

Catholics meet to refashion their church

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This week I'm hearing about the 2021 Census results, including the precipitous fall in adherents of both Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, and about the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney demanding that Catholic leaders defend church values and teachings.

Next week I'll be in Sydney as one of 276 members meeting in the final assembly of the Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia, a law-making body, to vote on motions about the future direction of the church. Those motions relate to Indigenous reconciliation, child sexual abuse safeguards, mission, liturgy, evangelisation, recruitment, training, governance, inclusion, and integral ecology.

The church is meeting because it is in crisis and has failed by various measures. For these reasons it is refashioning and repositioning itself. Some members want deep transformation, while others may be happy with superficial adjustments and fine-tuning.

This is a situation well-known to many community organisations which have suffered massive failure and/or rejection and are bleeding members and supporters. The church is not unique and there are parallels elsewhere. Passionate differences still remain about whether or not there is a problem and, if so, what it is. An important difference of opinion within the church is about whether the problem is one of its existing beliefs and structures or whether it is a matter of failing to sell these beliefs well, especially to younger generations.

Put yourself in my shoes and think what you would do given the opportunity in the organisation of your choice. It could be a political party, voluntary organisation, trade union, corporation, or another church or faith.

The ingredients are a proud organisation with a successful history which has fallen on hard times. It has been rejected by the wider community and most of its own adherents. It is concerned about its own identity and suffers internal dissension. It worries about how it is seen by the wider community, recognises it needs to change, but is also determined to protect its traditional beliefs and core values.

The lead up has been arduous. The PC members are well-prepared, but many have full-time jobs or study and limited time to devote to the details, while still feeling a sense of duty.

Part of the exercise is admitting church failures, including those revealed by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Is the demise temporary or permanent? Another part is to recognise the limitations in being just one element in an international organisation. A third is to discern viable and practical alternatives, given limited and declining resources.

Members come to this exercise with different perspectives, including gender, ethnicity, and age. Some are from schools, some from parishes, some from agencies, some for high up in the official organisation, some from the 'rank and file'. Some are church employees, while others are volunteers. Increasingly the church is an immigrant church from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

From some perspectives things don't look too bad or are even thriving, such as schools. From others, including many parishes and religious orders, they look disastrous because of ageing profiles. Some people are pessimistic and others more optimistic. Everyone admits the task of 'righting a sinking ship' is enormous.

Should the wider community take an interest or just let the Catholics get on with it? This exercise is of general interest for several reasons.

The Catholic church and its agencies, including its schools, hospitals, aged care facilities and social services bodies are major public providers of important services not just to Catholics but to the whole community. The more effectively, justly and inclusively they provide these services the more our whole society benefits.

Secondly, the Catholic church still has enough clout to make a difference in public policy debates. It can be a defining difference if the church throws its weight behind reforms, such as the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and a motion to that effect is on the Plenary Council agenda.

Thirdly, anyone keenly interested in social issues, such as equality for women and inclusion for LGBTQI+ people, should hope that the church, which lags far behind, will move in a more progressive direction as part of broader progress in the community.

Anyone who wants to penetrate the workings of the Plenary Council should read the public Framework of Motions. Then they should watch Plenary Tracker, a nightly Zoom service hosted by journalists, Genevieve Jacobs and Paul Bongiorno. It will offer reports, analysis and critique of the direction the council is taking from Sunday till Friday this coming week. Plenary Tracker is run by Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn, which I chair, one of 20 church reform groups across Australia.

The composition of the Plenary Council is one of the problems, reflecting the hierarchical church structure. Membership is diverse, but I am one of a minority of lay Catholics present. Women are in a clear minority too. The Council is not a parliament, because bishops hold the deciding ('deliberative') votes. But there are still opportunities for facts to be aired, voices to be heard, and concrete proposals to be put.

The success of such a venture can be measured in many ways. For some Catholics just holding such an event is cause for hope. Others hold no hope at all for a transformed church. By the end of the week if members and observers can't detect some boldness, courage, and fresh thinking then the church will remain stuck in a mire. The wider community can't be expected to listen respectfully to such a church.

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