

Master Plan – A response so far

For the first time in many years of seemingly endless talk and debate about Parish problems with declining population, priests and finances, and increasing liabilities, I am somewhat encouraged to believe that things are at last in a position to *start* moving forward. When the Parish Leadership Team Executive briefly introduced their draft Master plan at Masses just before Christmas they strongly echoed and reinforced the well made and increasingly relevant point of past years that, given well quantified Parish decline, particularly in a ‘business’ sense, there remains no option to do nothing. I strongly agree that changes are necessary and believe we are at last in a position to start moving forward immediately on selected elements of the master Plan, as we simultaneously consider and review some of its other elements.

The draft Master Plan Report, separate drawings and attachments and additional summary present a full concept, albeit without detail, and with some generalisations. To the extent that details exist I have attempted to determine and articulate some of my thoughts on the overall proposal as published. In reading these reports my conclusions so far result also from a combination of reflection on the rich history of this Parish, a longer-term perception of the nature of Church, our community, and of rapidly changing society - very much including young people. It also results from having actively observed and chosen to participate in this Parish for 22 year whilst actually residing in another Parish.

The PLT Executive having worked extremely hard considering very many inputs from the past and now additionally the relatively fresh views of a contracted architect have been faced with much more than addressing the visible issues, the well canvassed declining attendances, declining income, and increasing costs and liabilities. Their difficult and thankless task has taken much of their personal time, for which much appreciation and support are appropriate. Beyond dealing with these more visible issues they have had to be sensitive to very strongly expressed views, reasonably attempting to accommodate their diversity and intensity. No single decision could ever be expected to fully encompass all expressed views and satisfy everyone, yet a decision was and remains urgently required. They have further needed to consider ‘big picture’ and future issues, not just the present. In particular there has been need to carefully take into account what has effectively been unashamed and understandable threats by sizeable groups of Parishioners in particular locations to abandon the Parish and move elsewhere if the previously confirmed idea of a single Mass Centre were to proceed. What non-masochist other than a saint would want the job of resolving all this?

Threatened relocation whilst self-serving is a position that people are perfectly entitled to have, and this appears to have figured very strongly in the Exec’s deliberation to propose abandoning the single Mass Centre concept. From a short term business perspective and respecting these strong views that is understandable. However as Wennie van Lint eloquently pointed out in his letter of 23 January it is not a position that works well with other apparent (even if less visible) elements of the Master Plan to unify and strengthen the Parish. Managing declining income in the short term is one thing but equally offering a credible future vision and preparing in a Christian way for a viable future in a rapidly changing and very different world embracing all age groups is another.

Master Plans need to be visionary whilst steering a pragmatic path through all known issues. In particular, given the nature of the 'business', they need to inclusively serve the needs of people of all ages by making the Parish attractive to them now and into the future, thus at the same time enhancing future prospects for survival as a Christian community. Our Master plan focuses on some difficult issues but appears more present focused and less willing to embrace the opportunity for inclusively serving all age groups in the costlier and more complex emerging world. It appears to concentrate on satisfying critics of change and maintaining the status quo rather than the more difficult task of gearing for and embracing the future.

In a sense the draft Master Plan has already been successful because through their recent silence the very vocal critics of a Single Mass Centre appear so far to have been appeased.

If declining priest numbers, attendances and income weren't a problem then the current draft Master Plan could be a great strategy. However the continuing rate of decline in the Parish from a 'business' sense suggests to me that the master Plan mostly just buys time, until the present generation of parishioners, and their income, disappear. To survive in the longer term some sacrifice of status quo is called for. Resources need to be pooled, duplication avoided, and once and for all unification made the hallmark of what is supposed to be a cohesive, nurturing and sharing Christian community. Ironically these characteristics formed the rationale for the previous decision, which formally still exists, to adopt a single Mass Centre.

How then to proceed amidst these difficulties? Given the options of doing nothing, reverting to a three Church model or pooling resources and sharing costs I can see little in the draft Master plan that does more than address current short term problems. I believe that if the principle of longer term survival of the Parish were to be an agreed and shared objective across the parish then some sacrifice is called for.

The first sacrifice, however regretful it might be, is turning the existing St Bernadette's Tennis courts into an income generating resource as per the Master plan. At the same time the Parish should work towards supporting tennis players with alternatives. The second step would be even more difficult, that of once again, asking people to re-consider making the sacrifice of reverting to a single Mass Centre. If that were to be achievable now when it wasn't previously, then great. If not, then perhaps nothing further can be lost either by doing nothing, or proceeding with the Master Plan as drafted, and then allowing nature to take its course. At least via the Master Plan we will have bought time, even if as though rearranging deck-chairs on a Titanic.

Of course it's always easier to call for sacrifice than for some one to have to make it. However in the end, one way or another, we are all called to sacrifice the status quo.

At the risk of now providing an anti-climax *after* my main points above in relation to principles I would like to briefly comment on some other more detailed elements the draft Master Plan.

If indeed it is the case into the future, as it seems, the Master Plan dramatically reverses the single Mass Centre concept without directly admitting as such.

Confirmation of this, if it's the case into the foreseeable future, and a clear explanation for the change is owed to the Parish. Give that the Single Mass Centre principle was previously formally agreed then some explanation should similarly be offered on how this would be changed if the case.

Whilst the central Parish Centre concept in Upper Heidelberg Road looks visually attractive together with the enhanced Parish Office this does not appear to sit well financially with the proposed simultaneous expenditure on two other Churches, despite the one-off benefit of sale of part of that site. Other than various Master Plan Recommendations there is little to suggest that people who already appear not to want to have to shift church attendance from current locations will want to go to a new Parish office centre for meetings, Why should they when they could also continue to meet locally? Despite the visually attractive drawing of a new Parish office, this together with refurbished churches would unlikely shift people from current local meeting centres and achieve the implied objective of unifying the Parish.

Without wishing to canvass the relative merits of any one church over another, and I share use of all three, the Report speaks of Mary Immaculate being unwelcoming. Its hospitality capability is clearly inadequate but I defy anyone who looks at website photos of the many varied liturgies at each of the Churches to say that this Church is visually unwelcoming. On the contrary I consider it to be especially welcoming, including the way that the congregation is seated partly around the altar in a participatory sense, rather than in regimented rows behind it.

Similarly the report's calculation of relative congregation size appears misleading to me as anyone who has attended services above, and especially behind MOG proper may sense. Again as Wennie van Lint has expressed the building should be secondary to a sense of shared community. The Church of my local Parish that I don't attend is actually outstanding, but that doesn't keep me there. Sad as it may be, if one or more Church or other building in our Parish does need to be demolished or sold for the sake of the community into the future then so be it. The key outcome instead should be a cohesive sharing Christian community rather than a particular building or site.

Despite personally having other Parish options available to me I currently remain attracted to the Catholic Parish of Ivanhoe community. The Deanery is also making inroads in working towards an even larger Catholic community than just the Parish of Ivanhoe. If nothing much changes in Ivanhoe now then perhaps in years to come this current debate will have become academic anyway as a result of other, external, changes beyond Ivanhoe's present boundary or capacity to act upon.

Whatever happens I hope we don't discard the worthwhile unifying values and sacrifices of earlier generations across all three churches that currently comprise the catholic parish of Ivanhoe, but Que Sera Sera.

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