

FORMATION/EDUCATION

The Church of Maitland-Newcastle is centred on Christ, the Cornerstone, and seeks always to live as a community of people who educate and form

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

Our Story takes us to the source of our faith in the early church when *they devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching*: to deepening their understanding of what Jesus taught.

Foundational Statements remind us of the responsibility we have as individuals and as communities of Jesus' disciples to deepen our relationship with Jesus and our understanding of his mission.

Concerns summarise the 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.

*The intention of formation for mission
is to enable deeper relationship with God, church, self, other, creation;
greater engagement between individuals' lives
marked by 'accompaniment' in the service of others;
a culture of dialogue;
stronger commitment to the ministry of teaching and parenting
a deeper call into missionary discipleship*

A Framework for Formation for Mission
National Catholic Education Commission

OUR STORY

On the day of Pentecost visitors to Jerusalem were gripped by a life-changing experience. They heard Peter and the apostles preaching that a crucified Jesus had been raised to life.

Many were convinced by Peter's witness, accepted what he taught, and were baptised. They were immersed in a community in which they would learn to know, love, and follow Jesus Christ.

Guided by the Holy Spirit they found Christ, the Wisdom of God, foretold in their scriptures. They came to know him in a new way which upended presumptions about power and success. They discovered a suffering messiah to whom they would cling for his promise of fullness of life.

As Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit reminded the disciples of his words and deeds. They were able to grasp their full significance, and to pass on this wisdom to the community being formed.

The Lord's counter-cultural Beatitudes; his admonitions to turn one's cheek; to love enemies; to forgive seventy times seven; to welcome sinners; to wash feet; to embrace crosses; to die in order to live — all these now yielded their true wisdom and formed new hearts and lifestyles.

Knowing the crucified and Risen Jesus as God's wisdom, power and love enabled them to embrace him in personal relationship, and then make him known to others.

The Holy Spirit enlightened and formed the infant Church as they grew in the Lord, discerning their evolving identity and their mission to take the knowledge of Jesus to the world.

Today, through the same Holy Spirit, we too learn to know Jesus who, in all he said and did as a human being, revealed the fullness of God's faithful love. When we ask "What must we do?" we likewise are told to see things in a different way and to immerse ourselves in Jesus.

Today, our local church, the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, forms and teaches us as she proclaims Jesus as Son of God, the second person of the Trinity who was made man, who died and rose again to save us from sin and for the fullness of life with God.

Our diocese teaches the doctrines that relate to Christ and to his Church, and the practices and behaviours appropriate to Christ's followers. More importantly, it provides the formation which makes us one with Jesus as disciples eager to share the good news of God's love.

Our celebration of the Eucharist is at the core of forming us in Christ. We come to know him in the Scriptures. We are formed most profoundly as we participate in the Last Supper, Calvary, and the Resurrection. We are formed most intimately as we receive Jesus in Holy Communion.

Our diocese provides children with holistic education in a thriving school system and a growing pre-school network. Age-appropriate formation in Christ is fundamental within this endeavour.

State School catechesis and Sacramental Programmes provide a Christian education for some children. The diocese supports parents to be the first and best teachers in the ways of the faith.

For adults, faith formation courses and learning experiences are provided at diocesan level along with learning and formation initiatives in small groups within parishes. In every instance the goal is to produce Catholic Christian disciples who are well-informed about their faith and well formed in Christ.

FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS

We believe that formation in faith is an essential and life-long process and the heritage and responsibility of every Christian.

Formation (and not just information) ... is not for a select few, but for the faithful generally. As Church, we need to give priority to this (Br Peter Carroll FMS, 14 July 2020)

For lay leaders assuming leadership for governance roles in the Church, especially for those whose expertise has been primarily in the commercial world, formation is needed to ensure a comprehensive understanding is acquired of the nature of the Church and the servant leadership required for service within the Church, either as an employee or as a member of a board. (*The Light from the Southern Cross* p 89).

Children and young people grow in awareness of themselves and search for meaning and purpose in their lives and in the world around them. Children begin this journey enabled by the nurturing love of parents and families. (Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools 2017 p 5).

We understand that formation for mission is respectful, experiential and relevant, building on participants' personal story and everyday reality

The questions of our people, their suffering, their struggles, their dreams, their trials and their worries, all possess a... value that we cannot ignore if we want to take the principle of the incarnation seriously. Their wondering helps us to wonder, their questions question us. (Pope Francis September 2015).

“Unless we train ministers capable of warming people’s hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness, what hope can we have for our present and future journey?” (Pope Francis, July 2013).

When [formation] brings faith into dialogue with life it has the capacity to be a source of wisdom, a stimulus to lifelong learning, a means to personal transformation and a call to missionary discipleship (Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools - National Catholic Education Commission, 2017, p 5).

We are nourished and inspired by formation that is scripturally rich and ecclesially grounded, and deepens our relationship with Jesus, the living Word of God.

It is absolutely necessary for us to take into account the heritage of faith that the Church has the duty of preserving and presenting it to the people of our time in a way that is as understandable and persuasive as possible (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 3)

For the Catholic school to achieve its objectives, it needs people who are committed to this faith-filled vision, confident in their understanding of the Christian faith as it comes to expression in the Catholic tradition and eager to do their best to help their students grow in their own understanding of the presence of God at work in their lives. (A Framework for Formation for Mission in Catholic Education — National Catholic Education Commission, 2017, p 3).

CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. BETTER FAITH FORMATION

What we heard:

- *The need for adult faith formation in a wide range of topics (scripture, liturgy, church teachings, sexuality, relationships, conscience, faith and science, living one's faith in a hyper-rational, secular age)*
- *a range of people needing faith formation: youth, parents, families, lay leaders, disillusioned and wounded people, those 'living the hardships and joys of marriage and family life', those involved in pastoral ministries and diocesan agencies,*
- *the allocation of finance and personnel resources to the faith formation of children, while the majority of Catholics have had little or no ongoing faith formation since leaving school*
- *that opportunities for adult faith formation have been limited:*
 - *for many, to homilies at Mass/liturgies,*
 - *for some, to their involvement in faith-sharing groups, occasional conferences and seminars*
 - *for a small minority, to their participation in user-pays courses such as the Christian Formation Course, theology degree courses and Religious Education training ...*

What we recommend:

- FE 1.1 That parish communities and diocesan agencies give priority to faith formation, aimed at encouraging and enabling all to participate in the life and mission of the Church.**
- FE 1.2 That a network of Formation teams be established across the Diocese in order to encourage, communicate and promote formation opportunities, including online opportunities.**

2. CAREFUL, WELL-PLANNED PROGRAMS

What we heard:

- *The diocese already makes available many faith formation opportunities (cf. work of the Pastoral Ministries Formation and Education (PMFE) staff, the Diocesan Adult Faith Formation Council [AFFC], Christian Formation Course, the Religious Education and Spirituality department of the CSO [RE&S], the DOMN-ACU Scholarship program, the Diocesan Liturgy Council, the Diocesan Council for Ministry with Young People [DCMYP], University of Newcastle Catholic Society, Pastoral Placement Program, Catholic Care's Marriage Team, as well as RCIA, Sacraments of Initiation Teams, and faith sharing groups such as Cursillo,....)*
- *Very few seem to make use of the opportunities provided by the diocese which therefore fail to touch the majority of adult Catholics*
- *Current research shows that 50% of young people under the age of 30 struggle to see any connection between faith and reason; practicing faith has been reduced to the attendance of Mass in the eyes of many; there is a growing distance between the church and the modern world*

- *Many diocesan employees reportedly have little understanding of the Church and its mission, while they undoubtedly have skills and expertise for the work, they do*
- *There are more people than perhaps ever before in the Church with qualifications in Religious Education and Theology*

What we recommend:

- FE 2.1** That research be carried out and a report prepared on the adult faith formation issues identified in Plenary Council/Synod responses, and on the groups identified as needing ongoing formation, with a view to determining what future face-to-face and online opportunities the diocese could provide, with what resources of finance and personnel.
- FE 2.2** That the Pastoral Ministries – Formation and Education (PMFE) and the Religious Education and Spirituality department of the Catholic Schools Office (RE&S) collaborate as needed to create, adopt, or adapt programs for specific groups, that are invitational, Christ-centred, theologically sound, connected to contemporary life and accessible.

3. RESOURCES

What we heard:

- *There is no physical or online centre for promoting faith formation and spiritual development*
- *There is no dedicated space where people can gather for a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ*
- *Catholic students at State Schools are increasing so more resources are needed for SRE*
- *In comparison with the resources spent of the education of children, investment in adult faith formation/education has been minimal*
- *Ongoing work is being done on the rationalising of all books and media resources in the diocese*
- *Existing programs such as e-learning already available are not used*

What we recommend:

- FE 3.1** That priority be given by diocesan leadership to the establishment of a Diocesan Formation Centre and a dedicated, engaging and attractive website.
- FE 3.2** That effective communication methods both online and otherwise be investigated to ensure that the diocese's efforts to address ongoing formation are well known and the availability of resources are promoted.

4. CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

What we heard:

- *the decline in Mass attendance and especially the loss of young people from parish communities should be addressed via our school communities*
- *the schools have a well-developed faith formation framework in place*

- *some believe it is the responsibility of our Catholic schools to produce fully-formed, 'practising' Catholics*
- *Lip service is given to the principle that parents are the first and most important faith educators of their children but little collaboration between schools and families is evident*
- *There is a lack of understanding of the nature of faith development as a life-long process: from childhood, through adolescence, young adulthood to mature faith and the varying needs of individuals in these different stages*
- *Research indicates that the greatest influence on young people attending Mass is that of parents*

What we recommend:

- FE 4.1** That at the local level, parish and school communities give priority to communal conversations that will address the concerns raised by some respondents as well as communicate and promote the mission and goals of our schools.
- FE 4.2** That resources be produced to facilitate such conversations and to assist staff formation, including e-learning modules for significant elements in the RE curriculum.

5. CANDIDATES FOR PRIESTHOOD

What we heard:

- *The process and the criteria for the selection of candidates for priesthood is unknown to most Catholics*
- *Many of our diocesan priests can be considered amongst the injured as a result of clergy sexual abuse*
- *The doctrine of ontological difference appears to separate priests from the laity*
- *Concern about the low numbers of candidates for priesthood in our diocese and in Australia*
- *The majority of our priests formed in the spirit and teachings of Vatican 11 have retired*
- *For overseas priests ministering in the diocese there are cultural differences that are problematic both for the priests and the people they serve*

What we recommend:

- FE 5.1** That in the interests of transparency and rebuilding trust, women as well as lay men and priests be involved in the selection of candidates for the priesthood, their seminary formation and the review of their ongoing formation as disciples as well as ministers.
- FE 5.2** That the formation and training of candidates for the priesthood, and ongoing formation and training during their ministry, give emphasis to the values servant leadership, collaborative ministry, human sexuality and the dangers of clericalism.
- FE 5.3** That there be appropriate supervision and performance review throughout seminary formation and beyond to parish ministry.