



Our parishes in lockdown

Great signs of life and hope

Have you been wondering what is happening in parishes around the archdiocese during the pandemic ‘lockdown’? We have discovered that while our churches may be closed, our parishes are thriving and active. Parishes are discovering many innovative ways to pray, communicate, connect, socialise and reach out. Here is some of what the Mission Team is discovering as we have connected with more than two hundred parishes since restrictions came into place.

First, our parish priests and their teams are amazing! They are working hard to lead their communities through this challenging time. We acknowledge and feel a great deal of compassion for priests who are struggling to minister to their people without access to sacraments, with reduced staff and with sometimes outdated parish office and communication systems. We greatly admire the deep heart priests have for the elderly, sick, disabled and lonely people in our communities, and for the huge efforts so many parishes are making to keep in touch and reach out in love to these people.

Prayer

Many of our parishes are doing great work in pivoting towards a strong online presence. Almost half of our parishes are offering Mass online, and many report huge numbers of ‘views’—sometimes many more than would usually attend Mass in church on Sunday. A percentage of parishes are also offering Masses in languages other than English, including Vietnamese, Italian, Tagalog (Filipino) and Chin. Many parishes, 14 per cent of them, are offering online Mass during the week, and some daily. One parish is streaming Masses from each of its parish churches in turn, so that parishioners can worship from a familiar setting.

Moreover, parishes are being very creative in the provision of online opportunities for communal prayer, including:

- novenas and the Divine Mercy chaplet
- the rosary
- Eucharistic adoration
- reflection videos
- a parish choir ‘Zoom’ singalong
- an ‘online retreat’
- charismatic healing prayer.

Parishes are also producing an impressive array of reflection and prayer resources, including:

- homilies, in either text or video format
- weekly (and, in one parish, daily) reflections from the parish priest

- testimony from parishioners
- resources for prayer with children, such as colouring sheets, puzzles, and gospel readings in both text and video form
- online children’s liturgy sessions
- links to great online content from around the globe.

Communication with parishioners

Without Sunday Masses, the usual method of communication via the pulpit and printed bulletins is not possible. Yet communication is more important than ever. Parish leaders have expressed their desire for the parish to remain a strong presence in people’s lives. In these disorienting times, they want to both hear and respond to people’s needs, and also to communicate the love and care of Jesus and his church.

Parishes are using a range of ways to stay in touch with their parishioners:

- 75 per cent of parishes are continuing with a weekly ‘bulletin’, which might take a variety of forms, such the usual print version for people to collect from outside the church, or weekly website and/or email updates.
- 20 per cent of parishes have sent at least one letter by mail to everyone on their database.
- 29 per cent of parishes have systematically phoned their parishioners. Some are regularly phoning elderly people who live alone, in some cases more than once a week. Others are phoning parishioners they don’t have an email address for, in order to improve their database for online communications.

Innovative ideas have included:

- care calls, where a team of parish volunteers calls every parish household to ask them questions about the blessings and challenges they are experiencing, and to offer to pray for them
- at Easter, posting a prayer card and gift to each parishioner with a letter of care and support from the parish priest
- making parish candles for parishioners to collect and pray with
- placing a whiteboard outside the church for people to write messages and news for others to see.

Websites and Facebook

The parish website is seen by many priests as a crucial ‘front door’ to the parish—both for parishioners and for others curious about the parish. Many parishes have recently updated their websites so that they

have a modern and welcoming feel that invites deeper engagement with the parish. About 39% of parishes in the archdiocese have a website that is updated regularly and includes news, resources and invitations to connect to online parish 'events'. In addition, 31 per cent of parishes have an active Facebook page, where parishioners are notified of streamed Masses and prayer opportunities, and where they can comment and communicate with each other.

Online gatherings

While we cannot meet physically, our archdiocesan parishes have been creating a number of online opportunities for people to socialise, pray and learn together. Likewise, a growing number of parishes are beginning to run their usual leadership team, parish pastoral council and finance meetings online, so that governance and leadership decisions continue to be made in a timely and appropriate way as conditions change.

Just after Easter, around 30 per cent of parishes were having online gatherings. This number appears to be growing steadily as the 'lockdown' persists. In addition to formal committee meetings, examples of the types of gatherings parishes are holding include:

- a 'virtual' cuppa after Sunday Mass in a Zoom 'foyer'
- after-work 'wine and cheese' gatherings on regular evenings during the week
- youth groups gathering online to share faith and have dance sessions, quiz nights and internet-based games nights
- online Alpha, as a simple way to invite online-Mass 'newcomers' into group faith conversations
- video-based Bible studies, where group members read selected passages beforehand, then gather to discuss in small groups and watch a video together
- 'meet the priest' sessions, where parishioners can gather with their parish priest in an informal way. This is proving to be particularly helpful for priests who have arrived in their parishes just prior to or during the lockdown.

Outreach and care

Many parishes have created new networks of volunteers in order to connect with and support people in their communities. Other parishes are asking parishioners to contact people in their particular parish groups and ministries via 'phone trees', as well as reaching out to people in their own streets and apartment complexes. Examples include:

- the creation of a dedicated phone number and email address that is monitored everyday by parish staff or volunteers. People are encouraged to make contact for a supportive chat or to ask for help with a wide

variety of tasks, including delivery of prescription medicines or groceries and assistance with digital connection

- a weekly recorded Mass for the many nursing homes in one parish's community. Residents love the opportunity to pray as part of a weekly parish Mass, when previously Father could only say Mass for them 'in-person' monthly. After the lockdown, the parish is planning to invest in equipment and software that will enable them to continue making this ministry available as a way of supplementing their regular 'in-person' visits and Masses in these facilities
- 'kindness' cards delivered to every mailbox within the parish boundaries
- a parish 'food pantry' to provide hampers for people in need
- Vinnies groups responding to requests for food vouchers and support in paying household bills.

Into the future

This interruption to our usual ways of operating has seen parishes innovate very quickly in order to continue to minister to their people. Some priests have said they are surprised at how quickly they have become adept in using technologies and processes they would 'normally' have never considered.

As we slowly move out of lockdown, we will not be moving 'back to normal', but rather forward into a new reality. Parishes are already thinking about how they can use what they are learning to develop new ways of reaching people in the digital world inhabited by many of the people with whom they want to connect.

Over coming weeks, parishes could ask themselves:

- Before the crisis, what would we have considered essential?
- During the crisis, what have we done without?
- After the crisis, what do we need to leave behind?
- After the crisis, what will be essential for mission in our parish?

These 'pruning' questions might help you shape the parish you need to be in order to be engaging and missional into the future. Pruning is painful—we are experiencing this—but it does lead to new growth. God the great 'pruner' continues to lead us through these times. May we pray:

Come Holy Spirit, Fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen!

Parish 'lockdown' activity in the Archdiocese of Melbourne (percentage, by region)*

Region	Live-streaming Masses and prayer (%)			Communicating with parishioners and community (%)						Running online meetings (%)
	Weekend	Weekday	LOTE	Current parish website	Active Facebook page	Emails	Phone	Mail	Bulletins (including weekly updates to website)	
Northern	39	7	5	21	33	24	40	15	72	21
Southern	47	10	1	54	28	60	59	19	76	30
Eastern	56	30	6	46	23	25	46	13	73	38
Western	45	8	6	39	41	59	71	29	78	31
Overall	47	14	5	39	31	42	29	19	75	30

*205 parishes were contacted in April and May 2020.