

Becoming a more synodal Church: the Diocese of Sale Case Study

Sense of the Faithful¹

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This case study by the [Sense of the Faithful](#) examines the Catholic Diocese of Sale's journey to becoming a more synodal Church. The Diocese of Sale covers a vast geographic area ranging from Melbourne's outer south-eastern fringe to the NSW border, with a Catholic population of 123,748 (18.2% of the region) across 26 parishes served by just 34 priests — half of whom are from overseas.

The Sale Diocese has played a leading role in the shift to a more synodal church in Australia for several decades. Bishop Jeremiah Coffey (1989–2008) laid the foundations for synodal practice, establishing a Diocesan Pastoral Council in 1996, developing a Diocesan Pastoral Plan called 'Journeying Together' and championing lay involvement. These were continued by each successive bishop, Bishop Christopher Prowse (2009–2013) and by Bishop Patrick O'Regan (2015–2020), who led extensive consultations ahead of the 2020 Plenary Council, culminating in the 2019 Diocesan Assembly. Since his election in 2020, Bishop Gregory Bennet has continued to build on these foundations through the development of a whole of Diocese integration of synodal approach and practice.

Some of the most important developments since 2020 have been:

- *Conducting Synod on Synodality consultations (2021–22)*: Over 300 participants engaged via "Coffee Conversations," Zoom sessions, and parish groups, producing the diocesan synthesis *Let's Walk Together*.
- Appointment of Br Tony Clark FMS as Diocesan Facilitator for Synodality and Mission in February 2023.
- *Diocesan Mission Council (DMC, 2023)*: A 16-member body functioning as a diocesan pastoral council, selected through a discernment process emphasising gender, age, and regional balance.
- *April 2024 Diocesan Consultation to February 2025 Diocesan Assembly*: Some 1,200 student responses and 65 parish group inputs were synthesised into an Assembly Working Document, with delegates organised into 27 table groups for structured discernment on pastoral priorities for the next five years.
- *Diocesan Pastoral Plan 2026–2030*: This Plan outlines six pastoral goals covering faith formation, synodal leadership, inclusivity, youth engagement, parish-school collaboration, and missionary outreach.

This extensive consultative process provided a strong foundation to Sale's synodal journey. It brought the community together. It also highlighted, as have similar processes in some other dioceses, the challenges involved in moving towards a more synodal Christian life in complex, diverse and regional dioceses.

Based on our available knowledge, we offer the following suggestions for consideration as future steps:

- Try to expand lay leadership roles in parishes and the diocese, with specific attention to the position of women, and provide additional information about these roles;
- Publish a Year in Review with the Bishop's account of the successes and challenges for the diocese, reports of diocesan agencies, events and the information on key financial and other performance indicators for parish and the diocese;
- Work further to establish a bottom-up synodal process from the parish level, building on the formation of lay leaders in liturgy that is currently occurring. Consideration could be given to setting up a structured episcopal parish visitation program, consistent with personnel availability in the Sale Diocese; and;
- Deepen engagement with other faith communities and civil society in the service of the common good, including a diocesan *Laudato Si* Action Plan.

¹ Interviews for the case study were conducted by Dr Richard Curtain and Fr Gerard McKernan. Richard is responsible for the analysis of the available evidence. We are grateful to Bishop Gregory Bennet and Br Tony Clark for their feedback on the case study and to Br Clark for his invaluable detailed comments on an early draft. In addition, an external reviewer provided valuable feedback. We are also grateful to the diocesan staff and parishioners we were able to interview. However, the Sense of the Faithful editorial committee is responsible for the analysis and recommendations of the case study.

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A. The case study

Why conduct a case study?

The purpose of the Sense of the Faithful case studies is to encourage the Australian Church in its adoption of a synodal path. We want to do this by helping dioceses and parishioners deepen further their understanding of what a synodal approach involves. The focus of the case studies is on identifying the key features of a synodal process and outcomes in the diocese under study and the factors supporting or hindering their further adoption. There are two main reference points or lens we are applying. The most important of these are the key issues highlighted in the Final Document of the 2024 Synod. Our second frame of reference are the three case studies of the synodal practices and outcomes of the dioceses of Adelaide, Sandhurst and Parramatta.

Introducing and expanding synodal practices in Australian Catholic dioceses, viewed from a social science perspective, is an exercise in organisational change, albeit with an important spiritual dimension. The case study method is widely used in education, sociology and business studies to help people seeking to make organisational changes to understand the complex situations relevant to them. Case studies are particularly appropriate for explaining the interplay between the context shaping the organisation, the nature of the changes and the role of the people involved.

These case studies of synodality in dioceses undertaken by the Sense of the Faithful Ltd are based on documentary evidence, available statistical data, and person-to-person interviews with the bishop, if he is available, with members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, if possible, diocesan staff, parish priests and active parishioners. The final input is an assessment of the lead investigator, with feedback from the Sense of the Faithful editorial committee. A group in the Diocese can then review a draft of the case study and provide a response.

What is synodality?

Synodality in the Catholic Church has a long history, from the earliest centuries to even the reforms of the Council of Trent. Vatican II's document on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) emphasised the need for dialogue within the Church and with the world. The final document of the Synod of Bishops 2-17 October 2024, '*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*' noted (para 28) that the terms 'synodality' and 'synodal' derive from the early ecclesial practice of meeting in synods. Despite the different forms these meetings have taken, 'what unites them is gathering together to dialogue, discern and decide'.

Pope Francis promoted a form of synodality based on an extensive consultation process, involving each level of the Church, ranging from each diocese to national episcopal conferences and then to continental meetings. Given this extensive preparatory stage and the form of the conduct of the final synod in Rome, Pope Francis declared that the final document is now part of the Church's official teaching or magisterium. The document defined the meaning and dimensions of synodality in these terms:

Orientated towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and communal discernment. It also involves reaching consensus. [and] in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. ... synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church ... In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ (Para 28).

Synodality, therefore involves not only 'mutual listening, dialogue, and communal discernment'. But also, central to the synodal practices, is the outcome: 'spiritual renewal and structural reform' needed 'at all levels in local Churches' to enable them to 'become more participatory and missionary'.

Pope Leo and synodality

Pope Leo, stated in his first words as Pope on 8 May 2025: ... ‘we want to be a synodal Church, a Church that moves forward, a Church that always seeks peace, that always seeks charity, that always seeks to be close above all to those who are suffering’. He has further expanded on what he views as what is necessary to be a synodal church in his homily in St Peter’s Basilica [on 26 October 2025](#):

Please trust me when I tell you that by listening to the Spirit in dialogue, fraternity and parrhesia, you will help us to understand that, prior to any differences, we are called in the Church to walk together in the pursuit of God. ...This will enable us to live with confidence and a new spirit amid the tensions that run through the life of the Church: between unity and diversity, tradition and novelty, authority and participation.

In a letter ([14 April 2026](#)) Pope Leo sent to cardinals ahead of the Consistory he has convened in June 2026, he highlighted a key message from Pope Francis’ Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* concerning mission and the transmission of the faith. Leo noted that:

At the community level, it calls for a shift from a pastoral approach of maintenance to one of mission. This requires communities to be living agents of the proclamation

- welcoming communities that use accessible language, attentive to the quality of relationships, and capable of offering places for listening, accompaniment and healing. At the diocesan level, the responsibility of Pastors to resolutely support missionary boldness emerges clearly, ensuring that such boldness is not weighed down or stifled by organizational excesses, but is guided by a discernment that helps us to recognize what is essential.

The Sale Diocese

The Catholic Diocese of Sale is one of the three regional, “suffragan” dioceses in the Melbourne province, with Australia’s largest diocese, the Archdiocese of Melbourne, as the “metropolitan” diocese. The Catholic Diocese of Sale covers the Gippsland region in Victoria, stretching from the outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne (Berwick, Cranbourne, Narre Warren, and Pakenham) in the west to the New South Wales border in the east. It encompasses the coastal area from Phillip Island to Mallacoota and inland to the Great Dividing Range.

Background on previous diocesan changes

The Catholic Diocese of Sale is prominent among other dioceses in Australia for its synodal initiatives. Lay involvement in pastoral planning started initially by Bishop Jeremiah Coffey (1989-2008) and was carried forward by successive Bishops, Bishop (now Archbishop) Christopher Prowse (2009-2013) and Bishop (now Archbishop) Patrick O’Regan (2015-2020). Bishop Gregory Bennet (2020-present) has built on these past efforts to work towards becoming a synodal Church initially through diocesan-wide consultations, setting up a diocesan mission council and in 2026 inviting parishes to develop their own pastoral plans.

B. Sale pastoral planning

Bishop Jeremiah Coffey and key changes in the diocese

Sale was made a diocese on May 5, 1887. The diocese relied heavily on overseas-born bishops and priests, mostly from Ireland. Jeremiah Coffey was the fourth Bishop of Sale to be born overseas and the third from Ireland. His long tenure as the Bishop of Sale and his leadership in making changes in the diocese has had a continuing impact. He trained as a priest and was ordained in Ireland for the Diocese of Sale at his request. He served in seven parishes in Sale before been appointed Bishop in 1989. Coffey's leadership over 19 years shaped the diocese’s governance arrangements, its parish structure and the role of the laity. He initiated synodal practices as a way of giving a greater role for the laity in the pastoral direction of the diocese.

He noted in his 'Seeds of Hope' Pastoral Letter to the People of God in the Diocese of Sale in May 1995 that:

This period could be called the time of the laity. It is a great paradox that laity show great commitment in a time when there is a sharp decline in religious vocations and religious practice.²

He formed a Diocesan Pastoral Council to foster lay involvement and strategic planning for the diocese. Its first meeting was held on 20 July 1996 in Warragul, with 20 members. These included 10 lay people from parishes, 2 religious sisters, 1 brother, 3 clergy including the bishop, and four people who were to be co-opted. A Diocesan pastoral co-ordinator was appointed during 1997. Bishop Coffey also overhauled the diocese's finances by appointing a business manager and setting up a diocesan finance committee. He also established the council of priests, and a diocesan executive. Bishop Coffey introduced the Parishes in Partnership strategy in 2000 to address the issue of fewer priests in a diocese with a widely dispersed population.

Another initiative of Bishop Coffey was to establish the Bishop's Family Foundation in 1997 as a charitable trust to support families in need across Gippsland and outer eastern Melbourne suburbs. Its purpose was to provide ongoing aid rather than funding based on one-off appeals. The foundation raised over A\$2 million through community donations, primarily from the Catholic population. By the time of his retirement in 2008, it had disbursed more than A\$500,000 for programs including family counselling, youth intervention, suicide prevention, and emergency accommodation, while building a self-sustaining investment fund. Its work continues under its new name: [Trinity Families](#).³

The contributions of Bishops Prowse and O'Regan

The next bishop, Christopher Prowse, instituted a number of significant administrative reforms during his four-year tenure (2009-2013). Bishop Prowse re-convened the Diocesan Pastoral Council after his appointment as Bishop of Sale and the Council continued through his tenure at Sale. Although Bishop Patrick O'Regan (2015-2020) did not re-institute the Diocesan Pastoral Council during his tenure, he established instead a quasi-Diocesan Pastoral Council named '*Gaudium et Spes*' that focused instead on setting up extensive consultations leading up to the 2020 Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia. As discussed in greater detail in the next section, these consultations led to a diocesan assembly which was held on 13-14 September 2019 with some 170 representatives.

Recent steps toward becoming a more synodal Church

The 2019 Diocesan Assembly had the title 'Sharing our Story - Celebrating our Faith - Shaping our Future'. The Assembly focused on five themes drawn from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* - The Joy of the Gospel and was given added impetus by the national journey toward the fifth Plenary Council of Australia. The Assembly identified the following pastoral priorities: Faith Formation and Spirituality; Leadership and Governance; Families and Vocation; Liturgy and Prayer; and, The Welcoming Community. The Assembly's recommendations were released in a report entitled [Sale Diocesan Assembly Ideas for Pastoral Initiatives submitted by the Assembly](#).

² 'Signs of Hope', Part 1, Pastoral letter to the People of God in the Diocese of Sale', 24 May

1995, Diocese of Sale Archives, cited in DJ Gleeson, 2022, Diocesan Pastoral Councils: An Australian Historical study. Revised edition: 26 February, p 75.

³ Trinity Families provides over \$2 million in funding to charities that support families facing hardship. Programs funded include bushfire relief, family counselling, suicide prevention, emergency accommodation, and parenting support.

In the lead up to the 2019 Assembly, Bishop O'Regan's *Gaudium et Spes* Plenary Committee organised the consultations within the Diocese for the Plenary Council and the Synod consultations within the diocese for the Plenary Council and the Synod of Bishops in Rome.

New impetus for diocese-wide consultations

Bishop Gregory Bennet was appointed as the tenth Bishop of Sale on 27 June 2020. He was formally installed as the Bishop of Sale on 8 December 2020, at St Mary's Cathedral in Sale, following several delays due to COVID-19 restrictions. The consultation process in the diocese for the Synod of Bishops 2021-2023 in the Diocese took place between November 2021 and February 2022. Over 300 participants were involved through deep listening and communal discernment. To reach the community, the Diocesan Pastoral Office employed a multi-channel approach that included a dedicated website, weekly emails, parish bulletins, and tailored liturgical resources. Additionally, a simplified 'Coffee Conversations' guide was developed to facilitate informal discussions in homes and schools. Because of severe COVID-19 lockdowns in Victoria, many formal group sessions were held virtually via Zoom. Despite significant challenges such as pandemic exhaustion, a short timeframe, and public confusion about consultation due to the concurrent Australian Plenary Council, the process was able to collect concerns of the local Catholic community.

Key findings from the Diocesan synthesis 'Let's Walk Together' ...

In the national lead up to the Universal Synod called by Pope Francis in October 2021, diocesan consultations highlighted several substantive challenges facing the Catholic Church in Sale and elsewhere. A diocesan synthesis using the three themes of communion, participation and mission was prepared as one of the inputs for a national synthesis prepared by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Under the theme of communion, the diocesan synthesis noted that:

While many appear happy with the status quo and their weekly one-hour commitment for Mass, others want to invest more of themselves in the life of the parish. They are excited about the possibilities for change but express disappointment when their ideas, skills and initiatives are ignored or dismissed... There is a common sentiment that people desire a greater sense of community in which to live their Christian calling. They want to do more but many are uncertain how this might happen. Are our parishes places where people are actively encouraged to use their gifts and charisms? (Let's Walk Together Diocesan synthesis, p 7-8).

In relation to participation, the diocesan synthesis identified three key issues: the need for more co-responsible leadership, a more inclusive liturgy and prayer and a greater involvement of women in the Church. On the first issue, the synthesis reported the calls from parishioners for 'a parish reformation':

There is a huge need for a change from monologue to dialogue at every level of the Church. The Church also needs to be more transparent. There is sometimes a reluctance by clergy in allowing lay people to be too involved and there is some wariness [about] them taking initiatives. Shared decision making should be modelled by the Pastoral Council. ...Many congregations are growing older, more tired and more disillusioned. Communities want to enthuse those people who are currently just committing one hour a week at Mass to more intentional discipleship (Let's Walk Together Diocesan synthesis, p 8).

In relation to the liturgy and prayer, the synthesis noted that maintaining male gendered language showed who was important in the Church. On the matter of women in the Church, synthesis stated:

There are consistent calls for the Church to be much more proactive in enabling women's full participation. There is growing impatience that the Church is out of step with society when it concerns the meaningful involvement of women. It is often difficult

for men to see the obstacles and challenges that women have to face, dealing as they do with patriarchal structures in the church and all too often in the workplace and the general community.

In relation to the third theme of Mission, the decline in the number of priests available to administer the sacraments was highlighted as a significant issue affecting the diocese. It was noted that many smaller rural and remote communities in the diocese do not have weekly access to a priest for the celebration of the Eucharist. In these places, it is left up to the community to gather for prayer under a lay person leading the liturgy. One solution, already applied during Bishop Coffey's tenure, has been to cluster parishes to give the clergy responsibility for more than one parish. This often requires priests to travel long distances and has narrowed their involvement with parishioners to their role as sacramental ministers.

Another solution has been for the diocese to rely on overseas clergy to fill the gaps, many of whom have only temporary appointments in Australia. The synthesis notes, however, that the issue of enculturation is a huge one for these overseas priests, who have 'as much a struggle for many of them as it is for the communities they serve' (Lets Walk Together Diocesan synthesis, p 10).

The synthesis emphasised the importance of making greater use of lay pastoral leadership to preside at baptisms, marriages and funerals. It noted that some dioceses in Australia and New Zealand have appointed trained and competent lay pastoral leaders of parishes and smaller faith communities:

although this model may come with particular concerns and struggles, it seems to be a life-giving model of ministry which can be embraced together with the various other forms of parish pastoral leadership' (Lets Walk Together Diocesan Synthesis p 11).

Diocesan Facilitator for Synodality and Mission appointed

In February 2023, Br Tony Clark FMS was appointed the Diocesan Facilitator for Synodality and Mission on a three-day-a-week basis. His brief has been to 'work closely with Bishop Greg, Diocesan leaders, clergy and groups, in facilitating efforts to work across the Diocese in becoming a synodal Church' at all levels of the Diocese. He has continued in the role while this case study was being undertaken.

Establishing the Sale Diocesan Mission Council

In 2023, Bishop Bennet formed the Diocesan Mission Council (DMC) to function as a diocesan pastoral council. The *Gaudium et Spes* group drafted the Statutes for the new council. The selection for membership of the DMC involved the following process: people were asked to nominate themselves supported by a reference from their parish priest. Those submitting an expression of interest were asked to provide a brief reflection on how they could contribute to the council. Selection was based on demonstrating an active faith, leadership in ministry, and a commitment to synodal processes (deep listening and collaboration).

Nominees were invited to a day-long discernment process, based on an outline of what was involved. The nominees were invited to pray before deciding whether they wanted to be involved. A selection committee chaired by the bishop chose the Council members based on gender, age and regional representation across Gippsland and the parishes in outer Melbourne. It was made clear that the DMC members were to regard themselves as representatives of the diocese, and not of their parish alone.

Eight key functions of the Diocesan Mission Council are identified in the Statutes which specify its role and the statutes governing its operations (see Attachment 1). The DMC members, numbering 16 in total, were commissioned at the end of 2023 for a three-year term. DMC members spent most of 2024, involved in getting to know the Diocese and learning how to function as a synodal team. The meetings were conducted using the synodal practice of spiritual discernment and were seen as crucial to enabling the Council to function productively, aware of the nature and extent of

the issues they were to consider and decide on once the Diocesan Assembly had concluded.

The bishop and all priests meet regularly, using synodal practices

Another important governance change has been the expansion of the Bishop's Council of Priests to include all 29 active priests in the diocese. The meetings are held monthly and are designed in a synodal way to ensure that everyone has a change to contribute. In-between the monthly meetings, there are online prayer meetings with pastoral updates on the happenings around the diocese. The consultative body includes the Bishop and other key diocesan officials such as the Vicar-General. Br Tony Clark also reports on the synodal process. The Council of Priests has been a valuable vehicle for keeping priests informed, giving priests the opportunity to raise matters of concern and to get support where needed.

The leadup to the 2025 Diocesan Assembly

The visioning and planning for the Diocesan consultation process and assembly preparation was undertaken by the Diocesan Animation Team. This team of 14 people were selected by Bishop Greg for their experience and expertise and led by Br Tony. On Pentecost Sunday, 19 May 2024, the Diocese launched in each Parish community a diocesan consultation process to take place between June and October 2024. All parishioners were invited to participate in a two-phase process of prayerful spiritual conversations. The first phase of the consultation was to ask participants to outline what had been happening in their personal and faith community lives over the previous five years. The second phase asked those taking part to look forward to the next five years 'to identify the steps or initiatives that the Holy Spirit is calling the Diocese to take to become more Christ centred, synodal and missionary'.

The feedback from these consultation sessions were brought together in an Assembly Working Document as the basis for discussions and discernment at the 2025 Diocesan Assembly. Feedback was received from 65 parish groups, 25 individual submissions, and approximately 1,200 school student responses provided input by use of a simplified version of the key questions. The feedback was synthesised into an Assembly Working Document and shared with the assembly delegates before the assembly to aid their reflection, discernment & preparation. The key steps and dates are shown in the figure below.



The 2025 Diocesan Assembly Working Document offers an outline of the key issues identified in the five years before the Assembly. Phase One: Key Issues (2019-2024) The Phase One report surveyed the Diocese of Sale's lived experience across five difficult years, identifying both significant challenges and notable spiritual resilience. Impact of COVID-19 and natural disasters dominated the period.

The Phase Two consultations identified the following seven strengths of the parish communities and the diocese: strong sense of community and inclusivity; commitment to faith and spiritual life; valuing and preserving our tradition; excellence in catholic education & potential of young people; social outreach and service; gift of our diversity and cultural strengths; and strength of leadership and vision. The challenges faced by parish communities and the diocese were identified as:

- overcoming generational and cultural gaps to engage youth in an aging population.
- reversing declining church membership by tackling loneliness, building community, and embracing cultural diversity.
- addressing gaps in spiritual formation by bridging catholic identity, tradition, and modern expectations to reignite evangelisation.
- securing the future of church leadership by sustaining clergy, lay formation, and women's evolving role.
- strengthening parish-school partnerships and sustaining educational excellence.
- managing financial challenges and measuring impact effectively; and
- enhancing communication strategies to bridge the technological divide (see Assembly Working Document pp 17-19 for more detail on the challenges).

The 2025 Diocesan Assembly

The Diocesan Assembly was held at Federation University Auditorium in Churchill, Victoria, on February 14–15, 2025. The Assembly brought together 220 delegates and participants, representing every Catholic parish, school, hospital, and aged care home, as well as major Diocesan bodies, organisations, and Ecumenical partners.

The goal of the 2025 Diocesan Assembly was to bring together a broad and representative group of people from the Catholic Diocese of Sale, alongside their ecumenical partners, to experience the synodal Church in action, by listening deeply to one another, and discern, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, how the Diocese can become a more Christ-centred, synodal, and missionary Church.

All discussions and spiritual conversations took place in the Federation University Auditorium. The focus of the table group discussions was to 'affirm the strengths and best practices of the Diocese, identify the significant challenges being faced by the Diocese, and discern what pastoral goals and actions were needed for the next five years. The recommendations from the assembly's discussions and discernment were then passed to the Diocesan Mission Council to provide the basis for a Diocesan Pastoral Plan.

The Diocesan Assembly delegates and participants were placed in 27 table groups, each carefully selected to ensure a mix of ages, gender and parishes. The table group remained the same over the two days. The facilitators of the table group discussions were either a member of the Diocesan Mission Council or a member of the Diocesan Animation Team. Other delegates were nominated as Table Scribes. Each scribe was provided with a laptop to record via Google Form the individual and group responses to the questions set for each session.

The roles of the Table Facilitators included endeavouring to create and develop a safe, harmonious, and relaxed spirit among table group members, leading the dialogue and spiritual conversations according to the process detailed in the Assembly handbook. Table Facilitators were also asked to inform the Assembly Facilitator of any issues, concerns or questions arising from the table group experience.

Bishop Bennet stated in his opening address with his apology for the harm caused by the sexual abuse crisis. He encouraged participants to be open to the Holy Spirit, seeing the assembly as a form of pilgrimage, recognising the many ways people are witnessing to the Gospel and acknowledging the results of the feedback. The bishop's address also noted the outreach ministries within the diocese such as those involved in the prison ministry, the aged-care chaplaincy, the St Vincent de Paul Society conference, and parish-based programs like Mick's Kitchen- Traralgon, Paddy's Kitchen Pakenham, other groups working together like Frankies in Warragul, Catholic Women's League, and prayer groups.

The details of the work and outcomes of the 2025 Diocesan Assembly are well documented in the [2025 Assembly Summary Report](#) published in March 2025. An outline is provided in a separate attachment to the case study (see Attachment 2).

The Diocesan Pastoral Plan Framework

After the Diocesan Assembly, the Diocesan Mission Council (DMC) was set the task of forming, shaping and refining the final outcomes of the 2025 Diocesan Assembly into a five-year Diocesan Pastoral Plan Framework. In the Bishop Bennet's words, the Plan is to 'act as a compass for all our parishes, agencies, schools and colleges, and guide our pastoral support throughout the Diocese'. He noted Pope Francis' expectation that the universal synodal way:

...be enacted, interpreted and implemented in local Churches taking into account different contexts, 'so that the style proper to the missionary synodal Church can be ever-better learned and developed' (Synod Final Document, Accompanying Note, Pope Francis 24 November 2024).

During much of 2025, the DMC met several times to develop the Diocesan Pastoral Plan. The 12 priorities identified by the 2025 Diocesan Assembly were subsequently reduced to six and a vision statement was developed. The Plan was launched at St Michael's Parish Church, Traralgon, on 10 October 2025 as the [Diocesan Pastoral Plan Framework 2026-2030](#), based on the following six core Pastoral Goals.

Six Core Pastoral Goals (2026-2030)

1. Deepen Christ-Centred Faith and Spiritual Growth: Strengthening spiritual life through prayer, liturgy, and formation.
2. Advance Synodal Leadership and Engagement: Promoting shared leadership and "journeying together" among clergy and laity.
3. Build an Inclusive and Welcoming Church: Creating compassionate communities that value all individuals.
4. Inspire the Engagement of Young People and Families: Empowering youth and families as vital participants in church life.
5. Enhance Parish-School Collaboration: Building stronger partnerships between Catholic schools and local parishes.
6. Ignite Missionary Outreach and Evangelisation: Encouraging missionary discipleship through outreach, social justice, and ecological stewardship.

The Plan's primary audiences are parishioners and all baptised Catholics, parish leadership and ministry teams, the clergy and pastoral staff, diocesan leaders and collaborators, the wider community and faith and mission partners. The Plan's aim is 'to unite all communities in the Diocese under a shared purpose and vision, while remaining responsive to local contexts'. It sets clear, measurable pastoral goals aligned with Diocesan priorities, 'encourages bold and creative pastoral action, guided by Church tradition and teachings, and fosters collaboration through shared resources and support'. The Diocesan Pastoral Plan Framework is intended to be more than just about organizing activities. Its purpose is to cultivate 'a shared vision of discipleship, service, and renewal that responds to the real needs of people today' (See Diocesan Pastoral Plan Framework 2026-2030, p 8).

Parish pastoral plans

Parishes are encouraged to develop their own pastoral plans using the diocesan pastoral plan as a key reference point. The Diocesan Pastoral Plan offers a recommended seven-step process for parishes to develop their own Parish Pastoral Plans, as outlined in the box below.

1. Ground the process in prayer and discernment.
2. Establish diverse parish planning teams.
3. Align with the Diocesan vision and goals.
4. Understand local contexts and needs.
5. Consult broadly and deeply with parish communities.
6. Draft, finalise, and commission the Parish Pastoral Plan.

Parishes have been asked to finalise and commission their pastoral plans by May 2026, then to start implementation in June 2026. Regular reviews are to occur throughout 2029 to culminate in the 2030 Diocesan Assembly. The Diocesan Pastoral Plan booklet has an appendix describing key elements of the parish planning process. These the topics of ‘what a Conversation in the Spirit involves’, ‘practical considerations’, ‘crafting a question’ and ‘the outline of a method for conducting a Conversation in the Spirit’, as well as ‘good and bad habits in conducting the conversations’.

C. Sale Diocese social profile

The Catholic population in the diocese and its parishes

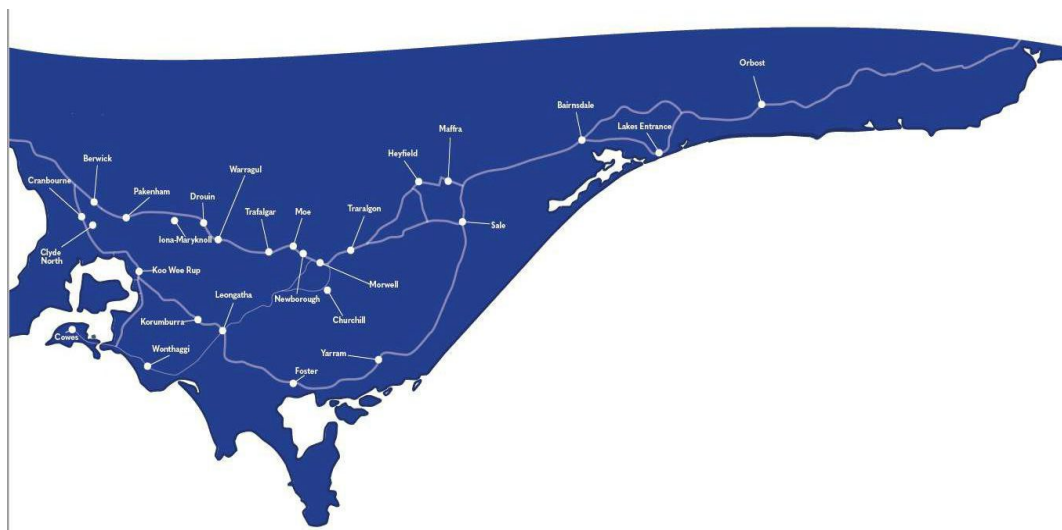
The total population of the region the diocese covers as recorded in the 2021 census was 680,681. The census showed that 123,748 residents self-identified as Catholics, or 18.2 per cent, below the Catholic national share of 20.0 per cent of the total population. However, as noted below, in absolute terms the size of Catholic population of the Sale diocese increased significantly between 1996 and 2021.⁴

Parishes of the diocese

In 2026, there are 26 parishes and some 60 Mass centres. There are 34 priests and 3 deacons in full-time ministry. This means that in many rural centres, Mass is only available every second or third Sunday. On the other Sundays, lay people lead the liturgy. Many rural and regional parishes are in partnership with other parishes, with one parish priest and one parish office. In addition, there are 9 priests and 3 deacons who are retired and who are on a supplementary list of clergy. Half (15) of the priests in full-time ministry were born overseas, namely India, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Vietnam. There are five parish associates. In the absence of a priest on a Sunday, the Bishop has commissioned lay leaders, in rural Mass centres, to lead Liturgy of the Word Holy Communion.

The parishes of the diocese are spread across Gippsland starting from the outer metropolitan areas of Melbourne in the west, notably the parishes of Berwick, Clyde North, Cranbourne, Narre Warren, Pakenham, Iona/Maryknoll, and Koo Wee Rup. The parishes of Central Gippsland, from Warragul to Sale, are Drouin, Warragul, Trafalgar, Moe-Newborough, Morwell, Churchill, Traralgon, Heyfield-Cowwarr, Maffra, and Sale. The parishes in East Gippsland are Bairnsdale, Lakes Entrance, and Orbost. Omeo in the High Country is partnered with Bairnsdale. In South Gippsland, the parishes are Korumburra, Leongatha, Foster, and Yarram. Cowes parish is on Phillip Island, and the parish of Wonthaggi is on the south coast.

⁴ The data source is the National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2023, Diocesan Social Profile based on the 2021 Australian Census: Diocese of Sale Page 3.



Differences in parish demographics

The Catholic population of the Sale diocese increased from 82,678 in 1996 to 123,748 in 2021, an increase of 50 per cent. This big increase in population has been largely concentrated in the parishes on Melbourne's fringe. The largest parishes in terms of population, as recorded in the 2021 Census, are in outer metropolitan suburbs of greater Melbourne in the west of the diocese. These are the parishes of Narre Warren (16,805), Berwick (15,012), Clyde North (13,904), Cranbourne (11,648) and Pakenham (11,452).

However, the only parish with a significant recent growth in its Catholic population between 2016 and 2021 (47 per cent increased) is Clyde North. Its population in 2021 had a median age of only 34 years. It is located approximately 46–52 km from the Melbourne CBD. So it is a residential suburb of Melbourne, situated in a key growth corridor near Berwick and Cranbourne. The suburb is described as having modern, master-planned housing estates.⁵

Only four other parishes in the diocese have had a modest increase in their Catholic populations between 2016 and 2021. These are Cowes (an 11 per cent increase to 3,490), Warragul (a 7 per cent increase to 4,150), Berwick (a 3 per cent increase) and Wonthaggi (a 2 per cent increase to 3,134). All the remaining parishes have Catholic populations declining. The large parish of Narre Warren, which despite its outer metropolitan location, experienced a decrease in its Catholic population between 2016 and 2021 by 15 per cent.

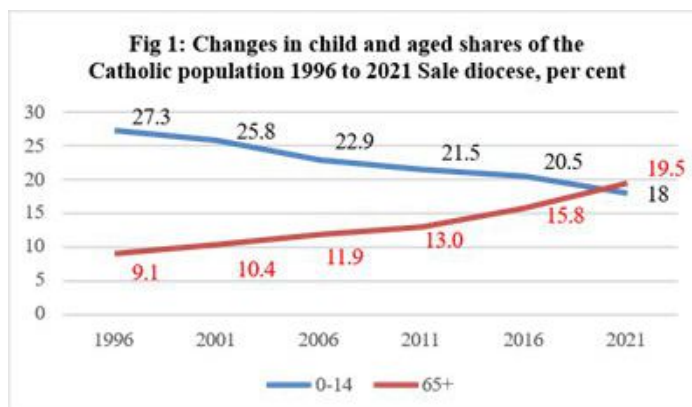
Most parishes in the diocese with smaller and older populations also experienced a fall in their Catholic populations. The average decline for eight parishes in Central Gippsland was 13 per cent. This did not include the Warragul Catholic population, which, as noted above, grew by 7 per cent.

The differences in average median age of the Catholic population in Outer Metro and West Gippsland parishes in 2021 was 40 years of age. In Drouin and Warragul, the Catholic median age was 45 years of age. But for all the parishes in the rest of the diocese, the median age of the catholic population in 2021 was 53 years of age. These median age differences show that the diocese has some large parishes with a much younger population than elsewhere. In contrast, the diocese also has many more dispersed parishes with small, aging Catholic populations in decline.

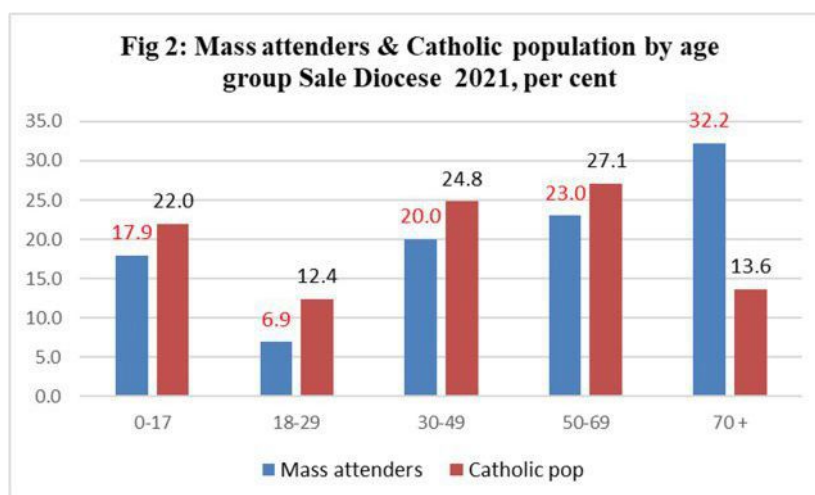
Figure 1 below shows the extent of demographic change for the Sale diocese over the 25 years to 2021, using census data. The upper blue line shows the share of young children aged to 14 years in the Catholic population has declined from just over one in four (27.3 per cent) in 1996 to just over

⁵ <https://www.barryplant.com.au/suburb-profile/melbourne/casey-south-east/clyde-north/>

one in six (18.0 per cent) in 2021. Over the same period, the lower red line shows that the share of the older population aged 65 and over has risen from just below one in ten (9.1) to one in five (19.5 per cent) of the Catholic population.



A major indicator of the changing population structure of parishes in Sale is the overall Mass attendance rate and the age structure of the Mass attenders. The 2021 Mass attendance rate for the Sale Diocese was 6.2 per cent of the Catholic population, which is much lower than the 2016 attendance rate of 9.7 per cent. Covid is a factor in the drop in the attendance rate, but it is possible that this fall will have an ongoing effect.



Source: [National Count of Attendance May 2021 and the National Catholic Census Project 2021](#).

Figure 2 shows the under-represented age groups among the Mass attenders compared with the total Catholic population in 2021 show that the most under-represented age group is the 18–29-year-olds. However, other age groups of Mass attenders (0–17-year-olds, 30–49 -year-olds and 50–69-year-olds) are also under-represented compared with their share of the total Catholic population. It is only the oldest age group - those aged 70 and over who are over-represented among the Mass attenders. Figure 3 shows the overall data on Mass attendance by age compared with the Catholic and the region's total population. These data show a longer-term trend.

Mass attendance now shows a predominance of older Catholics. The next national count of attendance will be in 2026. Age-specific attendance results will be one measure of the impact of recent changes coming from the Diocesan Mission Council and parish level initiatives. Another more readily available indicator of parish life which can be used, if available, is the trend in the number of marriages, baptisms, first communions, confirmations and funerals taking place over time. These statistics are collected for the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, published by the

Vatican.⁶ The Diocese could report on these statistics by parish to show the extent to which the nominal Catholic population still wants to mark major life events such as marriages, birth and deaths by taking part in church services. A third indicator of changes at parish level is the number of adults joining the Church each year. At Easter 2026, over 100 adults were received into the Church in the Diocese.⁷

How parishioners differ in their views on parish involvement

Catholic Mass attenders in the Sale diocese and elsewhere have widely divergent views about the main benefits to them of being a parishioner. This is shown by the evidence from the 2022 National Church Life Survey for Sale parishes and more recent parish consultations from the parishes of Drouin and Warragul (including Neerim South). Parishioners' views of what it means to be a Catholic are likely to be shaped by where and when they were born, whether female or male, their education level, employment status and where they now live.

In other words, parishioners' own understanding of what being a Catholic entails varies by what country they were born in, what era they grew up in (e.g. pre Vatican II, early post-Vatican II and late post-Vatican II), their education level, whether they have a secure job or not, and their place of residence (e.g. living in a relatively new parish in an outer suburb, in a long-established parish in a regional town, or residing in a small rural settlement). Reconciling these divergent views of parishioners within one parish may pose a major challenge for parishes in developing a common pastoral plan.

Four distinct types of Catholic parishes and parishioners

To understand these divergent views among parishioners, a prominent Melbourne diocesan priest, Brendan Reed, is the author of a major international study of a four-part typology of parishes and parishioners. The analysis below focuses on using the typology to explain the significant differences in views among Catholics in the same parish.

Fr Reed has identified four types of parishes and tested their validity by detailed survey analysis in Melbourne and Belgium. These four parish types are: (1) the '*convinced*' and the (2) '*engaged*' parishes which are externally or publicly oriented; and the (3) '*devoted*' and (4) '*consumerist or service*' parishes which are internally focused or privately oriented.⁸ Another dimension is traditional or open to change. The leaders of '*convinced*' and '*devoted*' parishes are likely to follow a more traditional Catholic orientation and the leaders of '*engaged*' and '*consumerist or service*' parishes are more likely to be open to changed ways on working together as a parish. More recently, Fr Reed has extended his typology to explain the different approaches by parishes and parishioners to synodality and the form it can take in practice.⁹

Catholic parishioners' different perspectives on parish involvement can be seen in the responses to a 2022 National Church Life Survey of parishioners from seven parishes in the Sale diocese, reported in the following section. The four different orientations can also be seen in the feedback from the Drouin and Warragul (including Neerim South) parishioners made in the lead up to the February 2025 Diocesan Assembly, reported in detail in a separate attachment on the Sense of the Faithful

⁶ *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* (Statistical Yearbook of the Church) is edited by the Vatican's Central Office of Church Statistics. The volume provides quantitative data on pastoral activities worldwide, including the number of marriages, baptisms, first communions, and confirmations.

⁷ <https://www.cdsale.org.au/news/bishop-greg-s-easter-message-2026>

⁸ Brendan Reed, 2018, *Engaging with the Hopes of Parishes: A Systematic, Empirical and Practical Search for a Parish Engagement Scale (SPES)*. Vol. 2. LIT Verlag Münster.

⁹ Brendan Reed, 2025, 'A compass of four subtypes: realising synodality' *Priests and Synodality Presentation*, ACCCR and Garratt Publishing, 6 November. Slides 21-22.

website. These differences in parishioner attitudes to their parish reveal how difficult it can be trying to achieve agreement on key objectives for the parish to aim for. Experienced facilitators may be needed to address and attempt to resolve these differences so that a common set of parish goals are accepted by most parishioners.

2022 survey data on parishioners' attitudes in seven parishes spread across the diocese

The aim of the National Church Life Survey is to help churches connect with the wider community. The national survey covered 2,100 local churches in 20 denominations and movements. It aims to provide the information that churches can use to strengthen their vitality, develop effective leadership and inform their ministry and mission in the Australian context. The questions are designed to identify three types of core qualities: internal (faith, worship, and belonging), outward (service, faith sharing, and inclusion) and inspirational (vision, innovation and leadership).

The 2022 report of the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) for the Catholic Diocese of Sale is based on 1,253 persons aged 15 and over. Some 71 children aged 8 to 14 were also surveyed. It is based on responses from parishioners in seven parishes, three of which are located in the outer west metropolitan area of Melbourne, one in Central Gippsland, two in East Gippsland and one in South Gippsland.¹⁰ Nearly all the Mass attenders were regulars, with 92 per cent stating they were frequent attenders (monthly or more). Three quarters of respondents had been a member of the parish for more than five years, with 40 per cent attending the parish for more than 40 years.

The average age of the respondents 15 and over was 59 years, with more than third (37 per cent) aged 70 and over, and another 31 per cent aged 50 to 69 years. These two age groups account for two thirds of the parishioners surveyed. Only one third of those surveyed were younger (24 per cent 30-49 years and 9 per cent aged 15-29 years).

Parishioners' responses on what they value

In response to the question: what do you value about your church/parish, three out of five attenders (59 per cent) said they valued celebrating the Eucharist/receiving Holy Communion and one on three (32 per cent) said praying for one another. Other features valued highly were sermons/homilies and traditional style of worship or music (28 per cent for each response). Only one-in-four parishioners surveyed (23 per cent) valued the parish's 'wider community care/social justice emphasis' and still fewer (7 per cent) stated that they valued 'reaching those who do not attend church'.

Using Reed's parish types, these responses indicate that many parishioners have a strong 'consumerist or service' view of their parish. This perspective is also evident from the responses to a question about their priority in the next 12 months. The largest response from parishioners (33 per cent) was to 'build a strong sense of community' and to promote their 'spiritual growth' (29 per cent).

Only a minority of parishioners surveyed nominated as a priority a greater external focus for the parish, what Reed calls an 'engaged' perspective. Their focus is reflected in the following responses: 'a new program for reaching the unchurched' (17 per cent), 'supporting social justice and aid' (16 per cent), 'increasing the number of people at Mass' (16 per cent), 'ensuring that new people are included' (15 per cent) and 'encourage to share faith/invite' (10 per cent).

Most parishioners (84 per cent) believed that there was a strong sense of belonging in the parish, and 89 per cent agreed that their church was inclusive of different kinds of people. However, only 40 per cent said they 'always or mostly seek to make new arrivals welcome'. Less than half of the

¹⁰ The number of parishes participating in the survey in 2022 and 2016 was each time. This compares with 22 parishes surveyed in 2011. This big difference may indicate an aging parish population less interested in the results of the survey for their parish and acting on them.

parishioners surveyed (46 per cent) said that they are likely to follow-up someone drifting away from church involvement’.

Parishioner engagement with the wider community

Several survey questions concerned how parishioners relate to the wider community. Overall, a third of parishioners surveyed (35 per cent) said they participate in wider community groups. This includes a quarter of parishioners (25 per cent) who reach out to the wider community through local church-based activities. Most of these activities are related to community services and some are evangelistic outreach activities.

In relation to ‘acting for the environment’, nearly all respondents (91 per cent) agreed that Christians have a responsibility to actively care for the environment. However, only a quarter (26 per cent) ‘are very active’, with nearly a third (31 per cent) saying they ‘are a little active’. In a notable contrast, most of the children (86 per cent) surveyed said they ‘do things to help the environment’, albeit these responses are based on a small sample (71) of children aged 8 to 14 years surveyed.

The extent of parishioner involvement in the parish

In terms of active involvement in parish activities, one third of parishioners (33 per cent) surveyed in 2022 performed at least one leadership or ministry role. This is an increase from 27 per cent in the 2016 survey of seven parishes in the Sale Diocese. The survey, however, indicated that there is scope for parishioners to be more engaged in the future. Up to 75 per cent of respondents agreed that ‘they would support the development of new initiatives in the ministry and mission of their local church’. Nevertheless, only 17 per cent of parishioners agreed ‘to a great extent’ that their local church’s leaders encourage them to make use of their gifts and skills. A further 26 per cent agreed that this happened ‘to some extent’.

The orientation of active parish groups

The parish groups listed on each parish’s website provide another source of information on the nature and extent of activities that parishioners are undertaking. The nature of parishioners’ involvement in the parish can be gained from categorising into four types of parish groups operating in the parish. Three of four types are internally focused: functional, faith community, devotional. The fourth is externally focused on connecting to the wider community.

The seven parishes reported on in the 2022 NCLS vary in the number and types of groups listed on their websites. Two of the three parishes surveyed, which are in the outer west metropolitan area of Melbourne, have large Catholic populations (16,805 and 11,452 recorded in the 2021 Census). However, parish Catholic population size alone is not the main factor explaining the broader range of parish groups. The outer west metropolitan parish with the smaller population (11,452) has fourteen parish groups. These groups are listed below under three types: devotional, faith community-based groups, and groups focused on connecting with the wider community.

- Devotional groups Servant Community Charismatic Prayer Group, Legion of Mary, Martha & Mary Friendship Prayer & Social Group;
- Faith community groups: Sunday Morning Cuppa After 9.00am Mass, D’Vine Kids Children’s Faith formation program, The Vine Youth Group, Luncheon Group each month, Sewing group each week, Seraphs group);
- Parish groups engaging with the wider community: Paddy’s Kitchen Sundays between 4-4.30pm Free two-course home cooked takeaway meal every Sunday for anyone in need; Catholic Earthcare parish; Community Resilience Mapping Workshop: Come join Friends of the Earth Australia and the Gippsland Anglicans ACTinG team for an interactive workshop.

The other large parish located in the outer west metropolitan area has five faith support groups and two groups focused on the wider community (St Vincent de Paul and Shephard's Table).

The parish in the NCLS 2022 located in Central Gippsland, with a 2021 Catholic population of 4,457 has two devotional groups, four faith community support groups, including the Catholic Aboriginal ministry and three external focused groups (St Vincent de Paul, an Op Shop and a social justice group). One parish in the 2022 NCLS in East Gippsland, with a Catholic population in 2021 of only 1,418 has up to 19 parish groups, seven of which are focused on functional roles in the parish, three groups are devotional, five groups are supporting the faith community, and four are engaged with the wider community, including two groups with an ecumenical focus.

The Sense of the Faithful has prepared a separate case study of the Warragul and Drouin parishes, available on the [Sense of the Faithful](#) website. The two parishes have Catholic populations in 2021 of 4,150 and 3,772 respectively. They are in partnership operating as a joint entity supporting three distinct church communities (see separate case study for more details). Of the 31 parish groups open to parishioners, twelve (12) groups are involved in the *functional* roles needed for their parish to operate as a sacramental and liturgical service provider. Another 12 parish groups are focused on supporting or growing the parish faith community. Six groups are engaged in devotional activities related to personal piety. Only one group is engaged with providing support to the wider community beyond the parish - St Vincent de Paul group. Parishioners, however, independent of their parish, reported that they are involved with community service clubs such as the Service clubs, foodbanks, op shops, and emergency services.

Explaining differences between Parish activity profiles

The above parishioner responses and statements about the value to them of parish life provide important snapshots of the differences between parishes in how they function. The listing of group activities of nine parishes from different regions in the diocese provide an insight into what is happening in practice. What makes parishioners become active participants in parish activities is likely to be the result of many factors coming together. The encouragement of the parish priest and other clergy is one factor. A high proportion of parishioners who are migrants with young families from a non-English-speaking background is another factor. On the other hand, a relatively remote regional town with a small population of long-established residents can also be fertile ground for a highly active parish. In both instances, the parish is at the centre of the ways people want to help build or foster the wider community in which they live.

Parishioners benefit from not only having groups and activities that support their faith community through participation. They also are likely to grow in their faith if they can engage as Catholics with the wider community to contribute to the common good. This is the essence of what mission means for a parish community, as stated in the Final Document For a Synodal Church (para 59).

In a missionary synodal Church, under the leadership of their pastors, communities will be able to send people out in mission and support those they have sent. Communities will, therefore, see themselves as primarily devoted to the service of a mission that the faithful carry out within society, in family and working life. They will, therefore, not remain focused exclusively on the activities that take place within their own communities and upon their own organisational needs.

D. Catholic schools and their connection with parishes

An important component of the progress towards a more synodal church in Sale has been the integration of the Catholic schools into the synodal process. The Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Limited (DOSCEL), under the Chief Executive Officer Paul Velten, developed in 2024 a new Strategic Plan 2025-2028. This involved consultations with principals, staff, students, parents, clergy, board members, and the agency secretariat. The plan sets the vision, mission, values and strategic priorities for Catholic Education in the Diocese for four years to 2028. The strategic plan includes a commitment ‘to develop an informed, shared understanding of the nature and purpose of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Sale, promoting, supporting and aligning school engagement with diocesan and parish mission’.

The Diocese of Sale covers 39 Catholic primary schools and seven Catholic secondary schools spanning metropolitan, regional, and rural areas from Cranbourne and Narre Warren in the west, to Philip Island in the south and Orbost in the east. School staff number 3,152 teaching 10,706 primary and 9,809 secondary students. Two new Catholic primary schools are opening in 2027.

DOSCEL shows a strong commitment to synodality and shared mission at the leadership level, as well as through involvement in Dialogue Days. These are gatherings organised by the Diocesan Chancery and Sale Catholic Education to bring parish priests and school principals together for focused discussion on their shared purpose and to explore ways to enhance the presence of the Church within school and parish communities.

A 2020 Diocese profile noted that at the end of 2019, the Diocese's 37 primary and 7 secondary schools were educating 10,183 primary and 9,014 secondary students.¹¹ This amounts to a total of 19,197 students in Catholic schools administered by the Diocese of Sale Catholic Education agency. The 2024 Sale Catholic Education Annual Report records for the year 2024 a total of 20,515 students, comprising 10,706 primary students in 38 primary schools and 9,809 secondary students in the 7 secondary schools it administers. These data show that despite a declining Catholic population in the diocese, the number of students in Catholic schools has increased. It is not clear why this is the case when their parents, in most cases, are not active parishioners? Further investigation into the reasons parents want their children to have a Catholic education will help parishes work out ways that the parish can better engage with them.

E. Summary and recommendations

Six key features important to becoming a synodal Church

The Catholic Diocese of Sale has responded well to Pope Francis call to become a synodal Church. At least six factors can be identified as contributing to this outcome. These are the legacy of past bishops, the role of a dedicated coordinator, the setting up of a Diocesan Pastoral Council, the importance of an extended consultation process, the integration of Catholics schools into the synodal process, and a well-developed pastoral plan framework focused on parish-level changes.

The first key feature is the value of being able to build on the legacy spanning over 35 years of past changes introduced by Bishops Coffey (1989–2008), Prowse (2009–2013), O'Regan (2015–2020) up to Bennet (2020–present). Starting with Bishop Coffey's innovations, each subsequent bishop inherited, preserved and extended the foundations laid by his predecessor rather than starting afresh. This background has given the Diocese of Sale's synodal journey an organic, cumulative character. This contrasts with a first-time ‘project’ quality the synodal process can have in other dioceses without this background.

A second important feature has been Br Tony Clark's role as the appointed Diocesan Facilitator for Synodality and Mission. His brief has been to work across all levels of the diocese, not just to organise one-off consultations. He has given the synodal process a human anchor within the

¹¹ Peter Wilkinson The 2020 profile of the diocese. Prepared for Catholics for Renewal.

diocesan bureaucracy, an investment that has been crucial in a geographically vast diocese with limited numbers of clergy.

The third essential element is the setting up of a Diocesan Mission Council (DMC) as a carefully designed governance body to guide the synodal process. The newly appointed DMC members were asked to spend their meetings during 2024 learning how to function as a synodal team. This involved practising spiritual discernment in its own meetings. It also involved learning in depth about the diocese before being asked to draft the pastoral plan. This investment in formation before action gave all members the necessary skills to contribute to the pastoral planning process.

The fourth important ingredient has been a multi-layered, multiphase consultation process. Starting in 2021-22, synodality consultations reached over 300 participants via 'Coffee Conversations', Zoom sessions and parish groups, even during COVID lockdowns. The April 2024 diocesan consultation produced 65 parish group inputs, 25 individual submissions and around 1,200 student responses. These were synthesised into an Assembly Working Document, which was distributed before the assembly to allow delegates time for reflection and preparation. The 2025 Diocesan Assembly participants were then better able to engage in discernment and not just be offered one-way presentations. The Diocesan Assembly was also structured to reflect the diocese. This involved bringing together representatives from every Catholic parish, school, hospital and aged care facility, as well as ecumenical partners. In total, 220 delegates were grouped into 27 carefully mixed table groups. The DMC then played its role by refining the Assembly's 12 priorities into six coherent pastoral goals.

The fifth component of the synodal changes has been the integration of the Diocese's Catholic Schools into the synodal process. The Diocese of Sale education agency has made a deliberate attempt to connect its 46 Catholic schools to the diocesan synodal journey, and not to treat education as a separate silo. The agency's Strategic Plan 2025–2028 explicitly commits it to aligning school engagement with diocesan and parish mission goals. 'Dialogue Days' bring parish priests and school principals together to work out how to do this.

The sixth and final key element is a concrete five-year pastoral plan framework focused on parish-level changes. The diocesan pastoral plan provides a seven-step guide for parishes to develop their 'own' pastoral plans during 2026. It also includes a built-in review cycle which is to culminate in a 2030 Diocesan Assembly. This creates the potential for accountability at the parish level. The challenge at this level is to avoid the common failure mode where diocesan synodal processes generate enthusiasm and documents but with little structural follow-through at the local level. The separate Drouin/Warragul case study illustrates both the promise and the challenges of parish-level implementation.

Recommendations

Four recommendations are offered based on our assessment of the synodal practices and related changes in the Sale Diocese. These suggestions refer to (1) the need for more information about actions taken to increase the leadership roles of lay men and women in parishes and the diocese; (2) the value of an annual review of the diocese based on reports of diocesan agencies, events and key indicators of parish and diocesan performance; (3) more emphasis given to encouraging bottom parish synodal responses through programs such as structured episcopal parish visitations and (4) more attention to promoting activities at the diocesan and parish levels which connect with other faith communities.

Recommendation 1: Foster more lay-led activities in parishes

The 2024 Synod in Rome noted the importance of expanding the 'possibilities for participation and for the exercise of differentiated co-responsibility by all the baptised, men and women' (Para 36). But the same paragraph also noted that 'the lack of participation by so many members of the People of God in this journey of ecclesial renewal was a source of sadness'.

The Diocesan Pastoral Plan Framework 2026-2030 makes two mentions of proposed action related to lay leaders. Under the second goal to advance synodal leadership and engagement, parishes are asked to consider as an objective:

- Provide formation and support for clergy and lay leaders to adopt collaborative leadership, fostering accountability, co-responsibility, and a spirit of service in all aspects of mission.

A sample behaviour later suggested under the same heading is to ‘support and mentor emerging leaders, both lay and ordained’.

The Final Document of the 2024 Synod stated: ‘A missionary synodal Church would encourage more forms of lay ministries, that is, ministries that do not require the sacrament of Holy Orders, and this not only within the liturgical sphere’ (Para 66).

The lay faithful, both men and women, should be given greater opportunities for participation, also exploring new forms of service and ministry in response to the pastoral needs of our time in a spirit of collaboration and differentiated co-responsibility (Para 77).

Recent changes in the Diocese have included the formation of lay leaders of liturgy along with priestly formation.

The Final Document calls for local churches to provide greater transparency on lay participation in the form of annual reporting on these aspects:

Each local Church is asked to prepare and publish "an annual report on the carrying out of the local Church's mission, including also safeguarding initiatives, and progress made in promoting the laity's access to positions of authority and to decision-making processes, specifying the proportion of men and women" (para. 102d).

To foster more lay-lead activities in parishes and the diocese, it is recommended that information be provided by the diocese on lay leaders’ roles in each parish and what range of activities these roles cover. Information should also be provided each year on the type and extent of support the diocese gives its lay leaders, especially their ongoing formation and mentoring. Lay-led liturgies and group activities are ways that long-established Church communities continue to meet, pray together and interact with their community. One option is to formally recognise these lay roles in the diocese and to provide a faith community investment fund to support the work of lay leaders in small communities.

Recommendation 2: An annual review of the diocese and its parishes is proposed

It is recommended that the Sale Diocese produce an annual report, like the Sandhurst Diocese’s Year in Review. This report can provide the Bishop with the opportunity discuss the successes of the past year and challenges for the diocese. It can also include reports of diocesan agencies, events and the information on key financial and other performance indicators for parish and the diocese.

The annual report can show Sale Catholics what the diocese is doing, who is doing it, what it has achieved and how well the diocese is performing on a select group of indicators, as discussed below. To show how their Church is changing, members of the Diocese need information on how well the synodal reforms proposed are being implemented. This reporting, for example, is an opportunity to give specific attention to initiatives, now being undertaken, to highlight the leadership role of women at the parish and diocesan levels.

Valuable information on key indicators related to the provision of Catholic services by parishes and social welfare agencies is needed to work out what resources are needed to implement synodal practices. One set of indicators should include baptisms, marriages and funerals and Catholic children in Catholic primary schools by parish and in aggregate for the diocese. This will show to what extent self-identified Catholics are continuing to maintain a connection with the Church and the wider community, and what form it is taking. Information is also needed on parishioners’

connections to other catholic service providers and their involvement with wider community activities. This will also help the Diocese to show the wider community the nature and extent of the contribution that active Catholics are making. It may also encourage other parishes to become more involved with the wider community on issues of common concern.

Recommendation 3: adopting a more bottom-up synodal approach

It is suggested that processes are needed to help parishes put in place a bottom-up form of synodal practice. The Final Document of the 2024 Synod stated that:

... it is necessary to have structures and methods for regularly evaluating the exercise of ministry. Such evaluation is not a judgement upon an individual. Rather, it allows a way of assisting the minister by highlighting positive aspects of their ministry and bringing to light areas for improvement. The evaluation also assists the local Church in learning from experience, adjusting plans of action, determining the outcomes of its decisions in relation to its mission, and remaining attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit (Para 100).

One such structure and method for regularly evaluating the exercise of ministry is the episcopal parish visitations. The Sandhurst Diocese has developed a formal review process to accompany the bishop's visit. Bishop Mackinlay noted in his report in the 2025 Sandhurst Year in Review (p 8) the success of the formal review process involved with his parish visits:

Once again, I was impressed by the thorough preparation undertaken by the parishes in the lead-up to my visits. The time I spent with parishioners, school students, their pastors, the sick and the elderly was extremely fruitful. I was heartened to see the faithful and generous involvement of these communities as they face a range of challenges. I am also glad to hear that other parishes in the Diocese have chosen to continue using the discernment and reflection tools provided by the Program, despite my appointment to Brisbane requiring the suspension of the actual visitations.

Pope Leo has also recently highlighted in his letter to cardinals ahead of the June 2026 Consistory, among other issues, 'the importance of valuing apostolic and pastoral visits as authentic opportunities for kerygmatic proclamation and for a growth in the quality of relationships ...'

The bishop's parish visitation is a major opportunity for a parish, through its parish pastoral council, to review its performance against its goals and functions based on a listening and discernment process. The review process can also spell out where they, as a parish, want to be by the time of the next visitation. The next step is to present the report in advance to the bishop before his visit. This is to enable him to discuss with the parish leaders in specific terms what issues they are facing and how they want to address them. After these discussions, over two to three days, the bishop then undertakes to provide a written response to the Parish Pastoral Council within a set period.

However, to be effective in the short-term, these parish visitations need to be conducted regularly, at least every 12 months. We recognise that such a program needs to be developed in the specific context of the Sale Diocese, having regard to the availability of the bishop and other key figures. If the bishop is not available, the vicar general or other senior priest could deputise for him and report back. This would enable more regular visits to take place, with feedback collected and discussed with the parish leadership team. This process provides a level of accountability to the bishop that can identify and resolve problems related to synodal changes at the parish level. It can also be a vehicle to promote activities that form a bridge to others in the wider community.

Recommendation 4: promote activities at the diocesan and parish levels which connect with other faith communities on issues related to the common good

The goal of mission, which is engaging with others not part of one's faith community, is a foundational theme of becoming a synodal Church. This requires generating activities that are not only focused on internal church matters. Information from the 2022 National Church Life Survey of the attitudes and behaviour of parishioners from seven Sale parishes and the separate case study of Drouin and Warragul parishes showed that most parishes were limited in their connections to the wider community.

More initiatives are needed at the diocesan and parish levels that are directed outside the church community. This involves building on the strength of the faith community to connect with other organisations and communities in the service of the common good.

As Pope Leo, in a homily at the Holy Mass in the 'Plaza de Cibeles', Madrid on 7 June 2026, stated:

It is not merely a matter of bringing out the monstrance, but of allowing ourselves to be brought out of our selfishness and indifference, of a comfortable, private faith, so as to respond to his invitation to conversion, to change our perspective, and to welcome his presence which transforms us and makes us builders of a new world.

Goal 8 of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan Framework 2026-2030 is to 'Ignite Missionary Outreach and Evangelisation'. Two of the objectives that parishes are encouraged to consider are:

- Develop and promote initiatives that reflect the Church's commitment to social justice and ecological responsibility, inspired by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and the vision of 'Laudato Si'.
- Encourage respectful dialogue and active engagement with other Christian denominations and faith traditions, building bridges of mutual understanding, collaboration and unity.

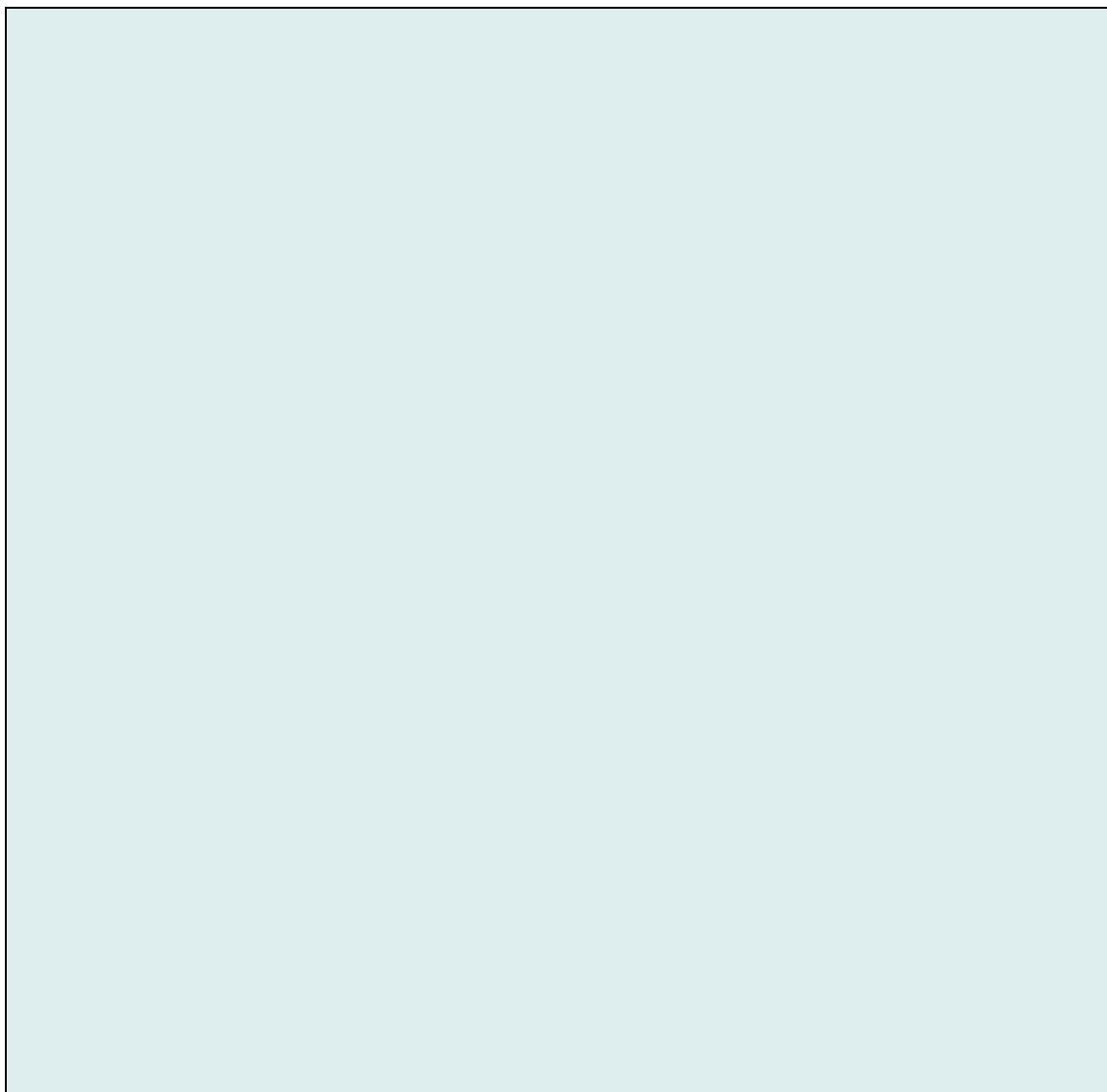
The profile of parish groups of nine parishes in the Diocese, based on their websites, indicates that only one parish is an accredited Earthcare Australia parish. On the issue of active engagement on matters ecumenical, only one other parish in the profile is involved. Parish pastoral plans are being developed during 2026. Information collected on the extent of parish external engagement in these two areas related to the wider community based on the new parish pastoral plans will become clear once these plans are completed and made public. It is recommended that the extent to which parishes adopt activities related to wider community engagement be monitored, reported publicly and promoted where needed. The development of a diocesan Laudato Si Action Plan for Sale, following the one made by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, may help parishes take on the task, knowing that diocesan support is available.

F. Conclusion

The Diocese of Sale's distinctive combination of strengths is its legacy of previous institutional changes sustained across episcopal transitions, its purpose-built governance body, a dedicated synodal facilitator role, and a parish plan-making process. Important also will be how parishes address the challenges of a vast, priest-scarce regional diocese to build practical lay leadership where it is needed. The considerable resource constraints the diocese faces into the future gives it a strong incentive to make major changes at the parish level rather than to leave synodality at the level of managed consultation events.

The challenges of introducing synodal practices into parish communities are significant. Different expectations of what it means to be a Catholic and the value of parish life are shaped by a range of factors, making the pursuit of common goals difficult. As Pope Leo has emphasised to his cardinals, it requires 'an honest assessment of what has actually been embraced over the years and what, by contrast, remains unfamiliar or unimplemented'. Pursuing a focus on mission calls for changes at each level of the Church: personal, parish community, diocese and the Holy See.

Attachment 1: Key functions of the Diocesan Mission Council



Attachment 2: The 2025 Diocesan Assembly

The [2025 Assembly Summary Report](#) was published in March 2025, outlining the whole process and detailed report back on the issues identified by the questions given to each table group. One question asked what strengths of the diocese had not been listed yet need to be recognised? The responses to this question were grouped under 12 headings. These included the issues related to diversity, inclusion and interfaith engagement, volunteerism and lay leadership, partnership between parishes and schools, leadership, wisdom and pastoral care, spirituality and liturgy, effective use of resources and communication, social justice and catholic social teaching, family and youth engagement, environmental stewardship and connection to land, and collaborative ministry and community engagement.

The next question asked: ‘What opportunities do our strengths offer to further develop the life and mission of our Diocese?’ The responses were grouped under six headings (see pp 18-19 of the Assembly Summary Report for the details).

The focus of Day Two was on identifying and prioritizing the Diocese’s Pastoral Priorities and Actions for the years 2026-2030. Twelve priority issues were identified (see [2025 Assembly Summary Report](#), pp 25-26 for details).

Final message of the Assembly

The final message of the Assembly from the delegates to Bishop Greg Bennet and The Diocesan Mission Council was based on feedback from the 27 Table Groups.

We are deeply grateful for this Assembly and for the opportunity to listen, to collaborate in the spirit of synodality and to discern our future path. We recognise the goodwill, dedication, and leadership that have guided this process, and we stand with you as we move forward together.

Now is the time for bold and resolute action. The Holy Spirit is at work, and we must not allow this momentum to fade. We encourage you to step forward with courage, clarity, and conviction, translating our shared vision into a clear, actionable strategic Diocesan Pastoral Plan. This plan needs to be concise, measurable, and easily implemented across all faith communities and Diocesan bodies and organisations, such as parishes, schools, hospitals, aged care facilities and social services, that will renew and strengthen our Diocese.

We urge you to prioritise:

A culture of co-responsibility, ensuring that all parishes, schools, and organisations work together in a spirit of shared mission.

Faith formation and evangelisation, particularly for youth and families, fostering a balance between tradition and contemporary engagement.

Embracing new ways to connect with and serve our communities through digital evangelisation and outreach.

The central role of liturgy and prayer, ensuring that prayer and worship remain a source of spiritual nourishment, unity, and inspiration, guiding and celebrating our faith and action.

A Church that goes out, embodying Pope Francis’ vision of a refuge for the broken and a beacon of hope in our world.

We trust in your leadership and stand behind you, ready to work together in building a vibrant, mission-driven Diocese. Embrace a synodal journey that continues to listen to our communities, builds on existing strengths, communicates regularly, and acts decisively to transform inspired words into

real-world impact.

The road ahead is long, but we believe in the power of faith, unity, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let us go forth with courage. The time to act is now.

Evaluation feedback

A 23-question evaluation was administered at the end of the Assembly, covering the topics of communication before and throughout the Assembly, the Assembly process, liturgy and prayer, and hospitality. Of the 205 delegates, ecumenical participants and observers, 192 responded, which is a 93 per cent response rate. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with nearly all responses (four out of five) giving the highest approval rating of strongly agree. Those taking part gave the highest approval rating of ‘strongly agree’ to the following statements:

- ‘I felt respected and listened to in my Table Group’ (97 per cent),
- ‘The Table Scribe did a good job of recording our responses and other assigned tasks’ (95 per cent),
- ‘The process of the Assembly (spiritual conversations) enabled me to engage deeply with the agenda and outcomes of the Assembly’ (88 per cent),
- ‘The Facilitator of the Assembly assisted the process by offering clear instructions, clarification as required and flexibility in engaging with the Assembly agenda’ (89 per cent).

The only response that differed from this pattern was in relation to the following statement about the future outcomes expected from the Assembly’s deliberations. Only just over half (52 per cent) of 187 respondents strongly agreed with the statement that they had achieved clear outcomes for the next five years’

The total cost of the Assembly was \$20,000 for the hire of the facility and catering for lunch and dinner on Friday night. Delegates had to cover their own overnight accommodation costs, although many stayed with people they knew nearby. The catholic Development Fund was a key sponsor of the event.

Attachment 3: Consultation feedback highlighting the need to lift and support role of women

The importance of giving greater attention to improving the position of women in parishes and the diocese was one of the key issues the diocesan consultations identified. As noted in the text, the 2022 Diocesan Synthesis '*Lets Walk Together*' highlighted the need 'for the Church to be much more proactive in giving women recognition and equality in the life and mission of the Church' and devoted two columns to the issue of 'Women in the Church'. The *Phase Two Report of the Diocesan Consultation Looking Forward to the Next Five Years 2026-2030* noted that, among the seven greatest challenges facing parish communities and diocese, was: 'Securing the future of Church leadership: sustaining clergy, lay formation, and women's evolving role'. This challenge was expanded to include the following assessment of women's role in the Church:

Women are essential to the Church, but their leadership opportunities are often limited. Greater involvement in ministry and governance requires recognising their contributions, expanding their roles, and fostering inclusivity while staying faithful to Church teachings.

Under pastoral priorities and actions recommendations for the Diocesan Assembly related to fostering a culture of listening and inclusion, the following recommendation was made:

To include and value women in all aspects of church life, strengthen connections between women and key church institutions, and promote shared goals.

Other recommendations also proposed included the following:

- 'listen to the voices of women in the community to understand their needs and concerns',
- 'foster a culture of equality where women have equal opportunities to contribute to the Church's mission',
- offer mentorship and development opportunities for women leaders, and
- develop initiatives to celebrate and promote the role of women in the life of the Church.

The Diocesan Assembly Summary Report (March 2025) made several references to the need to recognise and improve the role of women in parishes and the diocese. Under the heading 'what strengths not listed yet need to be recognised' was 'the dedicated work of our volunteers' often described as an 'army of mostly women'. The recommendation was to 'affirm the significant role lay persons play in supporting the clergy in the life of our parishes'. Under opportunities to strengthen further the life and mission of the diocese, the recommendation was to 'further empower lay leaders including women and youth ...'. Another related recommendation was 'empowering lay leaders, including exploring new roles for women, to share the workload and to bring fresh perspectives to Church leadership'.

Under the heading of challenges viewed as overwhelming or too difficult was leadership hierarchies and structural inertia. This involved:

Issues related to entrenched church leadership and the resistance to change (both among clergy and parishioners) make it difficult to navigate necessary reforms, including clarifying and expanding the role of women in leadership.