

# IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

**The Church of Maitland-Newcastle is centred on Christ, the Cornerstone, and seeks always to live as a community of people who believe and are missionary disciples**

In the pages that follow we explore the first 'Foundation' of our life and mission as the church of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

**Our Story** takes us to the Acts of the Apostles, the source of our identity as a community of Jesus' disciples.

**Foundational Statements** remind us of what should characterise communities who are committed to his mission of bringing the Good News of God's love to our world.

**Concerns** summarise related issues raised by diocesan respondents to the Plenary Council Listening and Dialogue Session as well as those who submitted written responses at the first session of our Diocesan Synod in November 2019.

**Recommendations** suggest what could be done to address the issues raised in the preceding section. In many cases they will involve personal and communal conversion and/or actions at local community level.

*We proclaim the gospel when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, offer hospitality to the stranger, visit the sick and the lonely, care for those imprisoned or dying (Mt 25:35-36).*

*We proclaim the gospel when we stand up and tell the truth, although it's easier to stay silent.*

*We proclaim the gospel when we take time out to be with God, even when there are many demands on our time.*

*We proclaim the gospel when we agitate for justice and peace to prevail even though our own lives may be comfortable and secure.*

*We proclaim the gospel when we speak well of our family members, our colleagues, our leaders, our neighbours, our fellow parishioners.*

*We proclaim the gospel when we share our resources – our time, talent and treasure – with those who need them.*

*We proclaim the gospel when we recognise and honour those beliefs customs and ways that are different, even radically so, from our own.*

## OUR STORY

On the day of Pentecost three thousand became disciples of Jesus, evangelised by the few on whom the Holy Spirit first descended.

They remained faithful to the apostles' teaching, to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The whole group was united, heart and soul, gladly and generously sharing all.

They grew and developed beyond their Jewish roots, assuming a separate identity as 'the Way' and as 'Christians'. "See how these Christians love one another!"

The early Christian community gathered around those whom Jesus had gathered around himself.

They 'remembered' what Jesus said and did, passing on their treasured encounters with the God-man who had invited them to think, speak, and act like him in relating to God and to one another.

By word and example Jesus had taught them to be lovers always, motivated by the love of God.

They were to be known for loving enemies, turning the other cheek, endlessly forgiving!

Such radical, counter-intuitive behaviour identified a community as founded by Christ. Animated by Christ's continuing presence through the Holy Spirit it was destined to flourish.

Today, the Church of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle is the local gathering of the global Catholic Church in the Hunter-Manning. It is our church where we are at home.

Here we encounter Christ as his beloved friends and disciples and seek to grow our relationship.

It is the community from which we reach out to share the good news of God's saving love to all and to serve the coming of God's reign in the world.

We are Catholic Christians, belonging to the community of word and sacrament in continuity with the first Christians, including strong women of influence like Mary, Priscilla and Lydia.

We share with the first disciples the essential elements which defined them. We are faithful to the legacy of the Apostles, handed on under the leadership of their successor, our Bishop.

We seek equality and unity as children in God's family. We seek to love God faithfully, and to love others in practical service. We seek justice, mercy and love, especially for the poor and marginalised.

We are called to be a community of 'intentional disciples' who know the Lord well and warmly, who seek to follow him out of love and make him known and loved by others.

As humans we are imperfect in our attempts to be united heart and soul, to live together in harmony and to share our resources. To the extent that we succeed we identify ourselves as Christ followers.

Some of our behaviour has been antagonistic to that which Jesus enjoined on his followers. Our diocese has acquired some shameful notoriety in relation to sexual abuse and its cover-up. Victims and their families have suffered horrendously. All members of the community have suffered with them. We have failed Christ in his little ones.

Acknowledging our guilt for this evil reality, we strive to overcome our sins against the love in practice which should clearly identify us.

## FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS

**We are a people of faith, 'intentional disciples' of Jesus, entrusted with a mission by God – the mission of proclaiming the Good News of God's love.**

The church comes to be as the church engages in mission – as it realizes that its mission is the very mission of God: to go into the world and be God's saving, healing, challenging presence.... The church is not about the church. It is about what Jesus called the reign of God (Stephen Bevans SVD, *The Mission has a Church*)

Take...a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way?... Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one (Pope Paul VI *Proclaiming the Gospel*, 21)

**We are called to be a welcoming, listening church for all, attending to wounds of hurt and rejection, poor with the poor.**

Love is our foundation and our destiny. It is where we come from and where we're headed. (Richard Rohr OFM)

Let the Church always be a place of mercy and hope, where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven (Pope Francis June 2013)

[Christians should welcome others] without classifying them on the basis of social condition, language, race, culture, religion....mercy is that way of acting, that style, with which we try to include others in our life, avoiding closing up into ourselves and into our selfish securities (Pope Francis on Twitter, Nov 2016)

There is a sense that we are still coming to terms with the depth of the hurt and trauma of the victims and survivors of sexual abuse, along with the distressing shock that ripples throughout the whole Church. There is a great demand to acknowledge this pain and trauma, own the consequences of this dark chapter in our story and respond with courage, humility and tenderness. (Plenary Council Thematic Paper 2019)

**We are a people who respect and support the diversity of roles and functions in the community, while maintaining the equality of each individual before God.**

Diversity is valuing difference because it makes a difference: we see more when there are more of us seeing (Margaret J Wheatley *Who do we choose to be*. 2017)

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security (Pope Francis *The Joy of the Gospel* 49)

...the Church as a community of faith can never outgrow its need for conversion to greater authenticity in its faith and action. (*The Light from the Southern Cross Report* 2020, p 25)

# CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

### What we heard:

- *Need to be focused on Jesus, the Word of God, committed to continuing his mission of bringing the Good News of God's love to our world, and to witnessing in society to his teachings*
- *Need to see Jesus as their friend, as part of their community, not as another program to make him real to us*
- *Need to understand and live out their baptismal call and seek to be Christ-like - joyful, loving, accepting, healing, prayerful – and to reflect the gospel values of justice, compassion, forgiveness, peace, equality, and freedom in all they do*
- *Need to feel that they are all valued as people of God – no conditions on belonging – showing what it means to be unconditionally loved by God*
- *Need a community that addresses the realities of people's lives from childhood to the grave in language that is easily understood, that encourages the participation of all - children, young people, parents - with all the challenges which that might involve*
- *Need to be acknowledged as pilgrim people - prioritising mission over maintenance, not a power hierarchy or institution structured around "ordination"*
- *Need a church community that actively functions as a human community - as God's people, rather than seeing a building as the key ingredient of our catholic identity*

### What we recommend:

- IC 1.1** That priority in our diocese be given to building life-giving communities which reflect the words of Jesus "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full."
- IC 1.2** That a culture of family be promoted which affirms its role in society and in the Church, honours parents and carers in their role of making Jesus known to their children, supports families in dealing with the realities of people's lives from childhood to the grave, and provides formation and practical assistance to help them.

## 2. RELATIONSHIPS

### What we heard:

- *Need to build relationships with God, others, self and creation*
- *honour, value and respect each other and the differences by seeing Christ in oneself and the other, **and** to encourage a sense of worth and belonging in everyone encountered*
- *strengthen our parish communities so that they become centres of joy, hope and service to their own members and the wider community*
- *grow in our understanding of what it means to be a missionary disciple sent forth at the end of Mass to continue Jesus' mission in our daily life*

### **What we recommend:**

**IC 2.1** That with Jesus Christ at the heart of everything, we prioritise and support whatever enables people to grow in their relationship with God, self, each other and creation.

**IC 2.2** That we strengthen our parishes and organisations so that they become centres of joy, hope and service to their own members and the wider community.

## **3. LISTENING**

### **What we heard:**

- *That the voice of the Spirit is in everyone, believer or non-believer*
- *That the disconnected, the disillusioned, the confused, as well as the joy-filled, are valued by all without judgement*
- *The need to consider others' certainties, others' ways of saying things, and other ways of looking at what we see*
- *The value of those with whom we disagree, in order to 'learn and not to refute', willing to face our own prejudices, to discover what the Spirit may want us to hear*

### **What we recommend:**

**IC 3.1** That in this time of a change of an era, we all endeavour to listen and discern with the ear of the heart, open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through scripture, prayer, and story.

**IC 3.2** That we seek to be open to listening and responding to those outside our framework and culture without bias or agenda, even when it is unsettling and requires us to reach out.

## **4. WELCOMING**

### **What we heard:**

*Concern for the elderly, the poor, young people, newcomers, single parents, divorced and remarried people, Catholics who no longer attend church, singles, the disabled, the marginalised, the vulnerable and those at risk, refugees and asylum seekers, those of other cultures, of different faiths, survivors of sexual abuse, those of different sexual orientation*

### **What we recommend:**

**IC 4.1** That in our parishes and organisations we review our culture, behaviour, attitudes, in order to create places of inclusivity and welcome.

## **5. DIVERSITY OF GIFTS**

### **What we heard:**

- *the belief that all are made in the image and likeness of God*
- *need to discern, use, and rejoice in the call and gifts given by the Spirit to all people – women, men and children*
- *embrace and celebrate diversity of God's gifts within our communities*
- *recognise our own incompleteness and appreciate that no individual or group is sufficient by itself, that we are all 'on a journey'*

**What we recommend:**

**IC 5.1** That we embrace and celebrate the diversity of God's gifts within our communities.

**IC 5.2** That we endeavour to build a discernment of gifts culture by encouraging all adults and children to explore and discern their gifts and utilise them for the good of the whole community.

## **6. SMALL COMMUNITIES**

**What we heard:**

- *Need to encourage small communities for believers and searchers*
- *explore new models of community*
- *learn from other church communities who are doing 'mission' well*
- *form small faith sharing groups in the parishes, e.g. Family Groups, Alpha, Cells, Cursillo*

**What we recommend:**

**IC 6.1** That parish communities be encouraged to develop a renewed vision parish as a community of communities.

**IC 6.2** That we encourage each of our Church communities and organisations to support the creation of small groups of faith and life.

**IC 6.3** That we investigate and learn from the experiences of our communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.