

# Conversations



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19 January 2024: This is the main report from this project, remitted to the the General Council and Columban Lay Mission Central Leadership Team, and intended for addition to web-based resources for the Society's General Assembly in 2024.

15 September 2023: Two items related to this project, *Headlines about 'Conversations'* and the *Summary Report: Conversations about choices*, were provided for general circulation ahead of conferences and meetings to be held from September 2023 onwards in preparation for GA 2024.

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## Overview

### Background

1. This report responds to the request for two reviews for the Missionary Society of St Columban, as an initiative arising from the IRMU Meeting in Seoul in March 2023.
2. As advised to all Columbans in May 2023, the IRMU Meeting made six recommendations for the Society ahead of the General Assembly scheduled for May 2024 (GA 2024). At the behest of the General Council and Columban Lay Mission Central Leadership Team, initial action on two of those six recommendations was taken via a project now addressed in this report. The two particular tasks concern:
  - a strategic, independent review of the Society in the light of mission priorities; and
  - an independent review and assessment of vocation programmes based on internal and external data, trends, and other congregational plans.
3. This report thus will provide the Society with a basis from which it can attend to the second part of the corresponding recommendations - the creation of strategic plans.
4. As noted in the letter to Columbans about these reviews, they have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and significant overlap between them, but important connections also arise with the other four recommendations from the IRMU Meeting. The project has proceeded in that light towards its main purpose, which is to provide the Society with a “reality-check” in relation to these two matters on the way to GA 2024, in preparation for conversations that will be necessary there.

## Without courage, wisdom bears no fruit.

- Baltasar Gracián y Morales, SJ



5. In his homily for the close of the IRMU meeting, Society Leader Father Tim Mulroy spoke to the theme of “courageous conversations”, referring to the final days of James Maginn as he enjoined members to engage in reflective preparation ahead of GA 2024. In the consultation survey which was a key analytical component of these reviews, participants were urged to bear such thoughts in mind when responding to the survey - and that urging bears some repeating as one considers the necessary logic for, and findings of, the reviews as expressed in this report.

## Approach to the project

6. In scoping out this project, the interconnections between all review initiatives emerging from the IRMU Meeting were pertinent. Based on experience of advising highly diverse organisations,<sup>1</sup> we might paraphrase the focal point of the other four, in turn, as seeking:
  - genuine accountability, in the light of clericalism;
  - effective partnerships, in the light of the contributions of Columban lay missionaries and co-workers;
  - mentoring and leadership, in the light of evolving Columban membership; and
  - a fresh expression of Columban mission, in light of present realities.
7. We observe that this interconnectivity is a natural consequence of these matters all being both questions of governance,<sup>2</sup> and central to sustainability of the institution over time. They are also very largely endogenous: they have an internal cause or origin, or otherwise emanate from within. For any and every organisation, addressing such matters effectively is essential to obtaining good governance, then maintaining it in circumstances that are rarely static. Exogenous considerations - those things arising outside of the organisation, having causes or origins that are external to it - must also be addressed. However, what is endogenous ought to take precedence in associated decision making processes, because these things are within the organisation’s capacity to alter. Planning thus is about making choices about those things found inside and inherently within the organisation’s capacity to decide or determine,<sup>3</sup> including as a response to germane exogenous factors - things that they are as they are and must be accepted as such, being beyond the organisation’s control.

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<sup>1</sup> Including government, for-profit, and not-for-profit alike - the latter group including various religious communities and a variety of other membership based organisations ([read more](#)).

<sup>2</sup> On which our team has written extensively ([read more](#)), including about accountability generally ([read more](#)) and in depth as a PhD topic ([read more](#)), as well as the relationship of accountability to the trust placed in an organisation by supporters ([read more](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Noting that, as discussed later in this report, there are layers to this when an organisation is itself part of a larger organisation.

8. That is the case with all questions raised by the IRMU's recommendations, including review questions addressed via this project: all concern salient endogenous matters well within the capacity of the Society to address, making their priority appropriate but also their interconnectivities and interactions impossible to avoid. Exogenous factors naturally remain relevant, so their nature and the extent of their influence is also worthy of further reflection.<sup>4</sup>
9. With that in mind, to the extent that we may cross into the province of those other reviews in this report, our thoughts and consideration of the Columbans are offered in good heart and a spirit of collegiality, with the genuine intent of aiding the Society to find a positive pathway into the future.
10. That much said, the pivotal design feature of our work is independence: this we maintain even when being "the messenger" on vexed issues calls for quite a generous measure of professional fortitude. Thus, while sincerely grateful to work with a reference group,<sup>5</sup> and noting some ideas in this report may resonate with views already voiced in the Columban community, we confirm that all viewpoints expressed herein are considered the advice of our team led by Dr Carolyn Evans, and definitively unencumbered by other direction.
11. Beyond that, we note that working with religious communities and other membership organisations has vividly demonstrated to us the practical implications of evolving into a smaller and older body of members.<sup>6</sup> Such implications need not be accepted as inevitably leading to closure, but should be considered proactively and by approaching endogenous factors quite differently to exogenous factors. What to do, if anything, then naturally remains for the membership to determine. Based on findings from this project, however, we strongly urge that "courageous conversations" be had at GA 2024 and action be taken very promptly thereafter. Via this report, we hope to assist towards this being done in due cognisance of canonical, legal, ethical, and other, obligations.

### Which questions to ask?

12. As a prelude to formulating a fresh strategic plan, there are as many ways to approach a review as there are advisers who do such reviews, and each has its charms. However, for best effect a review begins by considering whether, and to what extent, the entity - here, the Society - is doing what it was created to do. In fact, it would be fair to say that this is the defining endogenous consideration that should be at the heart of any assessment of, or potential change to, the organisation, naturally making this crucial to strategic planning.

**Endogenous factors have an internal cause or origin,  
arising from within or being found inside.**

**Exogenous factors are the obverse - coming from without,  
they have an external cause or origin, or are found outside.**

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<sup>4</sup> See also discussion at paragraph 44 re the Church as exogenous to the Society, and later discussion of vocations in terms of the conception of how to focus on elements that the Society can expect to alter (Figure 11 and associated text).

<sup>5</sup> With whom to confer on practical matters and research issues that arose in our work - the group was nominated by the GC and CLMCLT, and included ordained and lay missionaries and a key co-worker. See also n33 below.

<sup>6</sup> For an abundance of clarity, while our team has many years of experience in advising religious communities, the relationship of our team, and individuals within it, to any and all of those communities is limited to nothing more than being a professional adviser.

13. Put bluntly, even if an entity may seem to be thriving, not doing what it was created to do is to be taken as evidence of governance failure. No matter their endogenous nature, the sector of activities, or the myriad exogenous factors involved, this remains true across the vast majority of organisations, institutions, and enterprises, whether government, not-for-profit/philanthropic/community service, for-profit/commercial, and so on.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, ensuring either that the organisation duly pursues its existential remit, or otherwise undertakes necessary due process to adjust that remit, is emblematic of good governance and dealing effectively with both endogenous and exogenous factors.
14. In terms of questions involved in a strategic review, the next most pressing issue is about sustainability in doing what the institution is there to do, notwithstanding whatever is going on around the organisation. In response to challenges arising, priorities should be shaped accordingly: change what can be changed in order to better respond to that which cannot. For example, institutional arrangements for the Society are entirely endogenous, being at the behest of the membership (albeit set in conformance with applicable canon law); in contrast, vocations are impacted upon by endogenous factors, but in much larger part are the product of exogenous factors, beyond the control of the Society. It is therefore crucial that the Society do everything possible to focus on and respond to what is within its grasp, as so much simply is not.
15. Any mention of sustainability tends to excite debate about what, exactly, that might be for a given organisation, and then this engages supplementary questions about organisational capacity and resourcing. Experience suggests, however, that a straightforward definition serves quite well enough: since it needs stakeholder support to continue, an organisation is sustainable only to the extent that it can keep its promises to stakeholders and thereby earn their ongoing support - not just today and tomorrow, but next week, next month, and next year.<sup>8</sup>
16. Then, the more challenging questions typically turn on acknowledging just how diverse a group those stakeholders might be, rather than the finer details of how, more precisely, sustainability is defined. The key is to acknowledge promises the organisation is making by the activities it conducts as well as how they are conducted, starting with what the organisation says it is there to do, for whom, and how, as well as in tangible things that it does (such as paying staff, buying goods and services, leasing premises, and so on).<sup>9</sup> Of course, there are also promises implied by other interactions an organisation has with places, communities, individuals, and so on.

**An organisation is sustainable only to the extent that it can keep its promises to stakeholders and thereby earn their ongoing support - not just today and tomorrow, but next week, next month, and next year.**

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<sup>7</sup> Again, to be completely clear, this is equally true and relevant no matter what the ownership structure might be ([read more](#)).

<sup>8</sup> Stakeholders being very broadly defined - including the whole gamut of supporters, staff, communities served by the organisation, those who contribute funds, and so on.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, that is why reviews such as this characteristically include consideration of financial resourcing and sustainability of that. However, this was specifically excised from this project and we have not been provided with financial information of any kind about the Columbans or the Society: we refer instead to the assurances provided by the Society's Bursar-General to the IRMU Meeting in March 2023 that the finances of the Society are sufficiently in order, with ongoing review and monitoring by professional advisers.



17. For almost any membership based organisation, sustainability turns on a nexus between the fundamental basis of the organisation in membership, promises made to members, and scope for forging and sustaining the membership connection. For example, from a comparative perspective, it is one thing for a shareholder to move on from a commercial entity, but quite another to move on from a membership association. A shareholder is at liberty to go their own way just by selling their shares, severing the connection simply by disposing of their portion of the entity's collective assets. In contrast, for a member of an institution that has shaped a part of their life - perhaps a farming cooperative, or some professional association - a portion of that mutuality cannot be severed, so parting ways unavoidably means any product of their contribution must be abandoned. Losing such an organisational connection, and promises it may have held for one's working life, means losing - and grieving for - some part of one's endeavours over however many years. But in the end, it is still only part of one's life, even if an important one. In stark contrast, the profound organisational connection that an individual has to a religious community, in their lifelong, holistic commitment to vocation, sits at a vastly further remove.
18. But while little in secular life might compare to this all-encompassing commitment, it is not a one way street. A religious community makes a concomitant promise to members, and one that is similarly more profound than arises in secular life, even in a membership based mutuality. At and from the moment of permanent commitment, the promise made to each member by that religious community means sustainability of the institution pivots almost entirely on whether it has, and then maintains, the capacity to honour that promise over the course of their lifetime.
19. Even in the preliminary stages of this project, this perspective made obvious that big steps are ahead if the Society wishes to continue accepting vocations in good conscience.<sup>10</sup> Modelling Society membership showed that its sustainability is quite fragile, meaning there are serious question marks over the Society's capacity to honour its promises to members, in turn implicating the ethics of continuing to accept priestly vocations. These reviews therefore came to centre on exploring sustainability of the Society, because this has predominantly endogenous causes, and so addressing this must be the foundation for whatever comes next.
20. So, one way or another, big steps are necessitated: to choose changes that will prolong the life of the Society by addressing sustainability proactively and effectively, or otherwise to close the Society in a way that is canonically, legally, and ethically sound.



**Don't be afraid to take  
a big step if one is indicated.  
You can't cross a chasm  
in two small jumps.**

*- David Lloyd George*

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<sup>10</sup> In relation to such "big steps", we defer here to the wisdom of David Lloyd George, a social reformer not known to resile from a challenge, who was Prime Minister of the UK at the time when the Columbans were formed.

21. In broad strokes, to perceive of an organisation as sustainable one needs to believe that it can keep its promises by combining three essential ingredients emanating from within:
- a purpose that expresses the existential objective of the organisation,<sup>11</sup> a thematic basis for unified action in an agreed direction - where ideally routine review would show that all activities contribute to that purpose in some fashion or another;
  - the will, or intent, vested first in leadership afforded via institutional arrangements - but then needing to be evident in animating and directing those involved towards pursuing that purpose, even in evolving exogenous circumstances; and
  - the capacity to realise that purpose, enabled by the wherewithal of the organisation, most particularly its people - but where capacity is more than the sum of such parts, and must be brought forth with help from positive leadership.<sup>12</sup>
22. Also brought from within the institution, synergy in combining these things provides best effect, so a strategic review will usefully centre around discussion of purpose, will, and capacity, in terms of what an organisation exists to do, what current activities indicate it intends to do, and what it is seen to do by a wider world - coming together into something of a footprint of outcomes. If sufficiently visible, that footprint is key to inspiring and promoting all kinds of support.
23. From that perspective: what the Columbans exist to do is conveyed by the mission of the Society; what the Society intends to do is put more particularly (but not exclusively) in mission priorities;<sup>13</sup> and what the Society is then seen to do are the everyday actions that others perceive as being emblematic of the Columbans. Those everyday actions underpin Columban capacity to refresh support over time - not least, but also not only, through renewing membership of the Society via vocations to missionary priesthood.
24. Since health of membership circumscribes all future options, the (endogenous) structural issues revealed by modelling and forecasting of future membership must trump all other considerations. This shaped the project because a professionally ethical approach meant being open and frank about this very serious reality. Possible Society closure was thus put at the centre of discussion, analysis working outwards from there to seek options that may ameliorate structural issues and so help to prolong the life of the Society.
25. Conversations needed ahead of GA 2024 thus were pursued by a consultation survey, with questions based on the picture of the Society drawn by modelling and forecasting. A modest point of comparison was obtained from a vocations questionnaire opened to some similar institutions. These elements of the project's work are each discussed below.

## Modelling & forecasting

26. Analysing key features of what the future is likely to hold is inherent in understanding questions about sustaining Columban mission, and some extent of quantitative forecasting of variables is necessary to inform that. However, such analysis need not be especially time consuming or resource intensive. Accurate enough information, still highly impactful for decision making, is obtainable by identifying the most salient things to forecast and combining those with a careful choice of forecasting methodology.

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<sup>11</sup> In secular governance parlance, "purpose" is synonymous with "mission" but that approach is avoided here for obvious reasons.

<sup>12</sup> Again, financing is nearly always a central part of this, but instructed to us as out of scope in this case. We note that this is certainly a novel approach to a strategic analysis, but one that our team accepted - and, ultimately, this has also proven to be inconsequential, as there are far more significant issues on the decision making horizon for the Society.

<sup>13</sup> Which are, of course, still to be read in the wider context of the Catholic Church, including the fundamental obligation to be a missionary disciple and "proclaim the good news" said to be entailed in Christian baptism - see the Apostolic Constitution from Pope Francis: *Predicate Evangelium*: on the Roman Curia and its Service to the Church in the World (The Holy See, 19 March 2022), I [10].

**Institutional arrangements are almost entirely endogenous, while future membership is impacted upon by both endogenous factors and a variety of exogenous factors. Priorities for action in response to challenges should be shaped accordingly: address what can be changed in order to better respond to that which cannot.**

27. For any membership based organisation, there is no more salient question than the shape of the membership itself. In almost every case, therefore, this is the hook from which any future plan must hang for missionary societies and religious institutes.<sup>14</sup>
28. Forecasting membership is open to a range of methodology genres. At one end of the spectrum there are individual plans, and other micro-focussed or “bottom up” approaches, which engage with small groups or individuals, aggregating information thus gleaned to compile an overall picture. Such approaches have advantages in being facts-based and directly addressing those involved, but are quite resource intensive and open to forecast error arising from any and all movement in the details. At the other end of the spectrum there are mathematical, actuarial, and other macro-focussed or “top down” approaches. These work from aggregate, statistical variables combined in a model to project an overall picture, and have the advantage of drawing the picture quite readily. However, they do not directly engage with those involved and analyses remain generalised, even as the picture drawn is still open to forecast error: for example, statistical variables used may not fully reflect important nuances within the whole, or the whole may obscure movement in sub-parts of the larger picture that are impactful as they unfold over time.
29. Since forecast error is impossible to obviate, choosing a methodology involves striking a balance between the analytical effort (and thus resources) necessary to apply a chosen methodology, and the degree of accuracy that a particular methodology may offer. As a further practical refinement, one can also choose to trade off the number of forecasts against their accuracy. That is, to live within a budget of resources for forecasting, one can consider how many forecasts to make versus how much effort to devote to making each individual forecast more accurate. Deciding how many to make can also be simplified just by orienting the periodicity of forecasts to the relevant decision making process.
30. Taking these things together, for modelling the Society membership and forecasting its makeup in the years to come, the approach adopted in this project involves:
  - a “middle path” sociodemographic model, being a variant of demographic modelling (part of the “top down” genre), refined by incorporating social context and relevant trends (taking a few steps towards the “bottom up” genre), since this combination together dials down the propensity for forecast error;<sup>15</sup> and
  - a modest series of forecasts, aligned to timing of membership gatherings for group deliberations and decision making, so here looking out to the next three Columban General Assemblies - GA 2024, GA 2030, and GA 2036.

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<sup>14</sup> With the exceptions most usually being where some form of misconduct or mismanagement has led to dire financial issues emerging to over-power the question of membership (see also n 9 and n12 above).

<sup>15</sup> This is the approach we have used for over 15 years in advising various religious communities and other membership based organisations - to very helpful effect, we are told, and, without wishing to appear immodest, with notable accuracy demonstrated in tracking those forecasts as they have unfolded since.

31. Forecasts show the Society will continue becoming both smaller and older. From over 400 in 2012, there will be around 270 priests in 2024, and still over 200 in 2030, but then just around 160-170 priests by 2036.<sup>16</sup> In parallel, a significant minority, about 40%, of priests was aged 75 years or more in 2012, and over half will be in 2024, but by 2036, over 60%, or nearly two out of every three priests, will be aged 75 years of age or more.<sup>17</sup>
32. These forecasts are summarised in Figure 1, with silhouettes representing approximately 10 ordained Columbans. Having fewer, and older, members marks two significant trends in the Society, but together they lead to a substantive consequence for the Society, in the makeup of those working it: even now, the lion's share of work is in the hands of a rather smaller group of about 200 people, a goodly portion of whom are not Society members.
33. This is shown in Figure 2: the group working for the Society's mission in 2024 will be nearly two-thirds Columban clergy (those aged under 75 years), but over one-third lay missionaries and co-workers. Work of the Society thus is already reliant on some 50 "co-workers", defined in the Society's *Manual of Policy and Procedures* (refer MPP 908) as being "lay employees who hold professional positions of leadership in Columban mission".
34. On the whole, over one-third of those likely to be working for the Society's mission in 2024 will be laity, demonstrating their truly significant contributions.<sup>18</sup> That proportion will continue to tilt further towards laity as demographic trends in the Society continue to unfold (assuming, of course, that lay support continues in future).<sup>19</sup>
35. The Society's configuration then gives rise to two interlocking existential quandaries:
  - sustaining the will behind the Society as first vested in and voiced by leaders, when, as per the signature of member organisations, leaders are drawn from within, which makes size and scope of the member body definitive of what is possible;<sup>20</sup> and
  - sustaining capacity to realise its mission via members hand-in-hand with leaders, noting that many others are already essential to what the Society can do.<sup>21</sup>
36. Initially, the salve for these quandaries is stability in the overall number of members: over time, basic sustainability of a membership body means new members must be at least as numerous as members who are lost, to keep overall numbers stable and commensurate with the established institutional structure.

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<sup>16</sup> In addition to the "unknowns" that are unavoidable in forecasting, there are particular uncertainties about whether a seminarian will eventually join the priesthood - a highly individualised outcome that ought not, in our opinion, be forecast. It is worth noting in this context that Columban records (held by the General Council) covering the last 15 years suggest about one in five seminarians are, ultimately, ordained. This indicates, to our eyes at least, that on present numbers of seminarians, their impact on ordained membership over the long term would be very welcome, but not substantial enough to change the membership dynamics involved.

<sup>17</sup> Throughout this report, and as per established Columban practice about making provision for senior ordained Columbans, 75 is recognised as being the customary age of retirement for ordained Columbans - noting that some continue on mission past this age, while others retire earlier for various reasons.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that this came as no surprise to a significant majority of survey respondents - see Figure 12 and Annex B, Q31.

<sup>19</sup> That is, continues despite issues of a patriarchal structure, clericalism, and clergy misconduct, as discussed in the next section.

<sup>20</sup> Assuming that established practice continues unchanged, however we note that other religious communities continue to find creative ways to care for members and to express their ministries in different models - for example, in Australia the "aggregation" of the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Brisbane with the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in 2009 ([read more](#)), or the more recent, and more broadly based, initiative named the "Emerging Futures Collaborative Limited" ([read more](#)).

<sup>21</sup> Of course, the smooth functioning of the Columban organisation also depends on many other employees who make a valuable contribution in various areas, and not to forget that priests in retirement may well continue at least a partially active ministry.

37. Avoiding downward trend in numbers then is seen when overall size of the member body is sustained over the longer course of years, even if fluctuating modestly from one year to the next. Further, to avoid a “tipping point” where the decline can no longer be reversed, the institutional structure must be amended apace with declining numbers, or it will become unhelpfully “top heavy” and/or internally focussed in comparison to the numbers still engaged outside the institution in pursuit of its purpose.

Figure 1: Long term picture of ordained membership of the Society

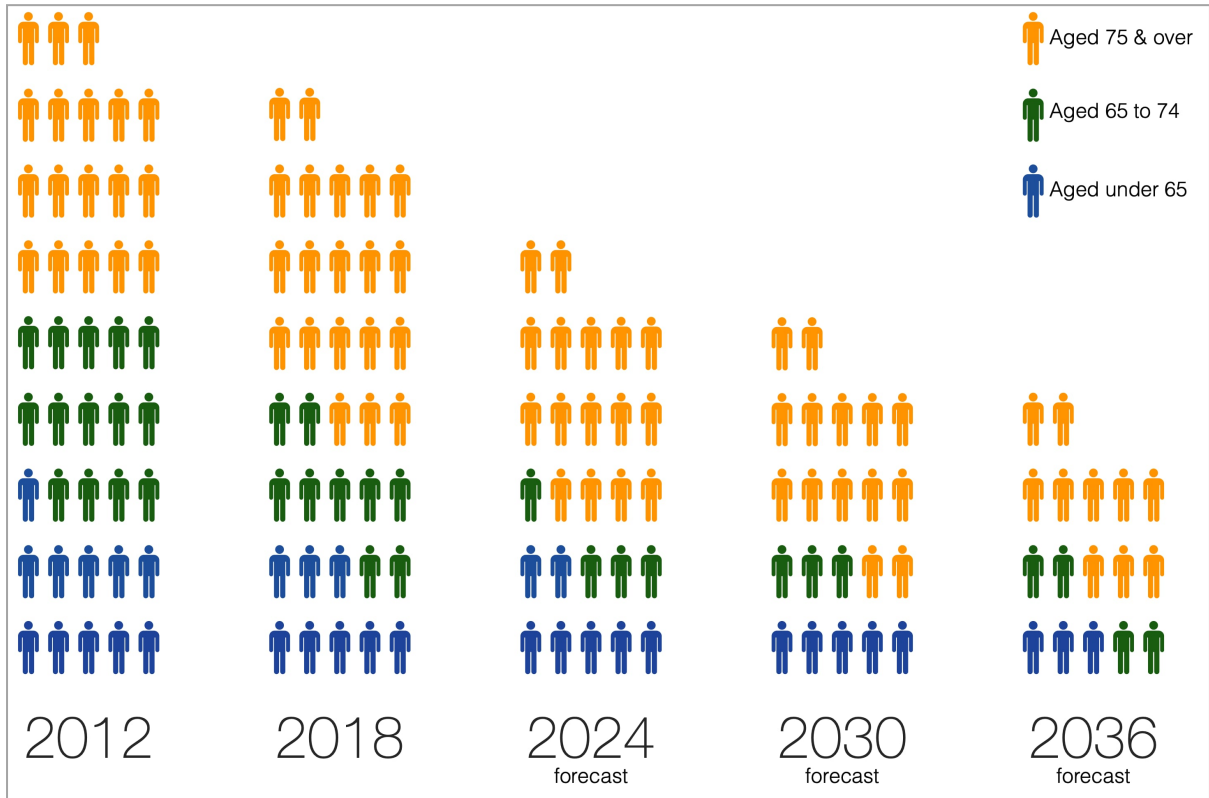
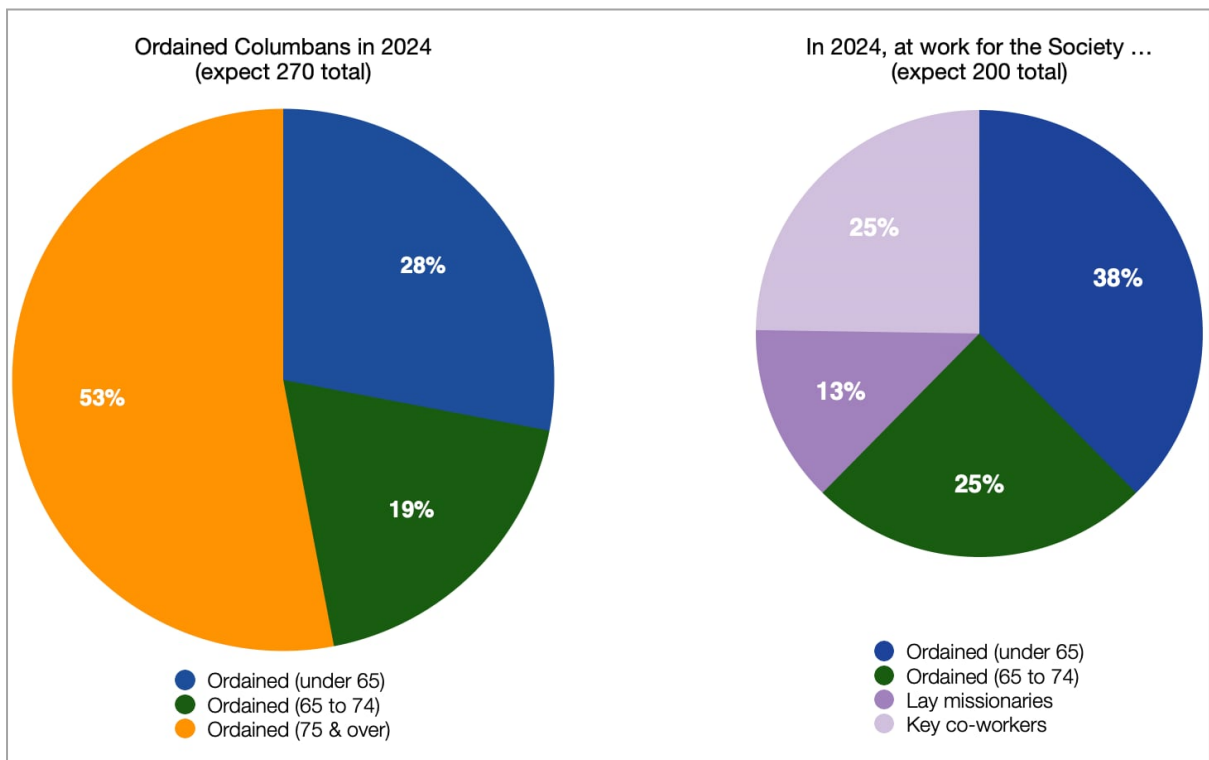


Figure 2: Those engaged in Columban mission



38. If, instead, a downward trend develops, it will be just a matter of time before a minimum sustainable body of members is reached, especially if institutional arrangements are not sufficiently adjusted as membership numbers diminish. What that minimum might be is governed by the object, purpose, and circumstances of the organisation: those largely endogenously determined things about what it is there to do and how it goes about doing that, places in which it has activities, and the extent of support able to be garnered from beyond the membership per se (in lieu of what members might have done).
39. Whether the minimum is at hand in part concerns the extent to which that context is adjusted over time - but another part, and perhaps the more significant portion, concerns the extent to which the organisation continues to manifest capacity to regenerate. Effects of a downward trend being cumulative, capacity is progressively lost as the membership pool becomes increasingly constrained - meaning, not least, that the longer the trend continues the more difficult it will be to address. In particular, arrest of a downward trend calls for having, and continuing to have, members willing and able to attend to refreshing membership - here vocations and formation - which is less likely with smaller numbers.
40. All indications about the Columbans suggest that this level has been reached, or will be very soon, given a downward trend in numbers that has continued unabated for decades. Perhaps more importantly, this has persisted despite efforts to the contrary, and it is this part of the picture that should most concern future leaders - those ordained members presently aged under 65 years - because that group is already, and will continue to be in the future, the primary source of volunteers for working on vocations and formation.
41. Beyond that basic question, membership can be stable but not thriving, which will mean an aging membership itself becomes inevitable. As a consequence, vagaries of individuals' health and longevity mean the prospects for finding enough appropriate candidates for leadership diminishes progressively, to where all must be considered regardless of their suitability for leadership. There is, however, a stark contrast between how these things apply to the general run of membership organisations, and implications for a religious community: individuals have many openings to join membership organisations over the course of a lifetime as their family, work, and interests unfold, but this is simply not so for vocations to religious life. Not only are the opportunities more limited (see later discussion of vocations), they may, or may not, engage individuals with capacity for, and inclination towards, leadership. Canonical arrangements for a religious community thus constrain membership renewal by defining who may aspire to be a member,<sup>22</sup> but also, in turn, function as the principal determinant of the extent of leadership resources available for the organisation in future.<sup>23</sup>
42. Naturally, responding to whatever the world brings to the organisation's door calls for more than just numbers: practical sustainability is seen in how well and productively it can respond to exogenous opportunities and challenges, including by making fruitful adjustments to those things that come from within, endogenously-determined conditions under which it does what it is there to do (being its institutional configuration, leadership arrangements, choice of places in which it works, and so on).

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<sup>22</sup> The Society belongs to the canonical category of clerical Societies of Apostolic Life, and is an exclusively missionary society of pontifical right (*Constitutions* C.101, C.104) comprised of men who are priests, deacons, or laity who take the oath of membership (*Constitutions* C.201) - change to any such parameter would change the nature of the Society, possibly shifting canonical category.

<sup>23</sup> Where options to alter that are also delimited if amending the constitutive arrangements for the community would, in effect, alter its fundamental nature. This is not always the case - some religious communities have found ways to come together without such profound change to their nature - see n20 above. There is also, for example, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG) which was able to be created from no less than 14 previously independent Mercy Congregations and an autonomous region of Mercy Sisters, coming into effect in December 2011 even as three other Mercy congregations in Australia continued as they were ([read more](#)).

43. For a membership organisation, this ability arises from the members via a unique nexus between three things: a purpose that members can articulate about what the organisation exists to do; what the organisation intends to do through present activities, guided by the leadership but still to be animated by the will of the members; and sufficient capacity from engaged and active members that manifests in what the organisation is seen to do - via actual outcomes, and visibility of them - to engage others who may then choose to lend their support to the organisation.
44. For the purposes of Society governance, note that these things are endogenous, being set by internal processes, while the Church proper in this perspective is part of the exogenous context, and beyond control of internal processes. So the Society's purpose is at the behest of its members, albeit contextualised by the external environment of the Church; the will to carry that forward is the sum of intent by members, albeit shaped significantly by their connection to the wider Church; and Columban endeavours and the visibility thereof is set by the extent of their distinctiveness and propagation over time, even though usually seen against the (exogenous) backdrop of the Church and its standing in the wider world.
45. To inform the strategic review in this project thus called for exploring with Columbans what now frames the Society and its mission, and bears upon the interlocking quandaries noted. Ahead of GA 2024, the most practical option in time available was via conducting a consultation survey, as a complement to the sociodemographic modelling and forecasting undertaken as the other main analytical component of these reviews

### Consultation survey

46. When surveys function as a two-way activity - both sharing information via materials that are used to frame questions, and gathering information via participant responses - they entail rather more than a brief feedback form or an opinion poll. The consultation survey was designed this way, as an opportune means to both share what was already apparent from research for this project, and gather reactions in responses as food for thought ahead of important conversations on the way to, at, and from, GA 2024.
47. It bears repeating here that the clear implication of sociodemographic trends is scope for closure to be necessitated in the foreseeable future when Society membership becomes unsustainably smaller and older. The project team felt professionally obliged to ensure that Society members were apprised of this reality in preparing for decisions to be made at GA 2024, and so various pertinent questions were included in the survey.
48. In turn, the project team was particularly concerned for voices and views from across the spectrum to be heard about such important matters that impact upon both Columban mission and the lives of Columbans - but also that such views be heard in balance with each other, both in terms of the attitude that members might have on issues per se, as well as in terms of heeding those views that might possibly differ by age, nationality, cultural background, and so on.

## About the survey and the results

*Annex A includes the text of all questions in the survey; Annex B provides results from each question where responses are amenable to being summarised in a table or a graph.*

*Questions covering respondent demographics are reported by being summarised in a diagram in Annex A. Questions limited to a text responses are not summarised (except in Figure 5).*

49. This was an online survey for due economy in using Columban resources.<sup>24</sup> Participation was invited from a total of 375 persons, including all ordained members, lay missionaries, seminarians, priest associates, and 50 nominated co-workers.<sup>25</sup> The invitation made clear that participation was to be:
- individual, for each person to give their own perspective (as opposed to a consensus view from an RMU, for example), present leaders being enjoined to offer a personal point of view (rather than, for example, seeking to represent those to whom they provide leadership);
  - voluntary, in that each individual could decide to participate or not, plus no survey questions were mandatory (respondents being at liberty to progress to the next question at any time); and
  - anonymous, with anonymity to be preserved in how results are collated, analysed, and reported upon.
50. Originally opened on Monday 3 July 2023, the planned window for responses was three weeks until 24 July 2023. The window was extended for one week, until 31 July 2023, to accommodate Columbans experiencing email issues or being absent while travelling, etc.<sup>26</sup> In the end, the survey elicited 290 responses, amounting to a response rate of over 75% - far beyond what most comparable exercises would typically see. This leaves no practical doubt that aggregated responses are sufficiently representative to inform project findings.
51. It is well worth noting from the outset that, consistent with the makeup of the Society, over two-thirds of those responding were priests, and over half had been a Columban for at least 25 years. However, we hasten to add that views expressed were *not* noticeably aligned to any particular variable (age, for example), but instead were diverse within and between age groups as much as one would anticipate given the multifaceted nature of the group of those responding - in various combinations of sociodemographic factors such as national and cultural background, age, time on mission, and so on.
52. Interestingly, for example, some of the most open and embracing views were expressed by the very elderly, while some of the most restrictive actually emanated from those under 50 - but also vice versa, where elder members were highly averse to some changes that might well be championed by younger members. We note here that it is not unusual to find that greater diversity of opinion is expressed under conditions of anonymity, this being one of the reasons for this provision in exercises such as this survey.
53. Our analysis of relevant data indicated no sufficiently clear causal relationships on which decisions could reasonably be based. Hence, summaries such as Figure 7 below are far more reliable as a summary of viewpoints expressed, and so function much more usefully to inform considerations at GA 2024. To be very clear, based on data from the consultation survey causal relationships are inconclusive due to the diversity/divergence of views in any slice of the respondent group, so we urge great caution in generalising by age group or other sociodemographic factors.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The survey was offered only in English, but that was not for the want of seeking other options - these did not prove to be practical, however, in the time available when constrained by the scheduling of pre-GA RMU meetings/conferences (from September 2023).

<sup>25</sup> That is, nominated by RMU leaders - who were invited to make such nominations at their discretion in light of the definition of co-workers in MPP 908. All of those nominated by an RMU leader were included in the invitation distributed to elicit participation.

<sup>26</sup> While preserving the individual approach to the survey, steps were also taken to facilitate accessibility for those less confident or less familiar with using IT generally, or online instruments more specifically, and also for those less confident to work in English. Further, in terms of analysing responses, various text responses to open-ended questions were received in languages other than English - which were translated and then incorporated into the relevant question data.

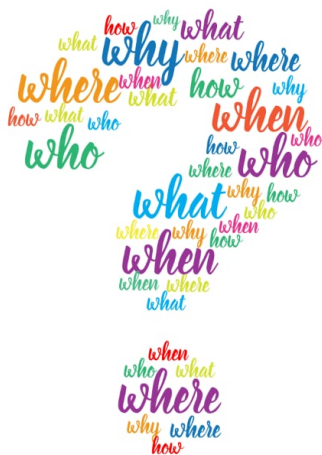
<sup>27</sup> Just to confirm: publishing cross-tabulation of results was not possible while maintaining anonymity of respondents.



Views expressed were quite diverse within and between age groups and across culture, nationality, and so on: the youngest and eldest members are, for example, perfectly aligned on some things, diametrically opposed on others.

**On the whole, sociodemographic characteristics do not serve to indicate viewpoints held by Columbans.**

54. To assist in grappling with the complexities and nuances of the subject matter, the survey was designed using an analytical device helpful in probing alternative future scenarios. It is commonly used in sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and sociolegal analytical work, where one simply asks what the future will look like if nothing (or not enough) is done in the face of major changes, including those that are already unfolding. The question thus providing a logical backbone here was: *What happens for the Columbans if “things remain as they are”?*
55. To take an example, sustaining pursuit of a mission inescapably calls for resourcing - most particularly including the hands and feet, hearts and minds, of all those who support the Columbans in so many ways. While this includes ordained members and lay missionaries, seminarians, priest associates, and co-workers, the first consideration is what happens if current trends in ordained membership and vocations continue as they are? All else will follow in the wake of this since the Society is a membership based organisation.
56. From there, hope springs eternal but opportunity for action in the face of change is not so enduring, and likely even less so for responsible and productive action in the face of major change. This makes timing central to digesting the probable consequences of where things stand, and where they will stay, if “things remain as they are” - with the Society retreating further from view in contrast to decades past when many hundreds of ordained members and many dozens of lay missionaries were engaged in a multitude of ministries.
57. Recalling the intent to both share and gather information in this exercise, with a view to fresh life having opportunities to flourish for the Society over many years to come, the subject matter in the consultation survey was therefore organised under three headings as follows:



**What happens if “things remain as they are”?**

- project team

- **Realities now for GA 2024:** those most pressing issues needing specific outcomes from GA 2024. Beyond engagement with mission priorities, conversations that need immediate priority are about the size and shape of the Society, since the impacts of its current limitations are already evident in areas such as leadership and vocations.
- **Pathways to new realities for GA 2030:** these are conversations that need to start sooner rather than later if sound strategic plans are to emerge from GA 2024, especially because implementation needs to be realised well ahead of GA 2030. Importantly, making progress that is both tangible and timely may afford the Society opportunity to function effectively as an organisation in the service of mission well beyond just another decade or so. Therefore a sufficient response will need to name specific tasks to be undertaken by the General Council elected for 2024-2030, but this must also be based on members proactively putting aside any assumption that “things are going to remain as they are”.
- **Eventualities on the agenda for GA 2036:** the Society must confront some very serious issues eventually, but membership trends and forecasts show “eventually” will come much sooner if “things remain as they are”. On the other hand, if members are open to change and can come together to initiate fresh and concerted efforts, particularly towards initiatives that are visible to the wider community, it may well be possible to defer when “eventually” will arrive. As urged from this project, such direction must actually come to fruition, otherwise managing to closure will become an unavoidable GA agenda item. Modelling and forecasting show that this will be as soon as GA 2036, unless substantial organisational change is duly realised. This is a direct consequence of Society demographics and how they interact with due time that is required to comply, and be seen to comply, with canon law and secular law (in multiple jurisdictions), and ensuring duly ethical treatment of all concerned.

58. In terms of the approach taken in designing the survey, questions took multiple forms but the significant majority employed a Likert scale.<sup>28</sup>
59. A Likert scale is a device commonly used in social science to gauge subjective attitudes (or perceptions, or viewpoints, etc) across a group.<sup>29</sup> This facilitates aggregation of responses into a synopsis, to illustrate the group’s overall attitudinal standing on an issue.<sup>30</sup>
60. A typical approach to using a Likert scale involves assigning a nominal value to each response option, combining these across all responses, and interpreting that combination to form a balanced summary of how things are placed at that point in time, place, and circumstances.

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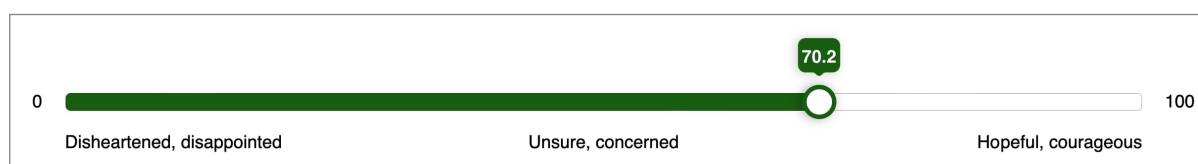
<sup>28</sup> The main approach was consistent with the mode of a classic Likert scale - ranging, for example, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, or similar when contextualised by the question. Within this, a small number of questions used a “modified” Likert scale - meaning an option such as “don’t know” was included. Note again that no questions were required to be completed, and, indeed, the number of responses elicited does vary from question to question, and between sub-parts of multi-part questions - see Annex B.

<sup>29</sup> For those interested to know more, see this overview intended for the general reader - Susan Jamieson ‘Likert scale’, *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Britannica, July 2023) ([read more](#)). In particular, Jamieson notes that: ‘Deciding which descriptive and inferential statistics may legitimately be used to describe and analyze the data obtained from a Likert scale is a controversial issue.’ Accordingly, for clarity we confirm that our approach is confined to interpretation of results in terms of their directionality and ordinal frequency among respondents - we do not make use of descriptive or inferential statistical analyses of responses.

<sup>30</sup> And, in particular, without making the report spin around exhaustively tabulating the responses, a type of reporting that can prove to be inaccessible for the general reader. That said, we confirm that, consistent with the survey’s anonymity provisions, all responses to questions able to be tabulated are captured in Annex B, for those who are comfortable in accessing information in that form.

61. If responses are exactly equally divided among “agree” and “disagree”, for example, this is fairly interpreted as the group being “neutral” overall.<sup>31</sup> This approach allows capturing a full range of views, and is quite distinct from calculating a numerical “average” response.<sup>32</sup>
62. Beginning below under the heading of *Findings*, data from the survey proper is set out to inform all Columbans and to aid in conversations that are integral to the process of preparing for GA 2024. Ahead of that, looking at the results from one question illustrates how those responding to the survey interacted with this part of the project’s research.
63. Learning about and engaging with challenges ahead of the Society, via materials presented in the survey, had potential to be disconcerting for participants to contemplate. Sensible to this, for our part in the process we welcomed, and then acted upon, a suggestion for the substance of the survey to conclude with an opportunity to express one’s outlook at that point in time.<sup>33</sup> The questions designed in response to that suggestion were two-fold: a simple way for respondents to register their outlook, plus an open-ended question for text responses.
64. To simply take stock of how they were feeling before submitting their survey, respondents could first use a quantitative device in the form of a slider - set on a scale from 0 to 100, with the default setting being 50. Since all but a very small handful of survey participants did use the slider, an average score was valid to calculate here: Figure 3 depicts the slider with the numerically average result, being 70.2. This indicates that those responding were, on the whole as a group, in quite a positive frame of mind after completing the survey.
65. For a little more texture, all slider scores and accompanying comments were reviewed, revealing slider scores were deliberate choices in three main ranges. This is illustrated by scores being summarised in groups as depicted in Figure 4 (overleaf), suggesting plenty of scope for positive work to emanate from discussion of the survey - despite its somewhat dour focus on potential for Society closure.
66. The second, qualitative opportunity was for survey participants to express their main thought after working through the survey, perhaps in around 50 to 100 words. This resulted in nearly 14,000 words in responses offered by more than 240 respondents, in fact ranging in length from a single word to short essays.

Figure 3: After the survey - the slider average



<sup>31</sup> For an abundance of clarity, our approach is most definitely *not* an exercise in reducing views expressed to a number or a score, nor of ignoring the less frequently-occurring (or less “popular”) views. In actuality, the approach centres around the desire to encompass all responses in an overall picture of opinion that is both balanced and digestible.

<sup>32</sup> Which may - even if expressed as a statistical mean, mode, or median value - still hover unfortunately close to being *perceived* as just being the most popular or most frequently heard views/opinions/sentiments etc.

<sup>33</sup> We note that the initial suggestion came from the project’s reference group, as did various contextualised insights - our project team found these most helpful in obtaining best effect from bringing to bear our governance expertise and experience with membership based organisations. In particular, we are most grateful for the unintrusive way in which the group offered their insights without in any way abridging the independence of the two reviews being conducted by our team.



69. As is self-evident, the single most common sentiment proffered by respondents was some form of appreciation, gratitude, or thankfulness, for the opportunity presented by the survey - again suggesting fertile ground for future discussion of these matters.
70. Lest this appear self-serving to highlight, we hasten to observe that not only is the credit largely due to the IRMU Meeting for its recommendations leading to this project, but also that it is the surrounding comments that provide some informative (albeit not statistically robust) insights to ponder further in preparing for GA 2024.
71. Also, lest this feature seem to arise more from simple courtesy of respondents, we note that comments on reasons for being “thankful” paralleled the spectrum of views evident across the survey in the text responses to open-ended questions. While generally tending towards warm and hopeful, views expressed ranged from positive and/or optimistic to resoundingly negative and/or pejorative: for example, from lauding openness in this frank and informative engagement on challenging issues, through to seeing this as another example of leadership seeking to manipulate the Society towards undue pessimism and closure; from seeing associated discussion as flying in the face of authentic respect for divine guidance, through to embracing this exercise as an entirely legitimate, and suitably inspired, component of discernment and preparation towards GA 2024 and beyond.
72. As secular outsiders, it is not for us to assess those ideas per se. However, we do take this as confirmation that our advice on designing the survey was well-placed. We advised that, rather than being for some subset or selected group, the survey should be quite an open exercise. That advice was accepted with alacrity, so for our part we applaud that decision for enabling the consultation survey to proceed as it did.
73. This seems an opportune moment to reiterate the unencumbered approach via which this entire assignment was undertaken. In particular, to again confirm our independence in advising about how to proceed in the reviews, and the detailed subject matter to traverse. This advice is the product of our genuine respect for Columban mission and considerable previous experience of what it is necessary to understand, acknowledge, and work with, when sincerely seeking a new lease of life for a membership based organisation.
74. To that end, we note that the second most frequently expressed insight from respondents was around “hopeful preparation” for what lies ahead at GA 2024

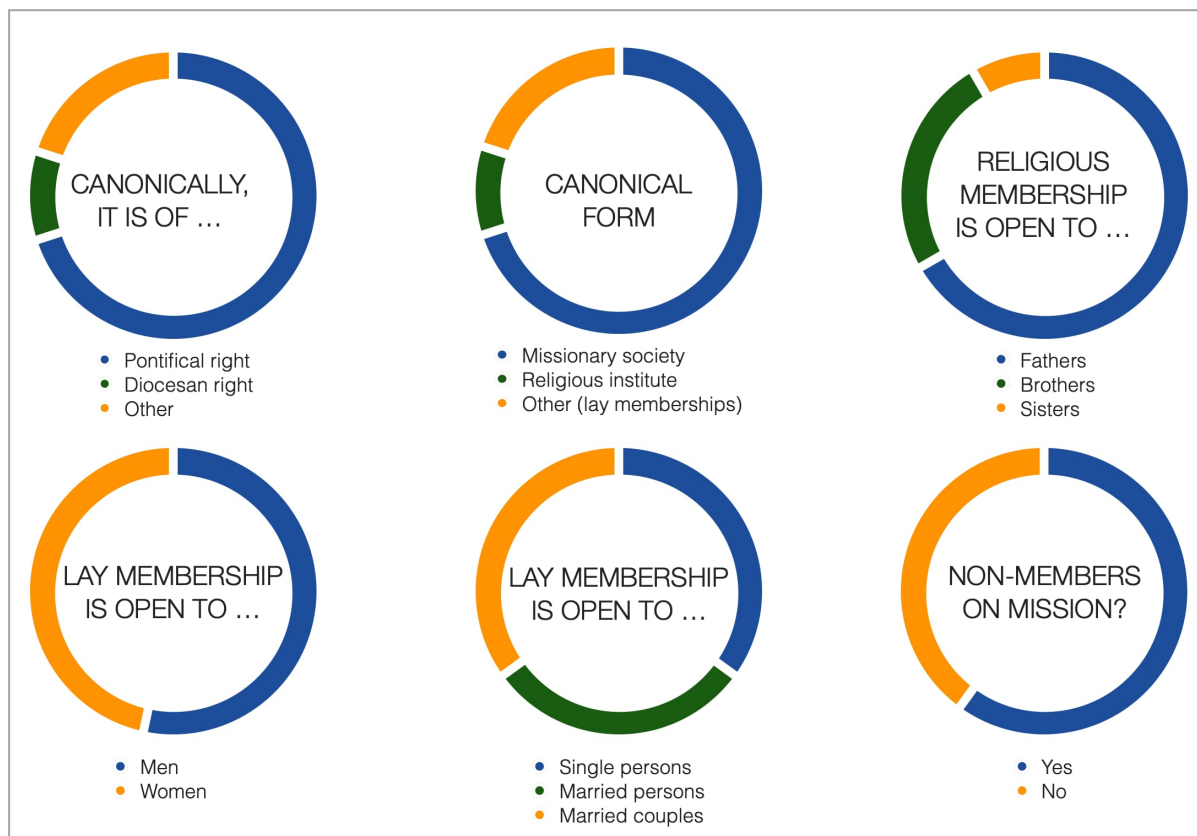
## Questionnaire

75. The final research element in this project was a modest enquiry re congregational plans in other institutions.
76. In October 2023, ten missionary societies/similar institutions were invited to participate in a short questionnaire on trends in vocations and formation, on the basis that responses would be kept confidential.
77. All those invited did indeed complete the questionnaire.<sup>34</sup>
78. Noting that each institution conducts missionary activities in various places and together this covers most of the world’s less developed countries (including where the Columbans are active), organisational arrangements reported are summarised in Figure 6 (overleaf).

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<sup>34</sup> The text of all questions is provided at Annex C. To facilitate involvement of institutions operating in similar parts of the world to the Columbans, time was invested by members of the General Council in translating the survey into Spanish and Korean, and this appears to have been time very well spent.

Figure 6: Summary of organisational arrangements for respondent institutions



79. This quantum of respondents produces results that may be generally informative for the matters at hand, but it is insufficient to be amenable to statistical analysis. Any greater specification of responses than is shown here would also tend to abrogate the undertaking of confidentiality that was a condition of these institutions participating in the exercise.
80. Accordingly, while sufficient to provide a sense of comparable reality with other relevant institutions, nothing should be extrapolated from the collected anecdotal material. That said, the Society should take comfort in our assessment that all responses from these other institutions reflected experiences that were consistent with that of the Columbans.
81. For example, at first glance, a point of departure from the Columbans might be observed around the inclusion of women or laity in those eligible for membership. However, careful reading of all responses does not indicate there is a relevant causal link to explore further: all had broadly similar experiences with vocations over the last two decades or so, and those experiences were definitely in line with that of the Columbans. Each made broadly similar comments about challenges ahead on this, many of which were also noted by the consultation survey respondents (again, spanning age groups, cultures and so on).<sup>35</sup> As expected in a small data set, there was thus no discernible pattern on causality to suggest that one approach is more recommendable than another. In particular, opening up the opportunity for life on mission to women and/or laity certainly does expand the group from which potentially interested persons might be drawn, but that it is not enough of a response on vocations: experiences reported in the questionnaire did not suggest it could be definitive or determinative in resolving membership dilemmas.
82. Rather than statistical analysis,<sup>36</sup> some thematic observations provide perspective for the Columban experience from contemporaneous experiences of comparable organisations.

<sup>35</sup> See also later section on vocations.

<sup>36</sup> Again, this would be potentially misleading due to the small number of participant organisations involved in the questionnaire.

83. In terms of membership, experiences were diverse and without a discernible pattern, but still broadly in line with the Columban trend to a smaller membership:
- Around 2010, only two of the 10 organisations had increasing membership; in 2023 both of those were said to now have stable rather than increasing member numbers.
  - Three had stable membership in 2010, and this was still the case reported for 2023.
  - Five were already experiencing a decreasing trend in 2010, and this continued in 2023 - a couple also seeing the impact of aging to make decreases more marked.
84. In terms of vocations, all were reported to be accepting vocations in 2023, although some noted this has become a topic of discernment, debate, or other discussion. In terms of challenges ahead, common points raised in multiple responses include that:
- Vocations “outreach” is now a key feature of leadership activities - whereas in the past (for some, a more distant past), persons with a possible vocation tended to find the institution, now much more proactive effort is required for the institution to find those persons.
  - Similarly, various leadership teams, and several of the membership bodies, had seen debate on the places from which the institution was prepared to accept vocations, with a spread of rules and arrangements aligned to the mission of each institution. None was consistently or definitively associated with easing challenges in relation to vocations.
  - Inter-congregational cooperation, as a way of meeting evolving realities, is an active discussion in several places.
  - In formation, a generation gap was evident, but much more so a cultural divide that required considerable attention to bridge.
85. In terms of institutional structure, the main theme was the necessity of continuing to respond to change in the surrounding environment, and doing so at a pace commensurate with that external change. At one time or another, that pace had proven to be challenging for most of the institutions responding - again consistent with the Columban experience.
86. Even if only modestly more than anecdotal evidence, overall responses did show one very clear theme: the less kind the environment is for those with a potential vocation to find their way to a religious community, the more necessary it is for each community to do what is needful to find those individuals.
87. Taken on the whole of responses in the vocations questionnaire, the point on the necessity of vocations “outreach” was the single most compelling issue raised, noting that this was raised in some form or another by all respondents.

**Opening up opportunity for life on mission to women or laity is not enough of a response to challenges on vocations: experience of like institutions does not suggest it could be definitive in resolving membership dilemmas. Rather, visibility in the community and vocations “outreach” must necessarily be a key point of focus for leaders.**

88. The footprint of the institution being quite visible in the community, and leaders bending their efforts to “outreach”, thus are both crucial - something for those under 65, the future leaders of the Society, to have very much at front of mind as a point of focus in planning. A weather eye to doing these things in ways that are positively encompassing (rather than patriarchal and clericalist) would also be well-advised.

## Findings

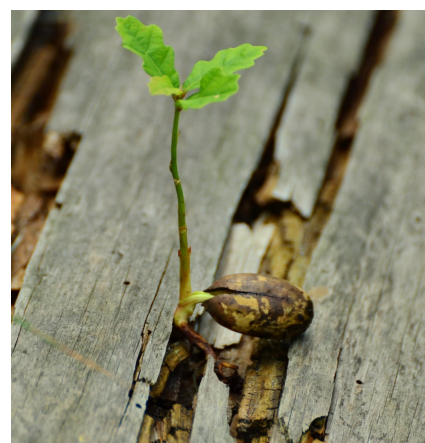
89. This overview concludes with findings, being overarching observations from the project. The next two sections address the two review questions comprising this project, including presentation of and commentary about related portions of the consultation survey and the vocations questionnaire, before the *Openings* section addresses principal options and choices necessary to be made based on learnings from this project.

### The Society’s overall future

90. In the end, this report does not break ground in attending to the changing size and age profile of the Columbans, and the need to respond to that change to prolong the future of the Society. Acts of General Assemblies, going back to at least 1994,<sup>37</sup> have mentioned this issue, and responses to the consultation survey confirm that this is lodged in the memory of a majority of Columbans (albeit to a lesser extent among the more recently ordained).
91. This project did, more importantly, show this as a pressing reality: put bluntly, Society membership is now so much smaller and older it an existential question, because doubt is cast on the Society’s ability and capacity to keep its promises even to its own members. Supporting the lifelong commitment of ordained missionaries directly implicates the ethics of continuing to accept priestly vocations, but also the practicality of continuing to accept lay vocations.<sup>38</sup> We also note that there is something of a dearth of Columbans who are willing to take responsibility for fostering vocations, as per their responses to the consultation survey (refer Figure 19 later in this report).
92. While properly addressing these pressing realities did tend to focus on potential closure - in the survey, for example - there are two overarching observations to note on this.

**We must accept finite disappointment  
but never lose infinite hope.**

- Martin Luther King Jr



<sup>37</sup> Missionary Society of St Columban *Choosing Life: Preparing for Columban Mission in the Twenty First Century* (Acts of the Columban General Assembly, Santiago, Chile, 17 October - 18 November, 1994); Missionary Society of St Columban *Columban Mission in the Third Millennium* (Acts of the Columban General Assembly, Sydney, Australia, 8 October - 8 November, 2000); Missionary Society of St Columban *Strong and Courageous* (Acts of the General Assembly of the Missionary Society of Saint Columban, Dalian Park, Ireland, 2006); Missionary Society of St Columban *Called to Communion* (Acts of the Columban General Assembly, Los Angeles, USA, 26 August - 21 September, 2012); Missionary Society of St Columban *Transitioning for Columban Mission* (Acts of the General Assembly of the Missionary Society of St Columban, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Noting again that financial matters were beyond the scope of this work.



**Those responding to the consultation survey were, on the whole, reluctant to be charged with fostering vocations to Columban priesthood or to lay missionary service, despite being in no doubt about the importance of this to the future of the Society and its mission.**

93. First, this approach has also had the effect of shaking out very clearly the positive options that remain open for prolonging the life of the Society, but these all call for choices about institutional arrangements of the Society. The options are not numerous, and, it must be said, are somewhat hobbled by a patriarchal structure many in the wider community would see as asynchronous with a contemporary, human rights-based view of leadership, along with unhelpful legacies of clericalism and the Church's reputational woes from clergy misconduct (as discussed further later in this report).
94. However, available options still do, in the opinion of the project team, represent a practical set of choices that the members of the Society might make at and from GA 2024.
95. Second, there is more to realising beneficial effect of such change than the formal process of choosing among options. Authenticity of those changes needs also to be demonstrated in the extent to which the Society is less patriarchal and/or clericalist, which would be seen, for example, in genuine accountability and effective partnerships being in evidence across the Columban endeavour.
96. In fact, we would suggest that the more fundamental shift is needed in what others in the community see the Columbans doing: their perceptions of how ministries are conducted, and are seen to be conducted, defines for the community what it means to be Columban, including how appealing that is as something they may choose to support (in vocations or on a wider front). Future sustainability is thus almost entirely in the hands of those the community will encounter knowing them to be Columbans - largely Society members still in the fullness of working life (and so most likely priests aged under 65 years).
97. Thus, this report places, perforce, primary focus on institutional arrangements that will be subject to related decisions and planning at and from GA 2024, but we note, however, that those decisions will matter little if real change in day to day Columban working practice is not in evidence to the wider world.

## Leadership

98. It is not clear the Society actually has capacity to continue as it is. Providing for sufficient leadership for the Society from within the membership base is particularly difficult, when the need is to simultaneously:
- meet the overall leadership needs of the Society in its present configuration;
  - meet canonical, legal, ethical, and other obligations that are inherent in maintaining a sufficient standard of governance;
  - provide a suitable coterie of leaders able to foster vocations and provide ongoing formation for both Columbans and aspiring Columbans (clergy or laity); and
  - animate mission and ministry among a thriving body of members and supporters.

99. We hasten to add that it is not the sterling efforts of previous leaders that are the question. The question is an intersection of challenges the Society must now contend with: an older and smaller membership from within which to find suitable and willing leaders in future, further limited by impact on potential vocations from contemporary views re patriarchal arrangements that are not infrequently attended by clericalism, in an external atmosphere tinged by ongoing publicity about clergy misconduct.<sup>39</sup>
100. Significantly, having “enough” leaders has already been challenging for the Society (seen in recalling, or “recycling” leaders to serve again). Consequently, all choices available to the Society involve rescoping arrangements to reduce what “enough” means, then working to cut one’s cloth as best as possible, to avoid the risk of having no shirt at all.

## Membership

101. Membership circumscribes the Society’s potential leadership, because as a membership organisation, leadership must be found from within. It is fundamental to the Society’s capacity for realising mission, bringing mission priorities to fruition over time, but also in refreshing support and reinforcing sustainability by those the Society joins to its cause - lay missionaries, co-workers, and others who support the Columban charism and works.
102. As already discussed, the Society’s membership has been changing from times when the Society had many hundreds of members and many dozens of lay missionaries to create a large footprint of activities in many countries and a multitude of ministries. Crucially, a moment for responding to that change, and doing so effectively - available in 1994 and perhaps for some years after - now hovers on the very edge of passing the Columbans by.
103. Beyond GA 2024, there will be no more second chances as membership is progressively more unsustainable. So one obvious option for change is to do what seems to be necessary to seek a more lively inflow of members, but, at this stage of the membership trajectory, ethics about doing so are interconnected with the question of the Society’s sustainability, in something of a Gordian knot. To be clear, the question is not *can the Society continue?* It can because members and supporters would continue to be Columban wherever they might be, until their last day if needed. The real question is *should the Society continue as it is?* Given genuine doubt about the Society’s ability to keep promises entailed in accepting vocations to missionary priesthood, *is it ethical to do so?*
104. Together these things mean if members wish to see a more hopeful picture on revivifying the Society for the future, action is first needed to stabilise membership. Consistent with similar institutions, this dynamic has shifted from potential members finding their way to the Columbans’ door, to where the Society must proactively seek to find those individuals in the community who may be amenable to missionary priesthood with the Columbans. Quintessentially, vocations “outreach” is a leadership function, and an intricate, nuanced, and time consuming one at that. Choices therefore must be made about use of leadership resources - both clerical and lay persons - revolving around other roles competing to use a finite coterie of clerical leaders available within the Society. Alternative uses of clerical leaders are largely a function of the structure of the Society, making this the most likely place where change could provide openings for more hopeful options for the Society.

**The main choice at hand is doing what is necessary to revivify the Society, or allowing that it has run its course and so should be let pass into history.**

<sup>39</sup> Comments to that effect would be apt from external observation, but also surfaced in the consultation survey.

**The mission unit offers significant potential as a basis for institutional structure - but questions arise about what should fit into, around, or between mission units, and how many will thrive in the likely future reality of the Society.**

105. That said, respondents to the consultation survey were, on the whole, quite reluctant to be charged with fostering vocations to Columban priesthood or lay missionary service, despite there being no doubt about the importance of this to the future of the Society and its mission.

## Structure

106. As has already been discussed, demographics of the Society are at, or rapidly closing on, the point of no return for reframing the Society and its governance, leadership and other institutional arrangements. Importantly, this speaks not so much to modest numbers of vocations and slim additions to the Society's membership over the last 15 years, and more to intertwined trends that have played out over a very much longer time horizon: pan-social and inter-generational trends away from religious affiliation, as well as away from marriage (taking this as a broadly indicative form of long term or life commitment).
107. From an external perspective, consequences of such trends intersect in the organisational structure of the Society: this was suitable for a much larger missionary endeavour, but now lags behind in adjusting to realities of the present scale of membership. One way and another over decades, the Society's structure has not been sufficiently adjusted in the face of change around the Society. The result is a structure that now appears as an overburden, even as managing the anxieties that come with change has tended to make discussion of further change somewhat vexed and, in turn, rather too internally-focussed.
108. To take a re-energised focus on external issues - such as a progressively smaller Society being less and less visible to the world at large - the practical option is to re-structure the Society to be more in keeping with the present scope of membership. This would also have the virtue of creating some space for leadership to undertake proactive initiatives to address vocations and other externally-focussed initiatives. This change has potential to bear fruit in the short to medium term. On the other hand, the structure of the Society cannot be bolstered by any material change on membership until later;<sup>40</sup> where renewed effort on that will not soon bear fruit in the form of ordinations, for example, and that it is hardly a process to be rushed. So the membership must decide whether putting more energy into seeking vocations is an appropriate initiative, but having options to divert leadership to that purpose means first reducing the load already upon them - not least to afford the necessary extent of energy and commitment to external communications about the Columbans required to give such initiatives reasonable chances of bearing fruit.
109. To such ends, there are options to "catch up" on the Society's configuration: leaving aside the hierarchical structure of regions, the mission unit idea is still a very useful construct, with good prospects for continuing to provide the basis for an institutional structure for the Society - one that is both workable now and sustainable for the future. For example, centring the Society's institutional arrangements on mission units, without the regional structure overburden, could make a real difference to sustainability. Important things to consider on this include:

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<sup>40</sup> An assessment which seems to be confirmed by experiences reported in the vocations questionnaire - see later section.

- Congruent with the recent initiatives of Francis, a mission unit can, at least in theory, have a Coordinator who is lay or ordained, a woman or a man - meaning it could be built upon to sustainable purpose without canonical change being necessitated.
  - Calling for a less all-encompassing set of skills and abilities would potentially open up the Coordinator role to a wider range of people: this is possible already because this role carries less weight of responsibility than does that of Regional Director, the Superior General of the Society functioning as the Major Superior for mission units.
  - Those in the role of Coordinator are intended to remain engaged in the field, as well as in the leadership ministry, and again, this is a more inviting prospect for a wider range of people than a role devoted only to leadership matters may be.
  - As far as it actually works - and is seen to work - in daily practice, this approach to leading mission units could show less patriarchal and clericalist approaches, instead evidencing mutuality in decision making by lay and ordained missionaries together.
110. The actual effect of daily practice is, however, crucial to whether greater propagation of mission units would really improve the sustainability of the Society - again linking back to the IRMU recommendation about effective partnerships. Further, how mission units might be arranged to best interact with the world in furtherance of the Society's purpose is another, more complicated question. Important aspects include:
- If regions, and the role of the Regional Director, were taken out of the institutional structure entirely, what elements of that role would still need to be incumbent upon the Superior General, and is this a reasonable scope of work to address? If not, how might the Superior General be assisted as needed (without taking up the extent of leadership resources presently implicated in the regional structure)?
  - Even without overburden from a more hierarchical structure, how many mission units can be sustained? In effect, this implicates the question of how many places of mission the Society can expect to sustain, in the present and likely future reality of member numbers.
  - Noting that single country mission units could engender local connections to very beneficial effect, what new or additional arrangements would provide for genuine accountability on mission and then help mission units to work coherently together as the Society (without the regional structure)?
111. Putting aside, for the moment, issues of ethics already discussed on accepting vocations, the key question is thus how to apply available leadership resources to best effect - where these ideas about building up from a basis of mission units is one example of that.
112. From observation and analysis in this project, it is abundantly clear that the configuration of the Society is the single most influential determinant of the quantum of leaders needed. To prolong the life of the Society and continue its mission, making different choices thus is essential to go forward managing those resources more sustainably (where dispensing with the regional structure is but one option). Beyond some form of restructuring, this speaks to mission priorities and leadership of them, but also to having a firmly articulated intent to approach vocations with the renewed sense of vigour and extent of "outreach" that is required.
113. Within the current scope of membership, and without changing the fundamental nature of the Society,<sup>41</sup> all options here involve *devoting those best suited to clerical leadership to the highest priority things that only clerical leaders can do*, by some combination of:

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<sup>41</sup> See notes 20, 22, and 23, above.

- a. redrawing institutional arrangements to put more focus on the external-facing leadership needs (not least, animating mission with the wider community and thereby also facilitating the fostering of vocations); and/or
  - b. redefining other clerical roles in places of mission to be more amenable to a broader scope of possible leaders from among members, including via taking a local community focus rather than (necessarily) involving the burden of exercising canonical authority in Society decision making processes; and/or
  - c. more fully and sincerely incorporating laity into decision making processes of the Society, by defining different and/or additional leadership roles that need not implicate exercise of canonical authority, and thus showing that there is a great deal more to the Columban way of being than might be expected from a patriarchal base and the clericalism often associated with that.
114. The *Openings* section further mentions options to continue the Society's mission and ministries in synchronicity with direction for the Church set by Pope Francis in *Predicate Evangelium*. These have some potential to offset the patriarchal structure inherent in the canonical form the the Society takes; done in a spirit of collegiality, these would progress towards genuine accountability, and greater openness and transparency in governance, which together provide prophylaxis for misconduct of all kinds.
115. That said, restructuring internal arrangements of the Society is just another challenge in a long list of those through the Society's heritage. As an organisation of mission priests, the Society has evolved considerably since it was first established - geographical refocussing over the years alone is testimony to collective ability of Columbans to realign the Society to new realities in being "pilgrims for Christ".
116. In comparison, internal change to prolong the life of the Society should not be so difficult, even if it requires individuals to let go of a place of comfort to which they have become accustomed so as to better address Columban mission with renewed energy, authenticity, and heart.

## Mission

117. As much as reconsidering how best to arrange and lead the Society as an organisation, desire to prolong the life of the Society also calls for members to make a fresh expression of mission - to which members and others might commit in an open-minded and open-hearted way. Further, in support of aspirations to continue accepting vocations, it will be necessary to choose ways in which to gather together what makes their mutual efforts visible - in effect, to both update the nature of the Society's footprint, and create a freshly-lit beacon to make more visible what in that footprint is characteristically Columban.
118. Even at the preliminary stages of this project, it was evident that choices on this could put the Society on profoundly different pathways: either for renewal of the Society per se to continue its mission and ministries, or for these to be continued in the Church without the Society itself - or, indeed, if things are left to remain as they are, for the Society and its works to wither slowly but surely to where they are no longer.
119. Accordingly, the consultation survey was designed to include questions that would unpack these ideas, and the responses are central to the summative diagrams placed through the balance of this report. For example, Figure 7 below collates responses about individual view points on life as a Columban. While there are likely few surprises in seeing where any of these synopses land, food for thought does arise in what this suggests about the role of the RMU structure in Columban identity, and, similarly, what impact changing ministry activities over time might have.

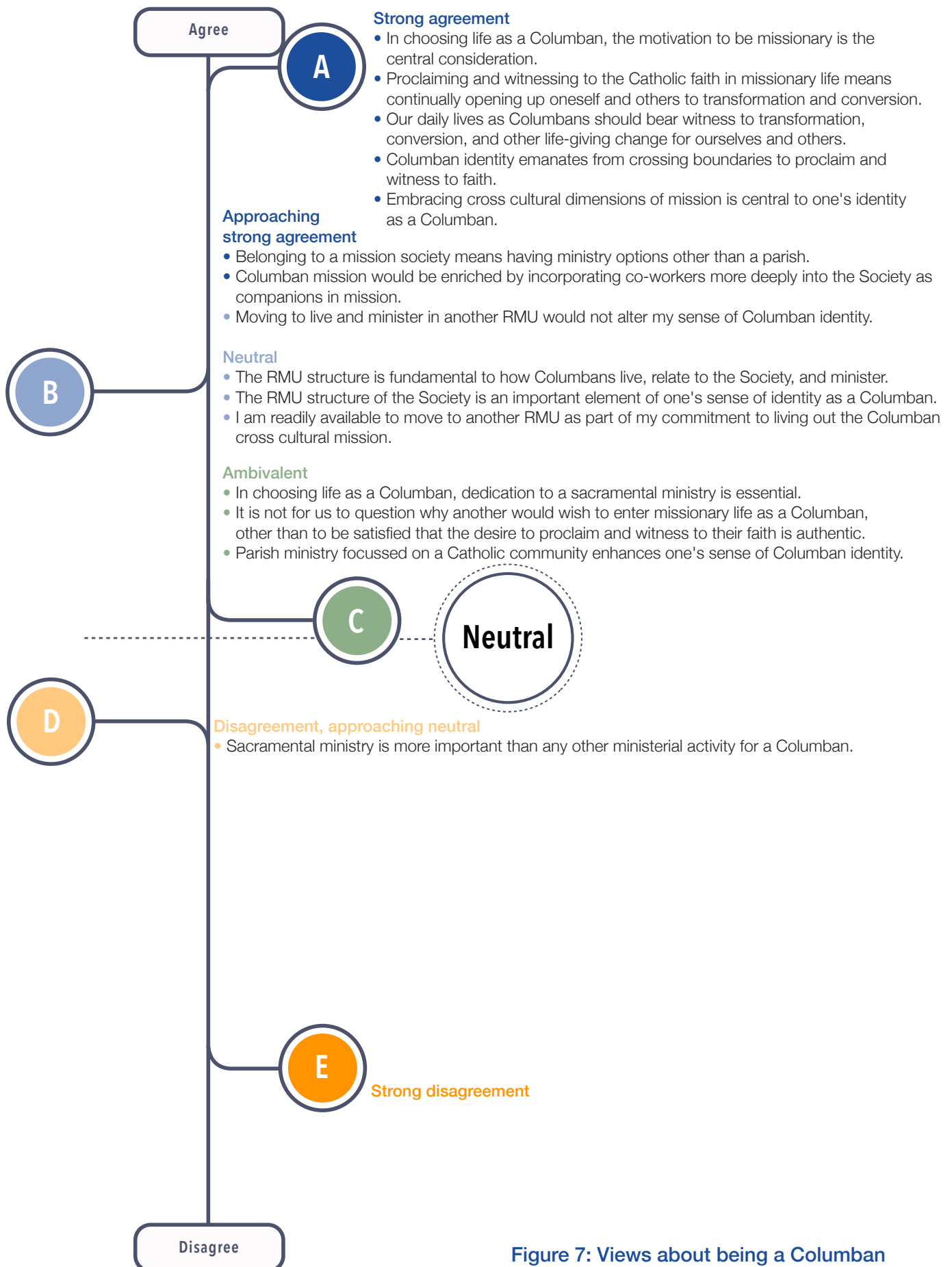


Figure 7: Views about being a Columban

## Reading these diagrams

Keep in mind that each diagram represents a synopsis of views expressed by respondents. The diagram is an overall summary balancing agreement and disagreement from all respondents to that question - if all responses were exactly evenly divided between "agree" or "disagree", then the result would be an overall "neutral". Further, the synopsis being "strongly positive" does not mean there were only positive views expressed. It shows that while some survey participants chose "disagree" and/or "strongly disagree" as their response, many more chose "agree" and/or "strongly agree", usually with a few in the neutral part of the range.

Where the overall synopsis fell in the centre of the range:

- in some cases this amounted to "neutral" because the views expressed were spread relatively evenly across the entire range from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", or the equivalent responses in context of the question; but
- in others, this amounted to "ambivalent", because while views were fairly evenly poised overall, the spread across the range was lumpier, in some cases, or noticeably more polarised in others (more towards either end of the spectrum, with fewer in the centre).

## For further thought

120. Implications of a smaller and older Society need not be accepted as inevitably leading to closure, but should be considered proactively, and by approaching endogenous factors quite differently to exogenous factors.
  - ➔ ***What exogenous factors are members prepared to openly acknowledge and discuss as limitations on the potential footprint of the Society?***
121. To prolong the life of the Society and its missionary purpose, fostering transformation in the lives of others, its members will need to embrace transformation of the Society - not least in moving to a more amenable institutional structure and making personal changes to live and work authentically in a more sparse and less hierarchical set of arrangements.
  - ➔ ***What formal change to endogenous factors are members prepared to embrace in order to prolong the life of the Society and foster its missionary purpose?***
  - ➔ ***What change could members, especially those under 65, make towards being co-responsible for their place of mission in refreshed institutional arrangements?***
122. As a society of apostolic life open only to men, the footprint of the Society begins in a place of patriarchy - not so helpful in a contemporary setting. Towards improving sustainability, altering this by canonical change is one option, but there are many others. They involve realising practical change evidencing that the Society's footprint is made up of so much more than this one canonical feature: well advisedly beginning by demonstrating effective partnerships with women and laity, and continuing by propagating everyday practice that shows genuine accountability, collegiality, and mutual respect, rather than a clericalist approach. Even without canonical change, there are various endogenous elements of the Society's fabric that members can choose to change to such purposes. Importantly, it is particularly those now under 65 years of age who can be, and be seen to be, the change that will engender sustainability of the Society over the course of their lifetimes.
  - ➔ ***What action could the Society take, short of canonical change, to create a visibly more encompassing and welcoming missionary footprint?***
  - ➔ ***What changes could members, especially those under 65, make in what they do day to day as evidence the Society is evolving a more encompassing footprint that will also be more sustainable over the course of their lifetimes?***

123. Beyond addressing mission priorities, the visibility to the world of the Columban footprint is key to fostering not only vocations to missionary life but also the wherewithal needed to further Columban ministries. While vocations “outreach” will be a crucial leadership function going forward, there is an open question about making more visible the footprint left by each and every element of the works of the Society, including to increase the opportunities for encounters with missionaries which are experienced knowingly (that is, knowing the Columban missionary purpose as distinct from the general purposes of the Church).

- ➔ ***What contribution might each person make towards refreshing the Columban footprint, especially those under 65 years as the principal group on which the Society will rely in the future - including so that those in the general community might readily encounter a missionary to learn about the missionary purpose?***





## Mission priorities

### The general picture

124. In a strategic review, core questions are about endogenous concerns as noted earlier: the purpose, will, and capacity, of the organisation in terms of what it exists to do, and what current activities indicate it intends to do. If framed by an exogenous backdrop, these also reveal what the organisation is seen to do - something of a footprint of the organisation. This is created by a combination of actual outcomes, and the external visibility of those outcomes, which come together to, hopefully, engender trust in the organisation and thereby elicit ongoing support.
125. Proclaiming and witnessing to the faith of the Catholic Church is, of course, the framework for the Columban mission, this being an obligation said to be entailed for every Christian who is called by baptism to be a missionary disciple.
126. As for what the Society specifically exists to do, this is set out in *Constitutions* C.101:

*The Missionary Society of Saint Columban is an exclusively missionary Society sent by the Church "to the Nations", to proclaim and witness to the Good News in Jesus Christ of the full Christian liberation and reconciliation of all peoples.<sup>42</sup>*
127. As organisational purposes go, this is crystal clear. For sustainability of the Society, however, to what extent is this distinctly Columban to a wider community? There is also a question of what activities suggest that, from time to time, the organisation intends to do, and linking these back to its enduring purpose.

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<sup>42</sup> *Constitutions and Directory 2020* (Missionary Society of St Columban, 29 June 2020).

128. In that respect, *Constitutions* C.102 serves very well for focus following on from C.101:  
*Crossing boundaries of country, language and culture, the Society has as its specific objectives:*
- *to establish the Church among peoples to whom the Gospel has not been preached;*
  - *to accompany Churches as they mature and are able to evangelize their own and other peoples;*
  - *to promote dialogue between Christians and those of other religious traditions;*
  - *to facilitate interchange between local Churches, especially those from which we come and those to which we are sent;*
  - *to foster in local Churches an awareness of their missionary responsibility, particularly in the areas of justice, peace, and the integrity of Creation.<sup>43</sup>*
129. To an external observer this goes a long way towards clarifying direction for activities to appear as characteristically Columban, even if these are not entirely distinct from other Catholic missionary societies (no small number of which are active across the world).
130. Turning to how this direction might be elucidated further in the Society's governance processes, *Constitutions* also provides that:
- C.307. The General Assembly is a special moment in the life of the Society. It represents the whole Society, bringing together members serving in administration and elected delegates, and is its supreme authority.*
- C.308.1 The General Assembly has as its principal functions:*
- *to evaluate the state of the Society and its work;*
  - *to articulate the contemporary mission of the Society;*
  - *to plan for the future ...*
131. Acts of a General Assembly thus stand to expand on governance arrangements of the Society in a temporal context, by "recommendations" emanating from a particular General Assembly. These are to be taken most seriously by leaders and members of the Society, giving shape and priority for what should feature among Columban activities, which is then there for the world to see and perceive of as being "Columban". For example, Acts of the General Assembly 2018 addresses Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and Interreligious Dialogue (IRD), with specific recommendations for action by Columbans at least until the next GA.<sup>44</sup>
132. From a governance perspective in a strategic review - so far, so good. Experience suggests that all kinds of other organisations could do very well to be this clear in laying the foundations for what might be created from activities and outcomes to follow.
133. Before delving further into Columban activities, an unavoidable element of Columban context calls for comment. Beyond general concerns about patriarchy and clericalism, this is about the travails of the Catholic Church relating to clergy misconduct, which, for the foreseeable future, will continue to hang rather heavily in the background.

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<sup>43</sup> As amended at GA 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Missionary Society of St Columban *Transitioning for Columban Mission* (Acts of the General Assembly of the Missionary Society of St Columban, 2018), pp 8-9. See also p4: 'We stand in solidarity with, and are evangelized by the poor, the marginalized and the wounded earth. We actively witness to Jesus' message by working for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and Inter Religious Dialogue (IRD) in a world that is fragmented and conflictual.' Review of earlier Acts shows the development of this thread over some years, meaning JPIC and IRD are to be taken as established elements of Columban Mission.

134. The supreme difficulty of this question is about its origin in the fabric of the Church itself. For the Church, the entirely endogenous nature of the problem sets it apart as being quite distinct from other significant but exogenous challenges, such as the global trend away from religious affiliation. Such misconduct is not something going on outside or around the Church, impacting upon context in which the mission is pursued, or the lens through which individuals perceive religious affiliation, such as shifting societal attitudes about feminism. Nor is it a matter of concern for all humanity, distinct from religious affiliation (even if responses may be linked to that): perhaps most notably climate change, or the consequences of more readily available technological amenities (such as internet usage or devices for AI applications).
135. Clergy misconduct emanates from within the Church, but the crux of the problem is that it speaks to a failing of the Church as an institution, even as a conduit of religious affiliation, and thus to validity and authenticity of that religious affiliation per se. Quite simply, the issue of clergy misconduct is most profoundly a failure in self-regulation of the Church's leaders - the priests whose role it is to provide leadership to the Catholic community in living out commitment to faith.
136. In turn, the failure of the overall Church hierarchy to deal effectively with this over many decades has now come home to roost, as seen in a succession of leaders being implicated in inadequate, insufficient, or improper responses to clergy misconduct. That misconduct is itself indubitably reprehensible and self-evidently contrary to an authentic religious commitment, but a more pernicious problem arises in its wake - this is not so much from incidents per se, or even an incidence rate, but rather more from the aggregate failure, perceived or actual, of institutional authorities to respond effectively and appropriately.
137. Institutional failure to act, or to act sufficiently, has itself become the dilemma, though demonstrably not unique to the Catholic Church (nor even to churches more generally). In fact, this has become an area of systemic concern across the globe - sufficient to establish a distinct area of academic study,<sup>45</sup> including on debunking "it can't happen here" logic,<sup>46</sup> and novel approaches to criminal culpability of institutions.<sup>47</sup>
138. In any case, as long as the litany of horrible headlines continues to implicate the Church in abuse allegations, scandals, and court cases (some historical but many contemporary or ongoing), it would seem that a pall cannot help but hang over the global Church, including the Columbans' good works.
139. Against that dispiriting backdrop, how well might the will and purpose of the Society transform into activities that create an inspiring Columban "footprint" of some kind?

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<sup>45</sup> Such as has emerged over the last decade in the works of, for example, Professor Johanna Sköld (Linköping University, Sweden) or Professor Shurlee Swain (Australian Catholic University). As a sign of things to come, they are both now contributors to overarching academic enquiry in a research project led by Dr Katie Wright (La Trobe University, Australia) entitled 'The Age of Inquiry: A global mapping of institutional abuse inquiries' ([read more](#)). There are also adjacent areas of study that routinely deal with the profoundly harmful consequences of undue clerical direction - for example, in relation to forced and servile marriage, where excessively doctrinal, ill-informed, or even just thoughtless, instructions to obey parents are implicated in the abuse of girls.

<sup>46</sup> The reality of which in the past has derailed many an organisational response. Even well meaning leaders, captured by that logic, have been inspired to evince, in effect, some form of denial, obfuscation, or delay in responding. Put bluntly, from a criminological perspective a lack of evident cases should most certainly not be read as there being no problem - as many otherwise laudable organisations have learned to their sorrow. For an illustrative case example, see Carolyn M Evans 'The UN's Role in The Institutional Abuse of Children: Wronged or Wrongdoer?' *E-International Relations* (30 March 2022) ([read more](#)); more generally on this case context see Jeni Whalan 'Dealing with Disgrace: Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in UN Peacekeeping' (Providing for Peacekeeping No 15, International Peace Institute, August 2017) ([read more](#)).

<sup>47</sup> Again, just for one example, one might look to the research interests of Professor Penny Crofts about criminal culpability of institutions ([read more](#)).

140. Extensive study of Columban activities was not requested when the project was initiated. Instead, for a reality check in keeping with the project's remit, design of the consultation survey included several related questions. For example, Columbans were asked to self-assess their familiarity with the substance of mission priorities, plus the extent to which they identify with JPIC and IRD, and are able to put them into practice by integrating them into their lives and activities.<sup>48</sup>
141. Since being a Columban does not exist separately to, or outside of, the Catholic Church and its fundamental mission, for a modicum of context the survey also included matching questions on teachings from Pope Francis. The documents chosen to include here were *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato si'*, and *Fratelli tutti*.<sup>49</sup>
142. All these questions were framed on a Likert scale,<sup>50</sup> to facilitate developing synopses of views, such as is now presented in Figure 8.
143. As an overall summary - balancing agreement and disagreement from *all* respondents to that set of questions - this diagram illustrates a substantial weight of encouraging news, especially in light of social, cultural, national, and ethnic, diversity that is evident among Columbans and those associated with them.
144. Two further questions gave respondents an opportunity to provide examples of how these two mission priorities had featured in their life and/or ministry over the past year, and respondents gave about the same number of examples for each.<sup>51</sup> The examples were ample demonstration of the very many thoughtful and creative ways in which these mission priorities are embraced by Columbans, even if no particular revelatory theme emerged.<sup>52</sup>



## Action expresses priorities.

- Mahatma Gandhi

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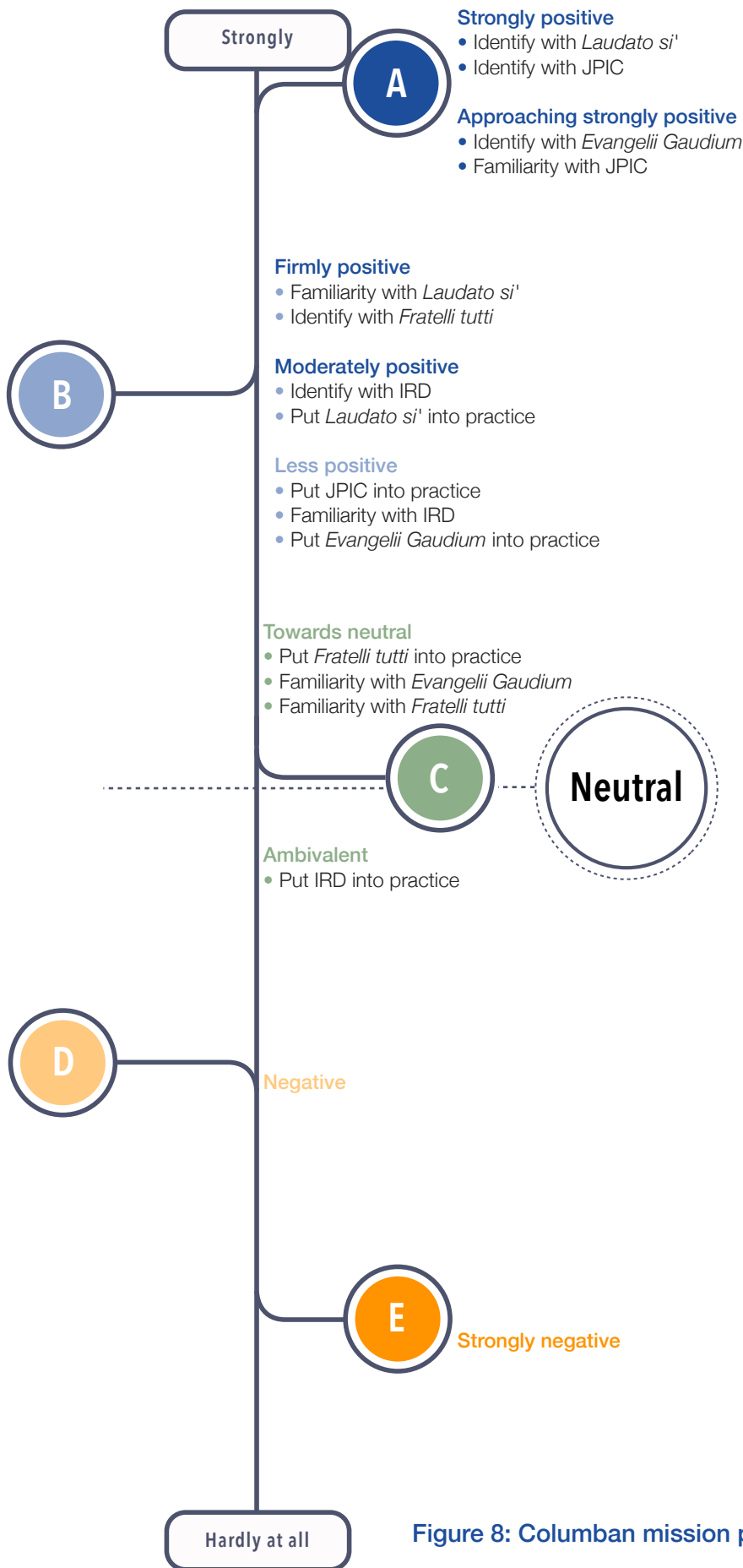
<sup>48</sup> The project was not scoped to engage with the detail of the extent to which members account for their time or activities against these priorities, that being a matter of canonical leadership and ongoing formation related to such matters.

<sup>49</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*: on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (The Holy See, 24 November 2013); *Laudato si'*: Praise be to you - On Care For Our Common Home (The Holy See, 24 May 2015); and *Fratelli tutti*: On Fraternity and Social Friendship (The Holy See, 3 October 2020).

<sup>50</sup> See notes 28 and 29 above, and associated text.

<sup>51</sup> See Annex A for the text of Q6 and Q7.

<sup>52</sup> Similarly Q9 was an open ended question on mission priorities more generally, which yielded parallel results. See Annex A for the text of all questions, and Annex B for summaries of results as are amenable to that - text responses are omitted as not amenable to summary, but also in many cases not suitable to be shared while preserving the anonymity of respondents.



**Figure 8: Columban mission priorities & selected teachings**

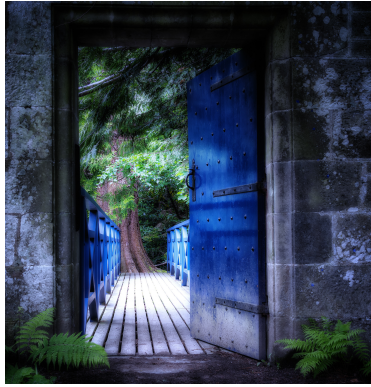
## Leadership issues

145. Allowing for the significant variation in opportunities inherent in the variety of places and communities in which Columbans pursue mission, views expressed in the survey are not suggestive of any significant issue to be concerned over. Rather, it was evident that where the overall result was “ambivalent”, the issue was mostly a lack of opportunity. Putting IRD into practice, for example, had two large groups of responses that were diametrically diverse, even polarised, reflecting the simple reality of communities in which Columbans are present - some of which are quite socially homogenous and provide for few relevant opportunities, while others are rather less so and naturally provide more. In similar vein, possible barriers to engaging with mission priorities were generally reported to be higher for connecting to IRD than JPIC, but again - hardly surprising in context of opportunity.
146. Otherwise, responses did indicate where thoughtful leadership might build on what has been done to date, and perhaps prioritise making these things more visible to the wider community. So commonly reported barriers to engaging with either mission priority included connecting them to one’s own activities; being isolated from others engaged with the idea or relevant activities; or not grasping the full practical meaning of the priority.
147. For perspective, while 253 out of the total 290 respondents answered the question about such barriers, the most responses any suggested barrier received was 132, or 52% of respondents - this being for the combination of IRD and “the idea is not connected to their own activities”. So, again, this is not unexpected in the practical reality of RMUs and how they are placed in cultural perspective: much more a modest gap that might be bridged than a gaping hole to be filled, but also an opportunity to fill the gap in such a way that the efforts of the Columbans might become more visible to the wider community.<sup>53</sup>
148. Insights gleaned from the survey show the much larger issue lurking in the background is that of clericalism, and its relationship to genuine accountability for individual actions. This topic was included in recommendations from the IRMU Meeting in March 2023, and noted earlier in the *Overview* section for being interconnected with subject matter of this project. Suffice it to say here that even if it had not been, various forms of clericalism, and the antipathy that it generates between clergy surfaced in regretful acknowledgements across the survey,<sup>54</sup> including being mentioned in relation to how, and how well, mission priorities are being advanced.
149. In terms of priorities for leadership attention at and from GA 2024, the prevalence of such comments alone should encourage the Society to act apace in taking further substantive action to address this matter (without even needing to consider the negative ramifications of clericalism on a wider front - for vocations and other forms of support for the Society).
150. Then, the style of leadership in and around mission priorities would be worthy of attention as part of bolstering visibility of the many positive things that the Columbans are engaged in doing for the community. In broad terms, this would be profoundly collegiate rather than in any way being suggestive of clericalism, but that is another component of organisational change that, along with changing institutional structures, is something more readily said than done. In particular, experience suggests quite strongly that the need for each person to embrace an extent of change in their own daily practice is rather more challenging than obtaining decisions for institutional change.

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<sup>53</sup> See also Q8 in Annex B.

<sup>54</sup> That is, negative comments were very largely made by clerics about other clerics. Courage of respondents offering those comments is acknowledged, and we assume that all these matters have been or will be addressed using due processes as provided for in *Constitutions*.



## Way will open ...

- Quaker saying

### Membership issues

151. Overall, it is abundantly clear that the Society is faithfully doing what it is there to do. However, even on the whole it is rather less clear that this coalesces into an evident footprint of the Society. Rather than this being cause to urge Columbans to greater energy in their endeavours, the perspective in this review instead connects back to another recommendation from the IRMU Meeting: this was earlier read as calling for a fresh expression of Columban mission, in light of present realities, and we would urge members to embrace this with enthusiasm. Based on all of the observations possible in this project, duly articulating and animating this will do as much to energise and focus the efforts of members as it would do to inspire connection with and from the wider community.
152. After that, the best contribution from members would be to open up to change in the Society that will assist in making their efforts more evident: Columbans are now spread so thin over so much (literal and metaphoric) territory that this appears itself to be a barrier to the efforts of Columbans being recognised as a distinctive contribution to the larger mission of the Church.
153. To respond to this calls for either larger numbers of Columbans, which is simply not likely for the present, or for Columbans to be organised so that they and the Society become more visible to the community in pursuing a distinctively Columban mission. This is something that is well and truly within the grasp of the Society as a collective.
154. It is also worth thinking about the cumulative effect of these things on vocations: as the saying now goes, “We can’t be what we can’t see” - so the better the world can see Columbans and their good works, the more opportunity there is to create awareness among those for whom aspiring to be one may become a possibility.
155. To make a fresh expression of mission, with similarly refreshed opportunity for any and all members to be visible in the community, would ideally include rethinking where the Columbans will continue to be in the future, especially the number of places that it will be feasible to support in meaningful fashion.

### Options

156. So what can the Society do to help here? Without being unduly blunt, hopeful options spin around two things:
  - externally, the extent to which communities and individuals will be prepared to look past scandalous headlines, to continue to see the good works of Columbans - and, indeed, those of the Church; and
  - internally, there being enough individual members who are willing and proactive in embracing necessary change so that the Society is then placed to make the most of the extent to which the community does so.

157. Options then vest in collective expectations about just how many things any leadership group can be expected to deal with in the working reality of the Society. Reflecting what was clear from the vocations questionnaire: how can time and effort be afforded to vocations “outreach” in hope of a more stable and sustainable membership? Across the Society (not just the GC or CLMCLT, for example), what fresh and more embracing characterisation of leadership roles and their associated tasks will better serve in future? In particular, what approach to leadership will stand effectively to counter clericalism, and how can each Columban support this in their own daily practice?<sup>55</sup>
158. Ideas were ventured in the survey about the options that are most readily actioned in the short term: reducing the structural requirements (that being the legacy of a much larger missionary endeavour), and/or widening the pool of potential leaders (duly embracing guidance from Francis on such matters, as far as possible without altering the canonical nature of the Society). As discussed further in the *Openings* section, there does seem to be fertile ground on those, but moving ahead to till that is a challenge for GA 2024: these both stand to be life-giving initiatives, but grieving is likely unavoidable if moving away from the legacy of the regional structure and related presumptions about the apparatus for management and administration of the Society.
159. In the medium term, in the course of making mission priorities more visible to the wider world, there is also the opportunity to foster and nurture future leaders in a way that leads by example in moving away from clericalism, connecting back to another of the IRMU recommendations as read in the introduction to this report. Those things together being realised, one might look to have a stable, or at least stabilising, body of members and lay missionaries upon which longer term sustainability could be built.
160. Needed change might have been done step-wise in more modest bites if starting when the downward trajectory of vocations was first in evidence. But the world has continued to change around the Columbans and the Church, and to do so more quickly and extensively than adjustments made within the Society. As a consequence, that incremental approach has simply not proven to be sufficient, and now is no longer feasible.

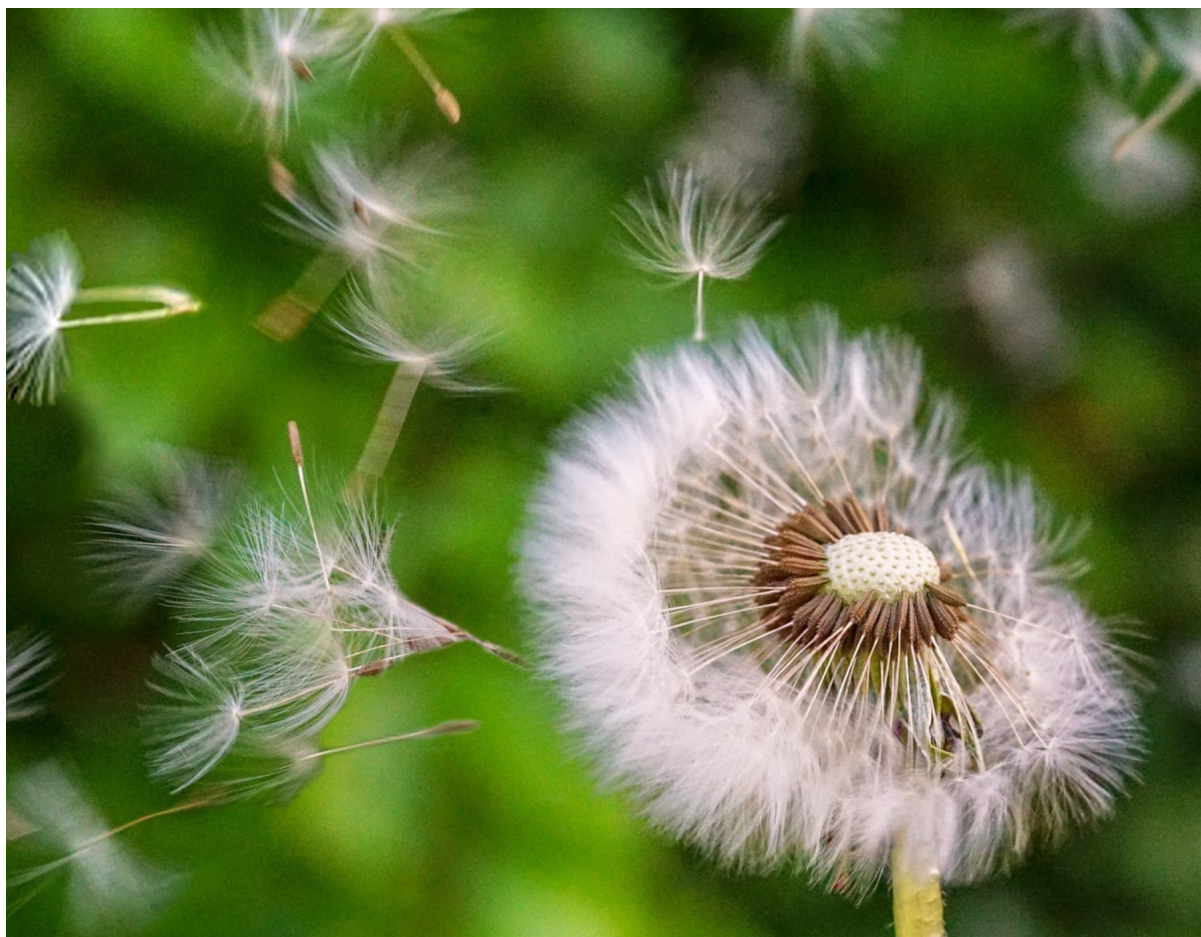
## For further thought

161. In a fresh expression of mission, the number of places in which Columbans will be active is key to the future sustainability of the Society: in particular, too many and the Columbans will continue to be spread too thinly to have a suitably visible footprint, including to allow those in the general community to (knowingly) encounter a missionary.
- ➔ ***What reduction in places of mission are members prepared to embrace in order to prolong the life of the Society and better foster its missionary purpose?***
162. Within a fresh expression of mission, distinctively Columban ministries set it apart from, for example, the broader run of non-government organisations (NGOs) that are at work in many of the same places as missionary societies.
- ➔ ***What new or different ministries would be enlivening for Columbans and assist in making the the Society and its missionary purpose distinctive?***

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<sup>55</sup> Again noting the opprobrium afforded to clericalism by the Society’s clerical members in the consultation survey.





## Vocation programmes

### The general picture

163. Membership renewal and a healthy body of members is fundamental to the sustainability of a membership based organisation, and so it goes for religious communities. Fostering vocations and formation are pivotal to new members flowing in; subsequent ordinations or final aggregations need to be commensurate to the loss of members to maintain a stable religious community. However, it is also true that something more is needed lest the community stagnate, and the capacity to serve its purposes then tend to wither.
164. Vocations are, of course, inherently interconnected with the Church and the wider world around a religious community: many relevant factors are exogenous to the Society even if endogenous to the Church proper (such as perceptions of clergy misconduct); others are entirely exogenous to religious affiliation (such as views about long term commitment). So it would be fair to say that ongoing media attention to clergy misconduct will continue to be a factor in what is possible for various elements of Church endeavours, and no less so for the Columbans. Then, human behaviour being what it is, this will persist regardless of the extent to which Columbans are or are not directly implicated, although the precise way in which it persists is impossible to assess. Accepting that reality, the next most influential information to consider is the trends in related matters that might be observed in the world around the Columbans.
165. By research for this project, this was approached in terms of what “life commitment” is evolving to mean in the wider communities of which the Church and the Columbans are part, and then what a modest group of other religious communities have experienced in relation to vocations in recent years.

## Trends in “life commitment”

166. As Columbans would be aware, anxieties over vocations are hardly new for the Catholic Church, with the period since Vatican II punctuated by debate about framing and direction of religious life, its connection to the broader social fabric, underlying theological divides, and so on - a truly and deservedly complicated debate that does not need to be rehearsed here. Importantly, this trend parallels developments about “life commitments” that have emerged in wider society, and stand as exogenous influences on vocations. These vary around the world - for example, the nature of working life, the desire for change expressed in undertaking mature-age study or starting a new career, even the propensity to join community groups or professional organisations. Each is unfolding in different ways and at different paces, while changing prosperity levels are also interconnected and influential in terms of options for working life, study, or other pursuits that may emerge.
167. Those trends are each highly complex and nuanced, and the subject of a body of academic study too complex to present succinctly. More importantly, working from such trends also involves traps from over-generalising and then over-reacting to them - or, indeed, traps in thinking that is unduly guided by exceptionalism, and then under-reacting.
168. Regarding vocations, a more informative perspective on trends about “life commitment” - or even just “long term commitment” - comes from what one can discern about marriage trends. Researchers at the University of Oxford,<sup>56</sup> for one example, study world wide trends in marriages and divorces.<sup>57</sup> Among other things, they observe that:

*The proportion of people who are getting married is going down in many countries across the world. ... For non-rich countries the data is sparse, but available estimates from Latin America, Africa and Asia suggest that the decline of marriages is not exclusive to rich countries. Over the period 1990 – 2010 there was a decline in marriage rates in the majority of countries around the world. ...*

*The de-institutionalization of marriage and the rise of new family models since the middle of the 20th century show that social institutions that have been around for thousands of years can change very rapidly.<sup>58</sup>*

169. Returning to the Catholic context, one might simply note that the number of Catholic weddings reportedly celebrated around the world in 2021 was 1.8 million versus 3.8 million in 1991.<sup>59</sup> But the wider persistence of this trend, across society rather than just the Catholic community, itself highlights that reversal is not in sight, in turn compounding the way in which such a trend influences the social fabric of attitudes to “life commitment”, as an exogenous factor in trends about lifelong commitment to religious life.
170. Taking Australia as a convenient example illustrates this in more detail. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), reputable as part of the Australian Government, has reported that:

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<sup>56</sup> Specifically the Oxford Martin Programme on Global Development ([read more](#)).

<sup>57</sup> Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser ‘Marriages and Divorces’ *Our World in Data* (Oxford University, 2020) ([read more](#)). Their observations are consistent with the world-wide dataset aggregated by the United Nations, using data provided by official sources in each place - see United Nations Population Division *World Marriage Data* (United Nations, 2019) ([read more](#)). The UN data set is somewhat less accessible, but a highly appropriate source for many purposes, being gathered on a consistent basis ([methodology](#)).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Some effort was applied to finding alternative viewpoints by which to balance this analysis, but little evidence was located - where current scholarship and journalism are very much more in the vein of ‘Almost 90% of the world’s population now live in countries with falling marriage rates’ ([read more](#)).

<sup>59</sup> Source: Vatican statistics summarised from *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae*.

The crude marriage rate (the number of marriages registered in a year per 1,000 Australian residents) fluctuated across the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup> The all-time high was in 1942. Following an increase in the 1960s, the rate began to fall steadily from 1970 until 2000. It then stabilised for a decade before falling again.<sup>61</sup>

171. The first of their graphs makes abundantly clear that fewer marriages is not a passing fad or just due to the transient influence of things such as COVID-19 lockdowns.<sup>62</sup> The second, about how couples celebrate their marriage,<sup>63</sup> points to a more pervasive trend away from religious affiliation more generally, including when people contemplate “life commitment”.

Figure 9: AIFS long term trend on marriage rate

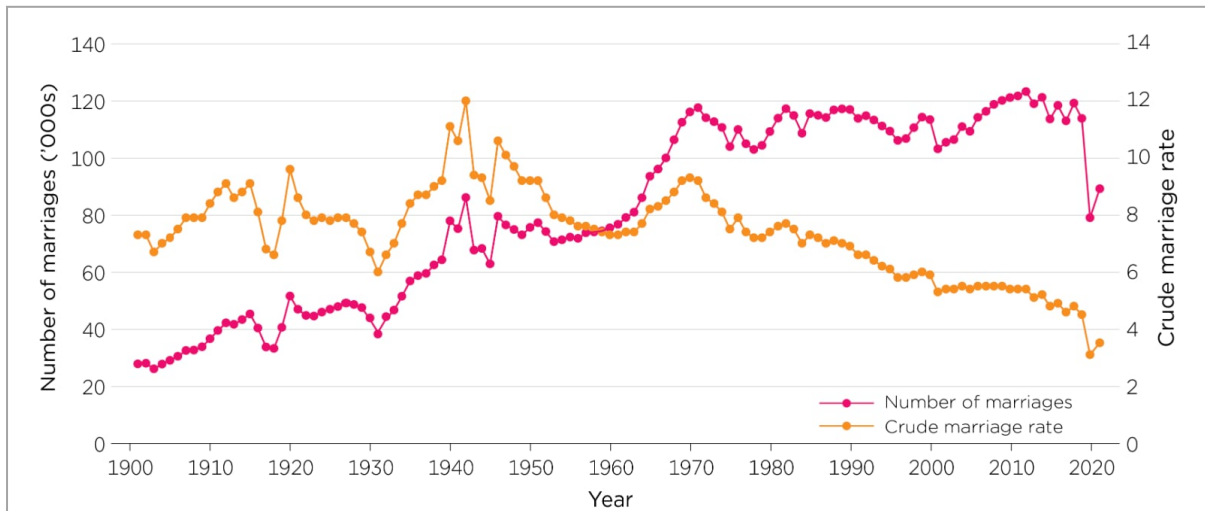
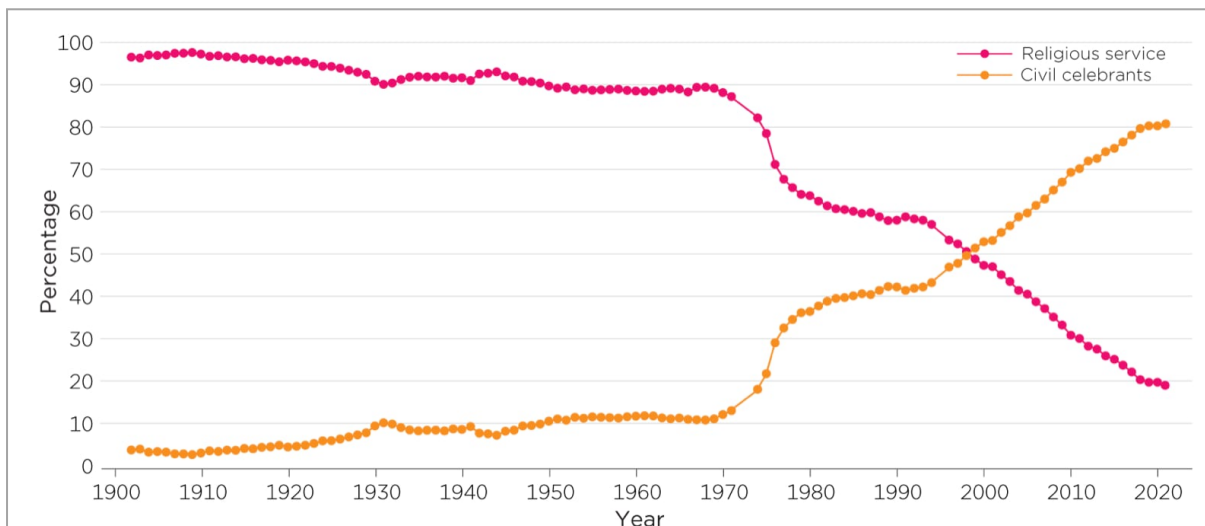


Figure 10: AIFS long term trend on celebration of marriage



<sup>60</sup> A “crude rate” is, in statistical parlance, an “unadjusted” rate - that is, not adjusted for data gathering features - which does not imply that the variables are causally related. For example, marriages registered in Australia may not all pertain to Australian residents; marriages are counted by the year in which they are registered, which may be delayed from when the wedding actually occurred. The subtleties of the definition are not material to this discussion, but retained for authenticity of the reference.

<sup>61</sup> Lixia Qu and Jennifer Baxter ‘Marriages in Australia: Facts and Figures 2023’ (Australian Institute of Family Studies, March 2023) ([read more](#)). NB: divorce is not considered in statistics quoted here - definition of the “crude marriage rate” is unrelated to divorce.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. See original image for detailed data sources.

<sup>63</sup> Where the changing nature of religious affiliation itself is now established as a long term trend in Australia, heading away from any religious affiliation - see Australian Bureau of Statistics ‘Religious affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the changes in reported religion in the 2021 Census’ (Australian Government, 4 July 2022) ([read more](#)).

172. Together they show that any idea of reversing the tidal change in prevailing attitudes should be firmly put aside. As an exogenous influence on vocations, this trend is, in short, a 50+ year phenomenon continuing - for better or for worse - to unfold across the globe. This deserves sincere acknowledgement and reflection in developing expectations about future Columban vocations: these trends suggest that one must have much more modest expectations of membership numbers and learn to live within the means thus afforded.

### Prospects for vocations

173. As mentioned earlier, the project made enquiries with other missionary institutions to tap into the wisdom of their experiences with vocations over the last 10 to 20 years.<sup>64</sup> That revealed a clear commonality and consistency across their experiences that was coherent with that of the Columbans. Most had taken opportunities over this time to adjust their approach to vocations and/or initial formation, some more so than others including the Columbans. The single most prevalent theme was to be more wholeheartedly inclusive of women and laity on mission - whether as members or non-members of the institution.<sup>65</sup>
174. It was abundantly clear, however, that no such adjustments were definitive of sustainable “success”, as would be seen in an increasing trend on membership. A couple had stabilised their numbers, but still noted challenges relating to vocations continued to loom large on the institution’s horizon.
175. Against that backdrop, prospects on Columban vocations seem no more encouraging from long term experience of the Society. Consistent with the reported experience of those other institutions, General Council data shows that 135 seminarians have participated in Columban formation programmes since 2008. The present situation of those 135 men is: ordained - 29, or about one in five of the total; continuing as a seminarian (as at 1 October 2023) - 27, again about one in five; and left - 79. While some may focus on or be concerned about this as an overall result, considerable caution is required where both the process itself, and the outcomes of it, are inherently qualitative. As with the broad run of things that might come under the umbrella term of “education”, obtaining more outcomes is only an improvement if they are “good” outcomes - in turn, this is challenging to consider when the process itself cannot help but be inherently qualitative.
176. In any case, this amount of data does not support strong conclusions in any direction.<sup>66</sup> What can be said is that the Columbans’ overall experience, of seeing between 0 and 5 ordinations in any given calendar year, appears consistent with the experience reported from institutions responding to the vocations questionnaire.
177. Further, as with the wider genre of “education” processes, vocations and formation involve complex interactions of multiple groups of variables associated with the environment, the institution, and the individual. While any specific conclusions would be better informed by reflective review of formation by those qualified to provide it, for the purposes at hand Figure 11 serves well enough to put this into perspective in terms of options that GA 2024 might have on its agenda.
178. This characterises determinants of outcomes as environmental (generally affecting all programmes), individual (specific to life choices for that person), or institutional, where a specific institution will necessarily sit in an intermediary space.

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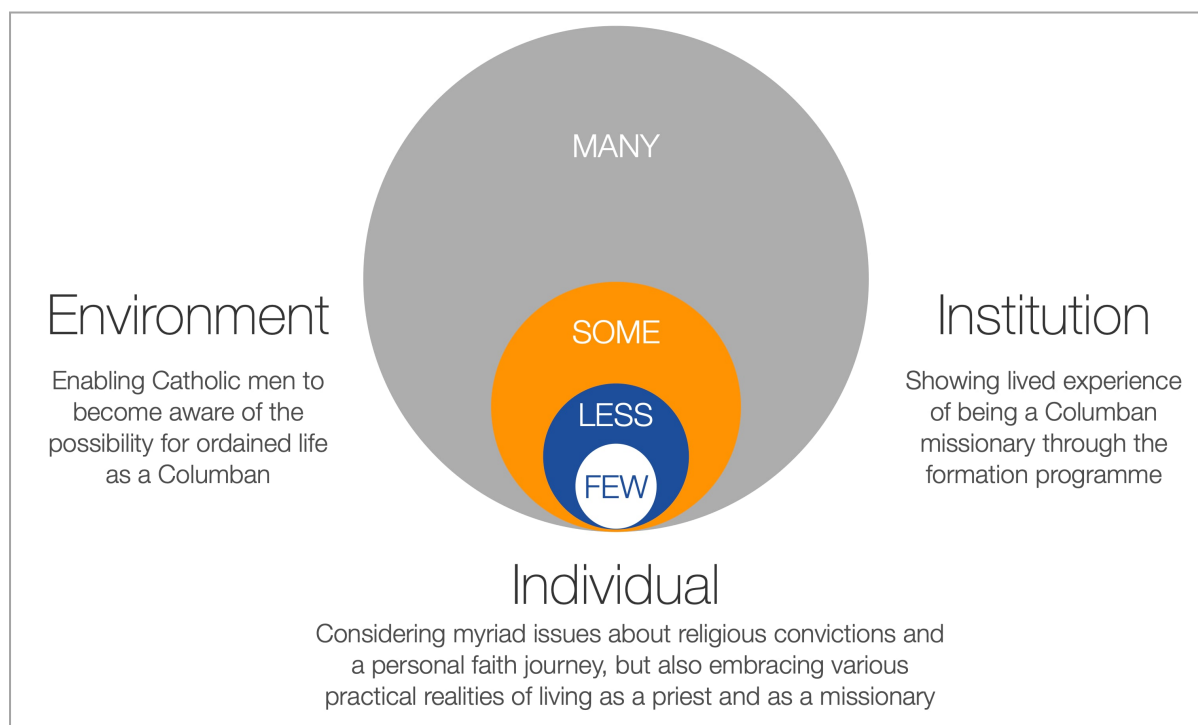
<sup>64</sup> See Annex C for the text of the questions.

<sup>65</sup> Members always being those who have rights to participate in the decision making processes of the institution, while non-members may do everything else involved in mission but will not have that right.

<sup>66</sup> While the experience of the Columbans certainly seems to be consistent with the experience reported in the vocations questionnaire, this is, in effect, anecdotal information, and not statistically robust in providing support for any firm conclusion.

179. From this perspective, outcomes of the vocation programme might be summarised thus: since 2008, of all men who have been actively engaged in the overall Catholic environment (*many* thousands, one could safely assume), a proportion became aware of the possibility of life as an ordained Columban with *some* specifically considering that, but then rather *less* (135) of these formally began such a journey, and just a *few* (29) have made it an enduring commitment (with a few more, 27, still in process as at 1 October 2023).

Figure 11: Vocations outcomes



180. To that extent, this picture is hardly surprising: life as a missionary is not for everyone, and especially not when involving ordained priesthood. More directly to the point of this project, this explanatory logic also shows up the (relatively limited) opportunities that present to alter this dynamic:

- Expanding the outer circle involves change in the external environment and factors exogenous to the Society. Religious affiliation (at all, or with the Catholic Church specifically), would more usefully be burgeoning, rather than waning, as a feature of the wider community; perhaps more importantly, the Church would surmount its reputational travails over clergy misconduct to be a more positive presence in lives of men amenable to life as a missionary priest.
- Expanding the next circle is about awareness among such men of the possibility for life as a *Columban* priest, which speaks to (largely) endogenous things - visibility of the Society, its members, the works that they do, whether men in the community may encounter missionaries knowingly, etc. Issues relate to the extent to which that Columban mission is *not* distinctive within the overall mission of the Church: good works of the Society and its members may inspire men to serve the Church without necessarily engaging them to do so through the Society.
- To expand the inner two circles speaks directly to the initial formation programme and individuals engaging with and within it, processes almost entirely endogenous in nature. However, these remain fundamentally circumscribed by scope offered via capacity for potential vocations arising from the environment, as far as that may then be engendered by visibility and standing of the institution, to even draw men to the doorway of the vocations programme.

**Fostering vocations is emblematic of a leadership dilemma: an internal focus is crucial for today's responsibilities, such as providing ongoing formation, while an external focus, to foster new potential vocations, is equally crucial for there to be a viable tomorrow.**

181. So two things here are true but ultimately unhelpful in looking beyond GA 2024. First, the outermost circle remains almost entirely beyond the Society to influence, except to the extent that Columbans form part of the reputational image of the Catholic Church. Second, adjustments towards fostering vocations and formation for men who seek out the Society cannot help but be a marginal impact in the overall scheme of things. In best working with those who arrive at its door, the focus must, to put it very bluntly, be on attending to "good" outcomes rather than just "more" outcomes. Thus reflection on formation is a rightful, and presumably ongoing, part of governing the Society, including what may be on the agenda for GA 2024, but that will not be a sufficient response in and of itself.
182. Instead, much more positive impact on the sustainability of the Society is likely to arise from considering the nature, visibility and distinctiveness of the Society's footprint in the community, coupled with proactive vocations "outreach" by leaders which is supported in daily practice by all Columbans. Changing the dynamic on these has potential to change the dynamics of engaging with the next outer circle - the "some" who might become aware of the Society and the part it might play in their own life.
183. Accordingly, it is worth reiterating a question already raised by the other reviews arising from the IRMU Meeting, and mentioned earlier in this report: what more can be done to integrate women and laity more fully and sincerely into the Society's decision making processes, whether or not into the canonical elements of those responsibilities?
184. In parallel there continues an imbalance between vocations leading to ordination, and loss of members in the natural course of things. The age profile of the Society now means there would be no material impact upon the overall size of the Columban community even with 5 to 10 ordinations each year. In effect, ordaining all 135 men entering initial formation since 2008 was needed to meet this mark - an outcome which would rather stretch credulity, especially about obtaining "good" outcomes vs just "more" outcomes.
185. A further note is needed here on membership: experiences of comparable endeavours, including those which responded to the vocations questionnaire, show that the first and most profound limitation on who might arrive at the door of the initial formation process is set by the canonical structure of the institution. Being open only to men halves the potential for any individual to consider this life, a requirement to be single and/or celibate reduces it further. That is certainly not to suggest these features of the Columbans should be reconsidered, but to set more pragmatic expectations of how fruitful any adjustments can be expected to be.

**Vocations "outreach" is now a key leadership activity. Gone are the days when persons with a possible vocation tended to find the institution; now the institution must take much more initiative to find those persons.**

186. As Francis has shown,<sup>67</sup> there is a choice to be made on such things, but even where this comes to being an existential choice there is no “right” answer - only options that appear more or less palatable in the circumstances. To further their purpose, other missionary institutions have fully embraced - as members with voting rights - single and married individuals and married couples. That may prove fruitful for them in those circumstances, but, self-evidently, that is quite distinct from being a “right” answer per se. Further, even if this required change to canonical arrangements,<sup>68</sup> questionnaire responses were rather more concerned with changing how activities were conducted in daily practice to make this an authentic paradigm shift that is observable by the wider community.
187. Beyond just the question of membership, the upshot of these trends is hard news in terms of the leadership capacity of the Society - so hard that it was included in the consultation survey to invite members to engage with the realities that this represents, summarised in discussion that follows in this report. In particular, falling below a minimum sustainable body of members means it becomes inevitable that a day will come when, with so few priests remaining, all ordained Columbans would be called to serve in Society governance (leadership, management, administration, etc), regardless of their abilities and skills, or preferences about ministry and how they wish to contribute to Columban mission. To help frame the survey, the question was, *when might that day come for the Columbans?*

## Leadership issues

188. As put in the consultation survey, that day will come sooner than many were expecting, as a product of three-fold ramifications for what the Society “intends to do” (in the strategic perspective of governance discussed earlier) which surface in relation to vocations:
- A membership based organisation characteristically finds its leaders from within, so unless the membership body is at least stable in size, options become progressively more limited. In fact, the march towards a smaller Columban Society has continued largely unabated for over three decades now, fuelling propensity for leaders to be recalled for another term of service (even if in another role).
  - Maintaining the body of members is itself a leadership function, but, in effect that responsibility competes for time and space with other demands placed on leaders. In a religious community, which can only grow via vocations, fostering vocations and mentoring of newer members must somehow dovetail with managing support of personnel and ministries, care of the elderly, fund-raising and budgeting, attending to general needs for formation and education, oversight of properties, etc, plus more contemporary matters such as safeguarding, and increasingly complex requirements for financial compliance (especially across borders).
  - Leadership direction on a specific part of a large organisation is, for most practical purposes, constrained by realities of how that larger organisation is placed. On this, due acknowledgement of the long and rich history of the Catholic Church, and many wonderful contributions to human society, does not discount the legacy of clerical misconduct that is now so visible. Little within the control of the Society will make a dent on this larger problem. The IRMU Meeting provided, however, a very timely and useful opening that arises from the recommendation on genuine accountability in the light of clericalism: the Society could decide to show sincere intent on this via actions to, for example, actually realise standards for leaders to evidence collegiality.

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<sup>67</sup> See n13 above.

<sup>68</sup> Before taking that step, we advise that a variety of canonical and secular legal advice would be required.

**A minimum sustainable body of members is contextualised by the institution's object, purpose, and circumstances: things that are largely endogenously determined about what it is there to do and how it goes about doing that, places in which it has activities, extent of support garnered via visibility of activities, and so on.**

189. Taking those things together, looking out to 2030 to envisage what that General Assembly might have to consider was a way of taking a step into a picture of longer term realities in the Columban future in light of the minimum sustainable body of members for the Society. Modelling and forecasting generated doubts about having enough personnel for how the Society is configured and operates: that is, having sufficient leaders at all, beyond concerns that those available might not all be entirely suitable (in terms of the skills and interpersonal style needed, their willingness, continued good health, and so on). Thus, if things remain as they are, sociodemographic modelling indicated that by 2030 three out of every five ordained members under 75 would likely be called to be in leadership roles.<sup>69</sup> Whether it would be a full time or part time commitment is a modest point in this picture: the major point is that it would be disingenuous to suggest such a proportion of any organisation is suited to leadership and inclined to undertake the role willingly. Also, pragmatically, this would leave just two out of each five members to actually be on mission in the wider community, which itself has obvious ramifications for what might be realised from Columban mission and ministry.
190. Forecasting further showed that by 2036 likely just 50-60 Columban priests under 75 years old and in good health will remain - which basically equates to the number presently in leadership roles for the Society. Absent significant change to the Society's configuration being fully realised, all would thus need to assume a leadership role. Rather than being a suggestion, this is a point for reflection about what the future looks like if the Society and its members are not able to embrace meaningful change.
191. These considerations meant ethical advice here must be led by considering that closure may ultimately be required, and so must be incorporated into this picture - but whether that becomes the pressing issue sooner or later is very much in the hands of the members of the Society. Their appetite to each embrace change in their life, that will together sum to meaningful change for the Society, is pivotal to what the future of the Society will be.
192. Many other missionary societies and religious institutes have already faced the reality of fewer vocations and insurmountable challenges in reversing such a trend. Realising that they can no longer expect to fulfil their serious duties, they have chosen to cease taking new vocations. They also cease to be when unsustainably small in numbers.<sup>70</sup> This has especial salience for Columbans under 65 years, still in the fullness of working life: their lives Columbans are subject to whatever change can be made institutionally, but they are also the key to that having any real impact going forward, because it is their work practice on a day to day basis that will be the evidence seen by the wider world of what it means to be Columban in future.

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<sup>69</sup> Again, as noted in the survey question, forward-looking forecasts take into account the present group of seminarians, and 75 years of age being recognised as the customary age of retirement for ordained members. We also note that while there is no bar to older priests being in leadership positions, this would subject the Society to the vagaries of ageing as experienced by those individuals.

<sup>70</sup> In canon law terms, to cease means the juridical person of the society/institute is "suppressed", whether by outright closure, or by amalgamating with, or folding into, another amenable society or institute. Also, as a reminder, see examples at n20 and n23 above.



193. Absent a dramatic change in circumstances, it is arguable that the Columbans need to consider now, at GA 2024, the question of whether the Society should cease to accept priestly vocations, because uncertainties about the Society's future create significant doubts about its capacity to fulfil its long-term canonical and ethical obligations to new members. To understand awareness of these realities and provide a basis for where discernment towards GA 2024 might proceed, the consultation survey included questions setting out context about vocations and enquiring as to whether those facts and forecasts came as a surprise to survey respondents - as summarised in Figure 12 (overleaf).

### Considering closure

194. Figure 12 shows that, on balance among all respondents, the facts themselves were not a surprise - though that is not to discount that at least a small group expressed at least some surprise on each question. This suggests a greater general awareness of the issues than might have been anticipated.
195. Perspectives on where implications of that might point were noticeably more polarised: views about clerical vocations were spread quite lumpily across the range “No, not surprised” to “Yes, quite surprised, and similarly so on lay missionary vocations. With the overall Columban group heading towards ambivalent, this is topic that GA 2024 should have very firmly on its agenda to be resolved.
196. As is evident from discussion of vocations and the formation programme, in conversations at GA 2024 the challenge to address will be that a moral balance must be found between the desire to seek organisational renewal via new members, and, on the other hand, having (or finding) the capacity to provide people and resources necessary to facilitate formation, and then to continue to provide canonical leadership for those members in faithfully living out the Columban charism over several decades.
197. To be clear, this is not primarily about providing for retirement, for example, or long term illness of members. Instead it is about ensuring that seminarians, and younger members more generally, will have due opportunity over the course of their lifetime to pursue a vocation to Columban missionary priesthood in keeping with the Society's charism and missionary vision. Other missionary societies and religious institutes, when realising that they cannot fulfil this serious duty, have chosen to cease taking new vocations.<sup>71</sup>



**Every wall is a door ...**

*- Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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<sup>71</sup> Even while existing members continue to live out together their vocational commitment as fully as possible for as long as possible - again see notes 20 and 23 above.

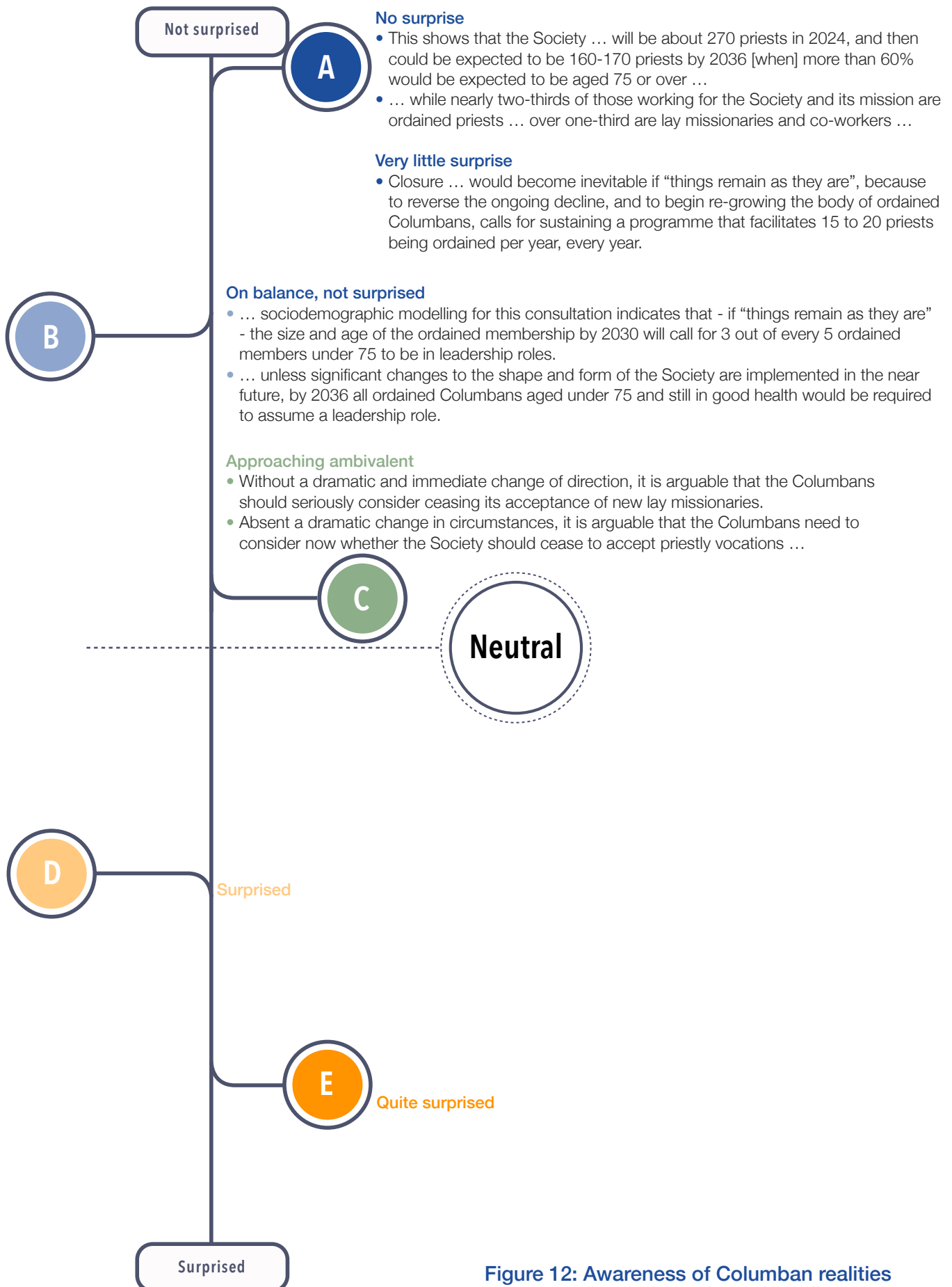
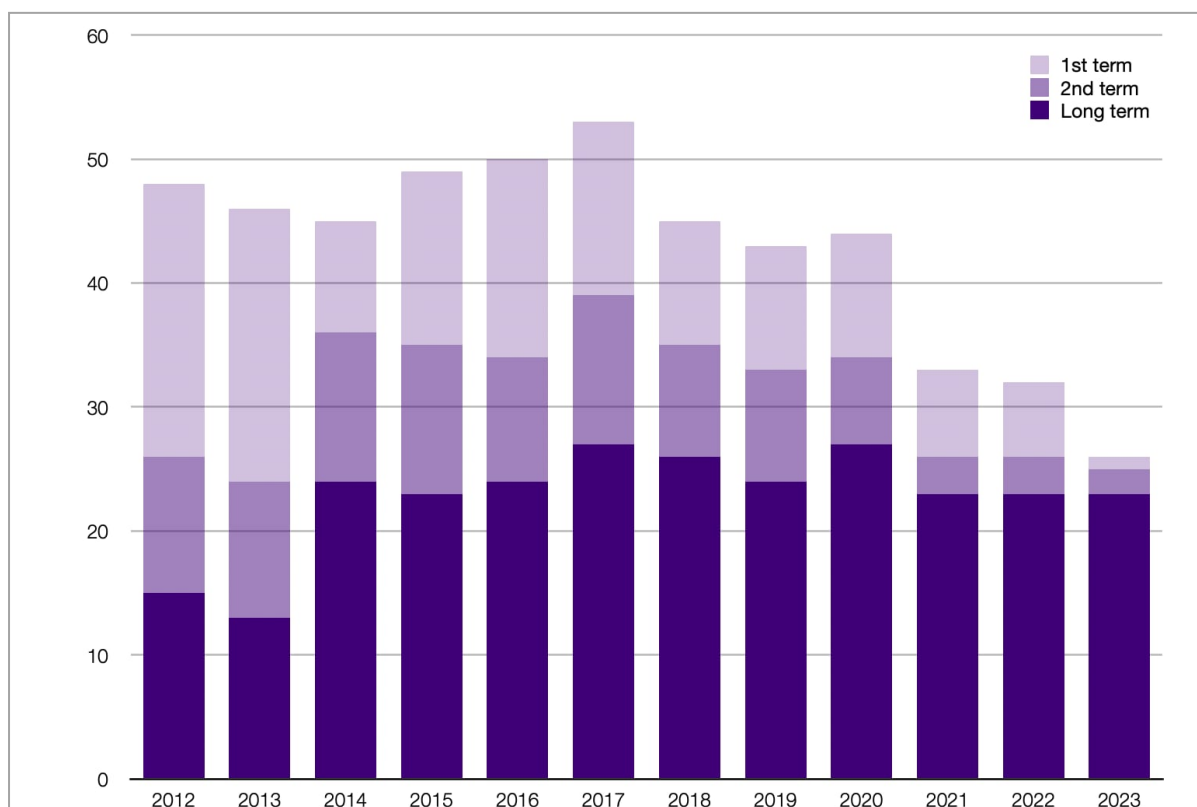


Figure 12: Awareness of Columban realities

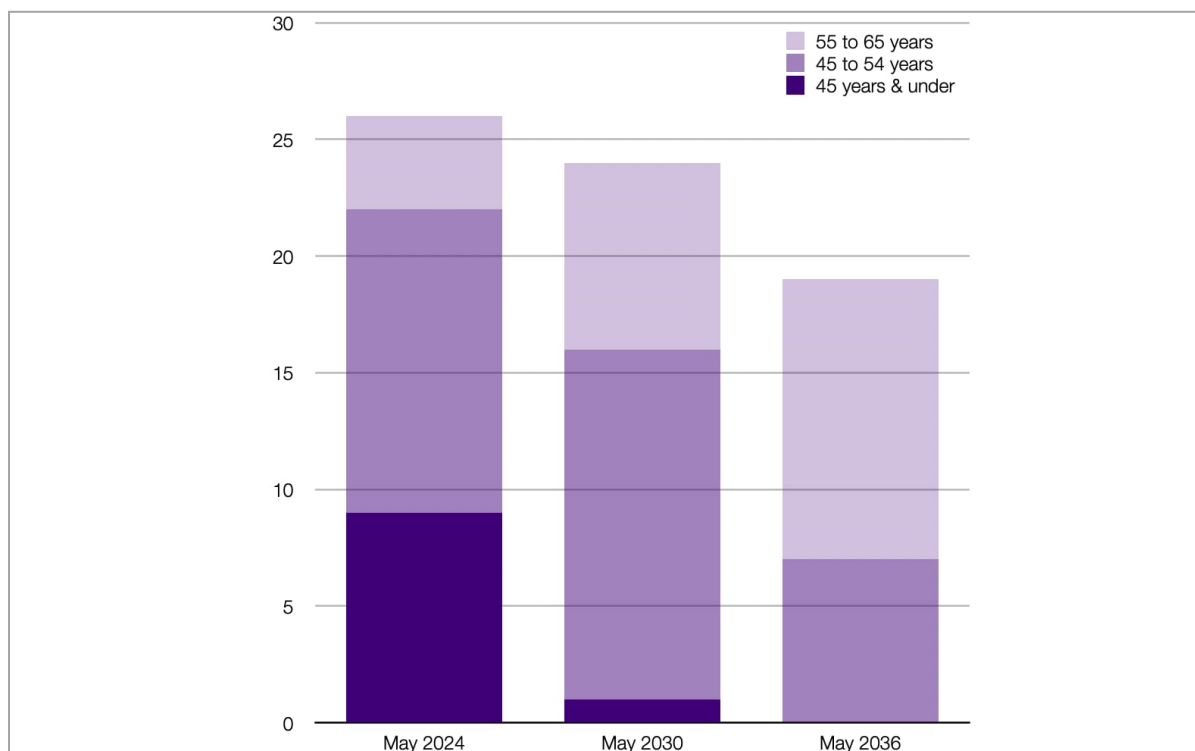
198. Beyond just the question of aging clergy, closure of the Society is inevitable if “things remain as they are”. As mentioned earlier, it is not a question of fluctuating numbers from one year to the next: a long-standing continuous decline in the all up membership body, with the parallel trend in aging of the membership, means that the sustainability of the Society has reached a tipping point, the point of no return beyond which a new lease of life becomes infeasible.
199. That tipping point may already have passed: to reverse ongoing decline in members calls for sustaining a programme that facilitates 15 to 20 priests being ordained per year, every year. This is more than has been the case for many years, and certainly rather more than in any year since 2008. Even to stabilise membership would need 5 to 10 ordinations, rather than the handful each year since 2008. In turn, were there sufficient potential vocations that might lead to this number of ordinations, it is doubtful that the Society now has, or could soon locate, suitable personnel to support such a substantial programme: fostering a seminarian to ordination calls for a structured commitment from several priests over a period of 10 years or more.
200. Turning to Columban lay missionaries, the structure and reality of the Society leads to a similar logic in relation to lay vocations that the Society may have capacity to foster. A general “life commitment” frame of reference remains relevant, of course, given the dislocation that being a lay missionary entails.
201. There is, however, one profound difference: there is no provision in the Society’s canonical governance arrangements that allows for a “lifelong commitment” by lay missionaries, comparable to that for an ordained member. This relieves the Society of the obligation to provide for long serving lay missionaries in their retirement, but it then also behooves the Society to afford equitable opportunities for lay missionaries, allowing them to freely proceed as they must for their own circumstances.

**Figure 13: Columban Lay Missionaries, by term since 2012 (as at 1 June 2023)**



202. As illustrated in Figure 13, a generally downward trend in vocations to Columban lay missionary service was somewhat in evidence over a decade, but has been exacerbated by COVID-19 (new starts being rather impeded by travel restrictions).
203. It would also be fair to say that the numbers leave room for discussion about underlying sustainability of the lay missionary initiative. Noting leadership resources are needed to foster lay missionary vocations and provide due formation, this relies on Columban clerics as lay missionary vocations have not reached an evidently self-sustaining level. As with priestly vocations, travails of the Church on misconduct issues are almost certainly a factor, with these things becoming progressively more evident to the global community over the time horizon shown in Figure 13.
204. In tandem with issues over fostering priestly vocations, challenges for the Society could be expected to continue in terms of providing enough suitable personnel for initial and ongoing formation so lay missionary candidates develop appreciation of the Columban charism and have due opportunity to find fulfilment in living out a missionary vocation. For example, looking at the present Columban lay missionaries by age is an indication of those who, in future, may remain available for Columban mission, including working in concert with clergy to foster and nurture lay missionary vocations.
205. As depicted in Figure 14, in June 2023 there were 26 Columban lay missionaries, at which time all but three of whom had long term agreements with the Society. Given the length of time on mission and experience of Columban life needed for a missionary to be prepared for leadership, this was the upper limit of potential lay missionary leaders until around 2030. As it happens, in January 2024 there are now fewer CLMs, some having completed their service. For consistency with the consultation survey and earlier reports from this project, *Headlines about 'Conversations'* and *Summary Report: Conversations about choices*, this graph is unamended for that change: the key point is that CLMs possibly remaining in 2036 will all be aged over 45, and may be fewer than the graph shows if circumstances mean some choose to complete their time as a missionary sooner rather than later.

**Figure 14: Columban Lay Missionaries, by age (as projected in June 2023)**



206. While every vocation is to be sincerely welcomed, the number of candidates required to sustain a viable pathway is rather more than a handful of lay missionary candidates each year. In order for a suitable number of new lay missionaries to join the Society on mission, for several years nearly all of the present Columban lay missionaries would have to shift their primary focus to working in concert with clergy to foster and nurture aspiring lay missionaries - an uninviting prospect leaving few engaged in other missionary activities, that may not even be feasible. This highlights profound difficulties of making a credible response to a situation that has already emerged - a current reality, not a future problem.
207. On the whole, the prevailing dilemma is that acceptance of vocations entails very serious obligations for the institution that are concomitant with long term commitment from an individual. In particular, it is simply not ethical to seek “lifelong commitment” from religious vocations without sure knowledge and authentic belief that the community will continue long enough to honour its related obligations.

### Leading other leaders

208. Since the consultation survey revealed that most Columbans are sufficiently aware of such realities, action to address those problems has one less barrier to surmount. To move past that point, however, involves engaging those for whom it is tempting to feel the problems are for some other person to solve at some other time, or those who feel comfortable in their place, secure in the present arrangements, and so find doomsayers have too dour an outlook. This speaks to the a fundamental reality of clerical life - that in many and various ways, all clerics are spiritual leaders, and so the challenge for nominal leaders of an institution is to *lead those other leaders* by first persuading them to understand the nature of the problem at hand, but then to engage with action that is needed from each person to contribute to a solution.<sup>72</sup>
209. The overarching implication is that, without a dramatic change of direction, it is arguable that the Columbans should seriously consider immediately ceasing to accept vocations for new lay missionaries, and quite possibly for ordained missionaries as well - *placing the focus squarely on what positive action Columbans are individually and collectively prepared to take to prolong the life of the Society.*

### Membership issues

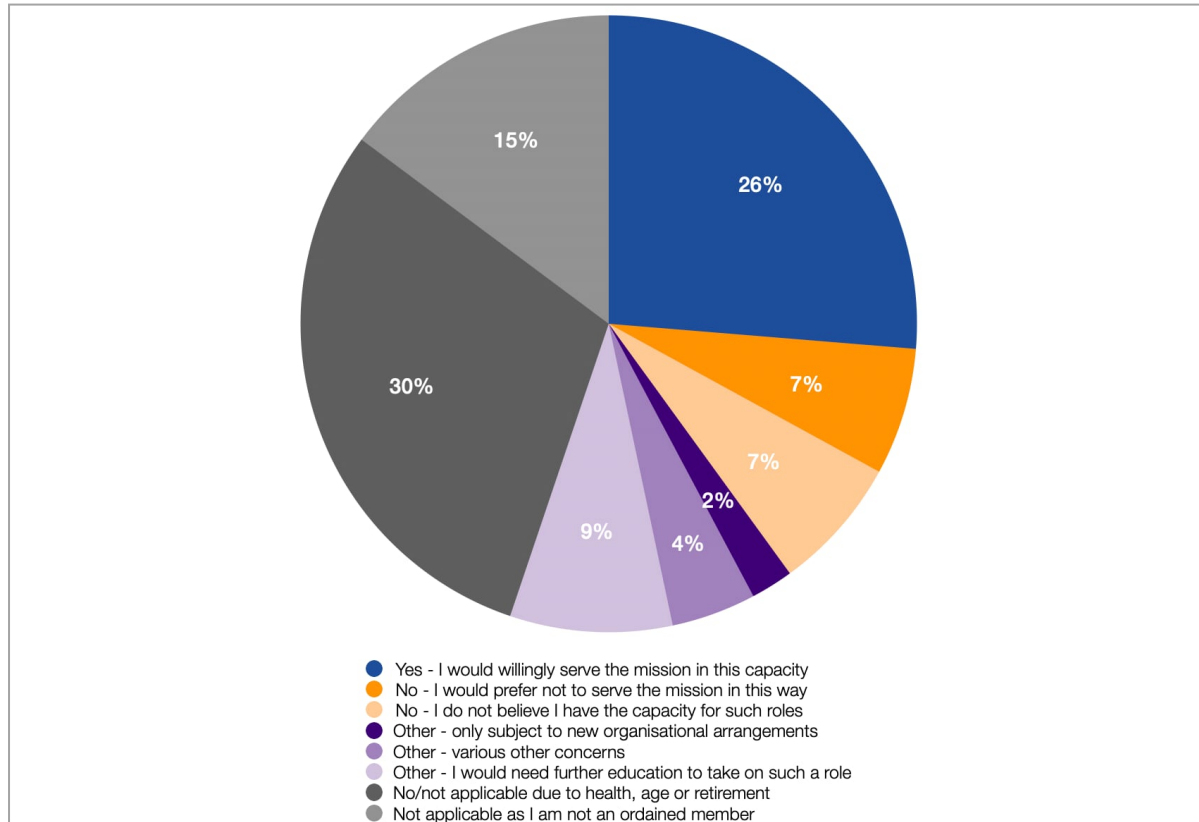
210. As noted already in discussing how the project approach moved from modelling and forecasting to conducting the consultation survey, the quantum of membership of the Society is rapidly approaching an unsustainably small number, making this an existential threat to the ongoing life of the Society as an institution. Thus every member ought to be engaged with the implications of this question and be under no misapprehension as to the seriousness of the issue, and the imminence of a “tipping point”, after which recovery will no longer possible.
211. In good professional conscience, the project team felt obliged to explore this via the survey, as views of the wider Columban community would help to inform options for discussion in conversations on the way to and at GA 2024. Accordingly, some questions were included in the consultation survey, firstly about individual reactions to the prospect that demographics suggest that “if things remain as they are” all ordained members would be needed in leadership, management, or administrative roles for the Society by 2036.

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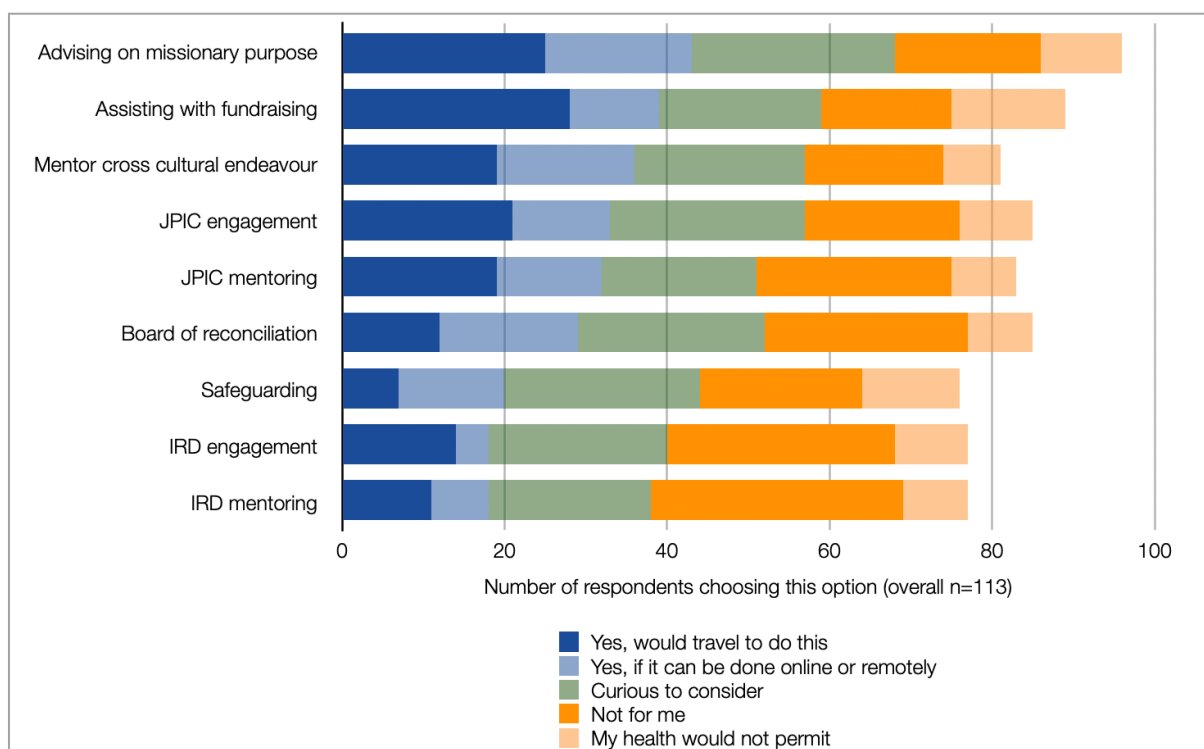
<sup>72</sup> The nature of the missionary endeavour suggests that this may even be all the more so here because of the leadership character that is fundamental to, even inherent in, being missionary: by proclaiming and witnessing to their faith, missionaries are, in effect, seeking to lead others in their transformation via embrace of the Good News.

212. As Figure 15 shows, the views of respondents tend to confirm any emerging concerns about a short supply of ordained members willing and able for leadership. The deleterious consequences of pressing into leadership those who are less than wholeheartedly willing (even if they are able) need no repeating here.<sup>73</sup>

**Figure 15: If “things remain as they are” ... all will be in leadership in 2036**



**Figure 16: Ordained Columbans (65 or over), partially active roles**



<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in responding to the survey many Columbans remarked on their various concerns about the visible necessity in recent years to “recycle” leaders, so much so that this has clearly been part of the Columban dialogue in multiple RMUs.

## Options

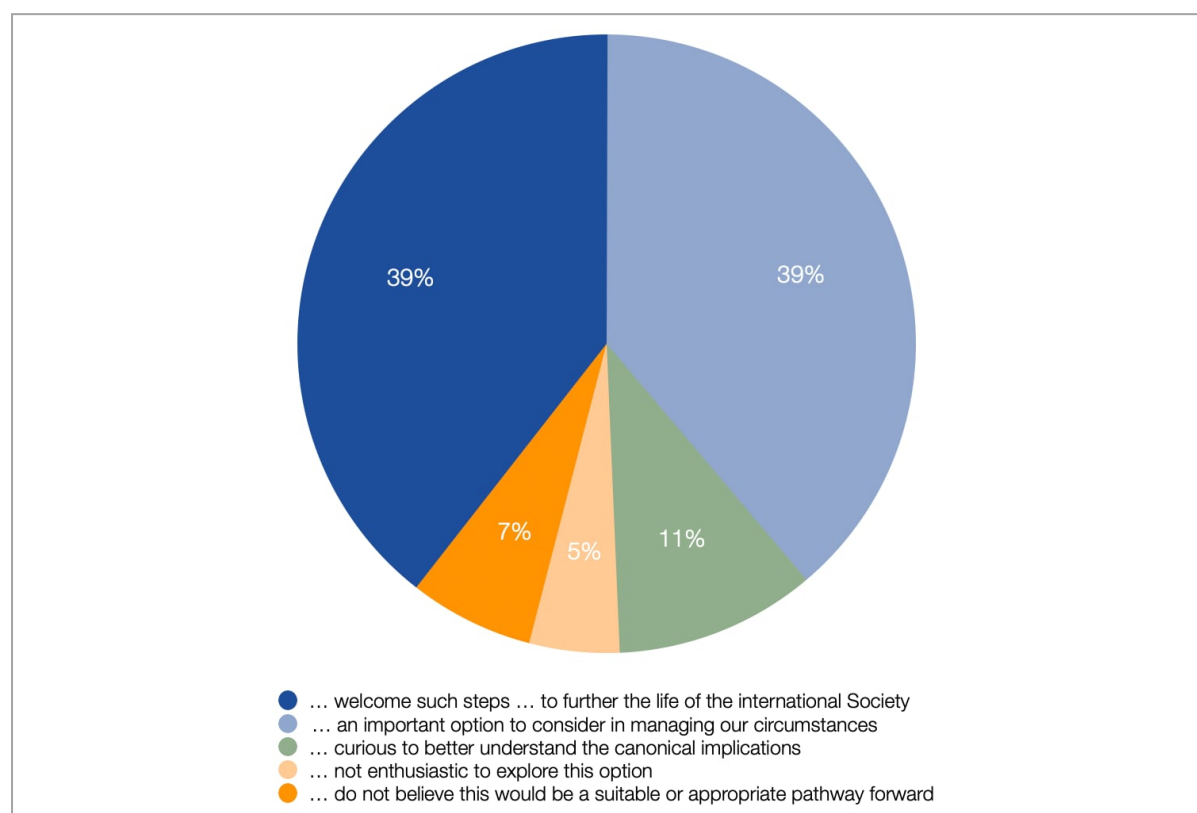
213. There is obviously some scope for ordained members of the Society to work past the customary retirement age of 75, and indeed, many do.<sup>74</sup> Equally obviously, this has limited scope to ease the leadership burden, subject to the vagaries of health considerations and the like. Nonetheless, this option was explored with those over 65 who completed the consultation survey, with the results reflected in Figure 16. To an external observer, while not part of a longer term or ongoing solution, this suggests key elements of capacity to work as a “pressure relief valve” in supporting the leadership structure in the short term.

### Other approaches to prolong the life of the Society

214. All options to prolong the life of the Society mean change to arrangements for governance and decision making to accommodate the Columban reality as it is transpiring - especially in terms of the structure of leadership, management, and administration of the Society.

215. One possible approach would be to further extend responsibility in some areas to laity, which would necessitate their more substantive integration into workings of the Society - Columban lay missionaries or co-workers as appropriate to a particular role. Columbans would be aware that this is congruent with the direction of Pope Francis, as set out in *Predicate Evangelium*,<sup>75</sup> aimed at facilitating more women and/or laity being in significant decision making roles across the senior reaches of Church structure. From the reaction of survey respondents, as summarised in Figure 17, this idea appears to provide very fertile ground for further attention.

Figure 17: Another approach - more embracing Society leadership



<sup>74</sup> As Columbans have also said: ‘Retirement is not an end to being on mission. It is, rather, a new way of being on mission’ - Missionary Society of St Columban *Called to Communion* (Acts of the Columban General Assembly, Los Angeles, USA, 26 August - 21 September, 2012), p18.

<sup>75</sup> See n13 above.

216. On the other hand, findings of this review show this will not, of itself, be sufficient to address the question of providing enough willing and able leaders for the Society as presently configured. GA 2024 therefore should have on the agenda consideration of other approaches that reconfigure organisational arrangements of the Society to ameliorate demands on leadership.
217. In essence, this is because prolonging the life of the Society requires stable or expanding mission personnel - whether ordained members, Columban lay missionaries, or others - *plus* enough willing and able leaders placed to ensure best possible outcomes flow from the efforts of all those joined to the Columban endeavour. Leadership is restrained on this to the extent that it is over-burdened and/or unduly internally-focussed on canonical matters and decision making for the Society per se (as a society of apostolic life), leaving something less than sufficient external focus on engaging with the wider community and making the Society visible to those who may be amenable to engaging with the Columban cause as a lay or ordained missionary.
218. Altering present institutional arrangements thus is the single most fruitful step towards real hopes of a revived future for the Society. If the internal demands on leaders (for the Society itself) can be reduced in view of the smaller Society of today, there is much greater scope for leaders to make real the changes needed to show those potentially inclined to service as a missionary that the Society is not defined by patriarchy and clericalism.

## For further thought

219. Those responding to the consultation survey were, on the whole, reluctant to be charged with fostering vocations to Columban priesthood or lay missionary service, despite being in no doubt about the importance of this to the future of the Society and its mission.
- ➔ ***If not prepared to take formal responsibility for fostering vocations, Columbans still need to contribute to this effort - so what will each undertake to do towards this essential element of a thriving Society?***
220. With Columbans spread so thinly across places of mission, and the structure of the Society only marginally amended from the times, decades past, where abundant numbers spoke to a thriving missionary endeavour, the prospects are now dim for a teamwork effort on fostering vocations and mentoring missionaries in their early years. However, the work of mission is a crucial part of the picture in fostering vocations - “we can’t be what we can’t see”, as the saying goes - so those who are the “some” in Figure 11 fundamentally need an opportunity to encounter a Columban missionary, whether lay or ordained.
- ➔ ***Without taking formal responsibility for fostering vocations, Columbans could relocate to help create more sustainable teams for mission, which would be more visible and potentially more inviting for vocations - so who is prepared to volunteer to do this?***
221. In religious communities, the member body is, effectively, comprised of those who lead the wider community towards proclaiming and witnessing to their faith. This makes leading the community a signal challenge, perhaps especially for missionaries and the ordained. But then, rather than leadership being “they” who will devise and provide solutions etc, for religious “we” all lead, and so need to play a part in being actively responsible.
- ➔ ***As a further expression of their missionary purpose, what fresh commitment might Columbans make towards recognising that “we are they” and that every member might contribute to co-responsibility for a reconfigured Society?***





## Openings

### Generally

222. Our approach to providing the requested “reality check” ahead of GA 2024 led to detecting existential dilemmas early in the project, making it crucial to ensure that time, space, and energy of the Society are now directed to addressing those head on. Thus, the priority has been identifying where the Columbans can best apply their efforts towards developing a sustainable future, to inform needed conversations, and to facilitate formulating strategic plans of action in due course of time. Based on our further analysis, we add that this time should be no later than at GA 2024.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, this work makes significant advances by attending to where change would do the most good, plus how and why attention on that would be helpful. Together this should sufficiently focus Columbans on making necessary choices as the basis for thoughtful strategic planning to occur at and from GA 2024. Put another way, here we identify the choices that the Society faces in prolonging its life, point to those more likely to bear fruit in all of the circumstances, and then pass the baton to those who will be deliberating at GA 2024.

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<sup>76</sup> This project did not proceed by a direct review of activities conducted by the Society to make recommendations about them - the project team has conducted such reviews in the past, for religious institutes and for a wide range of other organisations, but that was not the remit for this project. We also confirm that detailed recommendations for action could only be provided after such an evaluation of specifics, including the financial commitments involved in those activities or programmes. Thus, no specific action recommendations are proposed in this report: from the distance inherent in how this review was tasked, a secular outsider cannot say how, precisely, to make the differences that are needed (or, indeed, what legal, financial or other implications may be involved).

We also note that the remit of the project did not include external consultations - so a significant group of voices *not* heard as part of this project are those of the recipients of the ministries of the Columbans.

## The Society's overall future

223. The present state of membership means the Society is now challenged to have sufficient members to create an organisational footprint that others can aspire to supporting (lay missionaries, co-workers, and so on), but also sufficient numbers who can do that while also helping the Society thrive into the future. Together these mean that the main choice at hand is whether to work to revivify the Society, or allow that it has run its course and let the Society pass into history, ceasing to be as Columban mission reverts to the main body of the Church.
224. Of course, this project does not break ground in attending to the changing size and age profile of the Columbans. Acts of General Assemblies, going back to at least 1994, have mentioned this issue, and responses to the consultation survey confirm that this is lodged in the memory of most Columbans. This project did, however, find indubitable evidence of existential questions that are a pressing reality: bluntly, Society membership is now at or approaching a minimum sustainable level, with hard challenges ahead to draw from there a sufficient coterie of leadership for the future. These things together cast serious doubt on the organisation being able to keep its promises, even to its own members.
225. Doubting the Society's capacity to support lifelong commitment by ordained missionaries implicates at least the ethics of continuing to accept priestly vocations, along with, we suggest, the practicality of accepting lay missionary vocations. It is not the sterling efforts of previous leaders that are the question, but finding enough suitable leaders in future. In short, demographics of the Society have reached, or are very rapidly closing upon, the point of no return for reframing how the Society either goes forward for many years to come, or goes toward unavoidably arranging for closure after about another decade. The imminence of this tipping point was such a compellingly reality that the project team felt obliged to engage members on this via the consultation survey, and to pull no punches on this score.
226. In short, an overarching finding of this project is that, on its present trajectory, it is not clear that the Society even now has the capacity to continue as it is. Emanating from the Society's members, this capacity is already challenged to - simultaneously - meet overall leadership needs of the Society in its present configuration; fulfil canonical, legal, ethical, and other obligations inherent in maintaining a sufficient standard of governance; provide a suitable coterie of leaders able to foster vocations and formation for both Columbans and aspiring Columbans, whether clergy or laity; and animate mission and ministry to engender members and supporters in a sufficient body that is at least stable over time, but preferably thriving.
227. In short, *the Columbans, leaders and members, are now stretched far too thinly over too much and this is itself impacting upon sustainability.*
228. Accordingly, choices must be made about how best to manage the Society's configuration, governance, vocations, and formation towards renewal, so that the Society might continue its mission and ministries confidently and well for many years to come.

**The question is not whether the Society *can* continue, but rather: *should the Society continue as it is?* Given genuine doubt about the Society's ability to keep promises made, especially as entailed in accepting vocations to missionary priesthood, *is it ethical to do so?***

**As an organisation of mission priests, the Society has evolved considerably since it was first established - strong testimony to the collective ability of Columbans to realign to emerging realities in being “pilgrims for Christ”.**

**In comparison, finding a new configuration for today’s reality should not be so difficult.**

## Options

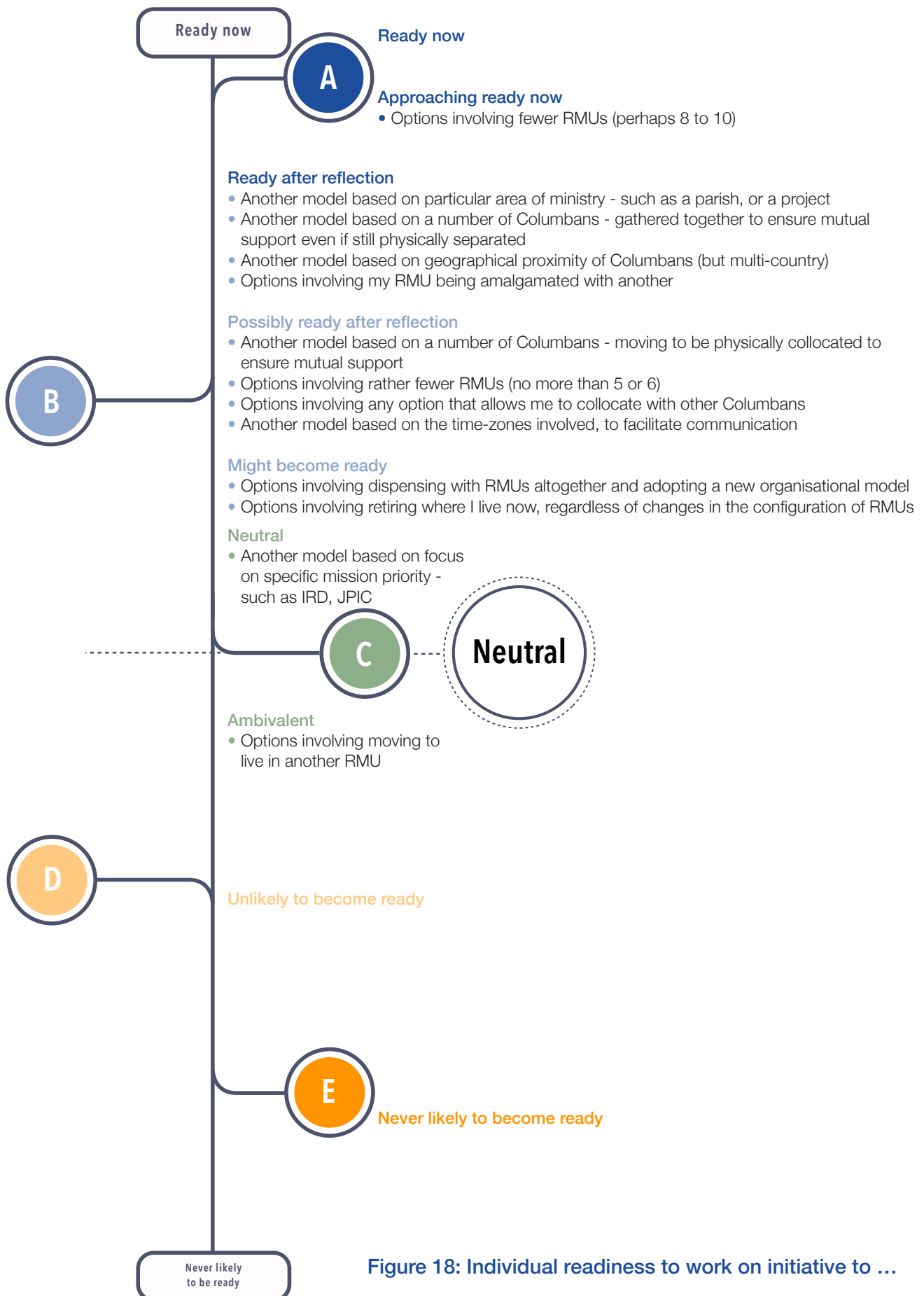
229. Choices about how to lead the Society into the future are emblematic of the overall dilemmas that the Society now faces, and so they are the point of divergence for paths that the Columbans might take: the most hopeful choices involve managing constraints around leadership to afford space in which the Society might find new life.
230. To such ends, research and enquiry in this project shows that there are limited options available, and much experience also strongly indicates that the path to implementation will not be smooth, nor will it necessarily be supported by those comfortable with present arrangements and less pragmatically cognisant of the need for fresh direction.
231. So the bad news is that any choice will lack perfection and may be less than entirely helpful, but the better news is that, at this stage, almost the only choice that won’t help is no change at all.
232. We note here that until specific options on some choices are set out, the detail of potential canonical and legal implications remains in abeyance, pending advice to be obtained when setting out those options. That said, in effect choices available to the Society amount to some combination of these options:
  - i. *Reconfiguring* the institutional arrangements around fewer leadership roles in order to focus, reinforce, and expand capacity for animating mission, ministry, and vocations “outreach” - but this unavoidably involves change to the present RMUs, where more change would likely do more good.
  - ii. *Rescoping* activities on a wider scale, in light of internal and external points of focus so as to best support visibility of mission priorities that resonate with the wider community, further enabling vocations “outreach” - but this calls for having fewer clerics who exercise canonical authority, plus withdrawing from some places and seeking more congregational and diocesan cooperation.
  - iii. *Recasting* the net on leadership to widen possibilities for filling each role to best effect, and thus overcoming some of the constraints that are the natural consequence of a smaller and older (clerical) Society - but that will involve accepting direction from more lay leaders (though without needing to amend canonical arrangements) and realising progress on genuine accountability in light of clericalism (in keeping with the IRMU recommendation).
233. The challenge to reconfigure the institutions’ internal structure is just another in the Society’s heritage. As an organisation of mission priests, the Society has evolved quite considerably since it was first established: geographical refocussing alone is testimony to the collective ability of Columbans to realign to emerging realities in being “pilgrims for Christ”. In comparison to surmounting those challenges, finding a new configuration to meet today’s realities really should not be so difficult.

## Choices on configuration

234. The place of RMUs may be vexed as they have been the pivot point of the organisational structure, and so have come to play a part in what it means to be a Columban. More hopefully, we would observe that this is more about MUs than Regions per se. Further, based on results from the consultation survey, there are nonetheless openings to consider reducing the number of RMUs: respondents were approaching “ready now” to consider arrangements for fewer (perhaps 8 to 10) RMUs, as shown in Figure 18.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, results depicted in Figure 7 (in “neutral” views about being a Columban) hint at contrasts between the theory of RMUs being just a means to the ends of mission, and the practical reality moving to another RMU as part of living out the cross cultural mission of Columbans. This also comes through in Figure 18, where the theory of reducing RMUs seems reasonably welcome, but the reality of moving to another RMU was met with quite distinct ambivalence.
235. The overarching dilemma might thus be summarised as: what configuration of the Society best serves the mission going forward, while also living within the means of the Society in terms of leadership resources and duly preserving a sense of Columban identity? In discerning this, distinguishing between mission units and regions may help: do Regions have a sufficiently profound place in this to justify their retention? Practically speaking, if Regions were no longer, but Columbans continued living as and where they are, would they have a different view about changing the institutional structure?
236. From an external perspective, it is quite notable that there was, in any case, more fertile ground located on these options than might have been expected - especially since, arising from a delayed IRMU Meeting, this project has proceeded apace so as to assist in the journey to GA 2024, but without so much opportunity as would be usual for preparatory meetings, presentations, and the like.
237. With that in mind, Figure 18 also shows that, on the whole, respondents were “possibly ready after reflection” to reduce RMUs even further, perhaps to 5 or 6 RMUs; and it was also possible that on balance, the group might even become ready to dispense with RMUs altogether. Further, we note several dozen additional proposals on configuration were put forward in text comments, mostly in the vein of Columban groups uniformly becoming mission units (that is, taking Regions out of the picture) and/or using a new “grouping” model based on mission priority rather than location.
238. What is certain is that the present organisational model met the needs of a much larger missionary endeavour, and that local leadership and familiarity with place and culture are important values for missionaries. Since the Regional model is increasingly challenging to maintain with fewer Columbans being spread progressively more thinly across the world, this calls for a model for local leadership that will also support coherence as a Society.
239. On the other hand, organisational change is notoriously difficult to accomplish. We would note from experience that this is not usually helped by attempting change via a long series of smaller steps - due to undercurrents of uncertainty and instability that this approach tends to generate, including where only part of the organisation is implicated at each step, often making those in that place feel “singled out” in an unhelpful way. In any case, most “modest change” options that might have been pertinent have already been attempted, to limited effect (such as modest adjustments to the structure of RMUs from time to time).

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<sup>77</sup> Recalling again that this does not mean there were no negative views expressed, but that the positive and very positive views expressed were quite significantly more numerous.



**Figure 18: Individual readiness to work on initiative to ...**

240. These things together strongly suggest there is particular challenge for those deliberating at GA 2024: they will need to work hard to avoid the temptation to make a bit of change in the hope that it goes well enough to make a bit more. That sort of incremental approach is, in effect, the path followed by successive General Assemblies at least since 1994. Suffice it to say results have not been enough to date, and the time to respond more substantively - available at GA 1994 and for some time afterwards - now hovers on the very edge of passing the Columbans by. Beyond GA 2024, there will be no more second chances as membership becomes progressively more unsustainable.
241. This sums to a powerful need for taking a bigger and bolder step at GA 2024, rather than falling in to the chasm that is there to be crossed - a chasm made up of things such as desire to continue living in a familiar place, to have a local Columban community with bonds of unity among the members who grow in fidelity to the community's life and the Society's charism, and to seek one's own missionary path but as part of the larger purpose of the Society across the world.
242. If the project team were to venture an opinion here, it would be that the necessary step would be to devise a fresh organisational model that speaks more directly to the needs of the future - centring around the highest priorities for externally-oriented leadership. This can be done by dispensing with Regions as part of the structure, and having fewer but more sustainable (single country) MUs, but would much better be done if reconfiguring proceeds in tandem with both rescoping leadership roles, and recasting the net to more fully and sincerely embrace laity to the widen possibilities for filling each leadership role.

## Choices on scope

243. As much as changing the structure, rescoping what each leadership role entails stands to assist noticeably in terms of living within the personnel means of the Society. Narrowing expectations about what each role will take responsibility for makes for an institutional design more amenable to practical realities, and more able to respond in matching people with the leadership work that needs doing.<sup>78</sup>
244. For one example, at present taking responsibility for an RMU involves more than the day to day leadership of a local community. If, instead, the day to day leadership ministry was largely the limit of that role, and such leaders remained quite active on mission, more choices would likely become available in terms of those willing and able to accept that extent of responsibility - including, pro tem, some who might otherwise largely be retired.
245. For another, Figure 19 shows that respondents were, on the whole, reluctant to be charged with fostering vocations to Columban priesthood or lay missionary service, despite there being no doubt about the importance of this to the future of the Society and its mission. This is not unreasonable given the particular type of leadership role that this represents, though it does rather underscore the fundamental nature of this part of the Columbans' existential quandaries. In any case, a concerted effort on vocations may help over the longer term but will be of little real help in the present Columban reality for two reasons.
246. First, that concerted effort would take leaders away from the many other roles they must fulfil in the Society and for its mission, and there is a practical limit on this anyhow, from the number of leaders now available and their suitability for fostering vocations. So there is little help there if the same number of leaders must first be devoted to the institution's structure (see earlier discussion of choices on configuration), or the pool of leaders is not somehow expanded (see below for discussion on leadership eligibility).

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<sup>78</sup> To very clear, this concerns adjusting guidance on leadership roles (eg in role descriptions) in a formal process, rather than just being organic and situational, essentially rolling with the realities of what plays out in different parts of the institution's life.

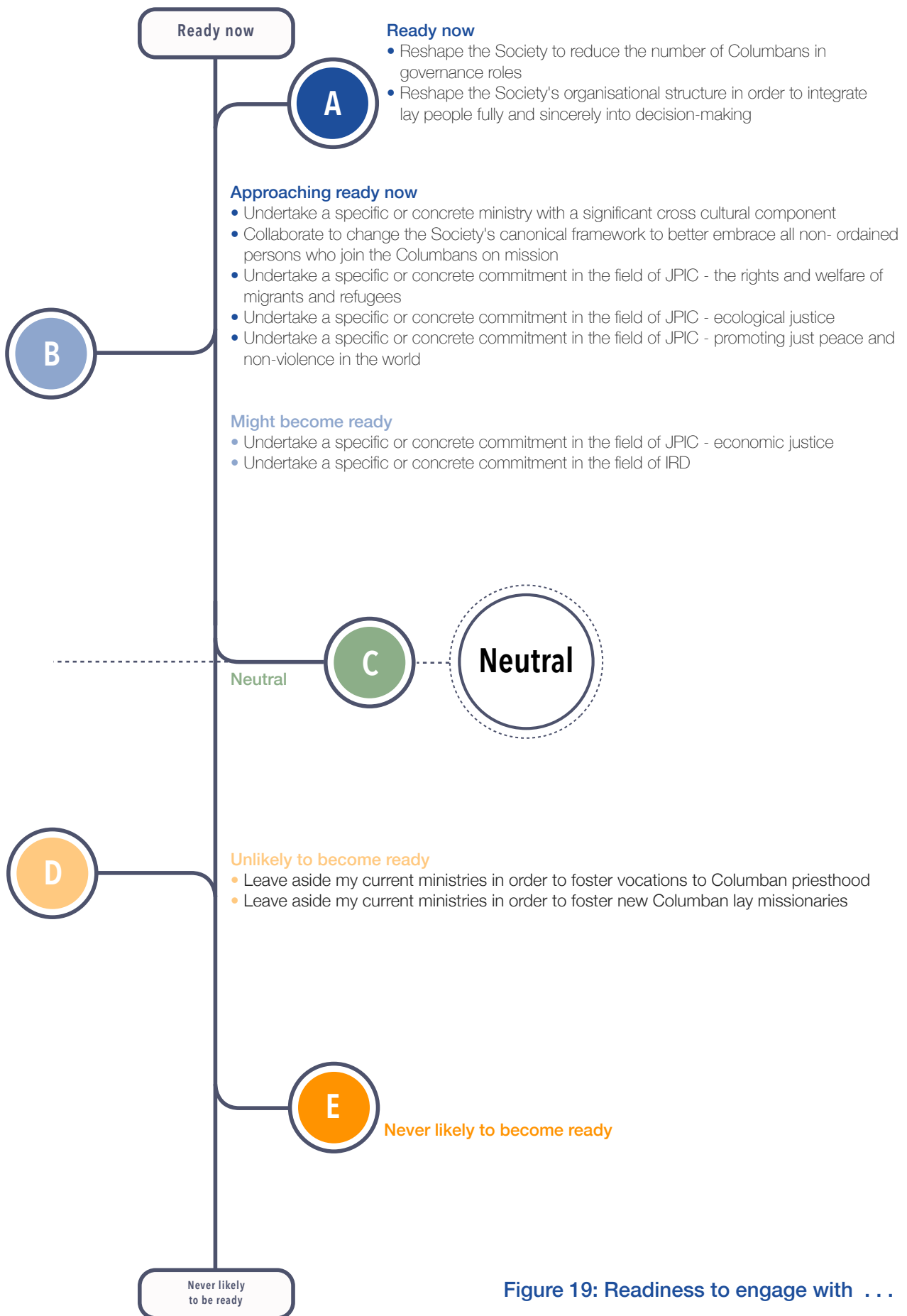


Figure 19: Readiness to engage with ...

247. Second, a considerable length of time will pass before a new “class of 202X” could mature in their vocation sufficient to swell the ranks of potential leaders - even an ardent optimist would be looking towards GA 2042 and beyond.
248. Together such things suggest that the necessary “bigger and bolder” step here would build on the back of doing away with Regions as part of leadership arrangements for the Society. If instead MUs were led by a Mission Coordinator, canonical leadership could be gathered into a team that is placed to provide direction on canonical matters as and when needed across the Society, and then more often and more pervasively to be active in:
- seeking opportunities to pursue mission priorities more visibly in the wider world, to which local Columban communities might then respond and take forward;
  - increasing breadth and depth of external awareness of opportunities for service on Columban mission, including congregational and diocesan cooperative openings that might surface; and
  - engaging in vocations “outreach” to facilitate a path to the door of the Columbans for those whose missionary inclinations should be fostered, including by increasing the chances of individuals encountering a missionary so as to enliven such aspirations.
249. Those responsibilities would usually form part of the overarching remit of the General Council, so it is salient here to consider, in particular, the abundance of things that fall to the GC and need support from the RMU leaders. Using RMU leaders as a point of contact and coordination of such things is one way to share that load, but necessarily means that those in RMU leadership need to be willing and able for exercise of canonical authority. Instead, bringing those with such capacity into a core team, to work as and when needed, would very likely husband these resources more frugally and more fruitfully towards the overall missionary endeavour of the Society. Thus this approach might entail, for example, a two part central team connecting to MU Coordinators (supported by a coordinating committee to suit local circumstances), rather than a central team and many RMU teams.

## Choices on leadership eligibility

250. Beyond these different approaches to fishing in known waters, there are options for the Society to cast the net much more widely in the search for leadership that will help it thrive and prolong its life for many years to come. Clerical leadership is at a premium in parishes and dioceses across the Catholic world, which necessitates turning to non-ordained Columbans for help here, as indeed is increasingly the case everywhere from the Vatican outwards. In short, to help the future endeavours of the Columbans calls for more substantive integration of laity into the decision making roles of the Society: something more than being “effective partners”, albeit stopping short of what would constitute a change to the nature of the Society. This also speaks to making visible progress to defray negative aspects of clericalism (so much commented upon by priests responding to the consultation survey) and realising genuine accountability (as noted in one of the IRMU recommendations) as an evident part of the leadership remit.<sup>79</sup>

**Responses to the consultation survey show that there is no doubt that Columbans are - as a whole - “ready now” for extending positive and sincere embrace of lay leadership.**

<sup>79</sup> Note again that if canonical change were to be contemplated, advice would first be required from canonical, legal, financial, and other advisers.



## For further thought

251. For an optimist, discussion in this report makes clear the Columbans have an abundance of choices available to renew the Society, even if not so much of an abundance of time in which to make them work before closure becomes inevitable. On the other hand, members of the Society ultimately might consider that revivifying the Society involves choices that they are not prepared to make, so the Society should instead become history, its purpose reverting to the Church proper.
252. If the membership chooses the positive and generative path, making their choices a reality is, of course, a substantial portion of what a future General Council could bring to the life of the Society. However, we also note that those men will certainly have their work cut out for them in “leading other leaders” through the “courageous conversations” ahead.
253. One way or another, time is seriously of the essence - so with thanks for the opportunity to advise on the way to GA 2024, we commend all these ideas to those involved in guiding the Missionary Society of St Columban and any who support its endeavours.

## Readiness for action

254. Twin constraints from the present state of membership challenge the Society to both have enough members to sustain a suitably visible institutional footprint others may aspire to support, and also find enough able leaders from within who are willing to help the Society thrive into the future.
255. Together these challenges mean the main choice at hand is whether to work to revivify the Society, or allow that the Society has run its course and let it pass into history, ceasing to be while its purpose and mission somehow revert to the main body of the Church.
256. Figures 19, 20, and 21, reflect various elements of how ready Columbans are to do things necessary to continue the life of the Society. Following that through to finality on certain questions would facilitate whatever comes next, so GA 2024 might begin by asking:
  - ➔ ***Do members support formal change to (endogenously-determined) institutional arrangements so as to prolong the life of the Society and continue to foster its missionary purpose?***
  - ➔ ***Do members wish to see further exploration of canonical change at this time?***

## Reconfiguring

257. Reconfiguring the Society’s institutional arrangements is the main antidote to closure in another decade or so, with two related themes arising from the consultation survey. First, respondents made clear their preferences for GC action following GA 2024 (Figure 20), although they were less firm about where they stand on personal readiness to embrace such options (Figure 21). Second, amending the Society’s canonical arrangements (to perhaps create a new missionary society or to merge with another) was not, on balance, a preferred option, but a significant group within the whole was positive about considering this (see Figures 20 and 21).
  - ➔ ***After due reflection on the way to GA 2024, to prolong the life of the Society what generative change can be made to endogenous arrangements, via institutional reconfiguring, rescoping activities and the places in which they are present, and recasting the net on leadership to widen possibilities for filling each role?***
  - ➔ ***After due reflection on the way to GA 2024, what change might Columbans each make in their lives and ministries to support these institutional changes to revivify the Society?***

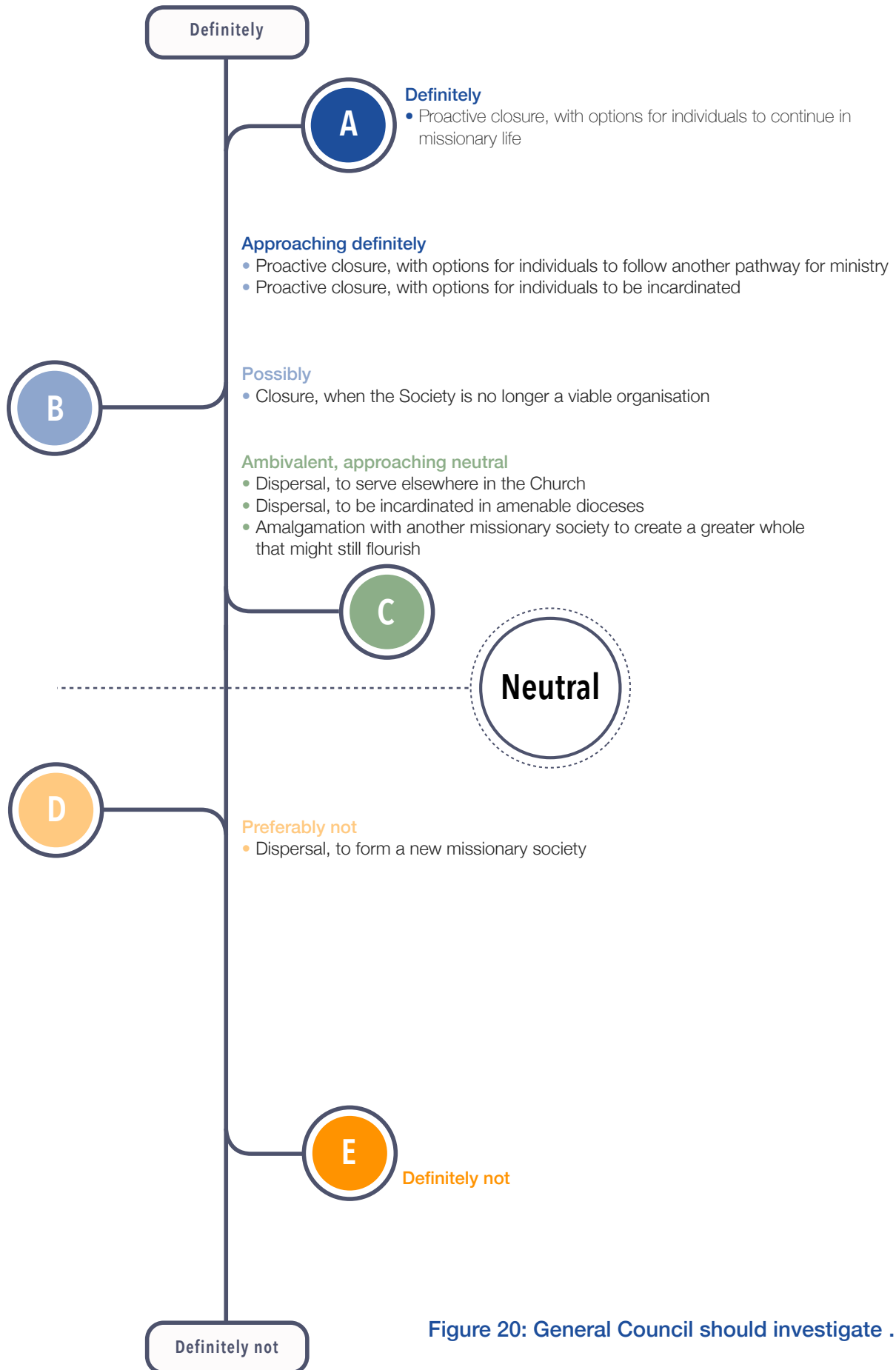


Figure 20: General Council should investigate ...

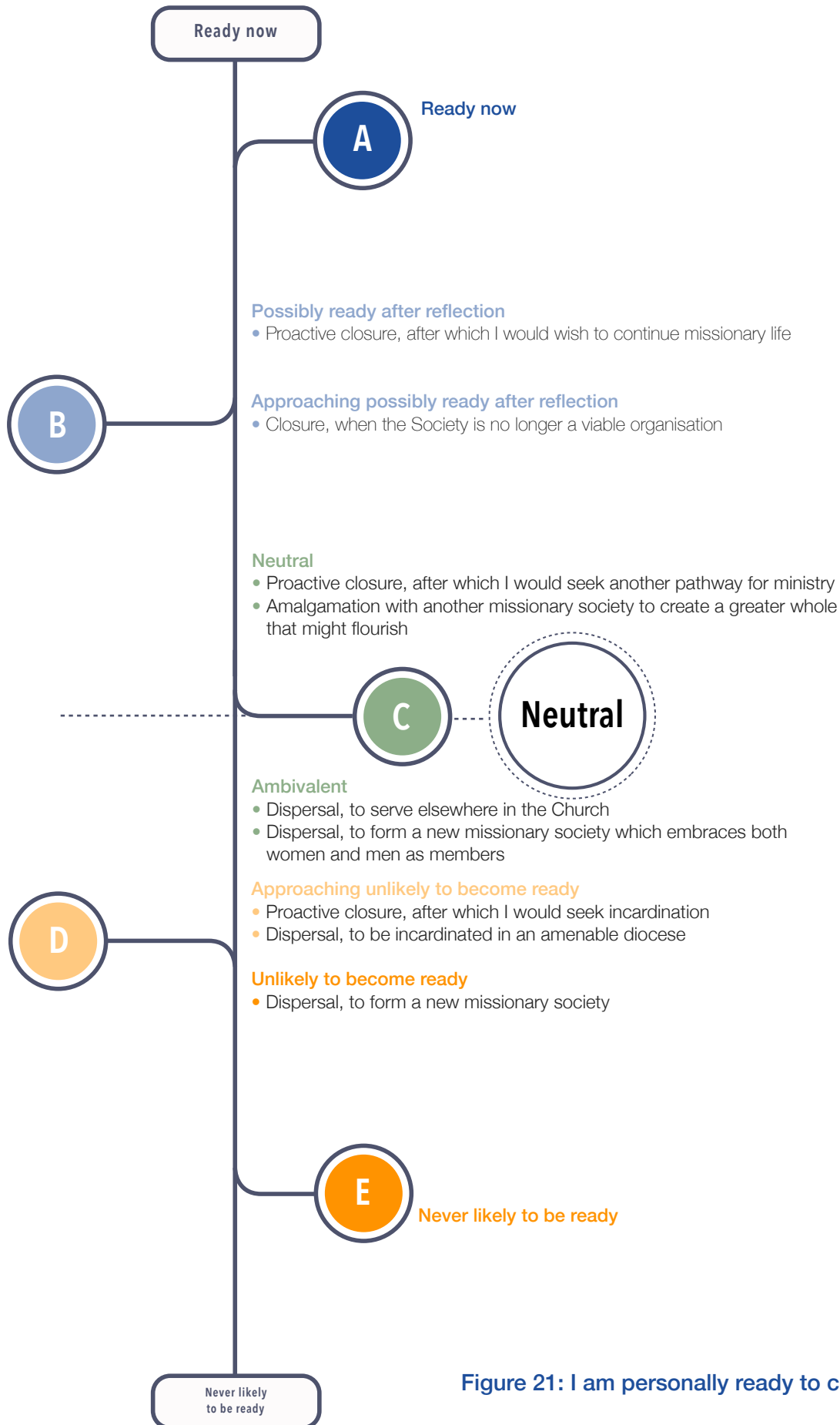


Figure 21: I am personally ready to consider ...

258. As much as reconsidering how best to arrange and lead the Society as an organisation, a fresh expression of mission would assist in gathering together mutual efforts which might then stand visible to the world as characteristically Columban.

- ➔ ***What fresh point of focus for the Columban mission - in terms of purpose, place, or people - would re-energise the efforts of all who support the Society?***
- ➔ ***How might a fresh expression of mission potentially inspire more Columbans - clergy or laity - to be willing to be seen as the public face of the Society?***

## Rescoping

259. Short of canonical change, there are ways in which leadership roles might be rescoped to limit the demands placed on clerical leaders who are willing and able for leadership roles.

- ➔ ***Do members support first dispensing with Regions in favour of mission units as the basic way of organising the Society's people and works?***
- ➔ ***If so, how many MUs can be sustained fruitfully?***
- ➔ ***Would a "single country" MU model help to make MUs more sustainable?***
- ➔ ***Does the present MU Coordinator role sufficiently express the leadership needed for a single country MU (when supported by a coordinating committee to suit local circumstances)?***
- ➔ ***Assuming MU Coordinators would link directly to the Superior General for canonical purposes, what different or additional arrangements would assist on that, and/or support MUs cohering together strongly as the Society?***

## Recasting

260. As shown in Figure 19 above, there is no doubt that Columbans are, on the whole, "ready now" for positive embrace of lay leadership. Fruitful direction on this, within the confines of canonical arrangements for the Society, could simply follow the lead set by Francis in seeking to more closely and sincerely involve women and laity in leadership and decision making roles and processes.

- ➔ ***How might the present expression of the MU Coordinator role be refreshed to further develop the effective involvement of laity in leadership of the Society?***
- ➔ ***What else can be done in reconfiguring Society arrangements for mission that would widen the openings in which to engage with lay leadership?***
- ➔ ***What might be evidenced in a refreshed approach to day to day practice by all Columbans that would demonstrate authentic embrace of lay leadership?***

261. Considering vocations outcomes (Figure 11 and associated text) suggests a very hard road ahead. A two-pronged approach is essential: "vocations outreach" by leaders plus practical day to day support of that via more visible works of Columbans and opportunities to knowingly encounter a missionary. But the numbers may still prove to be insufficient. So GA 2024 should consider the following questions:

- ➔ ***What approach to fostering priestly vocations is canonically sound, secularly legal, ethical, and practical, or should the Society cease to accept new vocations?***
- ➔ ***Vocations for lay missionaries also rely fundamentally on leadership afforded by clergy, so how might the Society similarly manage that nexus?***
- ➔ ***What else, if anything, might be done to sustain the Society if vocations are not likely to be sufficient to stabilise ordained membership?***



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Annexes







# Annex A: Consultation survey

## Explanatory notes

The text of all questions is provided in this annex for future reference, while responses that are amenable to be summarised are presented in tables and graphs in Annex B. Questions omitted from Annex B are those that were limited to text responses, plus Q46 to 51 which covered respondent demographics.

Since over 75% of those invited to participate did respond to the survey, this leaves no practical doubt that aggregated responses are sufficiently representative to inform future discussion and discernment on the matters addressed in the survey.

However, further analysis and reporting on respondent demographics, and/or cross-tabulation of those with other questions, would have the effect of abrogating anonymity of respondents, a condition of the survey. Accordingly, this data has been kept confidential to the project team, and, like the details of text responses, seen only by our two most senior analysts.

Summary of respondent demographics is limited to the following diagram.



## Respondents: key demographics

In Annex B, the number of survey participants responding to a given question is noted in the form of (n=X) - for example, (n=270) indicates a response to that question was recorded by 270 participants.

For the purposes at hand, there is no statistically significant difference in the number answering one question or another, with exceptions as follows:

- Q41 (n=269), Q42 (n=257) and Q44 (n=262) - in terms of the range of how many responses were made to each question across the survey, each of these was at the lower end, but review indicates that this is associated with not answering and the presence or absence of answer options for “Don’t know” and/or “Not applicable”. No particular conclusion should be drawn from this variation.
- Q52 - regarding taking a partially active role in retirement, this question was open only to priests aged 65 years or more (n=113), but those answering each option varied notably. This is not unexpected or anomalous in the context of the question - see the relevant graph in Annex B.

Open-ended questions, limited to text only responses, were as follows:

- Q6 and Q7 - examples about putting JPIC (n =225) and IRD (n=231) into practice;
- Q9 - elaboration on Q8 (n=125);
- Q13 - elaboration on Q10, 11 or 12 (n=104); and
- Q43 - other suggestions for reconfiguring the Society (n=80).

In terms of the number of responses, no particular conclusion should be drawn on this count.

Responses given were analysed and documented in the report as appropriate and informative. The single most significant matter raised was “clericalism” (without being further defined). Many comments were made to amplify the choice of response made to the related question by offering a personal reflection. So in various ways ‘clericalism’ was put forward as a key issue (mostly by clergy about other clergy), but not in a way amenable to further analytical attention in the context of this project.

Other respondents cross-referred to matters raised elsewhere in the survey without opening up a new line of discussion (for example, the question of continuing to take priestly vocations was raised before that question came up in the survey).

As far as appropriate given the number of ideas expressed by survey respondents, the sense of such insights has been incorporated into the report where that is mentioned.

Further summary would be infeasible for practical purposes, but also open to interpretive error and/or breaching the anonymity condition.

Lastly, the opportunity for comment on Q45 (slider) elicited 230 responses - see discussion of Figure 5 in the main report.

## Question text - all questions

### Background to this consultation

#### From the IRMU meeting in Seoul . . .

Those who gathered for the IRMU Meeting in Seoul in March 2023 had the opportunity to consider various aspects of the Society as it seeks to respond to the missionary challenges and possibilities in the world today.

Some of the participants visited Samcheok as an expression of solidarity with the local community in the ongoing struggle to protect their ecological heritage in a place central to the memory of Columban martyr James Maginn.

In his homily for the close of the IRMU meeting, Society Leader Father Tim Mulroy spoke to the theme of 'courageous conversations' with particular reference to James Maginn's final days - in the context of the preparations that will be required during the Society's journey towards GA 2024 as well as in the years that will follow on from it.

If you have not yet had an opportunity to consider Tim's words on that occasion, or would like to refresh your recollection, now would be a good time to do so and to reflect further on his message, as part of your personal preparation for GA 2024.

Listen to Fr Tim here

#### . . . towards two reviews ahead of GA 2024

As advised to all Columbans in May 2023 (read the letter), the IRMU made 6 recommendations for the international Society to seriously consider as part of its preparation for GA 2024.

The implementation of 2 of those 6 recommendations is initially being facilitated by Dr Carolyn Evans ahead of GA 2024.

Carolyn is a lay woman with a professional qualification in several disciplines, and an extensive background in the not-for-profit sector (including religious communities) as well as in the private and public sectors (read more).

The particular tasks being undertaken by Dr Evans concern:

- a strategic, independent review of the Columban Society in the light of mission priorities (JPIC/IRD, etc), and
- an independent review and assessment of the vocation programs based on internal and external data, trends, and other congregational plans.

It is expected that this consultation survey will inform a report from Dr Evans, which will provide the Society with a basis from which it can attend to the second part of both recommendations - the creation of a strategic plan - during the GA 2024.

#### Please note:

All questions in this consultation survey are optional, and you may go ahead to the next page at any time.

In the interests of ensuring that this review process is well-informed, however, it would be greatly appreciated if you would take the necessary time to reflect on each question and answer as many as are appropriate to you.

To proceed with the survey, enter the code shown below into the text box, noting that this code is case-sensitive and so may require upper case/capital letters.

## **Approach taken in this consultation survey**

Looking in from the outside for the two independent reviews, work in progress already points to a clear and serious need to examine the assumptions used for planning the Society's future activities, such as might be discussed at GA 2024.

For such discussions, a crucial group of assumptions will usually concern the implications of change seen around us - but, of course, this often involves both many, many questions and even more potential answers!

To assist in grappling with such things, one analytical device - very commonly used in sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and sociolegal work - is to probe into the alternative, simply by asking what the future will look like if we do nothing (or not enough) in the face of major changes, including those that are already happening:

### ***What happens if 'things remain as they are'?***

Crucially - though hope springs eternal - the opportunity for responsible action in the face of major change is not so enduring.

So, if the Society is assuming that 'things remain as they are', then it needs to consider not only its future but what the consequences are likely to be for all involved.

With this idea in mind, an early lesson from this review work is that there is a single feature of the Columban Society which will, very likely, be the pivot point of all assumptions about its future as an organisation and for its ministries - and this feature is the size and age of its membership.

This highlights an important temporal issue as to how the Society might move forward at, and from, GA 2024 with regard to encouraging fresh life to flourish for the Columban mission.

Accordingly, the subject matter of this survey is organised into three groups of issues:

### **Realities now for GA 2024**

These are the most pressing issues that the Society needs to acknowledge and to begin addressing in the hope of obtaining specific outcomes from GA 2024.

Beyond continuing engagement with mission priorities, key concerns are the size and shape of the Society today, since the impacts of its current limitations are already evident in areas such as leadership, formation, and priority ministries.

### **Pathways to new realities for GA 2030**

There are necessary conversations that would benefit from a longer period of reflection and discernment in relation to possible future pathways for the Society. However, given the current constraints, such lengthy conversations would curtail even further the pathways that are available.

Therefore, conversations need to be started sooner rather than later, in order for plans to be put in place during GA 2024 and implemented before GA 2030.

In pragmatic terms, this calls for the naming of specific tasks to be undertaken by the General Council that will be elected for the period 2024-2030.

These tasks will revolve around the restructuring of the Society and its decision-making processes - requiring members to proactively put aside the assumption that 'things are going to remain as they are', in order for the Society to function effectively as an organisation in the service of mission beyond another decade or so.

## Eventualities on the agenda for GA 2036

There are certain major issues that the Society must confront eventually, but 'eventually' will come sooner - and certainly sooner than many may be anticipating - if the assumption that 'things remain as they are' persists.

On the other hand, if the members are open to change, extending the time before 'eventually' arrives might yet be possible with proactive initiatives during GA 2024.

Otherwise, a process for the closure of the Society is likely to be an unavoidable agenda item for GA 2036 - having due regard to the time it will take for such a process to be completed in a way that is, and is seen to be, compliant with canon law, as well as with secular law in the relevant jurisdictions, and that will be duly ethical in the treatment of all concerned.

## Background to this consultation

### Q1

As just explained, this consultation is an initiative arising from the recent IRMU meeting in Seoul in March 2023. In the lead-up to that meeting, a wide range of relevant material was made available through a designated web site so that every Columban and key co-workers could engage in well-informed discussions about the Society and its mission.

Please choose all options that reflect your involvement prior to that meeting:

I was aware that the meeting was planned

I saw some of the materials prior to the meeting

I was involved in discussions about those materials or in preparation for the meeting

I engaged actively in various preparations for the meeting I attended all or part of the meeting in Seoul

Involvement was not applicable to my role

Please add a comment if you would like to elaborate on your answer:

### Q2

Since the IRMU meeting in Seoul, there has similarly been a variety of information arising from the meeting which has been shared across the Society. Please choose the option that best describes your involvement with the meeting and/or engagement with recommendations emanating from it:

I have engaged actively with the outcomes of the IRMU meeting in preparing for the General Assembly in 2024

I have discussed with others outcomes of the meeting and related materials (such as reports and videos)

I have personally considered all or most of the outcomes and related materials

I have seen some of the materials from the meeting, but not taken that further

I am aware that the meeting was held

Engagement is not directly applicable to my role

Please add a comment if you would like to elaborate on your answer:

## Realities now for GA 2024

### Realities now for GA 2024

The first group of questions in this consultation survey concern the most pressing issues that the Society needs to acknowledge and to begin addressing in the hope of obtaining specific outcomes from GA 2024.

Beyond continuing engagement with mission priorities, key concerns are the size and shape of the Society today, since the impacts of its current limitations are already evident in areas such as leadership, formation, and priority ministries.

### Q3

#### Mission priorities

At present, as per Constitutions 102, the 'Nature and Purpose of the Society' includes these mission priorities for Columbans:

- interreligious dialogue (IRD), 'to promote dialogue between Christians and those of other religious traditions', which in practice means meeting with people from other religious traditions, in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, to listen, to understand, to appreciate and seek possibilities for friendship and collaboration; and
- fostering awareness in relation justice, peace and the integrity of Creation (JPIC), which points to the need for action in areas such as ecological justice, the rights and welfare of migrants and refugees, economic justice, and the promotion of just peace and non-violence in the world.

How familiar do you consider yourself to be with the substance of these mission priorities?

Response options: Very familiar; Good working knowledge; Familiar enough; Not so familiar; Unfamiliar

### Q4

To what extent do you identify with the the substance of these mission priorities?

Response options: Strongly; Fairly well; Moderately; Not so much; Hardly at all

### Q5

To what extent are you able to put these into practice, integrating them into your work?

Response options: Daily practice; Fairly common practice; General practice; Not so much; Hardly at all

### Q6

Please give an example of how interreligious dialogue has featured in your life and ministry in the last year

### Q7

Please give an example of how justice, peace, and the integrity of Creation has featured in your life and ministry in the last year, via one or more actions on ecological justice, promotion of the rights and welfare of migrants and refugees, economic justice, and/or the promotion of just peace and non-violence in the world

## Q8

Do you observe that, in practice, others experience barriers to connecting with these mission priorities?

Please choose all the options that you think are applicable:

- Difficult to identify with the ideas or concepts at a personal level
- Difficult to fully grasp the practical meaning
- Deeper meaning of the intention remains unclear or unfamiliar
- Resources to support engagement are in short supply
- The idea is not connected to their own activities
- They are isolated from others engaged with this idea or related activities
- No particular barriers that I would observe
- Please elaborate on your answer if you wish

## Q9

If you wish, please elaborate on your answers regarding the Columban mission priorities

## Q10

### Context from the Catholic Church

Proclaiming and witnessing the faith of the Catholic Church is, of course, the framework for Columban mission. In the contemporary context, the teachings of three documents from Pope Francis are of particular importance in shaping that framework:

- *Evangelii Gaudium*: on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (24 November 2013)
- *Laudato si'*: Praise be to you - On Care For Our Common Home (24 May 2015)
- *Fratelli tutti*: On Fraternity and Social Friendship (3 October 2020)

How familiar do you feel with the substance of the teachings in these documents?

Response options: Very familiar; Good working knowledge; Familiar enough; Not so familiar; Unfamiliar

## Q11

To what extent do you identify with the the substance of the teachings in these documents?

Response options: Strongly; Fairly well; Moderately; Not so much; Hardly at all

## Q12

To what extent do you find yourself putting into practice the substance of the teachings in these documents?

Response options: Daily practice; Fairly common practice; General practice; Not so much; Hardly at all

## Q13

If you wish, please elaborate on your answers regarding the teachings in these documents

## **Priorities for the Columban mission**

Mission priorities are made real in living as a Columban, in the ministries chosen and then practiced daily. Based on your own experience or observation, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements about being a Columban:

**Q14** In choosing life as a Columban, the motivation to be missionary is the central consideration.

**Q15** The RMU structure is fundamental to how Columbans live, relate to the Society, and minister.

**Q16** Sacramental ministry is more important than any other ministerial activity for a Columban.

**Q17** Proclaiming and witnessing to the Catholic faith in missionary life means continually opening up oneself and others to transformation and conversion.

**Q18** Columban identity emanates from crossing boundaries to proclaim and witness to faith.

**Q19** Columban mission would be enriched by incorporating co-workers more deeply into the Society as companions in mission.

**Q20** The RMU structure of the Society is an important element of one's sense of identity as a Columban.

**Q21** Belonging to a mission society means having ministry options other than a parish.

**Q22** Embracing cross cultural dimensions of mission is central to one's identity as a Columban.

**Q23** Parish ministry focussed on a Catholic community enhances one's sense of Columban identity.

**Q24** Moving to live and minister in another RMU would not alter my sense of Columban identity.

**Q25** Moving to live and minister in another RMU would not alter my sense of Columban identity.

**Q26** It is not for us to question why another would wish to enter missionary life as a Columban, other than to be satisfied that the desire to proclaim and witness to their faith is authentic.

**Q27** I am readily available to move to another RMU as part of my commitment to living out the Columban cross cultural mission.

**Q28** Our daily lives as Columbans should bear witness to transformation, conversion, and other life-giving change for ourselves and others.

Response options for each question: Strongly agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Strongly disagree

**Q29**

## **Ordained membership**

Over many years, the trend toward fewer vocations has been seen across the Catholic Church. For many religious institutes and missionary societies, this can be observed in the smaller, and older, communities of ordained or professed members that have emerged.

The trend is also visible in the Columbans, and become clearly evident in several countries where Columbans are on mission. It has been a significant point of discussion during 5 past General Assemblies in 1994, 2000, 2006, 2012, and 2018 (as documented in the various Acts of those Assemblies that are now posted on the Columban-designated web site). Accordingly, to inform conversations in preparation for GA 2024, historical data and sociodemographic modelling together provide a view out to the horizon of the General Assembly in 2030, and the one to follow in 2036.\*

\*Forward-looking forecasts take into account the present group of seminarians. Given the rigours of missionary life, here, and throughout this survey, 75 is recognised as being the customary age of retirement for ordained members - noting that some continue on mission past this age, while others retire earlier for various reasons.



The long-term picture of the ordained membership of the Society is illustrated below:

[See Figure 1 in main report]

As depicted here, each figure represents about 10 ordained Columbans, tinted to indicate three age groups: under 65 years, 65 to 74, and 75 years or older. This shows that the Society:

- has contracted from a total membership of over 400 priests in 2012 to what will be about 270 priests in 2024, and then could be expected to be 160-170 priests by 2036; and
- has aged from a significant minority, about 40%, of ordained members being 75 or more years of age in 2012, to more than half being aged 75 years or over in 2024, while approaching two-thirds, more than 60% would be expected to be aged 75 or over by 2036.

Does this picture come as a surprise to you?

Response options: No, as expected; More or less as expected; Unsure; A little surprised; Yes, quite surprised  
Please elaborate on your response if you wish

### Q30

#### Considering closure

Many other missionary societies and religious institutes have already faced the reality of this well-established trend towards fewer vocations and the difficulty of turning it back, inevitably leading to where they became unsustainably small in numbers and so then ceased to be. In canon law terms, to cease means that the juridical person of the institute or society is 'suppressed', whether by outright closure, or by amalgamating with, or folding into, another amenable society or institute.

Closure of the Missionary Society of St Columban would become inevitable if 'things remain as they are', because to reverse the ongoing decline, and to begin re-growing the body of ordained Columbans, calls for sustaining a programme that facilitates 15 to 20 priests being ordained per year, every year.

Certainly, hope springs eternal, but priestly vocations have continued to decline steadily since the 1960s. Aspiring to reverse this long-term trend would not appear to be a prudent basis for planning the future of the Society, with due regard to the canonical, secular legal, ethical, and practical considerations involved.

Again, it is well worth noting here that the Columbans are not alone in this. The Columban situation is congruent with trends not just for religious communities but also across Catholic Church, and in the wider world, particularly with regard to 'life commitment'. For example, the number of Catholic weddings reportedly celebrated around the world in 2021 was 1.8 million, compared to 3.8 million in 1991 (source: Vatican statistics).

Does this come as a surprise to you?

Response options: No, as expected; More or less as expected; Unsure; A little surprised; Yes, quite surprised  
Please elaborate on your response if you wish

### Q31

#### Columbans at work

As an organisation of mission priests the Society has evolved in many ways since it was first established. Further adjustment would be synchronous with the direction of the Catholic Church, called for by Pope Francis in *Predicate Evangelium* particularly in regard to greater involvement of women and lay persons in leadership and decision-making.

Such change could lead to questions around the fundamental nature of the Society and the prevailing sense of identity among Columbans.

With that in mind, it is worth noting that the Society already relies on the work of many non-ordained Columbans in carrying the purpose of the Society forward. This is illustrated below:

[See Figure 2 in main report]

As shown here, the apparent size of the Society pivots around the ordained membership, which will be around 270 priests in 2024. However, the lion's share of ministries and work is being done by a smaller group - of around 200 people - of rather different composition as it includes not only priests but also lay missionaries and co-workers.

The fact is that the Society is reliant on some 50 'co-workers', defined in the Society's Manual of Policy and Procedures (refer MPP 908) as 'lay employees who hold professional positions of leadership in Columban mission'. Without their professional contribution, such roles would have to be undertaken by ordained or lay missionaries. Of course, the smooth functioning of the Columban organisation also depends on many other employees who make a valuable contribution in many areas.

Thus, while nearly two-thirds of those working for the Society and its mission are ordained priests (those who will be aged under 75 in 2024), over one-third are lay missionaries and co-workers - which means their presence and contribution to the Columban mission is truly significant.

Does this come as a surprise to you?

Response options: No, as expected; More or less as expected; Unsure; A little surprised; Yes, quite surprised

### Q32

The Society's Manual of Policy and Procedures (MPP), mentioned in the previous question with regard to the Society's co-workers, calls for all RMUs to develop and use a similar manual which adequately adheres to national labour laws and culturally appropriate norms of employment (refer MPP 908).

Are you familiar with such a manual in your RMU?

Response options: Yes, quite familiar; Have seen it; Aware there is a manual; Have not seen it; Haven't needed to know about it

### Q33

#### Leading the Society

There is a strong obligation, both in canon law and in secular organisations law, to ensure that good governance prevails in an organisation, through adherence to due processes of leadership, management, administration and decision-making generally. In broad terms, this means that a missionary society should honour:

- Outward commitments - for example, to supporters, donors, and communities with which the society is engaged. For the Columbans this includes safeguarding, and fulfilling any and all legal obligations arising in secular jurisdictions which are host to Society activities or initiatives.
- Inward commitments - for example, to all of those engaged in facilitating the mission. For the Columbans, this includes co-workers, lay missionaries, ordained members, priest associates, and seminarians.

These are weighty obligations for those in leadership roles. In addition to the decision-making associated with long-standing needs such as support of personnel and ministries, mentoring of newer members, care of the elderly, fund-raising and budgeting, attending to needs for ongoing formation and education, and oversight of properties, leaders are now faced with much expanded management and administration such as from safeguarding, and financial compliance across national borders in the highly regulated contemporary environment.

The Columbans are, of course, not alone in this, but these many responsibilities bear heavily on those elected or appointed to leadership or administrative roles, and this will likely increase further as the ordained membership becomes older and fewer in number.

So the specific issue to consider here is that sociodemographic modelling for this consultation indicates that - if 'things remain as they are' - the size and age of the ordained membership by 2030 will call for 3 out of every 5 ordained members under 75 to be in leadership roles.\*

\*Again, forward-looking forecasts take into account the present group of seminarians. Also, as already noted, 75 is recognised as being the customary age of retirement for ordained members - while there is no bar to older priests being in leadership positions, this would subject the Society to the vagaries of ageing as experienced by those individuals.

Does this come as a surprise to you?

Response options: No, as expected; More or less as expected; Unsure; A little surprised; Yes, quite surprised  
Please elaborate on your answer if you wish

## **Pathways to new realities for GA 2030**

### **Pathways to new realities for GA 2030**

We move now to look a little further out into the future, to imagine more of what that may look like to the Columbans if 'things remain as they are'.

This is helpful as a starting place to work from when thinking about how that future could be different - to then shed light on what may need to be done to encourage fresh life to flourish for the Columban mission.

Discussions around these issues are necessary conversations that would benefit from more reflection and discernment in relation to possible pathways forward.

Importantly, however, time needed for that could well curtail the pathways available.

In pragmatic terms, this calls for the naming of specific tasks to be undertaken by the General Council that will be elected for the period 2024-2030.

These matters revolve around the restructuring of the Society and its decision-making processes - requiring members to put aside the assumption of 'things remain as they are', in order for the Society to function effectively as an organisation in the service of mission beyond another decade or so.

### **Q34**

#### **All will be called to Society leadership**

Taking a step further in thinking about the Columban future means looking to 2030 and envisioning what that next General Assembly might have to consider. Initial work on these two reviews already suggests that a key consideration will be limitations about having enough personnel for leadership and administration of the Society.

Put another way, it seems inevitable that the day will come when, with so few members in the Society remaining, all will be called to exercise governance (leadership, management, administration, etc.), regardless of their abilities, skills or preference as to how they would wish to contribute to the Columban organisation and its mission. So the question is, when might that day come for the Columbans?

In fact, forward forecasts from sociodemographic modelling indicate that by 2036 there is likely to be just 50-60 Columban priests under 75 years of age. This means that, unless significant changes to the shape and form of the Society are implemented in the near future, by 2036 all ordained Columbans aged under 75 and still in good health would be required to assume a leadership role.

Does this come as a surprise to you?

Response options: No, as expected; More or less as expected; Unsure; A little surprised; Yes, quite surprised

Please elaborate on your answer if you wish:

### Q35

#### **Another approach - more embracing Society leadership**

To prevent such a situation happening necessitates adjusting governance/decision- making arrangements - especially the structure of leadership, management, and administration of the Society.

One approach would be to give even greater responsibility in some areas to non-ordained Columbans, which would necessitate their more substantive integration into the decision- making roles of the Society. This would be congruent with the recent initiatives of Pope Francis that are aimed specifically at facilitating more women and lay people being in significant decision-making roles within the Church, such as expressed in *Predicate Evangelium*.

Given your own experiences with the Society, how does this prospect sit with you? [single choice]

I would welcome such steps in order to further the life of the international Society

This is an important option to consider in managing our circumstances

I would be curious to better understand the canonical implications

I am not enthusiastic to explore this option

I do not believe this would be a suitable or appropriate pathway forward

Please elaborate on your answer if you wish:

### Q36

#### **Another approach - rethinking RMUs**

Another option is to adjust the organisational structure of leadership, management, and administration of the Society in response to its decreasing size and scope of activity.

Crucially, the shape of the Society pivots around RMUs, and so the number of leadership roles is a consequence of the number of RMUs.

This RMU organisational model met the needs of a much larger missionary endeavour, but has become challenging with fewer Columbans being spread more thinly - not just within RMUs but across the world. On the other hand, local leadership and familiarity with the place in which mission is being pursued are important values for missionaries.

If a balance could be found between maintaining a Columban presence on the ground in all the countries, but reducing the number of RMUs, it would release some Columbans back into ministry, including the promotion of the mission of the Society. If done in a spirit of understanding and cooperation, this approach may have the effect of extending the life of the Society by potentially providing more time in which to discern and explore the most life-giving path for the Society and fresh options for Columban mission.

In terms of reshaping the Society for the future, leading up to the GA 2030 I am personally ready to consider options involving:

Fewer RMUs (perhaps 8 to 10)

Moving to live in another RMU

Rather fewer RMUs (no more than 5 or 6)

My RMU being amalgamated with another

Any option that allows me to collocate with other Columbans

Retiring where I live now, regardless of changes in the configuration of RMUs

Dispensing with RMUs altogether and adopting a new organisational model

Response options for each part of the question: Ready now; Possibly ready after reflection; Might become ready; Unlikely to become ready; Never likely to be ready; Don't know

### Q37

#### **Another approach - redefining how Columbans are grouped**

The concept of an RMU has long been based around a group of Columbans in a particular country. However, the effectiveness of this model is challenged as the number of Columbans in almost every RMU becomes fewer and fewer, and the overall number of Columbans continues to decline.

On the other hand, with the advent of many supportive technologies now available at quite modest cost, there may be other ways to imagine a group of Columbans who are engaged with one another in the service of mission.

In terms of reshaping the Society for the future, leading up to the GA 2030 I am personally ready to consider other models for organising Columbans that promote co-responsibility for mission, which are defined by:

A particular area of ministry - such as a parish, or a project

Focus on specific mission priority - such as IRD, JPIC

Geographical proximity of Columbans (but multi-country)

A number of Columbans - moving to be physically collocated to ensure mutual support

A number of Columbans - gathered together to ensure mutual support even if still physically separated

The time-zones involved, to facilitate communication

Your suggestion - please elaborate below

Your suggestion on how to promote shared responsibility for Columban mission - please elaborate

Response options for each part of the question: Ready now; Possibly ready after reflection; Might become ready; Unlikely to become ready; Never likely to be ready; Don't know

### Q38

#### **Vocations - ordained missionaries**

As mentioned earlier, to begin re-growing the body of ordained Columbans would call for sustaining a programme of ordaining around 15 to 20 priests per year, every year.

Even if there were such a large number of candidates seeking ordination, it is doubtful that the Society has, or could find, suitable personnel to support such a significant formation programme, since nurturing a single seminarian through to ordination calls for a structured commitment from several other priests over a period of 10 years or more.

As other missionary societies and religious institutes have learned already, acceptance of religious vocations has major implications for any organisation where the individual makes a life-long commitment. It would only be ethical to seek this commitment from young adults in the sure knowledge and authentic belief that the society or institute will itself continue long enough to honour its commitment to them.

The point at which a society or institute might decide not to accept new vocations is clearly a matter for serious discernment in the light of its overall reality and circumstances. However, the common thread is the balance to be found in seeking to renew the organisation through the acceptance of new members on the one hand and, on the other, having (or finding) the capacity to provide personnel and resources necessary to facilitate initial formation, and the canonical leadership required to guide and support those new members in faithfully living out the charism over the next several decades.

To be clear, the question facing the Society is not primarily about providing for retirement or long term illness, for example, but ensuring that those who are admitted as seminarians can pursue their vocation to Columban missionary priesthood throughout their lifetime in accordance with the Society's charism and missionary vision.

There is a serious duty to be mindful of the great trust that a young person places in the organisation when making a lifelong commitment. Other missionary societies and religious institutes, when realising that they cannot fulfil this duty, have chosen to cease taking new vocations, while existing members continue to live out together their vocational commitment as fully as possible for as long as possible.

Absent a dramatic change in circumstances, it is arguable that the Columbans need to consider now whether the Society should cease to accept priestly vocations, because uncertainties about the Society's future create significant doubts about its capacity to fulfil its long-term obligations to new members.

Does this come as a surprise to you?

Response options: No, as expected; More or less as expected; Unsure; A little surprised; Yes, quite surprised  
Please elaborate on your response if you wish

## Q39

### Vocations - lay missionaries

Turning to Columban lay missionaries, the structure and reality of the Society leads to a similar logic in relation to lay missionary vocations, but with one significant difference to consider.

Vocations for Columban lay missionaries have experienced a decline similar those for ordained Columbans. As illustrated below, the downward trend was exacerbated by COVID-19 in the most recent years:

[See Figure 11 in main report]

For the Society, the question about lay missionary vocations is framed differently as there is no provision in the Society's canonical governance arrangements for a lifelong commitment for lay missionaries.

This relieves the Society of the obligation to provide for long-serving lay missionaries in their retirement.

However, lay missionaries must then each decide - and the Society should afford duly equitable opportunities for them to decide - how to balance their commitment to Columban mission and ensuring they make adequate arrangements for their retirement years. This will involve adapting to life without the communal support that they have been accustomed to as Columban missionaries, and other adjustments that may be necessary when returning to their home country after many years of mission service elsewhere.

With this in mind, as the number of lay missionaries continues to decline the challenge is providing suitable personnel for initial and ongoing formation so that lay missionary candidates can develop a true appreciation of the Columban charism and find fulfilment in living out their missionary vocation. For example, looking at the present Columban lay missionaries by age gives an indication of those who may remain available for Columban mission - including the fostering of lay missionary vocations - in the future:

[See Figure 12 in main report]

As depicted here, there are presently 26 Columban lay missionaries, all but 3 of whom have long term agreements with the Society.

Importantly, given the length of time on mission and experience of Columban life that is needed for any missionary to be prepared for leadership, this is the upper limit of resources available for leadership until around 2030 (and events may well emerge to reduce this number).

Around two-thirds will be aged 45 or more at the time of GA 2024. By GA 2030, it would be reasonable to expect that:

- up to 7, being aged over 65, may have chosen to complete their long-term service with the Columbans, and
- all those possibly remaining would be aged over 45, which may prove to be less than 19 people (those presently of relevant age) if circumstances call on some to complete their time as a missionary sooner rather than later.

Similarly to the trend with ordained Columbans, changing this outlook calls for, each and every year, a substantial number of new lay missionaries to complete formation and commence their first mission assignment.

Clearly, every vocation is sincerely welcomed, but the number of candidates required to sustain a viable path into the future is more than a handful of candidates each year.

In order for a suitably substantial number of new lay missionaries to join the Society on mission, nearly all of the present Columban lay missionaries would have to make fostering and nurturing aspiring lay missionaries their primary focus during the next several years. This would leave few or none engaged in other missionary activities - unlikely to be a desirable pathway - which highlights the profound difficulty of forming a credible response to the situation that has already emerged.

Without a dramatic and immediate change of direction, it is arguable that the Columbans should seriously consider ceasing its acceptance of new lay missionaries.

Does this come as a surprise to you?

Response options: No, as expected; More or less as expected; Unsure; A little surprised; Yes, quite surprised  
Please elaborate on your response if you wish

## **Eventualities on the agenda for GA 2036**

### **Eventualities on the agenda for GA 2036**

Turning now to the final segment of questions in this consultation survey, we look further out into the future for items that may need to be on the agenda for GA 2036.

There are certain major issues that the Society must confront eventually, but if the assumption that 'things remain as they are' persists 'eventually' will come sooner - and certainly sooner than many may be anticipating.

On the other hand, if the members of the Society are open to change, extending the time before 'eventually' arrives might yet be possible with proactive initiatives during GA 2024 that will be implemented before GA 2030.

Otherwise, a process for the closure of the Society is likely to be an unavoidable agenda item for GA 2036 - having due regard to the time it will take for such a process to be completed in a way that is, and is seen to be, compliant with canon law, and secular law in the relevant jurisdictions, as well as being duly ethical in the treatment of all concerned.

## Q40

### A future where all are in leadership

As noted earlier, given current indications if 'things remain as they are' by 2036 all ordained Columbans who will then be aged under 75 will almost certainly be asked to forego public ministries in order to take on a role in governance to meet the leadership, management, or administration needs of the Society.

After reflecting on what has been addressed in this consultation survey, and given your own experiences with the Society, how does this prospect sit with you? [single choice]

- I would willingly serve the mission in this capacity
- I would prefer not to serve the mission in this way
- I would need further education to take on such a role
- I do not believe I have the capacity for such roles
- I do not believe my health will permit such service
- Not applicable as I am not an ordained member
- Other: [text box to specify]
- Please elaborate on your answer if you wish

## Q41

### Pathways forward

Absent the realisation of significant change before 2030, that could potentially extend the life of the Society, it seems very likely that definite decisions about the continuing existence of the Society will be necessitated by 2036.

Possible pathways at that time could include:

*Closure as a necessary step* - that is, when no other option remains open. This could be the least complicated approach, but will still be complex, requiring major decisions and substantial planning to meet canonical, secular legal, and ethical, obligations.

*Proactive closure* - that is, closure that is decided and acted upon well before the moment when no other option remains available. If done sooner rather than later, this may afford opportunity to duly discern pathways for individual Columbans - such as whether to be incardinated in a diocese, join another missionary society, or find another pathway so they can continue their preferred ministry.

*Amalgamation*, merger, or folding together with another missionary society may be possible, in order to go forward together with the support of a larger body of ordained members in service of cross-cultural mission. For the Columbans, given their unique history and mission, there may be significant challenges in coming together with another society. However, given the ubiquity of the problem of smaller, older memberships for missionary societies and similar organisations, further investigation and discernment may reveal unexpected - and potentially fruitful - pathways forward.

*Dispersal*, meaning to disaggregate the Columbans into multiple groups who identify their own missionary purpose to pursue. This would be a variation on proactive closure, where groups of Columbans may find a common path - perhaps:

- as a new organisation based in or emanating from a new place, or
- as a new organisation embracing both women and men as members, or
- incardination, of a group of Columbans in a particular diocese, or
- engaging in a creative way with some other part of the Catholic Church.



To address and resolve the future of the Society, leading up to GA 2036 the General Council should investigate and lead discernment on the option of:

Closure, when the Society is no longer a viable organisation

Amalgamation with another missionary society to create a greater whole that might still flourish

Proactive closure, with options for individuals to continue in missionary life

Proactive closure, with options for individuals to be incardinated

Proactive closure, with options for individuals to follow another pathway for ministry

Dispersal, to form a new missionary society

Dispersal, to be incardinated in amenable dioceses

Dispersal, to serve elsewhere in the Church

Another option not mentioned here (see next question)

Response options for each part of the question: Definitely; Possibly; Unclear; Preferably not; Definitely not

#### **Q42**

To resolve the future of the Society, leading up to the GA 2036 I am personally ready to consider the option of:

Closure, when the Society is no longer a viable organisation

Amalgamation with another missionary society to create a greater whole that might flourish

Proactive closure, after which I would wish to continue missionary life

Proactive closure, after which I would seek incardination

Proactive closure, after which I would seek another pathway for ministry

Dispersal, to form a new missionary society in a new place

Dispersal, to form a new missionary society which embraces both women and men as members

Dispersal, to be incardinated in an amenable diocese

Dispersal, to serve elsewhere in the Church

Another option not mentioned here (please explain below)

Response options for each part of the question: Ready now; Possibly ready after reflection; Might become ready; Unlikely to become ready; Never likely to be ready; Not applicable to my situation; Don't know

#### **Q43**

If you have another option in mind that is not mentioned in this and the previous question, please elaborate here - including, if you wish, why you would find it an interesting option to consider

#### **Q44**

##### **Fresh life for the Society**

To put aside the assumption that 'things remain as they are' calls for positive decisions about ways of breathing fresh life into the Society, and action to bring those decisions to fruition.

This type of decision should rightfully be taken at a General Assembly, so all Columbans should be cognisant that the opportunities to shape the future of the Society are not open-ended, but arranged around the expected timings of General Assemblies.

If a future General Assembly were faced with decisions about the possible closure of the Society, what action would you envision and be prepared to support to avert closure and extend the life of the Society?

Thinking back over and reflecting on all the material covered by this consultation survey, to extend the life of the Society, I am personally ready to work on an initiative to:

Reshape the Society to reduce the number of Columbans in governance roles

Reshape the Society's organisational structure in order to integrate lay people fully and sincerely into decision-making

Collaborate to change the Society's canonical framework to better embrace all non-ordained persons who join the Columbans on mission

Undertake a specific or concrete commitment in the field of IRD

Undertake a specific or concrete commitment in the field of JPIC - ecological justice

Undertake a specific or concrete commitment in the field of JPIC - the rights and welfare of migrants and refugees

Undertake a specific or concrete commitment in the field of JPIC - economic justice

Undertake a specific or concrete commitment in the field of JPIC - promoting just peace and non-violence in the world

Undertake a specific or concrete ministry with a significant cross cultural component

Leave aside my current ministries in order to foster vocations to Columban priesthood

Leave aside my current ministries in order to foster new Columban lay missionaries

Response options for each part of the question: Ready now; Possibly ready after reflection; Might become ready later; Unlikely to become ready; Never likely to be ready; Don't know

#### Q45

Thank you most sincerely for taking the time to work through this material and to share your thoughts, ideas, and insights about the future of the Columbans.

It is natural that this consultation survey and other preparatory activities leading up to GA 2024 will give rise to waves of fears and hopes, doubts and dreams for the Society and its future mission.

For example, it would be understandable if the reality of the challenges ahead - after more 105 years of dedicated service by so many Columbans - perhaps leaves you feeling discouraged, or worried about what the future holds for you personally as well as for the Society and its mission.

On the other hand, being proactive in looking out to the future, with the opportunity to engage in those 'courageous conversations' that Fr Tim talked about, may be uplifting for you by illuminating possibilities that are open for the future flourishing of the Columban mission.

So before you go on your way today, could you say how you are feeling now, and then very briefly, perhaps in just 50-100 words, share what your main thought is at this time?

As I go, I am feeling: (Move slider - default setting was 50) [See Figure 3 in main report]

My main thought as I go is: (text response)

**... tell us a little about you to give context for the information you have provided**

#### Q46

My age group is:

Response options: drop down list of years in 5 year brackets

Q47

In terms of the Missionary Society of St Columban, I am a:

Response options: co-worker; lay missionary; priest; priest associate; seminarian; Other (Please specify)

Q48

I have been with the Columbans in this capacity for about:

Response options: drop down list of years in 5 year brackets

Q49

At present, for the Columbans I am engaged in being:

active on mission in the field

active and emplaced in a parish

retired

in education or training - eg seminarian, in languages training, otherwise in formation

in leadership for the Society - eg RMU leadership team or General Council or CLM CLT

in another leadership role - eg JPIC Coordinator, Vocation Coordinator, LM Coordinator, Bursar, etc.

Other (Please specify)

Q50

I anticipate being engaged in this role for: [single choice]

another year; up to 3 more years ; up to 5 more years ; indefinitely; not sure; Other (Please specify)

Q51

When I leave my present engagement, I anticipate: [single choice]

moving to be active on mission in the field

moving to a diocesan role

moving to a parish

going into further education, formation, languages training, or similar

possibly going into a leadership role

retiring

not yet known

other (please specify)

**Q52 [Open for priests aged 65 or more]**

In your eventual retirement would you be open to a partially active role on mission?

Please choose those options that you would be curious to explore:

Advising on developing the missionary purpose of the Columbans

Assisting with fund- raising

Being part of a centralised team to advise on safeguarding

Engaging in part of a JPIC activity or initiative

Engaging in part of an IRD activity or initiative

Serving on a board of reconciliation from time to time (see Constitutions, Appendix 2)

Mentoring a JPIC initiative

Mentoring an IRD initiative

Mentoring those in cross cultural endeavours

Please elaborate on your answer if you wish:

Response options for each part of the question: Yes, would travel to do this; Yes, if it can be done online or remotely; Curious to consider; Not for me; My health would not permit

# Annex B: Summary of survey responses

## List of summarised responses

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In relation to those questions not listed here, see explanatory notes about the survey in Annex A.

## Q1: Awareness of IMRU meeting

**Q1** (n=278) ... In the lead-up to [the IMRU meeting in Seoul in March 2023], a wide range of relevant material was made available through a designated web site so that every Columban and key co-workers could engage in well-informed discussions about the Society and its mission.

*Please choose all options that reflect your involvement prior to that meeting: [multiple responses]*

I was aware that the meeting was planned (n=228)



I saw some of the materials prior to the meeting (n=160)



I was involved in discussions about those materials or in preparation for the meeting (n=106)



I engaged actively in various preparations for the meeting (n=71)



I attended all or part of the meeting in Seoul (n=27)



Involvement was not applicable to my role (n=65)



## Q2: Engagement with IMRU outcomes


**Q2** (n=277) ... Since the IMRU meeting in Seoul, there has similarly been a variety of information arising from the meeting which has been shared across the Society.

*Please choose the option that best describes your involvement with the meeting and/or engagement with recommendations emanating from it: [single response]*


I have engaged actively with the outcomes of the IMRU meeting in preparing for the General Assembly in 2024 (n=52)



I have discussed with others outcomes of the meeting and related materials (such as reports and videos) (n=61)



I have personally considered all or most of the outcomes and related materials (n=36)




I have seen some of the materials from the meeting, but not taken that further (n=51)



I am aware that the meeting was held (n=43)



Engagement is not directly applicable to my role (n=33)



### Q3, 4, 5: Engagement with Columban mission priorities

**Q3** (n=279) How familiar do you consider yourself to be with the substance of these mission priorities?

Interreligious dialogue



Very familiar (n =75)      Good working knowledge (n=84)      Familiar enough (n=88)      Not so familiar (n=23)      Unfamiliar (n=8)

Justice, peace and the integrity of Creation



Very familiar (n =107)      Good working knowledge (n=96)      Familiar enough (n=61)      Not so familiar (n=9)      Unfamiliar (n=4)

**Q4** (n=278) To what extent do you identify with the the substance of these mission priorities?

Interreligious dialogue



Strongly (n =98)      Fairly well (n=97)      Moderately (n=47)      Not so much (n=26)      Hardly at all (n=10)

Justice, peace and the integrity of Creation



Strongly (n =153)      Fairly well (n=80)      Moderately (n=26)      Not so much (n=9)      Hardly at all (n=6)

**Q5** (n=277) To what extent are you able to put these into practice, integrating them into your work?

Interreligious dialogue



Daily practice (n =37)      Fairly common practice (n=54)      General practice (n=89)      Not so much (n=64)      Hardly at all (n=30)

Justice, peace and the integrity of Creation



Daily practice (n =83)      Fairly common practice (n=73)      General practice (n=84)      Not so much (n=24)      Hardly at all (n=8)

## Q8: Potential barriers to engaging with mission priorities

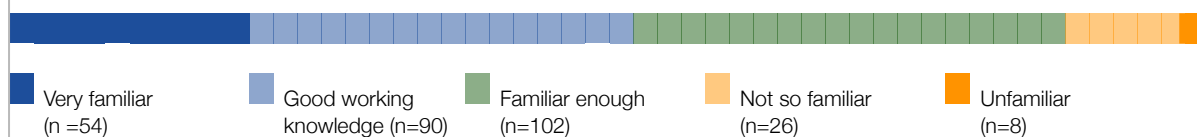
**Q8** (n=253) Do you observe that, in practice, others experience barriers to connecting with these mission priorities? Please choose all the options that you think are applicable: [multiple responses on both parts]

| <b>Interreligious dialogue</b>   |                         |                                |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
|  | chosen by n respondents | which is % of those responding |
| The idea is not connected to their own activities                          | n=132                   | 52%                            |
| Difficult to fully grasp the practical meaning                             | n=113                   | 47%                            |
| They are isolated from others engaged with this idea or related activities | n=110                   | 44%                            |
| Difficult to identify with the ideas or concepts at a personal level       | n=99                    | 39%                            |
| Deeper meaning of the intention remains unclear or unfamiliar              | n=90                    | 36%                            |
| Resources to support engagement are in short supply                        | n=87                    | 34%                            |
| No particular barriers that I would observe                                | n=49                    | 19%                            |
| <b>Justice, peace and the integrity of Creation</b>                        |                         |                                |
|  | chosen by n respondents | which is % of those responding |
| The idea is not connected to their own activities                          | n=101                   | 40%                            |
| They are isolated from others engaged with this idea or related activities | n=92                    | 36%                            |
| Difficult to fully grasp the practical meaning                             | n=69                    | 27%                            |
| Deeper meaning of the intention remains unclear or unfamiliar              | n=67                    | 26%                            |
| No particular barriers that I would observe                                | n=64                    | 25%                            |
| Difficult to identify with the ideas or concepts at a personal level       | n=61                    | 24%                            |
| Resources to support engagement are in short supply                        | n=56                    | 22%                            |

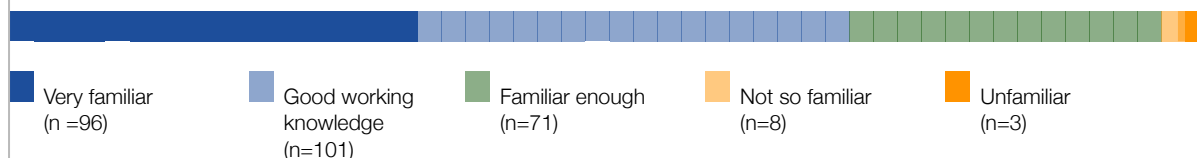
## Q10: Context from the Church - familiarity

**Q10** (n=283) How familiar do you feel with the substance of the teachings in:

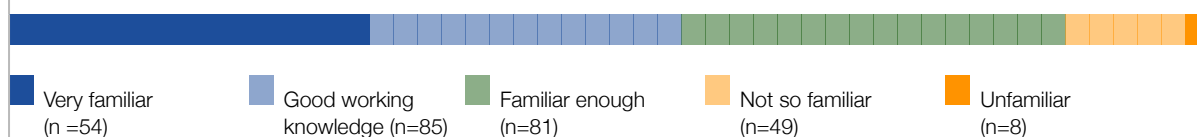
*Evangelii Gaudium*



*Laudato si'*

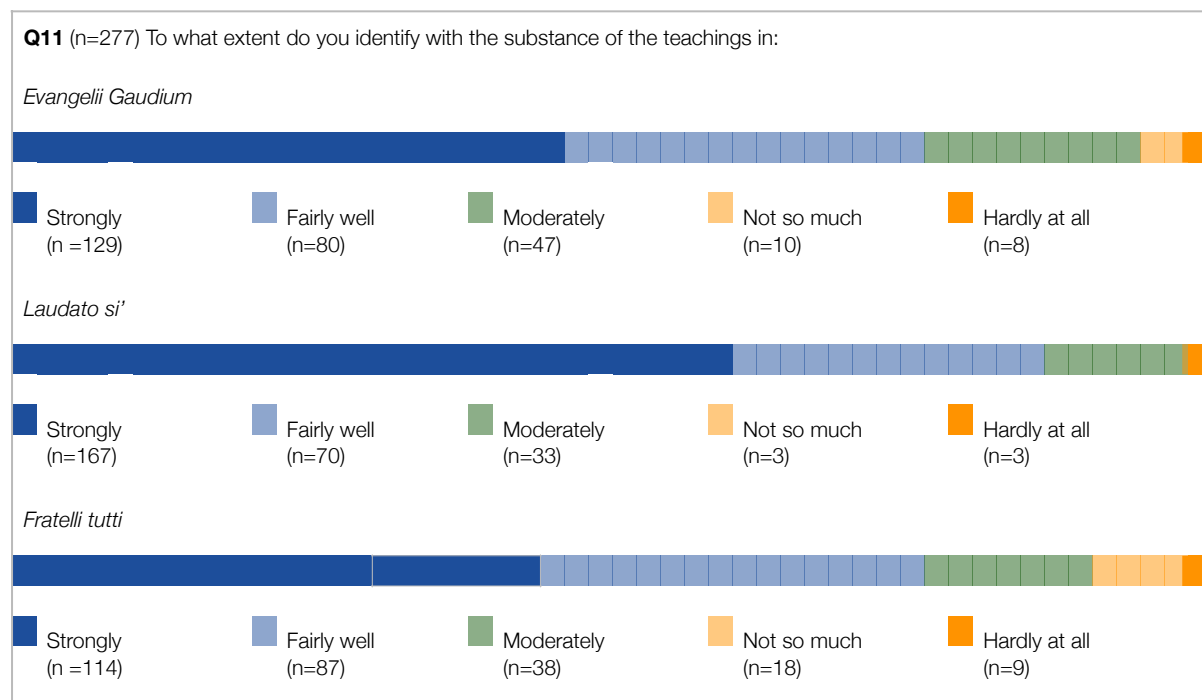


*Fratelli tutti*

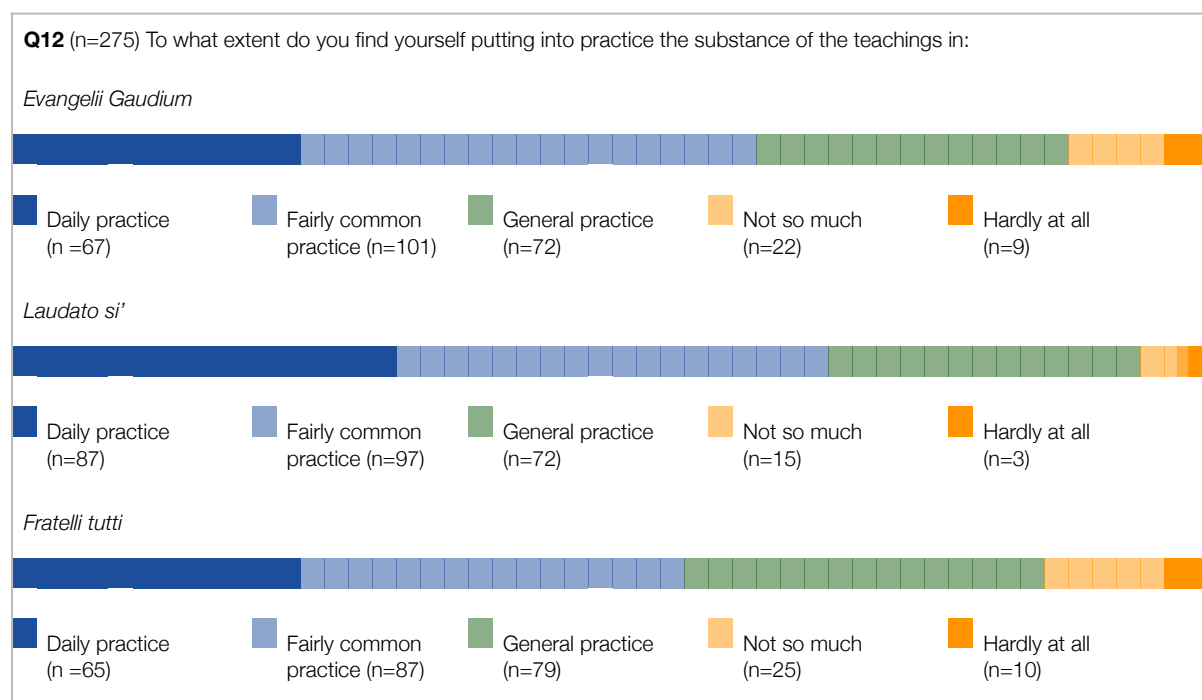




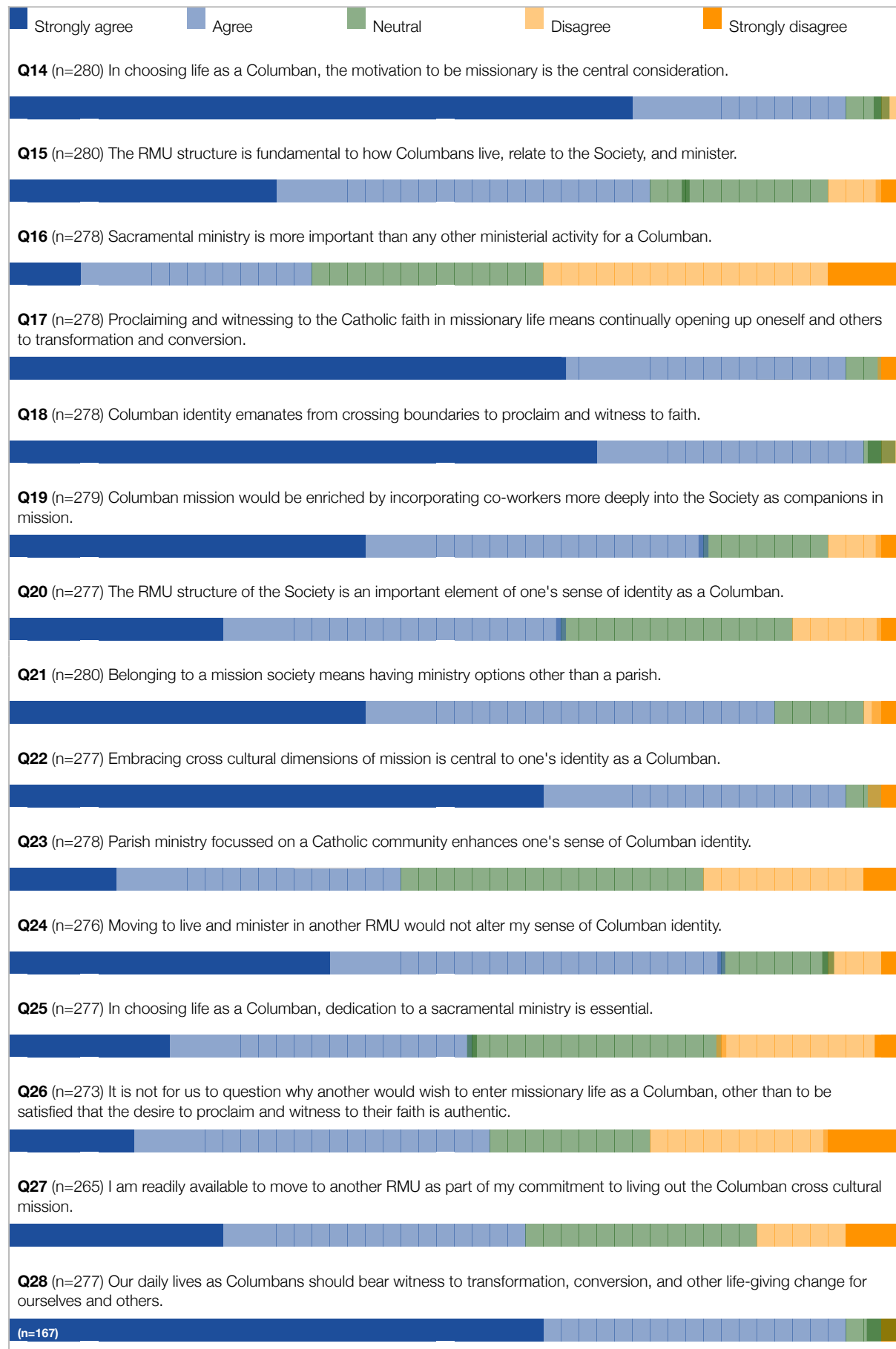
## Q11: Context from the Church - identifying with selected teachings



## Q12: Context from the Church - putting selected teachings into practice

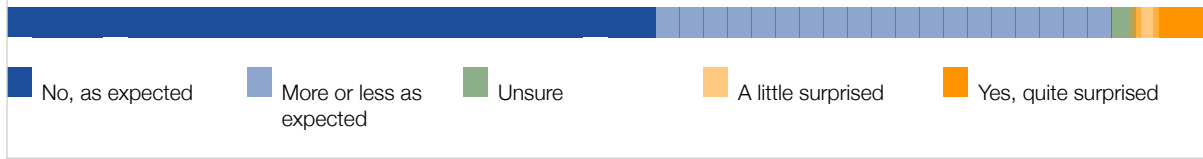


## Q14 to Q28: About being a Columban



### Q29: Long term picture of ordained membership

**Q29** (n=281) ... As depicted here, each figure represents about 10 ordained Columbans [and] shows that the Society ... will be about 270 priests in 2024 [but] could be expected to be 160-170 priests by 2036 [and] more than 60% would be expected to be aged 75 or over ... Does this picture come as a surprise to you?



### Q30: Considering closure

**Q30** (n=278) ... Closure of the Missionary Society of St Columban would become inevitable if 'things remain as they are' ... Does this picture come as a surprise to you?



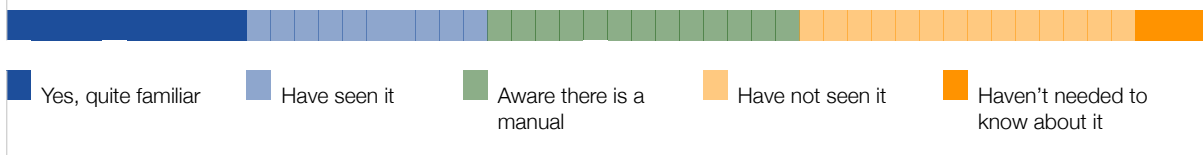
### Q31: About Columbans at work

**Q31** (n=282) [In relation to graphs showing 'Ordained Columbans' and 'Columbans at work' in 2024] ... Does this come as a surprise to you?



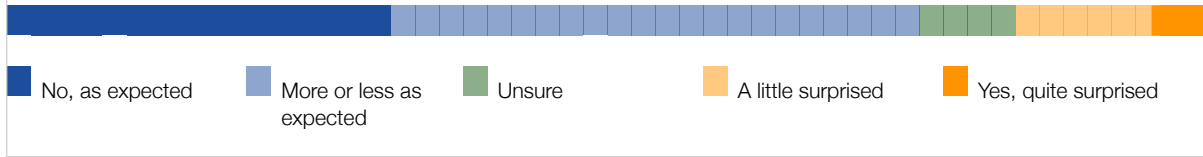
### Q32: RMU manual re co-workers

**Q32** (n=280) The Society's Manual of Policy and Procedures (MPP) ... calls for all RMUs to develop and use a similar manual which adequately adheres to national labour laws and culturally appropriate norms of employment (refer MPP 908). Are you familiar with such a manual in your RMU?



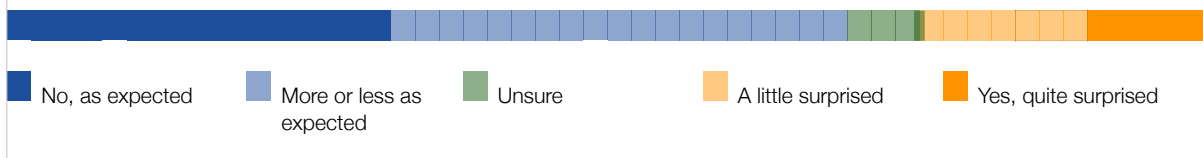
### Q33: Leading the Society in 2030

**Q33** (n=279) ... the size and age of the ordained membership by 2030 will call for 3 out of every 5 ordained members under 75 to be in leadership roles. ... Does this come as a surprise to you?

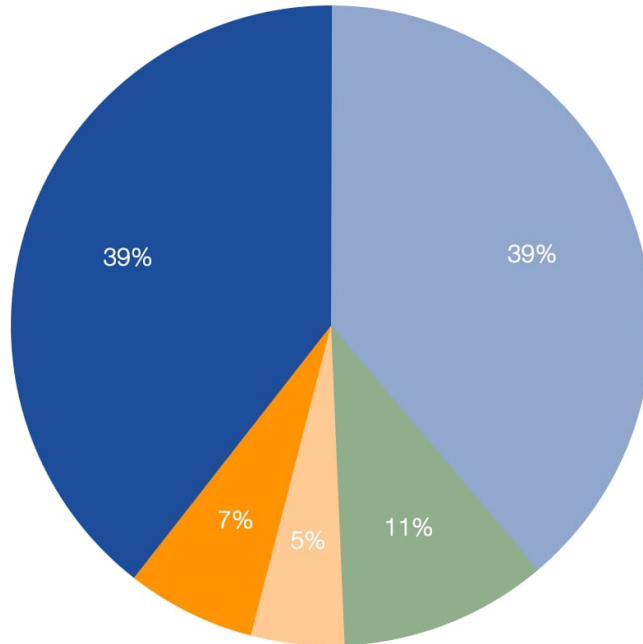


### Q34: All will be called to leadership by 2036

**Q34** (n=279) ... unless significant changes to the shape and form of the Society are implemented in the near future, by 2036 all ordained Columbans aged under 75 and still in good health would be required to assume a leadership role. ... Does this come as a surprise to you?



### Q35 Another approach: more embracing Society leadership



- I would welcome such steps in order to further the life of the international Society
- This is an important option to consider in managing our circumstances
- I would be curious to better understand the canonical implications
- I am not enthusiastic to explore this option
- I do not believe this would be a suitable or appropriate pathway forward

Overall, n=278 for this question.

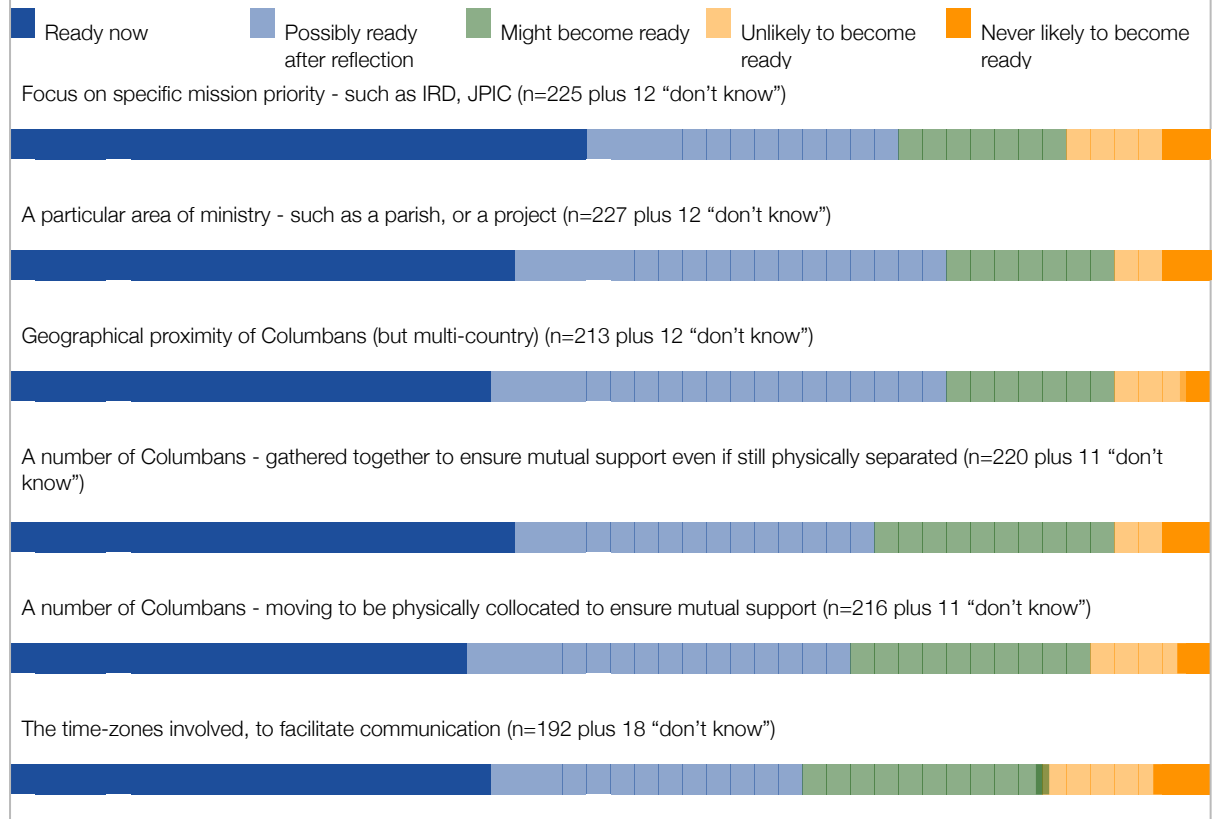
## Q36 Another approach: rethinking RMUs

**Q36** (n=272) In terms of reshaping the Society for the future, leading up to the GA 2030 I am personally ready to consider options involving: [possible choice on each option]



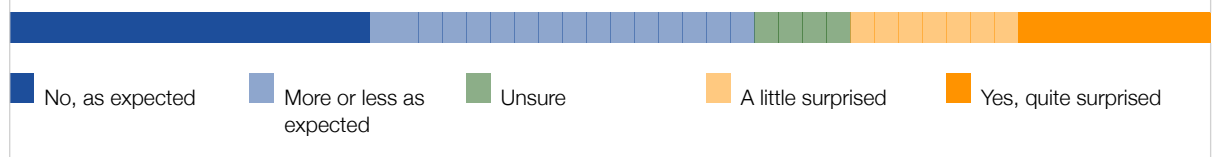
### Q37 Another approach: redefining how Columbans are grouped

**Q37** (n=269) In terms of reshaping the Society for the future, leading up to the GA 2030 I am personally ready to consider other models for organising Columbans that promote co-responsibility for mission, which are defined by:



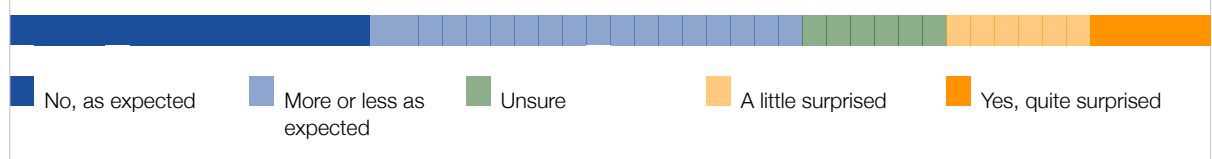
### Q38: Continuing to accept priestly vocations

**Q38** (n=279) ... Absent a dramatic change in circumstances, it is arguable that the Columbans need to consider now whether the Society should cease to accept priestly vocations ... Does this come as a surprise to you?



### Q39: Continuing to accept lay missionary vocations

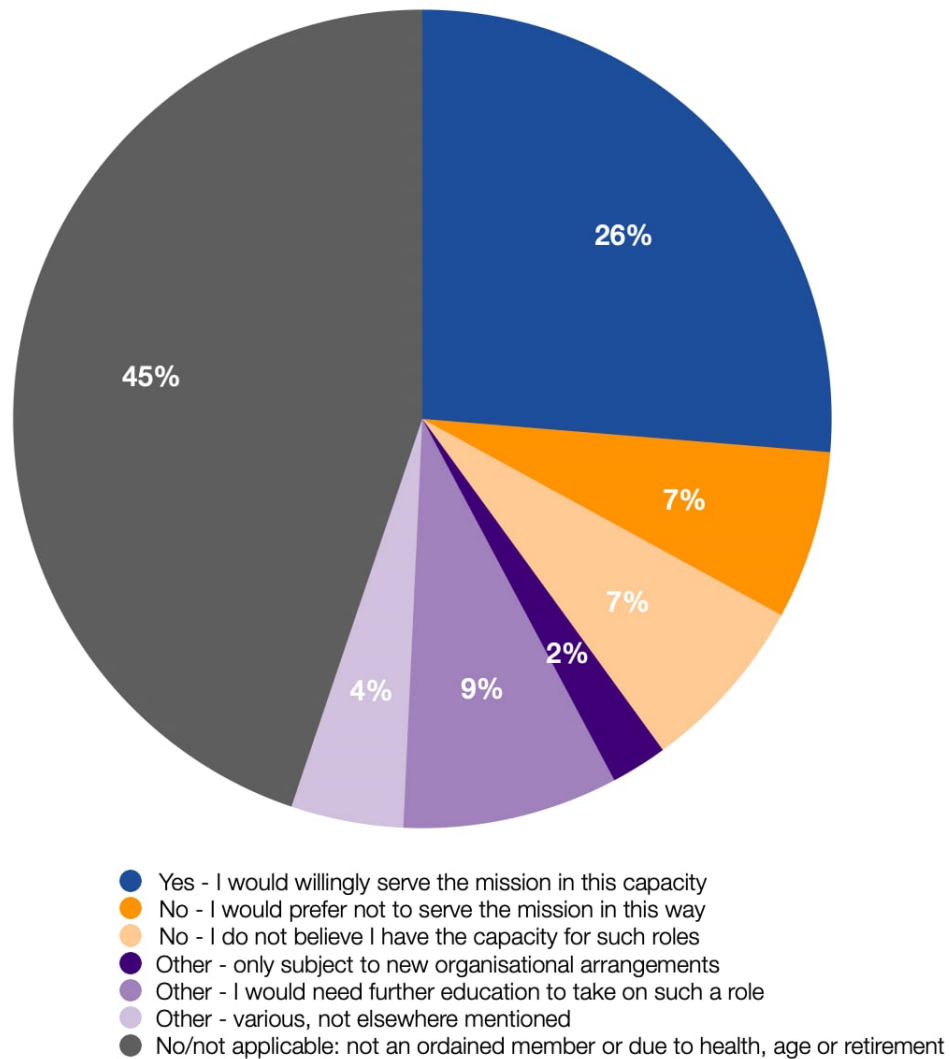
**Q39** (n=281) ... Without a dramatic and immediate change of direction, it is arguable that the Columbans should seriously consider ceasing its acceptance of new lay missionaries. Does this come as a surprise to you?



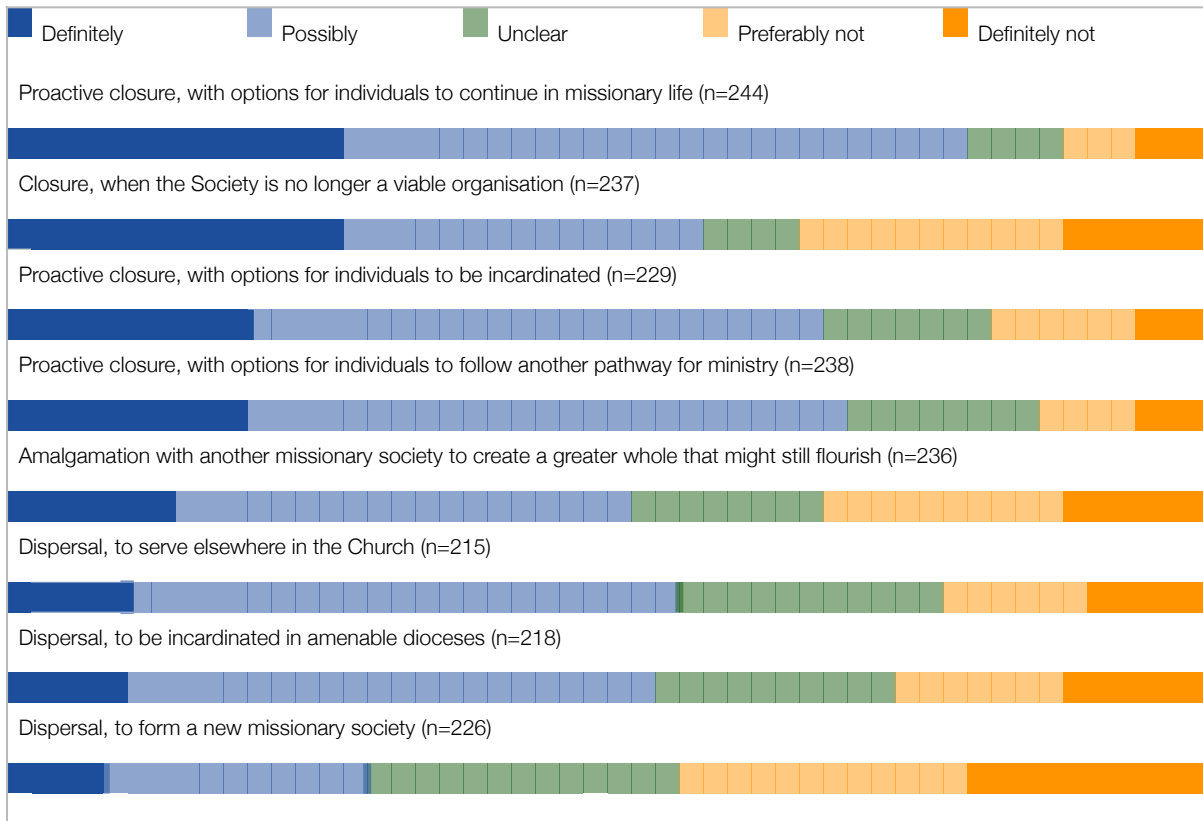
#### Q40: ... a future where all are in leadership in 2036

Note: Graphing this question required interpretation of 'Other' responses, of which there were quite a number. Some belonged in named categories, while others were seen in multiple similar statements of reason that gave rise to additional categories to appropriately capture the range of responses made.

Overall, n=273 for this question.



### Q41: General Council should lead discernment on ...

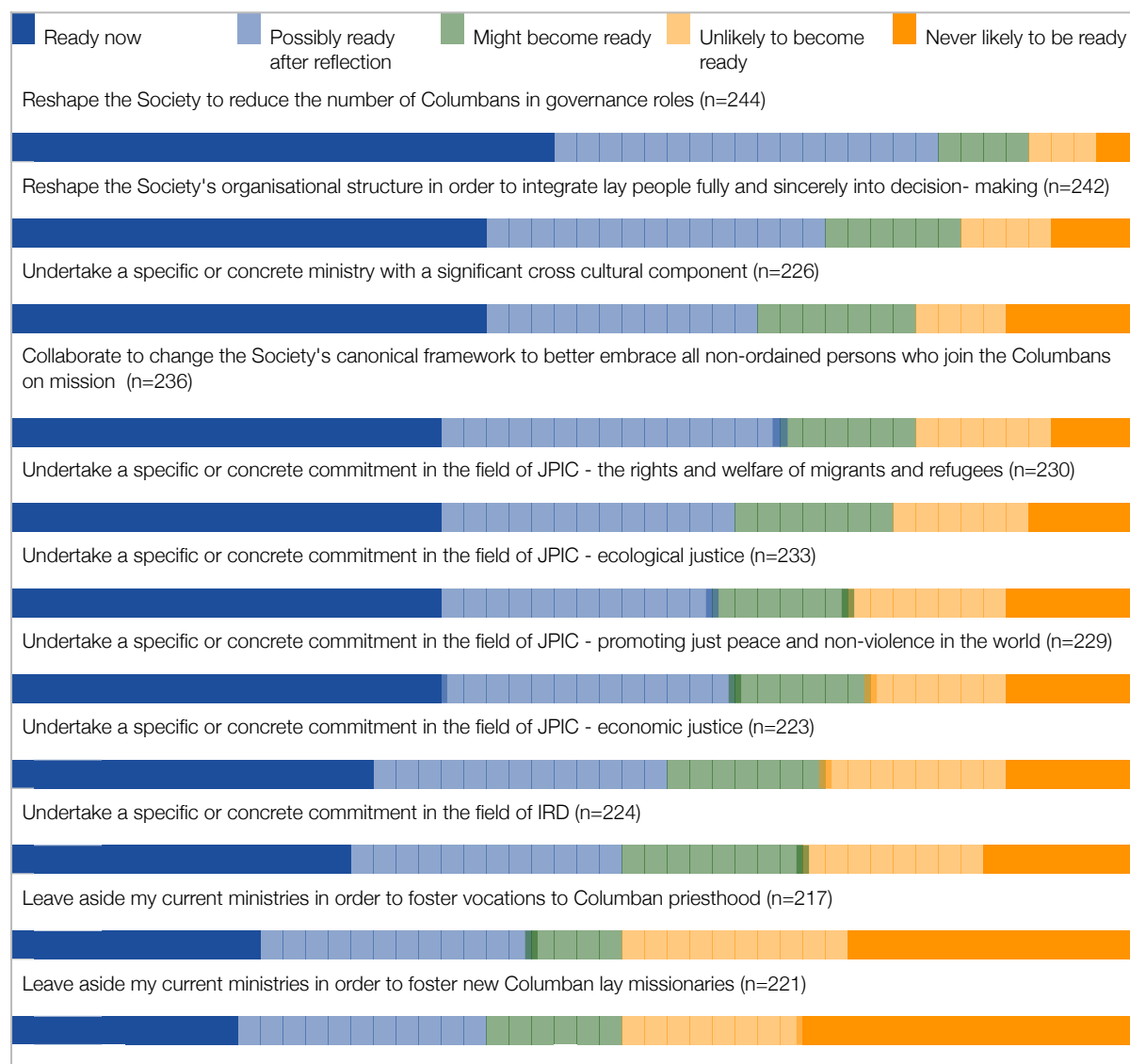


### Q42: I am personally ready to consider ...





## Q44: I am personally ready to work on an initiative to ...



## Q45: the slider

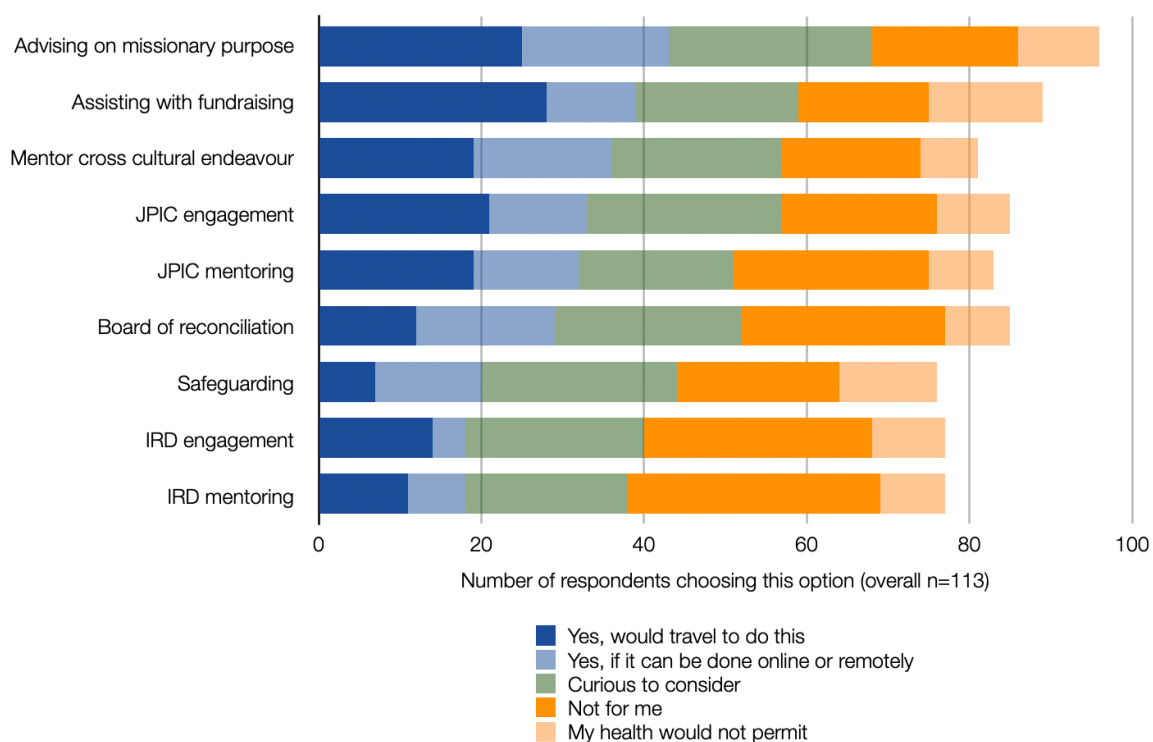
**Q45** (n=285) ... It is natural that this consultation survey and other preparatory activities leading up to GA 2024 will give rise to waves of fears and hopes, doubts and dreams for the Society and its future mission. For example, it would be understandable if the reality of the challenges ahead - after more 105 years of dedicated service by so many Columbans - perhaps leaves you feeling discouraged, or worried about what the future holds for you personally as well as for the Society and its mission. On the other hand, being proactive in looking out to the future, with the opportunity to engage in those 'courageous conversations' that Fr Tim talked about, may be uplifting for you by illuminating possibilities that are open for the future flourishing of the Columban mission. ... As I go, I am feeling: (Click on the slider line from 0 to 100)



## Q52: Options to explore in retirement

Open to priests aged 65 years or more, this question was answered to varying degrees by those eligible (total of 113), including not at all by some.

In this case, to understand the comparisons between responses the more valid quantitative approach is working from numbers for each response, rather than the percentage these are of the overall responses. To the same ends, responses are ordered in the graph from the most numerous combination of the “Yes” options.



# Annex C: Vocations questionnaire

## Explanatory notes

The text of all questions is provided in this annex for future reference.

To the extent that responses can be noted while maintaining the confidentiality of relevant information, this is included in discussion in the main body of the report.

## Question text - all questions

### Vocations questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of the information being brought together to assist the Columbans on their journey towards their next General Assembly in May 2024.

The questions relate to your organisation and its experience with vocations in the context of mission life and work.

Information provided by individual organisations will be treated as confidential: no responses will be attributed to, or identified with, any organisation; and

results reported will be limited to responses collated across multiple organisations.

With some information on vocations to hand, it should take about 20 minutes to complete. If needs be, you can save your progress and complete later - after you begin the questionnaire, a button will appear in the top right hand corner of your screen. (An email will be sent to provide you a link to continue later - you may find the email containing the unique survey link in your junk mail folder.)

Thank you most sincerely for assisting the Missionary Society of St Columban.

**Q1** About your organisation - The name of the organisation or congregation is:

**Q2** It was originally founded in (year):

**Q3** Canonically, it is of: pontifical right, diocesan right, other

**Q4** The canonical form is: missionary society, religious institute, secular institute ,other

**Q5** Since around 2000, has there been significant change/s to its canonical structure? This might include amending the scope of membership, or aggregation with another religious community. If so, please give brief details of the change, including when made.

### Geographical arrangements

**Q6** The General Council, Board of Directors, or similar as applicable, is located in (country):

**Q7** At present, ... has at least one ministry active in the following countries:

## **Organisational arrangements**

In broad terms, "members" of an organisation have the right to vote in election of office bearers and to participate in formal decision-making.

**Q8** Membership ... is open to religious who are: fathers, brothers, sisters

(please choose all that apply)

**Q9** Membership ... is open to laity who are: men, women, single, married, married couples

(please choose all that apply)

**Q10** Thinking about members who have the right to vote in election of office bearers and to participate in formal decision-making: As applicable ... up until around 2010 the overall trend on membership was: increasing, stable decreasing

**Q11** As applicable ... about how many members were there around 2010?

Number of members [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

**Q12** As applicable ... about how many members are there now in 2023?

Number of members [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

## **Plans**

**Q13** Is ... open to accepting vocations for new members who would, in due course, intend to go on mission as:

laity, sisters, brothers, fathers, OR no, new members have not been accepted since (year)

**Q14** Are there plans under consideration ... to change its current understanding of vocations or to re-define who it would accept into its organisation? If so, please describe briefly.

[For those no longer accepting vocations, skip to Q15N at end of main question list]

## **Formation locations & plans**

**Q15** Please indicate the main countries from which vocations originate for ...

**Q16** At present ... has its own initial formation programmes as follows:

Specifically for laity: not applicable, one location, more than one location

Novitiate: not applicable, one location, more than one location

Seminary: not applicable, one location, more than one location

Other: not applicable, one location, more than one location

**Q17** At present ... also avails of initial formation programmes that are external to the organisation as follows:

Specifically for laity: not applicable, one location, more than one location

Novitiate: not applicable, one location, more than one location

Seminary: not applicable, one location, more than one location

Other: not applicable, one location, more than one location

**Q18** Are there plans to change these arrangements for initial formation programmes in the next 2 to 3 years?

yes, no, undecided; please comment further if you wish

### **Other supporters on mission**

**Q19** Does ... embrace a wider group of people who go on mission but who are not members (and so do not then have the right to vote in elections or participate in formal decision-making)?

This might include laity who go on mission but who are not voting members ... or perhaps diocesan priests who are associated with ... for a specific period.

yes, no [followed by skip logic to allow that next section is not applicable]

### **Wider circle of supporters**

**Q20** Thinking about the wider group on mission who are not members ... up until around 2010 the overall trend on numbers of such persons was: increasing, stable decreasing

**Q21** As applicable ... about how many non-members were part of its endeavours around 2010?

Number of persons [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

**Q22** As applicable ... about how many non-members are part of its endeavours now in 2023?

Number of persons [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

### **Formation for Mission**

**Q23** Initial formation includes all stages from initial acceptance until placement on mission for laity, or ordination or permanent profession/aggregation for religious.

Thinking about those who could potentially become members ... about how many persons were in initial formation for mission in 2010:

Number of persons [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

**Q24** Still thinking about those who could potentially become members... about how many persons are in initial formation for mission now in 2023:

Number of persons [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

[Skip logic meant a “no” to Q19 caused skipping of the next section as not applicable]

### **Wider organisational arrangements**

**Q25** Thinking now about those intending to go on mission ... but who are not eligible to become members, around 2010 about how many persons were in initial formation for mission as:

Number of persons [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

**Q26** Still thinking now about those intending to go on mission ... but who are not eligible to become members, about how many persons are in initial formation for mission now in 2023 as:

Number of persons [being]: laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

## Summary of vocations

**Q27** Thinking now about the period from 2010 to the present, and those who have proceeded from initial formation to first mission for laity, or ordination or permanent profession/ aggregation for religious:

Approximately how many became members ... from 2010 to the present?

(please type the number in the box): laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

**Q28** In addition to those who became members ... during this period, approximately how many who remain non-members proceeded on mission ... from 2010 to the present:

(please type the number in the box): laity, sisters, brothers, fathers

## Looking ahead [If the organisation is still taking vocations per Q13]

**Q29** In terms of vocations, what would you see as being the two most significant challenges facing ...?

**Q30** What are the longer term implications of these challenges for ...?

**Q31** What gives you hope for the future of vocations for ...?

## Thanks

A warm thanks from the Columbans for taking the time to participate in this questionnaire. Your responses will help to inform our deliberations, discernment, and decisions in light of our General Assembly in 2024.

**Q32** Before going on your way, please feel very welcome to share any further thoughts or questions on the matters raised above:

## Looking ahead [If the organisation is no longer taking vocations per Q13]

**Q15N** What would you see as being the two most significant challenges facing ...?

**Q16N** What are the longer term implications of these challenges ...?

**Q17N** What gives you hope for the future of vocations in the wider Catholic Church?

## Thanks

A warm thanks from the Columbans for taking the time to participate in this questionnaire. Your responses will help to inform our deliberations, discernment, and decisions in light of our General Assembly in 2024.

Before going on your way, please feel very welcome to share any further thoughts or questions on the matters raised above:





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