

Movement for Church renewal keeps growing

- [John Warhurst](#)
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Main image: St Patrick's Catholic Cathedral, Parramatta (Credit: Leelakajonkij / Getty)

The wider community should be aware that the Catholic renewal movement in Australia continues to grow. It has been stimulated by Vatican II teachings and more recently by the inspiration of the vision of Pope Francis. Within Australia the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse's recommendations helped generate special interest in reform of church governance, structures and culture. Then the preparations for the Plenary Council 2020 (PC2020), a national gathering to discuss the future of the Catholic Church in Australia, opened up more possibilities for local and diocesan discussions mandated by church leadership.

What's going on within the Catholic Church always matters more widely given its size and power. Lay participation in leadership, especially of women, is a major social issue. Observers of social trends should watch this space for its wider public policy implications.

[Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn](#) was created in April 2017, a newcomer to the renewal movement. Our motivation was a desire to press the Australian bishops to implement the royal commission recommendations at the meeting the following month of the Australian Catholics Bishops Conference. We act as a ginger group within church circles and a public lobby group from without.

Driven by a desire for lay co-responsibility and greater leadership, especially for lay women, we run public forums and workshops, make submissions to church leaders and to PC2020 and connect with priests and religious. We are perceived by those holding church authority as at best 'just one voice' and at worst 'unrepresentative old, white grandparents'. But we meet a need in the church and have developed a model which can be replicated and adapted to suit other circumstances.

Recently Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn has been privileged to play a part in two further church renewal developments. On 24 October we provided three speakers at a public meeting to launch Concerned Catholics Wagga Wagga Diocese (CCWWD), under the general heading of Accountable, Inclusive and Transparent: A Better Church for Australia. In a notably more conservative diocese than Canberra-Goulburn, CCWWD is determined to extend the message of renewal to other centres in the diocese, including Albury and Leeton.

More recently, on 7 December I addressed a meeting in Launceston of parish representatives from across Tasmania at which it was agreed to create a new state-wide body, Concerned Catholics Tasmania (CCT). The enthusiasm of this meeting showed once again that against the odds faithful Catholics concerned about the future direction of their church are prepared to invest their time and energy to revitalise the status quo and to raise their voices to counter conservative tendencies.

For these three groups PC2020 is just one aspect of their agenda. While already involved individually and at parish level, and prepared to be involved further through submissions and writing groups, they maintain a healthy scepticism about the likely outcomes given the entrenched power of church authorities either actively committed to the status quo or weighed down by apathy and inertia. The Wagga group has already joined the network of groups which makes up the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform (ACCCR) and the Tasmanian group is likely to do so.

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Bottom up initiatives of lay Catholics crossing the orthodox boundaries of church life are rarely welcomed and often barely tolerated. They are commonly accused by church authorities of not being representative. Such a dismissive response from the Archbishop has happened in the Melbourne Archdiocese with another new development, the combined efforts of 27 Melbourne parishes to influence the discussions of PC2020 through a collaborative submission. Seven sponsoring parishes have lent their support to a new website soon to be launched, which will promote conversations between parishes about change and renewal.

Such activities are also supported by national conferences, such as Voices of Hope and Challenge, instigated by the Yarra Theological Union and Garratt Publishing in November, and attended by many members of the renewal movement.

Ideally each Australian diocese should contain organised groups of Catholics committed to church renewal by the conclusion of PC2020. PC2020 is just one step along the way. Such a development would mean that the voices of renewal would be maintained in the

national, diocesan and local spheres Australia-wide. The ACCCR network, now numbering 15 groups, will meet again in Canberra early in 2020 to discuss cooperation and strategy in the lead up to the October 2020 council in Adelaide.

Prospective lay reformers should become informed, involved and questioning of authority, build bridges to supportive clergy and religious, maintain a healthy scepticism towards PC2020 while taking the opportunities the process offers in good faith, and initiate developments locally and immediately rather than waiting for diocesan, national or international developments. They should ready for widespread disinterest and apathy and opposition from some bishops, priests and other lay people, but take heart that we have considerable support.

Observers should recognise that the church renewal movement will impact not just on internal events such as PC2020 but also on the way in which Catholics participate in politics, public policy and wider society.



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