

BUILDING THE PARISH COMMUNITY FOR THE FUTURE

**Parish Engagement Project
of the Catholic Community in
Balwyn, Camberwell, Deepdene,
Surrey Hills and Wattle Park**

Report on Focus Groups

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In mid-2020, the Christian Research Association was commissioned by the Catholic Parish of Camberwell, Balwyn & Deepdene and Surrey Hills Wattle Park to undertake a two-part project investigating how the parish's mission is engaging within the local community.

The first part of the project was a survey, which was reported on to the parish leadership team in October 2020.

The second part of the project, which this report covers, involved undertaking three focus groups with selected volunteers. The focus groups were conducted online in late November and early December 2020. Overall, 12 participants were involved. Each group represented a distinct group of people within the parish community:

1. Parents of students currently or previously enrolled at one of the parish's schools;
2. Individuals who had limited recent engagement with the parish; and,
3. Young people under the age of 30.

About faith and life

Almost all of the participants had grown up in the Catholic Church or were married to partners who had. There were various patterns of current involvement amongst the participants. For a number of the participants, engagement with the parish was through the Catholic school community or on parish-school committees.

Faith was considered important for all of the participants, although the expression of faith was different for each. Most were appreciative of the Catholic tradition they had grown up with, even though their present involvement may have been somewhat infrequent. They recognised the importance of faith for celebrating the big moments in life and acknowledged that it was important to pass on the faith traditions one grew up with. A Catholic school education was also considered important.

The focus group of young people were asked additional questions related to contemporary youth and faith, their role in life and their involvement in community. They noted the importance of having close friends and supportive families, as well as having a sense of purpose in life. They suggested that the key issues facing their peers related to self-worth, mental health and finding one's 'place in life'. Connecting with and understanding their faith was an ongoing challenge for some young Catholics. The parish community offered the possibility of support and a safe space for them to be listened to and to get involved. They were very receptive to greater engagement with the parish community through opportunities open to young people but suggested that there needed to be informal and formal ways for that to happen.

Involvement in the parish

When asked about the reasons for being involved in the parish, participants noted the importance of giving back to the community, having a strong sense of belonging, modelling involvement to their children and sharing values with like-minded people in a safe environment. For a few participants, the parish involvement revolved around the Catholic school community, rather than the church.

All of the participants had experienced changes to their involvement in the parish community over time, although some had ceased involvement altogether. For many, such changes were related to life changes, but for others, there were significant negative factors which had caused them to reduce their involvement. A few participants noted that involvement can depend on the priest or leadership within a parish. Participants suggested that involvement in any community started with relationships or a connection which instigated some level of involvement. For some, the Covid-19 pandemic had caused them to reflect on their future involvement in the parish.

The mission of the parish

Participants understood the mission of the parish as a place for raising awareness of and undertaking social justice activities in the wider community and providing services which focused on building community. Many participants noted the importance of the parish providing a place where faith can be expressed and nurtured in different ways. The young people identified that the parish's purpose should also include it being a community to meet new people and to be challenged in a safe space.

Participants suggested that a parish needed to bring people together with a shared sense of belonging, as well as providing for the spiritual needs of people through deeper teaching and allowing individuals to express their passion for God and their faith. The young people welcomed the idea of a Plenary Council but wanted to see "real action" through the local parish community and broader Church, rather than just talking about it.

The most important aspects of a parish, for participants, centred around community. Key components of such aspects were providing and developing a sense of community for those with shared values, growing the community through various activities, providing the opportunity to celebrate Mass, welcoming others and allowing all to express their gifts and be nurtured.

For those focus group participants who had been involved, the parish's sacramental program was generally positive, and for some, had led to more involvement with the school or parish community. They suggested that it was important to continue to have leaders involved who had a personal connection with the school, who were welcoming and ensured that the program was run well. On the other hand, there was some reservation about the program being too exclusive.

The future

There was much discussion in the focus groups about ideas for how the parish could focus its energy and resources in the future. Such ideas related to the parish adapting to remain relevant in people's lives and being a safe and supportive place for all, no matter what a person's ideology or background. One participant appreciated that, through the parish, the Catholic faith provided a moral compass for many, although warned of the need for the Church to recognise that it means different things to different people.

There were positive comments about welcoming and inclusivity of the school communities from those participants who had been involved. However, there was a question posed about how to keep the community aspect as the children moved from primary to secondary schooling. There was thoughtful and reflective discussion amongst participants about their future involvement in the parish community.

Moving forward, a number of recommendations for the parish were proposed or implied amongst the focus group participants.

1. Continue to provide forums for discussion of similar issues explored in this research project.
2. Offer formal and informal ways for people to get involved in the life of the parish community.
3. Ensure people's involvement in the life of the parish community is invitational. People express their faith in many ways and an individual's desire for involvement in parish is different.
4. Explore further the many opportunities for developing school-church connections in the parish.
5. Further examine the various aspects of parish engagement should include those who may or may not be currently involved.