived they seem to be. Nothing that others do is a substitute for these contributions. A primary responsibility of the Jesuit Team is to help them make these contributions through their interaction with Groups, II, III and IV. For instance they could work with Groups III and IV to reduce undesirable forms of dependency frequently induced and encouraged by their interventions.

- Overall development is most likely to occur if people from all the groups are acting collaboratively. The Jesuit Team could help to promote this because they are both local and non-local workers.

- The Jesuits must work alongside the local people but, if they are to make their fullest contributions, they need to work with and talk to people in Group III (and possibly help people in Groups I and IV to do so); they need to relate their work to the wider debate about working for development in such areas; they need to report their experiences and educate others; they need to promote and support similar work in different local areas. This will tax to the full all their reserves and exploit their status, learning and contacts to work out their commitment to the preferential option to the poor. These activities beyond the local area are an integral part of it: they are not activities to compensate for the local involvement.

- The Jesuits were, in fact, ideally equipped and placed to make this design work.

- At the time we felt that this design model seemed to be the single most important thing that came out of the consultations.

**5. Project Objectives redefined**

Now we were in a position to redefine the objectives the Jesuits had for the project in this way:

(a) To promote human and spiritual betterment in an area of acute deprivation in Northern Ireland from a living/working base within the community by getting all parties (Groups of people I, II, III and IV) to make their contributions and, whenever possible, to work together for the betterment of the whole.

(b) To learn as much as possible about reconciliation and development in Ireland from the experience and to get as many others as possible to do the same.

Achieving these objectives, they felt, would make significant contributions towards achieving their overall purpose—the reconciliation of the people of Ireland.

**III. OBSERVATIONS ON THE PROCESS**

Now to some observations about this particular experience of designing a project; then, in Chapter Six, I consider the creation of designs for church and community work most likely to promote development.
1. Purpose and Objectives

It is interesting to see the ways in which the purposes and objectives evolved as the design unfolded. Father Doyle’s expression of aims in his initial paper enabled us to carry out the first phase of the design. At that point he expressed his aims in terms of the things that he desired for all people—becoming more aware of themselves, their capacities for growth and their place in the overarching unity of all people, non-Christians and Christians. During the time of moving to Portadown they had felt the need for “crucial reference points”. (During the plenary sessions of the first week of the course we had discussed reference points along the lines that they are discussed in Chapter Five.) They now stated their purposes as, “to contribute to the reconciliation of the people of Ireland”. This enabled them to go on with the next phase of design. Then after they had got out the “essential design” they were able to articulate their objectives. These were: to promote betterment in an area of acute deprivation in Northern Ireland bedevilled by the “Troubles” and to learn as much as possible about reconciliation and development in Ireland and to make it widely known. One of the interesting things about all this is the creative interaction between the clarification of “aims” and the designing of the project. Successive statements of aims helped the Team to design the project and successive stages of the design helped to clarify aims. As the aims became more specific, so did the design, and vice versa.

2. Developing a Systemic Approach

The way in which the Jesuits had approached the Diocese showed deep insights into ways in which the inter-related parts work. What the design process did was to bring out the systemic nature of the activities in which the Team planned to engage and led to the project being seen as a systemic exercise.

First, they worked at the Roman Catholic aspect. Gradually they built up a more comprehensive picture of Portadown by putting together sub-systems which they had previously thought of separately. For instance they first worked at the Roman Catholic diocese as the system. It is in its own right a very complicated and important one. Then they saw it as a sub-system related to or adjacent to other sub-systems: the community in which they would be living; the voluntary and statutory agencies; the Protestant churches, etc. A systemic picture emerged. Then it became clear that the Team were introducing another sub-system, foreign to the host system because it was Jesuit and different in membership, approach and theology. As far as possible the Team and their project had to mesh in with as much of the system as possible. Making systemic connections avoided it being a top-down or bottom-up project. They had begun to do this with the Roman Catholic diocese without conceptualizing what they were doing in the way we have just done. Having conceptualized the process systemically they were in a better position to engage with the system as a whole and with its parts in a systematic way: they would, of course, encounter the system whether or not they were conscious of it.

Whilst they wanted to mesh into the Portadown system they also wanted, as an integral part of the project and their ministries, to mesh into the larger human and religious systems of action and research which affected the locale. They wanted and needed to be both local and non-local workers.

It was fascinating to see how, by concentrating on purpose and actualities, we moved from a single organizational (the Roman Catholic diocese) to a multi-organizational community development approach and from an expanding complexity to an essential simplicity of design.

At an early stage the Jesuits had been asking whether they would constitute a team or a religious community. These questions were not pursued in the consultative sessions. Looking back, I realize that designing the project helped to form the Jesuits into a working team and to get them working at their separate and collective functions. They were, in fact, being formed by their purposes, the context and the functions they would have to perform—quite a different process from that of forming a community and then implanting it. Other aspects of their community life would develop from within themselves and their personal, devotional and social activities.

3. Diagrams and Models

Diagrams and models were principal tools in this process. It is quite impossible for me to do this kind of designing or to see how to do it without diagrams, models and flow charts. I discuss their uses in Chapters 6 and 7.

IV. ASSESSMENT BY THE TEAM

This chapter is based on notes I drafted in 1985. I sent a copy to the Team and had this reply from Father Patrick Doyle.

Your account was very useful to read especially as we are now reviewing our first five years in Portadown. The work has not been written up fully but progress is being made. . . . I bring out the notes and diagrams of the Consultancy Sessions at our various review and planning meetings. So the influence and help of the Avec course ’80-81 has perured. The Essential Design did in fact embrace most of the developments which have occurred. Clearly the depth and effectiveness of the different relationships have varied considerably. Also the sequence of their development has depended on many things outside our control. However, by now when one fills out the structure with actual named relationships it can look impressive! It is therefore still valuable in the process of assessment and planning.

In 1992 I sent Father Doyle a draft of this chapter. The following is an excerpt from his reply:
It might be of interest to add that the house we rented was in a Housing Executive Estate with endemic unemployment of 90 per cent and very rundown physically and in morale. The house we got was in a block, of many others, bricked-up because nobody wanted to live there. After one year we took the adjoining house because the whole block was being renovated for others now applying. Eventually the whole estate got a complete and effective renovation. The first Community Council Brian Lennon developed was largely responsible for this advance together with better relations we helped develop with Groups III and IV.

Fr Michael Drennan, SJ was in Portadown only for the weekends during the first year. His place was taken in the end of 1981 by Brother David Byrne, SJ, who is still doing trojan work amongst the people of the area. Fr Declan Deane then joined us and we were four for most of the time until 1988 when I came to Belfast to open another residence. My place was taken by a Fr Senan Timoney. Changes of personnel continue but Father Brian Lennon has remained for the twelve years the centre of great activity and initiative. Many local people have grown very considerably in confidence and skill so that even Brian could leave soon with the good hope that much community development would continue. Over the years after our first five the spiritual dimension flourished in ways we could not have more directly encouraged in the early years. Ecumenical contacts and co-operation in community affairs also grew but of course even now in limited ways.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A phrase now in common use amongst Roman Catholics and particularly Religious. It was first used in the conclusions of The Third Conference of the Latin American Bishops in 1979 at Puebla attended by Pope John Paul II in a message to the peoples of Latin America as a main heading. Cf. Sheppard, David, Bias to the Poor (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), p. 149.