

St Mary of the Angels Parish

Parish Planning Day Outcomes

April 2023



stmarysgeelong.com.au



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Contents

FOREWORD	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
THE SURVEY	4
THE PLANNING DAY.....	4
OUR STRATEGY	4
OUR ASPIRATIONS.....	5
HOW WE RECEIVED FEEDBACK	5
SURVEY	5
SURVEY - KEY LEARNINGS.....	6
PASTORAL COUNCIL PRE-PLANNING SESSION	6
PRE-PLANNING SESSION - KEY LEARNINGS	6
PLANNING DAY	6
PLANNING DAY - KEY LEARNINGS.....	7
WHAT WE HEARD	7
PLANNING DAY SESSION 1: CALLED TO BE MISSIONARY DISCIPLES	7
PLANNING DAY SESSION 2: WHAT A HEALTHY PARISH LOOKS LIKE	8
<i>Strengths</i>	8
<i>Weaknesses</i>	8
<i>Opportunities</i>	8
<i>Threats</i>	9
PLANNING DAY SESSION 3: WHERE TO NEXT?	9
NEXT STEPS.....	9
TIMELINE.....	10
APPENDIX A	11
APPENDIX B	12

Foreword

The Parish Pastoral Council (or we) has been working together with the parish priests of St Mary of the Angels and the broader community to build a strategy for a thriving community for the years to come.

We want to support our Catholic community to grow in faith, with a parish that is also growing to meet the needs and preferences of the people we serve. Planning ahead is necessary to ensure we build and nurture a strong faith connection and to do this means we need to hear from the community directly on their values and priorities.

We are fortunate to be supported by our priests who feel a deep sense of connection and responsibility to the parish and its parishioners, in presenting the idea of a parish planning day and supporting the Parish Pastoral Council in making it a reality.

We have heard that recent changes in how we worship, especially after COVID, and declining numbers, particularly of younger generations, has impacted parishioners' confidence for the future of the parish. We know that to create a thriving community that is available for future generations requires us to take action now and be proactive within the Geelong community.

We are committed to working together with parishioners and hearing the different voices that are represented in our community. We will continue to work to make sure people are heard and seen.

Regards,
Georgia Cowdery
Chair, St Mary's Parish Pastoral Council

Acknowledgements

St Mary of the Angels (St Mary's) Parish acknowledges the Waddawurrung people, the Traditional Owners who have walked upon and cared for this land for thousands of years. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment and relationship Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation. We acknowledge and pay our respects to their local Elders, past, present and emerging, and to all Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

We hold the care, safety and wellbeing of children as a fundamental responsibility of the church and are committed to making our church a safe place for children and young people and protecting them from harm. Young people were invited to participate in planning activities, and we thank them for the eagerness in which they contributed to this important conversation.

We thank Parish Priest: Fr James Clarke and Assistant Priest: Fr Jaycee Napoles for their unwavering support, guidance, and spiritual leadership in planning for the future of the parish and acknowledge the work of all members of the Parish Pastoral Council for their help in preparing for the planning day, the time they volunteer to prioritise these activities is greatly appreciated.

We would also like to recognise the individual parishioners who have shared their stories in the survey and planning day workshop. Their feedback has been invaluable, and their time and commitment are acknowledged.

Introduction

This report has been prepared by the Parish Pastoral Council and provides strategic direction to guide the activities of St Mary's for the future. The Parish Pastoral Council alongside the Parish Office will work together to prioritise and plan for a thriving Catholic community in Geelong, aided by the support and assistance of the many parishioners who kindly volunteer their time.

Since COVID-19, St Mary's had not been able to hold planning activities due to the logistics of bringing the community together. As such, the efforts to come together and take stock of parish life signifies an important step in rebuilding after COVID and hearing from the community about the issues, concerns, and ideas that most affect them.

The Survey

In preparing for the St Mary's planning day, it was important to get a 'pulse check' from the community on parish life. This led to the development of a parish-wide survey, encompassing several aspects of parish life, with a focus on four main areas:

1. Picture of the community;
2. Feeling connected;
3. Liturgy; and
4. Other comments.

The survey was built by the Parish Pastoral Council with support from the parish office staff and input from Proclaim: The Office for Mission Renewal (Archdiocese of Melbourne).

The Planning Day

St Mary's Parish Planning Day was held on 19 November 2022, facilitated by Jacqui Giuliano, animation consultant with the Office for Mission Renewal. The day started with sharing in prayer, scripture, and song, before reflecting on the relationship with Jesus and the parish.

The planning day was an opportunity to discern, pray, and map out pathways for 2023 and beyond and begin taking steps to build the ethos, vision, culture, and faith of the parish. Over three sessions there was a lot of great discussion, willingness to be open and share in a judgement-free environment.

Attendance was made up of a very diverse group of parishioners, with different ages, gender, values, and mass times. Of note, ages ranged from 11 to 90. This meant that there were plenty of differing views, opinions, and perspectives, which greatly improved the outcomes of the day.

Our Strategy

Our strategy aligns to three aspirations that support our vision statement, each with specific strategic goals. Our vision is:

With Jesus Christ as the centre point of our faith, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the members of St Mary's Parish Family strive to live out their Baptismal Commitment as disciples – faithful to the Word of God; to the sacraments, and to nurturing spiritual growth within the community.

Our Aspirations

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. A spiritually fulfilled parish, actively participating in the celebration of the liturgy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Increase parishioner attendance, reach, and numbers b. Introduce liturgical support and planning c. Increase accessibility of the mass d. Enhance opportunities to attract and retain youth attendance e. Improve opportunities to train and develop volunteers |
| 2. A genuinely connected and engaged parish community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Increase opportunities to engage families and the local community b. Promote diversity and inclusion in services available and support the visibility of diverse cultures in the parish c. Improve and increase services and supports that benefit the Geelong community d. Provide ongoing care, safety and support for parishioners to be involved in parish life e. Improve how information is shared and communicated, meeting the communication needs of all parishioners |
| 3. Respected and preserved facilities available for future generations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Enhance the appearance of parish facilities b. Improve how parishioners can contribute to the maintenance and upkeep of the parish c. Improve disability access and support an aging community |

How we received feedback

In preparing this report, we have pulled together the outcomes from three methods:

1. Parish survey
2. Parish Pastoral Council pre-planning session
3. Parish Planning Day

Below is the summary of feedback for each of the above activities.

Survey

The parish life survey opened on October 9 and closed on November 6 2022. Over the 4-week period, we received a total of 57 unique online responses.

We asked parishioners to provide some basic information to help build a picture of our community. This included capturing data about:

- Age
- Language
- Disability
- Location

We then asked more specific questions about:

- Attitudes towards parish life
- Getting involved and how we contribute to the parish
- How we celebrate the mass together

In each of the sections of the survey we included free text options, so parishioners could tell us in their own words their experiences. We asked a mixture of closed and open questions and promoted personal reflection.

Survey - Key learnings

We received feedback from parishioners to make sure the survey was as accessible as possible to all parishioners, this included making hard-copy versions of the survey available to those who may not have the technology or capability to complete the online form. In future, we will ensure both virtual and hard-copy versions are available and that the various options for completion are highlighted.

Pastoral council pre-planning session

The Parish Pastoral Council pre-planning session was held on 8 November 2022. It was an opportunity to meet the facilitators of the proposed planning day prior to the event and finalise the agenda for the day by practicing a run-through of the sessions.

8 members of the Parish Pastoral Council (including Fr. Jaycee Napoles and Fr. Jim Clarke) attended the session. This supported the early identification of potential themes and identified alignment of the Parish Pastoral Council with the broader parish community. This was later evident in the similarities between outcomes of this session and the subsequent planning day, of which only a smaller number of Parish Pastoral Council members were able to attend.

Pre-planning session - Key learnings

In addition to the planning day being run by an independent facilitator, it may have been useful to engage members of the Parish Pastoral Council to help lead some of the sessions on the day. The pre-planning session could therefore have benefitted from brainstorming on how best to utilise the members of the council instead of replicate the outcomes of the planning day, of which there was significant overlap. Involvement of the council members in setting the agenda may also have helped in building the profile of the Parish Pastoral Council within the parish.

Planning day

The planning day held on 19 November 2022 was a full-day event from 10:30am – 4:00pm. The event included more than 30 attendees, not including the facilitator and co-facilitator, office support staff, or the two parish priests.

The day began with large group work with several smaller break-out groups occurring throughout the day. Each break-out session was reorganised to ensure different voices were engaging throughout the day, promoting diversity of thought. We were asked to talk in partners or small groups, draw, write or present our thoughts in each of the sessions for the day. The success of the day was in the guided sessions that also supported a more fluid timetable responsive to the discussions.

Planning Day - Key learnings

It may have increased the number of attendees if the planning day was offered over multiple dates, this would have allowed more people to attend if they had scheduling conflicts on the Saturday and may have been a better option for families with busy weekend commitments. A Mid-week alternative may have attracted different participation but would also require an additional day of facilitation support, or conflict with business hours / work commitments for most parishioners. This will need to be weighed in discussions of future planning events.

The planning day could have also benefitted from more robust administrative support in the capturing of outcomes and minutes from the day. In future it is recommended that a dedicated person (in addition to the facilitator/s) is responsible for managing the agenda, minutes, and capturing attendance.

Representation across age ranges was successful, as was the reach across different mass times; however, there was a lack of diversity across other areas such as cultural, linguistic and disability cohorts. This could have been managed with greater advertisement (for example in the Polish mass), or direct engagement with parishioners of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as people with disability (through the Faith & Light program).

What we heard

Overall, we heard that parishioners are proud to belong to St Mary's parish, with many describing the parish community as 'inclusive' or 'welcoming' and noting the rich history and the beautiful Basilica as a place to come together. However, there were a number of responses to the survey and the planning day that highlighted concern for the future, in particular, highlighting declining numbers of parishioners, activities and representation as well as issues of an aging community and ability to actively engage in the parish.

When asked about the future of the parish and what parishioners would like to see, responses highlighted the need to leverage relationships and connections that already exist to build a thriving community. For example, maintaining and building a positive school and parish connection, or acting as a 'lighthouse' parish to attract people from across the region (and beyond).

There was a high amount of support for rejuvenating the parish with young people. This included envisioning an intergenerational and multicultural community, with adult formation and support for youth leadership that inspires young people and can also act as a service to the broader Geelong community

Planning Day Session 1: Called to be Missionary Disciples

The planning day began with several scene-setting activities that worked to bring together the group. Session 1 asked attendees to reflect on Jesus' vision for the church:

'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' (Matthew 28:19-20).

After reading this *Great Commission*, attendees were asked to discuss what some of the key words meant to them and consider the purpose of the parish as an effective outpost of the great commission.

Planning Day Session 2: What a healthy parish looks like

Attendees looked at what it meant to be a healthy parish through 5 characteristics:

1. Evangelisation
2. Fellowship
3. Worship
4. Discipleship
5. Outreach

Attendees broke in small groups and looked at each of the 5 characteristics collating what was happening in each area. A list of parish activities is included in **Appendix A¹** as well as a list of desired future activities **Appendix B**. Following this activity, attendees then completed an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for each.

Strengths

Strengths identified for the parish included the prominence of the parish in the Geelong region, aided by a long history, ability to provide sacramental celebrations, link to Catholic schools in the area and a strong presence in the community with funeral support. The visibility and actions of the priests as teachers was also highlighted as a strength.

Other strengths related to the demographics of the parish, including the resources available to support diversity, devotional consistency with a variety of masses, diversity in leadership, and the opportunities to contribute to parish life for people of all levels/stages of faith and backgrounds.

Weaknesses

Attendees noted that there were missed opportunities to improve parish life related to technology, communication, accessibility (including disability access requirements), how we welcome newcomers or involve families in parish life. There were also several comments around the liturgy such as the mass length, lengthy bulletin announcements, not celebrating diversity, not effectively promoting the available mass times and not making it easy for a congregation to participate in song.

The need for better communication was highlighted as an area of concern, in particular what is communicated in the parish bulletin, creating awareness of parish activities, and the need to make better use of other means of communication, such as social media.

The involvement of young people was a key area that came up in this discussion, including how we draw in the school community, attract youth, involve youth in liturgies or identify gaps in community services and how the parish community could fill these.

The way we identify and retain volunteers was also a key theme, including not being able to attract people to fill the more difficult roles, such as AV operators or how volunteering can appear closed to new people (same people doing the same things) or not more than a one-off contribution.

Opportunities

By looking at the gaps and weaknesses, this highlighted what opportunities were available. Key themes for opportunities were around how we celebrate mass, how we improve visibility and appearance of the church, and how we connect.

¹ For more detail on any of the listed activities being undertaken in the parish, please contact the Parish Office for information or to get involved (03) 5222 1977.

Opportunities to improve how we celebrate mass included more of a presence beyond the actual mass, such as more radio slots, participating in the Way of the Cross, maintaining an active presence on social media and in schools, and building faith through the Alpha program. Some practical opportunities included having music in a more accessible key, reinstating a liturgy committee, and providing more training for ministries (such as AV, eucharistic ministers, lectors etc.).

Attendees spoke about their connection to the physical presence of the parish. The grounds of the Basilica and the appearance of the physical building were common topics, this included supporting the parish community to volunteer in the garden or host working bees, and fundraising for church upkeep.

How we connect raised many suggestions, including being more direct in approaching people who may be good at providing a contribution (readers, welcomers etc.), showcasing the ways in which people can volunteer, continuing to provide non-liturgic focussed events such as carols, or hosting guest speakers and highlighting personal connections to outreach programs (e.g. sponsoring people from East Timor). Another aspect of this was providing aftercare and ongoing support for grieving families, supporting families in schools to reconnect with the church or share faith with their children

Threats

A number of threats to the longevity of the parish were identified, these mostly related to themes about attitudes and perception. This included past negative experiences, resistance to change, poor public perception and increasing community secularisation.

Another theme related to the makeup of parishioners. An aging community and volunteers, lack of representation in cultural diversity (including the difficulty of engaging parishioners from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds), feelings of being undervalued, burn out, indifference or the community being so large as to feel disconnected.

Planning Day Session 3: where to next?

The planning day concluded with a session on prioritisation and next steps. It was noted by the attendees that there needed to be time to digest the information before moving forward with any projects. Another suggestion was to consider the opportunities and then determine priorities by weighing the impact against the effort required.

Some early actions that were identified as potential 'quick wins' included:

- Ensuring there are welcomers at every mass
- Having recorded masses available on the radio
- Welcoming or identifying all new parishioners
- Proactively identifying parishioners who may be interested in volunteer opportunities

Next Steps

Building on the outcomes of the planning day and survey responses, the Parish Pastoral Council will develop a strategic plan for activities we will take and recommendations we will make in striving to meet the aspirations set in this document. This includes developing a forward work plan that sets out the finer details of actions to be taken over a multi-year period.

The Parish Pastoral Council will make available both this document and the forward work plan on the parish website, as well as make hard copies available upon request at the Parish

Office. Further information on the activities of the Parish Pastoral Council may also be published in the parish bulletin or in-church announcements.

In reimagining our local church as mission communities, the Archdiocese of Melbourne is embarking on a path of missionary discipleship – *The Way of the Gospel*. In 2021, Archbishop Peter A Comensoli met with clergy and lay leaders from around the Archdiocese of Melbourne to begin discussing what the local church in the region might look like in the future, such that:

- The mission of the Gospel is at the heart of our life, worship and outreach
- Local faith communities are arranged to allow for them to flourish
- Our faith communities are effectively resources- spiritually, ministerially and materially.

Any actions taken will also consider The Way of the Gospel journey in discerning our common mission for the years ahead.

Timeline

After holding the planning day in November 2022 and finalising this report in April 2023, the Parish Pastoral Council will prioritise work on developing a forward action plan to be delivered by mid 2023. The forward action plan will set out the specific timeframe for the delivery of any subsequent actions and will detail a multi-year implementation plan.

Evaluation is an important feature of how we continue to ensure we, as a parish, are meeting the needs of our community. In the development of the multi-year implementation plan we will not only include the actions we plan to take, but also outline timeframes for when these will be delivered, which will be refreshed as required. We remain committed to making improvements that are important to our parishioners.

We are also committed to continuing to provide planning sessions in the future that remain open to interested parishioners and provide an opportunity for all the voices of the community to be heard. We will continue not only to review action plans and priorities, but to ensure that future planning days build on learnings and key findings from past events.

We are committed to releasing a forward action plan that outlines strategic priorities over a 4-year period. This will be reviewed every year with accountability to report on how the parish has delivered on the aims within the action plan. Input from parishioners will also be sought to complement this ongoing cycle of monitoring and evaluation.

APPENDIX A

Activities being undertaken:

Evangelisation	Fellowship	Worship	Discipleship	Outreach
Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)	Café Light	Weekday and weekend masses	Sacrament preparation	St Vincent de Paul Conference – collections / Appeals
Alpha Program	Music	Feast Day and Seasons masses	Homilies	Parish Pantry
Teaching through schools	Faith and Light Group	School community masses	Advent/Lent groups/nights (music and prayer)	Piety Stall
Radio Pulse (Christian Radio)	Parish feast day gathering	Commemoration (e.g. ANZAC day)	Scripture Group	Solidarity Ribbons
Tours of Basilica	Bulletin / Website / FB	In languages other than English	Faith and Light Group	Project compassion
Bulletin	Parish Pastoral Council	Rosary and Novena		Café Light – partnership for East Timor
Facebook	Radio Pulse	Adoration and benediction		Life Boat
Personal witness	Catholic diners club	Divine Mercy		Pastoral Care – communion to sick / homebound, hospital
Sacramental celebrations	Parish Staff (welcome/friendly)	Choirs and carols		Lazarus House – support for those in need
	Social events eg community carols	Ministry – lectors, special ministers, sacristans		Samaritan House – homeless men
		Lent / Advent prayer		Christ Church Anglican partnership – meals
		Stations of the Cross		Ongoing care, maintenance for Basilica / historical tours
		Way of the Cross (ecumenical)		Prison ministry

APPENDIX B

Activities we would like to do in the future / reinstate:

Evangelisation	Fellowship	Worship	Discipleship	Outreach
	Days to draw people in (different topics, etc)	Eucharist chapel	Speakers / topics / themes – teaching and sharing sessions	Garden working bees
	Parish Fete	Children's Liturgy	Interfaith gatherings	Assistance helpers at masses (for people with accessibility needs)
	Parish Dinner	Mass with focus on young people	Youth life / liturgy / prayer group	Basilica tours, including in languages other than English
	Parish Picnic	Liturgy committee	Liturgy of the Word for Children	Youth groups and social activities coordination
	Youth gathering			Primary school sacramental groups – hosted Sunday masses