

Summary Report for the Missionary Society of St Columban

Conversations about choices



12 September 2023

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12 September 2023: This Summary Report was prepared for general circulation ahead of conferences and meetings to be held in preparation for the General Assembly in 2024.

In due course, the Principal Report will be remitted to the General Council and Columban Lay Mission Central Leadership Team, and is intended for addition to web-based resources for GA 2024.



Background

This report summarises our response on two reviews that we are conducting for the Missionary Society of St Columban, as an initiative arising from the IRMU Meeting in Seoul in March 2023.

As advised to all Columbans, the IRMU Meeting made six recommendations ahead of the General Assembly scheduled for May 2024 (GA 2024). In addressing those questions, our project is the initial action on two of the six recommendations, and is being undertaken at the behest of the General Council and Columban Lay Mission Central Leadership Team. The project concerns a strategic, independent review of the Society in light of mission priorities, and an independent review and assessment of vocation programmes based on internal and external data, trends, etc.

The intent is that these reviews provide the Society with a reality-check on the way to GA 2024, as part of preparation for conversations that will be necessary there. That should also inform the second part of the corresponding recommendations - the creation of strategic plans.

Ahead of conferences and meetings that will soon be taking place in preparation for GA 2024, this Summary Report covers leading elements of the project. In due course, the Principal Report will be remitted to the General Council and Columban Lay Mission Central Leadership Team, and is intended for addition to the web-based resources for GA 2024. The Principal Report will account fully for the project, including its logic, main analytical elements, and data generated as a result. It will be recommended reading for all those participating in GA 2024.¹

The hallmark of our approach is independence, which we maintain even if being 'the messenger' on vexed issues calls for a generous measure of professional fortitude. To that end, we confirm that all viewpoints expressed - even those that may resonate with ideas already voiced by some in the Columban community - are the considered advice of our team led by Dr Carolyn Evans, definitively unencumbered by other direction.

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 our work, respondents were urged to bear such thoughts in mind when responding - and that urging bears some repeating when considering the necessary logic for our work and findings, the implications, and the questions we commend to the Society.²

¹ Separately, 'Headlines about Conversations' covers just the key items to note from the 'Conversations' project.

² Many of the issues covered in this report were also raised in the consultation survey, with additional information and statistics. All of that will be captured in the Principal Report, along with text of the survey questions, summaries of survey responses, and the like.

Approach to the project

In undertaking a strategic review, the first questions concern the purpose, will, and capacity, of the organisation in terms of what it exists to do, what current activities indicate it intends to do, and what it is seen to do by the wider world.³

Then, every organisation needs stakeholder support to continue, so in very practical terms any given organisation is sustainable only if it can keep its promises to all stakeholders and so earn their ongoing support - and not just today and tomorrow, but next month and next year.⁴

To perceive of an organisation as sustainable one thus needs to believe it can keep its promises by somehow bringing together three essential ingredients:

- a purpose that expresses the existential objective of the organisation, 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 animating and directing all those involved towards pursuing that purpose in the face of evolving circumstances (which will often impact upon an organisation in ways largely outside of its control); 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, something brought forth with help from positive leadership.

So a strategic review will centre around discussion of purpose, will, and capacity, in terms of what an organisation exists to do as given by its constituent documents, what current plans and programmes indicate that it intends to do, and what the wider world sees that it does - the latter by way of activities and outcomes that are ascribed to that organisation, and which go towards creating something of a footprint to inspire and promote ongoing support.

**Without courage,
wisdom bears no fruit.**

- Baltasar Gracián y Morales, SJ



³ For those with a deeper interest in how the project was designed and proceeded, the Principal Report will provide a detailed discussion of the relevant considerations and how we approached them in completing this assignment.

⁴ Indeed, that is why reviews such as this characteristically include consideration of financial resourcing and the 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. In that regard, we refer to the assurances provided to the IMRU Meeting in March 2023, by the Society's Bursar-General, that the finances of the Society are in order at this time. 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.

What the Columbans exist to do is conveyed by the mission of the Society; what the Society intends to do is put more particularly (albeit not exclusively) in mission priorities;⁵ and what the Society is 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 certainly not only, through renewing membership of the Society.

However, analysing these things would not be enough for the questions arising in this project. This is because sustainability of the membership body is the question that trumps all others for a membership based institution - including any missionary society or religious institute.

In fact, the first major portion of our analytical work, on membership of the Society, showed that sustainability of the Society is quite fragile. This puts serious question marks over the ethics of accepting priestly vocations in light of lifelong commitment. In turn, practical challenges follow in fostering lay missionary vocations. These results led to the second major portion of our work, the consultation survey, to gauge awareness of such issues and their implications, and to gather an initial indication of attitudes about what action might need to follow from GA 2024.

One way or another, it has already become clear that big steps are ahead for the Society: either to choose the changes necessary to prolong the life of the Society, or otherwise to choose how to wind up the Society and close it in a way that is canonically, legally, and ethically sound.⁶

Modelling & forecasting

Inevitably, the hook from which all future plans must hang for membership based organisations - including missionary societies - is the health and sustainability of membership, making this consideration foremost in our analytical work on this project.

From a total membership of over 400 priests in 2012, in the course of a decade the Society has contracted noticeably. As presented in the consultation survey, modelling for the project showed that this trend is most unlikely to change.



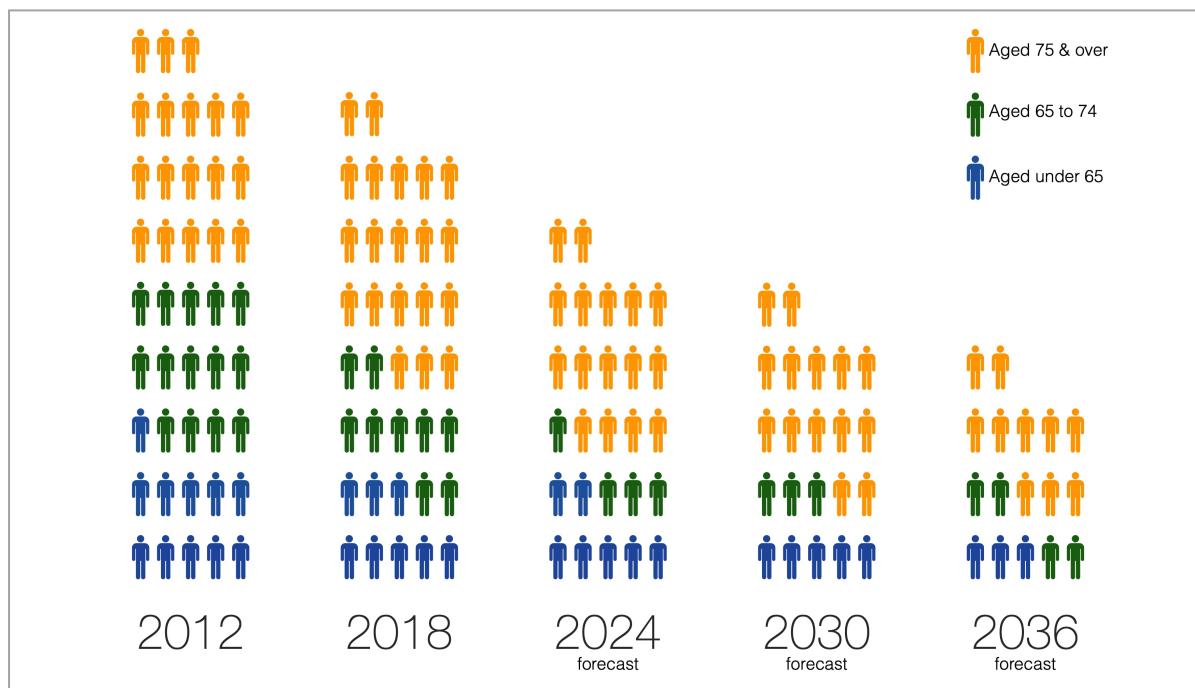
**Don't be afraid to take
a big step if one is indicated.
You can't cross a chasm
in two small jumps.**

- David Lloyd George

⁵ Which are, of course, still to be read in the wider context of the Catholic Church and the fundamental obligation to be a missionary disciple and to '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].

⁶ 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.

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



Forecasts are summarised in Figure A, with silhouettes representing approximately 10 ordained Columbans - revealing fewer, and older, members mark two significant sociodemographic trends for the Society, with a major consequence in the makeup of those working for the Society.

First, there will be around 270 priests in 2024, and likely still over 200 in 2030, but then just around 160-170 priests by 2036.⁷

Second, the membership has aged from a significant minority, about 40%, of priests being aged 75 years or more in 2012, to over half being in that group in 2024 - while by 2036 over 60%, or nearly two out of three priests, will be aged 75 years or more.

Then, in actuality the lion's share of work is already in the hands of a smaller group of about 200 people. The group working for the Society's mission in 2024 will be nearly two-thirds clergy (those under 75), but over one-third lay missionaries and co-workers.⁸ As the demographic trends continue to unfold, that proportion will tilt further towards the laity, so extending their already truly significant contribution.⁹

Due to the present configuration of the Society, two interlocking existential quandaries arise as a result. These are about:

- 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; 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.

⁷ In addition to the "unknowns" that are unavoidable in forecasting, we note that 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 (see also later discussion of priestly vocations).

⁸ The Society relies on some 50 'co-workers', defined in the *Manual of Policy and Procedures* (refer MPP 908) as 'lay employees who hold professional positions of leadership in Columban mission'.

⁹ 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 a good few priests in retirement remain active part time.

To avoid these existential quandaries, the overall number of members at least needs to be stable - so basic sustainability of a membership community over time means that new members need to be at least as numerous as members who are lost.

Responding to whatever the world brings to its door calls for more than just numbers, of course. An organisation's actual sustainability is seen in the extent to which it can respond productively to opportunities and challenges. For a membership organisation, this ability arises from active members via a unique nexus between:

- an unambiguous purpose that members can articulate about what the organisation exists to do;
- an animated will about what the organisation intends to do via present activities as guided by the leadership; and
- sufficient capacity from engaged and active members that will manifest in what the organisation is seen to do, via actual outcomes, and visibility of those outcomes, to inspire and engage those who might choose to support the organisation.

To inform a reality-check vis-à-vis these questions called for exploring with Columbans some of these realities that now frame the Society and its mission, and which bear upon the inter-locking quandaries just noted. Ahead of GA 2024, the most practical option for this in the time available was a consultation survey - a survey that was necessarily rather more than a brief feedback form or an opinion poll, given the significant matters arising and respect due to their consideration.

Consultation survey

Surveys can function as a two-way activity - to share information via materials that are used to frame questions, and to gather information via participant responses. Accordingly, this was a timely avenue by which to share what was already apparent in research for this project, and to gather reactions and responses as part of generating further food for thought in conversations on the way to, at, and from, GA 2024.

The project team was particularly concerned for voices and views from across the spectrum to be heard about these important matters that impact upon the Columban mission and the lives of Columbans - but also that such views be heard in balance with each other.

Participation in the survey was, therefore, invited from 375 persons, including all ordained members, lay missionaries, seminarians, priest associates, and approximately 50 nominated co-workers.¹⁰ For due economy in the use of Columban resources, this was an online survey.¹¹

The invitation made clear that participation was to be:

- *individual*, for each person to give their own perspective, leaders being enjoined to offer a personal point of view;
- *voluntary*, in that each individual could decide to participate or not, and even if they did participate, no survey questions were compulsory (respondents being at liberty to progress to the next question at any time); and
- *anonymous*, preserved in how results are collated, analysed, and reported upon.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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 (the first being in September 2023).

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 some Columbans experiencing email issues or being absent while travelling etc.¹²

In the end, the survey elicited 290 responses,¹³ with the demographic makeup as per Figure B.¹⁴ That amounts to a response rate of over 75%. Being far beyond what is typically seen in most comparable exercises, this leaves no practical doubt that aggregated responses are sufficiently representative of the Columban community to inform project findings.

Figure B: Respondent demographics



The survey was designed around a device that is common in socioeconomic, sociolegal, and sociodemographic analysis, 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 already unfolding.

So the logical backbone for the survey was: What happens for the Columbans if 'things remain as they are'?

For example, sustaining pursuit of a mission inescapably calls for resourcing, particularly including hands and feet, hearts and minds, of priests and lay missionaries, seminarians, priest associates, co-workers and all those who support the Columbans in so many ways.

Thus one cannot help but start by focussing on what happens if trends visible in membership and vocations continue as they are.

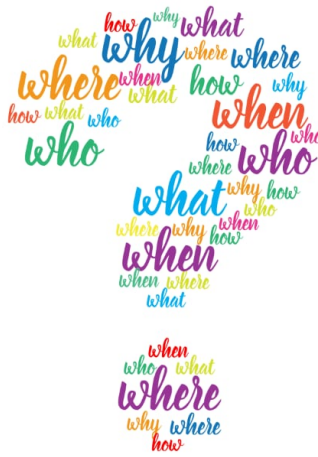
Then, hope springs eternal, certainly - but the opportunity for action in the face of change is not so enduring, even less so for responsible and productive action when major change is involved.

Decision making processes - such as are part of a General Assembly - also make timing central to digesting, and responding to, consequences of where things stand, and where they will stay, if 'things remain as they are'.

¹² While preserving the individual approach to the survey, steps were taken to facilitate accessibility for those less confident or less familiar with using IT generally, or online instruments more specifically. Similarly so for those less confident to work in English, as practical options for translating the survey were not available in a timely and cost-effective fashion. 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.

¹³ Noting also that more than two-thirds of respondents were priests - see also the explanatory notes in the Principal Report.

¹⁴ Those demographics are not further reported upon, nor is further analysis pursued in our reports (for example, via cross-tabulation with other questions) as this could have the effect of abrogating anonymity of respondents.



What happens if 'things remain as they are'?

- project team

Recalling the intent to both share and gather information in this exercise, the subject matter in the consultation survey was organised under three headings. With a view to fresh life having opportunities to flourish for the Society over many years to come, those headings were:

- **Realities now for GA 2024:** those most pressing issues needing specific outcomes from GA 2024. Beyond engagement with mission priorities, immediate concerns are 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:** the conversations that need to start sooner rather than later if sound strategic plans are to emerge from GA 2024, because implementation is needed well ahead of GA 2030. Tangible and timely progress may afford the Society the opportunity to function effectively as an organisation in the service of mission well beyond just another decade or so. A sufficient response will, therefore, name specific tasks to be undertaken by the General Council to be elected for 2024-2030, but must also be based on members proactively putting aside the 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 on visible initiatives, it may well be possible to defer when 'eventually' will arrive. As urged from this project, such direction must actually come to fruition, or managing to closure will become an unavoidable agenda item for a future General Assembly. Our modelling and forecasting show this will be as soon as GA 2036 unless quite substantial organisational change is made - in consequence of Society demographics and due time that will be required to comply, and be seen to comply, with canon law and secular law (in multiple jurisdictions), as well as ensuring duly ethical treatment of all concerned.

In designing the survey, questions took multiple forms but the significant majority employed a Likert scale.¹⁵ A Likert scale is a device commonly used in social science enquiries to gauge subjective attitudes (or perceptions, or viewpoints, etc) across a given group of people.¹⁶

¹⁵ 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. For more details, refer to the Principal Report when it becomes available.

¹⁶ 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](#)).

This approach facilitates aggregation of responses into a synopsis, which can then be used to illustrate the group's overall standing on a given issue.¹⁷

A typical approach to using a Likert scale involves giving a nominal value to response options, combining these across all responses, and then interpreting that to form a balanced summary of how things are placed at that point in time, place, and circumstances. For example, if responses are equally divided among 'agree' and 'disagree', this is interpreted as the group being 'neutral' overall.¹⁸

This approach allows capturing a full range of views, and remains quite distinct from calculating a numerically 'average' response.¹⁹

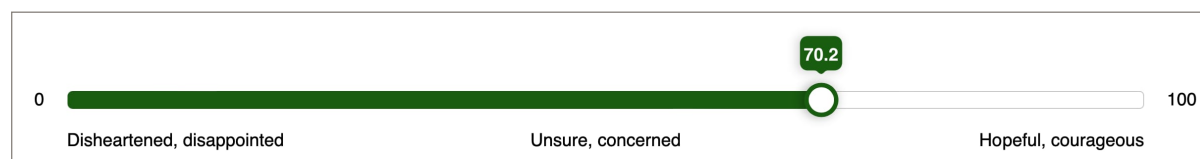
The results of one question help illustrate our overall approach to analysing the survey results, key elements of which are presented in diagrams at the end of this report.

Sensible to the idea that materials presented in the survey had potential to be disconcerting for participants to contemplate, the substance of the survey was designed to conclude with an opportunity to express one's outlook at that point in time.

To take stock of how they were feeling, respondents were invited to use a quantitative device in the form of a slider - set on a scale from 0 to 100, with the default setting being 50.

All but a very small handful of survey participants used the slider, so an average score was valid to calculate - this was 70.2 as shown in Figure C. We note that well over half of the respondents moved the slider clearly towards 'hopeful, courageous' (to 70 or more); less than 8% moved it clearly towards 'disheartened, disappointed' (to 40 or less).

Figure C: After the survey - the slider average



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 offered by more than 240 respondents, in fact ranging in length from a single word to short essays.

All responses to this question were textually analysed for signal insights as indicated in words or phrases. These were reviewed for thematic threads, and then ideas that were expressed by at least two survey respondents were ravelled up as a body of insights.

Finally, for a touch more food for thought (but, we caution, not a great deal more than that), this was transformed into a 'word cloud'.

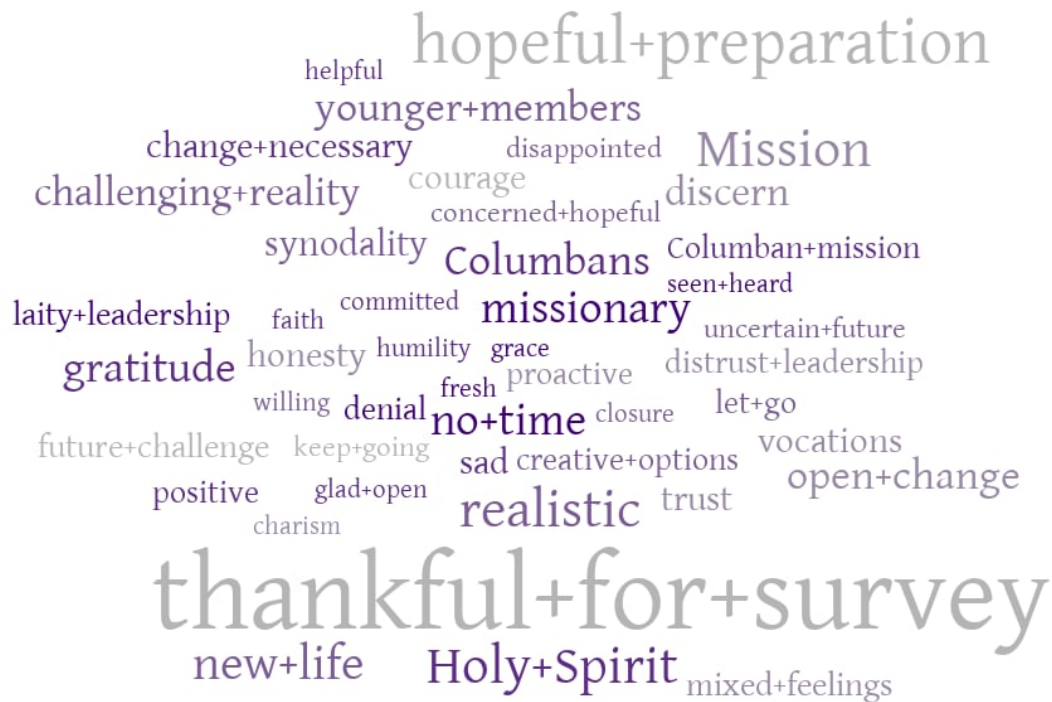
The size of the text reflects frequency of that word or phrase arising in the set of text responses while placement of words and phrases was randomly generated.

¹⁷ We confirm that all responses to questions able to be tabulated will be captured in an annex to the Principal Report for this project, for those who are comfortable in accessing information in that form.

¹⁸ For an abundance of clarity, and further to the previous footnote - 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 balanced and digestible.

¹⁹ 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.

Figure D: After the survey - themes from text responses



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.

Lest this appear self-serving to include in this infographic, we hasten to observe further that not only is the credit largely due to the IRMU Meeting for its particular recommendations leading to this project, but also that it is the surrounding comments that provide some informative (albeit not statistically robust) insights to ponder in preparing for GA 2024. Also, lest this feature seem to arise more from simple courtesy of respondents, we further note that comments on reasons for being 'thankful' paralleled the spectrum of views evident throughout the survey in the text responses to open-ended questions.

Viewpoints 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 it as another example of leadership seeking to manipulate the Society towards undue pessimism and closure. From another perspective, viewpoints also ranged from seeing discussion in the survey 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 needed towards GA 2024 and beyond.

As secular outsiders, it is not for us to assess those ideas, but we do take this as confirmation that our advice on designing the survey was well-placed. Rather than being for some subset or selected group, we advised that the survey should be quite an open exercise, and so it was after our advice was accepted with alacrity.

This seems an opportune moment to again confirm our independence in advising about how to proceed in the reviews, and the detailed subject matter to traverse. This advice was 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.

In that light, we note that the second most frequently expressed insight from respondents was around 'hopeful preparation' for what lies ahead at GA 2024.



Mission priorities

In undertaking a strategic review, the core questions concern the purpose, will, and capacity, of the organisation in terms of what it exists to do, what current activities indicate it intends to do, and then what it is seen to do by the wider world. The latter is something of a footprint created by a combination of actual outcomes, and the visibility of those outcomes, which come together to engender trust in the organisation and thereby elicit ongoing support.

Proclaiming and witnessing 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.

In terms of what the Society specifically exists to do, this is set out in *Constitutions* C.101.²⁰ As organisational purposes go, this is crystal clear. For sustainability of the Society, the extent to which this is distinctly Columban, recognisable as such by a wider community, is also important, as is the question of a link to what activities suggest that, from time to time, the organisation presently intends to do towards its enduring purpose.

In that respect, *Constitutions* C.102 serves very well on points of focus to follow from C.101.²¹ To an external observer these provide significant elements of clarification to establish direction for activities which may then appear as characteristically Columban, even if they are not necessarily or entirely distinct from other missionary societies of the Catholic Church.

In the Society's governance processes, *Constitutions* (C.307-C.308) also provides that Acts of a General Assembly stand to expand on governance arrangements, by the '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 and so what is there for the world to see and perceive as as Columban. For example, Acts of the General Assembly 2018 addresses Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and Interreligious Dialogue (IRD), with various specific recommendations for action by Columbans at least until the next General Assembly.²²

²⁰ *Constitutions and Directory 2020* (Missionary Society of St Columban, 29 June 2020).

²¹ As amended at GA 2018.

²² 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.

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.

Before delving further into Columban activities, there is an unavoidable element of Columban context that, at least for the foreseeable future, will continue to hang rather heavily in the background: the travails of the Catholic Church relating to clergy misconduct. Such behaviour is indubitably reprehensible, and self-evidently contrary to authentic religious commitment. There is, however, a more pernicious problem that arises in the wake of clergy misconduct - a product not so much of incidents per se, or even an incidence rate, but more from the aggregate failure, perceived or actual, by relevant institutional authorities to respond effectively (or at all).

Such institutional failure to act, or to act effectively, has itself now become a dilemma, though demonstrably not unique to the Catholic Church, nor even to churches more generally. This is an area of systemic concern across the world - sufficient to establish a distinct area of academic study,²³ including on debunking “it can’t happen here” thinking.²⁴ So for as long as the litany of horrible headlines continues to implicate the Church in abuse scandals, allegations, and court cases (some clearly historical but others contemporary or ongoing), a pall cannot help but hang over the Church, and the many good works of Columbans.

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? For a reality check in keeping with the project’s remit, design of the the consultation survey included several related questions. Responses are shown in diagrams placed at the end of this report for convenience. Figure F illustrates a substantial weight of encouraging news, especially in the light of evident social, cultural, national, and ethnic diversity among Columbans. It is worth noting that 253 of the total of 290 survey respondents answered the question about barriers to putting JPIC and IRD into practice in their daily lives, but the most responses any suggested barrier received was 132, or 52% of respondents. This was for the combination of IRD and ‘the idea is not connected to their own activities’. That sort of result is not unexpected in the practical reality of RMUs: much more a modest gap that might be bridged than a gaping hole to be filled.



Action expresses priorities.

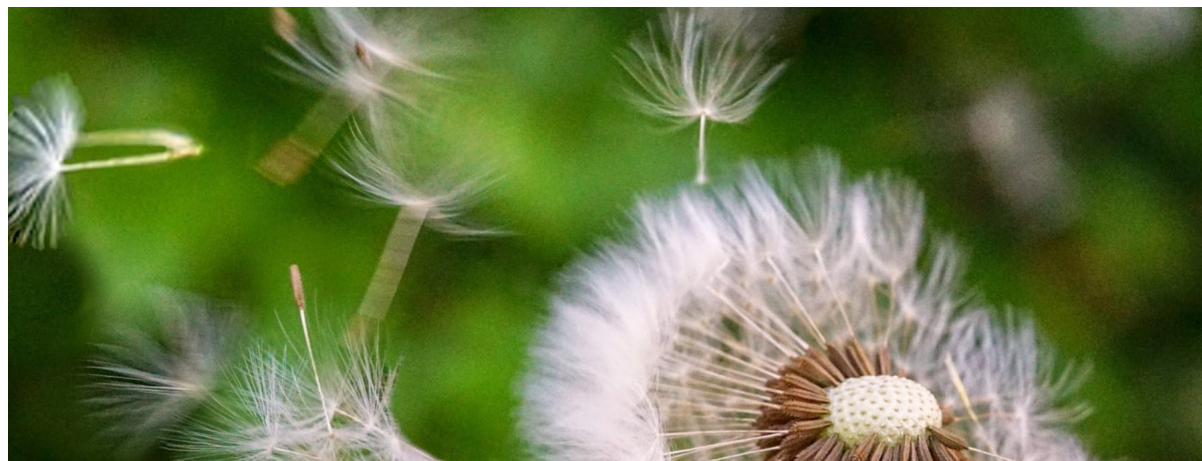
- Mahatma Gandhi

²³ 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 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 egregious abuse of girls.

²⁴ 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](#)).

Based on insights gleaned from the survey, the much larger issue lurking in the background is that of clericalism, and its relationship to genuine accountability for individual actions - as was included in recommendations from the IRMU Meeting held in March 2023. Various regretful acknowledgements in survey responses serve to confirm the need for further priority action.²⁵

Overall, in our assessment it is abundantly clear that the Society is faithfully doing what it is there to do. However, it is not self-evident that this coalesces into a sustainable footprint of the Society, particularly due to work of Columbans being spread so thin over so much territory.



Vocation programmes

Membership renewal and a healthy body of members is fundamental to the sustainability of any membership based organisation, and so it goes for religious communities. Fostering vocations and formation are the pivot point of new members flowing in; subsequent final aggregations or ordinations need to be at least commensurate with the loss of members to maintain a religious community. However, it is also true that something more is needed lest the community stagnate and its capacity to serve mission tend to wither.

The obvious downward trend on priestly vocations parallels trends about 'life commitments' that have emerged in wider society. As an informative reality check, where society is headed on 'long term commitment' might be seen through the lens of trends on marriage. Researchers at the University of Oxford,²⁶ for example, study world wide trends, and have observed:

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.²⁷

²⁵ Courage of respondents offering those comments is acknowledged; also that these comments were made largely by clergy about other clergy. We assume that all these matters have been or will be addressed using due processes as provided for in *Constitutions*.

²⁶ Specifically the Oxford Martin Programme on Global Development ([read more](#)).

²⁷ 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](#)).

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 1991.²⁸ But the wider persistence of this trend, across global society not just the Catholic community, itself shows that reversal is not in prospect - in turn compounding the way in which such a trend influences the social fabric of attitudes to 'life commitment'.

Taking Australia as a convenient example illustrates this in more detail. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), very reputable as part of the Australian Government, has reported that:

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

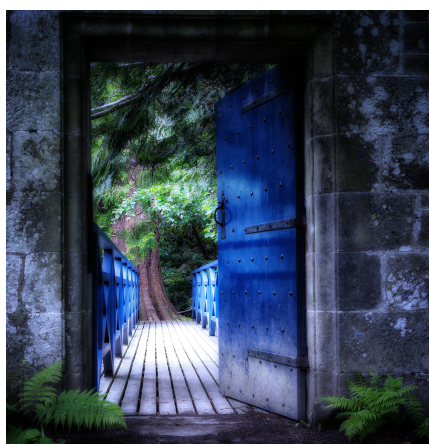
This trend is, in short, a 50+ year phenomenon continuing - for better or for worse - to unfold across the globe. As part of the profound reality surrounding religious life, this deserves sincere reflection in developing expectations about future Columban vocations.

The prospects on vocations to Columban priesthood seem no more encouraging from long term experience of the Society. General Council data shows that 135 seminarians have participated in formation programmes since 2008, leading to between 0 and 5 ordinations in any calendar year. However, the age profile of the Society means there would be no real impact upon the size of the Columban community even with 5 to 10 ordinations each year.

Beyond just the question of membership, the upshot of those trends is hard news in terms of the leadership capacity of the Society - in fact so hard that it was included in the consultation survey to invite members to engage with the realities that this represents.

In particular, it is inevitable that the day will come when, with so few priests left, all ordained Columbans would need to be called into Society governance regardless of their abilities, skills, or preferences about ministry and how they wish to contribute to Columban mission.

So the question is, when might that day come for the Columbans?



Way will open ...

- Quaker saying

²⁸ Source: Vatican statistics summarised from *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae*.

²⁹ A 'crude rate' is, in statistical parlance, an 'unadjusted' rate - that is, not adjusted for data gathering features and without implying variables are causally related. The subtleties of the definition are not material here, but retained for authenticity of the reference.

³⁰ Lixia Qu and Jennifer Baxter 'Marriages in Australia: Facts and Figures 2023' (Australian Institute of Family Studies, March 2023) ([read more](#)).

Considering closure

In fact, by 2036, just 50-60 Columban priests under 75 years old and in good health are likely to remain, equating to the number presently in leadership roles. Thus, without significant change to the Society's configuration being fully realised in the near future, by 2036 all would need to assume some leadership, management or administration role.

This reality has immediate consequences for continuing to accept religious vocations, as doing so necessarily entails long term organisational responsibilities to every individual who makes a lifelong commitment. In short, it is not ethical to even seek that commitment from an individual without the sure knowledge and authentic belief the community will continue long enough to honour its corresponding commitment to the individual.

Beyond just the question of aging clergy, the number of ordinations shows that closure of the Society is inevitable if 'things remain as they are'. To reverse the decline in Society membership calls for sustaining a programme that facilitates 15 to 20 ordinations per year, every year. There has not been so many candidates seeking ordination for quite some time, but even if there were, it is doubtful that the Society now has, or could soon find, suitable personnel to support such a significant programme.

To be clear, the question thus facing the Society is not primarily about providing for retirement, for example, or long term illness of members. Instead it is about the serious duties involved in ensuring that seminarians will, over their lifetime, have due opportunity pursue a vocation to Columban missionary priesthood in keeping with the Society's charism and missionary vision.

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.³¹ They also cease to be when unsustainably small in numbers. In canon law terms, to cease means that the juridical person of the society or institute is 'suppressed', whether by outright closure, or by amalgamating with, or folding into, another amenable society or institute.

Absent a dramatic change in circumstances, the Columbans need to consider - at GA 2024 - the question of whether the Society should cease to accept priestly vocations, as uncertainties about the Society's future create significant doubts about its capacity to fulfil its long-term canonical and ethical obligations to new members.

Every wall is a door ...

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

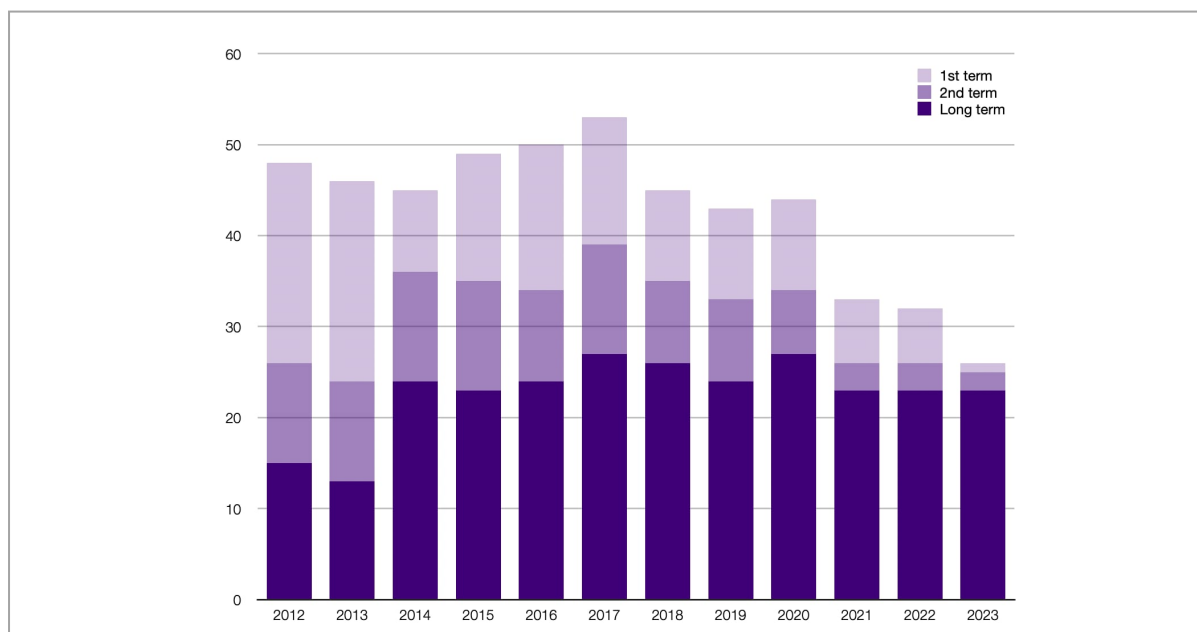


³¹ Even while existing members continue to live out together their vocational commitment as fully as possible for as long as possible - this will be addressed further in the project's Principal Report.

The structure and reality of the Society leads to a similar logic in relation to lay vocations that the Society has capacity to foster. Broadly, a 'life commitment' frame of reference is also relevant given the dislocation that being a lay missionary entails, but with one significant difference: no provision in the Society's canonical governance arrangements allows for a 'lifelong commitment' by lay missionaries, comparable to that for an ordained member. That relieves the Society of the obligation to provide for long-serving lay missionaries in their retirement, but it also behooves the Society to afford equitable opportunities for lay missionaries to freely proceed as they must for their own circumstances.

Vocations for Columban lay missionaries have also not been on a growing trajectory. An overall downward trend was in evidence but then exacerbated by COVID-19. As with priestly vocations, it is impossible to separate this situation from travails of the Church on misconduct issues.

Figure E: Columban Lay Missionaries, by term since 2012



As shown in Figure E, there are 26 Columban lay missionaries at present, all but three having long term agreements with the Society. Given a usual path to long term agreements, this is the upper limit of resources available for leadership by lay missionaries until around 2030. By 2030, up to seven, being over 65, may have chosen to complete their long-term service with the Columbans - leaving no more than 19, all aged over 45.

Put bluntly, while every vocation is to be most sincerely welcomed, to build on this and sustain a viable programme requires much more than a handful of candidates every year. To have hopes of this, for several years nearly all present Columban lay missionaries would need to focus on fostering lay missionary vocations. This would leave few or none to engage in other missionary activities - an approach unlikely to be inviting, or even feasible. The overarching implication is that, without a dramatic and immediate change of direction, it is arguable that the Columbans should seriously consider ceasing acceptance of vocations for new lay missionaries.

To understand awareness of these realities and provide a basis for where discernment towards GA 2024 might proceed, the survey included questions setting out context about vocations and enquiring as to whether those facts and forecasts came as a surprise to survey respondents.

The realities did not, but the implications did. So there was little or no surprise expressed about demographic realities, but on the other hand, opinion was divided on ceasing to take vocations for priests or lay missionaries (Figure G) as a key consequence of those demographics, while very few indicated willingness to actually engage in vocations ministry (Figure J).



Openings

In providing a reality check for the Society ahead of GA 2024, this project did not proceed by direct review of activities conducted by the Society to make recommendations about them.³²

Instead, existential questions detected early in the project meant that there was more use in identifying space where the Columbans can work to find a sustainable future, leaving details of how to do that for contemplation at another time. Based on our further analysis, we add that this time should be no later than at GA 2024.

This section sets out key features of that space,³³ pointing to choices that may enlarge it for future Columban endeavours and potentially allow the Society to thrive for many years to come.

The Society's overall future

In the end, this project does not break ground in attending to the changing size and age profile of the Columbans, and the need to respond to that change. 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 many Columbans.

This project did, however, find indubitable evidence of a pressing reality: bluntly, membership of the Society is now an existential question, casting doubt on the ability of the organisation to keep its promises. Doubts about the Society's capacity to support the lifelong commitment of 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.

In short, an overarching finding of this project is that it is not clear that the Society actually has capacity to continue as it is. Emanating from the Society's members, this capacity is challenged to simultaneously:

³² We have conducted such reviews for religious institutes and for a wide range of other organisations - recommendations could only be provided after such a detailed evaluation of specifics, including the financial commitments involved (see also n4 above).

³³ Delegates to GA 2024 and those interested in detail behind these findings should consult the Principal Report, which will be available from the GA 2024 web site in due course. The Principal Report includes two explanatory sections responding to the review questions comprising this project, including presentation of and commentary on the related portions of the consultation survey.

- 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.

Put another way, the Columbans, leaders and members, are now stretched too thin over too much and this is itself impacting upon sustainability.

Accordingly, there are choices to be made about how best to manage the Society's configuration, governance, and vocations towards renewal, either for the Society to continue its mission and ministries, or for these to be continued in the wider Church even without the Society per se.

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?* Further, given genuine doubt about the Society's ability to keep the promises made, especially as entailed in accepting vocations to missionary priesthood, is it ethical to do so?

Time for responding to that change, and doing so effectively - 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 is progressively more unsustainable.

As much as reconsidering how best to arrange and lead the Society as an organisation, this calls for members to make a fresh expression of mission, to best gather together their mutual efforts which then stand visible to the world as characteristically Columban.

This challenge is just another in the Society's heritage. As an organisation of mission priests, the Society has evolved considerably since it was first established - geographical refocussing over time alone is testimony to the collective ability of Columbans to realign to emerging realities in being 'pilgrims for Christ'.

In comparison, finding a new configuration, at least, really should not be so difficult.



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

- Martin Luther King Jr

Choices on leadership

In relation to how it is configured, and thus what leadership arrangements follow, the Society must cut its cloth to suit its circumstances, or risk having no shirt at all. Most particularly, this means devoting clerical leaders to the things that only they can do. In effect, the membership of the Society has choices on leadership, but pragmatic options now appear limited to:

- reconfiguring the organisational arrangements to need fewer leadership roles - but that will unavoidably involve change to RMUs; or
- widening the leadership ambit to embrace a more diverse group of possible leaders - but that necessarily involves opening more leadership roles to laity (even if this is done without amending the Society's canonical arrangements);³⁴ or
- a combination of both.

As a finding of this project, choices that should thus be on the agenda at GA 2024 include:

- What can be done by reconfiguring organisational arrangements of the Society to reduce the demands on clerical leadership?
- What can be done in reconfiguring Society arrangements for mission that widen the openings in which to engage with lay leadership?
- Is there any approach to vocations that appears canonically sound, secularly legal, ethical, and practical, or should the Society cease to accept priestly vocations?
- Since vocations for lay missionaries also rely fundamentally on leadership afforded by clergy, how might the Society similarly manage that nexus?
- What can be done to sustain the Society without vocations sufficient to stabilise or grow the ordained membership?

Choices on configuration

The Society's shape pivots around RMUs, and the number of leadership roles is a consequence of the number of RMUs. That organisational model met the needs of a much larger missionary endeavour, but maintaining the RMU configuration makes heavy demands for the Society itself. Such demands are incompatible with the twin constraints facing the Society - of having enough members to maintain an organisational footprint others might aspire to support, and finding enough leaders able to help the Society thrive into the future, including by fostering vocations.

The overarching dilemma for the Columbans 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?

Some options were explored in the consultation survey, and related results are summarised in Figure I (at the end of this report). The results show an opening to consider having fewer RMUs - overall respondents approached being 'ready now' to consider arrangements for fewer (perhaps 8 to 10) RMUs.³⁵

³⁴ Fruitful direction on this, within the confines of canonical arrangements for the Society, could simply follow the lead set by Pope Francis in seeking to more closely and sincerely involve women and laity in leadership and decision-making roles and processes. We note also that amending the Society's canonical arrangements - such as to create a new missionary society - was not, on balance of all responses, a preferred option, but there was a significant group within the whole who were quite positive about this. For further discussion, refer to the Principal Report when it becomes available.

³⁵ 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.

However, other results (Figure H) hint at contrasts between the theory of RMUs being more just a means to the ends of mission, and the practical reality of moving to another RMU as part of living out the cross cultural mission of Columbans. This also comes through in Figure J: the theory of reducing RMUs seems reasonably welcome, but the reality of moving to another RMU was, overall, met with distinct ambivalence.³⁶

From an external perspective, it is quite notable that there was 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.

With that in mind, attention is also drawn to results, shown in Figure J at the end of the report, that overall:

- respondents were 'possibly ready after reflection' to reduce RMUs even further, perhaps to 5 or 6 RMUs;
- it was possible that on balance, the group might even become ready to dispense with RMUs altogether; and
- separate to Figure J, there were several dozen additional proposals on configuration, all in the vein of Columban groups uniformly become mission units (that is, taking Regions out of the picture) and/or using a new 'grouping' model based on mission priority rather than location.

A choice for the membership

The Society is facing twin constraints from the present state of membership: having enough members to create the organisational footprint that others can aspire to supporting, and then finding enough leaders from within who are also able to help the Society thrive into the future.

Together they mean that 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.

With imagination and a spirit of generative cooperation - which was certainly in evidence across responses to the survey - findings in these reviews show that options do remain open to adjust to membership realities.

Breathing fresh life into the Society, if that be the will of the membership, unavoidably calls for choices to be made about drawing membership together to make a fresh expression of mission, and to focus on ministries that make clearly evident the characteristic Columban mission and what this brings to the world.

If instead the membership is moved to allow that the Society has run its course, the consultation survey also provided indications of priorities for decisions at GA 2024. Survey respondents made quite clear their preferences for General Council action following GA 2024 (see Figure K), although they were less firm about where they stand on personal readiness to embrace such options (Figure L). That provides additional nuances for the next General Council to consider.

One way or another, however Columbans seek to thrive as missionaries in the decades ahead, 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 who will be involved in finding fresh direction for the Missionary Society of St Columban and any who support its endeavours.

³⁶ Noting also that a non-trivial number of respondents were, indeed, willing to do so.

Consultation survey - key results

About the survey results

The Principal Report from this project will include the text of all questions in the survey, along with results from each question where responses are amenable to being summarised in a table or a graph.

Questions covering respondent demographics are reported to the extent of being summarised in Figure B in this report.

Questions that were limited to text responses will not be summarised, with one exception. That exception is as shown in Figure D in this Summary Report.

Reading these diagrams

Keep in mind that each diagram following represents a synopsis of views that were expressed by respondents to the consultation survey. So the diagram is an overall summary that balances agreement and disagreement from all respondents to that question.

For example, the synopsis being 'strongly positive' does not mean all there were only positive views expressed. It shows some survey participants chose 'disagree' and/or 'strongly disagree' as their response, but 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 in context of the question; but
- in others, this amounted to 'ambivalent', because while views were fairly evenly poised overall, they were more lumpy in how they were spread across the range, or were noticeably more polarised (more towards either end of the spectrum, fewer in the centre).

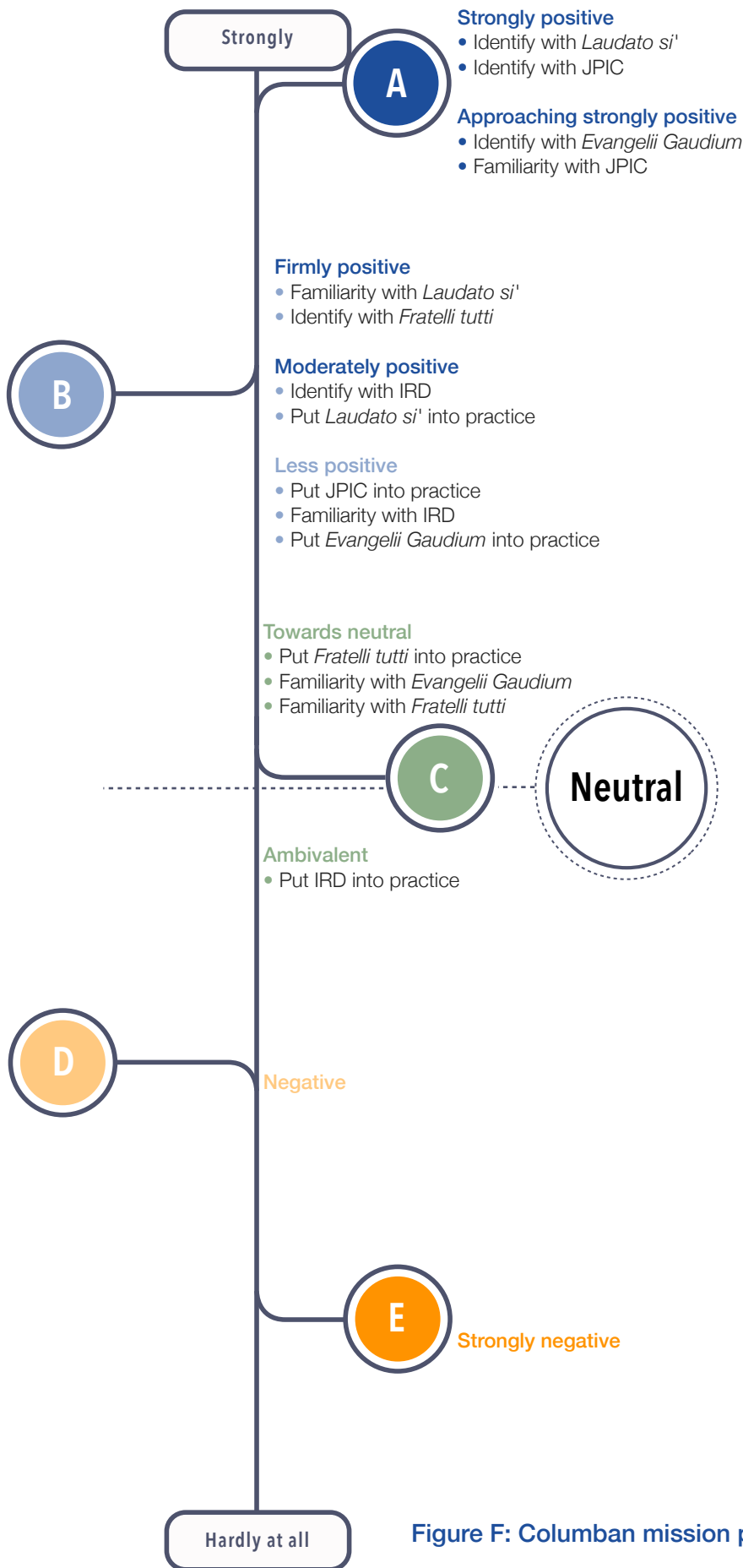


Figure F: Columban mission priorities & selected teachings

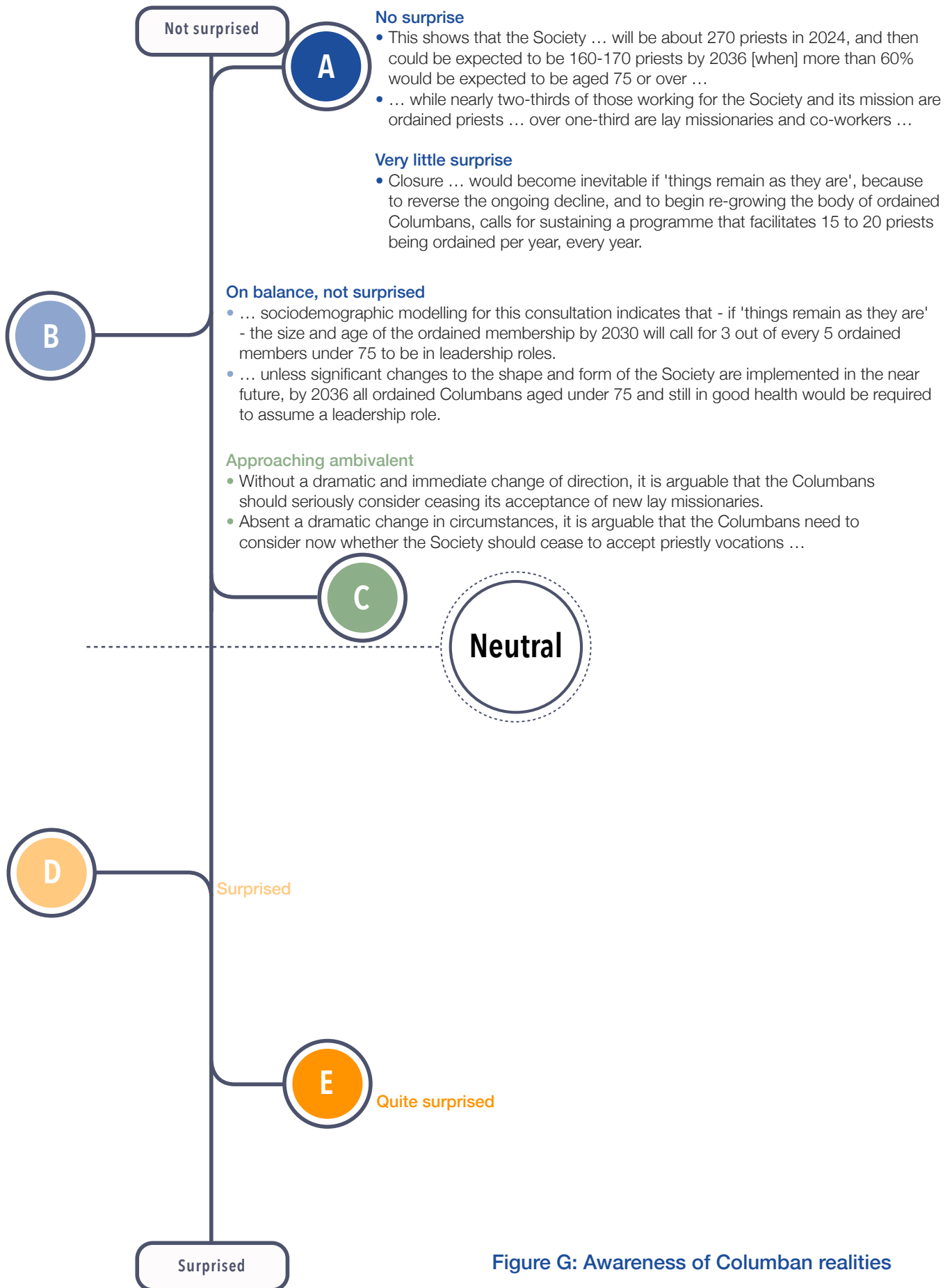


Figure G: Awareness of Columban realities

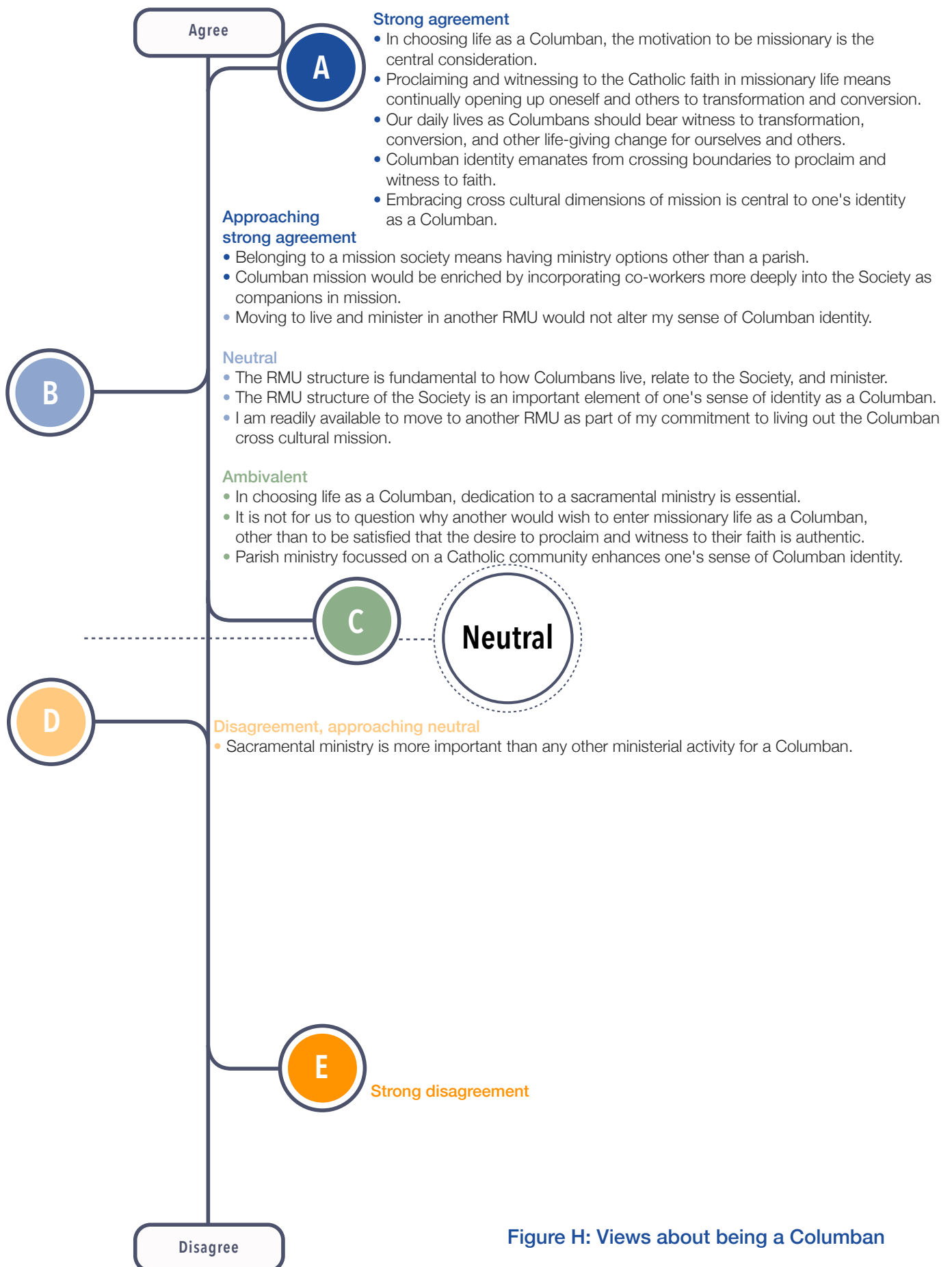


Figure H: Views about being a Columban

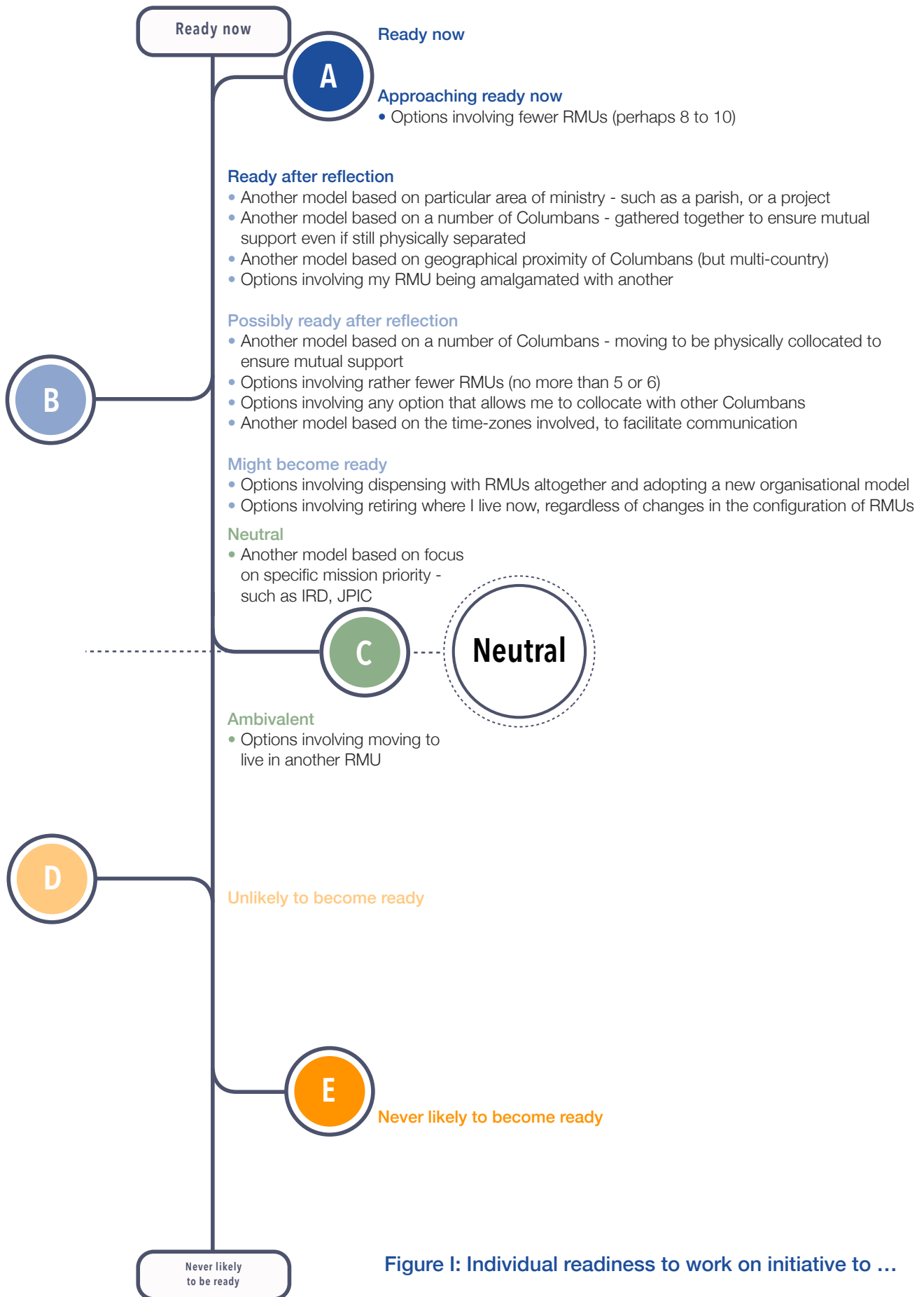


Figure I: Individual readiness to work on initiative to ...

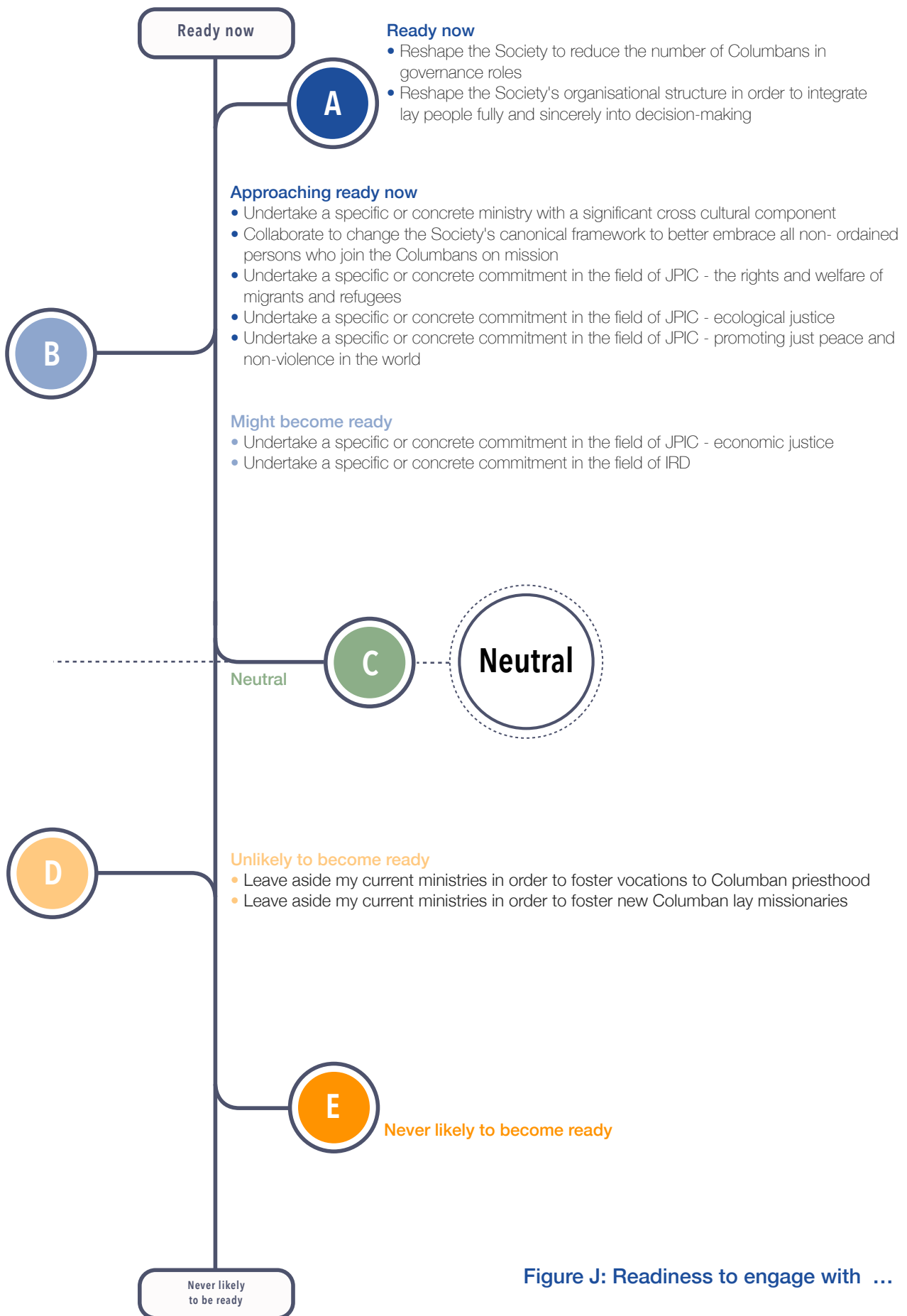


Figure J: Readiness to engage with ...

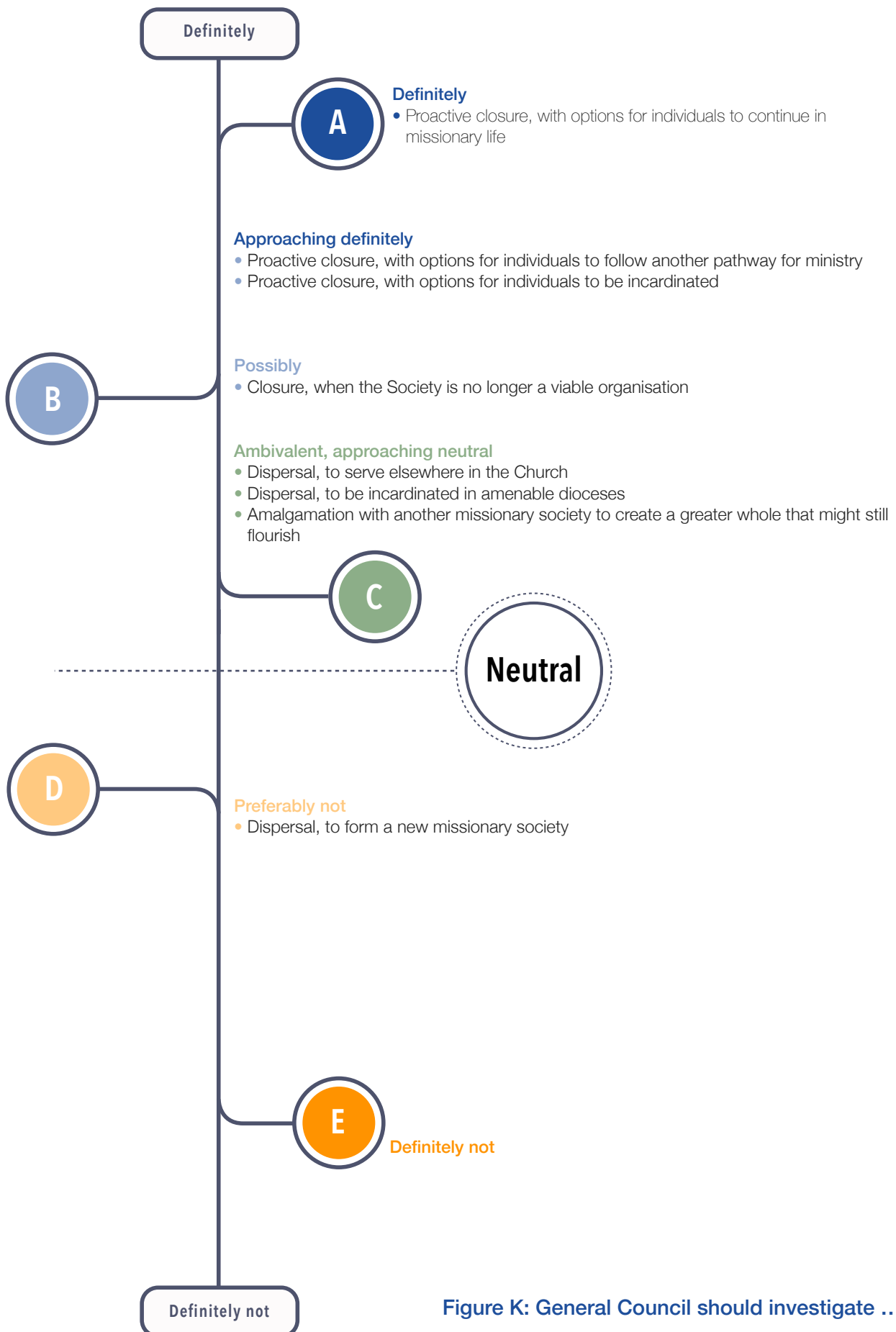


Figure K: General Council should investigate ...

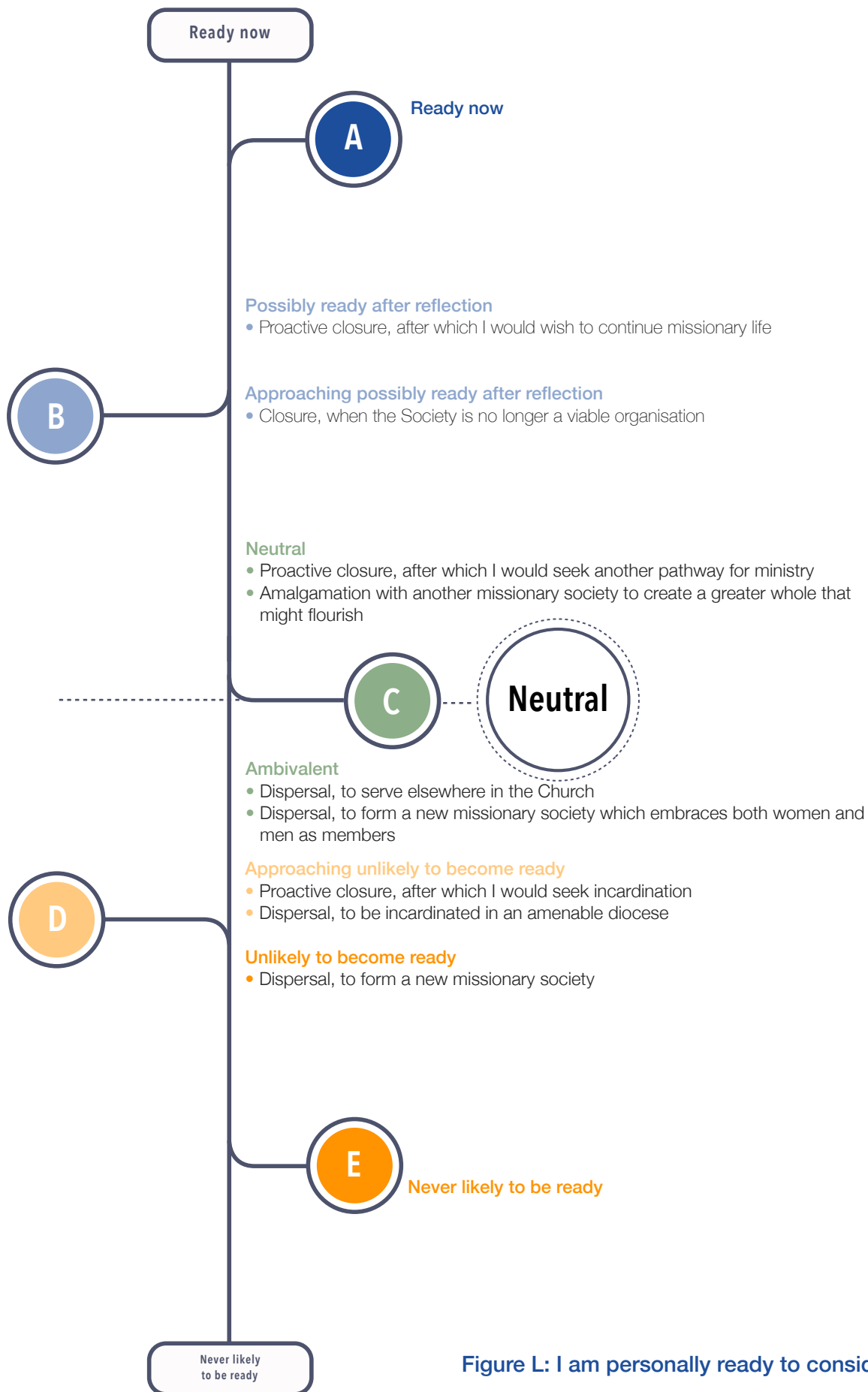


Figure L: I am personally ready to consider ...

