

Helping to Renew our Church via Inputs to the '2020 Plenary Council'



Capture of parish and school community responses to Question 'A'

Introduction

With minimal editing or removal of repetition at this stage the following responses have been captured from a mix of small groups and individuals in our Parish and school communities in answer to the Question "What does our Church look like today?".

Respondents included small Family groups, School groups, Friend groups, Outreach group, Men's group, Parish Pastoral Council and individuals. As part of the process of "Listening to God by listening to one another" these extensive responses are made available here to assist in collectively considering the key Question B that follows "What is Christ calling us to make our Church today (Listening to the Holy Spirit).

Together with responses to later Questions B&C these responses will be refined and briefly summarised for submission to the Church's Plenary Council agenda-setting group, and our local Archbishop Peter Comensoli, before the due date of Ash Wednesday (6 March) 2019.

Perceptions of our Church

- There are good things about our church. It lives out the Christian principle of love your neighbour and care for others through its extensive and effective ministries in health, welfare, education, chaplaincy and support for the vulnerable such as the elderly, the disadvantaged, mentally ill and imprisoned.

It would be fair to say that no other organisation does more. Members of the church have a strong commitment to social justice. Priests and religious, particularly the ageing priests, have dedicated their lives to serving their communities and done that well. Unfortunately this is not adequately recognised by their superiors but is by the faithful.

Unfortunately the church as an institution cannot be viewed so positively. It takes the form of a large bureaucracy and suffers the deficiencies of such bodies. As such it is rigid in its approach, lacks transparency and accountability. It is not inclusive but rather excludes people on the basis of perceived moral failings. Rather than being welcoming it is authoritarian and excluding. It is judgemental of how people live their lives and has little real understanding of what is involved for lay people in doing their best to live their lives in 2018. This is perhaps not surprising as these judgments are often being made by elderly, celibate, male clerics. A classic example is the area of human relationships. Thus with the church today there are positives and negatives the challenge is to maintain the positives and turn the negatives into positives.

- **Our** congregations are aging and many people, stretching across 2 or 3 generations, have walked away.

How did this happen when ‘Vatican 2’ outcomes from 1965 were held in high hope by many? It seems that there was a considerable group, among the clergy, the hierarchy and the laity who did not/could not/ admit that the church was not seeing the ‘signs of the times’. This was especially seen in adherence to rigid attitudes on many issues and to old-style of governance, that is, power was in the hands of people with those beliefs.

This made it difficult to bring to life the Vatican 2 vision that the Church is all the People God, equally valued, and equally needed in the bringing of the kingdom to our world.

There was not sufficient recognition of greater levels of education, the need/right people had to question. What had been based on superstition was not acceptable. The rote learning of old, no longer satisfied and the church was not ready to engage with these people.

As people walked away they found ‘excuses’, ‘explanations’, it was not ‘cool’ to go to church, all priests are paedophiles, I’m too busy, you don’t have to go to church to lead a good life etc. Others might have tried to be involved but were knocked back - for being out of place, being told it’s not your job, for not doing things the ‘right’ way. Yet many people still consider themselves as Catholics - ‘back-sliders’, ‘lapsed’ people, C and E Catholics, cafeteria Catholics. This Plenary opportunity might reach them and renew hope

- **Many** people of strong faith, especially older people, will still keep coming to Mass despite a now broken church, because of their faith and seen need for the Church.
- **Pope** Francis is good, newly appointed Bishops and Archbishops are good, having a Plenary is good, but damage has been done to the Church over the last 50 years that will be difficult to overcome. Many have left the Church from all age groups. Perhaps we will become a smaller Church?
- **The** Church shows some signs of heading in the right direction, but the challenge is to continue and move on, and to be more positive.
- **The** Church needs to better engage/integrate school families in Church communities.
- **It’s** not a listening Church, is divided, is clericalist, has covered up its serious faults, has poor governance, lacks openness and transparency, is unapproachable and has lost trust.
- **The** church works well in some parishes but not in its own hierarchy. Its overall structure and governance need re-working.
- **The** Church is challenged by ageing and its own conservatism, loss of young people and the prevailing sense of laity powerlessness in a remote hierarchical organisation.
- **The** Church is boring, Mass language and liturgy need to adopt more of the vernacular, texts need updating, Plain speaking is not encouraged but needs to be. The Church has not successfully tuned into the magic of its own faith.
- **Women** comprise 50% of the Church but by restricting use of their talents and qualifications the Holy Spirit is ‘gagged’, particularly in addressing social and moral issues such as IVF, contraception and divorce.
- **The** Church is not inclusive nor encourages those with diverse needs. It offers shallow excuses for its faults. Priority is protecting physical assets rather than its congregations.

- **The Church** does not recognise/respond to the sense of irrelevance experienced within different age groups.
- The Church does not recognise the support and outreach already provided by some of its members against all odds who provide a welcoming, inclusive and encouraging environment in parishes.
- **The Church** lacks or has lost the clear vision of our Church and its role as a pillar of Christ's trust.
- **Parishes** comprise a major part of the overall Church community. There are a number of welcoming and supportive parts of the church (including many parishes, support services, social justice, charity groups and particular religious communities) that faithfully and closely follow Christ's mission. Unfortunately overall goodness within other parts of the Church is masked and damaged by behaviour and institutional structure far removed from Christ, that has lost touch both with his mission and the times.
- **The** sexual abuse scandals involving priests have seriously damaged the church, which has an uphill battle to reclaim credibility with the wider community. You cannot blame people's derision of the Church's claim to the moral high ground.
- **The Church** is over-structured, rule-driven, over-shackled by complexity and needs to change structurally to become more pastorally supportive of the community.
- **The Church** is becoming increasingly irrelevant, uninteresting to and rejected by young people who themselves ironically tend to demonstrate 'Christian' values of social justice and caring while rejecting the institutional Church and tradition for its own sake.
- **Religion** was once the basis for law and society because it offers a blueprint for human behaviour. The Church now is a shadow of itself 50 years ago and out of touch with societal changes
- **The Church** is an authoritarian organisation preserving its institutionalism as a 'raison-d'etre'. It clings to the 'here-after' rather than the present time in order to retain its power structure.
- **The Church** is very clericalist and lacks openness, transparency and accountability
- **The Church** is hierarchical, living in the past and more focused on self-empowerment and self-protection than directly reflecting the values of Christ.
- **The Church** is fractured and divided, behaving far from the community that Christ intended and exemplified. Some parishes are welcoming and inclusive while others are restrictive.
- A divided church has led to personal beliefs and witness overriding community shared beliefs and witness.
- **The Church** focuses more on archaic organisational structures than on exemplifying its Christian message. It is disconnected to today's world, overly restrictive and uninviting to young people in particular.
- **There** is a lack of respect for authority generally and for the Church. Some shameful and hypocritical stands have been taken by some church members in recent times. Chance now for renewal. Need more volunteers and commitment to help homeless and refugees
- **The Church** has poor governance arrangements and needs to learn from and take advantage of skills within the wider Church community who are often better versed and experienced in good governance.
- **Half** of the Church is comprised of women who are restricted from authority roles in a Church in which womens' insights would be invaluable but are wasted instead.
- **Church** should shift its excessive focus from Vatican and episcopal rulings to more directly supporting communities through gospel values. Bishops roles are inadequately pastorally focused.
- **Church** Attitudes to marriage and divorce are out of touch.

- **People** are now better educated and discerning than to blindly obey imposed rules as they once did. People no longer accept 'Adam and Eve' as the origin of mankind.
- **Many** Bishops appear pompous and un-listening. They are often detached from most people in the community and have resulted in the Church losing relevance and perceived 'need to be church' by many people, particularly young people.
- **The** church has been a poor listener and needs to be more synodal and humbler.
- **People** of all persuasions are not well accepted as part of Christ's community as they need to be.
- **Attitudes** to LGBT people and victims of Child sexual abuse are very un-Christ-like and turn people away. Through these and other harmful behaviours the Church has lost credibility and trust.
- **From** now as things stand the Church will become a small vestige of its former self in 10-15 year's time.
- **Our** Church congregations don't reflect all the Catholics in the area. They are either going somewhere else or not attending Church. It would be nice to see more young people of any age come to Church & Church functions. The beautiful church buildings are in need of maintenance. There are no fund raising activities outside of the parish collections. There seems to be no bridge between the school's parent & teacher committees and the parish committees. The absence of the children is very noticeable, as also the absence of religious (brothers & sisters, etc) & school teachers. In the background, almost invisible is a mighty group of dedicated Catholics who are thriving with many ministries and a wealth of experience & charity; especially communion for the sick, volunteering, choir, social justice issues, awesome multimedia, music & information updates. There is tremendous promise, just quietly bubbling under the surface & people genuinely care for each other
- **Our** Church is traditional focused and has lost relevance to a great proportion of our community (Catholic or otherwise)
- **People** feel that our Church has one set of rules for itself and another set for everyone else (e.g. protection or abusers whilst covering up complicity and silencing victims)
- **Community** expectations of nurturing faith extends beyond attending Mass and simply following tradition. People firstly want to pursue community values, behaviour and support
- **The** Church is old, tired, out of touch with community needs, non-inclusive and uninviting, not always very Christ focused
- **The** Church is Grey and dull (12, y.o. comment)
- **Church** is not inspirational (10 y.o. comment)
- **The** Church appears to have lost its purpose to help the poor, sick and needy
- **The** Church lacks transparency
- **Church** is outdated and not adjusting to today's issues such as same-sex
- **Our** Church is currently a place for worship and celebrating key days and events
- **The** Church comprises an ageing population who's capacity is stretched to the limits
- **Church** looks like a leader needing to make some tough decisions
- **The** Church is a fractured community that prefers the status quo.
- **Today's** families are increasingly leading busy and active lives and find weekly worship non-essential
- **Families** who participate in sacred celebrations appreciate and are excited by faith experiences
- **The Church** has too many layers of management

- **Church** is where we go with our class to sing hymns and to quietly pray to God (Primary school student comment)
- **Our** Church mostly comprises very few people and mostly of old age.
- **Church** lacks relevance. Attendance is more habit than spiritual engagement, mostly by stubborn people unwilling to change and unable to communicate with younger generations. This leads to search for answers elsewhere.
- **Today's** Church services show no relevance to today's issues. Many are 'angry' with the Church for not addressing long-standing issues, particularly those of a criminal nature.
- **Church** narrowly lead by elderly white males for the hearts of all sorts of different people.
- **The** Church is very focused on the needs and preferences of middle-class white older people and affluent nuclear families
- **Church** is a place of peace and love which welcomes all people as a place to follow God and renew faith.
- **Church** is full of repetitive doctrine and rules that need to be reviewed for today's world.
- **Many** in congregations are suffering (from mental health and other problems) and in our Church can't find peace and meaning in life.
- **Not** everyone is made to feel welcome or involved (e.g, some women, people living with disabilities including mental health conditions, gay people, especially the poor)
- **Provides** many valuable social services, but posh private schools and hospitals have a very high, perhaps undue, focus. Is this a just and loving use of our collective resources?
- **Denies** the lived experience of domestic violence and sexual abuse survivors and families, including childhood incest.
- **Current** use of buildings and churches is often seen as more important than needs of the vulnerable
- **Service** to others, especially outside the immediate community is often restricted.
- **Too** 'politically correct', rarely speaks truth to power. Following Christ can be challenging but should not be an exercise in niceness.
- **The** Church is not attracting the younger generation. People are not very interested and have too many other commitments. Going to Church is not a priority.
- **The** Church is male dominated. Needs more lay input and female leadership.
- **Too** much passive resistance to the Pope's message of change.
- **Catholic** schools are seen as good community schools but are valued for their academic excellence and discipline not their religious values.
- **A** shameful and hypocritical Church in the light of recent Royal Commission findings.
- **Lacks** youth inclusion.
- **Whatever** the problems are with today's Church they are no worse than in the past. The Church will survive but it's time for renewal
- **The** Church looks incompetent, badly managed, inept, clumsy and non-responsive. Its priest and bishop selection processes have been inadequate. There doesn't appear to be any behaviour auditing processes.
- **The** Church is closed, dogmatic, not 'of the people', and shows no life vibrancy.
- **The** still male-oriented Church is defensive and dependent on the environment, particularly attitudes of the Parish priest.
- **The** Church is inconsistent, e.g. in its reversal of general absolution.
- **It's** good that the 'commandments of the Church' have gone. Why were 2nd commandments required?
- **The** 'look' of the Church is of those 60 years and older.
- **The** Anglican Church is more inviting to youth and organises more activities for children.

- **Severely** damaged beyond repair,-because of its stubbornness and lethargy in responding to its crisis -refusing to admit culpability in these insidious crimes-glossing over them in soft terms, using words like abuse and hoping the issue would go away -denial at its very worst. After all we were the elite Christian church -so we thought-we grew up in the 1950s never ever being allowed in other Christian churches for funerals, weddings ,baptisms etc. under the threat of mortal sin -absolutely pathetic,,As they say pride comes before the fall. How true. The church is lost and struggling to recover, loss of so many young people is incalculable-their spirituality, energy, intellect, passion, enthusiasm all getting transmitted into other directions-sadly material. As a grandmother in her 70s I struggle to understand the deceit, depravity, and degradation the church slipped into- at a time when it was preaching from the pulpit how married people should conduct their sex lives. The Catholic Church was /is obsessed with sex.
- **It** needs to be more widely and better understood that Christian Churches including Catholic continue to provide immeasurable assistance to the entire community via social service as they have for centuries.

What the Church needs to do wasn't asked in Question 'A' but some comments offered:

- The Church lacks or has lost the clear vision of our Church and its role as a pillar of Christ's trust. It needs also to recognise that the Church, like human nature is messy. It needs to support body, mind and spirit.
- The Church needs to practice and protect honesty, & Introduce ongoing synodality
- The Church needs to energetically offer hope, affirmation of faith, and encouragement of religious spirit rather than just a mechanical sense of duty.
- The Church needs to pay attention to the recruitment, selection and relevant training/formation of priests, preparing them for the realities of parish life.
- The Church needs to consider further adopting married priests.
- More changes are needed so as to reach out and connect with today's way of life.
- The language used in our worship should still be inclusive and more as we speak.
- Governance. It is to be hoped this will be based on Pope Francis' vision of a synodal church, at least, in the form of an archdiocesan pastoral council.
- Significant decision making roles for women. Can women be deacons?
- Training for the priesthood: candidate selection, 'real' formation, not just 'ticking boxes'.
- Appointments of priests to parishes: Genuine consultation, A proper handover - priests and community.
- Appointment of bishops. Ongoing consideration of suitable priests, looking ahead to vacancies, allowing time for due process.
- Very important: The relationship with children in the Catholic secondary schools---- Do they have any sense of a local worshipping community? Do they have a 'grown up' view of what the church teaches?
- Marriage, Divorce, Annulment. Real life situations often the cause of 'walking away'.
- Reproductive matters: More than 50 years since the controversial Humanae Vitae. Artificial contraception widely used by people who 'would be' Catholics.
- Chance now for renewal. Commitment to help homeless and refugees
- With the church today there are positives and negatives. The challenge is to maintain the positives and turn the negatives into positives.