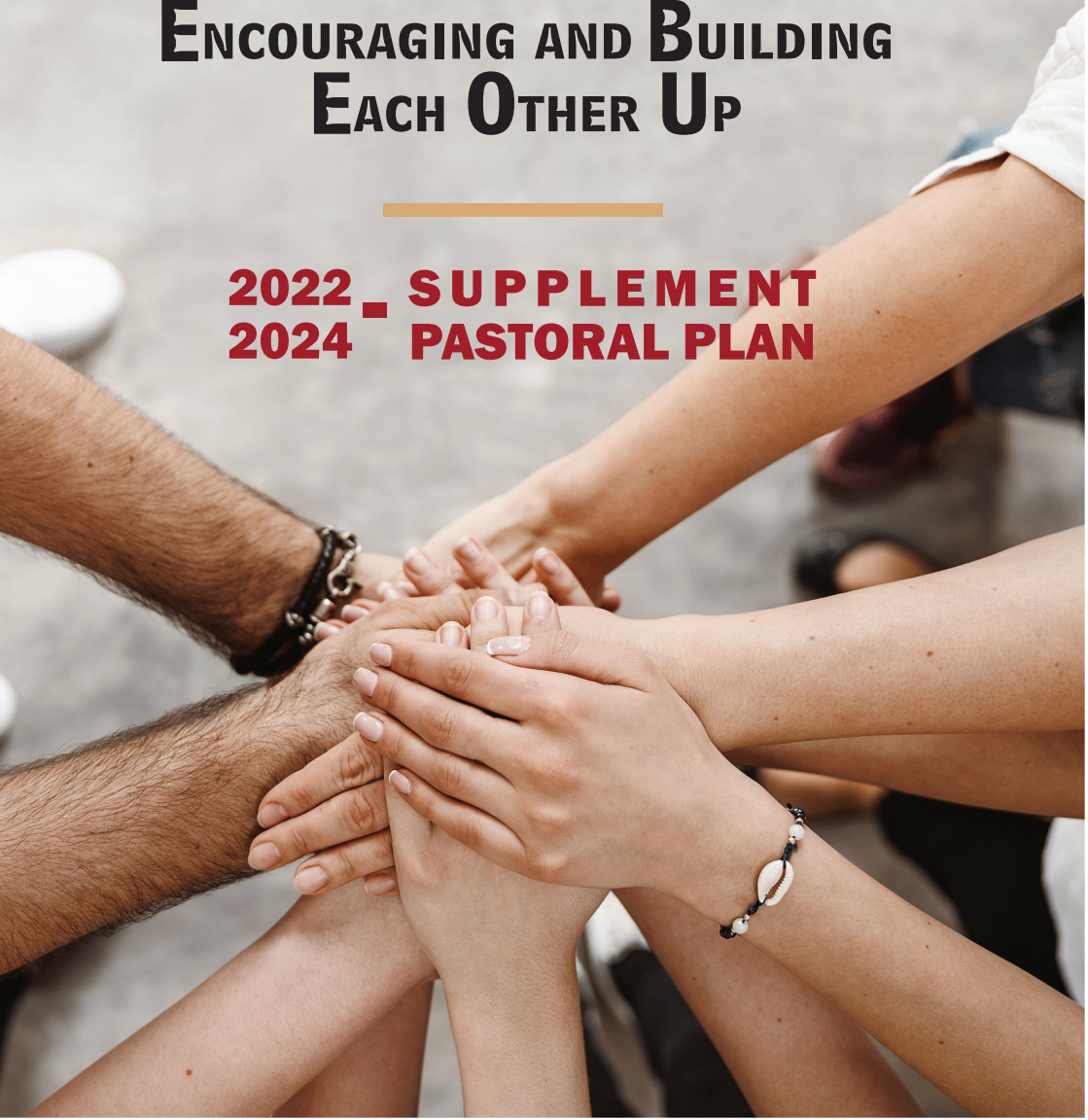




# ENCOURAGING AND BUILDING EACH OTHER UP

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**2022 - 2024** ■ **SUPPLEMENT  
PASTORAL PLAN**



# Contents

<b>Bishop's Message</b>	<b>p2</b>
<b>Part 1: What Has the Pandemic Taught Us?</b>	<b>p4</b>
<b>Part 2: Key Areas of Focus for the Pastoral Plan</b>	<b>p8</b>
<b>1.Reinvigorating the Relationship Between our Church and the Community</b>	<b>p10</b>
<b>2.Strengthening Leadership in our Parishes</b>	<b>p12</b>
<b>3.Resuming an Active Community Life</b>	<b>p14</b>
<b>4.Ensuring Welcoming, Safe, and Accessible Parishes</b>	<b>p16</b>
<b>5.Listening to All Voices</b>	<b>p18</b>
<b>End Note</b>	<b>p20</b>

# BISHOP'S Message



*“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”*

(1Thes 5:11)

“In all, the Maronite Church relies on the strength of the Holy Spirit who assists her on her journey and breathes hope into her.”

*(Maronite Patriarchal Synod 2004, Prologue, Par 1)*

A ‘Church of Hope’ is a community of faith, journeying together and building each other in the love of the Lord and the love of the neighbour. It is a community of the faithful who are aware that they are members in the Mystical Body of Christ and mindful of their calling to be a more Christ-like Church.

It is accurate to say that “the Church does not have a mission, but the mission [of Jesus Christ] has a Church.”

*(Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today, S. Bevans and R. Schroeder, p16, 2011)*

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has had enormous repercussions on the lives of many families, in addition to a number of pastoral and theological challenges within our parishes.

We know the pandemic has placed heavy burdens on our parishes and eparchy, and we will require a period of reinvigoration and building which we have already actively begun.

In consultation with our parishes and clergy, and with the support of a working committee, comprised of members of our community, we have consequently developed and introduced a sub plan within our Pastoral Plan 2021-2027 *Watering the Seeds*, to enable our eparchy to better move forward after COVID-19, for the next three years and beyond, titled “Encouraging and Building Each Other Up”.

While we cannot be certain that the pandemic is over, we know there will be continuing and new challenges into the future. It is imperative that we reflect on the past two years to learn, and to consider how we might improve and be better prepared to face similar challenges in the future.

First and foremost, it is critical that the faithful feel safe and encouraged to return to our churches and to participate in parish life, to be nourished by the sacraments and to encounter each other as brothers and sisters in Christ in the post-pandemic world.

This is a calling for our Maronite communities to grow in prayer, compassion, unity, and courage, so that together we can announce the good news of the Gospel and give witness to Jesus Christ. It is our hope that the mission is revitalised and our resolve strengthened as we continue to live through and emerge from the pandemic.

We must continue to hope: hope that God will help, and hope that better times await us.

I am grateful for the dedication and commitment of the members of the working committee who helped us develop this plan and thank them wholeheartedly for their contribution.

Let us always ask our gracious and loving God, our comforter, and our hope, to strengthen us in times of need, inspire us in acts of solidarity and generosity and give us hope of a brighter future.

**Antoine-Charbel Tarabay**  
**Maronite Bishop of Australia,**  
**New Zealand & Oceania**

# PART 1.

## What has the pandemic



### **The Church and Parish are Central**

“The Maronite family has interacted with its Church, which has been its centre from its very beginning until now.”

*(Maronite Patriarchal Synod 2004, Ch 1, Par 1)*

Those words of the Maronite Synod of 2014 ring true. Human connection has always been a fundamental part of expressing our faith, and this was even more evident during lockdowns. For many Maronites, our Church is central to our spiritual and community life and many Maronites expressed a sense of loss, uncertainty, and fear when that connection was taken away during COVID.

As a Church active in the lives of the parish community, we have learnt the importance of ensuring our capabilities to mobilise faster and to serve others instead of grieving over empty buildings.

### **Adaptability**

In the face of challenges, there is an ability to adapt as a people and as a community. COVID-19 has taught us the importance of holding onto things lightly and being open to new ways to engaging people.

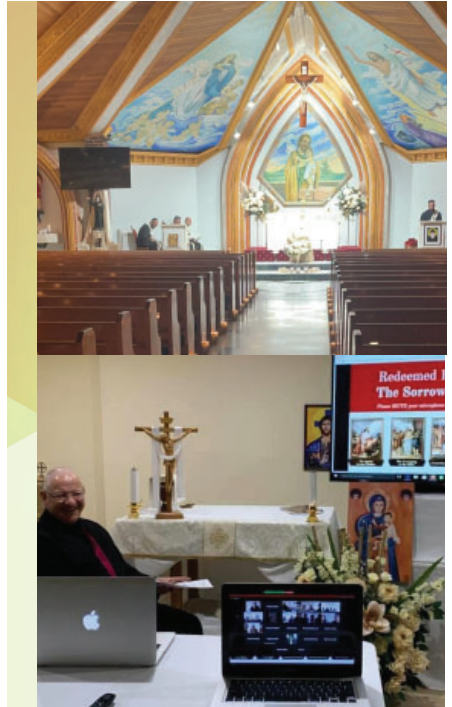
We have learnt a multitude of practical ways we can adopt to remain accessible, and this is because our head is not a human authority but God, the maker of heaven and earth, permanently affixed to every part of the body of the Church.

# taught us?

## Leadership Central to Jesus' Ministry

Our communities are filled with very talented people who are ready, able, and willing to assist, to lead and to connect with others, irrespective of barriers. We have learnt that developing ministries and opportunities for lay participation is essential for a dynamic Church, for building capacity and helping communities thrive.

We have learnt that we must recognise and form good leaders and that leaders require continued support, development, and care.



## Cultural Challenges

COVID-19 has highlighted that there are some continuing cultural challenges, which - although existed before the pandemic – persisted and became even more strenuous. These challenges, particularly in relation to safety, need to be addressed to ensure that we engage in health-seeking behaviour.

We have learnt the importance of multi-channel and multi-generational communication to help transcend barriers, increase awareness of preventive measures to help communities safeguard their own health and wellbeing, as well as that of their loved ones and those in their care.

## The Importance of Dialogue

The pandemic disrupted all our lives, and, in some instances, it created division. For instance, one source of these divisions manifested in how people viewed the social limitations they faced throughout the pandemic, such as stay-at-home orders or mandates to wear masks in public.

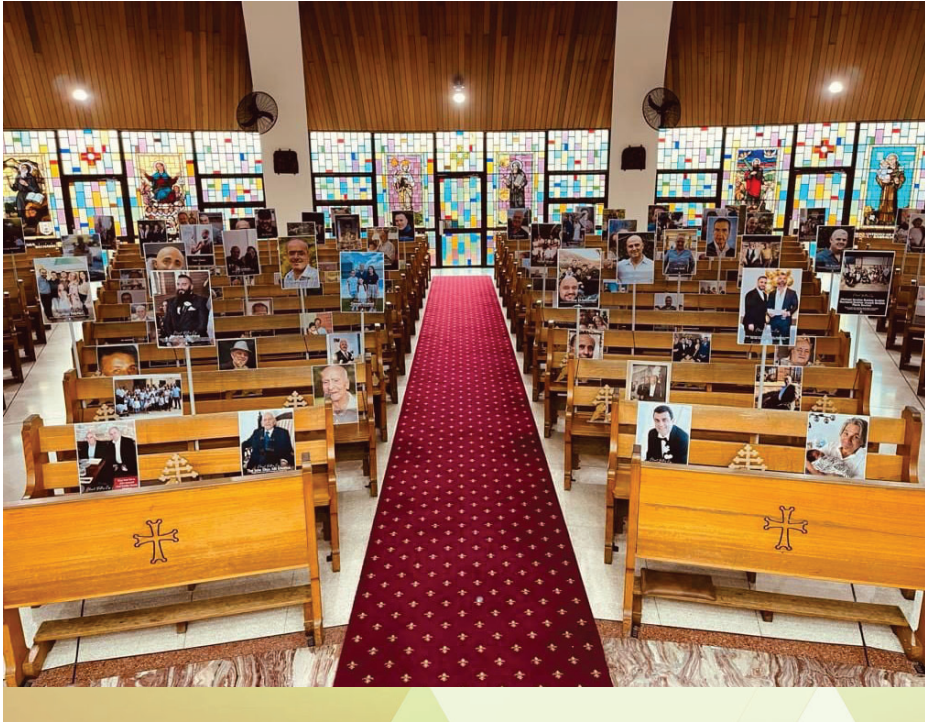
Regardless, it is imperative we do not allow difference of opinion to stifle our problem solving or become destructive, but rather, persist with open dialogue and listening to encourage understanding and progress.



## Listening and Discernment

Our communities seemed paralysed by anxiety brought about by the unknown. We all acknowledged that during the pandemic, it was certainly difficult to discern factual from fabricated information, and reliable from sensationalist news sources, which exacerbated our feelings of confusion.

We learnt the importance of ensuring the voices of the quiet majority are not drowned out by a louder minority. We learnt the need to be proactive in enabling all voices and views to feel and know they are genuinely heard.



## Returning to the Church

Pandemic-related restrictions and the shift from face-to-face worship to “virtual” services provided an opportunity for congregations to reimagine their presence beyond their sanctuary and intensified a deeper longing for faith practices.

Many have returned with great joy and have a renewed appreciation for their parish.

However, there are some who have - for various reasons - drifted from the Church both physically and or spiritually. We must find ways to reach out and understand why people may have disengaged, and actively strive for them to return.





# PART 2

## Key Areas of Focus for the Plan





The COVID-19 crisis is a hinge point for the global Church that now demands a mission-focused approach. While our mission itself remains the same, we must see our experience of the past two years as an opportunity to reflect on what God is inviting us to do next and how we can better connect with one another.

In collaboration with the working committee and parish priests, we conducted a “listening tour” which consequently resulted in the following key areas of focus for our Strategic Plan:

- 1 Reinvigorating the relationship between our Church and the community
- 2 Strengthening leadership in our parishes
- 3 Resuming an active community life
- 4 Ensuring welcoming, safe, and accessible parishes
- 5 Listening to all voices

## Reinvigorating the Relationship Between our Church and the Community

1

What we heard

*After COVID, the Church as a whole is adapting to a new way of doing things, I think we need to focus on relationships, work hard and leave space for creating human connections.*

Our Church is not defined by its buildings, neither is it defined by its leaders, clergy, committees or parishioners alone. Rather, we are collectively the Church.

The community is where our faith grows through connection, by sharing experiences and wisdom with one another and through the expression of our gifts of welcome and hospitality, service, charity, and leadership, and it is the place where we can find Christ in our midst.

We continue working to re-establish pastoral activities in a safe way and deepen connections with members of our community, welcome new ones, and importantly reach out to the poor, the lonely and the marginalised.

Some examples include our charitable arms: MaroniteCare, Maronites on Mission and Heaven on Earth. Whilst they never ceased their activities during COVID, they had to reduce events and change the way they operate to ensure COVIDSafe. In recent months, most activities have resumed and relaunched.

We continue to seek deeper and more authentic relationships with one another, challenging ourselves to a deeper spiritual commitment as a community in Christ.

## How will be working to achieve this?

- Engaging with the community and listening regarding the impact of the pandemic on individuals, families, priests and religious, and the community
- Re-focusing pastoral activities to incorporate mental health support, and helping address issues such as financial loss and loneliness
- Engaging with single and unmarried people (over 35 years of age)
- Reinstating home visits by clergy and church volunteers
- Involving and listening to parishioners in decision-making regarding pastoral matters
- Engaging in matters of transparency and accountability which include conducting annual parish financial audits
- Providing opportunities for feedback and follow up to demonstrate response and action



What our parishes are doing

*We are encouraging our priests and active parishioners, all those who are aware of anyone who's been away, is unwell or impacted in any way due to the pandemic...to phone or visit, deliver groceries to those in need and let our pastoral leaders know what more we can do to support.*

# 2

## Strengthening Leadership in our Parishes

### What we heard

*Formation, both professionally and spiritually for all our leaders is fundamental and essential for the successful running of a Parish...resources, training, and activities, as well as evaluation to know what is and isn't working would really help.*

We are blessed with so many talented people in our parishes and communities, ready, able, and willing to help develop a vision for our Church and bring that vision to fruition.

They work tirelessly to communicate and inspire the engagement of the whole community in Christ's mission and continuously seek to broaden and deepen their outreach.

Our parishes lean heavily on their active support. We need to continue to consider what makes good leadership and provide

ongoing formation and training to enable our leaders to continue to work together in a spirit of co-responsibility and inspire future generations.

They are critical parts of the "body" of Christ on earth, with unique, God-given skills and passions.

We continue to seek and encourage support and training such as through leadership retreats and workshops, online courses through theological institutes, parish renewal programs and leadership intensive courses.



### How will be working to achieve this?

- Identifying leadership roles needed in each parish
- Increasing leadership roles of laity, especially women
- Developing clear and consistent role descriptions, that include responsibilities, reporting and available support and training
- Attracting the right people through interviews, existing qualifications, and experience
- Ensuring ongoing and funded professional learning of those in leadership positions
- Ensuring clergy are trained in their leadership roles
- Encouraging more cross parish collaboration and consultation
- Formation in digital platforms
- Providing opportunities for feedback and follow up to demonstrate response and action

#### What our parishes are doing

***All the committees in the parish are asked to do at least one spiritual retreat a year and that's typically 2-3 days. We also encourage ongoing professional formation especially at the beginning of each year to help committees and leaders understand their roles and expectations.***

# 3

## Resuming an Active Community Life

### What we heard

*Jesus Christ unites us as a church and community. We welcome everyone and...we need to put even more effort in our outreach and communication. We have a common purpose and that's what will bring people together...we need to remind them that we love them, and we want to see them back!*



While we activated new ways to connect with one another, and God's Spirit continued to be at work in us and among us during lockdown periods, there is no denying that the absence of community life and interaction, during the height of the pandemic, left a void.

Today, as we continue to navigate the pandemic, we are called to be open to the Holy Spirit, for new ways of ministry and mission as we resume an active community life across all our parishes.

We are after all one body with one Spirit (Eph 4:4). The Holy Spirit inhabits God's church, and he's always drawing us toward unity. God's Spirit can't be divided.

In 2022, parishes have relaunched their spiritual and social events, to a very positive participation and response from parishioners who are keen to return to their community life. This has been evident at parish feast weeks, retreats, social dinners and fundraising initiatives.

## How will be working to achieve this?

- Reinstating annual planner of events in every parish and in the Eparchy
- Prioritising spiritual events such as retreats, processions, adorations, prayer online
- Planning faith formation for parishioners over a year and communicated across parishes
- Ensuring accessible faith formation events ranging in format, delivery methods, topics, and duration
- Encouraging delivery by digital platforms:
  - a.Subscription to online courses
  - b.Developing new online courses (paid and unpaid)
- Providing opportunities for feedback and follow up to demonstrate response and action



### What our parishes are doing

*There are different ways we have reached out in order to re-establish connection; we are always welcoming people who are new or would like to help, we use every opportunity such as a social event to make them comfortable to get more involved in the parish life, we work hard to meet people where they are at and always make sure we are open and honest about our parish matters.*





# 4

## Ensuring Welcoming, Safe, and Accessible Parishes

The welcome and accessibility of our parishes, including in our liturgy, communicates and embodies the presence, reconciliation and love of Christ who reaches out to all people.

Our pandemic response continues to be characterised by advice from health authorities as we prioritise the health and wellbeing of everyone in our community.

In the same vein, the safety and welfare – especially of people in our communities who are living with disability or with special needs and are vulnerable – remains a priority as we grow and build our parishes.

Beyond just accessibility in the physical sense, which we are working to address in many of our older buildings, it is also in our attitudes towards people and how we enable them to be part of the congregation,

rather than people apart who need special care and attention.

Another critical element is the safeguarding of our children, the vulnerable and the elderly, at every level in our parishes, organisations, and community. We continue to work to implement policies that have the safety and wellbeing of everyone, at the forefront.

By 2023, we expect to have launched Maronite Disability Services, a subsidiary of MaroniteCare, to provide services to all our brothers and sisters with special needs.

St Charbel's Parish in Punchbowl, NSW, has also launched the new weekly initiative, 'Atfal Yasu3', run by a group of dedicated volunteers who are passionate about creating a warm and safe environment for children of all abilities and their families, to flourish and build relationships.

### What we heard

***A refresher on Safeguarding for our Parish Priests and Safeguarding Officers, followed by an update to all committee members and volunteers to ensure safeguarding our children and vulnerable person, entrusted to our care is always considered as a priority when we are organizing our Parish activities.***



Artist's Impression of Our Lady Mercy Place, Harris Park

### What our parishes are doing

***With Parish Safeguarding officers, they ensure that the safety of all parishioners is of the utmost priority in every activity undertaken within or by the Parish...All volunteers, leaders, or anyone who has any sort of involvement in the parish are required to have a Working with Children Check.***

### How will be working to achieve this?

- Becoming inclusive in developing programs and reviewing current policies and procedures, especially to accommodate people with disability in our parishes
- Implementing the 'Keeping Them Safe' report, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of every child in our community
- Creating action plans that address domestic and family violence and provide intervention and support
- Implementing strategies to ensure access for all with special needs and disabilities
- Providing pastoral care and ensuring safety of our seniors
- Roll out maintenance and improvements over a 10-year plan
- Providing opportunities for feedback and follow up to demonstrate response and action

# 5

## Listening to All Voices

The most important task in pastoral activity is the “apostolate of the ear” – to listen before speaking.

As Pope Francis once explained, the ability to listen to society is more valuable than ever in this time wounded by the long pandemic.

True listening is a real shifting towards our brothers and sisters to meet them in truth and love.

And this is the first indispensable ingredient of dialogue and good communication.

We need to lend an ear and listen profoundly, we need to continue our work to ensure that people in our parishes and communities know they are valued and respected, and that we will listen and respond with action not just with words.

It is only when we engage in mutual listening with our brothers and sisters that we can achieve true communion, the most precious and life-giving gift we can offer each other.

### What we heard

***COVID occupied so much of the parish space, especially during the lockdown, that often the spiritual was lost. At times ...it was more needed than COVID information...***

***Future Suggestions: Parish hotline – staffed by volunteers, teams in specialist areas – or Parish moderated forums where all people can interact and voice their concerns.***

***Also, a place of conversation that is secure, and/or a parish sounding board.***

## What our parishes are doing

*“Our men’s, women’s, teens’, youth, and family gatherings are all events where there is space for people to talk in an informal and safe setting about their struggles. Tea and coffee are now also set up for after mass every Sunday.”*



## How will be working to achieve this?

- Encouraging and coordinating in-person/virtual discussion forums or meetings where people are given the opportunity to speak openly
- Implementing regular online surveys
- Providing “suggestion boxes” either online or physically at parishes and encouraging the contribution of ideas
- Increasing communication regarding the availability of counselling services
- Creating feedback loops that respond to submissions, for example suggestions, ideas, and complaints either via direct communication or announcements regarding action taken as a result of feedback

# End Note



COVID-19 brought about many disruptions, fears, and instability. We can certainly say it was a crisis. However, we do not emerge from a crisis the same as before: today we have an opportunity to build something better.

It is only by “Encouraging and Building Each Other Up” that we can do so.

This is more than a theme, it is a calling to act, to encourage one another in the spirit of faith, hope and love.

That means we need to continue to immerse ourselves in the Word of God and commit it to our hearts and minds. We need to soak ourselves in His words so that in times of crisis, we can maintain the hope of His love and we can be an encouragement to others.

More than an idea with a theme, this supplement plan within our Pastoral Plan, is designed to provide a guideline, based on consultation, for all of us to not only think of, but act on how we can work to:

- Reinvigorate our relationship with our Church and our thriving community
- Support and be involved in leadership roles within our parishes
- Resume active community life with our families and friends
- Ensure welcoming, safe, and accessible parishes

This is how we can continue to fulfil the calling of Christ as it is related to us in our relationship to one another. This is how we can be a more Christ-Like Church.



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