

Risen Christ

The Catholic Communities of
Our Lady Help of Christians, Eltham & St Francis Xavier, Montmorency



We acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation who are the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respect to the elders past, present and emerging.

Parish Pastoral Leadership Community's

Parish Survey 2024

Final Qualitative Report

Full Report

*This parish has a commitment to ensuring the safety of children and vulnerable people in our community.
We support the recommendations of the Royal Commission into institutional abuse and pray for all the survivors.*





Risen Christ

Parish Pastoral Plan Survey and Qualitative Analysis

Full Report

Parish Pastoral Community

October 2024

Summary

Background

Risen Christ Parish consists of the faith communities of St Frances Xavier Montmorency and Our Lady Help of Christians, Eltham, as well as three primary schools. The parish was commissioned by Archbishop Comensoli after the two communities amalgamated in 2023. The Parish Pastoral Leadership Community (PPLC) commenced a survey in August 2024 to form the basis of a Parish Pastoral Plan. The following is a qualitative analysis of the survey responses.

Method

The survey consisted of 8 questions, two quantitative questions and 6 open-ended qualitative questions. The survey was circulated to the community in online and paper versions, and communicated via parish newsletter, announcements and word of mouth. The report used thematic analysis to identify commonalities and differences among data. This data will inform the inaugural Parish Pastoral Plan.

Results and Discussion

A total of 93 surveys were returned, with 53% from St. Francis Xavier, 37% from Our Lady Help of Christians, and the remaining 10% from the primary school communities.

In the analysis of the data, the PPLC identified nine key themes:

- The importance of social aspects of parish life
- Social justice and outreach
- Youth and family involvement, including school engagement
- Contributions of parish staff, office volunteers, and newsletters
- The significance of Mass, liturgy, sacraments, prayer, and liturgical music
- The value of a welcoming community in the church
- The importance of volunteers and lay participation
- The condition and accessibility of parish buildings and physical spaces
- Parish pride and vision

The parish values social connection, making it essential to consider social activities in the Pastoral Plan. Additionally, it emphasises social justice and outreach; so, a dedicated Social Justice committee could enhance oversight and boost volunteer engagement. Youth and family involvement is crucial, though participants note challenges in connecting young people to the church. Strengthening ties between the parish and school communities could create opportunities for youth and family engagement, but low participation from schools in the survey complicates assessing interest.

Overall, the survey captured what matters most to many members of the Risen Christ Community.

Table of contents

Summary.....	2
Glossary of terms	4
Background	5
Methods.....	6
Results.....	7
Survey Participation	7
Need of Engagement Ranking.....	7
Qualitative Questions results.....	8
Discussion	9
The Importance of the Social Aspect of Parish Life	9
Social Justice and Outreach	11
Youth and family involvement in parish life, including school involvement	13
Parish staff, office volunteers and newsletter	15
Importance of mass, liturgy, sacraments, prayer and liturgical music	17
Importance of welcoming community in church setting	18
Importance of volunteers and lay involvement in parish.....	19
Parish buildings, physical spaces within the churches and surrounds	20
Parish pride and vision	22
Conclusion and next steps.....	23
Appendix.....	25
Appendix 1: Vision and Mission Statement	25

Glossary of terms

Qualitative Analysis – is a research method that focuses on understanding the qualities or characteristics of a subject rather than measuring it numerically. It involves gathering non-numerical data, like interviews, observations, or text, to explore ideas, experiences, and emotions. The goal is to gain deeper insights into a topic rather than to quantify it.

Coding/ codes – is the process of organising and categorising non-numerical data from sources like interviews or texts. Researchers assign labels, or "codes," to segments of data based on themes or concepts. This helps to identify patterns and make sense of the information, allowing for easier analysis and interpretation.

Themes – are the main ideas or patterns that emerge from analysing qualitative data. They represent common topics, concepts, or experiences found in the data, helping to summarise and interpret the information. Identifying these themes allows researchers to understand deeper meanings and insights within their study.

Saturation – refers to the point in qualitative research where no new information or themes are emerging from data collection and analysis. It indicates that the researcher has gathered enough data to comprehensively understand the phenomenon being studied. At this stage, further data collection is unlikely to provide additional insights or alter the findings significantly. Saturation is often assessed through ongoing analysis and comparison of data as it is collected, ensuring that the richness and complexity of the subject matter are adequately explored.

Background

The parishes of Montmorency St Francis Xavier and Eltham Our Lady Help of Christians amalgamated in 2023 to form the Risen Christ Parish. St Francis Xavier and Our Lady Help of Christians churches now form the two enduring Faith Communities of Risen Christ Parish.

Risen Christ Parish has three connected primary schools, St Francis Xavier Primary School, Montmorency; Our Lady Help of Christians Primary school, Eltham; and Holy Trinity Primary school, Eltham North. Combined, these schools service approximately 950 pupils from prep to year 6.

The parish moderator, Father Michael Sierakowski is the sole priest of the parish. He provides 3 weekend services; 6pm Saturday and 8:30am Sunday at Montmorency, and 10am at Eltham as well as weekday masses Tuesday-Friday shared equally between the two churches. The parish employs a secretary, Kate Kogler, and a safeguarding officer, Peter Williams and relies on the generosity of volunteers.

Attendees at Montmorency services have declined in number recently, however the 10am Eltham service is thriving and concludes with a well-attended morning tea in the large gathering space at the entrance to the church.

A Transition Leadership Community (TLC) supported the two faith communities to come together at the time of the amalgamation. It consisted of members from both faith communities and involved various forums with the wider faith community. The TLC established a Parish Vision and Mission statement and named the new parish. They also documented the intentions of the two parishes joining as one, and the document was accepted by Archbishop Comensoli.

The Parish Vision and Mission (appendix 1) details the strong faith connection of the members of the community and the commitment to maintain works of justice and mercy as well as a strong sense of community hospitality, welcome and belonging.

The TLC was succeeded by the Parish Pastoral Leadership Community (PPLC) which was established on 10 August 2023 following the commissioning of Risen Christ Parish by Archbishop Peter A Comensoli. The group includes members from both faith communities with the aim to establish a Parish Pastoral Plan (PPP) and to form the cultural norms of the new combined parish. The collective aim of the members of the PPLC is to model a relational approach to parish life and to build a strong, engaged and life-giving parish community.

The PPLC commenced a survey in August 2024 to ask the community what is most important to them in forming a PPP. The following is an analysis of the survey responses.

Methods

The PPLC formulated a survey to capture what matters most to the communities within Risen Christ Parish. The survey was accessible in paper form or online via Microsoft Forms. It was communicated through the community via parish announcements, the parish newsletter, communications to the schools, and word of mouth to the wider surrounding community especially social groups connected to the parish. The survey was available for one month.

The survey consisted of two quantitative questions:

1. Identifying which faith community the respondent is from
2. Ranking in order the groups in the community with which the parish should engage.

And six qualitative questions:

1. What aspects of the parish community do you find most helpful?
2. What aspects of the community require improvement or development?
3. What new initiatives would you like to see developed in the community?
4. What suggestions do you have for enriching the life of the community?
5. Are there any barriers preventing you from being more involved in parish life including the celebration of the Eucharist? How might the community be able to assist you?
6. What have we missed? What would you wish the parish to look like in an ideal world? Or add any other comment you would like to leave.

The **qualitative descriptive analysis** (see glossary) used a five-step strategy, using NVIVO software to:

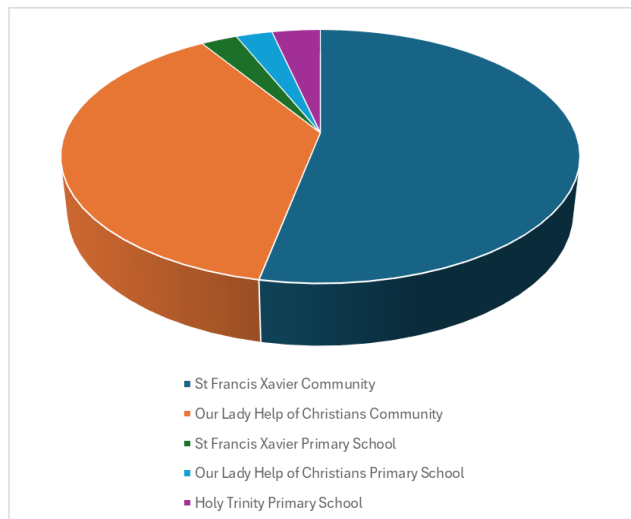
1. Identify **codes** (see glossary) within the text
2. Record reflections
3. Sort similar **themes** (see glossary)
4. Identify commonalities and differences among data
5. This data was then analysed in the context of how it related to the outcome of producing a Parish Pastoral Plan

Results

Survey Participation

We received 93 responses, mostly from the St. Francis Xavier Community (SFX 53%, OLHC 37%) and minimal input from our primary schools (SFXPS & OLHC 3% each; HTPS 4%). Some participants identified multiple community connections. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Faith Communities identified by Participants (right)



Need of Engagement Ranking

Question 2, “Please rank which of the following groups in the community you believe the parish needs to engage with” 1- Most in need to 9 – least in need. The answers were based on the experience and opinion of the participant (figure 2). The results showed a clear desire to connect with Families and Young People/ Youth. These responses had an average ranking of 2.6 and 2.8 respectively, and had the most 1-2 level rankings. However, the remaining groups ranked closely in average scores (4.2 - 5.6/9) and the difference is not statistically significant (table 1). Therefore, to draw conclusions from this data would be problematic without further investigation.

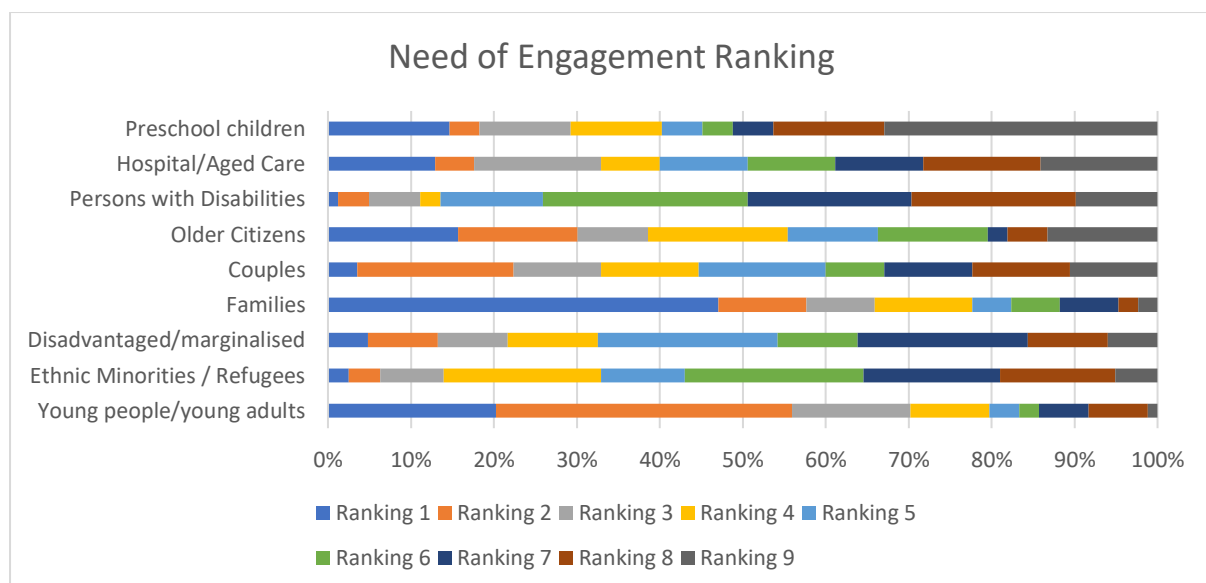


Figure 2: Question two: rank from 1 (most) – 9 (least) groups most in need of engagement with the parish.

Families	2.58064516	Hospital/Aged Care	4.86021505
Young people/young adults	2.81521739	Ethnic Minorities / Refugees	5.0326087
Older Citizens	4.1827957	Preschool children	5.29347826
Couples	4.60215054	Persons with Disabilities	5.64130435
Disadvantaged/marginalised	4.77173913		

Table 1: Average ranking of all responses to question 2. Low score = most in need of engagement.

Qualitative Questions results

The Qualitative questions, 3 – 8 were coded using NVIVO qualitative analysis software by a member of the Parish Pastoral Team experienced in qualitative analysis. Each question was coded (see glossary) separately and resulted in a total of 116 codes. The analysis showed no further codes generated in the final 20% of surveys, indicating saturation (see glossary) had been reached. The main themes (see glossary) emerging from the data were as follows:

1. The importance of the social aspect of parish life: 133 responses.
2. Social Justice and Outreach: 97 responses.
3. Youth and family involvement in parish life, including school involvement: 96 responses.
4. Parish staff, office volunteers and newsletter: 72 responses.
5. Importance of mass, liturgy, sacraments, prayer and liturgical music: 70 responses.
6. Importance of welcoming community in church setting: 56 responses.
7. Importance of volunteers and lay involvement in parish: 50 responses.
8. Parish buildings, physical spaces within the churches and surrounds: 26 responses.
9. Parish pride and vision: 17 responses.
10. Other/ outside of scope: 8 responses.

The following discussion will address the first nine themes identified. Quotations from respondents are followed by the participant number and the faith community to which they belong, in order to give context to the comment where relevant.

Discussion

The Importance of the Social Aspect of Parish Life

This breakdown highlights various groups within the parish and their significance in fostering community, indicating both strengths and opportunities for improvement:

- Hospitality and Fellowship Groups: 10 mentions
- Family Groups: 7 mentions
- Seniors and Older Parishioners: 7 mentions
- Inter-Parish and Community Activities: 7 mentions
- Community Engagement Initiatives: 7 mentions
- Small Christian Communities (SCC): 6 mentions
- Communication and Promotion of Activities: 6 mentions
- General Interest Groups (book clubs, choirs, etc.): 5 mentions
- Passionist Family Groups: 5 mentions
- Youth and Young Families: 5 mentions
- Church Schools and Families: 4 mentions
- Social Justice Groups: 3 mentions (to be explored further in next section)
- Christian Meditation and Spirituality Groups: 3 mentions

The parish community offers a rich tapestry of support, connection, and fellowship that many members find invaluable. One of the most cherished aspects is the social interaction among parishioners, fostering a warm environment where friendships can flourish. As one parishioner noted, *“It’s wonderful to be a part of the parish community, especially for all faith occasions. The feeling of belonging is so important.”* (participant 8, OLHC/SFX/HTPS). This sense of belonging is enhanced by activities like attending Mass and gathering afterward, allowing members to share experiences and strengthen their relationships.

The general atmosphere of inclusiveness is vital, as the parish strives to bring people together with kindness and warmth. *“(It’s) the lovely people and the catch-up after Mass”* (participant 18, OLHC) remarked one member, reflecting on how informal gatherings enhance their experience. One parishioner shared, *“The opportunity at Eltham for socialising and catching up after Mass is great”* (participant 30, OLHC), highlighting how these interactions foster a strong sense of community.

The presence of Small Christian Communities and Passionist Family Groups further enriches parish life, providing opportunities for deeper connections through shared faith and activities. These groups encourage hospitality, creating spaces for everyone to get to know one another.

For families, the parish community provides a crucial support network. As one former young member explained: *"Offering community, friendship support and it gave my children a sense of community."* (participant 22, OLHC/SFX). This sentiment resonates across age groups, demonstrating the parish's role in cultivating relationships among all generations. Engagement with various parish-run groups offers additional avenues for connection, encouraging parishioners to contribute to the community.

Finally, the shared experiences during worship create a sense of fellowship that many find uplifting. As one member put it, *"I really enjoy attending services at SFX without feeling like a visitor!"* (participant 30, OLHC). This reflects the strong bonds forging between the two faith communities. Ultimately, the parish is an environment where members enjoy both the spiritual and social aspects of their faith, reinforcing the importance of community in their lives.

There is also a clear request for more prayer groups and frequent hospitality after Mass, such as regular tea and coffee gatherings or sausage sizzles. One parishioner emphasised, *"The encouragement of fellowship before and after our weekend Masses deserves to be a high priority"* (participant 52, SFX), indicating that informal interactions are vital for strengthening relationships among parishioners at both places of worship.

Many fondly remember the monthly BBQs and other communal events that helped foster connections among families and the elderly. As one member noted, *"Years ago, the parish embraced young families more effectively... the BBQ after the 10:30 Mass brought families together for most of the early afternoon on Sunday"* (participant 48, SFX). This highlights a collective yearning to reinstate such gatherings to create a stronger sense of community around the shared experience of faith.

The impact of COVID-19 has been palpable, especially in the Monty community, where parishioners have observed a decline in participation and a reduction in lively events. *"Since COVID, the community at Monty is smaller, less lively... it would be nice to bring social activities back to Monty"* (Participant 46, SFX), expressed another member. This sentiment underlines a collective desire to rejuvenate parish life and reintroduce vibrant community engagement.

The desire for inter-parish social activities emerged, particularly to engage with the Monty faith community. Parishioners noted that, many social traditions have been lost, and that it is important to find new ways to engage members. One individual reflected on the need to revitalise social activities: *"we need to have more social events that involve all members of the parish. I remember as a child the parish fete, the parish ball, the parish picnic. Now as an older member, I know how hard it is to organise these things we all seem to be so much busier these days"* (Participant 22, OLHC/SFX).

Parishioners proposed organising multigenerational events that foster interaction among all age groups, including family nights or community service projects. There is a particular emphasis on forming an over-sixties group to ensure older members have a dedicated space for connection and support. Suggestions for monthly get-togethers for seniors acknowledges the ageing community in the parish.

Additionally, there is a desire to revive the Social Justice group and to host special occasions that celebrate the parish's heritage, such as an annual festival around Montmorency's patron saint, St. Francis Xavier. The idea of creating casual gatherings for sharing stories and experiences was also discussed, with one parishioner suggesting informal sessions outside Mass to strengthen community ties.

Finally, a suggestion was made for a detailed directory of parish groups and activities, helping members understand how to get involved and find their place within the community.

Overall, while the parish community is cherished for its support and fellowship, many members seek improvements in social engagement. There is a clear call to enhance community connections beyond worship to recreate a vibrant parish life.

Social Justice and Outreach

Parishioners express a strong commitment to caring for one another, highlighting the importance of community support. One member noted, *"Being part of a caring, considerate community. We do not need to agree on everything but 'listen' to others!"* (Participant 1, SFX). This sentiment is echoed in the belief that the community's prayers offer *"comforting and healing"* (participant 10, OLHC) support for those in need. Older parishioners especially value the camaraderie, with one stating, *"We are essentially a support group for each other"* (participant 39, SFX), as they check on each other's welfare before Mass. Many have experienced significant assistance during personal hardships, such as funeral arrangements, with gratitude expressed for the help received from parish staff and fellow members. As one parishioner remarked, *"The parish staff and generally all of the community are helpful if myself or others have a need and ask"* (participant 44, OLHC/SFX). This dedication to outreach is evident, with members committed to looking out for each other and their children. Overall, the community is described as *"mostly caring, has great hospitality and has a loving fellowship"* (participant 57, OLHC), reinforcing the spirit of support that characterises the parish.

Parishioners express a strong desire for a more engaged and caring community, emphasising the importance of outreach and personal connection. Many suggest that *"home visits or personal touch, however brief, would be terrific"* (participant 20, OLHC), highlighting the need to be aware of the aged,

disadvantaged, and homeless. There is a recognition that “*community outreach is always an ongoing challenge*” (participant 31, SFX) especially in reconnecting with young people and those who have drifted away due to COVID-19. Parishioners want to see greater involvement in community life and suggest utilising church precincts for events that engage the wider community. They emphasise the importance of inclusive liturgies that resonate with diverse groups, including the bereaved and marginalised communities. Many feel that the parish should actively demonstrate its beliefs through social activities that support others' welfare, such as establishing a bereavement group and providing transport for those unable to attend Mass. Additionally, there is a call for increased awareness and support for vulnerable members of the community, with some advocating for the reestablishment of outreach groups to assist the homebound and isolated. Overall, parishioners believe that fostering a caring community requires ongoing efforts to connect, support, and engage with all individuals.

Key Areas for Improvement

Parishioners have identified several key areas for improvement to enhance the sense of community and support within the parish:

Community Engagement (10 mentions): Suggestions include creating more opportunities for social engagement within the parish, particularly to reconnect with those who have drifted away. Engaging young people and families is also seen as vital for revitalising parish life.

Increased Personal Outreach (8 mentions): There is a strong desire for more personal touch in outreach efforts, such as home visits for the elderly and housebound. Parishioners feel that brief, personal interactions can significantly strengthen community bonds.

Awareness of Vulnerable Groups (7 mentions): Many members emphasise the need for greater awareness and support for marginalised groups, including the elderly, disadvantaged, and homeless. They want the parish to actively engage in outreach efforts to these populations.

Support Programs (6 mentions): There is a demand for more focused local support programs, such as bereavement groups and assistance for those who have lost loved ones. Many believe that these initiatives could help address specific needs within the community.

Reestablishment of Social Justice Commitments (6 mentions): A decline in social justice activities post-COVID has been noted, and parishioners want to see a revival of these initiatives, including organised efforts to support local charities and outreach programs.

Communication and Visibility of Outreach Activities (5 mentions): Many parishioners feel that the work of existing outreach groups, like the St. Vincent de Paul Society, is not well publicised. They suggest better communication about these activities to encourage greater participation and awareness among the parishioners.

Inclusive Liturgies (5 mentions): Parishioners would like to see liturgies that cater to diverse groups, including the bereaved, LGBTQ+ individuals, and First Nations communities. This inclusivity helps everyone feel welcome and valued.

Utilisation of Church Spaces (4 mentions): There is a call for better use of church precincts for community events, such as book launches, talks, or social gatherings, to foster a sense of belonging and connection beyond Sunday Mass.

Transport Services (4 mentions): The need for a system to help transport parishioners who cannot drive to mass, or parish events is highlighted. Many believe that creating a list of those in need could facilitate better support.

Development of a Seniors' Group (3 mentions): There is a request for a dedicated group for older or widowed parishioners to gather regularly, fostering social connections and support within this demographic.

By focusing on these areas for improvement, the parish can work towards becoming a more inclusive, supportive, and engaged community that meets the diverse needs of its members, showcasing its commitment to social justice and communal care.

Youth and family involvement in parish life, including school involvement

Engaging youth in parish life is a crucial focus for fostering a vibrant and sustainable community. The parish believes a multifaceted approach is necessary to attract young people and their families. One suggestion highlights the power of music: *“Attracting our young through music and maybe once a month having them join in some sort of activity that our Parish organizes (sic)”* (participant 19, OLHC/SFX).

A community member suggested that an area for improvement is, *“Involving more young people in parish work”* (participant 41, OLHC/SFX/HTPS). Encouragement extends beyond participation; it also includes making the experience of mass more engaging for younger attendees. One parent expressed the need for a tailored program, stating, *“It would be good to have a program for children during the*

service so that my daughter can be educated about our faith in a way that is relevant and age-appropriate” (participant 78, OLHC).

To strengthen ties with families, there is a call to celebrate milestones together. A parishioner shared a fond memory of a tradition that existed prior to COVID-19: *“Celebrating every month the birthdays of children was a wonderful way to make young families feel loved and welcomed to our parish”* (participant 48, SFX). These celebrations foster community and help families see the parish as a supportive environment.

Engagement also includes outreach to young families, aiming to bridge the gap between church and home life. As one member remarked, *“We need to work on our outreach to families and the vulnerable in our community”* (participant 85, SFX). This outreach can take various forms, from school collaborations to inviting families to attend Mass together. *“Encouraging young families and youth to attend Mass and be involved in the parish”* is crucial, as *“the youth are the future of the Catholic community, so without focus on this, the parish will eventually die off”* (participant 42, SFX/SFXPS).

The establishment of a youth group was suggested, allowing teenagers to take an active role in the parish. Connecting with local schools for special masses or events is also mentioned, allowing the parish to reach families who may not regularly attend. *“Developing closer ties with our local primary and secondary schools”* (participant 36, OLHC/SFX) can help integrate parish life with the daily experiences of youth.

Ultimately, the parish recognises that youth engagement is not just a matter of numbers; it’s about creating meaningful experiences that resonate with young people and their families. The survey participants believe commitment to inclusivity and active participation could help ensure that the parish remains a vibrant community for generations to come.

Suggestions made of how schools can be further integrated into parish activities:

Religious Education Programs (6 mentions): Schools can collaborate with the parish to provide religious education, especially for those not attending Catholic schools.

Joint Liturgies (5 mentions): Organising special Masses where school students participate by reading, singing, or serving as altar servers.

School Events in the Parish (4 mentions): Hosting school events, such as family nights or fairs.

Parent-Teacher Involvement (4 mentions): Encouraging parents and teachers/ schools to engage in parish activities.

Service Projects (3 mentions): Collaborating on community service initiatives allows students to engage in meaningful activities and foster a sense of responsibility.

School Choir Participation (3 mentions): Inviting the school choir to perform at parish Masses.

Faith-Based Events (3 mentions): Organising retreats, prayer services, or youth gatherings.

Parent-Child Masses (3 mentions): Hosting special Masses that focus on families, allowing children to participate in readings or activities.

Guest Speakers and Workshops (2 mentions): Inviting teachers or community leaders to speak at parish events can provide valuable insights and encourage discussions on faith.

Feedback and Collaboration (2 mentions): Establishing a parish-school advisory group can enhance collaboration and ensure all communities within the parish feel valued.

These initiatives, supported by the frequency of their mentions, highlight the various opportunities for the parish schools to engage meaningfully with the parish community.

Parish staff, office volunteers and newsletter

Feedback on the parish staff, particularly regarding Father Michael and the support team, is overwhelmingly positive, emphasising their vital roles in fostering community and spiritual growth.

Father Michael receives high praise for his engaging and relatable homilies. One parishioner noted, *"Father Michael connects people, groups, and stories that contribute to building a community"* (participant 4, SFX), while another remarked he, *"explains the gospel in lay terms, which is very helpful and informative"* (participant 59, OLHC). His welcoming and inclusive nature is frequently highlighted, with comments such as, *"Fr. Michael is welcoming, inclusive and gives great sermons"* (participant 65, OLHC). While there were minimal concerns about the homily content, some feedback indicating a need for more focus on contemporary issues that families face. One individual suggested, *"I think the homily should focus more on the Gospel and include relevant issues"* (participant 57, OLHC), reflecting a desire for the teachings to resonate with everyday life and connect more directly with parishioners' experiences.

Furthermore, there is a strong desire to expand on Father Michael's initiative of having parishioners speak at key events, such as Father's Day and Mother's Day, which has already shown to strengthen community ties. As one parishioner stated, *"It develops that sense of community really well"* (participant 48, SFX), underscoring the positive impact of personal testimonies and shared experiences on parish cohesion.

There is also a call for additional support within the parish staff. Suggestions include appointing a managerial position to relieve Father Michael of administrative tasks, allowing him to focus on pastoral duties. One parishioner emphasised the need for a *“female pastoral associate to provide another touch point to the Parish and to help Fr. Michael”* (participant 32, SFX). The need for pastoral care support, especially for those grieving, was also highlighted: *“People need someone to talk to in their times of need, especially after sudden and unexpected loss. It would be great to have a person to call upon at these times; we cannot expect Father Michael or Patsy Skipper to always be available, they already have enough to do!”* (participant 73, SFX).

Overall, the feedback reflects strong appreciation for Father Michael's leadership and a desire for enhanced support structures to ensure the parish continues to thrive.

Parish Communication

Feedback on parish communication reveals a mix of appreciation and suggestions for improvement. Many parishioners value current communication methods, particularly the weekly Parish Bulletin, with comments such as, *“The Bulletin is a great resource”* (participant 51, OLHC) and *“I find our weekly bulletin very helpful”* (participant 52). One respondent commended the editorial team, and asked, *“Have you ever thought of giving our bulletin a name?”* (participant 59, OLHC).

However, there are calls for broader and more effective communication strategies. A frequent concern is the need for *“better advertising of what events people can attend”* (participant 26, SFX/SFXPS) beyond the newsletter, which may not reach everyone in the community. There's a desire for *“full transparency in our finances”* (participant 90, SFX), with suggestions to reintroduce annual income and expense reports for better accountability.

The importance of inclusivity and visibility was emphasised, with one participant suggesting, *“Be more visible and available”* (participant 9, SFX) and *“Be inclusive and know your Parishioners by listening to them”* (participant 19, OLHC/SFX). Some felt there should be *“A question ‘group’ once a month to clarify any misconceptions”* (participant 7, OLHC) to foster open dialogue.

Lastly, the parish's digital presence was noted as an area for growth. A parishioner suggested, *“The parish could be missing a robust online presence that not only shares information but also fosters an online community”* (participant 23, OLHC/OLHCPS). This reflects a recognition of the need to adapt to modern communication methods while maintaining the quality of existing resources. Overall, while the parish is praised for its communication efforts, there is a clear desire for improvement and greater engagement.

Leadership Team Feedback

Feedback for the Parish Pastoral Leadership Community PPLC reflects a mix of appreciation, constructive suggestions, and encouragement. Many parishioners commend the current committee's efforts, noting, *"Congratulations to the present committee who I believe have had a difficult time"* (participant 69, SFX). There is recognition of the diverse nature of the two churches, suggesting that the team seek inspiration from vibrant parishes through *"many and varied parish initiatives"* (participant 52, SFX).

A key recommendation is to *"establish clear, simple, and achievable goals for the community to work towards"* (participant 39, SFX), emphasising the importance of clarity in leadership. Additionally, parishioners express a desire to foster individual charisms and gifts, cautioning against overly formalising processes, as *"Elthamites don't respond well to being told what to do"* (Participant 82, OLHC).

The survey is widely appreciated, with remarks like, *"This survey is a great idea"* (participant 11, OLHC) and *"Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on the present nature of our parish and provide some thoughts for consideration"* (participant 49, OLHC). Many respondents feel this feedback mechanism can sharpen the focus of the parish community and lead to valuable initiatives.

Overall, the feedback conveys gratitude for the PPLC's commitment and hard work. There is a hopeful tone that insights from this survey will contribute positively to future parish planning and growth.

Importance of mass, liturgy, sacraments, prayer and liturgical music

Parishioners greatly value the Mass for its variety and accessibility, appreciating that it is offered at multiple times throughout the week. This flexibility allows for community reconnection, with one member noting, *"Weekly Mass allows for faith development and formation"* (participant 48, SFX). Many find Sunday Mass particularly affirming and sociable, as expressed by a parishioner who stated, *"Attendance at Sunday Mass is affirming, sociable and informative"* (participant 49, OLHC). Overall, the Mass serves as a vital source of spiritual nourishment and community support, with participants enjoying the friendly atmosphere and the opportunity to grow in faith together.

Parishioners have identified several areas for improvement regarding Mass, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity and relevance. One suggestion is to introduce Saturday Masses at Eltham during daylight saving time, (participant 14, OLHC).

Additionally, the provision of Mass in the middle-of-the-day could accommodate those with mobility challenges or those who find it difficult to attend at traditional times. One parishioner noted, *"Maybe*

once a month... to make it easier for the elderly, new parents, disabled to attend" (participant 12, SFX). This illustrates the importance of accessibility in fostering a welcoming environment.

There is also a significant interest in creating additional opportunities for healing Masses, with suggestions for a *"quarterly Healing mass"* (participant 3, SFX), to support those in need of spiritual and emotional comfort, and additional masses on holy days of obligation such as the Feast of the Assumption (Participant 29, OLHC).

Finally, some parishioners highlighted the importance of music in enhancing the liturgical experience. One member emphasised, *"The musical liturgy should be expanded by encouraging people to join"* (participant 45, OLHC) indicating a desire for more robust musical participation. The idea of forming a choir was also strongly supported, with one parishioner stating, *"We need a choir for church masses [to] make it more engaging to sing and praise"* (participant 68, SFX). This reflects a longing for a vibrant and dynamic worship experience that encourages congregational participation.

Overall, these insights point towards a collective desire for a more relevant and engaging worship experience that fosters deeper community engagement, meets the diverse needs of parishioners, and enhances the overall sense of belonging within the parish community.

Importance of welcoming community in church setting

Parishioners express a strong sense of appreciation for the welcoming atmosphere at Mass, highlighting the hospitality and inclusivity that characterises their community. Members noted, *"I appreciate the welcome given to the community"* (participant 4, SFX), *"The parish is very hospitable and welcomes all people"* (participant 41, OLHC/SFX/HTPS). Another noted, *"The parish community is mostly welcoming"* (participant 57, OLHC) particularly appreciating the greetings from fellow parishioners, which further enhance the feeling of inclusivity for both new visitors and longtime members alike. The openness and non-judgmental atmosphere are also mentioned, creating a *"strong sense of welcome"* (participant 56, OLHC) that fosters a supportive community. Many praised the efforts of volunteers who contribute to this welcoming environment, with one remarking on the *"generosity of all the volunteers"* (participant 36, OLHC/SFX) as readers and helpers.

Inclusivity is a key theme, with many expressing the importance of making all groups feel valued. One parishioner highlighted that *"we should be seen to be inclusive and accepting of all groups at all times"* (participant 22, OLHC/ SFX), particularly families with children, young couples, and the elderly. Despite the warm nature of the parish, there are concerns that some members may feel left out, especially those from different communities. For instance, it was mentioned that *"the Montmorency community*

is not particularly welcoming to those from Eltham" (participant 29, OLHC) indicating a need for a more unified approach to welcome everyone.

While parishioners enjoy catching up with familiar faces, there is a call for greater encouragement to welcome and engage with newcomers. A parishioner pointed out, *"We seem to need encouragement to speak to new people and visitors"* (participant 30, OLHC), underscoring the need for proactive outreach during hospitality periods after Mass.

Parishioners have shared several insightful suggestions for improving the welcoming environment at Mass, with a more personal, engaging, and structured approach. One idea is to greet attendees with the Mass bulletin as they arrive, which could serve as an icebreaker. This could be complemented by reintroducing greeters at the SFX church entrance, which some remember fondly: *"Pre-Covid, we had people in the foyer welcoming people and distributing the bulletin prior to Mass"* (participant 37, SFX). Encouraging parishioners to introduce themselves to those sitting nearby could also foster a sense of community from the outset.

Creating a welcoming committee dedicated to integrating new parishioners into the community is another proposed initiative. This committee could organise social events and make personal invitations, as highlighted by one parishioner who stated, *"It is vital that these new parishioners are personally invited"* (Participant 52, SFX). Establishing a prominent welcome stand at each church with information about becoming involved in parish life could further enhance the welcoming atmosphere, allowing new members to feel acknowledged and valued.

Overall, there is a strong consensus that a combination of structured initiatives, personal outreach, and a commitment to inclusivity will significantly enrich the parish's welcoming environment.

Importance of volunteers and lay involvement in parish

Parishioners deeply appreciate the vital role that volunteers play in supporting the community, highlighting their generosity and commitment. Many acknowledge the *"generous army of volunteers"* (participant 61, SFX), primarily composed of seniors, who contribute significantly to various aspects of parish life, including reading and other essential services. This involvement not only enhances the parish experience but also fosters a sense of community and connection among members, showcasing the dedication and spirit of volunteers who strengthen the parish's foundation.

Parishioners have expressed several detailed suggestions to improve lay and volunteer involvement within the community, emphasising a collaborative approach to parish life. One prominent theme is the need for broader participation beyond the usual volunteers, with one parishioner highlighting, *"It's falling to a few people to keep things running"* (participant 6, SFX). This indicates a recognition that the

current volunteer base is stretched thin. Many members see a pressing need for clear communication about available volunteer opportunities, noting, "*Helping all parishioners be aware of opportunities where they can volunteer... is really important*" (participant 8, OLHC/SFX/ HTPS). This suggests a desire for a centralised platform or regular updates that make it easier for everyone to find ways to get involved.

Personal invitations and targeted outreach are also seen as critical. Some parishioners suggested reintroducing practices like a roster for home visits to the sick, stating, "*We could consider a roster for taking communion to the incapacitated as we used to*" (participant 51, OLHC). This reflects a longing for structured yet inclusive opportunities that encourage participation across all age groups.

Training and support for volunteers are also essential; one parishioner proposed, "*Some training and occasional gathering of these ministers*" (participant 81, OLHC) to enhance skills, such as reading or distributing communion effectively. This highlights the community's commitment to ensuring that volunteers feel equipped and confident in their roles.

Several respondents voiced concerns about the demographic challenges facing the parish, particularly with an aging population. They noted, "*It is a challenge that the same people tend to be the ones offering assistance*" (participant 46, SFX), pointing to the need for strategic engagement with younger families and individuals to invigorate parish activities.

Furthermore, there's a growing recognition of the importance of women's roles within the parish. Participants echoed sentiments about fostering the "*continuous and ongoing recognition and encouragement*" (participant 28, SFX), of women's contributions, which could enrich the fabric of the community.

Overall, the parish community aims to foster a vibrant and engaged environment, where everyone's contributions are not only recognised but actively sought, paving the way for a more inclusive and lively parish life.

Parish buildings, physical spaces within the churches and surrounds

Parishioners have expressed a strong appreciation for the design and layout of their churches, highlighting how these features enhance their worship experience. One parishioner noted, "*The designs of both our churches are so conducive to the contemporary liturgies*" (participant 52, SFX), emphasising that the modern architecture supports their communal worship. This sentiment is echoed by another member who remarked, "*The physical layout of the church itself is important and helps to create a sense of belonging*" (participant 56, OLHC), indicating that the thoughtful arrangement fosters a welcoming environment. Additionally, practical features, such as rails for people with mobility

limitations demonstrate a commitment to accessibility, ensuring that all members of the community can participate fully in the liturgy. Overall, the parish buildings are seen as integral to creating a vibrant, inclusive space for worship and connection.

Parishioners have expressed a desire for improvements to the parish buildings and surrounding areas to foster greater community engagement and accessibility. A prominent concern is the lack of an adequate gathering space at St. Francis Xavier (SFX). One parishioner emphasised that SFX "*absolutely needs a better gathering space where we can gather—like at Eltham and sit with a cuppa*" (participant 48, SFX). They noted that such enhancements may require "*capital work*," but stressed that "*it would be money well spent*."

Accessibility is also a critical issue. Parishioners have called for "*at least one all-abilities toilet*" (participant 61, SFX), that is easily accessible from the church. This highlights the need for facilities that accommodate everyone. The need for a coffee machine was also mentioned, reinforcing the idea that such amenities contribute to a welcoming environment.

Concerns have also been raised about the church carpark at Montmorency, particularly the steep exit, which poses challenges for smaller vehicles. Additionally, more disabled parking spaces are seen as essential for ensuring that all parishioners can attend Mass without difficulty.

The overall aesthetic of the parish grounds has been called into question, with some parishioners expressing concern about the presence of debris and overgrown vegetation, particularly along pathways. "*From the main road (and Dudley Street), there is frequently debris from trees, branches, mulch, and leaves on the footpath*" (participant 83, OLHC), one individual remarked, emphasising the need for regular maintenance to enhance safety and appearance. They suggested that while some of this work could be tackled through volunteer efforts, the ageing demographic of the parish community means fewer people are able to participate in such tasks.

Finally, there is a desire to see the gathering space at Eltham used for more community activities, such as discussions and social events. "*We used to 'lend out' the Gathering Area for 'Events' – usually social justice orientation*" (participant 82, OLHC), a parishioner recalled, expressing a hope for a return to such practices. They stressed that fostering community spirit through these spaces is essential to maintaining an engaged and vibrant parish life. Overall, parishioners feel that these improvements would significantly enhance the parish's welcoming atmosphere and support community connections.

Parish pride and vision

The parish is characterised by several key qualities that contribute to its vibrant community atmosphere. One parishioner remarked, *"Our parish has the qualities to face the future! We simply need to show it"* (participant 1, SFX). This highlights the potential for growth and renewal within the community. The sense of friendliness and welcome is a significant aspect, as another individual noted, *"SFX has always been a friendly, welcoming community"* (participant 6, SFX), expressing hope that the recent survey might inject *"fresh life"* into it.

Many parishioners recognise the current strengths of the parish, with one stating, *"We believe the parish is very good with what it does at the moment"* (participant 7, OLHC), while another shared, *"I'm sure the parish does its best. I hope and pray for all members on a private and regular basis"* (participant 20, OLHC). This sentiment reflects a collective appreciation for the dedication and effort put forth by the parish community.

Inclusivity is also vital, with one member simply stating, *"just continue being a strong inclusive community"* (participant 22, OLHC/SFX). The warmth of the parishioners is evident in another comment: *"In my opinion, the Parish is wonderful. It's engaging, welcoming, with diverse and warm parishioners"* (participant 40, OLHC/OLHCPS)

The parish's active involvement in various ministries has changed over time. One parishioner mentioned, *"There were several music groups and a full roster of volunteers"* (participant 46, SFX), indicating previous lively participation in community life. They also highlighted the diverse range of previous social events, noting, *"It would be great to see more lively activities returning if there is still an appetite for it"*.

Finally, the parish is seen as a place of solace and belonging, with one individual sharing, *"I sense a very positive spirit of community and belonging"* (participant 49, OLHC), and another stating that it is *"a place where people have an experience of rest for their souls"* (participant 63, OLHC). These qualities combine to create a rich and supportive environment that nurtures the spiritual and social needs of its members.

The vision for Risen Christ Parish encompasses a united and vibrant community where individuals of all ages come together to support and enrich one another's lives. One parishioner articulated this ideal, stating, *"Ideally, our Risen Christ Parish would be a united, friendly, welcoming and vital community of people of all ages"* (participant 5, SFX). This sentiment stresses the importance of inclusivity and connection, as many express a desire for newcomers to feel *"very welcome and at home"* (participant 31, SFX), upon entering, fostering a strong sense of belonging that leads to commitment.

Another parishioner expressed the hope for a *"vibrant, welcoming, faith community centred around God and families"* (participant 32, SFX), highlighting a concern about the current lack of children and young families participating in Mass. This call for active involvement resonates with another vision of *"active Catholics, participating in all roles - Ministries!"* (participant 35, all) and *"People of the Gospel - working & praying together for the greater good of all. (No one person has it all together BUT together we can have it all)"* underscores the idea that collective effort is crucial for nurturing the parish.

The parish is envisioned as a *"place of refuge and support for everyone"* (participant 53, OLHC), indicating a commitment to providing care and assistance to all members. This commitment extends to adapting to contemporary needs, as one parishioner noted, *"The parish and the world church needs to adapt to the needs of the world now, not the past"* (participant 88, OLHC).

Finally, the aspiration for Risen Christ Parish to be *"a strong Christ-like community"* (participant 89, SFX), that is inclusive of diverse beliefs and practices reflects a desire for broad acceptance and support. The ideas expressed emphasise that common goals and Christian fellowship are vital for enhancing the lives of all members. Together, these visions articulate a hopeful and collaborative future for the parish.

Conclusion and next steps

Overall, the survey was successful in capturing the priorities of the Risen Christ Community. It identified nine key themes: parish social life, social justice and outreach, youth and family involvement, parish office and volunteer activities, the importance of Mass, a welcoming community, volunteer and lay participation, parish facilities, and parish pride and vision.

Key considerations for the Parish Pastoral Leadership Community when developing a Pastoral Plan may include:

- The parish of Risen Christ takes great pride in its community and values a strong sense of welcome and belonging.
- Parishioners expressed a desire for more social activities, such as BBQs, social evenings, guest speakers, book launches, and patron saint celebrations, to be included in the parish calendar.
- Risen Christ Parish has a deep connection to faith, placing high importance on Mass, sacraments, and a prayerful atmosphere.
- The importance of Mass and sacraments must be honoured in the Pastoral Plan, alongside the contributions of parish staff and volunteers.

- Efforts should be made to expand the volunteer base and encourage those outside the usual pool to get involved.
- Given the parish's emphasis on social connection, it is recommended to incorporate social activities into the Pastoral Plan.
- The parish values social justice and outreach; establishing a dedicated committee for social justice initiatives could enhance oversight and increase volunteer opportunities.
- As an ageing community, there is a need for more services, including outreach to the homebound and transportation for those unable to drive to Mass and parish events.
- Youth and family involvement is crucial, though participants acknowledge challenges in engaging young people with the church.
- Strengthening the connection between the parish and school communities may help reengage families and young people; however, the low participation from schools in the survey makes it difficult to assess interest.
- While future growth is important, the parish has excellent facilities, such as the SFX hall and OLHC gathering spaces, that can support social and outreach initiatives.

Suggestions for improvements outside the Parish Pastoral Plan:

- Revamp the parish website and social media to include contact information for groups, ways to get involved, and a directory of services within the community.
- Consider successful engagement examples, such as the youth group (Life Teen) in Mill Park and the faith enrichment course (Alpha) in Greensborough Parish.
- Consider building improvements to enhance accessibility, such as all abilities toilet for SFX.

Now that we have gathered the voices of the parishioners at Risen Christ Parish, the Parish Pastoral Leadership Community will begin consolidating this information to develop a comprehensive parish pastoral plan. This plan will be reviewed and updated periodically to ensure it continues to address the evolving needs of the community.

Limitations

The analysis lacked a literature review and research methodology, which are essential for contextualising findings within existing literature. It would be beneficial for the Parish Pastoral Leadership Community to explore current research on developing a Parish Pastoral Plan to enhance their understanding and inform their methodology.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Vision and Mission Statement

Vision

Risen Christ is a welcoming Catholic Parish.

A living Community inspired by the Gospels;

Enriched by vibrant liturgy and sacraments, and

Respectful of the different histories and identities of our two faith communities

Mission

Guided by the Holy Spirit, Risen Christ parish strives to:

- Be a people of God, an inclusive community of hospitality and belonging
- Actively embrace social justice and the marginalised
- Be committed to the safeguarding of children and adults
- Seek equality of men and women in lay ministry and leadership
- Work towards healing for those wounded by the pain of our parish history
- Be an outward looking community which is ecumenically aware
- Listen, dialogue and grow in our faith and live together as disciples in the modern world