

ST AGNES[†]



GLEN HUNTLY

From the Vicar

Ash Wednesday 2021

Dear parishioners at St Agnes' Glen Huntly,

This document is an initial Consultation Paper in preparation for our meeting following the 9:30am Choral Eucharist and Lunch at St Agnes' on Sunday 21st February 2021. An invitation to that meeting was announced a month ago on the Second Sunday after Epiphany after I had foreshadowed for some time that it would be important to spend this year in prayerful discernment exploring possibilities and opportunities for sustained ministry and mission at St Agnes' into the medium to long-term. This conversation is also intended to go hand-in-hand with one about the right and most edifying use for the congregation at St Agnes' of the remainder of the Hocking Bequest, following a resolution of the Parish Council at its June 2020 meeting:

That the Parish Council express its view that the remaining funds of the Hazel Hocking Bequest should not be drawn down any further in the next 12 months and that during that time the Vicar initiates with the congregation at St Agnes' some discernment over a fitting use of the Bequest for the furtherance of mission and ministry at St Agnes' and in memory and thanksgiving for the life, witness and service of Hazel Hocking.

Setting the Conversation in the Context of Vocation

The readings set for the Eucharist on the Second Sunday after Epiphany prompted us to think of our vocation and calling, not just as individuals but as a parish community and particularly at St Agnes' Glen Huntly. This should provide the context to this early discernment of where God may be calling us and how to best respond in faithfulness, hope and trust. I reiterate what I said in my sermon that morning, which was also distributed afterwards, that "I hope this year might be one of listening, discerning and exploring together what God's call for us might be and where that gentle leading might take us."

This document, and our discussion and conversation at St Agnes' on the 21st February, is then the next step in a process of opening up what the immediate challenges are at St Agnes' as well as opportunities, what a broad range of responses might be and, finally, where in particular we might feel the Spirit leading us as we discern what models of ministry and mission will enable St Agnes' to continue to grow in spirituality and service as disciples of Jesus, glorifying God through inspiring worship, and sharing the generous hospitality of God with our neighbourhood and local community for another generation.

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Setting the conversation in the context of the whole mission of the Parish

This discernment has also been owned and enabled by the Parish Council which has made it a key priority at its Strategy Planning Weekend held in January 2021 and which committed to:

Planning for the sustained and sustainable resourcing of ministry at St Agnes' so that it might become a centre for mission and community connection in Glen Huntly.

How will we do it?

a) We will initiate some early exploratory conversations at St Agnes' around the implications involved in different options and offerings of ministry there in the medium to long-term with a view to narrowing these down and pursuing one or two possible avenues by the end of the year

b) We will initiate some prayerful discernment at St Agnes' around the use of remaining funds available in the Hocking Bequest in a way which builds up and enables ministry at St Agnes' and is a fitting tribute to Hazel Hocking's memory and legacy.

You may notice, however, that this statement is rather open-ended and, even, a little vague – in fact it was suggested to me that it could have been written by Yes Minister's Sir Humphrey Appleby! This is intentional, as it is important that the details of what might happen at St Agnes' are worked out fully in conversation with the people at St Agnes' and that they are involved and consulted from the outset. This document – and our conversation on Sunday – will begin to detail some of the specifics.

The Pretext

It is important to reiterate again what I have said consistently since arriving as Vicar regarding the ongoing ministry and mission of St Agnes' within the parish: I have absolutely no intention to oversee the closure of St Agnes' – I am in the 'business' of church growth not closure!

I am aware that before my arrival the Parish Council had passed motions relating to thresholds of attendance at St Agnes' that would trigger a process of closure – I am confident that this is no longer the mind of the Parish Council, not least as expressed in the recent Mission Action Plan.

I am pleased to note too that the last two years have seen – notwithstanding the impact of the Pandemic – a modest yet steady increase in attendance at St Agnes'.

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Furthermore, for a number of reasons I do not see the closure of St Agnes' as even a workable possibility.

First, there is the undeniable reality that the 'horseshoe' of property surrounding the church will provide critical income for the whole parish for at least the next 30 years. In the 2020-21 Budget this income accounted for 49% of our total Operating Income, and there is every expectation this will continue into the long-term. Given this reality, it is hard to see what purpose 'shutting up shop' at St Agnes' would serve.

More than this, however, I believe St Agnes' is critical for our parish's mission to truly proclaim the Gospel and reach out in loving service to all those amongst whom we live and minister. A distinctive element of our Anglican tradition is that we are charged to take responsibility for the mission of the Church of God within a defined geographical area – the 'parish boundaries'. After two recent amalgamations, we are an extensive parish within the south-eastern suburbs with its northern boundary reaching up to Wattletree Road, running east along the Southeastern Freeway to the 'Urban Forest', running along and across the 'great divide' of the Princes Highway and south down Koornang Road to the boundary with Ormond, west to Bambra Road and then back up north around Caulfield Racecourse, Monash University and Tooronga Road to the streets around the Gascoigne Estate centred at Finch Street. This is an area of Melbourne which is not just geographically extensive but culturally and socio-economically diverse – without a strong foothold for mission in Glen Huntly we have little hope of reaching out with the love of God and in witness to Jesus Christ to all those who live and work in our parish.

While aspects of the amalgamation have undoubtedly been painful for the community at St Agnes' it must also be recognised that it has given the church a long-term security and shielded it from what might likely have been its fate, which is an enforced closure. This presents a huge opportunity and also a freedom to experiment and try new things. It also means we have an even keener responsibility to discern and act strategically and missionally, not to simply 'sit on our assets' but to work not only for the building up of the Church of God in this parish but also aligned with the priorities and strategy of the Diocese of Melbourne.

The Challenges

Whilst the current model of ministry at St Agnes', thanks to the generosity and energy of Fr Ken Hewlett in his pastoral and liturgical ministry, as well as the dedication of time and effort of parishioners, not least Lance Nixon in providing musical and administrative support, is extremely fortuitous and represents an almost negligible financial impact on our available resources, we would be foolish to complacently rely on this as sustainable in the long-term. Nevertheless, I am very pleased that both Fr Ken and Lance have indicated their willingness to continue to contribute as they have been doing for as long as they are able. If nothing else this gives us space and time to look ahead purposefully and strategically, rather than react impulsively and hastily.

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In the event that Fr Ken is unable to continue in his current capacity, it is the provision of sustainable and sustained priestly ministry at St Agnes' which presents the most significant challenge.

Fr Ken and I have spoken of this often – and indeed it has been he who has challenged me to develop a vision for addressing the long-term shape and nature of mission and ministry at St Agnes'. I am grateful to him for this, as we both acknowledge that the current model which may broadly be categorised as a 'pastoral chaplaincy' to the current congregation, while it may serve the immediate need to address the pastoral context and honour the abiding faithfulness of the current parishioners, is unlikely to generate the energy and dedicated priestly presence at St Agnes' necessary to equip the people of God in that place to reach the community in new ways and nurture both growth and outreach. The ongoing provision for appropriate ministry for this purpose is the principle challenge we face.

Related to this is a further challenge that, notwithstanding the considerable efforts and initiative of those at St Agnes' to serve our community through activities such as, but not limited to, the provision of New Day Boxes, support for Dixon House, and partnership with the Anglican Board of Mission, it is evident that the church has very little presence and 'visibility' in the consciousness of those living in the streets of Glen Huntly that surround it, and that it is struggling to connect not only with older residents of the suburb but also a changing cultural and age demographic in the area. An indicator of this – anecdotal perhaps but nonetheless pertinent – is that at the Midnight Mass service last year, the only Christmas service at St Agnes' which was well advertised and promoted, we saw no visitors or worshippers other than those regularly involved every Sunday.

These challenges are significant and what follows is simply a sketch of possible options we might consider in addressing them.

However, it is important too to acknowledge that there have recently been a number of encouraging and hopeful signs of God at work at St Agnes' – and watching first for God already at work should guide our discernment of how to equip mission and resource ministry to effectively join in as 'labourers in the vineyard'.

Such signs include,

- A modest but steady increase in attendance at St Agnes' before the Pandemic, and welcoming a number of new parishioners who now consider St Agnes' their spiritual home
- Continued energy and effort around existing outreach ministries
- At least 4 candidates for Confirmation, Affirmation of Faith or Reception into the Anglican Communion during Eastertide 2021
- Energy and engagement from some particular parishioners who have responded not just to doing essential maintenance works to the grounds and site, but also bringing passion and ideas for outreach and growth.

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- Particular initiatives already commenced, such as the Community Garden and Gardening Club as a way of reaching out and improving connections into the community.
- A renewed spirit of co-operation and partnership with St John's East Malvern, evidenced through the recent Fete, joint mission studies, strong Parish Council representation, inclusive whole-parish social events.
- An openness and flexibility in facing change, evidenced not least in the moving of the Parish Office into the church and in giving up the front portion of the Hall to our new tenants at the Child Care Centre.
- A clear programme being generated from parishioners themselves of achievable activities for the next year to build up our own fellowship and reach out into the community so that we may commend Christ with confidence.

All this is deeply encouraging and should not be overshadowed by the challenges we face. It is also a reminder that while this document is principally engaged with the question of our long-term future, there is much happening now and – indeed – I would suggest two other essential ingredients of church growth which we could embrace immediately:

- A dedicated and persistent practice of prayer at St Agnes' that we might reach out to others with the Good News of Jesus and draw them to this place to worship and give glory to God
- Open the doors of the church during the week

Possible Responses

Apart from these current signs of God at work amongst us, and immediate actions we might take to nurture and enable it, there are a number of obvious practical responses to the challenge of providing and resourcing ministry at St Agnes' in the event that Fr Ken is unable to continue to contribute in his current capacity. With only one stipendiary priest in the parish (the Vicar), and concurrent service times at St John's and St Agnes', it is clear that a workable way forward would need to be found.

Before setting out these options it may be worthwhile addressing, and ruling out, some responses which may seem attractive but, I believe, would be neither sustainable nor sustaining.

The first is simply to appoint a full-time, or even part-time, priest to minister at St Agnes'. While this might well be ideal, the reality is that the parish is not yet in a financial position to sustain it. The total cost of a full-time priest of sufficient experience to offer such a ministry is around \$95,000 per year. A part-time loading is also not necessarily proportional: a half-time priest of 3 days, which I would consider a minimum, would involve a parish commitment of close to \$60,000 per year. Not only is the parish not in a financial position to commit to this in the short term, it would also be a highly risky strategy with a strong possibility that it could not be sustained nor make an effective and proportionate impact to growth and outreach at St Agnes'.

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The second, a variation on the first, is to appoint an Assistant Curate with particular responsibility for St Agnes'. Although not requiring quite as much financial resourcing (around \$80,000 full-time and \$50,000 half-time). I am strongly of the view that this should not ordinarily be a 'default' option. Although the experience will vary according to the individual, in general an Assistant Curate would not have the experience or developed leadership to take on this challenge. Furthermore, Assistant Curates are primarily placed in parishes as a learning experience or 'apprenticeship' – and although they contribute their own gifts, they should not be pressed upon to move forward significant change or renewal. Finally, it is important that Assistant Curates are adequately supervised by the Vicar and have a broad range of experiences of parish life to equip them for taking up a ministry of leadership of their own elsewhere, therefore it is undesirable that they be narrowly focused on only one aspect of the parish's mission and not able to commit to a longer ministry amongst us.

Given this, other obvious options include – in no particular order and with no particular commendation:

a) Finding and appointing another retired priest to take-over in a capacity more or less equivalent to what Fr Ken currently is able to offer. This of course wouldn't address the underlying need at St Agnes' but would offer stability and continuity and also give more time to consider and plan for other options.

b) Gathering a team of four or five clergy who might alternate in taking services at St Agnes' on Sundays, so not relying too much on the ministry of one person. Of course this would have a pastoral implication and co-ordination of mission would be even less possible – very much a 'caretaker' model.

c) Explore the option of offering the Vicarage to a priest on a 'house for duty' basis.

d) Change Sunday service times at either St John's or St Agnes' to allow the Vicar to be present at all. This would add significantly to the Vicar's workload and would not necessarily open up time and energy for other aspects of growth at St Agnes' other than Sunday worship. It's also unclear which service times would be changed. It would also impact the ability for the Vicar to host regular hospitality at both churches, such as our monthly Vicarage lunches, and limit opportunities for new initiatives on Sundays.

e) Phase out Sunday worship at St Agnes' and move to a weekday and perhaps Saturday night vigil model, with the Vicar leading this. This might open up connections with people for whom traditional patterns of Sunday worship are not possible and inspire creative initiatives at St Agnes'. It would still represent a significant increase in workload for the Vicar – something would have to 'give'. It would also be disruptive and potentially traumatic for the current Sunday morning congregation.

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f) Equip a parishioner to act in a lay capacity to lead worship at St Agnes' each week. This would necessarily mean Holy Communion only by Reserved Sacrament and would be a significant shift for the congregation. There is not an immediate candidate for such a ministry either at this time.

g) Handover the church on commercial terms to a tenant for use as, perhaps, a café, reception centre, community hub or arts space, or some other business enterprise while retaining a sacred space in the Sanctuary to be used for mid-week and Sunday liturgy by a smaller congregation. Commercial revenue for this might resource the appointment of a dedicated 'mission priest' to lead this. An example of something similar is what has been done at 'Michaelhouse' in central Cambridge in partnership with the University Church.

h) Enter into partnership with a mission or welfare agency, or some other similar organisation, that they might use the church as a base for their own work and explore how the people of St Agnes' can be part of this while maintaining a sacred space for worship, on Sundays or at other times.

A Particular Proposal

While it is true that this is very much an open conversation and no definite view has been formed yet on future direction, there is a proposal which I have been exploring in its very early stages and which I do believe may open up some exciting possibilities, give energy and a sustained prayerful presence of ministry at St Agnes', provide for a full-time stipendiary priest and also contribute to a new direction for the identity of St Agnes' in line with some of the vision for it as a place of learning and formation explored during Fr Nigel Wright's incumbency (for example, the 'St Agnes' Institute').

While I am primarily motivated by these things in order, as Vicar, to see St Agnes' flourish and thrive, I must admit too that I see in this proposal a way to move forward what I believe should be the three key priorities for the future of the Catholic tradition within Anglicanism in the Diocese of Melbourne: these are, an emphasis on growing, and planting, healthy parishes which teach the Faith and inspire us to worship; encouraging and forming for ministry young ordinands and priests with a passion for mission and parish ministry who will grow in leadership; and, the recovery of a greater sense of discipline, unity and mutual support amongst the clergy that they might uphold each other effectively in prayer and action in witnessing to and living the Catholic life in Melbourne.

The proposal is, then, to establish a 'house of formation' for young (under 35) ordinands in the Vicarage at St Agnes' run on a semi-monastic pattern with a regular pattern of corporate prayer in the church, a rigorous full-time programme of formation for ministry with an emphasis on both priestly character and also practical parish mission in the suburbs, with St Agnes' as a 'testing ground' to try out ideas and initiatives, to prepare them for the kinds of parishes and ministries in Melbourne

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where they will likely end up. The House would be led by an experienced full-time priest who would act as 'Warden' in overseeing the ordinands' formation while also leading worship, mission and outreach at St Agnes'.

It is hoped that this symbiotic relationship between the House and church would not only be a unique and much-needed option for young people from around Australia to explore and pursue a call to ordination, offering them a clearly defined residential pathway with an intentional and intensive formational component, but that it would also provide much needed energy and prayerful full-time presence to the site at St Agnes' and allow it to work with the existing community to build up a diverse congregation which truly reflects God's purpose for us to witness to the Kingdom in Glen Huntly.

The Vicarage could house up to four ordinands, in addition to the Warden, if the Master Bedroom is subdivided into two smaller rooms. Necessarily they would need to be single, as too would the Warden or – possibly – partnered but without children. The ordinands would pay between \$5000 and \$8000 each per year for rent and 'tuition' which represents outstanding value for money and an affordable option for such a rich experience. This would also offset the loss of rental currently realised from the Vicarage, albeit at present an under-utilised asset.

The choice of Warden would be critical for the success of the venture, and of course they would need to agree to living in community with the ordinands in the House. This would simply be part of the call, however, and might attract someone with experience of community life and a passion for ministerial formation from Australia or further afield drawn to the challenge and opportunity of the role.

The Warden would be paid a full-time stipend which, excluding the housing allowance, would be around \$75,000 per year. I propose that the parish contribute around \$35,000 of this – initially for the first two years from the remainder of funds in the Hocking Bequest, and thereafter built into our operating budget. I am confident this would be sustainable into the long-term.

The remainder of the stipend would need to be met in partnership with some other organisation. I had originally been in conversation with Trinity College, however am now exploring a partnership directly with the Diocese of Melbourne. I will also reach out to other dioceses and also religious communities, many of which modelled exactly this kind of ministry in their early histories.

The House would need to be recognised as an approved pathway for ordination in the Diocese, independent of both Trinity College and Ridley. It is envisaged that it would be particularly appropriate too for regional dioceses in the Province of Victoria and beyond as an affordable yet rigorous option for their ordinands with a residential option in the metropolitan centre.

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Of course, we could not provide an academic programme for a degree in theology – this would need to be done by ordinands directly through either Trinity (University of Divinity) or Ridley (Australian College of Theology) and an approved course of study would need to be negotiated.

While there is quite frankly a dearth of young ordinands in the Catholic tradition of Anglicanism within the Diocese of Melbourne. It is anticipated that providing for a clear and tailored residential and intensive pathway will encourage more vocations and present a viable model for life-long diaconal and priestly ministry which is able to commend itself as both realistic and exciting in the imagination of school-leavers and young adults. It might also be appropriate for many students who would otherwise undertake their formation at Ridley, particularly those with little experience of the Anglican tradition, as a way of experiencing the richness of spiritual formation and ‘catholic’ life within Anglicanism in a missional and truly ‘evangelical’ context.

It may also be that similar ‘houses of formation’ could be established elsewhere in the Diocese but run on the same rule of life and programme so there might be some exchange to broaden the experience of ordinands in different contexts – the inner city, perhaps, or new growth corridors, the multicultural West, or semi-rural edges of the Diocese.

There would of course be many details to work out – and variables to account for – though none of this is intractable. There are also a few permutations of the scheme, for example including not just ordinands but those seeking an intentional Christian community to give a ‘year for God’ or in the more preliminary stages of exploring a possible call to ordination. This kind of model is not uncommon in the Church of England and has proved highly effective in generating both renewal in parishes as well as young and capable ordinands. My rough timeline would be to plan and secure funding in the first half of 2021 so that the position of ‘Warden’ can be advertised from around July/August 2021 for a suitable candidate to be appointed and begin in the parish toward the end of the year to give time to plan the programme itself, ready to accept ordinands or those exploring a call to ordination from the beginning of 2022.

If it fails, at least we can say we tried! If it succeeds, I am confident that it would transform the identity and ability of St Agnes’ to act as a distinctive base and centre for mission in the south-eastern suburbs.

It might also produce each year at least two or three young ordinands formed in the Catholic tradition with a passion for parish ministry and a heart for mission. Who knows, they may well be your next Vicar!

I offer it to you as a possibility and look forward to the continuing conversation,

With every blessing,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Alex'.

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