

Letter to Parishioners of the Catholic Parish of Wellington South

3 November 2019

In February Cardinal John wrote to parishioners, Parish Councils and Leadership teams directing us to radically re-think how we are to be *"People of God."* In particular, our call to be missionary disciples – and that *"if we are to develop our support for the poor and marginalised, we may have to make sacrifices."*

He also requires us to face and plan for the uncomfortable reality of our shrinking congregations, reducing number of priests and financial situation, including the burden of ongoing maintenance of our many churches and presbyteries.

Importantly, he exhorts us to look to the future and not cling to the past, telling us that *"we've always done it this way"* is both invalid and damaging.

Across the Catholic Parish of Wellington South we have a talented, diverse community who live out their faith and exhibit missionary discipleship in many ways – both within the parish and within their lives in the wider community.

From the Discernment sessions in May we heard from the parish about the importance of:

- Existing faith communities and concern about the loss of community.
- The need to use buildings wisely to promote mission and vision of church.
- That the Church is sacramental and somewhat inward looking.
- Knowing the roles of laity and priests.
- The importance of the church /school connection.

At the Stewardship Day in August, we heard from the parish the desire for:

- Retaining two churches.
- Developing multi-use spaces that we can share with the wider community.
- Ensuring future financial stability.
- Working hard to ensure we build one parish community.
- Ensuring that ethnic and Samoan communities' needs are met.
- Supporting and growing family groups, prayer groups, youth activity and CCD for children.
- Considering the links between schools and churches.
- Honouring and respecting the legacies of the past.

As part of the consultation process we have spoken to neighbouring parishes and met with local Catholic school principals. 37 individual submissions from parishioners were also considered.

As a parish, we also have to face the uncomfortable reality of:

- Our financial situation: parish finances have been running at a deficit for several years. The parish faces substantial costs maintaining our four churches and presbytery in operating expenses, overdue maintenance and earthquake issues.
- Falling congregations: our Mass count has fallen by over 20% over the last 20 years, over 10% in the last 10 years and will likely continue to shrink.
- Reducing numbers of priests: we must realistically assume we will be a one-priest parish within 3-5 years or sooner.

For us not to face this reality and plan for it would be irresponsible.

So, within this context, we believe that the parish needs to:

- Accept that we will need to become a one-church parish within ten years.
- Plan for that eventuality and renovate and expand our facilities in a way that will support our mission, our youth, ethnic communities, refugee communities, faith formation in schools and colleges and prayer and family groups.

To achieve this outcome in the next decade, the parish should over the next five years:

1. Work with St Francis de Sales School and community to renovate St Francis de Sales church into a new shared facility that is both a sacred space, a weekday-only Mass centre and a multi-use space that support's Christ's message and mission in the school and community. In time this could include transferring ownership of the church to the school.
2. Work with the St Joseph's community to support and sustain the strengths of their unique intentional community and plan its transition from the St Joseph's location to the St Anne's campus, closing and selling the St Joseph's church and land.
3. Work with the St Bernard's community and school to create a sacred space and weekday-only Mass centre within the St Bernard's School hall, closing and selling the church and presbytery within 1-2 years.
4. Work with all communities to grow the St Anne's campus into a community and facility suitable for and truly shared by all our parishioners. This will require the St Anne's community not just to welcome and accept other parishioners. It requires them to also welcome and accept changes to liturgies, Mass times, music and leadership that reflect and retain the strengths and preferences of the parishioners currently connected with St Joseph's, St Bernard's and St Francis de Sales.

Additionally, the St Francis de Sales presbytery needs significant and expensive overdue maintenance and is no longer ideal as accommodation for priests. Over the next few years we will create a new presbytery on or near the St Anne's campus. We will also explore future options for the St Francis de Sales presbytery – such as creation of a youth mission house or the sale of the property – in consultation with the parish.

We know this recommendation to Cardinal John will be saddening to many of us, and evoke anger, disappointment and other emotions. Wanting to postpone and minimise change is natural and human.

But the uncomfortable reality of our ongoing falling Mass numbers, reducing number of priests and financial situation is undeniable.

So, if we are truly to be missionary disciples and want to grow and sustain the strengths of our community as it changes, we need to embrace this change and support each other through it – not fight change and each other.

When we hear back from Cardinal John, the next step will be to look at creating working groups of interested parishioners from all church communities to begin making the changes outlined in our proposal.

Thank you for engaging with the consultation and expressing your views. Now, more than ever, we need to work together to ensure a positive and sustainable future for our parish.

Nga mihi nui

Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Leadership Team