

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

Summary

*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 Survey

Final Qualitative Report – summary

Background:

In 2023, the parishes of Montmorency St Francis Xavier and Eltham Our Lady Help of Christians merged to create Risen Christ Parish, which comprises two enduring Faith Communities. The parish includes three primary schools—St Francis Xavier, Our Lady Help of Christians, and Holy Trinity—serving approximately 950 students from prep to year 6. Led by Fr Michael Sierakowski, the parish offers weekend services at both churches and weekday masses shared equally. While attendance at Montmorency has declined, the 10am service at Eltham is thriving, often followed by a communal morning tea. The Transition Leadership Community facilitated the amalgamation process, establishing a parish vision focused on faith, justice, and community. The Parish Pastoral Leadership Community (PPLC), formed on August 10, 2023, aims to create a Parish Pastoral Plan (PPP) and recently conducted a survey to gather community insights for shaping this plan.

Method

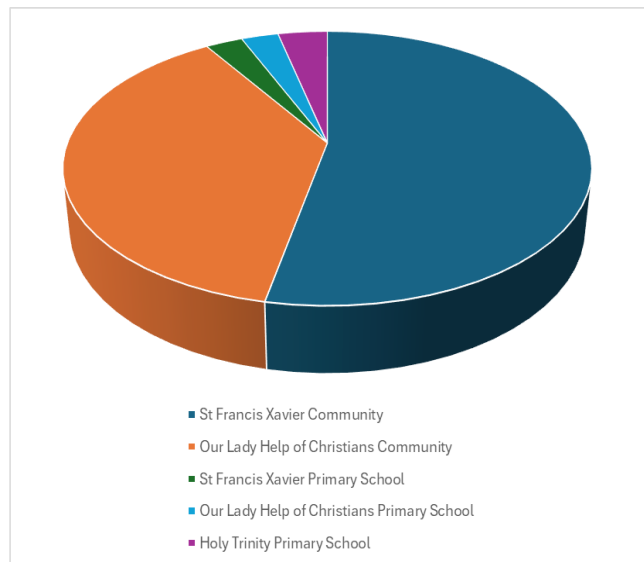
The Parish Pastoral Leadership Community (PPLC) created a survey to understand community priorities within Risen Christ Parish, available in both paper and online formats. Announced through various parish communications, the survey ran for one month and included two quantitative questions about respondents' faith communities and engagement priorities, along with six qualitative questions focused on community strengths, areas for improvement, new initiatives, suggestions for enrichment, barriers to involvement, and additional comments. The qualitative data was analysed using NVIVO software through a five-step process, identifying themes and insights which will inform the development of 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.



Need of Engagement Ranking

In Question 2, participants ranked community groups for parish engagement, with Families and Young People/youth receiving the highest priority (average rankings of 2.6 and 2.8). Other groups had closely aligned average scores (4.2 - 5.6), indicating no significant differences, making it challenging to draw definitive conclusions from the data.

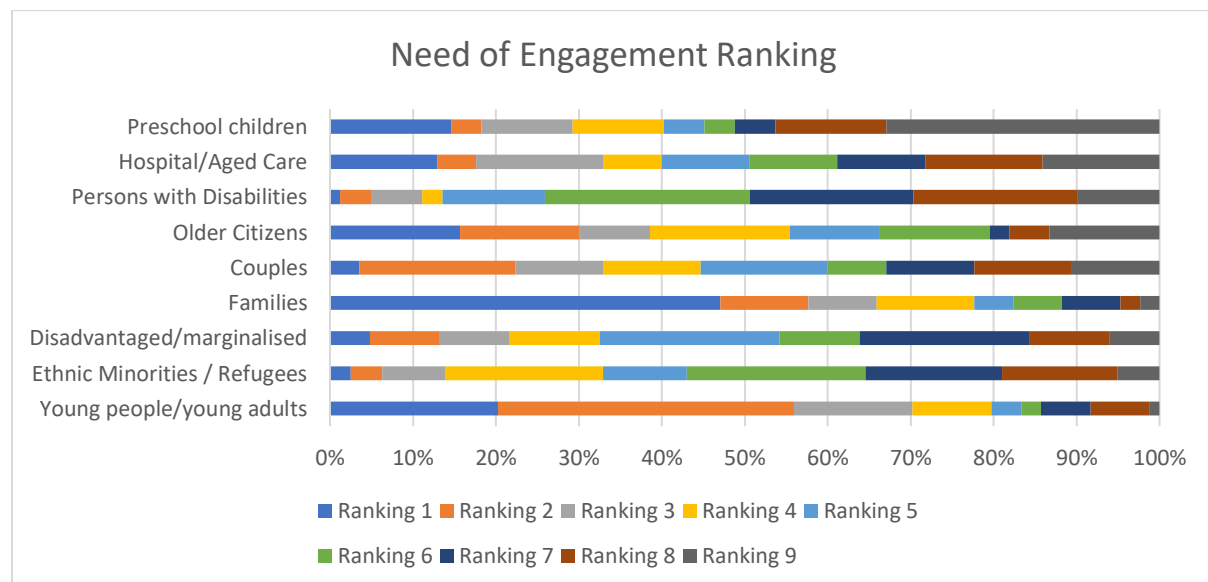


Figure 2: Question two: rank from 1 (most) – 9 (least) groups most in need of engagement.

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

Qualitative questions 3-8 were analysed using NVIVO by an experienced team member, resulting in 116 codes. No new codes emerged in the final 20% of surveys, indicating saturation. Key themes were identified from the data, reflecting the core insights of the community's responses.

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 briefly addresses the first nine themes identified. Each quotation is followed by participant number and the faith community 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 provides invaluable support, connection, and fellowship. Many members cherish social interactions, enhancing a sense of belonging. 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). Informal gatherings after Mass, like *“the lovely people and the catch-up after Mass”* (participant 18, OLHC), foster strong relationships.

Small Christian Communities and Passionist Family Groups enrich parish life through shared faith. Families benefit from a supportive network, as one former young member explained: *“Offering community, friendship support and it gave my children a sense of community”* (participant 22, OLHC/SFX). Shared worship experiences strengthen fellowship, with members expressing joy in feeling welcomed.

There is a clear request for more prayer groups and social activities, emphasising the need for fellowship before and after Mass (participant 52, SFX). Many fondly recall past events such as BBQs that brought families together. The impact of COVID-19 has led to decreased participation, particularly in Montmorency (Participant 46, SFX). Members seek to revitalise community engagement through multigenerational events, a dedicated over-sixties group, and a directory of parish activities. They want to enhance connections beyond worship.

Social Justice and Outreach

Parishioners show a strong commitment to community support, emphasising care for one another. One member stated, *“Being part of a caring, considerate community. We do not need to agree on everything but ‘listen’ to others!”* (Participant 1, SFX). Many appreciate the *“comforting and healing”* (participant 10, OLHC) prayers offered to those in need. Older members value their camaraderie, with one noting, *“We are essentially a support group for each other”* (participant 39, SFX). Gratitude for assistance during hardships is common, as expressed by another parishioner: *“The parish staff and generally all of the community are helpful”* (participant 44, OLHC/SFX). There is a desire for increased outreach, including home visits (participant 20, OLHC) and engaging young people post-COVID. Parishioners call for inclusive liturgies and social activities to support welfare, advocating for outreach groups for the homebound and isolated, reinforcing that fostering a caring community requires ongoing efforts to connect and engage.

Parishioners have identified several key areas for improvement to enhance community support within the parish.

- **Community Engagement (10 mentions)**

- **Increased Personal Outreach (8 mentions)**
- **Awareness of Vulnerable Groups (7 mentions)**
- **Support Programs (6 mentions)**
- **Reestablishment of Social Justice Commitments (6 mentions)**
- **Communication and Visibility of Outreach Activities (5 mentions)**
- **Inclusive Liturgies (5 mentions)**
- **Utilisation of Church Spaces (4 mentions)**
- **Transport Services (4 mentions)**
- **Development of a Seniors' Group (3 mentions)**

By focusing on these areas, the parish can become a more inclusive, supportive community that meets diverse needs while showcasing its commitment to social justice and care.

Youth and family involvement in parish life, including school involvement

Engaging youth in parish life is vital for fostering a vibrant community. Members of the parish believe a multifaceted approach is necessary to attract young people and their families. One suggestion emphasises 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). There is also a call for *“Involving more young people in parish work”* (participant 41, OLHC/SFX/HTPS). Enhancing the Mass experience is important, with a parent stating, *“It would be good to have a program for children during the service”* (participant 78, OLHC).

Celebrating milestones together strengthens ties, as one parishioner shared, *“Celebrating every month the birthdays of children was a wonderful way to make young families feel loved”* (participant 48, SFX). Outreach to young families is essential, with one member noting, *“We need to work on our outreach to families and the vulnerable in our community”* (participant 85, SFX). Establishing a youth group and connecting with local schools can further integrate parish life, as expressed: *“Developing closer ties with our local primary and secondary schools”* (participant 36, OLHC/SFX). Ultimately, meaningful experiences will help ensure the parish remains a vibrant community for future generations.

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

- **Religious Education Programs (6 mentions)**
- **Joint Liturgies (5 mentions)**
- **School Events in the Parish (4 mentions)**
- **Parent-Teacher Involvement (4 mentions)**
- **Service Projects (3 mentions)**

- **School Choir Participation (3 mentions)**
- **Faith-Based Events (3 mentions)**
- **Parent-Child Masses (3 mentions)**
- **Guest Speakers and Workshops (2 mentions)**
- **Feedback and Collaboration (2 mentions)**

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 Father Michael and his support team, is overwhelmingly positive, underscoring their crucial roles in fostering community and spiritual growth. Father Michael is praised for his engaging homilies; one parishioner noted, *“Father Michael connects people, groups, and stories that contribute to building a community”* (participant 4, SFX). His welcoming nature is frequently highlighted, with comments such as, *“Fr. Michael is welcoming, inclusive and gives great sermons”* (participant 65, OLHC). However, there are calls for additional support within the staff, such as appointing a managerial position to allow Father Michael to focus on pastoral duties. The need for pastoral care support, especially for those grieving, was also emphasised.

Parish communication receives mixed feedback. Many value the weekly Parish Bulletin, stating, *“The Bulletin is a great resource”* (participant 51, OLHC), but there are calls for broader strategies and better event advertising (participant 26, SFX/SFXPS). Transparency in finances is desired, with suggestions to reintroduce annual financial reports (participant 90, SFX). Additionally, some parishioners seek greater inclusivity and visibility, suggesting regular dialogue opportunities.

Feedback for the Parish Pastoral Leadership Community is generally appreciative, with a call to establish clear goals (participant 39, SFX) while fostering individual gifts. The survey is widely regarded as a valuable tool for community reflection. Overall, feedback reflects gratitude for the leadership's commitment and a hopeful outlook for future parish development.

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

Parishioners highly value the Mass for its variety and accessibility, noting that *“Weekly Mass allows for faith development and formation”* (participant 48, SFX). Sunday Mass is especially appreciated with one member stating, *“Attendance at Sunday Mass is affirming, sociable and informative”* (participant 49, OLHC). However, there are calls for improvements, such as introducing Saturday evening Masses at Eltham during daylight saving time (participant 14, OLHC) to enhance participation.

Feedback also emphasises the need for homilies to address contemporary family issues, with one parishioner suggesting, *"I think the homily should focus more on the Gospel and include relevant issues"* (participant 57, OLHC). Additionally, greater accessibility, including more middle-of-the-day Masses, is desired for those facing mobility challenges (participant 12, SFX).

Parishioners express interest in healing Masses (participant 3, SFX) and highlight the importance of music in worship, with suggestions to expand musical participation and form a choir (participant 68, SFX). Overall, these insights reflect a collective desire for a more relevant and engaging worship experience that fosters community connections.

Importance of welcoming community in church setting

Parishioners express deep appreciation for the welcoming atmosphere at Mass, noting the hospitality and inclusivity of their community. One member remarked, *"I appreciate the welcome given to the community"* (participant 4, SFX). Many praised volunteers, with one commenting on *the "generosity of all the volunteers"* (participant 36, OLHC/SFX). The sentiment is clear: *"The parish is very hospitable and welcomes all people"* (participant 41, OLHC/SFX/HTPS).

Suggestions for enhancing this welcoming environment include greeting attendees with the Mass bulletin and encouraging introductions to foster community. Inclusivity is a key theme, as one parishioner emphasised, *"we should be seen to be inclusive and accepting of all groups at all times"* (participant 22, OLHC/SFX). Concerns about some members feeling left out, especially from different communities, were also raised (participant 29, OLHC).

Proposals include reintroducing greeters, creating a welcoming committee, and establishing a welcome stand with information about parish involvement. Overall, a combination of structured initiatives and personal outreach could significantly enrich the parish's welcoming atmosphere.

Importance of volunteers and lay involvement in parish

Parishioners highly value the crucial role of volunteers (participant 61, SFX), primarily seniors, who enhance parish life through their contributions. This involvement fosters a strong sense of community and connection among members. However, there are calls for broader participation, with one parishioner noting, *"It's falling to a few people to keep things running"* (participant 6, SFX), highlighting the need for more volunteers.

Suggestions for improvement include clearer communication about volunteer opportunities, with one member stating, *"Helping all parishioners be aware of opportunities... is really important"* (participant 8, OLHC/SFX/HTPS). Personal invitations and structured outreach, such as a roster for home visits, are also emphasised, reflecting a desire for inclusive participation.

Training and support for volunteers were suggested to enhance their skills (participant 81, OLHC). Concerns about the aging population were raised, pointing to the necessity of engaging younger families. Overall, the parish aims to create a vibrant environment where everyone's contributions are actively sought and recognised.

Parish buildings, physical spaces within the churches and surrounds

Parishioners appreciate the design and layout of the churches, noting that this enhances worship experiences. One member remarked, *"The designs of both our churches are so conducive to the contemporary liturgies"* (participant 52, SFX), while another stated, *"The physical layout of the church itself is important and helps to create a sense of belonging"* (participant 56, OLHC). However, there is a desire for improvements, particularly at St. Francis Xavier (SFX), where a better gathering space is needed: *"SFX absolutely needs a better gathering space"* (participant 48, SFX). Accessibility concerns include calls for *"at least one all-abilities toilet"* (participant 61, SFX) and improved carpark facilities. Additionally, parishioners want more community activities in gathering spaces and regular maintenance for the church grounds. Enhancing these aspects is seen as crucial for fostering a welcoming and engaged parish community.

Parish pride and vision

The parish is characterised by qualities that foster a vibrant community atmosphere. One parishioner noted, *"Our parish has the qualities to face the future! We simply need to show it"* (participant 1, SFX), highlighting potential for growth. Friendliness is significant, as another remarked, *"SFX has always been a friendly, welcoming community"* (participant 6, SFX). Many appreciate current strengths, with one stating, *"We believe the parish is very good with what it does"* (participant 7, OLHC). Inclusivity is vital; one member emphasised, *"just continue being a strong inclusive community"* (participant 22, OLHC/SFX). The parish is seen as a place of solace, with one individual sharing, *"I sense a very positive spirit of community and belonging"* (participant 49, OLHC). Aspirations include fostering a united, vibrant community and adapting to contemporary needs, accenting the importance of collective effort and support for all members.

Conclusion and next steps

The survey effectively identified nine key themes reflecting the Risen Christ Community's priorities, including social life, outreach, youth involvement, and the importance of Mass.

Key Considerations for the Pastoral Plan:

- Risen Christ values a strong sense of community and belonging.
- Parishioners want more social activities, like BBQs and guest speakers, in the calendar.
- The parish prioritises Mass, sacraments, and a prayerful atmosphere.

- The Pastoral Plan should honour the importance of Mass and contributions from staff and volunteers.
- Expand the volunteer base and encourage broader participation.
- Incorporate social activities into the Pastoral Plan to enhance connections.
- Establish a committee for social justice initiatives to boost oversight and volunteerism.
- Address the needs of an aging community, including outreach and transportation services.
- Youth and family involvement is important, despite challenges in engagement.
- Strengthen ties with schools to reengage families, acknowledging low survey participation.
- Leverage existing facilities, like SFX hall and OLHC spaces, for social and outreach initiatives.

Suggestions for Improvements outside scope of Pastoral Plan:

- Revamp the parish website and social media for better engagement and service directories.
- Explore successful engagement models like Life Teen and Alpha programs.
- Consider building improvements to enhance accessibility.

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.

Glossary

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.