Summary: The Synodal Journey in the Archdiocese of Brisbane

Summary of *The Synodal Journey in the Archdiocese of Brisbane – Sense of the Faithful* (30 October 2026) – produced by Claude Opus 5.5

Purpose and scope

The paper looks at how the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane has taken up the synodal path, the call by Pope Francis and now Pope Leo for a Church where discernment, participation and decision-making are shared. It traces the path from Archbishop Mark Coleridge's apostolic priorities, through the Laudato Si' and Reconciliation Action Plans, the archdiocese's consultations for the global Synod of Bishops, and the 2024 Archdiocesan Synod (SYNOD24). It then turns to the leadership change in September 2025, when Archbishop Shane Mackinlay arrived. It ends with an assessment of what is still missing, mainly public reporting on change at parish level, and proposes a practical mechanism to close that gap: the bishop's canonical parish visitation. An attachment sets out all 50 SYNOD24 action plans under the eight decrees of the Australian Plenary Council.

The archdiocese at a glance

According to the 2021 Census, the archdiocese has 684,423 Catholics in a total population of 3,815,443 within its borders. That is 17.9 per cent of the population, below the national Catholic share of 20 per cent. Even so, the archdiocese is the second-largest Catholic diocese in Australia by absolute numbers. It is also very diverse:

- More than 20 active multicultural communities
- 170,485 Catholics born overseas, about a quarter of the Catholic population
- The largest Catholic population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country: 16,474

The archdiocese has 94 parishes across southeast Queensland and runs agencies in education, early childhood, aged care, disability and social support. Brisbane Catholic Education alone runs 146 schools, with more than 12,500 staff and almost 80,000 students. The archdiocese's own summary for the 2024 Synod of Bishops pointed to two achievements in particular: an ambitious Laudato Si' Action Plan, and progress on its second Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan.

History and leadership

The Diocese of Brisbane was founded in 1859 and became an archdiocese in 1887. It has had eight bishops, and most served long terms: James Quinn for 22 years, Robert Dunne for 35, James Duhig for 48, Francis Rush for over 18, and John Battersby for nearly 20. Mark Coleridge was installed in May 2012 and served 13 years and 123 days. Shane Mackinlay, formerly Bishop of Sandhurst, was installed as the eighth Archbishop on 11 September 2025. The paper's implied point is that because tenures are so long, each archbishop strongly shapes the archdiocese's direction. That makes the handover between Coleridge and Mackinlay an important test of whether the synodal agenda continues.

Archbishop Coleridge's seven apostolic priorities

In 2022, in *With Lamps Ablaze*, Archbishop Coleridge set out seven apostolic priorities for the archdiocese from 2023. He presented them at Summit 2023, a three-day gathering of parishioners, educators, catechists, lay leaders, religious and clergy. The priorities were:

1. Teaching prayer as listening to God first
2. Reshaping parish communities through long-term pastoral planning and sustainable structures
3. Bringing migrant cultural communities from Asia, Africa, the Pacific and Latin America to the centre of Church life
4. Responding to abuse and to those who were abused
5. Engaging anew with First Nations peoples
6. Putting integral ecology into practice
7. Embedding synodal governance built on shared responsibility and transparent decision-making

These priorities form the framework that the later action plans fit into. Archbishop Coleridge himself later said the SYNOD24 action plans should be read alongside *With Lamps Ablaze*.

The Laudato Si' Action Plan

The archdiocese's Laudato Si' Action Plan for 2024–2026 was developed with input from all its agencies, including Brisbane Catholic Education, Centacare, Archdiocesan Services, Evangelisation Brisbane, and the Office of Legal, Governance and Risk. It follows the seven global Laudato Si' goals:

- Response to the cry of the earth
- Response to the cry of the poor
- Ecological economics
- Sustainable lifestyles
- Ecological education
- Ecological spirituality
- Community resilience

Under the ecological education goal, parishes were asked to make their own commitments, enrol in the Laudato Si' Action Platform and undertake training, with a target of 15 parishes recruited by 2025–26. The Archdiocesan Ministries Annual Report 2025 recorded:

- 11 parishes signed up and developing plans, three more drafting plans, and three schools committed
- A Season of Creation Mass at St Stephen's Cathedral, with 10 parishes and 300 people attending
- Workshops involving 18 parishes

In 2025 the plan focused on divesting from indirect fossil fuel investments and moving towards renewable energy across agencies and parishes. The paper notes this was the first Laudato Si' Action Plan in an Australian diocese.

The Reconciliation Action Plan

The Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) gives agencies and parishes a roadmap for building respectful relationships with First Nations people. It aims to deepen understanding of systemic and casual racism and the lasting effects of colonisation, and to open new paths to healing. RAPs come in four types: Reflect, Innovate, Stretch and Elevate. Brisbane's is an Innovate RAP, which focuses on strengthening relationships, engaging staff and stakeholders, and piloting strategies that empower First Nations communities.

Archdiocesan Ministries leads the work with Centacare, supported by an Archdiocesan Services RAP Working Group. Six parishes are piloting it locally: Beenleigh, Bracken Ridge, Cleveland, Inala, Zillmere and Stafford. Archbishop Mackinlay launched the third RAP at the first Archdiocesan Reconciliation Dinner on 11 September 2026, attended by more than 300 guests including Elders. The paper quotes Archbishop Coleridge on why action matters: listening, learning and even love are not enough "unless the love becomes action."

First synodal steps: the diocesan summary for the Synod of Bishops

Before the Synod of Bishops in Rome, the archdiocese ran consultations. It sought a deliberate mix of ages, cultures, theological views and roles, and included people disconnected from or disenfranchised by the Church where it could reach them. The consultations covered three topics, and two main issues came out of each.

A Church "out of every tribe, tongue, people and nation"

- **Formation in inter-cultural dialogue.** Cultural leaders, chaplains and the wider Church need shared formation in the theology and practice of inter-cultural dialogue. Open questions included how to lead synodally within a particular culture, how to equip lay leaders, and how clericalism mutes women's voices.
- **RAP literacy.** The Church needs a much better understanding of the RAP. Most parishioners delivering parish RAP actions are over 50, which raised the question of how to involve younger people and how to get clergy and laity to take up truth-telling, on-country experiences and cultural safety training.

Women in the life and mission of the Church

- **Expanding ministries for women.** Participants called for wider use of the lector, acolyte and catechist ministries so women can hold significant leadership roles. They also raised formal places for women on decision-making bodies such as the Episcopal Council, lay- and women-led funerals and weddings, normalising lay-led liturgies, and lay preaching.
- **Preparing for a more formal role for women.** The archdiocese should be ready if the Holy See permits change, including opening diaconate formation to women and men equally. It should also improve fair pay, maternity leave and workplace culture for women working in the Church.

Mission in the digital environment

- **Forming content creators.** Creators face trolling, destructive criticism and misinformation. Questions included what toolkits, catechetical formation and monitoring they need, and how to combine older people's wisdom with younger people's digital skills.
- **Teaching faithfully online.** Teaching must stay true to tradition while reaching an audience that is often anonymous, secular and vulnerable, which raises questions about responsibility and oversight.

SYNOD24: background, process and promulgation

Background

Archbishop Coleridge described the Australian Plenary Council of 2021–22 as the immediate background to SYNOD24. The Council's decrees gave the Synod its framework, and the Council's extensive consultations shaped what it would address. The global Synod on Synodality was the other key context: its second session in Rome ran at the same time as the Brisbane assembly. Archbishop Coleridge described the two synods as interwoven and complementary, so the Brisbane final document should be read alongside the Roman one. Neither, he said, was "a final point of arrival" but "a decisive staging-post" on a long journey.

Process

SYNOD24 ran in three phases:

1. **Preparation.** Consultations, especially in parishes and regional deaneries.
2. **Engagement.** Two sessions of listening and discernment in September and October 2024, with about 150 members representing the archdiocese's diversity: clergy, religious, theologians, canon lawyers, and lay people from parishes, agencies and ecclesial communities.
3. **Implementation.** Putting the action plans into practice.

The Synod's stated objectives were:

- Listening and dialogue
- Unity and collaboration
- Prayerful discernment
- Renewed mission and evangelisation
- Empowering all members of the Church to take an active role

Promulgation

Using his legislative authority under canon 466, Archbishop Coleridge promulgated the action plans as synodal declarations and decrees. He stressed that, although he took the final decisions, they were "decisions not just of the Archbishop but of the Church." The 50 action plans fall under the eight Plenary Council decrees. Archbishop Coleridge ranked them with asterisks: 21 high-priority (three asterisks), 20 middle-priority (two) and 9 lower-priority (one). He acknowledged that the incoming archbishop and changes in society might reshape how they are carried out.

His Pastoral Letter of 28 November 2024 set the expectation that the plans would be implemented within five years, with budgets and responsibilities still to be settled. He added that none could be "delayed indefinitely." He also said the plans were "comprehensive but not exhaustive." Restructuring parishes and schools into a "community of communities," engaging young people, and teaching prayer as a way of life all needed attention beyond them.

Implementation so far

The Archdiocesan Ministries Annual Report 2025 lists several implementation activities:

- "SYNOD24 Towards Implementation" workshops for parishes and communities, with 250 participants from more than 50 parishes
- A parallel set of workshops for 60 participants from 25 Church agencies and organisations
- A Synod Symposium for religious orders and schools, attended by six orders and Year 10 students from five colleges
- A Domestic and Family Violence Project, set up in response to an action plan
- A pastoral discussion using synodal methods on the experience of LGBTQ+ people in Catholic communities, involving agencies, the Archdiocesan LGBTQ+ Reference Group, parishioners and the local community

The paper then makes a pointed observation: the archdiocese has published no public reporting on SYNOD24 activities since Archbishop Mackinlay's installation on 11 September 2025.

The leadership transition

Archbishop Coleridge's account of his legacy

At his farewell Mass on 6 September 2025, Archbishop Coleridge summed up his ministry in four themes:

- His role as teacher and preacher
- Leading the Australian Church through the Plenary Council and convening the Archdiocesan Synod, whose fifty action plans he called "the gift of the Spirit and a charter for the future"
- Bringing cultural communities from Vietnam, the Philippines, Latin America, India and Africa to the centre of archdiocesan life, alongside a new engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Offering hospitality to other Churches, Jewish and Muslim leaders, and political leaders, to build relationships for the common good

He acknowledged "so much unfinished business," but said that waiting to tie up every loose end would mean "waiting forever."

Archbishop Mackinlay's intentions

In his installation homily, Archbishop Mackinlay committed to "taking up and carrying forward" his predecessor's initiatives. He singled out the first SYNOD24 commitment, on deeper understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, cultures and spiritualities. He framed the fifty action plans as Brisbane's concrete answer to the call from Popes Francis and Leo to become more

synodal. He also said he would bring to Brisbane what he had learnt from six years of change in the Diocese of Sandhurst.

New governance: the Council of Vicars

Twelve months after his installation, Mackinlay announced a "renewed leadership model" in *Working together in the mission of the Gospel*. It was designed in consultation with leaders across the archdiocese's organisations and has three objectives: broader involvement in guiding the archdiocese's mission, more collaboration between parishes, agencies and other Catholic bodies, and a group to guide and monitor implementation of SYNOD24.

The model makes three changes:

1. **A Council of Vicars.** The Vicar General plus seven part-time vicars, each appointed initially for 18 months, covering health, social services, education, pastoral mission, clergy, religious and administration. Five of these portfolios are open to lay people. The Vicar General and Vicar for Clergy remain priests, and the Vicar for Religious will be a member of a religious institute.
2. **A chief of staff.** A new position to coordinate the Archbishop's office and the vicars' portfolios.
3. **An Archdiocesan Pastoral Mission Council.** To be set up later, it will use the priorities discerned by SYNOD24 and future synods to help parishes and agencies put them into practice.

Change at parish level

Reshaping parish communities was Archbishop Coleridge's second priority. The aim was to move parishes away from administrative burdens towards missionary outreach, through decade-long planning rather than short-term fixes. Under the Evangelisation Brisbane Strategic Plan, the archdiocese offered workshops for parish priests and lay leadership teams and enrolled about 80 new participants each year in lay leadership formation programs.

Parishes are encouraged to see themselves as a "community of communities," using their physical and financial resources as a launchpad for local outreach. The paper gives two examples:

- **Emmanuel City Mission** in South Brisbane, a daytime sanctuary for homeless and vulnerable people
- **The Veterans' Care Association**, founded by Deacon Gary Stone and his son, retired Major Michael Stone. Its peer-to-peer wellbeing program has run for 12 years and helped more than 1,000 veterans' families.

Archdiocesan Ministries has a three-year strategic plan for 2025–27 with measurable outputs and a 2025 progress report. It also offers a 10-week parish leadership course for clergy and laity, and helps parishes develop strategic plans. Twelve parish plans, plus one for the Emmanuel Community, are published online.

What SYNOD24 asked of parishes

The SYNOD24 recommendations for parishes centre on inclusion, participation and shared responsibility:

- Safe, facilitated story-telling for people who are marginalised or disenfranchised

- Welcoming families before and after the sacraments of initiation
- Support for lay-led liturgies where clergy are not regularly available
- Training and clear arrangements for lay people to preside at funerals, baptisms and, in specified circumstances, weddings
- More opportunities for lay preaching and reflections, with proper formation
- Expert-led formation in parishes and deaneries on prayer, Scripture, sacraments, family, mission, creation and inclusion
- Lay involvement in forming clergy and seminarians, including structured feedback on homilies
- A synodal, co-responsible roadmap with regular conversations in the Spirit
- A deanery-level project to identify and mentor lay people from diverse backgrounds for parish and archdiocesan councils
- Consultation with the Parish Pastoral Council when pastors change, including a statement of what the parish expects of its pastor
- Regular pastor reviews with professional supervision
- More coordination on ecological work, and guidance on bringing care for creation into the liturgy

Assessment

The paper's assessment is that Brisbane has "an impressive record of change" in initiatives led from the centre. Without an archdiocesan annual report, however, it is unclear how much is changing in the parishes. Basic data is not published: the number of parishes, Mass attendance by parish, planned or actual mergers, how many parishes have pastoral councils, and how those councils operate.

The central question is how far parish priests are leading or at least supporting the changes. The paper argues that what is missing is a public reporting link between the archbishop, parish priests and lay parish leaders.

The solution it proposes is the bishop's obligatory parish visitation under canon 396 §1. The archbishop, or his auxiliary bishops and episcopal vicars, must visit parishes and migrant communities so that every parish is visited within five years. The Vatican's *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops (Apostolorum Successores)* describes this visit as a way to maintain personal contact with clergy and people, to "rejuvenate the energies" of those working in evangelisation, and to "evaluate the effectiveness of the structures and agencies designed for pastoral service." The Directory recommends:

- Organising the visit well in advance
- Preparing the faithful through talks on the nature of the Church and the episcopate
- The bishop informing himself beforehand about the parish's socio-religious situation
- A follow-up letter to the parish that recognises its pastoral work and recommends improvements

The paper notes that a formal model of this kind was developed in Sandhurst under Mackinlay and has since been adopted by the Diocese of Cairns under Bishop Joseph Caddy. The implication is that Brisbane's new archbishop already has a ready-made tool for connecting central reform with parish life.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that under Archbishop Coleridge, Brisbane led the Australian Church in changes made in the spirit of Pope Francis. These included the first diocesan Laudato Si' Action Plan in Australia, a Reconciliation Action Plan, a clear set of apostolic priorities with resources directed to them, and the first archdiocesan synod to translate the Plenary Council's decrees into 50 local action plans. Archbishop Coleridge Mackinlay has accepted and endorsed these foundations. Given his record of significant change in Sandhurst, the author judges it "every likelihood" that Brisbane will stay at the forefront of the renewal promoted by Popes Francis and Leo. The assessment section makes clear, though, that this depends on transparent reporting and a working link between the archbishop and the parishes.

Attachment 1: the 50 action plans in brief

1. **Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts.** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander truth-telling and formation, culturally appropriate liturgical resources, and formation designed for First Nations peoples.
2. **Choosing Repentance, Seeking Healing.** Truth-telling with survivors of abuse, a reframed Safeguarding Sunday, and processes seeking forgiveness, possibly including a formal apology and a ministry to survivors.
3. **Missionary Disciples.** Family and intergenerational ministry, sacramental resources for children with disabilities, listening forums for marginalised people, deanery-based ecumenism, a digital mission strategy, and sports chaplaincy.
4. **Equal Dignity of Women and Men.** Readiness for women deacons if universal Church law changes, an Executive Officer for Participation, an inclusive language reference group, theological research, and a postgraduate scholarship pilot.
5. **Communion in Grace.** A front-of-house hospitality ministry, instituted ministries overseen by a Ministries Discernment Committee, lay-led liturgies, lay presiding at funerals, baptisms and weddings, lay preaching, family integration, marriage support, and formation on the sacrament of penance.
6. **Formation and Leadership.** Leadership formation, small faith groups, lay input into clergy formation, a synodal roadmap, teaching conversation in the Spirit, interculturality forums, and SYNOD24 implementation workshops.
7. **Governance.** Regular synods, a Synod Council with statutes and diverse membership, mentoring under-represented lay leaders, parish handover processes, and pastor performance reviews.
8. **Integral Ecology.** Ecological formation, net-zero and ESG reporting frameworks, an Ecological Ministry Strategic Plan with deanery hubs, family initiatives, shared practice across agencies, and liturgical guidelines.