



Take the Way of the Gospel Consultation Report #3

The following report is the third of the *Take the Way of the Gospel* consultation reports, the result of expansive engagement with parishes from across the Archdiocese of Melbourne. These consultations have been a fruitful opportunity to identify areas of need within our local communities of grace and discern together how we can become more missionary.

This series of consultations, taking place throughout August and September 2023 in each region of the Archdiocese, reflected on the theme, 'Forming for Mission', in the context of the vibrant, vital and viable communities we aspire to recreate. Working in small groups, participants were given the chance to contribute to two of the three key areas being addressed—Forming Vital and Vibrant People of Faith, Forming for Ministry, and Forming for Leadership. Through the sessions, time was given to regularly pause and invite the Holy Spirit to help participants discern rightly.

What does a well-formed person of faith look like?

The understanding of formation put forward was as follows:

We understand formation as an intentional, ongoing, and reflective process

- *that is focussed on the growth of individuals and communities*
- *where growth involves spiritual awareness, theological understanding, vocational motivation and capabilities; and*
- *its purpose is for mission and service in the Church and the world.*

In each of the sessions, participants broke into round-table discussions, able to self-select two of the three key areas of focus. Before launching into conversation, each group was asked to reflect on this definition and identify the characteristics and behaviour of a well-formed person of faith. Across the Archdiocese, there was an almost unanimous understanding of what this person might look like.

Common characteristics included being 'Christ-centred' and 'prayerful', the kind of person that has faith as a central aspect of their lives. They would carry themselves with 'enthusiasm' and a 'willingness to serve', as well as with 'humility', realising the 'baptismal call' that rests on them. They would also be people of 'empathy' and demonstrate an 'inclusive' attitude to those around them.

Additional characteristics reflective of well-formed lay and ordained leaders included the exercise of 'servant leadership', being 'a leader, not a manager' as well as a 'shepherd'. But they would also exercise vision and self-motivation, 'able to recognise the gifts of others bring them to good use'. To those around them, they would be 'empowering', 'inclusive', and open to 'listening to those who differ'.

Following this exercise, participants reflected on and discussed these three questions:

- What programs/resources/tools have you found effective?
- What are the needs/gaps? What is YOUR specific need in this area?
- How together might we meet these needs/fill the gaps?



Forming Vibrant and Vital People of Faith (missionary disciples)

Effective resources:

Tools, programs and resources that were found effective for the formation of people included retreats, workshops and seminars, RCIA, Alpha, various prayer, Scripture and spirituality groups, Word on Fire resources, modern technologies and social media, and opportunities for participation in local charities, notably the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Needs and gaps:

Common and notable concerns were the engagement of young people, young parents and families; the need for motivation and energy; 'sensitivity' to COVID-19 and a reluctance to return to community; financial constraints; the need for the 'availability' and 'accessibility' of formation resources, as well as a 'structure' for ongoing formation after baptism; 'succession planning' was also spoken about, as people identified the need for 'ongoing' training of people to take over various ministries; the gap between parishes and schools was a frequently recognised gap that needed bridging.

Filling the needs and gaps together:

The desire to work more closely with other local parishes and schools, to 'share resources', 'collaborate and cooperate', and share 'what works and doesn't work' was often expressed; the desire to see more local and 'smaller groups' arise, around shared interests and formation (especially 'Scriptural formation'); communities becoming more 'targeted' in their approach to families, young people and schools; utilising modern technology to reach people; and the need to 'know your people' was spoken about, to have an 'ear to the ground' to know their needs and states in life.



Forming for Ministry

Effective resources:

Many of the same resources were mentioned under this topic, with the addition of online platforms such as Formed and Life Teen; more programs designed specifically for training in particular ministries; learning from 'local champions' of ministry and even ecumenical initiatives; implementing a process of 'intentional' mentorship for others wanting to participate in the ministries.

Needs and gaps:

One of the biggest needs identified in this area was for more people 'willing to give' themselves to various ministries, to 'get involved', be motivated, and have their 'skill-set' and 'talents' recognised; there was noted a lack of formation resources in a variety of areas; and also a lack of a 'sense of ownership' on the part of people for their parish, for stepping up to become involved in the 'mission' of the community.

Filling the needs and gaps together:

Chief in this area was mentioned the need for an 'invitational' culture, to actively 'tap on the shoulder' people who might be able to put their gifts to good use in the community; reaching out to young people and families could also create a sense of belonging, of feeling 'welcomed' and 'comfortable' enough to get involved; and creating a culture of working together as a 'team' and 'delegating' responsibilities.



Forming for Leadership

Effective resources:

Resources for leadership included the witness and ‘example’ of good leaders; specific formation courses and programs for ‘ministry formation’; the APEST Spiritual Gifts Analysis; Parousia Media; Sherry Weddell’s book ‘Forming Intentional Disciples’; and having a culture of ‘encouragement’ to those with ‘leadership potential’.

Needs and gaps:

Here the need for ‘succession planning’ and handing over the reins of leadership was noted; the need for an ‘unambiguous purpose’ and ‘positive’ vision; there was a lack of ‘sharing’ between parishes; a lack of formation in several areas was also noted, and not just theological formation—the need for formation in ‘public speaking’, ‘listening’, ‘delegation’, and identifying other people’s skills and potential; a gap in the number of people stepping up to fill leadership roles was also frequently acknowledged.

Filling the needs and gaps together:

The development of resources for leadership was encouraged, including some kind of ‘toolkit’, online resources, and processes for ongoing formation; actively sharing resources, both formative and community resources (e.g. venues); ‘vision casting’ and goal-setting was identified as an important way to address the needs in this area, strategically ‘planning’ for the years ahead; again, being able to identify the ‘skill-sets’ and ‘talents’ of potential leaders, inviting ‘competent’ people to share the workload; and collaborating with Archdiocesan ‘specialists’ to provide formation for leaders in important areas.

Conclusion



These three stages of consultation with parishes across the Archdiocese—Leading for Mission, Collaboration for Mission, and Forming for Mission—have been a truly blessed time of discernment together. In this stage alone, there was a total of 90 parishes participating and 205 people—an extraordinary turnout.

One recurrent theme in all three sessions across the year was concern with the lack of connection with young people, young parents and families, and the gap between parishes and schools. Positively, however, there has also been an increased desire to work more collaboratively, not only parishes and schools but neighbouring parishes with each other: sharing resources and learning together.

Concrete suggestions such as creating an invitational culture, implementing a more targeted approach to young people and creative use of technology are helpful and to be encouraged.

While raised primarily in the discussion on forming people for ministry, a lack of ownership and an unwillingness to be involved is an important insight for all three areas. For example, if we are able to better engage people in their own formation, perhaps they would have more confidence to be involved in ministry and leadership. And if our leadership teams know their people, recognise their talents and create a culture of working as a team, they will be better at inviting people to become involved. This might be worthy of further reflection at the local parish level where it is perceived to be an issue.

The discussion on forming leaders highlights the complexity of the leadership role today. The importance of processes such as vision casting, goal setting and strategic planning as well as the development of competencies in a wide range of areas was well captured. Of the three areas, the need for further resources for leadership formation came across most clearly.

Proclaim: Office for Mission Renewal will be prioritising formation offerings – for laity, clergy and families in 2024. The Forming for Mission consultations series has provided rich offerings and suggestions for formation sought by parishes throughout the Archdiocese in Melbourne. The Proclaim team will continue to engage with clergy and laity as the formation offerings are further developed in 2024 and 2025.



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