

MEMBERS UNPACK BIG QUESTIONS FACING THE CHURCH

The 278 members of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia have continued to break open the 16 questions related to how we can create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia at this time.

After the broad discussions of the first small group sessions on Monday, yesterday's "spiritual conversations" moved to more specific questions, suggestions and even proposals.

Reflecting on the day's Gospel reading of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), the small groups continued their discernment and reported back during the assembly's livestreamed session this morning.

On the topic of conversion, Helen Belcher told the assembly that her group had begun looking at concrete points around training and formation, small ecclesial communities (home/family groups), structural changes such as diocesan synods and parish pastoral councils, and lay preaching by men and women.

She said elements of the group's prayer and discernment included the need to "come down from the mountain and live in the world" and to be "mindful of the optics - how we present and act".

Carol Teodori-Blahut said her group heard the Spirit calling them to "name and respond to the darker side of our Church and society where racism, exclusion and injustice have caused trauma, woundedness and suffering".

"Truth-telling around this part of our story is really important," she said.

While the group has not identified any concrete actions yet, two themes emerging were a "yearning for a Church that celebrates and brings into respectful dialogue Indigenous peoples and others" and an urgent call to use "our privilege and our voice to influence society" and change structures leading to injustice and suffering.

Fr Peter Whitely told the assembly his group's discernment on prayer sparked concerns that "too few young people in our schools have not yet been invited into a close relationship with Jesus".

He said the group questioned how the Church could engage people to pray, particularly when people were feeling disconnected due to COVID.

Discussions included consideration of the many people who did not feel welcome in our communities: "Sometimes we are seen as too 'clubby' or too comfortable in what we do?"

Tackling the question of how the Church might better embrace the diverse liturgical traditions of Churches and immigrant communities, Dr Sr Maeve Heaney said her group reflected on the need to know and understand one another's rites and celebrations through education in schools and in the formation of future leaders and clergy.

The aim, she said, was to remove a sense of superiority of any rite over another and, to facilitate this, the group suggested a national body or commission might be necessary.

Significantly, the group voted on two motions: to cease using the term immigrant communities and use language that reflects our inter-cultural reality; and to recommend that the prayer and liturgies of the second general assembly of the Plenary Council reflect the diversity of rites within the Church in Australia.

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Deepening the concept of leadership and distinguishing between mission and ministry were the basis for discernment on formation by Gabriele Turchi's group. He said there was also practical discussion around "accessibility, competing with busy lifestyles, the value of work and the challenges faced by workers and the stress on families and marriages".

Also addressing formation, in relation to equipping ordained ministers to be enablers of missionary discipleship, Gemma Thomson said her group reflected that holiness was "as much about looking out as looking in".

There is a "need for cultural change, not just structural change", she explained.

The group explored the "ministry of presence" and the practical aspects of the priestly role that would free them to focus on relationship. Collaboration, professional supervision and the need to go back and start with Jesus and "Jesus as priest" were other topics discussed.

Similar themes emerged in the group discussion on parish structures with Raj Rajasingam reporting that there was a lack of understanding of priests and parish leaders on their roles, which could lead to tensions. The need for a new catechist role was raised.

Dr Nimmi Candappa said her group identified that effective governance capitalised on the giftedness of the laity and well-formed clergy who are "truly pastoral leaders with mature faith".

"True authority was seen as the ability to 'bring into being'," she said.

The group was conscious that a lot of work has been done previously on governance, with documents such as the *Light from the Southern Cross* and the *Woman and Man* publication, providing well-defined recommendations yet there had been obstacles or resistance to their implementation. There was a question on what currently prevents women deacons.

The group asked whether the Church bureaucracy was serving the people well: "The ease with which regional communities, for example, adapt to meet the pastoral needs of a community was contrasted with the hindrances experienced in other areas."

Also looking at governance, Danny Casey said his group discussed the need for mission clarity and noted how important it was to maintain Catholic identity in the work of agencies.

"Structures and governance do not do the saving; people do," he said.

The group also talked about the importance of being an "outward-facing Church" and, to that end, it was looking forward to inviting expert input on the "why" of mission.

The final small group report, from Fr Cameron Forbes, addressed Catholic education and the desire to strengthen the connection with the faith and to accompany parents as the first educators.

"A challenge exists for educators to ensure that all receive a sense of welcome as we accompany them towards faith, away from the many distractions that exist," he said.

The idea of developing a "national understanding of what a graduate of Catholic education looks like" was put forward.

Find out more and access the livestreams at www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au