

One plan for the Parish

My dear people,

This weekend marks my first anniversary as pastor at St Paul's, so I thought it was a good opportunity to review where we are as a local parish church.

There have been a few small initiatives that have begun or changed during this year:

- New parish logo and identity
- New LCD screens installed
- New LED sanctuary lighting
- Move from hymnbooks to screens
- Introduction of message series
- Beginning of daily adoration
- Ministry formation and renewal
- New parish website
- Introduction of online giving
- New Parish Life bulletin / format

Most other things have remained unchanged. Yet there have been lots of little tweaks to this and that, mostly because of the difference in my personality, theology and liturgical styles to previous priests.

The last couple of months my prayer has been dominated by the question of what the Lord may be asking of me as the leader of this community. My thoughts have been strongly formed and influenced by a book called *Divine Renovation* (Fr James Mallon), in addition to the books *Rebuilt* (Fr Michael White and Tom Corcoran); *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Sherry Weddell) and *Heart and Mind* (Alexander Shaia).

So this is the time because there is no better time to begin a new phase of life as a parish.

It is said that it's not so much that the Church of Christ has a mission, as that the mission of Jesus Christ has a Church. We, however, have so forgotten our essential missionary calling that we have contented ourselves with maintenance and serving ourselves. That the Church exists for the sake of mission has been asserted by popes and theologians continuously for the last 50 years, but most Catholics perceive mission as something that a select few carry out in far-off places, and most parishes, crippled by a culture of maintenance, focus at best on meeting the needs of parishioners. (*Divine Renovation*, ch 1)

We are called to continue to grow in faith as a community.

If this parish is to be the church that the Holy Spirit calls us

to be, then we need to ensure that our focus changes from looking inwards, to looking outwards. We share in the mission of Jesus – and that mission is to know and love the Lord here in Albion Park by sharing the good news of his love with our friends and neighbours.

The Great Commission

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus calls his disciples together to provide them with their mission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Mt 28:20) We can see that there are four elements here: go, make, baptise and teach.

Only one of these words is a finite verb; the others are called participles, which are verbal nouns that only help to qualify the main verb. The word that is at the heart of this commission, and the word that must form the heart of all that we do is **MAKE**.

The church exists in order to *make disciples*.

We saw in the series on discipleship that the Greek word for disciple is *mathetes*, which comes from the word ‘to learn’. To be a disciple is to be a learner. Being a disciple is making a commitment to growth.

To grow means to change. And changing is often painful. No one really ever enjoys change. But unless we grow, we stagnate, and then death is the only outcome. This is the decision that our parish faces at this time – like every church in the western world. Do we want to keep doing all that we are doing, just the way that we are doing it – or are we prepared to be open to change and growth?

Pope Francis has warned that the church is “called to come out from itself and to go to the peripheries.” He says that if the Church does not do this, if it “does not come out from itself to evangelise, it becomes self-referential and gets sick.” He also calls the church a “hospital for sinners rather than a kind of club for the perfect.” This requires us to reflect deeply on every element of our parish and our life, from the way we gather and pray, to the time of services.

Church culture

You see the culture of a church in the things that it truly values. “Values are communicated by what is celebrated, by what is tolerated and by what is presumed.” What is done, or what is left undone, is always more important than what is only said.

We have a great parish. Although there are *great foundations* at St Paul's, and we have a tradition of being friendly and welcoming – there is so much more that needs to be done. The cultural forces that surround us, and which are part of all of our lives, will continue to eat away at the very fabric of church and Christian life.

What we need to undertake is a cultural change that will change what we understand to be normative for ordinary Christian life. It requires nothing less than the total conversion of our lived values.

As I see it, the change that needs to happen at St Paul's is at a number of different levels. These are the first three:

1. Making the Weekend a Priority

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a wedding banquet.

So our Sunday Eucharist should be an amazing and beautiful celebration. It needs to be intentionally prepared, with enough ministers to lead every aspect of the production, so that you joyfully walk away moved, nourished and engaged.

This leads us to the elephant in the room. We have three Masses each weekend. Two of them are fairly well attended. One is not. Over the last 17 weeks, a count has been kept for each of the three Masses.

- The 6pm Mass averages around **190** people.
- The 9.30am Mass averages around **195** people.
- The 7.30am Mass now averages only **85** people.

The attendance of all three Masses is low, in a church that comfortably seats 390 people. But the Vigil and 9.30am Mass are still sustainable in terms of readers, ministers, greeters, collectors, servers, etc. The 7.30am Mass with less than half the attendance of the other Masses is not. What makes this worse is that around 10 people attend the 7.30am Mass who also attend another Mass. Which means only ~75 people uniquely attend this early Mass.

Traditionally, each parish would only have one Mass.

The whole village would gather together in the celebration of the Eucharist at this Mass. As time went on, and the church became too full to accommodate everyone, then a second Mass was added to the schedule. If it also became too full, then you added a third, or fourth, and so on.

We have barely enough people attending Mass each weekend for two Masses. **But not three.**

Of course many people will have much to say on this. I welcome your thoughts **in writing** – over the weeks ahead.

Our current rosters take us through until November, so I don't propose any changes until then. If we can attract and invite *new parishioners* to join us, such that the average attendance at this early Mass increases to at least **150 people**, and the other Masses also grow, then this Mass may be sustainable.

2. Hospitality and Welcome

The Church is the only organisation that exists mainly for the sake of those who do not belong.

So we need to do more to improve our welcome of strangers and visitors. I propose that we all begin to wear name tags each week – because we really do like to go to a place where everybody knows our name.

The reality is that very few parishioners know the names of many others. So let's make this a little easier by having name tags that ministers can wear each week, and everyone can wear on the fourth Sunday each month. We'll also begin that Mass with a chance to welcome those around us, and ask for a prayer intention that we can hold in prayer during Mass.

3. Meaningful Community

"The church cannot be a collection of individual believers practicing their faith in private, satisfied with their self-sufficiency." (Arch. Mancini)

50 years ago most people knew what they were meant to believe and how they were meant to behave. But that is now gone. We may lament that those around us don't share our beliefs, but that won't change by preaching and teaching, but by building trust through relationships, through caring, through belonging.

My proposal to begin to address this, along with the call to make disciples, is to embrace the Alpha course, running it at least once each term, starting in Feb 2017. Alpha is a great program that has had much success across the world: The hungry are fed, the lukewarm are brought to life, and non-churchgoers and even non-believers come to faith in Jesus and return to church. More on this soon!

This is meant as the first stage of a conversation – not the last. So please, let me know your prayerfully-considered thoughts in the weeks ahead – in writing.

Note, *anonymous letters will not be read.*

Grace and peace,



Fr Richard Healey
1 September 2016