Parish of Sacred Heart and St Columba Issues report: May 2023

Background

In 2021, the Archdiocese began discussing what the local Church in Melbourne might look like in the future. This was framed as re-imagining our local Church as Mission Communities and is known as *The Way of the Gospel*. The formation of Missions has three aims:

- Greater effectiveness in sharing the Gospel
- Ensuring vibrancy, vitality and viability of the new Missions; and
- Equitable sharing of resources.

More information about *The Way of the Gospel* can be found here: https://melbournecatholic.org/about/take-the-way-of-the-gospel.

Our local context

In response to the archdiocesan invitation, St Columba and Sacred Heart have developed a roadmap to chart a process for discerning our future. The process is being led by the Discernment Group and PDLT. While we have invited our sister parishes to join us on this journey, to date they have declined. We nonetheless keep them informed of our progress and the invitation remains open.

The roadmap involves the following four phases:

Phase 1: Identifying the key focus question/s for the future of our parish that the remainder of the process will address.

Phase 2: Developing a shared future vision of our ideal faith community.

Phase 3: Understanding the influences that will shape our capacity to fulfil our vision.

Phase 4: Identifying the actions we need to take to bring about our vision.

Progress to date

- In 2022 the roadmap was endorsed by the PDLT and released to the parish.
- As part of Phase 1 the Discernment Group interviewed the parish leaders, primarily to identify what they felt are the burning issues that the parish must face over the next ten years.
- Each member of the Discernment Group selected two to three of what they perceived to be the most important issues identified in each question and met to discuss the emerging themes.

This report is the output from that process, with the burning issues summarised in the appendix.

Framing questions

A secondary purpose of the interviews was to inform the creation of a guiding question that will steer our exploration of the future of our parish through the remainder of the Roadmap process.

The Discernment Group felt that the two most important themes to emerge from the interviews were around questions of parish identity and formation on the one hand, and, nourished by faith, how to elicit greater participation in caring for the needs of the community on the other. These two themes are represented symbolically in a cross, with elements both deep and wide.

While some draft framing questions that attempts to capture these themes has been developed, they are on hold until the next steps are determined.

Next steps

Ordinarily, the next step would be to bring together the whole parish to build a shared vision for the future of our parish that will address our framing questions. However, the two parishes that the Archdiocese originally suggested we partner with have declined our invitations to work with us. Nonetheless, in a very encouraging development, the Carmelite Parish of Port Melbourne and Middle Park has indicated that they may wish to join us. After our first, very positive meeting with the parish priest, the Discernment Group has decided to pause the roadmap until that option can be explored further. If we are to partner with other parishes, it is important to build a shared vision so that we can move forward in unity and mutual understanding. To do that, we need to allow space for the other partners to do their own discernment first.

If other parishes do decide to join us, we will work with them to identify what they see as the burning issues facing their communities. These will need to be considered along with those already identified for Sacred Heart and St Columba and a new set of framing questions may need to be formulated. We will wait for that work to be done before starting on building a vision.

Appendix: burning issues

The following is a summation of the issues that the Discernment Group deemed the most important.

Global, national and local influences

1. *What things are happening now in our environment (global, national, local) that have the potential to make a major difference in our parish over the next ten years?*

Responses to this question are clustered in terms of environmental, social, political, economic, cultural or technological issues. This is to help us to discern where there may be gaps in our analysis of our external environment.

The natural environment

Anxiety over climate change and the uncertain trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic – and the anxiety that these provoke – are significant factors in the natural environment seen as most likely to impact our parish. However, alongside the potential and actual negative impacts of these uncertainties, response to climate change was also seen as presenting opportunities to engage greater thinking and action through the church (particularly under the leadership of Pope Francis) as well as forge partnerships with climate action groups.

Social issues

Embracing greater diversity emerged as a key social trend to which the parish will need to respond. This diversity ranges from the rise of educated, articulate women demanding greater say, to gender fluidity and exploration of sexuality by young people, to greater involvement of same sex couples.

As connection with faith is what brings people to Church, acceptance of diversity in the community is seen as crucial to our survival, with numbers continuing to diminish unless the Church can change and be more accepting of diversity. While it was felt that, as a parish we respond well to changes through our acceptance and social outreach, we need to prepare our parish to welcome a greater diversity of people and find ways to bring them in to parish life.

Changing demographics contribute to this diversity, both locally and nationally. Elwood and St Kilda are perceived as increasingly secular, resulting in fewer people seeing the relevance of the parish. There is also a spread of cultures currently entering the parish as a result of global economic and geopolitical events, with fewer backpackers and Irish Catholics.

The ageing of the congregation is seen to present both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, the older generation who hold onto traditions are passing, which may give rise to demand for a new spirituality. On the other, Sacred Heart's contribution to community life is through volunteering or membership of the association. There's a risk that as people age, we'll lose the volume of people active in that space.

Political issues

Scant attention was paid to national or geopolitics. However, concerns were raised about politics within the Church, perhaps encapsulated as 'the challenges of the formal party line of the Church vs the "real" church'. Some disquiet was expressed about archdiocesan preconceptions about parish mergers, and the impact of the new Mission structure in terms of how to fill multiple churches.

The question was raised as to whether the hierarchy may be waiting for the 'difficult' Catholics to leave, since the new wave of migrant Catholics is arguably more devout and less questioning than those leaving the Church. The Church hierarchy's refusal to reconsider its stance on priest celibacy was also raised.

At the local level, the relationship between the Catholic school and parish is still being worked out.

Economic issues

Again, scant attention was paid to the national or global economies, other than to acknowledge that we are living in an era of financial uncertainty.

Concern was raised about potential financial pressures from the Church and at local level because of the impact of clerical abuse and compensation claims, coming, as it does, at a time of reduced income for the Church. What scrutiny is there on decision making asking parishes to contribute?

Cultural issues

The cultural issues that emerged span societal, Church and local parish levels. A significant challenge is the movement towards an ever-greater materialistic post-Christian world, embracing pluralistic spirituality with many different paths. Additionally, people see the Church differently post Royal Commission.

Within the wider Church culture, two significant issues emerged. First, whether there is a move away from clericalism. If there's a greater awareness of it, then there could be a significant shift. If not, then more and more people will drift away. Second, Church hierarchy is one of the last bastions where there's a real struggle to get women recognised. It is completely out of step with the rest of society. Considering this, the scarcity of priests is seen as a potential opportunity for the Church to become less centralised; pragmatic necessity may mean lay people become more involved. It could be a fantastic model but will involve a huge cultural shift.

The centrality of Fr John's contribution emerged as a vulnerability for the parish as we move to multiple parishes. We risk losing the pastoral care that Fr John provides to the Sacred Heart Mission. As parishes become bigger and less connected to the Mission, honouring the death and life of homeless people becomes difficult to do. How do we do that differently? Further, if Fr John were replaced by a more traditional priest, it would have a significant impact on the parish.

Technological issues

Technology has become an important part of parish communication and will be more important as time goes on. More online masses are available, with less face-to-face participation. While we have learned how to operate in a virtual environment there are unknowns about what communication methods are ahead of us.

Furthermore, younger people are more connected online: physical community is not a big thing, which challenges somewhat the notion of geographical parish.

Surprises

2. What events or developments over the course of your association with the parish have come as a complete surprise to you? Are there any major disruptors that you sense could be coming over the horizon?

Various past surprises were nominated, such as changing demographics in the area and the influence of transient, privatised inner city living, disruptions caused by the number of priests through the parish, the watering-down of faith in Catholic schools, a positive surprise at how active and responsive the parish actually is – particularly during COVID, and differing views of Fr Ernie Smith within the parish. Indeed, the extent of sexual abuse in the Church and the scope of its cover-up were a major surprise, causing a magnitude of suffering.

However, the main focus of the question is on identifying potential future disruptors. The recurrent themes were issues to do with the survival of the parish, the changing role and relationship with Catholic schools, the influence of the archdiocese and the wider Church, issues relating to broader social change – including the changing needs of the communities we must serve, and the impact of technology.

The lack of concern in the community for the transmission of faith and no real responsibility for keeping the Gospel alive poses a threat to the future of the parish: 'it could be very precarious – what would hold the faith together?' We need to build community focusing on the core things of being Church with a sense of ongoing leadership and formation in the Gospel message.

Feeding into this is 'a school population of non-believers or those who give lip service to their faith coupled with a "consumerist" approach to religion [and] non-Catholic teachers who have no understanding of Catholic traditions, practices, liturgies, theology'. This means we cannot rely on the school for our supply of future parishioners. In addition, while it is still important and valued, the relationship between the school and parish has changed; the school is no longer an extension of St Columba church. Similarly, the relationship between the parish and Sacred Heart Mission is changing, with uncertainty as to how that connection may play out in the future.

However, we continue to use mass attendance numbers as a benchmark, 'which represents a particular way of framing what it means to have faith. But people may re-form in other ways that doesn't involve mass attendance – e.g., small groups meeting in people's homes.' The shortage of priests may be the impetus for a change of direction.

Current initiatives within the wider Church also have the potential to disrupt parish life in the future, in particular: either moving or being forced into Mission with other parishes, the recommendations coming out of the Plenary Council, the lack of priests, the role of the laity and women, and a change in pope.

Broader societal changes will also impact the parish. Catholics/Christians are no longer the dominant religion and the different beliefs from diverse faiths could be a big disruptor. 'As Christian influence diminishes, how does the Church connect to a more diverse community?' Further, we need to be prepared to lead the discussions of gender and engagement of the LGBTIQ community and welcome people, or the doors will close. 'We need to confront ourselves and our attitudes in order to offer welcome' – differentiating ourselves from the brand of the Catholic Church. Societal changes will also lead to increasing numbers of financially disadvantaged older women and refugees.

Potential financial disruptors were identified, such as conflicts of interest arise over parishes having responsibility for a lot of property that is beyond their capacity to manage, a perceived lack of transparency in the allocation of funds and the connection between declining numbers and declining finances – potentially leading to the sell-off of another church.

Finally, the impact of technology could be a positive disruptor to the way we currently meet and communicate. Keeping online engagement has the potential to bring people together if continued.

Favourable and unfavourable influences

3. *What would be the key influences shaping a favourable outcome for our parish in 2032? Unfavourable outcome?*

Positive influences are clustered around the notions of building parish renewal, engaging the community, particularly youth, and enhanced connections with Sacred Heart mission and St Columba's school. Negative influences include a change in the style of priest, exclusion of women

and the laity from decision making, a disengaged congregation, secularisation of SHM and disunity among the parishes of the proposed Mission.

Positive influences	Negative influences
Parish renewal	**Style of priest**
- Community and spiritual development and service. Training leaders of worship, services to the needy, more conscious sense of volunteering at the Mission. - Core of people working with interest and commitment to our future, coupled with a priest who is forward looking, encouraging collaboration with the laity, recognising the gifts of people, being inclusive, open-minded and having a wide interpretation of liturgical and spiritual practice. Need to inspire more parishioners to step up and take responsibility: convince the quiet, passive ones that ownership of this parish is their right. - Working out how to engage the other parishes - letting go of protecting territory and being willing to collaborate. Finding a neutral zone to meet or share, e.g. groups get together at Botanic Gardens. - Nurturing adult faith, though this is not as future proofing. - If the hierarchy backs off and lets people at parish level own the change - If women deacons come off and the Church moves with the times, we have greater capacity to attract younger people.	- A devotional style of priest, not connected to the local culture and reality of the Mission. We will fragment unless we have well developed leadership formation. - Importing priests from overseas because they don't understand parishes/community)
	Excluding laity from decision making
	- If the Church doesn't allow the laity to get involved in meaningful decision-making/say - If women continue to be left out of ministry
	Disengaged parishioners
	- Passivity by those in the pews is unfavourable, unhelpful and works against the growth of the parish. Similarly those who leave after Mass works against us. - Involvement of school families has waned.
	Secularisation
	- Erosion of the Christian part of SHM - Government or some other organisation taking control of the mission, further destabilising its connection with the parish. - If school enrolments are filled to provide financial viability rather than connection with the parish ethos
	Conflict with those who are protecting turf. How to get beyond 'turf' so people can feel connected to the one community of faith. Place doesn't matter.
Community and youth engagement	
- Amplify SHP leadership around community and the community having a broader role to play. - Nurturing future parishioners. - Develop strategy to engage with younger people, using their language. - Parish could be a centre offering activities engaging young people, even if they do not choose to regularly participate in worship, formation can still occur.	

● Staying open and relevant, not just for Sunday mass and funerals. We need to be connected with community, living the word, not just teaching it; values of the parish. ● Involve engaged or recently married couples who are connected to the parish through marriage preparation and ceremonies.	
Enhancing connections with school and SHM	
● Involvement with SHM gives our Parish a unique flavour and focus. Need to explore the status of the connection. ● Greater integration between school and parish. The school having a presence in the parish brings richness, allows for dynamic parishes. ● What will the impact of the Mission have on the schools? They will need to collaborate – may get youth groups going.	

Potential partnerships and alliances

4. Innovative strategies sometimes call for strange bedfellows. What are the major unexpected alliances, partnerships, and conversations that could advance the future of our parish?

Other Christian churches and non-Christian faiths and secular community organisations were the most commonly identified potential partners and allies. Collaborations with other Christian churches, particularly those more aligned with our social outreach, could involve sharing services and buildings. Seeing beyond the Multifaith communities. Seeing beyond the walls of the Catholic Church and embracing others in multifaith communities would support the idea of one community with all contributing.

Secular community organisations that involve an underlying value of (Christian) care were seen as potential allies. A key example is environmental action groups. With many people aware of the need for action, this may be a way to engage people without traditional faith. Aligning with organisations such as Beach Patrol, LoveourStreet3182/84 and Sea Shepherd may fuel some passions around issues that could have a positive influence on our parish. Strengthening alliances with the Brigidine Asylum Seekers' Project and Elwood Friends of the RSL show faith in action and more opportunities should be sought. Similarly, reaching out to non-government organisations to explore opportunities for collaboration and community connection promote the idea of the parish as part of the wider community.

There were suggestions of reaching out to the broader Church, creating greater awareness of what is happening in wider Catholic life and other communities, with a view to information and cultural exchange; perhaps establishing a sister parish connection with an overseas parish that offers a relationship with another culture: friendship, cultural or financial exchange.

Greater collaboration with our affiliated organisations was suggested, such as SHM, where we can learn from the poor people who come about our own poverty of spirit. We need to have a realistic

relationship to be strengthened and challenged by. Similarly, we might establish multi-generational activities in the aged care facility in St Kilda by getting local pre-schools/ kindergartens involved.

We could forge connections with another school alongside St Columba's, either Catholic or otherwise, and engaging with local secondary schools and not-for-profit organisations to commence dialogue to find ways to work together on shared activities.

Finally, a shift in priorities was suggested, to redefine where mass can be celebrated. Do we need churches? 'We have a bequest for building maintenance, as if the church were a museum. Why invest in buildings when we're diminishing?' The money from the previous sale of the church still sustains us.

Missing infrastructure

5. *Most organisations require a solid infrastructure of information technology, communication channels, revenue and other underlying support. Are there key pieces of infrastructure that seem to be missing from our parish?*

The gaps identified include physical and technological maintenance and upgrades, skilled human resources and technology skills development, improved communication, increased revenue and a non-church space for meeting.

In addition to the maintenance of the buildings, upgrading and ongoing maintenance of technology assets is also required: sound systems in both churches and the computer at Sacred Heart need upgrading, while the website needs interactivity and dedicated ongoing maintenance to keep it up to date. Perhaps the latter could be paid through judicious advertising to optimise the online platform, or we could seek advice and assistance from young people. Live streaming of funerals could be an addition.

Our communication needs to become more dynamic. Some of this is dependent on upskilling parishioners in the use of technology to avoid a digital divide. We need channels to communicate with young people such as Instagram and TikTok.

There is a shortage of skilled people to manage the finances and people with community development skills. If there is no dedicated priest to SHM, then we will need people who can provide end-of-life care, funeral ministers, a deacon to baptise and celebrate marriages. Amalgamation with other parishes may help as there may be greater capacity to manage resources. Or we may need paid professionals to manage our resources and ICT infrastructure.

Finally, we need somewhere to meet that is not a church and revenue is critically low.

Constraints

6. *What major constraints, internal or external, are you aware of? How do these limit what we can achieve?*

Constraints were seen to come from the wider Church, the characteristics and culture of our own parish, and a lack of capabilities and resources.

The Church is going through a reactionary period in its history, turning its back on Vatican II. We don't have a lot of convicted formation that can help people be more interior about who Jesus is. Clericalism is a big impediment, as is the failure of the Church hierarchy to take responsibility for clerical abuse and properly support the people impacted.

In our own parish there is passivity about engagement and little cross-over between our two churches. In addition, St Kilda is a transitory community, making it difficult to recruit new members

and the low numbers affect the parish financially. Parents attending our parish primary School are less involved in the parish and less inclined to contribute financially. As the community dwindles it has the potential to become inward looking and may create a barrier to people joining.

We have insufficient capabilities and resources, particularly a lack of leaders. We need programs to deliberately form current and future parish volunteers for leadership roles. We also have attitudinal constraints: there are those who want to look back to what we used to do, but the context has changed.

Critical decisions

7. What critical decisions have to be made soon? What forks in the road are coming up?
Forks in the road are seen to be largely about what happens in the wider Church, including at archdiocesan level, and critical decisions in light of those are primarily around parish formation.

What comes out of the Plenary Council (e.g. women deacons), whether the current strategy of importing priests to shore up diminishing numbers continues, and what happens to Pastoral Associates who have been defunded but could be a group of mainly women leaders to build and resource could generate the need for decisions. The financial implications of payment to abuse victims and how much of that is pushed down to parishes may compromise the capacity of mission-based work to be done.

The shape of the Mission and whether there will be central control of the parish regroupings is a major fork in the road. How many communities we have, what it will look like will generate decisions such as what shall we let go and what shall we hang onto for all that it's worth, how can we care for our people's spiritual and pastoral needs, and how can we work best with the other parishes in our Mission and still retain our identity? How do we connect with other parishes, so we can learn from them? Are we going to toe the line and do something under cover or challenge it if what's put forward won't work for us. How courageous will we be? We may need to prepare for Fr John's being moved to another parish or change will be forced upon us. We should prepare for what it might look like rather than just passively waiting for it to happen.

In light of this, we need to build a diverse lay-lead leadership and identify people to form who have a wide range of gifts. It is important to include many voices, not just the articulate. Our planning and visioning must include the pastoral care of all. We need continuous formation of the PDLT aside from maintenance and governance. Formation in our faith and spirituality is critical to successfully building a lay-led or actively collaborative parish into the future.

We need to forge ahead with the roadmap and prioritise key actions. We need to invite people to participate and contribute rather than waiting for people to step forward. How do we get families to infuse their children into parish life?

Faith story

8. What faith story could serve as a metaphor to guide our journey?
Suggestions for a faith story included the metaphors of a pilgrimage, a mustard seed, the Good Samaritan, and stories of trust and forgiveness, such as Jesus calling Peter to step into the boat or Peter having denied Christ, where we are reimagining and putting faith in something we can't see; people struggling to see Christ rising from the dead. We are being asked to have faith in new life coming out of a damaged Church.

The Good Samaritan story was suggested from two perspectives: one seeing beyond our personal needs and showing mercy, while the other as an image of crossing to the other side of the road to

where the wounded are. We are the wounded; we're in palliative care as a Church. We need people to cross the road. It's going to be outsiders, not Catholics. It's beyond the priest – clericalism – we need outsiders to bandage our wounds.

The pilgrimage was seen as the early church or as our wandering through the desert before finding a better place (did God desert us?). Who is leading us into the promised land? Similarly, the Road to Emmaus was put forward. We are grappling with the challenges put before us by the Church hierarchy and perhaps we lose sight of Christ among us. The two men on the road to Emmaus go from losing hope, being lost from the church to joyous when their "eyes are opened at the breaking of the bread" and they recognise Jesus. His words opening up scripture bring them back to the fold and make them realise that He is at the centre of everything. We can't ever lose sight of the "what would Jesus do?" question in our vision for our parish.

Legacy

9. If you were looking back on your time in our parish in 2032, what lasting contribution would you hope to have made?

Several people expressed the desire to make a difference. Such differences consisted in encouraging people to use their gifts, especially in ministry and leadership so that they are not dependent on priests to proclaim the Gospel; enriching their faith and seeking ways that they can serve others; welcoming people; practical and logistical skills; enthusiasm, joy and commitment, nurturing children and community members who are caring and inclusive, and who want to work towards a peaceful world; the way in which the Mission and parish work together with clarity and collaboration; and playing a part, as a woman, in the Church being in a healthier place in ten years' time.