

CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE GENERAL CONFERENCE

The Catholic Women's League General Conference was held in Bendigo this year. The Opening Mass, held in White Hills Parish, was celebrated by Bishop Les Tomlinson and concelebrated by Fr Dell'Avo (Parish Priest of White Hills), Fr Harte (former Parish Priest of White Hills) and Fr Ferwerda (Spiritual Director of the League in Sandhurst Diocese). Since the conference was held on the feast day of the Queenship of Mary, Bishop Tomlinson placed a wreath of flowers on the statue of our Lady of Fatima in the Church.

Mayor Margaret O'Rourke (pictured right) officially welcomed attendees in the nearby Fr Ted Harte Hall. Bendigo is obviously a thriving inland city, with a wide range of planned developments. Mayor O'Rourke called it a city within a forest. Growing so rapidly, the municipality infrastructure needs have to be foremost in council plans. Speaking as a private citizen, Mayor O'Rourke also spoke about the Aspire Precinct development, which is connected with the Sacred Heart Cathedral. Set up in 2011, it aims to honour the religious history of the city.

The first guest speaker was Phil Bretherton, Director of Mission Integration, St John of God Hospital, who gave a very informative presentation on the history of the hospital, its founder St John of God and its various outreach programs. The St John of God website states, "The Congregation of the Sisters of St John of God was founded in Wexford, Ireland, in 1871. Inspired by the work of their patron saint, St John of God, they nursed those in poverty. St John of God devoted his life to alleviating human suffering and comforted the afflicted, sick and dying in Spain in the 1500s. He was particularly passionate about combating the injustices experienced by people disadvantaged through illness or destitution.



As the Congregation of the Sisters of St John of God expanded, Bishop Matthew Gibney of Perth invited the Sisters to Western Australia to help care for the sick. The first group of eight Sisters arrived in Perth in late 1895 and began visiting the sick in their homes and established a convent hospital. In 1898 the Sisters opened a convent, hospital and school in the Perth suburb of Subiaco. They established a number of schools at this time and over the following decades hospitals in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. By the 1980s, the Sisters had nine hospitals as well as pathology and radiology services. Major changes in medical science, government policies and Catholic Church thinking at this time led the Sisters to rethink the governance and functioning of their hospitals. Recognition that a multi-hospital approach was needed led to the creation of St John of God Health Care Inc on September 20, 1989. All of the Sisters' services transferred to this new organisation." The outreach programs to homeless youth, young mothers, Mother and Baby Unit, community meals for those in need and scholarships are truly amazing and a credit to the hospital's enterprise and energy.

The second speaker was Dr Donna Bailey, Diocesan Archivist. It seems to me that collating and analysing data donated to the Archive Centre is meticulous detective work with a measure of good fortune. Donna presented some fascinating work being done to uncover why some events happened. Why did more pioneers die in March than in any other month? Why were a significant number of early pioneers married and where did they come from?

Although the Sandhurst Diocese was formed in 1874, with the Most Rev Martin Crane OSA the first Bishop, there were five missions already established in Sandhurst, Beechworth, Wangaratta, Heathcote and Echuca, so the history is varied and interesting.

Donna had some wonderful photographs including one of lightning striking the Cathedral in November 2017. The history of the Cathedral, from the time Dr Henry Backhaus purchased the land, through to the addition of the spire, the visit by the von Trapp family, to the present, all make a fascinating record.



L-R: Catherine Holmes with Dawn Shaw

Our last Guest Speaker was Catherine Holmes from the Gianna Centre in Bendigo. The Centre opened in 2004 and offers a wide range of services to mothers and babies and to couples. Bishop Grech supported them financially in the beginning and this support has been on-going. Some League branches support them too and they are obviously grateful for not only the assistance, but for the recognition. The number of services the Gianna Centre offers has increased over the years. Catherine's drive and energy has not diminished in that time. If she could bottle that and sell it, they would make a fortune.

Many people have contacted us to say how informative and inspiring the speakers were and how much they enjoyed hearing them. May God bless each of our Speakers for their good works, love and commitment.

*Jane Munro
General President CWL Victoria and Wagga Wagga*