

MARGARET CATON

## Read all about it

Newsletters and websites are valuable means of communication, but a parish magazine has much more scope, and can quickly become a vital and worthwhile ministry in itself. Now help is at hand for those wishing to set one up where none exists

Having a parish magazine was one of the things that came out of a mission we had a while ago in our parish. Once we had decided to go ahead, our starting point was to gather a production team of keen, committed people, including an editor, an IT expert for layout, someone to seek advertisers, a treasurer and a photographer.

If the parish priest has the time and energy to be on the team, it is good since he has information and ideas and can provide an overview of the parish that others might not have. Our parish priest provides a regular article on faith issues; I know of others who offer a regular question-and-answer column.

Once the team is assembled, there needs to be a decision on the purpose of the magazine. One question to ask is whether it should be of interest to the parish community only or whether to try to attract the interest of the local community too. Like many endeavours of this kind, it is useful to have a "mission statement", which could include what the magazine seeks to accomplish.

Such aims, for example, may be to support a sense of community and living faith; to provide information of events in the parish and the local area; to report the ecumenical work in the area; to raise issues of faith and spirituality; to provide information about the church beyond the parish – in the deanery, the diocese and in the local bishops' conference. This could include reporting on any outreach to the missionary countries.

Other aims might be to encourage parishioners to share their thoughts, their experiences and their talents by providing articles about their work, about their travels or how they are living their faith; they might be invited to offer their artwork, photos, cartoons, jokes and puzzles. Children and young people could be encouraged to contribute too; and a devotional column for the elderly members of the parish could also be included. It is important to give readers an informative, educational, entertaining, spiritual read – hopefully something for everyone.

Having established the purpose of the magazine, practical points need to be considered such as how many issues a year will be produced. Decisions have to be taken on the size, style and design of the magazine and, not least, a name and what it will cost. A large format is attractive for a magazine. Standard-size paper should be used and the overall effect must be as professional looking as possible, with plenty of photos or illustrations, a balanced layout and a font style and size that is clear and reader-friendly.

Content should be as varied as possible – in length and style. If people who have something interesting to share are reluctant to submit material because they do not feel confident enough in their literary skills, encourage them and offer to help them. It is important for them to know that they do not have to be Booker Prize standard; but, on the other hand, they do not have to do something on their own if they do not want to. One way of getting around this problem is to have a reporter on the staff who can interview people.

### TO DO

**Gather** a production team of keen, committed people and agree on the purpose of the magazine

**Encourage** parishioners to contribute their news, experience and talents

**Learn** from successes and failures, and listen to the feedback you get

parish school or schools, they too can have a regular column or they can contribute feature articles to tell people about their happenings and accomplishments.

Producing a magazine costs money. It helps if as much of the production as possible is done voluntarily as this reduces the cost; and local advertisers can help by providing a regular income. This is also a way of encouraging parishioners to promote their local businesses. The cover price of the magazine will be determined in the light of how many issues are likely to be sold after taking into account the production costs and income. It

may be decided simply to cover costs – or to build up a small surplus to fund emergencies, or to produce a bumper edition for special occasions. Alternatively, a price may be set to produce a profit to fund a parish charity.

We have found that experience is a great teacher; by trial and error, it has become clear what works and what does not. Another great teacher is the feedback you get from people – and this should be encouraged. The Association of Church Editors (Ace) gives useful help and information and runs workshops for its members. More information about these can be found on the Ace website ([www.churcheditors.org](http://www.churcheditors.org)). The association runs a competition for parish magazines, whereby very helpful ideas may be gained from the winners of the best magazine award and those who win awards for cover design, layout, headlines, contributions by/for children, communicating a Christian message, and for those contributions that appeal to the wider community.

There are important spin-offs from a parish magazine, including the sense of community it engenders. Old friends can be reunited as the magazines find themselves being passed on to people far and wide. One of our house-bound parishioners was cajoled into producing an article about her Dutch connections and the people from the Netherlands who came to work helping to drain the low-lying mosslands in our town. This came as a great revelation to many people, and the parishioner was reunited with long-lost friends. We have even found that our magazine can help people return to church. After receiving regular copies, one man was convinced that things had changed since he was last at church many years ago and he decided to go back.

And, finally, when people say that they learned something new from an article they read or they were encouraged to pray for someone or for something they read about – or when they say they decided to help with one of the parish outreach projects because of an article in the magazine – you will know what a worthwhile ministry this is.

■ Margaret Caton is retired, and is the editor of St Mary's parish magazine, Horwich, Lancashire.