

The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst's process for setting up a Diocesan Pastoral Council

Background on the diocese

The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst, based in Bendigo, includes 40 parishes and 50 schools. Its website says it has some 90,000 Catholics, 9,277 primary students, 8,707 secondary students, 55 priests, 50 religious sisters and 5 brothers.

Bishop Shane Mackinlay was appointed Bishop of Sandhurst in July 2019. He was elected as Vice-President of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia and one of the Australian delegates to the forthcoming Synod for a Synodal Church. In 2019, he was asked to join the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission, and in 2022 was appointed as its Co-Chair. From 2012 to 2014 he was the spokesperson for the Catholic Church during the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and other Non-Government Organisations.

Setting up a Diocesan Pastoral Council

The Sandhurst synthesis of consultations for the Bishops' Synod explained in its conclusion on next steps that Bishop Mackinlay had after the first phase of the Plenary Council commissioned an external review of the strategic, consultative, and administrative structures of the Diocese of Sandhurst. The final report entitled 'Go Forth: A Review of the Strategic, Consultative and Administrative Structures of the Diocese of Sandhurst' was completed by December 2020. Drawing on this report the diocesan synthesis stated that the next steps could include the following changes:

1. That all parishes establish a Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Leadership Team.
2. That the Bishop continues to implement the recommendations of the *Go Forth* Report, particularly the establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council (to be known as the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council) and develop processes and formation for shared governance, leadership, and decision-making in the diocese.
3. That the Church consider strategies and formation for a renewed understanding and practice of the sacrament of penance and the ministry of reconciliation, including reinstatement of the Third Rite of Reconciliation for occasions when it is appropriate.
4. The discernment and implementation of strategies for the authentic inclusion of women, young people, and those at the margins in the life of the Church.
5. Seminary formation programs are adjusted to include training in basic business management practices and formation for mission and pastoral outreach that is culturally appropriate, responsive, and adaptive to local needs.
6. Formation for mission programs are sourced and made accessible to all members of the diocese, particularly those who hold leadership positions. Wherever possible these programs should be targeted to needs.

7. Given many of the clergy who serve in the diocese are born overseas, formation programs should include a commitment to formal and informal intercultural learning for both the ordained and the laity.

8. All parishes and Catholic schools have an active Shared Mission Commitment Statement which is regularly reviewed and updated.

The establishment of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council

The new diocesan Pastoral Council is called the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC). It comprises 16 members, which include the Bishop as President, the Vicar General (ex officio), and members from each of the three deaneries, one clergy member and three lay members. Up to two members will be selected by the bishop ex officio. Membership is a term of three years. Each council member is to be a representative of the Diocese and not of the parish, deanery, region, or agency from which they come. The statutes for the Council were based on the Code of Canon Law, the Light from the Southern Cross Report, the Go Forth Report, the outcomes of the Plenary Council, and feedback from the preparation and consultation meetings. An executive has also been set up to carry forward the business of the Council between meetings. The executive is to comprise the Bishop, Chairperson and Director of Mission and Pastoral Life, who is to be the Executive Officer.

A plan for a year of preparation and consultation took place over the 12 months from April 2022. The plan included these steps: (1) Prayerful preparation to 24 July 2022, (2) Preparation and Consultation Meetings 24 July-13 December 2022, (3) Diocesan Assembly 15 February 2023, (4) Discerning, appointing, and commissioning members of the SMPC 15 February-4 April 2023 and the (5) First Meeting of the SMPC on 27 April 2023.

The consultation process conducted by the members of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Life Team was extensive. Fifty-two meetings were held in local parish churches, parish and school halls and other venues across the Diocese, including two meetings that were conducted online. Meetings were held with representatives from 38 of the 40 Parishes, 7 high schools and Catholic entities across the Diocese. Feedback was obtained from 905 participants. Information on what the consultation involved can be found in a detailed report on the process and outcomes, available on the diocesan website site [here](#).

Over 300 parishioners, all active clergy, professed religious, school principals and staff of Catholic entities took part in a Diocesan Assembly in Shepparton on 15 February 2023. The Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council held its inaugural meeting on Friday 28 April and Saturday 29 April. Of the 15 Members of the Council nominated, five are clerics, including the Bishop and 10 are lay members, of whom four were women. Members were selected by a membership panel which included the bishop, Vicar General, Episcopal Vicar for Education and three lay people. The selection was from a list of people who had responded to a call for expressions of interest in joining the council, and who met the selection criteria specified in the statutes for the council.

The meeting started with an exercise that focused on authentic listening and dialogue as well as a reflection on the kinds of behaviours needed to strengthen the Council's engagement and progress over the next three years. Then Council members considered the strategic directions identified in the Final Report on the Preparation and Consultation Meetings for the SMPC. Bishop Shane reminded members of the relevance for their work of the decrees of the 5th

Plenary Council of Australia and the terms of reference for their implementation, as well as the data gathered from participants in the Diocesan Assembly held on 15 February 202.

The second meeting of the SMPC was held in Shepparton on Friday 14 July and Saturday 15 July 2023. See a summary of the meeting below by the Council's executive officer, Dr Chris Cotter, with a link to his full report. See Attachment 2 for an extract from that report outlining the strategic directions for the Council.

The Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC)

Dr Chris Cotter (*SMPC Executive Officer*)
Director of Mission and Pastoral Life

The second meeting of the newly formed Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC) was conducted in Shepparton at St Brendan's Parish on 14 and 15 July 2023. Members of the Council came well prepared having completed two important "homework" tasks following the inaugural meeting on 27 and 28 April. The first task invited the Members to reflect prayerfully on the requirements of three diocesan leadership positions: two lay people (Members of the Council or not) to attend meetings of the College of Consultors; one Member of the Council to attend meetings of the Diocesan Finance Council; and the position of Chair of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC).

At the commencement of the Council meeting on Friday 14 July, Bishop Shane announced ... appointments to attend the College of Consultors, and ... an appointment to the Diocesan Finance Council. After a period of group discernment and "Spiritual Conversation", Members of the Council made recommendations to Bishop Shane for the Chair of the SMPC. On Saturday morning, it was announced that ... would be Chair of the Council.

The second "homework" task required Members to prayerfully reflect on the recommendation to the SMPC for concrete action from the Diocesan Assembly held on 15 February 2023 in Kialla. ... the Members of the Council have now begun to work in three strategic 'interest groups'. Each of these groups will bring to the August meeting of the SMPC a set of activities that could be further refined and eventually implemented to operationalise the Strategic Directions in the Final Report. In the meantime, the SMPC Executive... will meet to prepare for the next meeting of the Council.

Mr ... facilitated our first two meetings, and with great care and expertise assisted the Council in its initial formation and gradual development into a body that is truly committed to listening, discernment and action on behalf of the whole Diocese and in service of the mission.

<https://www.sandhurst.catholic.org.au/item/2506-smpc-gathers-for-second-meeting-14-15-july-2023>
Full report available [here](#)

Other indicators of change

The website provides details of an up-to-date diocesan newsletter published every two to four weeks. The newsletter includes information on the refugee action network, and information on the referendum on the indigenous voice to parliament, including details of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) new website called “One Journey, Together” for Catholics to learn about the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The website also has a youtube channel with 350 subscribers and 97 videos resulting in 48,885 views. The website also provides details of Bishop Shames forthcoming engagements and a calendar for upcoming diocesan activities.

In relation to Laudato Si actions, half of the parishes and schools in the diocese have made a commitment to Laudato Si’ action goals by enrolling in the Catholic Earthcare programme. Bishop Shane Mackinlay spoke of the Australia Catholic Bishops’ commitment to Laudato Si’ Action goals and his pride in the Diocese of Sandhurst’s response to the call to action.

Attachment 1: A profile of the bishop

Bishop Shane was born in Melbourne in 1965. At the age of 10, his family moved to Ballarat. He went to St Patrick’s College there and was dux of the school in 1982. His tertiary qualifications include a degree in Physics from Monash. He completed a Master’s degree and Doctorate in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. His doctoral thesis has been published in 2009 by New York’s Fordham University Press. It is a series called perspectives in continental philosophy. It is about the analysis of a French philosopher Jean-luc Marion. Its title is: *Interpreting Excess Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, And Hermeneutics*.

Marion objects to truth being limited to the verifiable truth of the natural sciences and insists on an excess beyond what we can grasp and understand. It is this excess that opens new possibilities for philosophical thinking about genuinely transcendent revelation

The book is described by the publisher as ‘a significant contribution to ongoing debates about philosophical ways of thinking about God, the relation between hermeneutics and phenomenology, and philosophy "after the subject." A reviewer at the Sorbonne in Paris said: ‘It is a brilliant and insightful reading, nourished by a perfect knowledge of the entire work, as well as the whole range of phenomenology, which never hesitates to engage in critical remarks when necessary’. He taught at the Catholic Theological College in the subjects of Philosophy, Hermeneutic And Critical Theory, Phenomenology, Ethical Theory, and the Philosophy Of Religion. He was appointed Master of the College in 2011 and Associate Professor in Philosophy at the University of Divinity in 2012.

Attachment 2: Strategic directions for The Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council

Strategic Direction interest groups	Strategic Direction in common
1. Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the missionary and pastoral outreach to families, young people, marginalised groups and those who are baptised but are no longer active in parish life.	<p>Strategic Direction 2 Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the promotion of the equal dignity of women and men; to enhancing the role of women in the Church in Sandhurst; and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality.</p>
3. Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese aimed at strengthening the connection between parishes and schools, parishes and Chancery, Chancery and Catholic Education Sandhurst, and other Catholic entities in the Diocese.	
4. Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the initial and ongoing formation of the faithful in missionary discipleship, missionary and pastoral outreach, theology and liturgy, ministry, listening, dialogue and discernment.	