

# Discernment Paper #1

This document is an abridged version of one of the six thematic Discernment Papers from the communal discernment process leading to the Plenary Council. As such, it is only a “taste” of the original document, albeit a close reflection of its approach, spirit and content. To read the full text from the original Discernment Paper, go to the Plenary Council website:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/continuing-the-journey-of-discernment/>

## Key Question

---

How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is **Missionary and Evangelising?**

## Introduction

---

Mission is God’s initiative and flows from the love of the Trinity.

At the heart of Christian identity is the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, to “bring the good news” (“evangelisation”) of God’s love.

To be effective evangelisers we must open our hearts and minds to Christ, recognise the signs of the times, repent of our failures, and bring Spirit-led transformation to our world. We must be faithful both to the Gospel message and to the people who are the recipients of it.

The Church is the sacrament of salvation for our world. Her activity is not limited only to those who accept her message. She is a dynamic force as human history unfolds towards an ultimate future which is in God’s hands.

The priority of the transcendent, conversion and witness to gospel values are all essential to the Church’s credible presence in the world. Key activities of the Church include dialogue, promotion of the human good, commitment to justice and peace, education. Through the sacraments of initiation, we belong to the community of the faithful and to Jesus.

## I. Listening & Dialogue

---

*“God is love”* (1 Jn 4:16).

The renewal of the world begins with our own personal encounter with Jesus, who offers us the gift of God’s love.

We have listened to the hopes and concerns of diverse voices, including those of women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, new migrants, the alienated, those who attend Catholic schools and public schools.

We hear of sadness and struggle, yet also of hope and belief in the possibilities for future ecclesial reform. Confronted by the Church's moral failures, as a Church we are called to be holier, humbler, and more faithful to a merciful God.

## II. Pastoral Reality

---

The Australian context today is a secular, pluralist society that has undergone many changes. Religion has its rightful place in the public domain. Secular governments and their agencies have held the Church accountable (e.g., Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse).

On the one hand, there are serious problems and challenges for the Church. For example, there is a decline in vocations to priesthood, religious life, marriage; there is growing indifference to certain Church teachings, and a trend of decreasing religious affiliation. Meanwhile, many in rural communities lack access to Eucharist.

On the other hand, there are positive developments and hope-filled signs of life. For example, emerging lay ecclesial ministries in parishes, schools, hospitals and welfare have brought new vitality. Professional standards and procedures have improved. Despite moral failures and diminished influence, the churches continue to be an influence for good through healthcare, welfare, education and ecclesial communities.

## III. Theological Vision

---

God is the source of love. To participate in God's mission is to participate in the movement of God's love for people and for the planet.

God's mission is active in the evolution of the universe and in all history and cultures. God's mission is, however, revealed in a particular way in the history and scriptures of God's chosen people, Israel. This mission is fulfilled in a unique and unsurpassable way in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's Spirit continues to move among all peoples, cultures and in all of creation, groaning in giving birth, and striving for completion at the end of time (Rom 8:22).

Bearing witness to the words and deeds of Jesus, the Church carries out its mission through presence and witness, social development and human liberation, liturgical life, prayer and contemplation, interreligious dialogue, proclamation and catechesis. (Mt 28:19-20; DP, 2)

"The Church exists in order to evangelise" (EN, 14) and to live in communion and to accompany others. Central to evangelisation is the interplay of Gospel and the human situation. Evangelisation involves both inculturation of the Gospel and transformation of society. It flows from a living, worshipping community of accompaniment and encounter. (See EG, 28)

The Church is a sign and sacrament within a greater unfolding Mystery that goes beyond the Church. Participation in God's mission involves respectful dialogue with other religious

traditions. Openness to other traditions can only enrich our lives and strengthen our communities. (See *RM*, 56; *EG*, 14)

## IV. Major Challenges

---

Pope John Paul II said, “All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.” Likewise, Pope Francis has shared his dream of a “missionary option” focused on the Church’s outreach to the world rather than on her self-preservation. (*EG*, 27)

Some present-day challenges for the Church in Australia include the following:

- We are no longer socialised into a “tribal” or “cultural Catholicism”. Our relationship with the Church requires a deeper understanding of discipleship as relationship with Jesus in mission. Such growth is facilitated through the family, the school and the parish community. It calls for a deep appreciation of Baptism.
- The damaged credibility of the Church presents a barrier to our being missionary and evangelising. The way forward requires carefully nuanced dialogue. There are no simple solutions.
- Women have been primary faith formators in families, a role best shared with their partner. Yet leadership opportunities for women in the Catholic Church are limited when it comes to shared leadership in decision-making.
- Nationally, we must forge deeper relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We must oppose all prejudice against religious and ethnic groups (e.g., antisemitism, Islamophobia, animosity towards Chinese people), and work for reconciliation.
- Catholic schools have been successful in many ways. We should continue to review their effectiveness, especially in religious education, while engaging the parents of students.
- All Catholics need opportunities to develop their faith. Diminishing numbers of Catholics actively participate in Sunday Eucharist, yet our parish communities are still significant and call for lifegiving liturgies, preaching, music and education programs.
- The voices of those who describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” must be heard. Let us look anew at the rich resources of our history to ensure access to the spiritual treasures of our Tradition. The challenge is to develop parish-based programs of outreach that welcome people to lifegiving groups where issues can be explored.

## V. Proposals for Change

---

### 1. Environment and the Common Good

Listen and learn from scientists, environmentalists, First Nations peoples.

- Develop sustainable Australian ecological strategies inspired by *Laudato Si'*, *Querida Amazonia*, and other documents.
- Increase funding to Catholic Earthcare Australia.
- Appoint a representative of Australia's First Nations peoples to Catholic Earthcare.

## 2. Service to All Humankind

Engage the wider society on shared concerns.

- Collaborate with other faith traditions and organisations on pressing social issues, in solidarity with the marginalised.
- Work with media professionals to promote and strengthen Catholic services in areas of education, healthcare and welfare.

## 3. Education and Formation

Interfaith dialogue is an essential element of the evangelising mission of the Church.

- Establish in every Diocese an interfaith commission that promotes interfaith resources.
- Have all ministry students undertake academic units on interreligious dialogue, including practical exposure to Judaism, Islam, and other major traditions.
- Celebrate Interfaith Harmony Week in the first week of February, with an approved Mass for Interfaith Harmony Sunday on the first Sunday of February.

## 4. Other Christian Churches

Enter into greater dialogue and strategic cooperation with other Christians, proclaiming Jesus Christ and collaborating for the common good.

- It is proposed that Catholic Dioceses establish covenants of faith and collaboration with other Christian communities.

## 5. Evangelisation

Equip Catholics to become "missionary disciples".

- Prioritise formation for mission, utilising existing resources and focused on distance-challenged places where resources are scarce.
- Establish short annual programs to enhance evangelical preaching by clergy that relates the Gospel to people's lives.
- Hold an annual conference (nationally or locally) to prompt each local parish to question itself on its missionary and evangelising approach.
- Expand use of digital media for mission.
- Regularly review diocesan and parish vision/mission statements, to assist local, contextualised mission strategies. Accountable, transparent decision-making is important.

- Conduct an audit of effective parish renewal activities, and promote them.

## 6. Marriage and Family

Prioritise formation, discipleship and accompaniment for families in their evangelising mission.

- Promote a culture of family, affirming its role in society and Church, honouring parents as teachers of faith, and providing formation and practical assistance.
- Activate married couples as ministers in parish revitalisation and as a key part of strengthening of the couple's relationship and vocation.
- Establish a nationwide marriage catechumenate, led principally by married couples, covering all stages of lifelong marriage formation.
- Establish peer support networks to learn from and accompany families in diverse situations (e.g., single parent, blended families, mixed-faith, inter-ethnic, with disabilities, with addictions, domestic violence or sexual abuse).
- Actively promote ministries that form fathers to share with mothers responsibility for spiritual leadership in families, parishes, schools.
- Expand fertility services to train and accompany couples to live their marriage open to life, including those with infertility or complex health and social situations.

## 7. Women

Female leadership in the Church is found to be abundant or lacking, depending on the context.

- Prioritise the formation of women and men as ecclesial leaders.
- Establish gender balance in diocesan Synods and parish councils.
- Promote qualified lay women and men to exercise their gifts in diocesan, parish and other ecclesial settings, including liturgical preaching.
- Establish greater formal consultation with women about their engagement in Church leadership at all levels. Reinstatement of the Office for the Participation of Women.
- Continue to examine the possibility of a female diaconate, as was indicated by Pope Francis (2016).

## 8. First Nations Peoples

The Church in Australia must be shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and spirituality for it to be authentically a Church of this land.

- Establish cultural competency training for clerical and lay leaders across all Catholic institutions.
- Make a Church statement recognising the important place of First Nations peoples and committing to tangible ways of embedding their rich culture and spirituality in the life of the Church.
- Install NATSICC Acknowledgment Plaques in all churches and schools.

- Incorporate aspects of First Nations peoples' spirituality into liturgical celebrations—led by NATSICC, in partnership with the National Liturgical Commission.

## 9. Young People

The key message for the Church in its approach to evangelising young people is contained in Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Exhortation to Young People, *Christus Vivit*, 2019, chapters 4 and 7.

- Conduct an audit of initiatives in youth ministry and evangelisation to identify effectiveness.
- Develop missionary teams of peers to work across parishes and schools in the animation of young people.
- Research the effect of strategies such as youth festivals, in order to tailor these to the needs of youth.
- Invite youth testimony at the Plenary Council 2020.

## 10. Education

Mission and evangelisation belong at the heart of our Catholic educational institutions.

- Consider opportunities for the preferential option for the poor at all levels of education.
- Ensure greater facilitation and oversight by the NCEC of collaboration between state and territory jurisdictions and dioceses, to ensure a constant focus on mission and evangelisation in Catholic schools.
- Empower the NCEC's Faith Formation and Religious Education Standing Committee to provide leadership formation of school and system leaders nationally, as well as faith formation of students and families.
- Provide specialist resources to minister to the needs of Catholic children in public schools.
- Encourage Catholic adults to undertake courses in theology and faith development to enhance their ability to serve the Church.
- Encourage seminarians to spend concentrated time in schools as part of their formation and mission.

## 11. Outreach to those Distant from the Life of the Church

Outreach and hospitality based on love of neighbour benefit both giver and receiver.

- Ensure that all Church communications use language that upholds human dignity.
- Hold listening sessions in parishes and dioceses to hear the needs of those who feel disenfranchised (e.g., divorced and remarried, survivors of abuse, LGBTI community). Accompany those who struggle with these issues while seeking to faithfully live in accord with Church teaching.

## Abbreviations

---

**DP.** Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*. 19 May 1991.  
[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

**EG.** Francis. Apostolic Exhortation. *Evangelii Gaudium*. 24 November 2013.  
[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

**EN.** Paul VI. Apostolic Exhortation. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. 8 December 1975.  
[http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html).

**NATSICC.** National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council.

**NCEC.** National Catholic Education Commission.

**RM.** John Paul II. Encyclical. *Redemptoris Missio*. 7 December 1990.  
[http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html)