**RESPONSE TO THE STIMULUS PAPERS PREPARED BY WRITING TEAMS FOR THE NATIONAL PLENARY COUNCIL**

**Introduction:**

I have worked – and continue to minister – across the church in a breadth of ministries. When the opportunity came to present a submission to the NPC I did so keenly – as one of the People of God, as a member of a renewal group, as a friend assisting others whose parishes offered no preparation, as a facilitator of parish groups, endeavouring to discern local responses.

Consequently I have been long awaiting the papers which will inform the next steps of NPC preparation. In observing the exacting process by which members of writing teams were chosen, I expected a highly competent, enlightening and enlivening result, with appreciation of the breadth of good current theology, pastoral initiatives, resources and networking already happening across the church and society. I expected clearly expressed documents, and prioritising of specific issues to be taken forward, including those needing further reflection, blocks etc.

I found them often unwieldy to read and digest, with only glimpses of capturing the breath of God’s enlivening Spirit. Some seemed to be a cobbling together of ideas, uncritically presented, with little evident weighting.

I appreciate that writing teams have attempted to take seriously many of the diverse ideas raised in submissions and imagine that within each team the diverse approaches may have been challenging, but feel disappointed at the following:

1. **The 6 thematic areas:**

The 6 themes have always seemed to me somewhat arbitrary. And the limitations of their wording and random grouping of notions are now evident. How were they chosen? Is their choice restricting the forward process (eg. locking in terms such as ‘eucharistic’ or ‘servant’ community – which ought rather emerge from a wider and longer process, through which a contemporary model/models of the church can be discerned?).
Many ideas were repeated across the papers – hardly a wise use of writing team energy. I would have found it far clearer were there key categories:
*eg. People of God, Ministry, Liturgy, Mission, Formation for Mission, Governance, Leadership*.

1. **The process chosen to present the material.**
While this is obviously a theological reflection model I would have found a clearer process more helpful, modelled on eg. Thomas Groome’s, *Shared Christian Praxis*. Such a process echoes the Cardijn methodology, mentioned in the papers. It needs to be an adult process, drawing people into decision-making – not pre-empting it for them. Such a model offers the data, presents it in the light of gospel/theology, then openly, not prescriptively invites people into response. I would have liked this process to engage and invite us more deeply into a vibrant adult faith, with clear questions to ponder in the light of the information distilled so that we might continue to discern present and future directions.

Such a process would
  **a. Present the reality: what people are people saying.**

This work had already been done – summarising the submissions, but it could have been further refined in these papers, under clear and unambiguous headings *(eg. Ministry)* as a prelude to ongoing discernment.

b**. Present a succinct, forward-thinking** (not timeworn and dated) **theological underpinning of the focus area**. I did not expect to see a repeating of theological premises as though reading the Catechism or theological treatise. Also, defining a particular theology, when three words are combined was highly problematic, unwieldy and focus-blurring (eg. *Hope; Joyful; servant community).* Theological concepts need to be worded intelligibly, accessible to most of the People of God. And where theology is emerging or needs to emerge (possibly every area) that needs to be stated clearly *(eg. Human sexuality; ecological conversion).*

**c. Response:**

Present, in dot points, the suggestions from submissions (not ideas for resources) that reflect this theology.

d. **Analysis:** This is where the Writing Teams, drawing upon their supposed competence, could have excelled! What material seemed to require prioritising (often ideas were lumped together into one paragraph)? What seemed to be lacking *(eg. A contemporary cutting-edge theology*)? Where have there been inhibiting factors in the past and do such factors needs addressing now *(eg ideas that have been already tried or suggested repeatedly but have not been implemented or have been squashed)*? Where is resistance now evident? What matters require further attention? How do we discern helpful models of Church for today? Who needs to be brought into the equation for further clarity and wisdom encouraging a Vatican II spirituality *(eg. Christian Meditation Community; Spiritual Directors’ Networks)* or sound planning practices *(eg. Education and Healthcare organisations)?*

The papers could have concluded with a few questions for the People and the NPC Body to consider, addressing what seem to be key ways forward, the blocks, gaps and resistances. (eg. How is the theology presented in this paper understood in our parish? In what ways do you see it already implemented? What steps could our parish take to enable this to happen?)

I did not see it the teams’ work to recommend specific personal preferences or opinions, moralising, motherhood statements, religiosity (eg. need to call on Mary as ‘mother’). Rather, it is their role to invite people into the discussion, so that we might grapple with the issues raised and consider, from sometimes diverse proposals, creative ways forward.

 **The ongoing task now requiring attention:**

1. **Preparation of succinct theological papers** to enable people to be abreast of sound current theology informing key areas. I see little awareness by the teams of fine current Australian theology that could inform renewal:
* The work of **Denis Edwards** – our inspiring, profound theologian who died in 2019 and has left such a legacy pushing the boundaries, exploring the interconnection of science, religion, the nature of God, our call to ecological conversion. Had attention been given his material the reflection on ‘Conversion’ would be entirely different – beginning with the goodness and invitation of God. I found the theological underpinning of this paper wanting, if not frustrating.
Denis’ colleagues such as Mary Coloe and Tony Kelly also offer sound underpinning to the emerging essential theology of creation highlighted in *Laudato Si’.*
* How do we approach a key challenge for our faith community: **our relationship with a pluralist society,** our engaging with culture? Can we move beyond secular/church dualism? Can we take seriously being an incarnational church? What informs our current thinking? Are we attuned to the accessible work of **Frank O’Loughlin**, *The Time of the Church* and **James McEvoy**, who distils the import and importance of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age?*
* While preparatory work for the Council has included a focus on *sensus fidelium* (certainly in the Catholics for Renewal document, *Getting Back on Mission*), I was disappointed not to see echoed theologically the work of **Orm Rush,** *The Eyes of Faith,* which needs wider exposure, because it is foundational and clarifying. Parishes and readers could be reminded of or exposed to some of its key principles: eg. *Tradition, tradition, sensus fidelium*, if we are to discern a wise way forward together.
* Lifegiving liturgy as imagined at Vatican II also needs brief attention – some key principles. Again, **Frank O’Loughlin’s** *New Wineskins. Eucharist in Today’s Context,* explores how our understanding is not static but needs reworking in the light of culture.
* **Dr John Collins** has submitted to the NPC his important theology of **ministry**, through the lens of lifelong study of the implications of the Greek word *diakonia*. I see no mention of his work as explored in his fine compendium *Gateway to Renewal. Reclaiming Ministries for Women and Men.* And I wonder about the choice to ignore it as a key submission regarding **ministry.**
Were his research and insight to be taken seriously we could find a foundation for discussion of this important area of consideration. He grounds its discernment in scripture, the history of the church, culture and theology.

It is significant because there is frequent mention across the papers, of women being given a much wider role in the church – of which I am totally supportive. But John gives foundation to such vision. He points to the nature of the word, *diakonia* – not gender specific – indicating that both women and men are called by God to mediate God’s nature and gifts, as a pane of glass mediates the light. And this call is not merely to be loving servant, but embraces the breadth of gifts: leadership, teaching – whatever is required to build up the body of Christ. I would strongly advise attention be given to this internationally-respected and refreshing research. It takes the debate well beyond focussing on ordination, or personal decision, or trying to right injustice and offers key principles to underpin future decision-making regarding **God’s calling of both women and men to minister in the name of Christ.**

* The areas of **ecumenism** and **interreligious dialogue** are both mentioned but need far greater emphasis. The quote accompanying ‘ecumenism’ is almost unintelligible to the average parishioner. Would it have not been preferable to remind of the 1952 **Lund Principle,** ideally so foundational to ecumenical relations between Christian churches, which affirms that ‘churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately’.

One of the aspects of our current reality as church is that many communities, especially in country areas are already working ecumenically – often out of necessity and that in different places shared initiatives are growing *(eg. Ecological conversion).* But resources in all the churches are also depleting. So under the influence of the Lund Statement there could be a Kairos moment for all Christian churches to embrace proactively Christ’s desire that we be one. It is incumbent on us as we prepare for the NPC, not merely to recommend covenanting (which I have experienced) – but to address the numerous blocks and resistances which are inhibiting our taking the Lund principle seriously.

In this light the work and lived experience of local scholars, **John May** and **Patrick McInerney** *(particularly interreligious dialogue and relationship)* are enlightening.

* The broad area of ethics and morality also requires a sound theological exploration, and an acknowledgement that it is an emerging area of understanding. I see no reference to the now well-understood **Consistent Ethic of Life**, a key framework against which decisions are enabled. The wording of the sexuality component of the ‘Inclusive’ paper points to the need to develop a far more current, robust and comprehensive Catholic Christian understanding of human sexuality.

We do not require motherhood and very timeworn statements speaking of the ‘beautiful gift’ of sexuality. What is to be preferred is an understanding that theologians are developing newer responses to the signs of the times. People want to see that responsive work is being done, enabling of dialogue and the testing of heartfelt longings. They do not want the door closed by moralistic thinking or platitudes.

1. **Consider the gaps in the submissions regarding future directions:**
* There is much written about parish renewal and sacramental life but a glaring omission is the **RCIA (or RCIC)** – declared by Vatican II as ‘the normative way of coming to faith’.

The RCIA is a process- based way of growing in faith, engaging the whole community. The RCIC for children is integral to this way of being. Were parishes truly RCIA-based, we would have a very different church. RCIA not just for the exclusive group of seekers and a team involves every parishioner and every ministry. It is possible. I have tried it! It incorporates seekers into a way of life, not a program for a few weeks. And ideally transforms the whole parish. But its resourcing in the church is another dimension of good renewal that has been let slip. Why is this Vatican II-mandated transforming process not universally embraced and understood?

* I found little interest in or understanding of maximising the importance of **networking** or the range of effective resources. There seems little sense of wider networks, and a presumption that the catholic church will do everything itself – when it either does not have or does not have exclusive rights to lifegiving initiatives.

There is barely a mention of the energy and life currently shared and effected by God’s people. For example, the women and men of the *Christian Meditation Community* who for years have been resourcing people’s spirituality, ecumenically; *The Spiritual Directors’ networks* (3 in Australia and the international Spiritual Directors International). Spiritual guides such as Richard Rohr or Joan Chittister with her worldwide Benedictine community or Sacred Space, or Liturgy Ritual Prayer an Australian group are touching increasing numbers of followers including schools and parish groups. To say that the institutional church has to do this herself when initiatives are already operating, is to be ignorant of the reality. What can the church learn from and foster or promote is a far more realistic question. Perhaps look at where the gaps are and then seek new and creative ways forward.

This applies also to the ecological movement. There are already Australian and worldwide initiatives that can be tapped into. The Uniting Church of Australia, for example, is a prolific pathfinder. In some places the churches together have shared projects. These are to be explored. We do not need to invent the wheel.

Renewal Movements are also flourishing, indeed, proliferating. Their members are committed to church life and growth and they are often tireless in calling for nothing less than the realisation of the vision of Vatican II and its subsequent theology. Rather than delighting in the passionate commitment of such initiatives episcopal leaders can reluctantly be drawn into dialogue with them. This ‘sign of the times’ needs radical attention.

* Is there any critical **analysis or conversation about certain resources or groups** that are encouraged *(eg. NET teams).* Are we prepared to do the work of analysing initiatives in the light of a Vatican II spirituality? The fact that some organisations exist does not mean they are an adequate focus for the energy and spirit of young people. What is their theology? How are they resourced? Are they sufficiently grounded to work with young people? Is their theology adequate to preparing people for the rich living of our tradition or is it fostering a devotion that has been superseded?

Has there been a commissioning in this country of the impact of WYD as an initiative for young people? Do we just maintain that momentum or do some evaluating?

What of the Men’s Movement which fosters the alliance of like-minded people and male leadership in the family? Is this a group which fosters a true Vatican II spirituality and promotes the active engagement of its members in bringing forth a more just society? Is its spirituality sufficiently vibrant to engage Gospel and contemporary culture?

* Where in the Reports is there recommendation to **‘read the signs of the times’?**  I would have thought that such a recommendation would be emphasised in the Submissions – or if not, that the Writing teams would have discerned this as a significant gap to highlight – especially as it is a Vatican II imperative.

Corona Virus and its implications is but one urgent pressing matter that is causing widespread theological, pastoral and social comment. We recognise that nothing will henceforth be the same. [The NPC had already noted well-beforehand that we cannot continue with business as usual]. This is now greatly exacerbated. We have a huge range of ensuing questions to address. Resourcing us all to read and respond to such ‘signs’ is of the utmost urgency. It will require a flexibility and capacity to move far more responsively than currently possible.

* What is our underlying pastoral motivation? Is it to maintain the organisation, to assist others so that they become part of the worshipping community, or is it our call to move unconditionally to the margins? This has an impact on all our missionary initiatives, but certainly on our engagement with First Nations Peoples, or our ecumenical and interreligious encounters.
* It is imperative that all future planning considers **the reality of parish and diocesan life**. We need to stop the pretence that the church has (or will return to) full pews, unlimited money and people trained to implement whatever the NPC determines.
* The Reports referred to **silo thinking**, but I found the language unclear. Certainly silos are unhelpful ways of operating , but I think there was a presumption that organisations such as Education and Healthcare are not collaborating with the wider diocesan or parish church.
Having worked in both fields I have found them extremely well-resourced, accountable, open to review and change - as distinct from the wider church. To work in one of these fields differs qualitatively from working in a diocese, where I have experienced that accountability and resources are concerning, because they usually defer to the perspective of a certain bishop, often unskilled in collaborative leadership. These fields, and that of Catholic Social Services have much to teach dioceses about management, leadership, accountability, strategic and responsive planning. But dioceses are often reluctant to engage with them from a learning perspective. Hence working in a diocese can be deflating, discounting of people with competence, disempowering, locked in past methodologies, selective, less that satisfactory, limiting, humiliating, even toxic.
The team may well have noted that some feel education and health are silos, disconnected from the broader reality, but it is up to incisive teams, who ought understand these wider bodies and their modus operandi, to suggest perhaps that these very bodies might be instrumental in pointing a new path to collaboration and effective ministry. They have moved not just remotely away, but often spherically distant from the diocesan or parish church. And the church rarely has either the humility or the openness to learn from them (as I have experienced). Let us not be under any illusion that the journey to renewal will be easy. Hence the articulating of challenges and blocks is essential for any change to be attempted.
* **Adult faith.**
This is naturally, as advocated in the papers, so important. But not so long ago there was a vibrant National Adult Faith Formation Council, of which I was part. National and some diocesan leadership (not Brisbane where it is still vibrant) saw fit to discount and dissemble the body.

I have also worked in the role in more than one diocese where adult faith operated in isolation from the broader pastoral plan (which was aeons old, but still revered, yet was clearly timeworn) and was unable to influence diocesan formation and direction. It was a frustration and waste of good energy. There was lip service to the importance of adult faith initiatives, but not to its being integral to a strategic diocesan direction, or to taking the person in the role seriously in that regard.

* **So, in planning for the future, I suggest the following questions:**What has blocked initiatives that once flourished and how can that be prevented from recurring? The good training and formation of the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s has been let go and depleted across much of the nation. Addressing the reasons why this path was chosen might prevent even further demise.

 How can people given diocesan roles such as adult faith formation be taken seriously (as they would in educational or healthcare leadership)?

How can emphasis be given to the importance of each diocese discerning its Pastoral Plan, with clear goals, to bring forth God’s reign in the local area? Then important areas for adult formation would emerge (*eg. Resourcing to live Laudato Si’/engage in ecological conversion).*

* **Clericalism.**While clericalism is admitted as problematic it requires incisive attention – as noted by both Pope Francis and Francis Sullivan, oam. This is particularly amongst clergy trained in some of the current seminaries (eg. Wagga and Sydney and even Melbourne), or many imported from overseas for whom clericalism and an inadequate theology underpin their ministry. Examples abound, such as the pastoral leader of a metropolitan parish who is dismissive of a parishioner who advocates Indigenous Reconciliation or *Laudato Si’* initiatives – believing them to be unimportant. This attitude is rampant. Is there no outcry?

**Implications to consider:**
How do we enable effective collaborative ministerial initiatives in the church? Seemingly the writing teams have not seen this as important or are ignorant of the import of lay ecclesial ministry initiatives (well-documented in the US for many years). At least one submission to the NPC suggested drawing upon the extremely well-resourced initiative from Wellington NZ *(Launch Out).* It is, par excellence, the ministry formation model in our region. This suggestion did not present in the Papers. I wonder what other valuable resources might have also been ignored.

* **Our language and terminology**:

The papers mentioned the importance of reviewing language in liturgical books etc, but in the writing they still reflected a masculine God. Surely the authors of such papers would already be modelling the attitudes and praxis which ought be evident? How did such omissions miss the scrutiny of the NPC committee before release?

There is continual reference to our engaging in the ‘Kingdom Of God’, but scholars for some time have been recommending the preferable ‘Reign of God’ – a far more dynamic reality. It needs to be at least open as a theological option to the masculine and static ‘kingdom’ terminology. I have often heard Orm Rush quote: ‘The Reign of God is our main game’!

I noted that the distinction between ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’ was at times unclear and wonder if that can also be addressed.

It is perhaps not timely in the papers to present a current theology of Mary, but I was concerned, as were others, to read of the opinion that it is time to embrace Mary as ‘mother’. This declaring of preference is not the task of a writing team. A wiser approach would be to appreciate Mary’s widely-embracing Gospel role – such as expressed in **Elizabeth Johnson’s** insightful (and not new) affirming of ***Mary, Our Sister, in the Communion of Saints****.*

* **Models of parish** are important but I do not believe they need to be suggested uncritically (such as ‘divine renovation’). Just because they exist is not sufficient.

Could the preparatory work for the Council do the hard work of analysing some the different presenting models (eg. *Divine Renovation*; Frank O’Loughlin’s *First Fruits* community; the *RCIA* as a shaping model, recommended by Vatican II). Where is there room to explore more ecumenical, mission-based models (eg. focussing on *Laudato Si* and forming communities of ecological conversion – well underway in other countries)?

* Our response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse was acknowledged as a priority, but former Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald in a short film clip on the *Catholic Professional Standards* Website stresses that henceforth **the child** has to be our top priority and **underpin everything we are as church**. This has profound and groundbreaking implications and needs wide pondering. It may already be the basic premise in a school community but is not the reality across the church.
* **Devise SMART goals for pastoral leadership and ministry:**

2020 has presented unforeseen challenges. Even beforehand it had been well- documented that we cannot continue with business as usual.

How will the church develop the capacity to respond to all presenting crises and challenges?

What will future-focussed leadership (diocesan and parish) look like? Will the ‘priest at any price’ philosophy or the bishop who believes he can work as a sole flier, cede to more collaborative, collegial, enabling and lifegiving models?

What competencies can we expect, if not demand, of our leaders?

Will they be open to newer, informed, less defensive ways of responding? Will they seek advice from those engaging in responsive, engaging initiatives?

Can we be assured that all of our episcopal leaders are loyal to Pope Francis?

Will the face of the church become more akin to that of culture, where diverse voices, and ordinary, not collared representatives, can articulate the vision and hope of the People of God? People such as Francis Sullivan embody such a voice. He is well-respected in wider society, but his role is more frequently seen as calling the church to account, rather than being at one with its leaders and all who desire God’s coming reign.

**CONCLUSION**

My sense of disappointment with these Papers derives from knowing the church broadly as I do, and continuing to witness the often-limited pastoral response evident in both parish and diocese. I was hoping that the Reports of the Writing teams would have been cutting edge documents, posing clear questions or issues, inviting all of us into their ongoing discernment: another significant step in informing the Council agenda. Those who took the initial submission process seriously, and all who care about the vitality of our Church, deserved no less.