



Executive Summary

Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle

2018 Synod of Bishops XV Ordinary General Assembly

Young people, the Faith and Vocational Discernment

***Feedback for undertaking consultation and providing feedback
to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
on the Youth Synod questions***

Introduction

The Bishops Commission for Church Ministry and the Bishops Commission for Family, Youth & Life corresponded with Bishop Bill in April inviting our diocese to participate in a response to the 2018 Synod of Bishops XV Ordinary General Assembly: *Young people, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*. The diocese was invited to provide feedback to the Synod questionnaire via a diocesan-led consultation process as well as inviting people in the 16-29 age group to respond to an online survey.

The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle established a reference group consisting of the Executive of the Diocesan Council of Ministry with Young People (DCMYP): James Elliott, Maryanne Hacker and Baden Ellis who were supported by the Diocesan Pastoral Support Unit.

The task of the reference group was to:

1. support, advise and guide diocesan consultation for the Synod questionnaire in the spirit intended by Pope Francis and
2. support the process of consultation regarding the Year of Youth in 2018.

The reference group identified six locations across the diocese in which to conduct open focus group meetings, based on the questions at the end of the Preparatory Document - *Young people, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*.

The following groups were identified and communicated with directly as contributors to the focus group process and/or the online survey:

- CSO – All Year 11 and 12 students and some staff
- CSO – staff in schools
- Diocesan Council of Ministry with Young People
- University Chaplaincy
- CatholicCare Social Services
- Vocations – Fr Brian Mascord
- Indigenous voices – Aboriginal Catholic Ministry
- Refugee Service and other CatholicCare programs
- St Vincent de Paul Society
- Office of Life and Faith
- Sports Chaplaincy.

As well as the focus groups and online survey, people were invited to complete the questionnaire via our website. There was wide promotion across our diocese of this consultative process.

Each diocese was asked to submit a 20-page report after this consultation process.

It appears from the data received from ACBC via the Pastoral Research Office that about 760 people participated in the online survey while around 70 people of mixed age groups, ethnicity and religious practice, male and female, gathered for the focus group meetings across the diocese. Only one person responded to the questionnaire via our website.

Summary of Findings



The demographic of those who responded to the online survey was overwhelmingly under 18 years of age (92%), of Australian origin, studying or working at a Catholic school and working part-time.

8% indicated that they were Catholics who regularly attended Mass and other faith activities; 19% considered themselves to be Catholic or Christian and go to church activities sometimes; 35% identified that their family was Catholic or Christian but doesn't practise or get involved; 9% were not sure what to think about the Catholic or Christian faith; 3% follow another religion or belief; 21% responded that they don't identify with being Catholic or any other religion; 6% responded 'other'. There was a significant difference in the figures recorded for our diocese and that of the Australian Catholic Church, particularly in the area of those who are regular attenders, 25% compared with our 8%, with 14% across Australia who don't identify with a religious belief compared with our 21%.

These figures are helpful in the responses we encountered in the focus group conversations. Participants in most groups had a limited understanding of church which was determined as a building, a place of worship where older people gather. There was almost total disconnection between the good works of the church – education, CatholicCare, St Vincent de Paul Society, healthcare, aged care and community services – and those who gather as an expression of their lived faith. The reality of the Catholic Church attending to the needs of families and the community, in a variety of ways, was almost invisible and contributed to the narrow understanding of church. And yet, the diocese attempts to listen to young people in the following settings – parishes, schools, university chaplaincy, the Diocesan Council of Ministry with Young People (DCMYP), CatholicCare particularly in Out of Home Care, Supported Independent Living and After Care Programs, and Parish Youth Groups which are growing in number.

As one respondent pointed out, in the Australian context, the 'State' and secular standards play a role in the provision of care for those who are sick and dying, those suffering physically and mentally and otherwise needing assistance and the education of the young. In our society today, not only does civic government accept responsibility for offering these corporal works of mercy but also takes responsibility for the maintenance of appropriate professional standards for providing these services. Consequently,

there are many opportunities for people to take up a wide range of loving services to our fellow citizens and enter into lives of dedicated service within a ‘secular’ context of paid work.

There was a strong sense that the secular nature of our Australian society has had a significant impact on young people and many do not feel the need to connect with people of faith; it is mostly irrelevant to their lives. There was fear expressed about ridicule and derision if young people are open about their faith, even within the Catholic school system. The legacy of child sexual abuse in the diocese has tarnished not only the institution of the church, but anyone who remains an active member of its community. Discussion also focused on the general loss of trust in society’s institutions and leaders, including the church.

Interestingly, however, in the online survey about 50% of respondents to the questions around the extent to which they had been involved in various Catholic groups, organisations or church activities, and their level of interest in those activities, indicated an involvement or desire to be involved. This leads us to think we are missing some opportunities.



Participating in youth groups was viewed as enriching, because young people could make new friends, discuss issues and explore their faith in a comfortable environment. Youth camps were also seen as an enjoyable experience. Youth festivals such as WYD and ACYF were popular for the opportunities they provided to meet other young people and listen to engaging speakers.

School Masses and Parish Youth Masses were particularly positive experiences as they can provide an opportunity to be engaged. Music concerts such as Praise and Worship were seen as an appealing and relaxed way of expressing one’s faith. Most critical for young people in these gatherings was the need for a sense of community where those who gather feel cared for and valued. Informal gatherings such as Pints With A Purpose were deemed successful.

Outside the church, young people like to gather at organised social events such as concerts, parties, music festivals and sporting fixtures. In the survey, there was a connection between gathering and outreach opportunities eg fundraising events to support a cause. Music was strongly identified as connecting young people. Unfortunately, the use of alcohol and drugs was also identified as motivators for gathering as a crowd.



One of the questions asked in the online survey was around the extent to which key people or groups have a lot of influence with key decisions and directions in life. 79% answered family, 49% friends and 20% school/teachers. They were not restricted to one choice. 21% indicated that parish or church community had some influence.

In the online survey the respondents were asked to rate their experience of being listened to by people from the church using a scale of 1 to 10, where '1' was 'very negative' and '10' was 'very positive'. Our overall mean score was around 5.4. The participants' responses revealed three main factors that contributed to the positive experiences of young people – the experience of talking to people who valued their story, the positive attitude of the clergy and the welcoming and supportive attitude of parishioners. The three main factors that contributed to the negative experiences of young people were a negative personal experience with a church member, an occasion where their comments were ignored by the group and the seemingly closed minds of people. In the focus groups it was identified that there is a tendency to want to do things for young people rather than listen to their lived situations. We appear to be busy being busy.

When asked to indicate ways in which the church could help them and their friends in today's world, many respondents believed that the church could provide guidance, help and counselling for young people in dealing with personal problems and relationship issues. In the online survey the main issues identified facing our young people were mental health, school or study, drugs or alcohol, body image and friendship and relationships; while in the focus groups underemployment, a lack of sense of belonging and the paradox of being disconnected by social media were also identified as issues facing young people.

Many from all age groups at focus group conversations and in the online survey are unaware of the social media presence of the diocese and therefore tend to miss the many opportunities offered to connect them to networks, gatherings, formation opportunities etc. There seems to be a desire that these social media networks require a personal contact responsiveness. The information is there but connecting to the breadth of age ranges is challenging.

Vocational discernment needs to be explored within the context of contemporary Australian life. Within Australia the vocational call may be revisited a number of times throughout one's lifetime, because many

Australians have several career options during their working life. As noted in the Preparatory Document, a key point in a pastoral vocational program can be “understanding that the vocational experience is a gradual process of inner discernment and growth in faith”. It was noted that vocational discernment may involve vocations or the call to ministry by way of a career, marriage, single life, the priesthood, permanent diaconate or to religious life. These discernment conversations are often not made available to young people.

Our Catholic schools attempt to provide spiritual care and formation for their students but what is on offer beyond school is less obvious, because of the lack of connection to parish and diocesan life while students are at school. The age of our clergy and the demands of parish life make it difficult for those who are formed in spiritual care to reach out to those who are searching. Our diocesan councils (Adult Faith Formation, Social Justice, Liturgy, Ecumenical and Interfaith, DCMYP) and parishes provide many opportunities for education, formation and training but these opportunities are often taken up by those who are already connected and committed.

It was noted that people, especially those who are young are searching for clear, strong, authentic leadership. It was stated that the Catholic Church needs to stand for something which is radically different – which in turn can make a difference to the lives of people.

Conclusion

A full diocesan report will be submitted to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference by 28 August, and one national report will be collated. The final national report will be approved by the President of the Conference and issued to Rome by 23 October. The General Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment will be held in Rome in October 2018.

The full diocesan report can be found at www.mn.catholic.org.au.





Diocesan Council for
Ministry with Young People

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