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SYNOD OF BISHOPS

Australian Diocesan Testimonies

2024 Consultation



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

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Diocesan Testimony Archdiocese of Adelaide, Australia

The characteristics and practices of synodality have been a key feature of the Archdiocese of Adelaide since the Second Vatican Council which have included Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils, Diocesan Leadership Teams made up of clergy and lay women and men, diocesan assemblies, various advisory councils and commissions, investment in lay pastoral ministry, formation for pastoral leadership, listening structures and pastoral initiatives in parishes, schools and communities. Over the past 60 years there have been periods of strong synodal practice and periods where it was lagging.

The recent consultations and listening and discernment process that have fed into the Synod on Young People, the 5th Australian Plenary Council, the Synod on Synodality and our own Diocesan Assemblies have reignited the desire for a co-responsible and collaborative church that truly listens and engages all of the People of God and those of good will in participation in the life, faith and mission of the Church. For many in the Archdiocese, the listening and consultation processes are a reminder of the changes initiated by Vatican II, and for others it was the first time they felt they were listened to by the institutional Church. There has also been scepticism at the effectiveness of the synodal processes and ability for the Church respond to current and future challenges adequately and quickly. Others have been wary of the possibility of change and potential loss of identity. In this way, the Archdiocese of Adelaide reflects the experiences of the global Church. In 2020, upon his appointment to the Archdiocese of Adelaide, Archbishop Patrick O'Regan called for a Diocesan Assembly to reengage the people with the preparations for the Plenary Council (which had been delayed by COVID-19), and to begin to discern the realities and needs of the Archdiocese. The convergence of the Plenary Council, our Diocesan Assemblies and the Global Synod have inspired many synodal initiatives.

Assemblies and Gatherings (see www.adelaidediocesanassembly.org.au for more information)

Assemblies have once again become a regular feature in the diocese and a useful means for listening, dialogue and community building. Participants typically include representatives from parishes, schools, communities and agencies. Each assembly features opportunities for prayer, discernment and formation. The focus and outcomes of each assembly differs from year to year. In addition to the Diocesan Assemblies, we have supported regional and parish assemblies as well as listening and feedback forums for Synod and particular local concerns.

- **2021 Diocesan Assembly.** The 2021 Assembly reengaged the Archdiocese with the practice of 'assembling'. Prior to the Assembly, a period of diocesan-wide consultation took place which guided the development of six pastoral themes for discernment at the Assembly: Leadership and Leadership Formation; Inclusion and Healing; Faith Formation and Spiritual Development; Parish Life and Liturgy; Outreach and Accompaniment of Children, Families and Young People; A Church that Hears and Responds to the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor. 450 participants gathered over 3 days and engaged in *conversations in the Spirit* in small groups resulting in 255 recommendations for local, national and universal consideration. These recommendations continue to guide our pastoral activity.
- **2022 Diocesan Assembly.** Between the 2021 and 2022 Diocesan Assemblies, parishes, schools, communities and Catholic agencies were invited to discern the recommendations from the 2021 Assembly and provide feedback for their own context and for Archdiocesan consideration. At the 2022 Diocesan Assembly, participants gathered in workshops shaped around the six pastoral themes from the previous Assembly. There were 3 rounds of workshops which provided formation, examples of good practice, and strategic planning.
- **2023 Regional Assemblies.** To further develop the discernment and planning around recommendations from the 2021 Assembly, parishes, schools and communities were invited to gather in one of 9 regional assemblies. A planning group was developed in each region, supported by the Archdiocese, whose task it was to develop the agenda for the assembly. Each region provided opportunities for listening and discernment and initial planning for collaboration and mutual support. Many of the regions have decided to make the assemblies a regular fixture and are committed to exploring synodality and mission together.
- **2024 Diocesan Assembly.** An Assembly is planned for June 2024 which will further embed the practice of shared listening and discernment through conversation in the spirit. The Assembly will focus on implementing the decrees of the Plenary Council and 2021 Diocesan Assembly recommendations.

Diocesan Pastoral Council

The re-establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) was a direct result of the 2021 Diocesan Assembly. Initially an 'interim council' was set up to develop the terms of reference, discern strategic priorities from the assembly recommendations, and develop new Archdiocesan Vision and Mission statements. The DPC was formalised in 2023 with membership reflecting the diversity of the Archdiocese and includes women and men, clergy and laity whose gifts and experience provide wisdom and creativity to the discernment of pastoral realities in the Archdiocese. The DPC adopted *conversations in the Spirit* as its method for discernment. The DPC is strongly committed to the practice and promotion of synodality throughout the Archdiocese.

Key Projects of the DPC:

- ***Archdiocesan Vision and Mission Statements.***
- ***Development of a Framework for Leadership in a Synodal Church.*** The call for leadership development for women and men serving in various roles in the Church was identified as an essential need out of the 2021 Assembly. This framework provides a basic outline of what is required for leadership in a synodal Church.
- ***Communications Strategy.*** The 2021 Assembly recommendations included requests for greater transparency and accountability through clear communication strategies. The DPC provides a public recounting of meetings in the diocesan newspaper and communicates regularly with the Bishop's Council of Priests and other advisory bodies. DPC members visit parish pastoral councils and diocesan events to listen to the voices of people from across the Archdiocese.
- ***Formation in Faith for Mission (see Formation below)***

Ministries and Roles – Pastoral Services Team

The 2021 Assembly recommendations informed the realignment of diocesan pastoral ministries and offices into one Pastoral Services Team (PST) resulting in a more collaborative and cohesive approach to ministry. The new structure of the PST reflects the six pastoral themes of the Assembly. Leadership roles were redesigned to support a synodal approach to mission and ministry (Director and Assistant Director of Pastoral Life and Mission), and Pastoral Leader and Pastoral Support roles are responsible for developing strategies and resources that support responses to the 2021 Diocesan Assembly Recommendations and participation, communion and mission.

Formation

An overarching theme of the consultations for the Plenary Council, Global Synod and our Diocesan Assemblies is the call to address formation at every level, age and stage of life and ministry.

- ***Drawn into the Joy of the Gospel: Formation in the Archdiocese of Adelaide / Commission for Formation***

Following the 2021 Diocesan Assembly, a working group was formed to further discern formation needs of the Archdiocese. Out of this group, the Diocesan statement on formation, *Drawn into the Joy of the Gospel*, was developed. It reflects Pope Francis' vision for the Church in *Evangelii Gaudium* and the call for a synodal approach to formation for those in pastoral ministry and the formation of faith for all people. Additionally, the Archdiocesan Commission for Formation was established to develop strategies and support for formation in the Archdiocese.

Synodality in Parishes

It is at the most local level of church where synodality is either expressed in its fullness or meets resistance. In parishes where there is a support for lay and clergy collaboration in ministry and decision-making, it works well. Where there has been little to no experience of co-responsibility and shared leadership, synodality struggles. We have observed that when those in leadership support and promote synodality there is greater uptake and trust from others in the community. The Archdiocese is committed to providing formation and support for synodality in all areas of Church life, especially in the parish.

- ***Support and resourcing for Parish Pastoral Councils***
Gatherings of Parish Priests and Chairpersons of Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish were established to encourage the promotion of synodal structures and practices. These gatherings take place twice yearly and provide opportunities for listening and dialogue, formation and information sharing. A Parish Pastoral Council Handbook was created, and regular formation and support is available from the Archdiocese.
- ***Being Church Together – Parish-School Relationship***
The relationship between Catholic schools and their parishes has been both a positive contribution to the development of Catholic community and a source of tension from the very early days of the Archdiocese. *Being Church Together* is the result of listening and dialogue between schools and parishes over several years. This resource provides a theology, vision and guidance for dialogue, discernment and action. *Being Church Together* has been assisting parishes and schools to enhance the synodal relationship and shared mission.

Publications mentioned in this testimony are available online at: <https://adelaide.catholic.org.au/our-works-and-community/pastoral-services/publications>



Catholic Diocese of Bathurst, Australia
Synodal Consultation Process: Phase Two
Towards The Second Assembly 2024

Testimony

Synodality is a word which at times can confuse people, but it is a word that has been used regularly, and also interchangeably, with co-responsibility for close to 20 years within the Diocese of Bathurst. At his ordination as the 8th Bishop of Bathurst in 2009, Bishop Michael McKenna expressed his desire for a more synodal approach to the life of our local church, with a statement that speaks deeply to the call of all the baptised; “there are some things that a bishop can do and some things he can’t do. Each of us is called to pick up our responsibilities as a child of God”. This statement about co-responsibility in mission has underpinned his time as Bishop.

To continue this understanding of Church life, seven regional meetings were held across the Diocese in 2010, to take time to listen to the reality of local church life, but also to open communication channels and hope for the future. During these meetings it was clear that there were certain segments of the Church that were not present in the numbers that should be, namely indigenous Catholics, young people and young families. These groups would later become a focus area for future Diocesan Assemblies and the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC).

At the beginning of the Year of Grace in 2012, the intention to call a Diocesan Assembly, as an event of faith and a renewal of mission, was announced. This event took place in 2013 with 250 members gathering in Bathurst to ask the Holy Spirit to renew our understanding of the Church’s mission to proclaim the Gospel of Christ and make disciples, especially in the central west of NSW.

The lessons learnt during the regional meetings in 2010, the dialogue that occurred during the Diocesan Assembly, more regional consultations and the establishment of a Diocesan Assembly Council, informed the Diocese’s priorities of mission. The six themes identified were; Participation of Indigenous Catholics, Participation of Young Catholics, The Domestic Church: Marriage and Families, Hearing and Proclaiming the Word of God, Worshipping God in Prayer and Sacrament and Building a Community of Love and Service. Working groups made up of parish representatives, clergy and ex officio members were established around each of these themes and became the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) in 2016. A key learning in regard to the establishment of the Working Groups was the significance of the role of the ex officio members of each group, which enabled actions on proposals. This was important as people and resources have always been a challenge for our Diocese.

For the initiatives discussed at the Diocesan Assembly in 2013, there were small but concrete examples of works and developments in each of the areas covered by the six working groups. The Diocesan Confirmation policy was the culmination of the work of several working groups who looked at various aspects of the policy before it was approved by the full DPC. Another example is the Participation of Indigenous Catholics Working Group lifting the profile of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* in each parish, working with local indigenous communities to design and make priestly stoles which can be worn during the celebration of Mass and leading

the Diocesan clergy through the *Cultural Competency in a Catholic Context* course, designed by NATSICC.

In 2019 the steering committee of our DPC met and discerned that there would not be a full Assembly in 2020, in order to concentrate on regional meetings and prepare for a review of local arrangements, in light of the Plenary Council. The working groups and steering committee were to continue as normal.

In 2020 Covid delayed the Plenary Council and the workings of our own DPC. This was a challenging time as most ministries and daily practices of the church had to change. However, there were positives. This was a time of innovation in our Diocese and new ways of connecting and worshipping together were initiated. These included weekly resources for families to pray with their children; Liturgies of the Word for individuals and families to gather and pray while in lockdown; a series of videos produced by the Diocese with individuals, including the laity, offering teaching of chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, giving an opportunity for discussion and sharing online; online Word and Faith groups (some still continue) and Connect@home, a daily email with a short 250 word reflection and prayer by a member of the clergy of the Diocese, which continues to this day. The importance of each Christian being aware of their own relationship with Christ, and how to nurture it, opened the way for these different ways of connection, as physical connection was not possible.

At different times over the past decade it was experienced by members of parishes, and even the DPC, that there was surprise when points of action or renewed thinking were accepted and acted on. This demonstrated the journey that was being experienced in terms of a Church listening to others and walking with them. An awareness of the importance of each Christian's role in mission and in living the calling given to us by Christ, to be on mission. This is a new mindset and a new way of being Church takes time, is not linear and is at times messy. However, it is part of the everyday conversion each of us experience, as well as the conversion that individually, and as a Church, we must undergo to continue in the Synodal Way.

In 2022, following the challenging times of Covid and lockdowns, it was seen that the DPC was due for a time of renewal and reformation. This then led to a suspension of the current DPC, with the intention to review the synodal process of the Diocese. The recommendations from the Plenary Council, and the consultation that has taken place in this synodal process, will inform Diocesan synodal structures going forward.



ARCHDIOCESE OF BRISBANE

Australian Diocesan Testimony: Synod for Bishops

In December 2023, the Archdiocese of Brisbane, Australia began preparing for ***SYNOD24: I am making all things new***, the Archdiocesan Synod linked to the Australian Fifth Plenary Council. Around this same time all dioceses were asked to take part in the Synod for Bishops consultations. This meant that we took the time to think about how we could move together synodally as part of the global Church, as well as moving together as an Archdiocese within our own context. We needed therefore to consider how we would honour the experiences, stories, hopes and challenges of the People of God that were shared through the Australian Fifth Plenary Council journey, while also making space for the creativity of the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us anew.

Considering the Archdiocese was highly engaged in the Plenary Council process, there has been a strong sentiment among the community that now is the time to act on what we have heard. The question therefore, ***“How can we be a more co-responsible Church on mission”***, became the foundation of our synodal process both for the Synod for Bishops consultations and ***SYNOD24: I am making all things new***, so that the Archdiocese could begin exploring what practical, measurable and Spirit-led actions could be implemented to help us be a more co-responsible Church on mission in a way that authentically reflects the Plenary Council Decrees.

However, in seeking to walk together, it has been important for us to acknowledge from the beginning how richly diverse the Archdiocese is, and therefore to shape a process that allows us to dream boldly while being realistic about the challenges the complexity of diversity poses. Moving together synodally for us means to ensure that all are seen, heard, valued and loved. It means seeking to hear from those on the edges of our community who have been excluded, hurt, abused, dismissed, silenced, disenfranchised and ignored by the Church. It means intentionally seeking out voices, stories, ideas and questions from those whose perspectives and approaches can be challenging and even at times difficult to dialogue with. It means honouring those who are the faith-filled building blocks of our communities, and allowing honest self-reflection to drive us outward in search of those who are absent, or who perhaps have never felt welcomed in the first place. It means providing spaces for inter-generational and inter-cultural mentorship and accompaniment so that emerging leaders can step up, be formed, and go on to lead their communities with experience, energy, and bold creativity. It means keeping in view an ideal, such as reading the signs of the times in light of the Gospel, while being willing to acknowledge when and how we fall short of the ideal, and the impact this has in the lives of many who are seeking the fullness of life that being part of the Body of Christ provides.

With this in mind, we have drawn on the wisdom of both the Australian Fifth Plenary Council journey and the global Synod on Synodality. We engaged in spiritual conversation to help create an environment where each person present in a consultation has equal opportunity to listen, and equal space to be heard. These consultations have also been designed to reflect the diversity of the Archdiocese and have at times challenged participants to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit talking to them through the experiences, stories, wisdom and challenges of people with perspectives different to their own. The responses from the spiritual conversations are beginning to be analysed through a SEE- JUDGE- ACT lens, helping to see more clearly the realities within the Archdiocese, which need to be affirmed and addressed.

When considering best practice, our synodal journey so far has taught us the importance of stepping out of our comfort zones to embrace the fluidity of a Holy Spirit led process, even though this can prove difficult at times. For many people, psychological and emotional safety is found in structure, predictability, scaffolding and the black and white. When it comes to issues regarding faith and change, particularly around hot-button issues such as the participation of women and inclusion more broadly, psychological and emotional safety are key to ensuring productive, robust and respectful dialogue and discernment. Synodality, however, is reliant upon the movement of the Holy Spirit and, in order to be faithful to the process, it requires us to remain responsive to what the Spirit is saying while also patiently allowing the process to unfold as it needs to. Being aware of psychological and emotional safety also calls us to be cognisant of the fact that exploring avenues for change on hot-button issues could, if not done carefully, be harmful towards an already vulnerable group of people. What would be the impact, for example, of putting forward action plans which reflect the needs of our most marginalised within our community, only to have these actions voted down with an overwhelming “no”? To trust in and fully participate in a synodal process therefore can be challenging - not just for those who find the notion of change within the Church difficult, but also for those that have been seeking change within the Church for some time, or for whom change would mean a genuine sense of welcome, belonging and authentic inclusion.

Perhaps this is where we take guidance from “Towards a Spirituality of Synodality” and draw courage and hope from the understanding that “synodality begins in forgiveness and reconciliation¹”. In authentically and intentionally moving together to discern practical, measurable and Spirit-led actions that will reflect the diversity of the Archdiocese and honour all that we have heard through the Plenary Council, we must all challenge ourselves to walk this journey in service of Christ. We must first choose to be co-responsible, by whole-heartedly engaging with the content being discussed, respectfully sharing concerns and questions as they arise, offering our gifts, experiences, stories, knowledge and wisdom where needed, and being willing to change course and adapt when the Holy Spirit leads in unexpected directions. We must all heed the call to seek out opportunities to listen open-heartedly to a diverse a range of perspectives and stories, and then to pay attention to the stirring within us that this listening provokes. In grounding ourselves in the hope, joy and mission of the Risen Christ, we must all be willing to walk together without agenda, keen to hear the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in what challenges and changes us, just as much as we want to share what inspires and affirms us. In doing so, we are able to move together as a co-responsible Church on mission, open to the creativity of the Holy Spirit making all things new.

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¹ Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group, “Towards a Spirituality of Synodality,” 2020, <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/towards-a-spirituality-for-synodality.html>, 12.

Any journey worth taking is difficult. It requires persistence, courage, flexibility and faith. Often the first steps are some of the hardest to take. Even while on the journey it is common to get a step wrong or even stop for some time. We continue on these hard journeys, however, because we believe it is worthwhile and because we understand the destination is worth the journey. As a Diocese our synodal journey reflects this.

Synodality has been defined as walking together. These are two distinct yet linked terms. Coming together is no easy task. As a diocese we face the challenges of division, of disagreements, of separation and of distance. Yet when we come together in faith the Holy Spirit is allowed to live and breathe in us and build harmony. For us in coming together, it is important we are genuinely together – that no one is left out or left behind. It is only from this point can we start forward, that we can start walking on this journey. Walking together is not easy, we can disagree on the steps and the direction, but it can also be very easy when we treat each other with love, respect and openness. Each step brings with it great opportunity as well as obstacles. This is true of our synodal journey as a diocese so far.

The Diocese of Bunbury is currently without a Bishop. This position has given us a unique insight into synodality and co-responsibility. Much can be learned when ingrained leaders and leadership structures are no longer present.

Historic

Many in our Diocese reminisce of a time when we led in synodality. The Diocese of Bunbury was the first dioceses in Australia to reintroduce the permanent diaconate. There were many bodies operating in a spirit of synodality including the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Diocesan Liturgical Council, Diocesan Social Justice Committee, and the Pastoral and Adult Faith Education Office. Overtime these bodies declined in effectiveness and were disbanded and not replaced.

Councils

In the Diocese today there are some Councils that continue to exist. The Diocesan Finance Council and the Diocesan Youth Council. Both these bodies are made up of a selection of lay people with relevant experience, skills and abilities. Diocesan staff members serve as the executive officers of these Councils and make recommendations on actions and appointments to the Council. These Councils advise and make recommendations to the Bishop of Bunbury on relevant matters. In some ways these Councils continually demonstrate synodality. However, it can also be argued that membership to these Councils is kept confidential and to people who are in agreement with existing leaders and priorities.

Diocesan Synod

In 2019 the Diocese of Bunbury celebrated a Diocesan Synod under the leadership of the Bishop and the Synod Commission. Two consultation phases were conducted with good results. The responses of people in the diocese during this phase contained many great insights. The Diocesan Synod faced a lot of opposition and criticisms in the lead up to the Synod. These included the selection of members and running of the Synod Commission.

Despite this the Synod persevered. During the Diocesan Synod assembly people cherished the ability to come together and acknowledged the presence of the Holy Spirit working amongst and in us. There was a great sense of hope and excitement. It was attended well by representatives from across the diocese but was not attended well by priests.

In the follow up to our Diocesan Synod many were left disappointed. The COVID19 pandemic in 2020 hindered the implementation of some Synod recommendations. Some felt the Synod was used to implement preconceived plans. Others felt little or no action was taken on some of the Synod recommendations. Many who were asked to volunteer and then agreed to work on recommendations claim they were never contacted or invited to contribute post-Synod. Other groups that proactively worked on synod recommendations and submitted documentation received little or no communication on their work. This led to many devaluing the idea of synods and consultation.

What we have learned from this for a future synodal way is:

- Local facilitators are important to the faith story of the diocese.
- Facilitators need to be prepared and formed for their role.
- Taking stock of the current situation, realities, signs of the times and resources is important. This allows for synod recommendations to be practical and achievable.
- People currently working in key areas explored by the synod should be consulted and asked for recommendations.
- Synod recommendations and their implementation or lack of implementation (including reasons why) should be clearly and concisely communicated to people.
- Leaders should take an open, transparent and collaborative approach to synods.

Plenary Council

Given the proximity of the Plenary Council to our own Diocesan Synod, the Bishop at the time decided to submit the responses and results of our Synod to the Plenary Council. Many in the Diocese felt 'consultation fatigue' but also lamented the reality of consultation with no real results, decisions or changes. Some individuals and groups in the diocese were proactive about engaging with the Plenary Council, but it was not given much support or attention on a diocesan level.

Synod of Bishops 2021 – 2024

Similarly to the Plenary Council, the current Synod of Bishops overlapped with the Plenary Council. Given the 'consultation fatigue' and disappointment in the implementation of our Diocesan Synod, the current Synod was not widely supported or given much attention. Once again there were a small number of individuals and groups who proactively engaged in the Synod of Bishops. Many of our people, including clergy, felt that they lacked the information, formation and background to engage with the Synod. It is worth noting that many people in the Diocese of Bunbury were unable to discriminate and comprehend the complexities and differences of issues faced at parish, diocesan, national and international levels.

Conclusion

Synodality is a great and worthwhile journey. It is important to note that this journey is open to be manipulated and/or stifled. Synodality is only possible in so far as the people of God allow it to be. Despite this the Holy Spirit has a way for working in, through and around all people and situations. Through our synodal journey we have discovered the difficulties and disparate views and opinions on walking together. We have also discovered the great joy, love and connection that comes from gathering together in a spirit of openness, faith and love.

Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle Australia
A Synodal Church in Mission
XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops
Towards October 2024
Diocesan Testimony

Pre 1992 Synod

“A strong consultative and reflective approach preceded and influenced the diocese’s establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council in 1994. This staged approach began in the late 1980s when the diocese’s Council of Priests established a pastoral planning committee, whose main brief was to survey pastoral needs on a parish basis, in the face of challenges, including a shortage of priests.”¹

“Concurrently, the diocese continued to proceed towards a diocesan synod, with the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee playing a leading role. In an Australian-first, the synod was held over two stages, 1992 and 1993, and attracted 160 delegates. The synod established teams to make reports and recommendations for:

- Faith Development of Adults
- Faith Development of Children
- Spiritual and Pastoral needs of Youth and Young Adults
- Spiritual and Pastoral needs of Those Not Actively Involved in the Church
- Minority Groups, Those in Poverty, Those Who Suffer Discrimination and the Alienated

The synod’s reports and recommendations were presented at the second session, again, something unusual in the Australian church. As a result of such detailed planning, a Diocesan Pastoral Plan was published, which included clear recommendations for pastoral councils at parish and deanery levels, and their relationships with an intended Diocesan Pastoral Council.”²

Synods³

1992-1993 Diocesan Pastoral Plan - Detailed structures for Pastoral Council, Pastoral Teams, Pastoral Assemblies. At Parish, Deanery, and Diocesan level.

2004-2005 Diocesan Pastoral Plan – Towards the Dawn – revision of the 1992-93 Synod.

¹ Damien Gleeson, Diocesan Pastoral Councils: An Australian Historical Study. 14 Sep 2021. Accessed on [Mar 2024], https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Report_Diocesan-Pastoral-Councils_-_Damian-Gleeson.pdf, page 66. Quoting Sr Patricia Egan RSJ, ‘Pastoral Planning in Maitland-Newcastle Diocese: Signs of Life and Hope’, Australasian Catholic Record, vol. 73, no 4, 1996, p. 422-423.

² Ibid., Gleeson page 67, Egan page 422-423.

³ <https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/about/pastoral-planning/assemblies-and-gatherings/>

2019⁴ Diocesan Synod, in conjunction with Australian Plenary Council. Currently suspended due to the death of Bishop Wright (2021).

Synod Like Assemblies

- 1995 Diocesan Assembly – Sacraments of Initiation for Children.⁵
- 1997 Diocesan Assembly - Review of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan, the Permanent Diaconate, and Preparing Parishes for Change consultations.
- 2000 Diocesan Assembly - New Wine into Fresh Wineskins. Parish boundaries and leadership models.
- 2003-2004 Regional Assemblies- in preparation for Towards the Dawn.
- 2007 Diocesan Assembly – Workers for the Harvest. Engagement of overseas born clergy.
- 2007-2010 Focus Group Meetings in preparation for – Moving Forward Together.
- 2010 Diocesan Assembly - Moving Forward Together. Parish evangelisation and ministry structures.⁶
- 2015-2016 Clergy and parish workshops – Developing a framework for clerics on professional supervision, performance review, and ongoing professional development.⁷
- 2017 Diocesan Curia Workshops – Many Parts One Body. Restructure of Diocesan Curia.
- 2019+ Focus Group Deanery Meetings – Parish viability after COVID and the Catholic Church Insurance collapse.

Learnings about best practice

1. Consultation, listening, responding, planning – it takes **time**. Spend the time.
2. Let people change. Many struggle with the move from personal control to shared leadership. Clericalism infects laity as well. If one takes the time and with good experiences, **conversion** occurs in most.
3. The **culture** of the individual’s birthplace is important. Some cultures seem to be not yet compatible with synodality. Most of our clergy born overseas cannot engage synodally. Even more time and support are needed for them to engage in a healthy way in such processes.
4. If a **bishop does not support** the outcome of a synodal process (our 2007 assembly) it will seriously set back the synodal engagement in the future.
5. **Membership** of Pastoral Council, and the like, need to be governed by a skills matrix. Otherwise, one will only get as members people with time to waste, or with an agenda to push. Everyone suffers.
6. **Keep your clergy involved.**

⁴ <https://www.domnsynod.com.au/about/synod-directory/>

⁵ <https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/church-mission/childrens-ministries/sacraments-for-children/>

⁶ <https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/media/1053/moving-forward-together-diocesanpastoralplan250810.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.mn.catholic.org.au/people/clergy-and-parish-leaders-professional-support/>



BEHOLD, I AM DOING A NEW THING! TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH IN THE DIOCESE OF PARRAMATTA SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA



In 2023, the Diocese of Parramatta, a suffragan of the Archdiocese of Sydney, embarked on the next step towards a synodal church. After the 5th Australian Plenary Council, the Bishop of Parramatta Diocese, Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv convoked the first ever Synod of the Diocese. The Diocese of Parramatta is the local church of Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains and was founded in 1986 by Pope John Paul II. Our community boasts of diversity, multiculturalism, youthfulness, and a heart for mission and service, evident in the many expressions of faith through local communities.

Bishop Vincent landed on the theme “Behold, I am doing a new thing” (Isaiah 43:19) inspiring us to consider where we have been and hope for a future beyond anything we could have imagined. The invitation set us on a yearlong journey listening to one another, reaching out to communities not often heard, and facilitating opportunities for robust dialogue through the building up of capacity at the grassroots.

The mission led us to go to the last and the least, the old and the young, from all walks of life and backgrounds, the clergy, consecrated, and the laity, parishes, families, school leadership teams, students, youth groups, ecclesial movements, ministry groups, community organisations, and agencies. We heard from over 5,000 people.

To do this we needed to do things differently. We created resources and content to encourage and equip local leaders to take up the call to facilitate listening sessions. Our focus was grassroots, in the households and classrooms. There were, videos, worksheets translated into different languages, reflection guides, templates, printed handbooks and more. The stories shared offered insights relating to people’s experience of belonging, formation, service, liturgy, prayer, and more. There was tension and challenges, but the stories revealed commonality that led to hope which moved people into a deeper understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ in the Diocese of Parramatta.

Following the collection of the submissions across 3 months, through 6 Deanery Listening Consultations, numerous parish, school, agency and ministry sessions, family and individual feedback, a Synod Writing Group worked to synthesise the stories culminating into a Working Document. This became the Agenda for the Synod. The Synod Working Document articulated 6 themes towards a Synodal Church, which featured summaries of what was heard through the listening stage, prompts for reflection and prayer, and the proposed resolutions for each theme.

The six themes were:

THEME 1:

AN INCLUSIVE AND WELCOMING CHURCH

THEME 2:

A HUMBLE AND HEALING CHURCH

THEME 3:

A LISTENING CHURCH

THEME 4:

A CHURCH RENEWED IN SPIRIT AND PRAYER

THEME 5:

A CHURCH THAT REACHES TO THE MARGINS

THEME 6:

A CHURCH WALKING TOGETHER

The Diocesan Synod Assembly was held over 13 to 15 October 2023 and brought together over 250 people including over 195 members, chancery staff, volunteers, facilitators, periti, observers and more. Bishop Vincent envisioned a Synod membership group rich in diversity, reflecting the nature of the people of God in the Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains. Each table was intentionally designed to include people from many walks of life to broaden people's understanding of different perspectives.

Together, we navigated through the six themes and the respective resolutions. Each session included prayer and reflection accompanied by music, silence, rounds of listening, free discussion, and 'voices from the floor' where the space was offered for any Synod member to share their thoughts, reflections or experiences related to the given theme. It was here that every member was invited to discern their position on the proposed resolution. As we entered deeper into the experience, the sense of the room witnessed to the care and respect exuded by the members. People shared honestly, openly, and vulnerably. In the sharing of suffering and hope, the unity deepened as members of the Synod began to appreciate the lived realities of their neighbours.

A pivotal moment occurred on the second day, which also fell on the same day every Australian voted on a referendum to enshrine "A Voice to Parliament" for First Nations People. One resolution relating to concrete signs and symbols recognising our First Nations people did not receive majority support. The feeling in the room was mixed. However, the team had prepared for this, having inserted a mechanism for the members to provide recommendations to rewording any resolution that had not received majority support. Together with Bishop Vincent, the Synod Secretariat, periti, and facilitators, a new resolution was designed. The reworded resolution was then put to members for discussion and discernment, and when the vote was revisited, a majority voted in favour of the resolution. It was a moment which reflected the honouring of a process, trust in one another, and the willingness to pray and discuss through one another's thoughts and reflections. It was honest, it was raw, it was real.

As the Synod concluded, the unity in the room was palpable. Through the holding of tension, walking with one another, sharing of vulnerability, forgiveness and reconciliation was experienced and a hope for more was realised. People were heard, and hearts were transformed, as the possibility of a renewed way of being church was finally experienced, and therefore, there was hope for our future. As we reflect on the experience, we can truly say that God was with us, in our midst, walking with and guiding our process and path - a synodal dynamism lived out by the people in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains.

The Diocese of Parramatta continues the journey towards building a synodal church, as we develop a new Diocesan Plan that seeks to honour our synodal process, the stories of the people in our community, and the resolutions that were affirmed at the Synod. It is our hope that we can nurture a synodal culture, strengthen existing synodal structures and develop new forms of lay participation and partnership with the ordained.

At the diocesan level, for example, we hope that the existing synodal reforms will be affirmed and enhanced going forward. These include the lay membership and/or lay participation in such bodies as the Diocesan Curia, the Diocesan Personnel Board, the College of Consultors, the Trustees and the Diocesan Finance Committee. They also include procedures that allow the interaction between the exercise of episcopal authority and community discernment such as the review and re-appointment of pastors.

There are other institutions that are truly ecclesial and expressive of the essential co-responsibility of all the People of God such as the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Diocesan Synod itself. These, for the most part, are at the mercy of the sitting bishop. We would like to make sure that they are permanent and dynamic vehicles of *Sensus Fidei* that are indispensable for a synodal Church.

At the parish level, similarly, we hope that the synodal exercise of community discernment is inherent to the exercise of ordained authority. In other words, the whole People of God through the dynamic of *consensus fidelium* must be involved in any communal discernment and decision making. The local institutions such as Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Committee and even Deanery Pastoral Council could be effective vehicles for synodal exercise.

In a way, our task is not yet done. It has only just begun. Our next challenge is to institutionalise best practice in communal discernment, decision-making and governance, which would enhance the authority of the ordained and the rightful participation of the faithful. But this would not be possible without the nurturing of the synodal culture through formation and training, particularly in the art and spirituality of mutual listening and discernment. Here in Parramatta, we would like to think that the synod has committed us to making synodality a truly constitutive dimension of the local Church and that the seeds we have sown will bear fruit beyond our lifetime.



SYNODAL TESTIMONY OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ROCKHAMPTON, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

Following his installation in 2014 as the tenth Bishop of our diocese, Bishop Michael (McCarthy) engaged in a process of listening in all parishes in the diocese. This listening process has led to pastoral initiatives that have enhanced and enriched how we work together to achieve our Diocesan Vision Statement and bring about the Kingdom of God. From the outset, the goal of our Bishop was co-responsibility and we have worked hard (and continue to work hard) to ensure this happens for the mission.

The steps on the Synodal journey in the Diocese of Rockhampton over the last ten years:

- Early in his episcopacy, travelling our very large diocese with a small team, Bishop Michael visited every region and parish asking the People of God to talk of their concerns, dreams, hopes and thoughts about our church. This was collated into local, diocesan, national and broader issues so that parishes had information which they could use to plan and meet the needs and concerns raised. A second round of visits followed during the next two years with the biggest goal for the Bishop being the opportunity to listen and for the parishes to take the lead in planning and looking forward. These were the first steps in ensuring we had the opportunity to work co-responsibly for the mission around the diocese.
- In 2018 preparations for a Diocesan Assembly began as an opportunity to address the Diocesan issues raised and collated from the two earlier listening processes. A team of volunteers prepared papers, collaborated with an outside presenter and in March 2019, a large number of participants worked and prayed together over a weekend culminating in nine areas of priority being identified. These areas were: Co-responsibility for the Mission; Governance and Leadership Formation; Mission to those on the edge; Education for Mission; Governance Structures and Roles; Youth and Family; Multicultural Welcome; Technology and Communications and Evangelisation. Following the assembly, the Bishop appointed groups to write, research and present papers on each of those topics with possible ways to move forward. These papers and the collated information already gathered proved invaluable in the future writing of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan.
- A key element to our Synodal journey was the re-formation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council during the year of Covid (2020). This foresight via the use of Zoom meetings, was instrumental in providing pastoral leadership and advice to the Bishop and continues to this day. The Council members were representative of every region in our diocese, some of our clergy and religious (appointed by the Bishop) and included ex-officio members (those who hold leadership roles on other councils and agencies).

- Amongst many of the projects undertaken by the DPC over the past three and a half years has been the writing of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan, a document that highlights the pastoral priorities for our diocese for at least the next five years. In the preparation and writing of the document the task group paid particular attention to information gathered from the previous listening processes, the outcomes, and reports from the Diocesan Assembly along with other significant documents and information including Church teachings and documents. This was a big task, but it was essential that the voices of our diocese were not lost in what was developed. https://rok.catholic.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CDR_Diocesan_Pastoral_Plan_WEB.pdf The DPP was launched at the Diocesan Festival in 2023 held at Pentecost, a significant time for all in our Church. All parishes and agencies are endeavouring to use the plan to prepare the way forward for their own parishes and councils. This is an ongoing opportunity for formation and development supported by the Bishop and the Diocesan Pastoral Council.
- The Plenary Council held in Australia has also engaged our diocese and allowed us to participate in the discussions and gatherings. The information received and contributed to the Plenary sessions also informed the writing of the DPP.
- In 2024, Bishop Michael called for a year of synodal listening and prayer for our diocese. This has resulted in a significant opportunity for the People of God to give time to prayer and listening at meetings and gatherings. A special focus and learning from what has happened in the process at the Synod assembly and also the Plenary Council assemblies.
- Parish groups are looking intentionally at how they work for the inclusion of all and especially working co-responsibly within their communities.
- Finally, as part of the journey, at the suggestion of the Bishop and what he has heard and read, our Diocesan Vision Statement was reworded slightly to better portray what guides us.

As a community of disciples of the risen Christ, we live out the call of baptism through personal faith in Jesus, witnessing together to the Good News of the Kingdom, co-responsible for the Mission.

Synod for a Synodal Church 2021-2024
Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst, Australia
Diocesan Testimony

What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod’. Journeying together — laity, pastors, Bishops — is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice. Pope Francis, 17 October 2015.

Whilst this testimony reflects on our more recent Diocesan story, it builds on the efforts of Sandhurst priests and the lay faithful over many, many years.

On 27 April 2022 the Feast of Our Lady of Good Council, Bishop Shane Mackinlay announced a year of preparation and consultation for a Diocesan Pastoral Council, to be known as the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC). Following the Bishop’s announcement, staff of the Diocesan Office for Mission and Pastoral Life (OMPL) developed documentation and processes for preparation and consultation meetings to be held throughout the diocese from July through to December. The meetings enabled participants to learn about the proposed Council, to enter a listening and dialogue process and provide feedback to the Bishop. By 13 December we had met with the priests and representatives of the lay-faithful in thirty-nine parishes, senior students and staff representing ten Catholic secondary colleges, all Catholic school Principals and Religious Education Leaders, Catholic Education Office Sandhurst staff, the Boards of Catholic Education Sandhurst Limited and Sandhurst Catholic Early Childhood Education and Care Limited as well as representatives of St John of God Hospital. 905 people participated in these meetings and more than 279 collected group responses were received, providing a rich source of data that helped inform the focus, direction and processes to be adopted by the Council.

In January 2023 the *Final Report on the Preparation and Consultation for the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council* was published, with strong and consistent themes emerging from the fifty-two preparation and consultation meetings conducted across the diocese in the second half of 2022. The themes were: “authentic listening and dialogue”, “inclusion and openness”, “communication”, “a bias for action” and “hope in the face of cynicism and hurt”. The themes were presented at the Diocesan Assembly and have helped inform the establishment, operations and workplan of the SMPC. As expected, a strong alignment emerged between these themes and the Diocesan Synthesis for the Synod on Synodality and the decrees of 5th Plenary Council of Australia.

On 15 February 2023 three hundred and twenty-seven members of our diocesan community assembled in Kialla: priests, parish pastoral and finance council members, pastoral associates, parish volunteers, parishioners, school principals, students, Catholic Education Office Sandhurst (CEOS) staff and Chancery staff. A makeshift venue was transformed by a hardworking team from the Chancery and CEOS. The team created a working ‘synodal’ space for participants in the assembly to pray, sing, reflect, learn, listen, speak, and make concrete proposals for action to Bishop Shane for the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council. At the conclusion of the Assembly, Bishop Shane called for expressions of interest from priests and the lay faithful from diocese to join the Council.



Synod for a Synodal Church 2021-2024

Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst, Australia – Diocesan Testimony

After a process of discernment, the members of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council were appointed in late March. At the annual Mass of Oils on 4 April 2023, three priests and eleven lay people from each of the deaneries were commissioned by Bishop Shane to join him and Fr Joe Taylor VG on the Council. The Council has met six times since then and following prayerful reflection on the themes from the *Final Report* and the two hundred and fifty-two proposals from the Assembly, four strategic directions have emerged: missionary and pastoral outreach, the promotion of unity and connections between Diocesan groups and entities, initial and ongoing formation, and the promotion of the equal dignity of women and men. The Council is developing priorities, goals and actions to address the strategic directions. The Council have also made recommendations to Bishop Shane for members of the lay faithful to attend regular meetings of Diocesan bodies. A member of the Council was appointed to the Diocesan Finance Council, and two lay people now attend meetings of the College of Consultors.

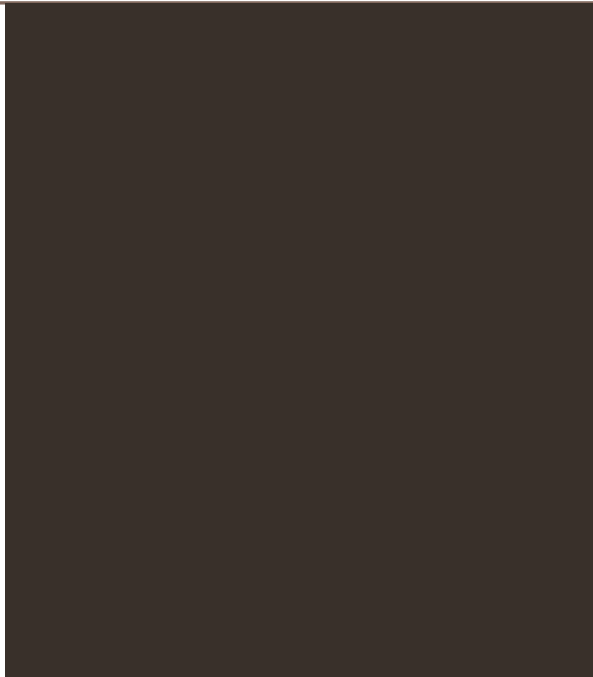
Along with dozens of parishioners and some priests from across the Diocese, members of the Council also participated in the ‘Sandhurst Scripture Talks’ which were held in May 2023 on Zoom. The topic was: The Acts of the Apostles: ‘making decisions with the Holy Spirit’. Our presenters were scripture scholars Rev Dr Brian Boyle EV (Administrator of the Cathedral Cluster of Parishes in Bendigo) and Dr Rosemary Canavan (Catholic Theological College, Melbourne). The presenters introduced us to the book of the Acts the Apostles and helped us understand how the early Christians sought the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit when making important decisions in the life of the Church. The learnings were invaluable as we discover together what it is to be a synodal church today.

In August and October 2023, the Office for Mission and Pastoral Life hosted four Zoom sessions entitled “Carrying Forward the Plenary Council”. Parishioners from across the diocese learnt a little more about Decree 1 (Reconciliation – Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts) and Decree 3 (Called by Christ – Sent Forth as Missionary Disciples) and participated in a simple listening and dialogue exercise which any parish or group could undertake. The exercise invited parishioners to reflect on what their faith community was already doing or could do in relation to the Decree. So, whilst the Plenary Council as an event has concluded and we await the final approval of the Decrees by the Holy See, the “Carrying Forward the Plenary Council” document reminds us that many of the Decrees contain the kinds of things that dioceses, parishes and other Catholic entities can do or are doing already.

Over the last three years parishioners have used the financial support provided by the Sandhurst Theology Scholarships to enrol in courses aimed at developing their theological knowledge and pastoral leadership capabilities.

A Diocesan Youth Ministry Reference Group was established in October 2023. This group provides advice to Bishop Shane and the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council on the future direction and approach to Youth Ministry in Sandhurst.

We have learnt much about the challenges of putting the synodal way into practice and what it means to exercise co-responsibility for mission. We also have much to look forward to as we continue our synodal journey as the pilgrim people of God in Sandhurst.



Synod Consultation Testimony

Catholic Archdiocese of
Sydney, Australia



By Christopher Meney, Chancellor
9 April 2024





Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia: Consultation and Experiences of Synodality, Including Practices for the Growth of a Missionary Synodal Dynamism.

Synodality is said to be “an expression of the Church’s nature, form, style and mission”.ⁱ It imagines a Church aware of people’s needs and aspirations, formally gathered to reflect upon a common theme, and led in that process by the Holy Spirit. On this journey, all are heard and their opinions valued, the ordinary faithful no less than the prelates, and even social outcasts. A synod is ... an evolving process, now being refashioned as “a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God”.ⁱⁱ “Synodality, understood as a prayerful, sacramental sensibility stretches beyond its application in the episcopal context and radiates as a model of hierarchical communion in the local Church, in our governing and advisory bodies and meetings, internationally, nationally, in dioceses and in parishes. Locally it should be an impetus to listen to new voices, views, pastoral strategies, ways of service, all faithful to the tradition, while eschewing politicized or bureaucratized misconceptions of the Church and her mission...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Starting from this perspective, input was requested from over thirty Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney individuals/ groups of the faithful. These included representatives of both lay and clergy bodies; Church agencies; religious communities; episcopal vicars; deans; migrant chaplains; social outreach and justice groups; catechists; university chaplaincies; ecumenism and interfaith bodies; university residential colleges; ecclesial movements; indigenous; systemic schools; health and welfare bodies. The invitation to all those diverse voices stimulated in response, a range of views, pastoral strategies and ways of service by which the faithful can and in many cases, already do contribute to the Church’s mission.

This experience of consultation also provoked some reflection on the many synodal initiatives and changes implemented within the Archdiocese of Sydney over recent years. In particular, the role of women in leadership. Many of the over thirty committees within the Archdiocese now have female chairs and/or members who contribute their particular insights and perspectives in areas as diverse as the Curia, finance, property, honours, charitable works and education. A large percentage of the catechists currently teaching scripture in government schools are women as are the majority of those involved in foundational education; and the Council providing advice on the operation of the diocesan seminary has female members as does the faculty of seminary staff. The head of the Catholic Institute of Sydney, an ecclesiastical faculty awarding pontifical degrees, is also a woman.

With respect to consultative synodal engagement with the broader presbyterate, the canonically mandated bodies of Council of Priests and College of Consultors are supplemented by the following: the Archbishop’s Curia, his principle advisory body, and the Council of Deans which advises on clergy appointments, both of which have lay members, and the body of Trustees which has civil responsibilities. An Ongoing Formation of Clergy Committee made up of both clergy and laity, has a scope of responsibilities which includes the fostering of professional development, professional supervision and the spiritual direction of clergy as well as assisting with the enculturation of clergy arriving from overseas. Over thirty migrant chaplains operate across the Archdiocese and provide both pastoral and spiritual support for the Catholic population where 1 in 3 are born in a non-English speaking country.

Synodality is very evident when considering both the variety and number of bodies engaged in the life of the Church, which currently are lay led. A key body, the Safeguarding Office, which focuses on the protection from abuse of the young and the vulnerable and the implementation of a national code of



conduct, is led by a lay woman; she is supported by other female staff and several experienced laity also serve on its advisory body. Other Archdiocesan works with lay leadership include the ministry to the indigenous, an apostleship to seafarers, social support agencies, a Commission for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, a Centre for Evangelisation, the diocesan Liturgy Office, Sydney Catholic Schools, Early Childhood Services and the Ephpheta Centre for the deaf. Most of these have advisory bodies which constitute additional specialist expertise.

Perhaps the most evangelising works of the Spirit are the various Movements. Every year the Emmanuel Community in Sydney reaches hundreds of people through its various missionary activities. The Neocatechumenal Way assists in the formation program of the second diocesan seminary as well as going 'on mission' to those struggling on the margins and searching for faith within the urban landscape. At one of the large secular universities, Opus Dei operates two residential University Colleges while also providing formation and spiritual support. Two additional Catholic Colleges show signs of renewed Catholic life at the main 'ivy league' university. The complementary contributions of the two lay led Catholic universities within the Archdiocese are further evidence of synodality within the domain of tertiary education. The vibrant lay led university chaplaincy groups at located at several (Catholic and secular) universities also continue to bear fruit in various ways including through vocations. Several houses of discernment for both young men and women, have flowered unpredictably in recent years and assist those who choose to live in a supportive Catholic community for a time while they try to discern God's plan for their life.

Active professional groups of doctors and lawyers also are making efforts to provide formation and support while contributing to public debate on important issues. Other long serving lay organisations such as the Knights of the Southern Cross, Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Catholic Women's League also each continue to make substantial contributions with the Sydney Street Feast, St Canice's Kitchen and David's Place all actively engaging with those struggling on the margins. In addition, the Knights of Malta together with those of the Holy Sepulchre and the Commissary for the Holy Land continue to foster a synodal sensitivity by providing support and outreach both within and well beyond the diocese. Large gatherings of devoted Catholic laity attend public events such as the Corpus Christi and Rosary processions and the Day of the Unborn Child walk and each of these provides important witness through a communal synodal public expression of faith and piety.

Over the next two years a diocesan synod will be undertaken, and this will provide opportunities to both listen further and also sharpen the thinking around how best to nurture and encourage the eruption of more works of the Spirit across the Archdiocese. Drawing on the fruits of its World Youth Day, it is hoped that Sydney may again host the International Eucharistic Congress in 2028, on the centenary anniversary of its last IEC. Challenges remain regarding how best to engage with a changing 'big city' demographic which while becoming more educated and secular, is also now less married and welcoming of children. However, along with these challenges there also are some encouraging shoots of ecclesial new life. Deo gratias.

ⁱ Pope Francis, *Address to the Faithful of Rome*.

ⁱⁱ Pope Francis, *Address for 50th Anniversary of Synod of Bishops; Episcopalis Communio*, 6. See also ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ Archbishop Anthony Fisher, *Address to Sydney Clergy*, 20 Sep 23

TESTIMONY ON SYNODAL PRACTICES

**SYRO-MALABAR EPARCHY
OF ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA**



MY LORD MY GOD

SYRO-MALABAR EPARCHY
OF ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE, MELBOURNE

INTRODUCTION

The Synodal testimony report of the Syro-Malabar Eparchy of St Thomas the Apostle, Melbourne, has been prepared to shine light on the synodal practices of the eparchy. This report documents our journey towards being a synodal church. To understand this report better, a brief history of the Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Melbourne is given as an introduction.

Pope Francis established the Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle, Melbourne, for the Syro-Malabar faithful (*Sancti Thomae Apostoli Melburnensis Syro-Malabarensium*) on 23 December 2013. In 2021, Pope Francis extended the jurisdiction of the eparchy to New Zealand and all other Oceanian countries. Over the past 11 years, the eparchy has grown to four foranes, 13 parishes and 53 missions, with 36 priests serving in the eparchy. We have been blessed to establish parishes/missions in all major Australian and New Zealand cities, and our mission is growing to other regional areas. These establishments have helped the Syro-Malabar faithful receive ongoing pastoral care and participation in regular Holy Qurbana (*Eucharistic celebration in the Syro-Malabar rite*) and regular faith formation classes for children and young people.

SYNODALITY IN PRACTICE

Syro-Malabar faithful across the eparchy acknowledge that synodality is practised through the various departments, apostolates, ministries and administrative bodies in our parishes/missions. Cherupushpa Mission League, Syro-Malabar Youth Movement (SMYM), Syro-Malabar Teens Ministry (SMTM), Fathers' Group (*Pithruvedi*), Mothers' Group (*Mathruvedi*), Young Couples Ministry, Nurse's Ministry, Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Congress (Social Action Group), Evangelisation Ministry, Catechism Department, Student Councils, Catechists Forums, Safeguarding Department give the laity a sense of belonging and responsibility for the church. The departments encourage active participation in decision-making and provide avenues for individuals to serve their calling. These departments and ministries conduct regular meetings and planned events or retreats centred around the teachings of Christ, with the common goal of creating a good fellowship of the Holy Spirit within our churches. The faithful often comment that these departments "...are the pillars of the church structure."

Synodality is practised at various hierarchical levels of the eparchy. Under the guidance of the Curia, the Eparchial (Diocesan) Pastoral Council operates to discuss and develop strategies to improving eparchial level activities. The Pastoral Council is comprised of clergy, members from each parish/mission and nominated members from pious organisations and ministries of the eparchy. Mirroring the structure of the Pastoral Council, we have established Parish Councils (*prathinidhiyogam*) in each Parish/Mission which is made up of representatives from each cottage prayer group (cottage prayers groups are created in each suburb or a group of suburbs) and pious departments and organisations of the parish/mission. In addition, all members of the parish are part of the general assembly (*pothuyogam*) for the systematic organization and administration of the spiritual and temporal affairs of their community. All activities undertaken in the parish/mission are guided by the *Palliyogam*-Procedure Rules; uniform law to assist with the smooth functioning and the integral development of the communities.

Members are appointed to leadership positions in the councils and departments after an election process. All voices are listened to, and candidates are chosen after consultation with the clergy and experienced elders. Participatory decision making is encouraged and practiced in the councils and departments. The decision-making process is democratic and transparent, and accountability is encouraged in all activities.

The recount below demonstrates the journey of our young people in forming and being part of a Synodal Church.

A SYNODAL CHURCH LED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

The Syro-Malabar Youth Movement is a shining example of how a synodal church must exist. Being a member of the Youth Apostolate Executive team, the coordinator of the Youth of New Zealand, and part of the leadership team in my local community in Auckland, I have seen first-hand how opportunities are given to all to be an active part of the church and to share their voices and opinions. I would like to focus on the aspects of the Youth Apostolate structure, how youth leadership selection occurs, the representation of youth in councils, and how National Youth Events are conducted.

The Youth Apostolate in the Eparchy of Melbourne is structured in a way so that effective collaboration can occur from the regional level all the way to an eparchial level. The Youth Apostolate Executive team comprises a team of representatives from the different regions of Oceania who represent their states/countries and take charge of different aspects of the Apostolate, such as evangelisation, media, finances, etc., at an Eparchial level. Under this team comes the National Teams, which includes representatives from the different regions within their respective countries, allowing leaders to understand each country's diverse needs. Under this team, there are regional leadership teams who coordinate activities at a parish/mission level and can help to convey the needs of the young people at the parish/mission level.

With regards to Youth leadership, the church has been active in inviting young people to take charge of organising themselves with the guidance of elders rather than the direct command of elders. Events like the Youth Leaders' Summit (YLS), which is held once every two years nationally, allow for young people from each region to participate and build inter-regional relationships over the days of the summit, after which they can vote to decide who is best suited to lead and represent them at a national level. The connections made and the training received at YLS also help each region to select leadership teams of young people who work with the Parish Priest to spiritually nourish the Youth of the Parish.

Additionally, national and eparchial events, such as the UNITE conference, are conducted with consultation from regional leaders and the collection of expressions of interest, expectations of resources and topics, and feedback from youth around the nation. This gives a platform for all to express their voices regarding how the events are conducted.

The understanding that the youth are not just the future of the church but also the "now" of the church is clear in the Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Melbourne; the various councils and departments, at all levels, are advised to have members of the Youth to effectively communicate the needs of the youth.

As seen, synodality is a key part of the functioning of the Syro-Malabar church in our Eparchy, with particular focus on the Youth Apostolate and the Syro-Malabar Youth Movement. If we want to guide the church to become more Synodal, then it is crucial that this process starts with the young people in our church, as seen in our Eparchy.

Jacob Anithottam (KHS)

Evangelisation Coordinator, Youth Apostolate

National Coordinator, Syro-Malabar Youth Movement, New Zealand

Youth Counselor, Syro-Malabar Youth Movement, Auckland

Syro-Malabar Eparchy of St Thomas the Apostle, Melbourne



Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes Synod Testimony 2024



The Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, Australia, was so named in 1917, taking in the Diocese of Wilcannia and six extra parishes. It covers western, central and south-western areas of New South Wales, and is the largest geographical diocese in this state, 414,398 sq km. According to the 2021 Census, of a general population of 105,894 people, there are 25,271 Catholics. These are spread across towns, stations, outback communities and one remote city (Broken Hill). There are 21 parishes administered by 16 priests, with 18 diocesan Catholic primary schools, 1 Catholic secondary school, 12 CatholicCare offices, as well as branches/groups of other Catholic agencies and private organisations.

Bishop Columba Macbeth-Green was born in Forbes and ordained as Bishop in 2014, currently residing in both Forbes and Broken Hill (over 800kms apart). He says, “The Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes is a unique Diocese full of strong, faith-filled people from all walks of life. The people of the bush in my Diocese have much to offer, particularly in terms of their faith. Generally, this faith has been formed by tough times and a tough environment and manifests itself through resilience, good humour, and a ‘down to earth’ spirituality. Theirs is a faith that has endured unique challenges and their insights concerning Catholic life are precious and of great value to me.” (www.wf.catholic.org.au/bishop/bishops-welcome/)

The Diocese became involved in systematic synodal processes through the Plenary Council, concluding in Australia in 2022. There were a number of parish, inter-parish, school, Catholic agency and other groups who participated in ‘conversations in the spirit’ in order to contribute to the ‘Listening and Dialogue’ and ‘Listening and Discernment’ phases. Local resources were created, such as clergy reflections and youth interpretations of the National Themes. In 2020, Bishop Columba established a Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) to “collaborate with the Holy Spirit to aid the Bishop with the pastoral governance of the Church.” (DPC Statutes)

This Council has produced a Vision and Mission for the Diocese, and worked through the Plenary Council decrees as a basis for local action. A key part of that has been to support the clergy and the Parish Pastoral Councils in mission with all the people of God. So the Synod Consultation has been an important step in a much longer synodal journey. Synodal consultation discussions were conducted for both the 2023 and 2024 Synods. In 2024, they built on acquired discernment skills and targeted key diocesan groups, as well as allowing for anyone to be involved through local groups or online diocesan gatherings.

A request was to make the Synod Consultation process simple, with clear language. So the given questions were modified to:

- How can all people in our Church better work together to strengthen our mission?
- What structures and processes do/can make this possible?
- What roles and groups can be renewed or started to enable this?

A modified slideshow was then used by groups to use in their consultation gatherings.

The Vicar for Clergy coordinated the synod consultation among the priests, which was done by deanery to ensure maximum participation in a natural and smaller gathering. This was a significant step forward from previous clergy involvement in Plenary Council and Synod consultations. The DPC provided avenues for consultation with the Catholic Education Office (CEO) and CatholicCare (CC). However, other major Catholic agencies and organisations were not able to participate due to the short timeframe.

The information and invitation to be involved were put out through the regular diocesan communication channels, which resulted in one parish group, a diocesan Lenten group, Catalyst for Renewal (CfR) and two diocesan Synod-specific Zoom opportunities. Two submissions (Lenten and CfR) included participants from other dioceses. Most groups were small (3-8 people), and included clergy, laity and religious. No participants were under 18, and there were a number of cultural backgrounds, especially amongst the clergy. For greater transparency, the draft of the Summary was sent to all participating groups as well as the Diocesan Pastoral Council before submission to the national process.

A highlight in all these processes has been a sense of ownership and co-responsibility in God's mission, through the Church established by Jesus Christ and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Individuals have felt listened to, connected to the wider Church and valued in living out their lives of faith. There has been, and continues to be, a suggestion that lay people have not been listened to enough, and that developing these channels of communication and participation are extremely important.

At the same time, in the most recent Synod Consultation, there was an increased participation by clergy, mostly within deanery groups. Many of the sentiments expressed in the clergy contributions were mirrored in the lay contributions, with both asking for more opportunities to build relationships with each other. A number of the Key Points made in the Summary were calls not just to the Synod, but to the Local Church. The DPC is working on these, and encouraging other groups and strategies such as a future Diocesan Synod.

Testimony prepared by: DPC chair, Louise Cormie, and secretary, Elizabeth Young RSM, April 2024.

Testimony of the Diocese of Wollongong Australia

Synodal Consultation Process: Phase Two Towards the Second Assembly 2024

GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The participation of the Church of the Diocese of Wollongong in the second phase of the Synodal Consultation process has provided a significant and important opportunity for the people of this local church to engage in further dialogue and discernment regarding the desires and implications of a more synodal universal church.

Our second phase of the Synod consultation follows extensive engagement by the Wollongong Church in Phase One of the Synodal Consultation (2022), **during which over 2200 persons participated in the tendering of 75 synodal submissions**. Also informing the initial Diocesan Synodal Synthesis was data and feedback obtained through a National Plenary Council (2020), which involved over 7000 members of the local Diocese of Wollongong church community.

MODELLING SYNODALITY IN THE DIOCESE OF WOLLONGONG

The Catholic Diocese of Wollongong is committed to Synodality. As noted in *'Come and See, Go and Make: A Vision for Parishes'*, (2023) Bishop Mascord describes synodality as not being defined primarily 'as having the right to speak at yet another consultation' but rather 'as having the freedom to live out our baptismal call, working with one another for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ' (p. 8)

In this document he references the International Theological Commission which states: '(Synodality) refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and Mission of the Church.' Critically, the Bishop's vision for parishes: *'Come and See, Go and Make'* focuses on rediscovering our 'Why' as it explores the essential elements of mission and evangelisation. In this Vision document, the faithful are challenged to be invitational, drawing all people to an encounter with the love and mercy of the Father through Jesus Christ, to be accompanied by a community of believers, and to be equipped to share that encounter with others in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are individually and collectively invited to be missionary disciples who contribute to the life of the church.

Introductory Video <http://dow.sh/CSGMvision>

CSGM Resources <http://dow.sh/CSGMresources>

It is a document full of hope, where Bishop Mascord casts a vision for parishes, empowering them, in the context of their own community, to develop local plans and strategies to bring this vision to life. Singularly and communally, we are called to be Bearers of Christ's Love: in parishes, religious congregations, ecclesial movements and across all Diocesan Agencies.

The strategic plans of: Catholic Education, Diocese of Wollongong: *'Lighting the Way'* tw.dow.catholic.edu.au and Catholic Care, Diocese of Wollongong: *'A Heart That Sees'*; <https://dow.sh/strategicplan> are both imbued with this broader vision and accompanying synodal intent. A recently produced Diocesan video: *'It's Who We Are'* captures the essence of our identity as Bearers of Christ's Love in a synodal church <https://www.dow.org.au/about-us>

All such processes, documents and resources provide testimony to the intentional synodal path of the Diocese of Wollongong as it seeks to sustain and enliven its missionary purpose of making Jesus known, loved and served throughout the world.

PHASE TWO CONSULTATION PROCESS

In accordance with the exhortation of the General Secretariat to **'involve people and groups that express a variety of experiences, skills, charisms and ministries'**, the Diocese undertook a strategic and targeted approach in this second phase of consultation.

Given the breadth of prior engagement, the Diocese elected to respond to each of the identified chapters named in the Reflection Guide, provided by the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCP). Significant personnel from within the Diocese were strategically invited by Bishop Mascord to participate in processes of prayer, reflection, discernment and written feedback on a chapter of the Synthesis report from the First Assembly.

Each participant was assigned a specific chapter, identified as being pertinent to their experience and expertise. A total of 34 members of the faithful were invited to prayerfully peruse the convergences, matters for consideration and

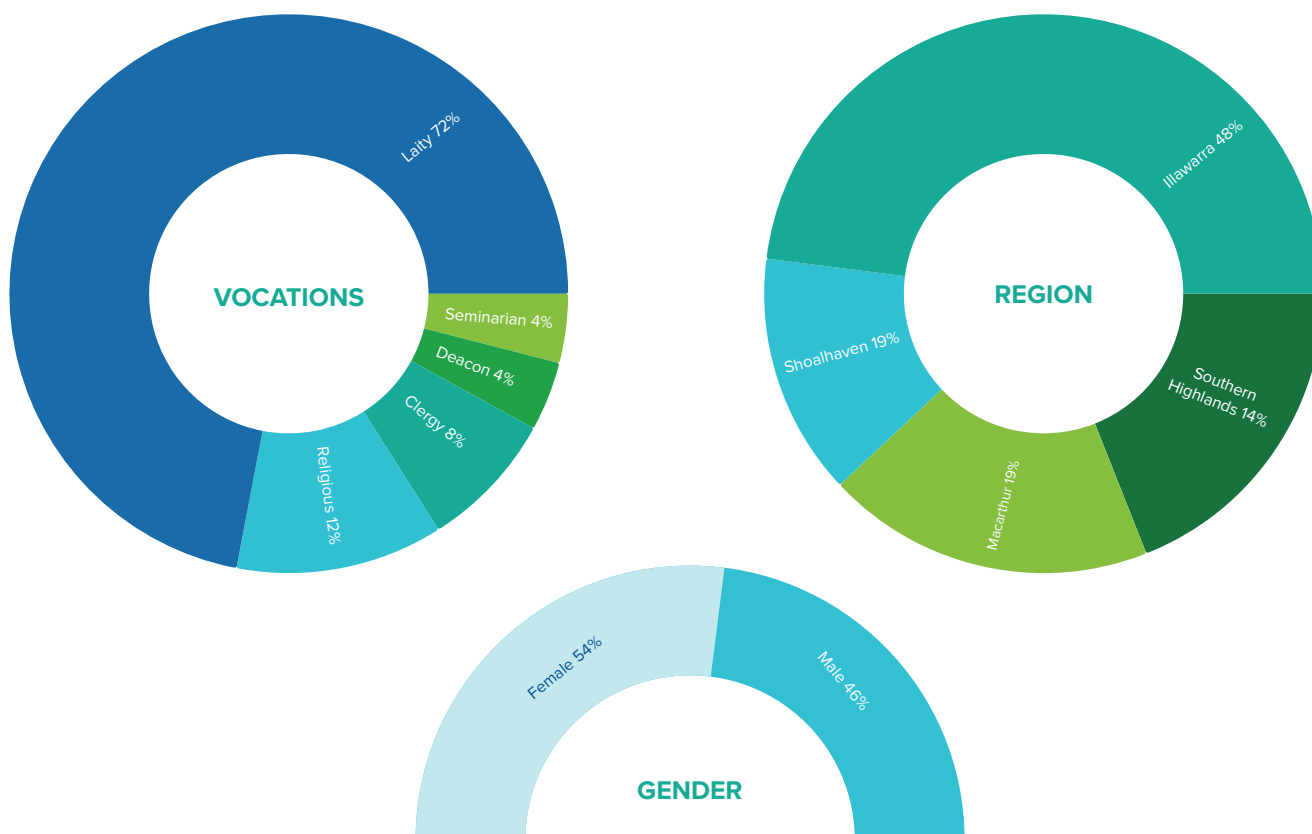
proposals named in the specified chapter and then to offer personal reflections and feedback in response to the key question and sub-questions posed through the NCPR consultation guidelines.

These responses were forwarded electronically and collated through the Office of the Bishop. A writing team was formed to consider and review these collective responses and then to produce a second phase draft consultation synthesis report for the consideration of Bishop Mascord prior to submission.

The submission was shared with the three Diocesan Vicars prior to submission to NCPR and tabled for discussion at the Council of Priests.

PARTICIPANT DATA

Thirty-four people from within the diocese were invited to participate in this consultation process. Twenty-four accepted this invitation and each provided written responses to the questions that were posed. The accompanying data below provides a snapshot of these participants:



SUMMARY OF DIOCESAN SUBMISSION

This report submitted by the Diocese of Wollongong offers a synthesis of the consultation feedback received by the Diocese in response to the Synthesis Report from the first session of the Synod on Synodality. It explores the fostering of co-responsibility within the Catholic Church, advocates for inclusivity, gender equality, and collaborative decision-making processes. The feedback sought from key leaders emphasises the empowerment of believers through a shared commitment, through being attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and by embracing the diverse charisms amongst the faithful.

The feedback points to the need for a paradigm shift towards, mission-oriented practices, participatory governance and inclusivity. It advocates for the reform

of structures, growth in lay involvement, promotion of women's leadership, and the empowerment of younger generations.

Key recommendations include embracing synodal methodologies, reforming decision-making processes, and establishing ministries focused on leadership development and spiritual growth. It is underscored by the importance of fostering evangelisation and facilitating authentic dialogue, whilst emphasising transparency, accountability, and a culture of listening, discernment, and participation.

By promoting inclusivity and embracing the unifying gifts of the Holy Spirit, this report envisions a Church focused on missional unity, amidst rich diversity.



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

