

Notes of Special Facilitation Session for STA and SJK Joint Steering Group – STA and SJK
Wednesday 19th Feb 2025

Facilitator: Dr Tony McArthur

In Attendance: Fr Tru, Carl Madsen, Di Bruce, Michael Carberry, Rod Goodisson, Gerri Bleaser, Marian England, Jenny McGee. Facilitator: Dr Tony McArthur.

Apologies: Marg Hourigan

1. Welcome & Description of the Process.
2. Letters from concerned parishioners read out to members.
3. Prayer: The facilitator commenced with the Lord's Prayer – followed by a discussion of where we want the Kingdom of God to be.
4. Introductions: Members then introduced themselves to each other and briefly stated how long they had been involved in their current Parish group and in what capacity.
5. The facilitation process then began:

- **What is the problem?**

Members of the Steering Group were asked to each state what they felt the most significant problem was causing the difficulties in having the two communities come together. Responses included:

- There is no relationship between the 2 Parishes
- How do we resource two Parishes?
- There is a lack of vision
- Fear of the future
- Lack of progress
- Change is not wanted by (some) members of the Steering Committee
- Convincing members of each community that the form of unity will unite persons & not leave a feeling of grievance
- The parishioners of the two different Parishes are out of step with each other in terms of how far they have accepted the process

The facilitator concluded that the most common element was related to various aspect of “fear of the future”. A discussion of Kubler-Ross Stages of Grief* ensued (*these are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression & acceptance) and it was suggested that part of the difficulty was that parishioners were at different stages in the “grief” process of coming to terms with what was happening in their own Parish.

- **What is the reality?**

The facilitator then proceeded to present what he saw as the realities of the situation, after talking to both Fr Tru and the Vicar General. In summary these were:

1. The number of priests in the Archdiocese (and elsewhere) is declining with no signs of recovery
2. According to Canon Law a single priest is not supposed to say more than 3 masses a day
3. All Church property, even if it were built and paid for by parishioners, *does not belong to them*, but is owned by the Church Trustees under the Roman Catholic Church Property Trust Act 1937. In the end, it is the Church Trustees who decides what happens to Parish Property.
4. According to Canon Law it is the Archdiocese which controls the Parish, and a bishop (or Archbishop) can establish, change or abolish one or more parishes within his domain, albeit he is required to listen to the views of the local council of priests.

5. An *Order* (eg MSC) *cannot* be appointed the pastor of a Parish, but an ordained priest belonging to a congregational order can be appointed a pastor by the Archbishop if he so chooses.
6. Parish pastoral councils are consultative only. They cannot dictate the decisions that a Parish priest makes. And any decision the parish priest makes regarding the Parish must meet with the approval of the Archbishop.
7. In other words, there is a huge power imbalance in which parishioners, at this moment in time, have really very little say in what happens to their Parish. And the parish priest can be overruled by the Archbishop.

Following this summary, members of the Steering Group were asked to nominate what they felt was the most desired and most *realistic* outcome of the current process. Responses were:

- One community
- Two parishes administered by one priest
- The two parishes will become one
- Unity, with some grief and letting go
- That both parishes continue to exist in harmony with each other
- The two parishes will come together. Some people will be happy, others won't be
- One Parish, one Church building
- Agreement for the sacramental life of a combined parish ie mass times, programs for ministry to youth, sick, aged etc
- The Archbishop will decree the outcome if parishes can't. It will happen in some form.

The facilitator then highlighted that most members of the Steering Group foresaw the eventuality of the two Parishes coming together (though not without some grief). In the facilitator's view and experience with Church hierarchy the Archdiocese had all the power in making the decision it felt was best.

- **What actions are required to achieve this?**

With the consensus that the most realistic outcome being that the two parishes would merge, the facilitator then urged the Steering Group to determine the following matters:

1. The name of the new entity
2. The type of model for the two parishes to come into one (ie either a collaborative model, an amalgamation or a merger)
3. Agreed mass times & locations
4. Common bulletin
5. Winding up of two separate finance committees and establishment of a new one.
6. Winding up on current separate pastoral councils and establishment of a new one.
7. Impact on the various Liturgy groups (note a joint Sacramental Program has already been established)
8. Priests' residence?
9. What is to be done with the spare presbytery?

In discussing these issues we were encouraged to think of the Parish community as being made up of a number of smaller individual "mass communities". Many parishioners would feel the loss of their individual mass community should its time or location be changed, and this needed to be acknowledged, but it was seen as a necessary step should the time come that we only had one priest. Given that we have two priests once Fr Chung returns from Vietnam, this step may not be required for some time.

There was some point of contention when discussion focused on the Joint Parish assembly which had been spoken about at both previous Steering Group and joint PPC meetings. After some debate the decision to *not* go forward with a joint Parish Assembly solely for the purpose of coming to decisions about 1-9 above for the following reasons:

1. A Parish Assembly would most likely *not* be representative of all parish members, would most likely attract those people who were opposed to the proposed changes and would risk causing further disagreement and exacerbate disharmony among the two groups.
2. Organising a joint parish assembly for the purpose of coming to final decisions would actually delay those decisions being made as well as incurring a financial cost to both parishes when they can least afford it (as it would require to be held at a neutral site with subsequent expense)
3. The decision to not hold a joint parish assembly would further alienate some parishioners who feel they have not been adequately consulted during this process and would require sensitive, yet at the same time open and transparent discussion about our rationale for deciding against it. However parishioners should be able to offer suggestions or alternatives if they strongly disagreed with any of the recommendations made by the Steering Group.

After concluding that a joint parish assembly would not proceed the following recommendations were made:

- The new parish will be known as “West Belconnen Community”.
- Both Churches would keep their current names.
- STA and SJK parishes will come together under a merger model
- The decision regarding changes to Mass times & mass sites will be deferred until we no longer have two priests.
- The two finance committees will be wound up and a new joint finance committee will be established.
- The two pastoral councils will be wound up and a new joint one will be established.
- The current Steering Group Committee will be wound up and replaced by a Transition Committee.
- There will be a further meeting in one week’s time to review what will be said to Parishioners at both mass sites.
- There will be a ½ day discernment process on 29th March to further discuss the process
- The decision regarding a survey for mass times will be deferred.

ACTION ITEMS ARISING FROM THE FACILITATION SESSION:

- The group meet next Wednesday 26th Feb 2025 to agree on a communication plan and joint script for both STA and SJK communities.
- Plan for ½ retreat / discernment process on 29th March 2025

Session concluded: 9.00 pm