The Catholic Diocese of Ballarat: Progress in Introducing Synodal Practices – summary of a case study

Sense of the Faithful Ltd
20 November 2026

The Catholic Diocese of Ballarat is making progress towards a more synodal, participatory Church, but its efforts are shaped by the lasting effects of clerical abuse, low public trust, geographic distance and an ageing population. The 2017 Royal Commission's findings on former Bishop Ronald Mulkearns severely damaged the diocese's moral authority. Although reforms followed, trust remains fragile, and survivors' public protests have symbolised unresolved tensions.

The diocese's vision and governance principles emphasise participation, dialogue, shared responsibility, subsidiarity, transparency and accountability. In 2022, regional listening sessions for the global Synod on Synodality gathered 259 participants. They called for stronger parish and diocesan pastoral councils, greater local decision-making, more leadership roles for women, and accountable governance. The 2024 Diocesan Assembly used "Conversations in the Spirit" to explore similar concerns. Delegates described the gathering as hopeful, while stressing that trust was very low and warning that the process must lead to meaningful change. Most of the commitments made at the Assembly focused on existing parish communities rather than outreach beyond them.

Several initiatives have since put synodal ideas into practice, including training in synodal dialogue, a formation programme for lay people, and student listening forums in Catholic schools. However, progress on formal governance structures had been slow: many parishes lacked pastoral councils, and the diocese had not established a Diocesan Pastoral Council, despite repeated recommendations.

New Diocesan Pastoral Council

That changed in October 2026, when Bishop Mark Freeman announced the formation of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. It is intended to advise and support the Bishop through collaborative discernment, community listening and strategic planning. Its membership is to draw on a range of regions, ages, cultures and vocations, with particular attention to groups including First Nations Catholics, young adults and migrant communities. The Council will meet four times a year and is advisory; the Bishop retains final decision-making authority.

The Purpose document describes the DPC as 'a central, trusted leadership body that advises and supports the Bishop'. It calls the Council 'an instrument of relationship and strategic partnership' that brings together lay people, clergy and the Bishop. It sets out five commitments:

1. **Strategic leadership through synodal discernment.** The Council acts as an executive advisory group to the Bishop. Leadership is meant to be collaborative, not top-down.
2. **Governance built on participation.** It will help shape governance that is transparent, participatory and accountable, with ways for parishes and communities to feed into decisions.
3. **Synodal engagement at the heart of leadership.** It will actively seek out diverse voices, 'especially those on the margins'. Synodality is 'not an optional value but the guiding principle'.
4. **An information and listening hub.** Feedback from across the diocese is to be treated 'as a voice of the Spirit speaking through the community'.
5. **Building trust through transparency and shared mission.**

In practical terms, the Council will review current realities, develop and manage a diocesan strategic plan, and set out a shared vision. It sits within the diocesan vision ('a community of communities from the Murray to the sea'). It also follows the eight Good Governance Principles.

How it will function

- **Meetings:** four a year, some in person at places across the diocese and some online. Each opens with a prepared prayer led by a Prayer subcommittee.
- **Leadership:** the Bishop appoints a Chair from the members. The Executive is the Bishop, the Chair and the Executive Officer, and it sets meeting protocols and the work plan.
- **Way of working:** the DPC statutes propose a cycle of listening, dialogue and discernment:
    - *Listening:* gathering input from parishes, schools and ministries, commissioning research, and using reference or working groups (for example Social Justice, Youth, Aboriginal Ministry, Caritas, Safeguarding and Archives).
    - *Dialogue:* exploring pastoral concerns and responding to the Plenary Council, the Synod, the 2024 Assembly and *Light from the Southern Cross*.
    - *Discernment:* proposing and reviewing the strategic plan, organising diocesan events and building unity and trust.
- **Decision-making:** consensus is the aim, but the Council is advisory and the Bishop makes the final decision (can. 514 §1). If he does not accept a majority recommendation, he is expected to explain why, while respecting privacy. Any proposal that commits money or resources needs a business case or budget first.
- **Links with other bodies:** at its meetings the Council will receive presentations from the College of Consultors and zone representatives, the Diocesan Finance Council, working groups, parish pastoral councils and the Catholic education agency. It will also hold joint planning sessions and synodal listening events.
- **Reporting:** These are to consist of quarterly written strategic updates in digital and print form, a secure online portal and regular newsletters.
- **Annual self-review:** community consultation, a Council retreat, benchmarking against synodal and governance best practice, and a review report and action plan presented to the Bishop, the Council of Priests and the College of Consultors.

Other provisions:

- Members must declare conflicts of interest.
- Members can resign with one month's notice, and the Bishop can remove a member at any time.
- Casual vacancies are filled for the rest of the term.
- The Bishop can amend the Statutes. The Council can propose changes by a two-thirds vote, but they need his approval.
- If the See becomes vacant, the Council ceases and a new Bishop must re-establish it within a year.

Member commitments and formation

Members are expected to attend meetings and prepare for them, engage with their local communities, keep matters confidential, and travel across the diocese. Expenses are supported. Formation is ‘an important expectation’ of membership.

Conclusion

The diocese has therefore made genuine progress in listening, formation and planning, while important structural and trust-related challenges remain. The key tests will be whether the new Council gives communities meaningful influence and whether pastoral councils become active across all 23 parishes. Bishop Freeman’s stated commitment to listening and participation offers an opportunity to turn synodal aspirations into lasting change.