

Once again, this week we hear the devastating news of yet another mass shooting in a US school – this time 17 people lost their lives at the hands of a 19-year-old ex-student in Florida.

Some details have emerged about the perpetrator. He was adopted at a young age and his adoptive father died several years ago and his adoptive mother died recently. He went to live with the family of a school friend on the death of his adoptive mother.

And once again, we have people crying out to change gun laws in order to prevent this kind of tragedy happening again. We are only in the second month of the year and already there have been 8 shootings in US schools.

What does it take for a society to realise something needs drastic change? Without change, these tragedies will continue to happen.

There are many possible factors that have contributed to man's actions as a murderer. There is no doubt he was a deeply troubled young man.

He seems to have an unhealthy addiction to violence if you read the accounts of neighbours and other students.

Addiction is always the result of unresolved trauma and pain, along with a loss of connection – to self or others.

There are many types of addictions and each of us has likely struggled with one kind of addiction or other at some time in our life.

The addictions we mostly think of relate to drugs and alcohol, but any substance or activity can be addictive. Binge TV, food, sex, exercise, and shopping as well as coffee and chocolate.

It is not the substances themselves that cause addiction – rather it is the situations and the state of the individual that determine how addicted or not, one becomes.

People use substances or excessive activities to manage emotions and pain. It's self-medication.

We are now seeing epidemic levels of addiction to all kinds of things – and this is due to increased levels of disconnection, trauma and unhealthy lifestyles.

In the past, most people were connected to family and community. Extended families were the norm and people lived in small communities and knew their neighbours. They were involved in local events, they met at the corner pub for a singalong and attended local places of worship where they could find friendship and support.

Nowadays many people live alone and are isolated and lonely. People do not know their neighbours and often live very private lives and struggle in silence.

They suffer from disconnection.

We can see the effects of this lifestyle in our declining church attendances.

People are busy with their own lives, struggling to make ends meet and chase after wealth and status.

When things go wrong, people have nowhere to turn other than to antidepressants that simply mask symptoms rather than help people deal with their feelings of loss and disconnection.

People now claim to be spiritual rather than religious and this usually results in them having a very individualised approach to matters of faith.

“I am a Christian, but I don’t need to go to church” is something we often hear.

But without being a part of the Christian community, a vital aspect of our life is missing.

Churches provide an interactive, mutually supportive environment where people can grow and share life experiences together and support one another.

Many of you have been members of St Christopher's for many decades. There is something here that keeps you coming back, even through difficult times.

And you are testament to the fact that being active members of a parish is good for us.

I have visited many churches and been a member of several, and I can honestly say I have never come across a bunch of so many happy, healthy seniors.

In most parishes there are few older men – the women outlive them by decades, but here we have a good proportion of healthy, active men in their later years. This really is significant. There is something so good for us here!

If you are one of those people who have been part of this parish for decades, I'm guessing it could be hard for you to imagine how different your life would have been, had this parish not been part of your life.

Church provides community. It is like being a member of a close extended family.

We are all different and come from a variety of backgrounds and we can support, challenge and grow together as we strive to become our authentic selves in Christ.

We do this alongside others who are on similar journeys.

Being part of a parish community keeps us active, involved and connected with each other, God and our world.

It gives us a reason to live and to love.

I believe the world would be a better place if all people were able to be active members of a healthy spiritual community.

Yet we live in a world where religious attendance is in serious decline and this is alongside an increase in people suffering from loneliness, isolation and depression.

People with little sense of real purpose, just going through the motions of daily life.

It is important to remember that “our parish’ or “our church” does not solely exist for our own benefit so that we can continue to practice our faith in the comfort and security to which we have become accustomed.

The church is not an elite social club for which we get a tax receipt for our contributions, a funeral and guarantee for the afterlife.

We are not consumers of “church services” who expect their preferences to be satisfied.

The church exists for others outside of ourselves.

The church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of those who are not yet its members.

This means that we are mandated by our baptism to grow and share what we have.

St Christopher’s is a lovely parish to belong to. We already have lovely people here, a beautiful, comfortable place in which to worship and fabulous facilities to gather for our other social activities.

It is tempting to just keep on doing what we are doing and what we have always done because it has worked in the past and it is satisfying to us.

But if we continue to in this manner, it is highly likely that our numbers will continue to decline and within a decade or two we will become unsustainable and cease to exist.

This may not affect us personally if we are already in our senior years or plan to move elsewhere, but it will have an impact on the wider community and future generations – our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

The church, our church, has so much to offer our fractured world.

We have a proven way of being together that prevents loneliness and isolation, a way that encourages people to be involved and look beyond themselves, ...

...that gives them a reason to live well in society and connects them with each other, creation and the creator.

Jesus said “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly”

We are people who are becoming whole – who strive for health in body, mind ***and spirit***.

A healthy church is a gift of God to the community.

To be able to give of ourselves, we need to make sure that we are healthy.

So, as I contemplate our parish life here at St Christopher’s I propose that we concentrate on these following priorities:

1. Reflect on who we are as a parish – recognise our strengths and strengthen and celebrate them. Notice our challenges and discern ways to meet them.
2. Deepen our faith through prayer and ongoing education

3. Strengthen relationships with one another through small groups, intentional Pastoral Care and social inclusion.
4. Find ways to engage with the wider community by inviting and offering to share our resources. To go out and meet our neighbours and be involved in transforming unjust structures of society.

We can have an enormous impact on others and help transform the world.

So here are the specifics of how we might go about this in the coming year as a parish.

I see three main aspects to parish life that overlap like a Venn diagram. Most of you are already participating in these activities.

One circle is Liturgical – and the goal is to strive for liturgical excellence so that people are able to experience God and worship in a beautiful and non-intrusive way.

There are a variety of ministries here to choose from.

- Reading, leading intercessions,
- Altar guild
- Choir and music
- As sides person or greeter
- As a server or Lay Ministrant

The second circle includes specific ministries of service and inclusion (Love in Action)

- Hospitality
- Serving on Parish Council
- Being part of the Intentional Pastoral Care team, we shall form soon
- Outreach
- Social issues – Reconciliation with FN people
- Interfaith and ecumenical initiatives
- Involvement in diocesan events and initiatives EDNP
- Prayer ministry

The third circle is Life Long Learning – education and spiritual renewal

Includes

- Study groups
- Retreats
- Training
- Book circles etc.

The goal would be for every member of the parish to be involved in at least one of each of the activities/ministries in each of the 3 areas.

For example, Lucile might be a reader (liturgical) and sing in the choir (also liturgical)

And be on an ecumenical working group to tackle homelessness. She would also be involved in a study group that meets regularly.

I would encourage you to try a new ministry from time to time. It is ok to step down from altar guild or Parish council and explore a new ministry. Once you join something you do not have to commit forever.

The key to healthy church communities is functional small groups that meet regularly to pray, learn and share. It is the small groups that give people the greatest sense of connection and belonging.

Ideally EVERY member of the parish should be part of a small group.

So, the plan is to create a Pastoral Care team, a prayer network and develop a range of small Life groups.

Over the coming weeks you will be asked to reflect on what areas you are currently involved in and which ministries you feel called to be part of.

You are never too old to participate. People who are less mobile make great members of a prayer team or as a home life group leader.

Let's embrace the future with excitement and a willingness to be open to explore new ways and be involved.

We have a treasure and we are called to share it- and help heal the world. Amen.