



## Headlines about 'Conversations'

Ahead of the General Assembly of the Missionary Society of St Columban scheduled for May 2024 (GA 2024), important questions were raised by the IRMU Meeting in March 2023.

To begin addressing those questions, our project will provide a reality-check for the Society, based on a strategic, independent review of the Society in light of mission priorities, plus an independent review of vocation programmes based on internal and external data, trends, and so on. The full account of the project will be recommended reading for all those attending GA 2024.<sup>1</sup>

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, and 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 component of our work, those responding were urged to bear such thoughts in mind - and that urging bears some repeating when considering our findings, their implications, and the questions we commend to the Society.

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

*- Baltasar Gracián y Morales, SJ*



---

<sup>1</sup> 'Headlines about Conversations' covers key items to note from the 'Conversations' project being undertaken by our team at ThinkEvans Pty Ltd ([read more](#)). The Summary Report 'Conversations about choices' is being circulated ahead of conferences and meetings in preparation for GA 2024. The Principal Report 'Conversations' will be remitted in due course to the the General Council and Columban Lay Mission Central Leadership Team, and is then intended for addition to the web-based resources for GA 2024.

# Approach to the project

A strategic review typically looks first to discuss the organisation's purpose, will, and capacity - considering these in terms of what the organisation exists to do as per its constituent documents, what current plans and programmes show that it intends to do, and what it is seen to do by the wider world, in activities and outcomes ascribed to that organisation and creating something of a footprint to inspire and promote ongoing support.

What the Columbans exist to do is broadly conveyed by the mission of the Society; what the Society intends to do is put more particularly (but not exclusively) in mission priorities; and what the Society is seen to do are the everyday actions that others perceive as being emblematic of the Columbans. It is those everyday actions that underpin Columban capacity to refresh support over time - not least, but certainly not only, through renewing ordained membership of the Society.

Second, any organisation needs stakeholder support to continue, so in very pragmatic terms it is only sustainable if it can keep its promises to stakeholders and so earn their ongoing support - today and tomorrow, as well as next month and next year. Inevitably, though, the hook from which all future plans must hang for membership organisations - including missionary societies - is the sustainability of the membership itself, making this consideration foremost in our analytical work.

In fact, our analysis showed that sustainability of the Society is quite fragile, which puts serious question marks over the ethics of accepting priestly vocations in light of lifelong commitment. In turn, practical challenges then follow in fostering lay missionary vocations. One way or another, this means that some big steps are ahead for the Society: either to choose 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.<sup>2</sup>

## Modelling & forecasting analysis

From a membership of over 400 priests in 2012, in the course of a decade the Society has contracted noticeably. Modelling showed that this trend is most unlikely to change. This reveals having fewer, and older, members are two significant sociodemographic trends for the Society, with a major consequence in the makeup of those doing the work of the Society.

First, there will be around 270 priests in 2024, and likely still more than 200 in 2030, but then just 160-170 priests by 2036. Second, the membership has aged from a significant minority, about 40%, of ordained members being 75 years old or more in 2012, to over half being in that group in 2024 - while by 2036 over 60%, nearly two out of three priests, will be aged 75 years or more. This means that the group likely to be working for the Society's mission in 2024 will be nearly two-thirds clergy (those under 75), but more than one-third lay missionaries and co-workers. That proportion will tilt further towards the laity as demographic trends continue to unfold.

**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



---

<sup>2</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.



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

*- Martin Luther King Jr*

In the present configuration of the Society, this leads to two interlocking existential quandaries about sustaining the will behind the Society as voiced by leaders, when leaders are drawn from within and options are constrained by the smaller and older Society; and also 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>3</sup> There is also the question of organisational configuration because the RMU model met the needs of a much larger missionary endeavour, but it is tough to maintain with the Society now spread so thinly across its places and ministries.

For basic sustainability of a membership community, and to avoid these quandaries, new members joining need to be at least as numerous as members who are lost. This has not been the case for quite a while for the Society. Since 2008, 135 seminarians have participated in formation programmes, with 0 to 5 ordinations each year. However, to approach a stable number of members calls for a minimum of 5 to 10 ordinations in each and every year.

### **Consultation survey**

To what extent are Columbans aware of that and how should the Society now respond? To take stock on this in time available on the way to GA 2024, the most practical option was a survey - one 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.

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 was, therefore, invited from 375 persons: all ordained members, lay missionaries, seminarians, priest associates, and approximately 50 co-workers (as nominated by RMU leaders). For due economy in the use of Columban resources, this was an online survey, where the invitation to respond made clear that participation was to be individual, voluntary, and anonymous.

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. In the end, the survey elicited 290 responses, which amounts to a response rate of over 75%. This is far beyond what comparable exercises would typically see, and leaves no practical doubt that aggregated responses are sufficiently representative to validly inform project findings.<sup>4</sup>

The survey worked around a device used in socioeconomic, sociodemographic, and sociolegal analysis to help think through 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. So the logical backbone through the survey was: What happens for the Columbans if 'things remain as they are'?

---

<sup>3</sup> Including the truly significant contribution of lay missionaries and co-workers, and noting smooth functioning of the Columban organisation also depends on many other employees - plus a good few priests in retirement who remain active part time.

<sup>4</sup> The responses have been analysed and drawn together in diagrams, graphs and tables that will form an important part of the Principal Report being prepared to be available in due course as part of the GA 2024 web-based resources.

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

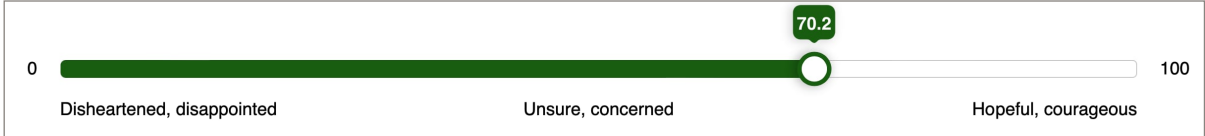
- project team



In terms of the approach taken in designing the survey, questions took multiple forms but the significant majority employed a Likert scale.<sup>5</sup> 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. This approach facilitates aggregation of responses into a synopsis, to illustrate the group's overall standing on a given issue.<sup>6</sup> For example, if responses are equally divided among 'agree' and 'disagree', this is interpreted as the group being 'neutral' overall.

To illustrate our approach to conducting the survey and analysing the results: we were sensible to the idea that materials presented in the survey had potential to be disconcerting, so the substance of the survey concluded with an opportunity to express one's outlook at that point in time, after having worked through the survey.

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, the default setting being 50. Noting that over half of the respondents moved the slider clearly towards 'hopeful, courageous', and less than 8% moved it clearly towards 'disheartened, disappointed', the numerically average result was 70.2.



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. For a touch more food for thought - but, we caution, not a great deal more than that - this was textually analysed by our team and then transformed into a 'word cloud', where the size of text reflects the frequency of the sentiment arising as captured in that word/phrase (while placement was randomly generated).

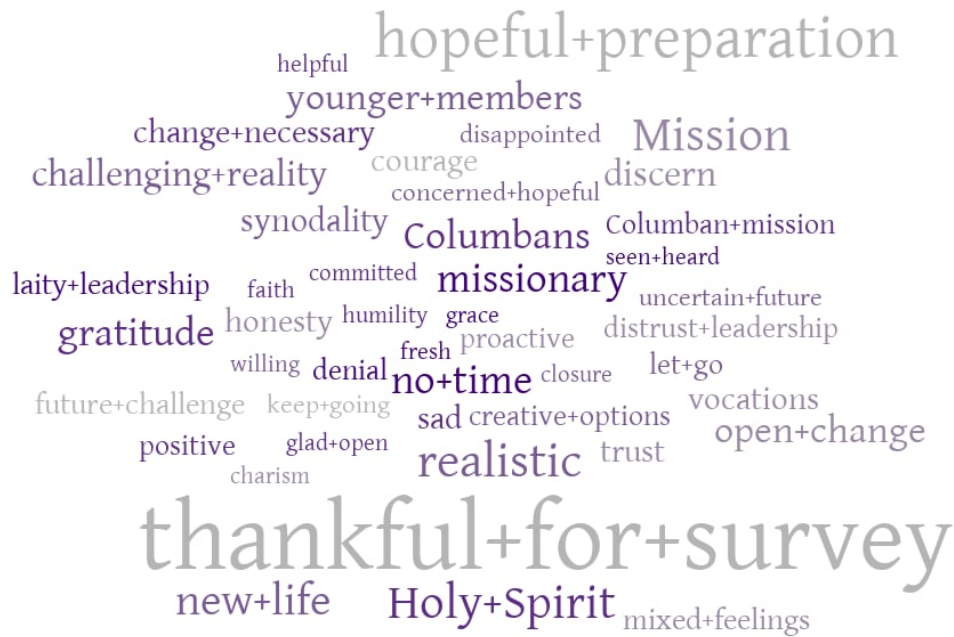
As is self-evident, the single most common sentiment proffered by respondents was some form of appreciation, gratitude, or thankfulness, for the opportunity presented by the survey. Lest this feature seem to arise from no more than simple courtesy by respondents, reasons given for being 'thankful' paralleled the wide spectrum of views evident throughout the survey in text responses - ranging from positive and/or optimistic to resoundingly negative and/or pejorative.

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

<sup>5</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.

<sup>6</sup> We confirm that all responses to questions able to be tabulated are captured in an annex to the principal report for this project, for those who are comfortable in accessing information in that form.

## After the survey - themes from text responses



### Survey results

Overall, the survey showed that most were aware of key trends and realities about a smaller and older Society, but were not so aware of the ramifications, including for sustainability of the Society.

For example, modelling combined with the usual number of ordinations showed that closure of the Society is inevitable if 'things remain as they are'. Reversing the decline in Society membership calls for facilitating 15 to 20 ordinations per year, every year, something not seen for quite some time.

In the survey, however, despite support for both clerical and lay vocation programmes, very few indicated willingness to actually engage in vocations ministry.

Then, serious obligations are involved in ensuring that seminarians will, over their ordained lifetime, have due opportunity to pursue a vocation to Columban missionary priesthood in keeping with the Society's charism and missionary vision. It is not ethical to even seek commitment from an individual without sure knowledge and authentic belief that the Society will be able to continue long enough to honour its corresponding commitment to the individual. Practical consequences then also arise for continuing clerical support for the Columban lay missionary programme.

Little or no surprise about demographics of the Society was voiced in survey responses. But on the prospect of ceasing to accept vocations, for ordained or lay missionaries, as a natural consequence of those demographics, views were more towards ambivalent.

Another pragmatic reality is that the Society's shape pivots on RMUs, the number of leadership roles being a consequence of the number of RMUs - thus the RMU configuration makes heavy demands for the Society itself on top of those for fostering vocations and various other leadership duties.

However, from survey responses it was not clear that members were ready to change the Society's configuration in meaningful ways, even though this will be essential to address constraints on having enough members to create an organisational footprint others can aspire to supporting, and finding from within the membership enough clerical leaders able to help the Society thrive into the future.

### Choices

Overall, a crucial choice is ahead for the members: either to make real change to revivify the Society, or to allow that the Society has run its course and should pass into history, ceasing to be while its purpose and mission somehow continue by reverting to the main body of the Church. But this hurdle 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 the course of being 'pilgrims for Christ'. In comparison, finding a new configuration, at least, should not be so difficult.



## Openings

An overarching finding of these reviews is that the Society lacks capacity to continue as it is, beyond another decade or so. 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, all would need to assume some leadership, management or administration role.

This means that unavoidable choices are ahead about managing Society configuration, governance, and vocations, in the interests of renewal. Openings for renewal are either major change to continue the Society's signature mission and ministries, or to let these revert to the Church, if the members are moved to allow that the Society has run its course.

To lead towards those openings, our further findings concern choices to be made at GA 2024, the agenda for which should now embrace the following questions:

- 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?

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

The consultation survey provided indications of priorities for decisions at GA 2024, such as in terms of what the General Council for 2024-2030 should investigate, and how ready individual Columbans might be to embrace such change. For those attending GA 2024, the detail on this is recommended reading when the Principal Report from the project becomes available.

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.