

## Region of Oceania Report to the GAPC Chairperson

November 2023

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### Columban Synod for Oceania

In March 2020, Pope Francis announced that the theme for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly for the Synod of Bishops would be “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” Prior to this announcement, the church in Australia had already begun its four-year journey of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia which began in May 2018 and concluded in July 2022. Over 220,00 individuals participated in the journey through prayer, reflection, conversation, consultation and discernment by considering: What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?

Columban priests and co-workers across Australia participated in the journey through various formats. Trevor Trotter, in his role as the Regional Director Oceania was our Columban representative at the Australian Plenary Council. From his lived experience of synodality throughout the Plenary Council process, Trevor recommended to our former Regional Council that we have a facilitated Columban Synod for Oceania. This was fully supported by everyone in the Region. All Columban priests, students, lay missionary (LM), co-workers and three representatives from the Columban Companions in Mission (CCIM - Fiji) were invited to participate in the Synod as well as Pacifican Columbans (priests and LMs) working overseas.

The aim of the Synod was *to come together to discern what the Spirit wants us to do in the Region of Oceania for the next 5 years*. The Synod comprised the following four phases:

- Phase 1: Sept 2022 - small group spiritual conversations in each country and with Pacifican Columbans working overseas to name issues and new possibilities for consideration.
- Phase 2: Nov 2022 – online Synod gathering to identify future directions to explore further.
- Phase 3: Feb 2023 – small group spiritual conversations across the Region and with Pacifican Columbans working overseas to explore and put forward preferred directions.
- Phase 4: March 2023 – online Synod gathering to affirm and put forward preferred new directions to the Regional Council for decision taking.

The following five emerging directions were all affirmed through spiritual conversations and at our two online Synod gatherings.

- Our Columban identity: We understand Columban identity as inclusive – we are all Columbans, and we are one Region.
- Synodality: We are becoming a synodal Region practicing prayerful, synodal processes which bring us together and foster transformation.
- Mission and ministry: We need to move to models which express our one Columban identity, synodality and new models of church.
- Ageing and retirement: We wish to explore our rich experience, the deepening of our spirituality and how this might be shared.
- Younger Pacifican Priests and Lay Missionaries: We invite and welcome any younger Pacificans who wish to exercise ministry within the Region of Oceania.

At the conclusion of our Columban Synod for Oceania, we all affirmed that the five emerging directions have “put the Region of Oceania on the right pathway, taking the Region in a positive new direction to somewhere new.” Participants affirmed “that the emerging directions and the inclusive and

prayerful synodal process are taking the group to a transformative place of letting go to let come.” “The gift of our Columban identity is inclusiveness encompassing different roles e.g. ordained, co-workers, lay missionaries, as well as diversity in age, gender and culture. Columban identity is inclusive of people who are not Catholic and from different faith traditions and we celebrate and affirm the richness of the faith traditions and cultures within our Columban identity.” (Final Report)

### **Becoming a Synodal Region**

Our Regional Council meets every two months for two days. The February and August meetings are face-to-face rotating across the three countries, and the other four meetings are online. Maha Shawky, Regional Bursar/Business Manager and Katarina Mukai, Regional Lay Missionary Coordinator, participate in all Regional Council discussions except personal matters regarding ordained members. This is partnership in leadership between Columbans ordained and co-workers. The presence of women at our Regional Council meetings enhances collective wisdom, insights, creativity and diversity.

One month prior to our Regional Council meetings, the Regional Council invites all Columbans (priests, co-workers, LM and students) in the Region to an online meeting where people can share their questions and ideas using the spiritual conversation process. Any questions and ideas are brought to our Regional Council meeting for discussion.

At our Regional Council Team Building Workshop in February this year, we setup thirteen Ministry Portfolios with each member of the Council holding two portfolios. Maha and Kata also have their Ministry Portfolios. All Columbans involved in these ministries prepare a written report to the Council every 4 months. This process creates better communication and accountability between the Regional Council and Columban personnel.

In preparation for the General Assembly, all Columbans in the Region were invited to participate in a Dialogue Circle. There are two face-to-face Dialogue Circles in Suva, one in Lower Hutt and two in Essendon. There is one online Dialogue Circle across the Region. Quite a few Columbans in the Region are participating in the online Guest Speaker Events.

All Columbans were invited to join our online Regional Assembly 13-15 November. 40 Columbans (13 co-workers, 3 students, 1 LM, 23 priests) and two CCIM members participated together with Alvaro Martinez, Tony Coney and Lee Jehoon. In each morning and afternoon session we used the spiritual conversation process. Many opportunities are created across the Region where Columbans can practice the prayerful, synodal process.

Our Columban co-workers are an integral and inclusive part of our Columban mission and synodal journey. They make up one-third of the participants at our Regional Assemblies. They bring their passion for Columban mission as well as their professional skills. They are young, dynamic, enthusiastic, energetic, visionary and predominantly female. They are involved in various ministries across the Region – IRD, JPIC, CLM/vocations, fundraising, mission promotion, communications and publications.

Maha Shawky has been the Regional Bursar/Business Manager and the Columban Mission Centre CEO, Melbourne, Australia since July 2021. Vinita Naidu became the Mission Office Manager in Lower Hutt, Aotearoa NZ in early 2022. Sadly, Vinita passed away only a few weeks ago. She worked at the Mission Office for more than 30 years. Lilian Bing became the Mission Office Manager in Suva, Fiji in early 2022 and retired in August. Elizabeth Chong-Mario is the new Mission Office Manager in Suva. Co-workers across the Region have been empowered to take on important leadership roles in administration.

## **Reconfiguration**

The new Region of Oceania was formed in November 2019. At the time there was some angst and mixed feelings of optimism, hope and hurt as we began our new journey. For the first three years there were 10 ordained Columbans in leadership, the Regional Director and three members on each of the three country Leadership Teams – Fiji, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The three Country Leaders and another member of the Fiji Leadership Team were also on the Regional Council.

At our Regional Assembly in May 2022, we decided to change our governance structure and reduce the number of people in leadership to the five members on the Regional Council. The new governance structure was approved by the General Council. It has reduced the number of people in leadership from ten to five.

The new Regional Council is more multicultural with members from Tonga, Korea, Aotearoa NZ and Australia. The members are also younger with two in their 40s, two in their 60s and one in his 70s.

In January 2022, the former Regional Council made the decision for all administration across the Region to come under the responsibility of the Regional Business Manager. This new model has strengthened collaboration among the co-workers in the three Mission Offices with the sharing of expertise and professional skills leading to more efficient and productive outcomes.

With the new Region, there is far more collaboration across the three countries in the areas of IRD, JPIC, CLM, vocations, fundraising, mission promotion, communications and publications.

As we move forward, I envision the need for a new, innovative and creative governance structure across the Region which is even more inclusive of our co-workers and LMs. There needs to be a letting go of the old Regional model of governance and embracing a new model that will emerge through our synodal process. This is inevitable with the rapid ageing of Columban priests in Aotearoa NZ and Australia. In 10 years time, there will be no Columban priests under 70 in Aotearoa NZ or Australia. Change is difficult and it takes time.

With our rapid decline in personnel across the Society, courageous decisions need to be made regarding the reconfiguration of our RMUs. The Region of Oceania may be one model of reconfiguration to reflect on.

## **Safeguarding**

Safeguarding is a ministry integral to our mission. Therefore, it is paramount that all Columban personnel in the Region participate in annual safeguarding training. In Aotearoa NZ and Australia, ordained Columbans engaged in public ministry are also required to participate in their local diocesan safeguarding training. In March 2024, we will conduct a Regional Safeguarding Training on the *Policy and Guidelines of the Missionary Society of St Columban on the Abuse of Minors and Vulnerable Adults 2023*.

In February 2023, the Regional Council established a Regional Safeguarding Community of Practice (CoP) with the aim of sharing relevant safeguarding information between the three countries and supporting best practice in safeguarding across the Region. There are seven members of the Committee – Australia Safeguarding Committee (4 members), Fiji Safeguarding Committee (2 members) and Aotearoa New Zealand Safeguarding Coordinator. The Committee meets four times a year via zoom.

Since the beginning of 2019, every ordained Columban in Australia who is engaged in public ministry is required to undergo personal supervision. Our Regional Council is in the process of considering

extending this requirement across the Region. General Assembly 2018 recommended that “regular mentoring and supervision be made available for all those in active ministry, especially for those in isolated situations.” (Act of GA 2018, page 14).

Tom Rouse, as the President of the Congregational Leaders Conference of Aotearoa New Zealand is very involved in the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care which was formally established on 1 February 2018. The final report is due to be delivered by 28 March 2024.

### **Vocations and CLM**

The Covid pandemic had a huge effect on the lives of millions of people across the world. Many young people in Fiji lost their jobs. When the restrictions were lifted and jobs became available again, young people began to work to support their families. Last year, Katarina Mukai, the Regional LM Coordinator organised four CLM Come and See programs with four young women attending each Come and See. At the end of September, the four women found jobs and continue to work to support their families.

Willie Lee, the Fiji Vocations Coordinator and Katarina continue to organise Come and See programs in Fiji for young people who are interested in becoming a Columban priest or lay missionary. This year, Willie organised three Come and See programs in different places across Fiji. In total, 38 young men joined the Come and See programs. Willie continues to keep in touch with several of them. Two young men are coming to the end of the one-year accompaniment program – one from Ba, Fiji and one from Kiribati. If all goes well, they will be presented to the Admissions Board early next year. The one-year propaedeutic program will begin in May 2024.

This year, Kata organised two CLM Come and See programs in Suva. In total, 20 young people joined the Come and See programs. Kata is organising another Come and See program for December. She has interviewed most of the young people. Hopefully, some of them may be interested in joining the CLM Accompaniment Program.

The future of the Society requires the willingness of some young Columbans – lay and ordained, to return to their home RMUs for a few years to take on the important roles of Vocations Coordinator and CLM Coordinator. Sometimes choices need to be made for the benefit of the wider Society and not just for one’s own RMU. This can be very challenging.

One of the recommendations in the *Columban Lay Missionaries Discernment Report March 2023*, is to “suspend LM Vocation Promotion, Accompaniment, Come and See and Orientation Programs for 5 years. Since the restructuring of the current CLM and the revisioning of its future will take considerable time and energy, it is vital to focus our limited energies on these two areas.” I think it will be the end of CLM if we suspend LM vocation promotion for 5 years. What will be the point in the restructuring of the current CLM and the revisioning of its future if there will be no future?

If the decision is made to continue LM vocation promotion, I fully support the establishment of a Joint Sending Orientation Program (JSOP) in the Philippines facilitated by a team of personnel rather than one person. This is one of the key areas that emerged from the Appreciative Inquiry process concerning CLM sustainability. A JSOP will enable more candidates from different RMUs to join the orientation program and the LMs will have an experience of intercultural living during the JSOP. It will reduce the number of staff involved in orientation programs and enable LM Coordinators to focus on vocation promotion and accompaniment. We have had one International Student Formation Program for many years and we now need a CLM JSOP.

At the 1994 General Assembly, we decided that “partnership is our preferred way of being on mission”. At a later General Assembly, we decided that “partnership is our way of being on mission”.

Presently there are LMs working in 8 RMUs. Moving forward, it is not possible to continue sending LMs to so many RMUs. I suggest that LMs are sent to RMUs where partnership in mission is a lived reality among Columban ordained and LMs.

### **Formation**

Our two Fijian students, Elia Poasa and Paula Suka graduated from the Pacific Regional Seminary on 22 November. In mid-January, they will begin a 10-week CPE course followed by 3 months parish ministry before going on FMA in early August. When they go on FMA, there will no longer be a formation program in the Region. Future candidates will continue to go to Manila for their formation. Ioane Naio is doing his diaconal ministry in the Holy Family Parish, Labasa. He will be ordained on 10 April 2024.

### **Missionary outreach**

IRD, JPIC and parish ministry have and will continue to be the major focus of our missionary outreach across the Region. This year, the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations (CCCMR) in Sydney celebrated its twenty-five years of commitment to interreligious dialogue and the 100<sup>th</sup> issue of its quarterly newsletter, *Bridges*. With the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, interreligious dialogue has become more difficult and even more urgent. The Centre assisted the local diocese to establish its Interfaith Commission and works collaboratively with the Commission to embed the IRD ministry in the diocese. Numerous IRD events for women, youth and adults are organised by Columbans working in IRD in Australia and Fiji.

The JPIC priorities include raising awareness on the impacts of climate change; biodiversity loss; poverty and human trafficking. We will continue to support vulnerable migrants; seafarers; and provide accommodation for asylum seekers.

Due to a shortage of personnel, the former Regional Council made the difficult decision to no longer staff the Ba Parish in Fiji. Columbans had served the Ba community continuously for nearly 70 years. The farewell took place on 25 February 2023. JPIC has always been an integral part of our parish ministries in Fiji. There needs to be a strengthening of our commitment to IRD ministry in the two parishes we staff – Raiwaqa, Suva and Labasa.

IRD and JPIC need to remain our Society mission priorities as we move forward. These are integral to the Gospel and cannot be seen just as “specialised” ministries. Columban priests, students, LMs and co-workers will continue to need training in these ministries.

### **Fundraising, Mission Promotion and Communications**

Digital mission promotion and fundraising is the way of the future. Columbans across the Region are working diligently in this new and challenging space. We cannot grow digitally without resources to be used on social media. Columban co-workers are working collaboratively with retired and active Columbans in the Region to capture their missionary stories and homily reflections which are used on social media for mission promotion. The number of supporters donating online is gradually increasing. Young people donate to charitable organisations online and we need to be constantly uploading new material online to attract them to support our missionary work.

In the meantime, our traditional ways of fundraising are still important. This year, our Australia Mid-year Appeal was the highest in the last 10 years. It was a 28% increase in the donations we received in 2013. Our surplus continues to rely on bequest revenue. We are grateful for our supporters who continue to donate generously to Columban mission.

The ministries of fundraising and mission promotion are not just the responsibilities of the surplus Regions. I read many Columban communications, and I am thankful to those Columbans who are willing to write at least one missionary story each year. It would be wonderful if each Columban was willing to do likewise. This would enable us to have more material to use in our digital fundraising.

### **Properties**

Many of our Society properties were either built or bought to cater for a rapid increase in personnel. Those days have long passed. Some of them are now underutilized and have ever increasing maintenance costs. Our Regional Council regularly reviews our properties. We are making plans so we can vacate our underused two storey Columban Mission Centre in Essendon hopefully within the next 2 years. In Sept last year we began renting the first floor of the Centre to raise funds for the Society. We are making the necessary plans for when it will no longer be viable for Columbans to continue living in the large Essendon mansion. There is no rush at the moment, but we need to be ready for when the time comes.

### **Health, Wellbeing, Ageing and Retirement**

Australia had a Health and Wellbeing Committee for about 4 years. In August, the Regional Council decided to setup a Regional Health, Wellbeing, Ageing and Retirement Committee with representatives from the three countries. For a few years, the Columbans in Lower Hutt have availed of the services of the Marist Fathers Health and Wellbeing Coordinator. This arrangement continues to work well.

Recently, we have employed on a fee for service basis one of the Jesuit nurses to provide health and wellbeing support for the fourteen men living in Essendon. Three of the men have been receiving assistance from the government's My Aged Care program for the last two years. The nurse is arranging for six of the other men to be assessed to receive assistance from the My Aged Care program. The free services provided through My Aged Care will enable the men to remain living in the Essendon house for as long as possible as well as reducing financial costs on the Society. We have sought the assistance of Emerging Futures Collaborative Limited (EFCL) to provide health and wellbeing services for the seven men living in Sydney. EFCL was established in Feb 2020 by eight religious congregations and was registered with the Australian government in June 2021. EFCL currently provides services for 18 religious congregations across Australia.

The Region is in the process of drafting a Regional Ageing and Retirement Policy.

### **Conclusion**

It has been stated very clearly in the *Conversations about choices Summary Report*, "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." (pg.3) Pathways to new realities "must also be based on members proactively putting aside the assumption that 'things are going to remain as they are'." (pg.7) Personally, I have always been open to change with the willingness to "come together to initiate fresh and concerted efforts on visible initiatives." (pg.7) This requires a commitment to synodality, deep listening, courageous conversations as we discern where the Spirit is leading us.