

## Sermon - Stewardship Program: Property, Finance & Custodianship

### Reviewing our Stewardship Program so far

- Over the last two Sundays, at the 10am services, we've had some guest speakers:
  1. GG spoke about the AA groups that meet here - some of them for decades - and how the members value being able to meet here at St John's parish church.
    - Although GG only attends a couple of the AA groups that meet here, his words hold true for all five AA groups, the two AI Anon groups and the NA group, that benefit from the support we provide with substantially discounted meeting room hire rates.
  2. Jack Merx spoke about The Dining Room Mission which provides community meals from here on Tuesday evenings, and how so many volunteers from different organisations, including from St John's, find that they themselves are blessed in providing not only a meal but also fellowship for those with a variety of needs.
    - Likewise Jack's words also hold true for the Winter Shelter program which provides community meals from here on Wednesday evenings.
  3. Last week Craig from our parish's Mission Action Team spoke briefly about how the team is taking steps to encourage the parish to be more missional in different ways: looking at how to make our on-site welcome clearer and more relevant, and exploring ways in which we can rekindle the parish's relationship with our own Kindergarten, and support them in their service to the wider community.
  4. And then Chelley, our Kindergarten Director, spoke enthusiastically about the Kindergarten community itself, and some projects that are being developed:
    - One project has already been launched this week - the Food Pantry - to help refugee families and others in the Kindergarten community that are doing it tough. Its operating principle is: "Give what you can - take what you need"
    - Another project is formally called the Intergenerational Project, but I like to think of it as 'Rent-a-Nana': the idea is for older members of our faith community to be available to sit with the children, perhaps to read a story or to be available just for children to chat with - for children who don't have access to their own grandparents.

### Property: areas of concern, and hope

- This week we are looking at two other aspects of our parish life: property and finance.
- And for each there are both concerns and blessings: concerns that we need to attend to and address - and also blessings that we should also attend to, and celebrate.
- When we think about property, then we think primarily about the buildings and land that is in our possession: this church building with the foyer and meeting room alongside, the lawn running down to Wicklow Avenue, the carpark, the Kindergarten, and the vicarage.
- One of the significant areas of concern we have was identified in a structural engineer's report from January 2019 which covered a number of issues with this building:
  - ancient excavations in the clay below the wooden church floors which appear to have destabilised footings,
  - broken stormwater drainage systems,
  - soil that has encroached above the damp course, and
  - inadequate roof gutters.
- The cumulative long term effect has been the increasing number of cracks all around the church building, with at least thirty-five significant cracks - or webs of cracks - that continue to grow: we even have a 'crack catalogue'.
- The hopeful news is that this situation is being taken seriously, and is being addressed.

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- We now have engineering diagrams and architectural drawings for a solution to fix the completely broken stormwater system, and we expect that, once these have been reviewed, we will be able to put the work out to tender, and for this work to be undertaken later this year.
- Addressing these property maintenance needs can feel a bit overwhelming at times, and so it can be easy to lose sight of what we have already been blessed with.
- In spite of the necessary maintenance work, we are blessed to have this sacred worship space, and all the other rooms around it.
- On some evenings recently there were three different events being held simultaneously: in the Fellowship meeting room, in this church space itself, and in the parish office downstairs.
- We could even have fitted in a fourth group - in the downstairs chapel.
- While our toilet facilities are not well set up for this, it is wonderful that so many different groups can benefit from these buildings.

### Celebrating our artwork

- There is another aspect of the parish's property that we could celebrate more intentionally.
- We tend to think of property only in terms of land and buildings, but there is so much more to the physical dimension of our church: the furniture, the furnishings, and the artwork.
- The All Saints and All Souls chapel downstairs has a wonderful icon-styled mural in the sanctuary.
- And we know about our various stained glass windows - particularly those designed by David Wright in our Lady Chapel, and for which there is an explanatory brochure available in the foyer.
- However, there is more.
- When I decided to hold a Stations of the Cross liturgy for this year's Good Friday service, I realised that our fourteen tableaux around these walls were not the standard set, but a selection unique to St John's.
- When I investigated them further, I discovered that they had been carved by an immigrant from Bavaria, Eva Schubert, who had come to Melbourne after the Second World War.
- Eva Schubert is an artist of some renown in Australia, with a number of her works in museums and galleries.
- But the fourteen tableaux, carved on ten separate pieces of wood, are not the only pieces of her artwork here.
- The two candle stands on either side of the altar, the Paschal candle stand, the image of St John, the crucifix above the font, and the Madonna and Child in the Lady Chapel, are six more pieces.
- Ideally we could have a brochure about them, too - and definitely make plans to celebrate what this generation of parishioners have been blessed with from previous generations.

### Custodianship

- When I talk about 'generations of parishioners', it is with the concept of custodianship in mind.
- In a strictly legal sense, no parish owns their own land and buildings: the titles of such properties are held by the trustees of the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne.
- However, we possess our material property, in that we have the use of it: we benefit by being able to use it as we have need, and we are also responsible for its upkeep.
- At the same time we do not possess it for ourselves: rather, we are custodians of our material property.
- This means that we inherit it from previous generations of parishioners here - we benefit from it and look after it - and then we pass it on to the next generation of parishioners.
- And what is a 'generation of parishioners'?
- In any parish, some parishioners stay for decades, while some are around only for a few years.

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- And yet all are equal members of the faith community: all have an equal share in its life and worship, all have an equal say in the affairs of the parish, and all have an equal responsibility for the parish's well-being.
- It is fundamentally important that we recognise this, because in many parishes this can be a point of ongoing tension between those who've contributed their 'time, talents and treasure' over decades and consider that their so-called 'investment' should give their opinion greater weight - compared to relative 'newcomers', who ironically might have had much longer or deeper faith journeys.
- This is why we need to keep turning ourselves to God, and keep ourselves aligned in the Way of Jesus.
  
- In today's story from Acts, Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians were confronted by this same tension between lifelong Jews, who were following the teachings of a Jewish rabbi - and Gentiles, who were new converts, as evidenced by the manifestation of God's Spirit in their behaviour.
- Fortunately for us, and countless of generations of Gentile Christians, Peter and his compatriots were able to overcome their discomfort, and welcome the outsiders as equal members of their common faith in God through Jesus Christ.
- Are we able to overcome our discomfort when new - and sometimes younger - people become part of our next generation of parishioners?
- Are we able to recognise and embrace where God's Spirit might be at work in them, to keep the life of the Church vital and growing?
- Are we good custodians of our current inheritance, at this point in time, in the Year of our Lord - Anno Domini - 2021?

### Finance: alarm, and hope

- This brings me to the last point, which is just as significant, although I only have a few words to say about it right now.
- Finance!
- As I said in my introduction three Sundays ago, this is not a Stewardship Campaign, whose success is measured by how much the offertory goes up by.
- Nevertheless, within the next twelve months we need to seriously consider such a campaign, because the state of our finances has not been sustainable for many years.
- Thank God for Adie Wasilewski's bequest of over \$150,000, received about 2013, because it has helped cover an almost annual shortfall between offertory income and operational expenditure.
- And just when we were using up the last of Adie's bequest, blessed Tom Pinkney bequested us with \$100,000 cash and a Mooroolbark property.
- This has not changed our ongoing yearly shortfall between offertory income and operational expenditure.
- Our income over the six months of October to March was over \$45,000, while our operational expenditure was nearly \$96,000.
- This means a six-month shortfall of over \$50,000!
- Obviously, this is not encouraging!
- However, there is much to be hopeful about.
- Firstly, the settlement of the sale of Tom's property is due in October, and it will ensure that we have four or five years to start breaking even again.
- Secondly, in spite of Covid, we have much to be thankful for, and there are green shoots of new growth sprouting strongly in the parish.

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- Thirdly, in our current parish leadership, we have people who are passionate for us, as the faith community of St John the Divine, to manifest God's kingdom both for ourselves and for the wider community of Croydon - and this is already happening.

### Keep the faith!

- And finally, we have faith in God.
- As John reminds us in his first letter:

*If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts ... And this is the testimony: God gave us [life in its fullness], and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life.*

*(NRSV 1 John 5.9-12: 'eternal life' is reworded)*

- And Jesus himself tells us in today's Gospel passage:

*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*(NRSV John 15.10-11)*

- May we give thanks to the God who blesses us, who sustains us, and who desires that our joy may be complete. Amen.