



Take the Way of the Gospel

Report on the parish consultations

FOR THE RECONFIGURATION OF BAYSIDE CATHOLIC MISSION

*"I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself."*¹

In 2021, Archbishop Peter A Comensoli met with the clergy and lay leaders from around the Archdiocese of Melbourne to begin discussing how our local Church in Melbourne might respond to Pope Francis' call for renewal. At the heart of who we are is not all the buildings but the person of Jesus Christ, who enters into our lives and who we then share with others. Exploring and dreaming a missionary way forward lies at the heart of our baptismal call – clergy and lay together – to live out the Gospel.

Over the last two years, through a series of regional meetings and other forums, we have been invited to be courageous and creative in our thinking as we embrace the challenges and opportunities that today's landscape presents as we *Take the Way of the Gospel*.

As part of our renewal, parishes are being encouraged to come together as local faith communities with the mission of the Gospel as the heart of our life, worship and outreach². It is hoped these larger communities of mission will facilitate:

- Creation of vibrant, vital and viable parishes alive with missionary disciples fully living their baptismal call;
- Greater effectiveness in sharing the Gospel;
- Effective resourcing – spiritually, ministerially and materially.

While some dioceses in other places have implemented a mission-centred type of transformational change through a major operational reshaping of the parish landscape, we intend to take a more evolutionary road, moving towards larger centres of collaboration for mission over time. However, there are some areas where change is more urgent, such as is the case for Bayside Catholic Mission.

Established in 2021, Bayside Catholic Mission comprises the parishes of St James Gardenvale, St Joan of Arc Brighton, St Mary's Hampton, Sacred Heart Sandringham, Nazareth Ricketts Point and, more recently, Immaculate Heart of Mary Hampton East.

On 20 May 2023, Archbishop Peter wrote to parishioners in the broader Bayside area explaining he had recently met with the local Pastors where there was in principle agreement that the timing was right to consider reconfiguring Bayside Catholic Mission and the adjoining parishes. He invited the engagement of each of the parishes in discerning the optimal future arrangements, asking the Pastors to open-up local conversations to hear the thoughts of the communities on the future.

¹ Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* §27

² At Pentecost 2021, Archbishop Peter sent a Pastoral Letter to all the faithful of Melbourne entitled 'Re-imagining our Local Church as Mission Communities'.

All of the parishioners from the Bayside Catholic Mission and adjoining parishes were invited to participate in a consultation session, viz:

- Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish Hampton East
- Nazareth Parish Ricketts Point
- Our Lady of the Assumption Parish Cheltenham
- Sacred Heart Parish Sandringham
- St Agnes' Parish Highett
- St Finbar's Parish Brighton East
- St James Parish Gardenvale
- St Joan of Arc Parish Brighton
- St Mary's Parish Hampton
- St Patrick & St John Vianney Parish Mentone & Parkdale

Seven consultation sessions were offered over a 4-week period. The sessions were facilitated by Jacqui Giuliano, Southern Region Animation Consultant or Cath Garner, Take the Way of the Gospel Strategy Coordinator, with support from either Bishop Tony Ireland, Regional Bishop or Fr Joe Caddy, Vicar General.

The first session was open to parishioners from the Bayside Catholic Mission parishes with the purpose of eliciting learnings from their earlier experience to guide the change process. More than 70 parishioners (approximately 10% of the current Mass-going population) attended the session.

The subsequent sessions sought input on the optimal reconfiguration from each parish's perspective. More than 350 parishioners (approximately 20% of the Mass-going population across the ten parishes) participated in one of these sessions.

We are very grateful that so many people took the opportunity to participate in the consultation process. This report has been prepared to synthesise the discussion that occurred across all of the consultation sessions, drawing out the themes to inform Archbishop Peter's discernment on the reconfiguration of parishes in this part of the Archdiocese and to inform the change management process.

Learning from the experience of Bayside Catholic Mission parishes

The initial consultation with the Bayside Mission parishes elicited their sense of loss in moving into a cluster arrangement. Loss of community, loss of a deeper relationship with the parish priest, loss of Sunday Mass, loss of parish identity, loss of involvement in liturgy and ministries and loss of income were all cited. There were also suggestions of how some of these losses might be mitigated, for example by having the same priest say Mass in the same parish each week, forming pastoral teams of lay people, awareness of and respect for parish culture and their differences and the possibility of creating small communities within the larger community.

Concerns were expressed about "an unreal expectation on the priests who were stretched too far", and there was a sympathetic recognition that most of our clergy haven't been trained in leading change.

Some participants suggested the answer to the shortage of priests is to ordain women and married men; but it is recognised that these are obviously matters beyond the power of the Archdiocese.

Several positive outcomes were also highlighted, such as:

- Being moved out of your comfort zone
- Meeting new people and extending your friendships
- Feeling at home in more churches
- Sharing talents and interests
- Access to more opportunities than a single parish can provide
- A stronger social justice movement, better care of the elderly and strengthening of communion to the sick
- Rationalisation and more economic use of resources across the parishes

Overall, there was a genuine desire "to bring people together in faith and love", "for mission to be nurtured at the Eucharist so you can then move out to encounter the wider community" and to reconnect with families and young people.

Most importantly, the parishioners requested that they are consulted in decisions that affect them and expressed their strong desire for clarity about their future.

Outcomes from the consultation on options for reconfiguration

Although the consultation sessions were genuine in their objective of constructive dialogue and listening, the experience of these sessions was mixed.

Some parishioners were grateful change was being endeavoured and were pleased to have an opportunity to contribute to the process. Others found the consultation process unsatisfactory or confusing. Many individuals were worried about the impact of the workload on parish priests potentially being assigned to more parishes. Concern was also expressed about the apparent quick turnaround of a recommendation to the Archbishop, feeding a perception or misconception that a decision had already been made.

Feedback submitted via the online mailbox (mission@cam.org.au) was mainly along similar lines.

Unfortunately, there was no consensus among the groups from each parish as to the optimal future composition of Bayside Catholic Mission or the grouping of parishes in the broader Bayside area.

Some parishioners supported a proposal that Bayside Catholic Mission parishes should be divided into three clusters – north, central and south – and incorporate the adjoining parishes. Others largely supported the status quo, suggesting only minor changes at the northern or southern end of Bayside Catholic Mission and maintaining other existing twinned parish relationships.

Despite the mixed response, the overall outcome was more strongly for some form of reconfiguration than for no change.

Reasons cited for nominating a partner parish included:

- Close proximity to other vibrant faith communities;
- Accessibility;
- Existing relationships between parishes
- Cultural similarities and “natural fit”
- Good transport links
- Similar Liturgical style
- Good Church facilities
- Historical links
- Current relationships
- Ability to accommodate anticipated population growth
- Existing school relationships
- Importance of feeder schools
- Alignment between social justice groups
- Shared ministries
- Maintaining current twinned arrangements
- Benefit from different style
- Benefit from joining parish with larger congregation
- Attachment to the incumbent PP
- Opportunities created for collaboration (youth, elderly etc)
- Socio-economic similarities
- Demographics – blend of people.

Most of the reasons why a parish should not be included in a cluster were the opposite, such as distance to travel and lack of transport links, a different liturgical style or different culture. The risk of losing more parishioners and the challenge of caring for multiple communities were other reasons cited.

The reasons for and against the clustering of particular parishes proved useful for developing criteria to assess the options for change.

Other suggestions

There were some other comments and suggestions offered during the consultation process, including:

- St James Gardenvale and St Joan of Arc Brighton amalgamating;
- Hampton and Hampton East amalgamating providing an opportunity to create social housing;
- Establishing a Bayside Catholic Mission outreach that facilitates collaboration between the newly grouped parishes;
- Closing St Joseph's Black Rock as a Mass centre when the school closes;
- Changing parish boundaries between Sandringham, Highett and Cheltenham;
- Providing transport for the elderly;
- Improving parish websites so they are more vibrant/capture the spirit;
- More effective sharing of communication between parishes;
- Improving fellowship;
- Offering a prayer or communion service if priest is not available for Mass;
- Development of an Adoration Chapel;
- Review of the timing of Masses;
- Potential to share buildings;
- There is a need for dynamic leadership and formation.

These comments and suggestions were included in the report to Archbishop Peter.

Conclusion

This was the first engagement with *Take the Way of the Gospel* for many of the parishioners and it was challenging to communicate the vision for change and gather views on the optimal reconfiguration in one short session.

Although changing the structural configuration of bayside parishes is essential at this point of time, missionary renewal is the integral aim of the change process. Of all the active ingredients of successful change, **vision, leadership** and **culture** emerged from the consultations as the most critical elements to focus current and near-term attention.

Drawing on the experience of Bayside Catholic Mission parishioners, it would be beneficial for the change process to be informed by the Synod 2021–2024 themes of Communion, Participation and Mission. These three themes are the exact way Jesus lived and worked with the original disciples. That is, the Twelve Apostles spent significant time with Jesus and with each other before being sent on mission. Enduring success and growth will need to be supported with a well-designed transformation program, which steps out the new path for encountering Jesus and growing mission including:

- Rejuvenating and building/re-building a community that embraces the Pope's aspirations for 'unity with diversity';
- Embracing new forms of parish leadership; and
- Unlocking the substantial latent capacity and capability of parishioners for active discipleship.

Over time, this can grow competency and capability, effective engagement, increasing authentic trust and trustworthiness, efficient and economical stewardship and sharing of essential resources, creative innovations and new models that can be shared across the Archdiocese and beyond.