

## **Introduction**

This report presents a collation of feedback received during the third Synod Members Meeting. Given the high volume of data collected, the information has been carefully reviewed and condensed to ensure clarity and relevance. While not exhaustive, this summary seeks to faithfully reflect the feelings, feedback, and overall perspectives expressed by members. The intent of this report is to provide an informed understanding of the key themes and insights that emerged from the contributions shared during the meeting.

## **Summary of Input: Dr Chris Cotter**

The Director of Mission and Pastoral Life for the Diocese of Sandhurst shared an overview of their synodal journey and the structures they are developing to support a more participatory and accountable Church. His office provides operational and strategic support to parishes, faith communities, and diocesan consultative bodies.

A central theme of Sandhurst's approach is mutual accountability, grounded in the scriptural call of Matthew 28:19–20: "*Go... I am with you always.*" This vision shapes how they listen, make decisions, and plan for the future.

The following questions were asked in response to the stimulus material presented by Dr Chris.

**Question One:** *What brings a sense of encouragement and hope? What brings challenge and disturbance?*

Across the 244 responses, many Synod Members expressed a genuine sense of encouragement and hope rooted in the way people come together in prayer and in community. Respondents found inspiration in shared mission, the dedication of volunteers, and the visible commitment of parishes that already practise forms of lay leadership. There was a strong appreciation for opportunities to learn from one another and from other dioceses, particularly in ways that help overcome the isolation experienced across our geographically diverse region.

Alongside the hopefulness, a number of significant challenges were identified. Many noted that geographical distance makes it difficult for communities to gather and fully participate. Others described uncertainty surrounding diocesan expectations and a lack of





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transparent communication between parishes and diocesan administration. Several responses highlighted volunteer fatigue, particularly where a small number of people, including the parish priest, carry a disproportionate share of responsibilities. Some respondents expressed a sense of “*change fatigue*,” acknowledging that while change brings promise, it also brings discomfort and strain.

Members are hopeful that when leadership is shared and community is strong, but anxious when structures are unclear or workloads are unbalanced. Suggestions for improvement included clearer communication from diocesan administration, increased formation for lay leaders, more flexible leadership models, and consultation strategies that better reach remote communities. As one table wrote, “*what seems hopeful can also be challenging*,” especially when “*there is no direction... re: what is happening in parishes*.”

**Question Two:** *How does this shape your understanding of “mutual accountability” in a truly Synodal Church?*

The responses reveal that many participants welcome the idea of mutual accountability, especially when it is grounded in clarity, shared responsibility, and respectful collaboration. People expressed openness to shared leadership models that distribute responsibility more evenly between clergy and laity, seeing these as pathways toward healthier and more sustainable parish life.

However, a significant number of respondents described challenges in understanding how mutual accountability should operate in practice. Many noted that support for parishes is not clearly resourced or assigned at a diocesan level, with comments such as “*no support from diocese for parishes*” and “*no direction... in parishes*” appearing frequently in the responses. Members indicated a desire for greater clarity and practical examples of what mutual accountability looks like, how decisions are made, how communication flows, and how evaluation or follow-up is carried out. Some also raised concerns about resourcing, requesting realistic timeframes, with several noting that “*five years is a good time span*” for meaningful implementation.

Responses showed caution, with members needing a vision that is realistic, grounded, and accompanied by adequate guidance and support. Concrete suggestions included developing a clear accountability framework, setting transparent expectations, improving two-way communication, and offering training and resources to help parishes meet



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diocesan goals. Overall, the feedback reflects a willingness to work towards mutual accountability, provided that the structures are practical, supportive, and well-defined.

**Summary of Input: Fr Josh Whitehead**

Fr Josh Whitehead, Parish Priest of Our Lady of the Rosary, Caloundra, shared the parish's experience of renewal through the establishment of a Senior Leadership Team guided by a shared vision. This approach has fostered transparency, trust, and measurable growth, including increased engagement and financial support. It has also helped cultivate a parish culture where people of all ages experience a joyful intimacy with Jesus.

Drawing on Mark 1:17 — *“Follow me and I will teach you to fish for people”* — Fr Josh emphasised the Church's mission to evangelise and the importance of discipleship. He reflected on Bishop Joe's words from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference: that the Church seeks to uncover *“the presence and power of the liberating Christ in the lives of the people and communities of Far North Queensland.”* Renewal, he noted, begins within each of us, entwined with the spiritual journey of freedom and transformation offered by Christ.

Fr Josh spoke of the parish's three-year journey and reflected on the call of synodality for clergy and the wider Church. Priests are shaped by the people they serve, and all members are uniquely gifted for mission. He highlighted three types of conversations: practical, emotional, and social, and their role in deepening parish life.

The following questions were asked in response to the stimulus material presented by Fr Josh.

**Question One:** *Which of these principles resonates most with your parish context and why?*

Feedback from this question highlights a strong appreciation for principles that are practical and workable in everyday parish life. Many respondents said that the concept of a “senior leadership team” resonated with them because it offers structure, clarity, and shared responsibility. Others pointed to small but meaningful initiatives — such as improved hospitality, consistent music and liturgy, or even the use of name badges — as tangible ways to build community and strengthen engagement.

A number of respondents noted that while more structured leadership models are appealing, there are challenges in implementation. The most common concern was



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difficulty recruiting volunteers and finding capable leaders. Some commented that shifting towards “business principles” can feel uncomfortable, while others welcomed this shift as adding intentionality and professionalism to parish operations. There were also comments about uneven engagement across the diocese, with some schools and parishes working closely together and others feeling disconnected.

The overall tone is constructive and practical. Members are looking for ideas that work and can be realistically implemented. Suggestions centred on strengthening welcome and hospitality, improving volunteer recruitment and formation, and tailoring leadership structures to local needs rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. One respondent summed up the spirit of many comments: “Senior leadership because of its workability,” alongside simple actions like “hymns, homilies and hospitality — engaging people and building community.”

**Question Two:** *Where is leadership thriving? Where is it stuck?*

Responses to this question show that leadership thrives most where it is shared. Parishes with active pastoral councils, collaborative decision making, and empowered lay leaders reported stronger engagement, clearer direction, and healthier community life. Many identified positive examples where schools and parishes collaborate and where leaders meet regularly to plan and reflect together.

However, respondents also highlighted several places where leadership feels “*stuck*.” The most common theme was decision-making bottlenecks, particularly when “*everything has to go through the parish priest*.” In such situations, roles become unclear, initiative slows, and volunteers can feel disempowered. Some parishes described inconsistent or unclear structures, with people unsure of who is responsible for what. A few responses also noted uneven engagement between schools and parishes, leading to gaps in participation or communication.

People feel encouraged and motivated where collaboration is strong and expectations are clear, but discouraged when leadership is centralised or poorly defined. Suggestions for improvement included establishing regular and well-structured parish pastoral council meetings, delegating authority more intentionally, offering leadership formation for clergy and laity, and improving communication between parish and school communities.



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## **Conclusion**

The feedback shared during the third Synod Members Meeting reveals a community that is deeply committed to the life and mission of the Church, marked by both hope and honest concern. Across the responses, there is a clear desire for a more participatory, transparent, and collaborative church where prayer, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability are not only affirmed in principle but lived in practice.

Members consistently expressed encouragement where leadership is shared, communication is clear, and people feel valued and supported in their gifts. At the same time, the challenges identified, including geographical isolation, volunteer fatigue, unclear structures, and uncertainty about diocesan direction, underscore the importance of intentional formation, realistic resourcing, and well-defined frameworks for accountability and decision-making.

The insights from Dr Chris Cotter and Fr Josh Whitehead provided practical and theological grounding for these reflections. Together, they point toward a synodal vision that is both spiritually rooted and practically attentive: a Church that listens, accompanies, and empowers its people while remaining focused on mission and discipleship. The experiences shared affirm that renewal is possible when leadership is collaborative, expectations are transparent, and communities are supported to grow at a sustainable pace.

Overall, there is a strong call for clarity, guidance, and trust as the Diocese continues this journey together. These insights will help inform the next steps of the fourth and fifth Synod meetings, which will put these suggestions into concrete actions for the Bishop to review and consider.



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