

The Religious

THE CLOSING of the Augustinian Church, O'Connell Street, was recently compared to losing "a leg".

Eighteen months ago, the order went out and asked people for their views. And to-day they are working towards implementing those views. In 1989 each of their seventeen communities throughout the country conducted a survey and analysis of their local circumstances so that the needs of the people in the locality would be accurately ascertained.

A professionally devised questionnaire was used.

"We decided on this course of action because we wanted to become more vital in today's church" explained Fr Seamus Humphries, a native of Dublin who came to Limerick eight months ago.

In Limerick about one hundred persons from all

By DYMHPNA
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walks of life and varying ages were interviewed.

People's attitudes regarding five specific areas, the local Augustinians, the church generally, God and Jesus Christ, personal faith and prayer, and neighbourhood and society were sought through questionnaires.

To most of the respondents, the Augustinian church was seen as a traditional part of the city centre, bringing a sense of peace, to contrast with the noise and commotion of normal city life.

A number of interviewees commented on the convenience of the church in that it was open and accessible. Many spoke of the work for the foreign missions, while others commented on the work being done for young teenagers.

The Augustinians' 700 years tradition

Another point raised was the failure of the Augustinians to carve a niche for themselves in Limerick over the years as other religious orders had done. The Jesuits are known

for their work in education, the Franciscans for working with the poor, the Dominicans for their parish, while the Augustinians are not really associated with any one

aspect.

One other observation was the need to "sell" the Order in the market place.

"If the Augustinians were to leave Limerick there would be

an enormous gap in the life of the city. They have a church in a very prime position which by its very presence encourages people to visit God, I think they are good and kind but

they need a more public presence," was the quotation.

One group compared the closing of the church to losing "a leg".

The survey also asked the people to put forward constructive proposals to address the problems as they perceived them.

Proposals included an urgent need for education and formation regarding the meaning and experience of the church as a community of believers, the need to build small basic communities and have liturgies celebrating the life of these groups.

In February, 1991, representatives both lay and religious, from the seventeen centres came together at Emmaus retreat house, Dublin, to study the overall findings and to draw up a plan of action.

The Limerick group came back with four specific areas they wished to address.

Their first priority was the setting up of a pastoral team including six lay persons and three priests with responsibility for carrying out the wishes of people as expressed in the survey.

At present groups in faith are being organised to enable people to come together to pray and share in their faith.

According to Fr Humphries, those meetings can take many forms including the rosary and benediction, discussion on the sacraments, or prayer groups charismatic or otherwise.

Young people are to be encouraged to take a more active role and to plan their own involvement in church activities.

"The young people themselves will be doing the organising. We will not be telling them what to do. We will only be providing guidance," explained Fr Humphries.



A view of the Augustinian Church, O'Connell Street.

And the facilities at O'Connell Street, which include a hall and a number of rooms are to be made available to lay people.

"Rooms are available here for people to meet and talk," said Fr Humphries who added that a bereavement support group had already availed of the opportunity.

And in a new venture, the Augustinians are prepared to organise religious services for vocational, or professional groups in the city. Such groups might include unions, multinational companies, state and semi-state organisations.

"The ground work has taken one-and-a-half years. We are now only starting on our new path and we intend to work at it. Success may not come with the plan we have outlined now but there will be ongoing collaboration with the laity", said Fr Humphries.

There are at present seven priests based in O'Connell Street.

The prior is Fr Denis Whelton, a native of Co Cork.

The other priests are Fr Tim Walsh, a native of Ballylanders; Fr Gerry Sheehan a Corkman; Fr Jude King a native of Co Galway; Fr Greg Howard, Cork; Fr Humphries, and Fr Anthony Leddin a member of the well known Limerick family.

With six Masses in the Church each day, and continuous confessions, the priests are mainly concerned with church duties.

St Augustine's school, a special school for young children with education and social difficulties, is located at the rear of the church.

Fr Sheehan is involved in the running of the school which is supported by the Department of Education. It has a average attendance of thirty pupils.

"We are in the centre of the city, and we are working at becoming the heart of the city," summed up Fr Humphries.

Historians, both ecclesiastical and secular, were rarely in agreement about the arrival of the Hermit Friars of St



Fr Seamus Humphries, and Very Rev Denis Whelton, prior.

Augustine, now known as the Augustinians, in the city.

It was the seventeenth century Franciscan, Anthony Bruodin, later supported by Fr Brehan in his Ecclesiastical History, who held that the Hermit Friars of St Augustine had a thirteenth century church and friary, dedicated to Our Lady and the Holy Cross in Quay Lane and founded by a member of the O'Brien family of Thomond.

One of the earliest foundations of the Augustinians was at Adare, where a site was granted to them in 1315 by Thomas, first Earl of Kildare.

There are very few references to the friary in two and a half centuries of its existence.

It is not certain when the friars vacated their friary but it would appear that it was sometime between 1567 and 1585.

For the following fifty years, history loses track of them, any records kept were destroyed in Cromwellian times.

In 1629 Limerick was proposed for a foundation as an alternative to their former foundation in Adare.

A house was rented in Sir Harry's Mall, close to Fish Lane while awaiting permission to gain possession of the old monastery of St Mary's.

With the penal laws in force in 1698 there was no option for them except to take refuge outside the city.

It is told by Canon Begley that friars disguised as market gardeners or workmen delivering vegetables, kept in touch with their people in the city as they went from house to house.

Some time after 1730 two friars, Nicholas Durkan and Edmund O'Brien, were appointed to find if it were possible to set up a permanent residence in the city.

They eventually settled down in or near their former house at Fish Lane.

As the numbers attending Mass and religious devotions grew steadily, the facilities at Creagh Lane became too restrictive. Thoughts were of

acquiring a more central site in the city and of building a church large enough to accommodate growing congregations.

In 1823, a ready-made building suitable for adaptation as a church, came on the market, the city theatre in George's Street.

In 1810, a new and splendid theatre had been built in the centre of the city's fashionable area, but, after running for thirteen years, it had incurred heavy debts.

It came under the hammer in Dublin, in 1823 and to the surprise and general satisfaction of the Catholics in the city, was purchased by the Augustinians for £400.

When it became known who were the new occupiers of the old theatre, it caused much indignation among the members of the County Club, to judge from the tone of the resolution passed at a general meeting in March 1823.

"Resolved — that we have seen with great regret that the theatre of this great and respectable city has got into the possession of gentlemen for the purpose of converting it into a place of religious worship and thus to deprive the inhabitants forever of a theatre: that we are clearly of opinion that this is neither a fit nor proper situation for any place of religious worship, and that the proposed establishment must be a great inconvenience to all the neighbourhood and particularly to this club."

However the author of the history of the County club added "The Friars have proved harmless neighbours".

About 1879 a house adjoining the church was occupied as a priory but as this proved to be too small for the community a house opposite the church was purchased for £255.

This was to be their priory until 1948.

It was only when the church was completed that they finally gained possession of the County Club as a residence.