

## Summary of the Parish conversations

### **Current environment**

The St Francis of Assisi Ohariu parish community is feeling the full impact of a shortage of priests and is unclear about its future. There is no rulebook to obey, no examples to follow. People are being asked to change but the extent of what needs changing and what will change is unclear. Depending on your point of view, the parish is involved in an unsettling experiment or an exciting evolution.

Those who attended the recent Parish 'conversations' expressed many emotions ranging from frustration and scepticism to optimism and excitement.

Here are the key ideas that came to the fore in parish discussions:

### **Hurts from the past**

There has been a lack of consultation and communication around the changes the parish is experiencing and the departure of the residential priests.

There is confusion about what is planned for the future.

Previous surveys and strategies have been ignored. Ideas in the Merger Consultation document in 2014 have been shelved.

There has been a lack of transparency about decision-making which affects the whole parish. Decisions made have been 'shrouded in mystery'.

The great work done by groups in the parish over many years has not been acknowledged.

### **Role of the LFT**

The role of the LFT is not clearly understood or accepted. What is their mandate?

The current team is transitional?

This leadership group needs to be representative of the community it serves.

Change needs to be introduced with pastoral sensitivity, evolution not revolution.

There needs to be a clear plan for the parish which is "owned" by the parish as a whole.

Clear, consistent communication from the LFT group is critically important to a successful transition.

### **Role of the priest**

The priest is traditionally at the centre of Catholic life. The Eucharist is when we gather as a community. However, the crisis in vocations to the priesthood in New Zealand is undeniable and will only worsen as elderly priests reach full retirement. We can no longer ignore this reality.

This is a huge challenge for the Catholic community. We have seen this coming. Why haven't we been better prepared?

The Marists have indicated they will help by supplying priests for Masses for the next three years but not in a traditional parish priest role. What happens then?

Given the central importance of the priest in the life of a parish, what is the Cardinal's strategy for provision of priest/s going forward?

What is the parish's strategy?

### **New model vs existing order**

The parish discussions reflect a clear divergence between those advocating a new model of church and those looking to preserve the existing model.

#### ***New model***

The current situation is a huge opportunity to create a new model of church with greater leadership and participation by lay people, more active and inclusive parish communities, and a more outward-looking focus.

This has been talked about for decades but not fully embraced.

The change process we are involved in will fundamentally challenge us as Catholics. It will require new parish structures and new ways of being a community, yet to be determined.

A priest/s will still be central to the life of the parish but as one of a governing group / pastoral team, not as the person making all the decisions. It is not possible for priests to be doing what they have done in the past.

A priest will still be saying Sunday Mass. Lay people, however, will need to step up and take on leadership roles and ministries in areas suited to their talents.

Given the shortage of vocations, there will need to be greater flexibility with liturgies.

There needs to be a greater focus on mission, looking beyond parish boundaries to the needs of the homeless and poor in the wider community. Serving the disadvantaged, not just giving money.

The parish could make its buildings available for use as community hubs for the benefit of the wider community.

We need fresh impetus to create a church community that welcomes younger people and young families and is relevant to their lives. There are not many people in their 20s, 30s and 40s at church.

The use of deacons should be considered. Lay people will need training to take on various ministries.

The vibrancy in a parish does not need to come from the priest. The church is the people of God. The greater the involvement of the people, the more dynamic the parish.

The parish must come together to decide what this new model means in practice. The new vision needs to be clearly explained, and people invited to come on board.

#### ***Existing order***

The parish needs a residential priest/s as shepherd of the parish as we have always had. We need a priest/priests to be here for the sick and the dying and the sacramental life of the church. We need priests not lay people to do the homilies. Some parishioners say this would be a deal-breaker for them.

Priests are needed to have personal input into our schools. They make a unique contribution.

The parish needs consistency of priests, not a rotating list.

The parish needs to source priests from overseas if they are not available locally. That's what other dioceses are doing.

Mass times are important. We can't reduce the number of Masses or people will leave.

We can't close down existing churches or people will leave.

We already have great communities in our parishes.

### **Parish infrastructure**

The maintenance costs of three churches and presbyteries are rising continually. Major financial burdens on the horizon.

Could resources be re-purposed or rented out to fund other initiatives in the parish?

Should we use assets to help the disadvantaged?

The presbyteries must not be left empty.

Infrastructural decisions need to be made in light of the overall strategic plan for the Ohariu pastoral area. Decisions about individual churches and/or presbyteries must not be made in isolation.

### **Church – school relationship**

Current involvement of parents in our communities is low. We need to bring the school families into our communities.

We need to support young families, and make it easy for them to participate with convenient Mass times and relevant liturgies.

We need to cater better for youth, grow ‘a young church’, have regular youth Masses with modern Christian music. We must ask youth what they want. Young people in the parish need to be heard.

The reality is that currently we lose young people once they leave school.

### **Not yet one community**

The three parish communities haven’t yet merged into one unified parish /pastoral area. It’s a merger in name only. The people in the various parishes don’t know one another. We need to build greater understanding and connection between the three communities.

Thriving groups are required within a parish to build a strong sense of belonging e.g.

Passionist family groups

We need more parish-wide social activities to build a unified community.

Get the groups from the various communities to work together eg music groups.

### **Acknowledge what we already have**

The Catholic faith has been lived and passed on in these parishes for generations. The parishes have enjoyed periods of great vitality.

People in the three parish communities already care for their church and for one another.

Effective groups (music groups, young mothers, SVdP, elderly etc) are in place.

We need to look after each other through this transitional time. The Gospel imperative is that we respect and love one another, even when we disagree. Especially when we disagree.

It is a time of major change with many issues to deal with. We can work through this as a community.