

Catholic Diocese of Parramatta: a case study of becoming a synodal Church

Sense of the Faithful Ltd, 29 October 2025

The case study¹

One of the newest Australian Catholic dioceses was created in 1986, at the site of one of the country's oldest white settlements. Parramatta continues to attract settlers, from many countries and – perhaps mirroring the dreams of the many newcomers to Australia making their home in the Western suburbs of Sydney – a faith community can be found here with freshly-minted dreams for the Catholic church of tomorrow. The Parramatta Diocese's now one-year-old *Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church* spells out “a synodal way of being Church” – a path more attentive to the voice of the Spirit, more collaborative, inclusive and welcoming, and which reaches out in mission to the margins of society. It is a dream not yet realised, but work has begun to make it so.

This second case study in the *Sense of the Faithful* series aims to give a taste of how a “synodal way” is being implemented in the Diocese of Parramatta – to show something of what has been achieved and to describe the speed-humps along the synodal path. Parramatta has been chosen for this case study, in particular, because its bishop was the first in Australia to call a diocesan synod after the 5th Plenary Council.²

Methodology

Sense of the Faithful is an organisation committed to fostering synodal practices in the Catholic Church in Australia. In a recent open letter, we urged Australia's Catholic bishops to take a stronger role in leading the implementation of the synodal path in this country.³ We welcome Pope Leo XIV's assurance of his intention to continue Pope Francis's commitment to promoting a synodal path for the Church.⁴

Our case studies are intended to encourage the Australian Church in its adoption of a synodal path, by deepening the understanding of what a synodal approach involves for dioceses. The focus of the case studies is on identifying the key features of synodality where it is found in a diocese and the factors supporting or hindering its adoption.

We base our research on documentary evidence, available statistical data, and person-to-person interviews with diocesan officials, priests and lay parishioners. From these we create a “snapshot” of the diocese that aims to be fair and accurate, if not comprehensive. The case study concludes with a summary assessment by the lead investigator, in consultation with *Sense of the Faithful* committee members. Before publishing, the work is reviewed by diocesan representatives to identify and rectify any errors or significant gaps. *Sense of the Faithful* thanks Bishop Vincent Long, diocesan officials and the people of the diocese for the information and feedback they gave and for their welcome to our lead researcher.

¹ The lead researcher for this case study was *Sense of the Faithful* editorial committee member Robert Carey.

² The Fifth Plenary Council of Australia (with assemblies in October 2021 and July 2022) affirmed the commitment of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference that “within five years following the closing session of the Plenary Council ... each Diocese conduct a Diocesan Synod and every ten years thereafter” (“At the Service of Communion, Participation and Mission: Governance”, 5b).

³ *Sense of the Faithful*, “Open Letter to the Australian Bishops and the People of God in Australia”, 24/3/25.

⁴ “Address of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV to the College of Cardinals”, 10/5/25.

What is synodality?

While “synodality” is a new word in the English language and not in the vocabulary of most Australian Catholics, the idea of *synod* – “walking together” – has a long and established place in the Church’s structure and governance.⁵ It was perhaps first seen in the “Council of Jerusalem” where Peter and Paul argued the case for a new way of moving forward in a community growing beyond its Jewish boundaries. Synodality developed through the first millennium where, in various forms, decisions were made through a coming together in communion of Church leaders. The “counter-reformation” saw the Council of Trent urge a return to the practice of regular diocesan synods and provincial councils. Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops (which he said “can be improved upon with the passing of time”), to carry forward the practice of consultation and collaboration established at the Second Vatican Council.⁶ While the word itself does not appear in the Vatican II documents, a comprehensive 2018 study of synodality by the Roman Curia’s International Theological Commission understands that Council’s conception of the Church – a communion of the pilgrim people of God, united through Baptism – as the bedrock of synodality: “It is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging.”⁷

The Synod’s final document, which Pope Francis declared to be part of the “ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter”,⁸ describes synodality as, at one and the same time: 1) a “modus vivendi et operandi” (way of living and working) – or, more simply, a “style”; 2) a set of structures and practices in the Church at an institutional level; and 3) a formal process of collaborative decision-making.⁹ Synodality should proceed from a “synodal spirituality”, a deep listening, in the first instance, to the Holy Spirit. The members of the Body of Christ should be aware of their co-responsibility, listening with humility and learning from the different perspectives of other members, discerning charisms for service and ministries. The synodal vision, as the Bishop of Parramatta, Vincent Long, describes it, is a commitment ...

... to becoming a community of listening, discernment, and decision-making that leads us to being a model society and an effective vehicle of the Good News for the disadvantaged, the planet, and all God’s creation.¹⁰

The concept of synodality has a clear definition, but the practice of synodality is not restrictive. Rather, the *Final Document* defines “pathways to follow, practices to implement and horizons to explore”. Local churches are free to find their own way along the synodal path.¹¹

Parramatta: a pastoral plan for a synodal Church

The diocese

The Diocese of Parramatta’s website declares it has ...

... a captivating history that stretches back to the early days of Catholicism in Australia. Established in 1986, it was founded to serve the rapidly growing, multicultural population in Sydney’s western suburbs. The roots of Catholicism in this region can be traced back to

⁵ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document (FD)*, 26/10/24, No. 28.

⁶ Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, 15/9/1965.

⁷ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”, 2/3/2018, No. 6.

⁸ In a note accompanying the *Final Document (FD)*.

⁹ *FD*, No. 30, citing “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”, No. 70.

¹⁰ *Behold I am with you Always: Diocese of Parramatta’s Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church*, p.4.

¹¹ “Synodal renewal fosters an appreciation of local contexts as the place where the universal call from God manifests and fulfils itself” (*FD*, 39).

the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, when the seeds of faith were first sown in Australian soil.¹²

The diocese was created the same year as the Diocese of Broken Bay, both dioceses being formerly part of the Archdiocese of Sydney. Parramatta's founding Bishop was Bede Heather (diocesan leader for 13 years), followed by Bishop Kevin Manning (13) and Bishop Anthony Fisher (4). The next and current Bishop, Vincent Long, was appointed in 2016, transferring from Melbourne where he had been an Auxiliary Bishop. The diocese covers an area that has a population of 1.3 million, where, in 2021, almost one in four (24.7 per cent) were Catholic, a higher ratio than the 20 per cent Catholic share of Australia's total population and the third highest of Australian dioceses.¹³ The Catholic population is relatively stable, with 62.4 per cent of Catholics at the same address in 2021, compared with the previous census.¹⁴

The diocese extends from Parramatta in the East to the Blue Mountains in the West and embraces 322,448 Catholics – a small decline in the Catholic population (-229) since the 2016 census. The Diocese includes more than 40 multicultural communities (106,000 born overseas), in 45 parishes.¹⁵ There are more than 120 active and retired clergy (half of whom are diocesan priests and half in religious orders), 230 religious (two-thirds female) and 16 permanent deacons.¹⁶ Reflecting the changing demographics of the region, one new parish was created this year in the rapidly expanding Marsden Park area, and three parishes in the Blue Mountains were merged into a single parish of the Upper Blue Mountains.

While the total Catholic population in Parramatta is not in serious decline, it is ageing. The percentage of Catholic children 0-14 years has declined steadily – over the past 25 years by 5.4 per cent – and in 2021 was 20.1 per cent of the population; the percentage of 65+ has increased by 8.9 per cent over the same period, and in 2021 was 16.5 per cent, the rate accelerating in the past ten years. At the same time, Parramatta has a younger population of Catholics than many Australian dioceses, with the seventh highest percentage of 0-14-year-olds and the fourth lowest percentage of 65+. The median age of Catholics was 39 in 2021, four years younger than the Australian Catholic median age of 43. Across the diocese, the Catholic median age varies greatly: it is 45 in the Blue Mountains but only 32 in Marsden Park, for instance.

Catholic Schools Parramatta administers 80 primary and secondary schools. The participation rate of Catholic children in Catholic schools has remained relatively constant over the past two and a half decades: it was 55.5 per cent in 1996 and 56.2 per cent in 2021.

The share of Catholics in Parramatta born in a non-English speaking country has risen to 29.2 per cent in 2021, up from 26.6 per cent in 2016. Catholics from the Philippines (9.5 per cent of the Catholic population) and India (2.1 per cent) are conspicuous among the recent Catholic migrant populations. Catholics from Brazil (0.1 per cent), Colombia (0.2 per cent), and Middle East and North Africa (0.6 per cent) also feature significantly in new arrivals in Australia between 2018 and 2021. Lebanese Catholics, a majority in the Maronite Rite, represent 2.8 per

¹² <https://parracatholic.org/about/our-history/>.

¹³ Wagga Wagga Diocese has 26.5 per cent, in first place, followed by Bathurst Diocese with 25.3 per cent. This and further demographic information cited in this case study is sourced from the Australian Catholics Bishops' National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au>) and Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census (ABS).

¹⁴ Parramatta ranks the sixth highest among Australian dioceses, Port Pirie being the highest with 65.0 per cent at the same address. (National Centre for Pastoral research, *Diocesan Social profile: Diocese of Parramatta*, July 2023.)

¹⁵ <https://parracatholic.org/about/NCPR>

¹⁶ <https://parracatholic.org/about/>; *Diocese of Parramatta Synod Working Document*, October 2023; <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dparm.html>

cent of the Catholic population, with many having settled around Parramatta before the diocese was created.¹⁷

The number of Catholics living alone is growing slowly and was 21,585 in 2021. Nearly a quarter of Catholics (24.4 per cent) held university degrees in 2021, a percentage that has been steadily rising over the past two decades and a trend with particular significance for future parish leadership.¹⁸ Nearly 20,000 Catholics live with a disability and their percentage in the community is growing. There are increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers resident in the diocese. The diocese also includes the largest urban population of First Nations Peoples in Australia, and that population is growing.¹⁹

The Synod and the pastoral plan

The coat of arms of Bishop Vincent Long bears the motto “Go out into the deep”, and it is fair to say the Parramatta Diocese is an early starter in pushing out into the deep on the voyage of synodality in Australia. The game plan for the current stage of Parramatta’s synodal journey is spelled out in a 63-page document launched in August 2024: *Behold I Am with You Always: Diocese of Parramatta’s Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church*. The journey can be said to have begun many years ago, and the present document notes that the “walking together” of synodality can be traced to the diocese’s foundation, when its first bishop, Bede Heather, adopted as his motto, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (“This Sacred Council”), the title of the Second Vatican Council’s key reform document on the liturgy. There had been, moreover, a previous pastoral plan, “Faith in Our Future”, that had followed a diocesan-wide consultation in 2013, under the previous bishop, Anthony Fisher.²⁰

The current pastoral plan – “a call to all the baptised without exception” – is the fruit of a Diocesan Synod, held in October 2023 and lays out a “four-year journey for the People of God in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains”. It presents a “Christ-centred vision of the diocese” which ...

... helps our Diocese align its efforts with the Church’s mission, meeting the changing needs of the community while staying true to its tradition and pastoral priorities ... [It] involves the commitment of the entire People of God, called to live out their baptismal call in the life of the Church. ... It seeks to respond to the action of the Holy Spirit, as we, united in prayer and the Word of God, discern and live out the path to ‘deeper communion, fuller participation, and a greater openness to fulfilling our mission in the world’.²¹

The Synod was preceded by a consultation between March and June 2023 engaging 5,000 individuals in “an inclusive listening process”, resulting in 1,000 submissions. The synod body had 195 members, “including clergy, consecrated persons, and lay people, as well as eight observers and four periti (experts). The Synod members, representing a diverse cross-section of the diocesan community, were selected through ex-officio roles, applications, and direct invitations.”²²

Bishop Long said the Synod was a response, in particular, to the invitation of Pope Francis to become a more synodal church, which the pope had declared was what “God expects of the

¹⁷ “Maronites Down Under”, *Catholic Weekly*, 24/9/21.

¹⁸ NCPR.

¹⁹ *Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church*, p.2. Parramatta is fourth in diocesan rankings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, behind Brisbane, Darwin and Maitland-Newcastle, where those populations spread beyond urban areas.

²⁰ *Faith in Our Future: Pastoral Plan for the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, 2014–2018*.

²¹ *Behold I am with you Always: Diocese of Parramatta’s Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church*, p.13.

²² *Diocesan Synod Summary Report*, Dec. 2023.

Church in a third millennium”.²³ In the Synod opening Mass, he said that, in the years since the Vatican council ...

... we have entered a new threshold in which the totality of the People of God is the way forward. Indeed, the Church cannot be fully itself without involving everyone as co-responsible for its life and mission ...

The challenge for us today is to be the Church on mission for those who long for healing, affirmation, encouragement, justice and love. We cannot be an inward-looking group but a missionary and prophetic community of disciples. We cannot be that community without engaging with those on the margins of life.²⁴

The Synod elaborated six “themes” that would define a more synodal Church.²⁵ Further consultation in the year following the Synod produced the 63-page pastoral plan, which adopted the Synod themes as its objectives, developing five diocesan priorities as a “framework for action”: prayer, mission, formation, listening dialogue and discernment, and community. The Synod’s 24 resolutions were the rationale for 49 “commitments”, with 57 examples of action for local communities. “Commitments” include: “Explore the establishment of ethnic chaplaincies”; “Shift cultural blocks and adapt structures that honour the gifts of all the baptised, women and men, at all levels of leadership”; “Establish a First nations Advisory Council”, etc. Local examples include: “Establish groups to visit the sick, housebound and grieving”; “Encourage local community leaders to attend liturgical formation courses”; “Assign seminarians to work in identified social outreach programs”, “Work with other Christian and non-Christian communities to support local charities”, etc. About two thirds of the commitments generally addressed the internal Church community and Church structures and just a third of the proposed actions reached out to the wider community (*see appendix for complete list*).

Lead Facilitator for the implementation of the pastoral plan, Mike Schembri, said “commitments” had been assigned to diocesan agencies, with accountability to the bishop’s chancery team. Parishes were invited to take the suggestions for action as starters for local conversations that would guide pastoral planning along a synodal path.

Diocesan action

Diocesan office

To facilitate awareness and understanding of the pastoral plan throughout the diocese and to assist in its implementation, a two-person team has begun a program of visiting all the parishes. This team is expected to contact all parishes by early 2026. Mike Schembri said discussions were being held first with the parish priest, followed by further meetings with parish councils and groups. He and Senior Facilitator Rachael Kama aimed to engage with what the parish was already doing and provide “encouragement and advice”, seeking to expand existing initiatives in more synodal directions. Growth would be “at God’s pace” and not necessarily as fast as some might like.

Other diocesan agencies stood ready to provide extra assistance in implementing the pastoral plan objectives, where requested, including, in particular, the Mission Enhancement Team

²³ “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” 17/10/2015, cited by Bishop Long at the opening Synod Mass.

²⁴ “Bishop Vincent’s Homily for the 2023 Diocesan Synod Opening Mass”, *Diocesan Synod Summary Report*, Dec. 2023, p.56.

²⁵ “An Inclusive and Welcoming Church, A Humble and Healing Church, A Listening Church, A Church Renewed in Spirit and Prayer, A Church That Reaches to the Margins and A Church Walking Together.” (*Diocesan Synod Summary Report*, Dec. 2023, p.3.)

(MET).²⁶ MET Facilitator for Parish Mission and Formation Alison Ryan acknowledged that synodal practices were not going to be “the be-all-and-end-all” for all Catholics in Parramatta, but as people began to experience “synodal listening” in parish and other local groups she believed conversion to that way of operating would spread.

Bishop Long appeared at ease with the rolling out of the plan. He believed it was a long-term project requiring “attitudinal change”. But he also believed there could be no turning back, given the work of the Synod of Bishops on synodality under Pope Francis and Francis’s assertion that synodality was the way forward for the Church. The ship was now “on course” and could not be turned around, notwithstanding inevitable “bumps and the storms” ahead.

The pastoral plan liberally quotes from the documents of the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (“The Synod on Synodality”). The Synod’s Final Document was published just two months after Parramatta’s pastoral plan. If the implementation of the diocesan plan is to be assessed in terms of the Synod’s “three distinct aspects of the life of the Church” – the style, the structures and the events – it has clearly ticked the box of *events* in its holding of the synod. It is now moving with a more synodal approach to the operation of diocesan and parish *structures*, as outlined in the following section.

Pastoral councils

Pastoral councils, on three levels, have been part of the established structures in Parramatta for many years: a Diocesan Pastoral Council, deanery councils and parish councils. The diocese was among the first to publish, in 2021, formal guidelines for the three levels of pastoral councils, which are “our vehicle through which the faithful can be heard and join in the diocesan task of recognising the signs of the times”.²⁷ The first Diocesan Pastoral Council was established around 1997, before lapsing. It was re-established under Bishop Long in 2018 and played an active role in the synod process, particularly in its appointment of synod members.²⁸

Deaneries are local geographical groupings of parishes under the care of a regional dean. They have functioned, in the first instance, to encourage collaboration between parishes and to develop a unified vision in pastoral planning. They also provide fraternal support for the priests of a given region. The deanery pastoral councils are ...

... representative bodies that act as a significant expression of the synodal church, sharing in the responsibility for the ongoing pastoral life of the local communities in the deanery. Considering the pastoral questions of our day with their dean, members listen to their communities and discern local needs, support the implementation of pastoral goals while fostering connection and communication throughout the deanery.²⁹

In January this year, the deaneries underwent a restructuring, their number being increased from five to seven, resulting in the need to create new deanery councils. According to MET head Michael Reid this created “an opportunity to renew them ... in line with the synodal approach”. They were seen to be a “driving force” for the implementation of the pastoral plan.³⁰ Alison Ryan said there was now an opportunity to “restart” the regional councils “with a particular focus on being what we’re calling synodal listening bodies within the diocesan structure”. She said the councils were not working groups making decisions but were there “to listen to their

²⁶ The Mission Enhancement Team has about 20 employed staff and “provides practical services such as Marriage Preparation Courses, Natural Fertility Programs and Liturgical Formation. The team also includes Catholic Youth Parramatta, our Peace, Justice and Ecology Team and many Pastoral Formation Facilitators and Trainers.” (<https://parracatholic.org/about/our-teams/>)

²⁷ *Diocesan Pastoral Council & Deanery Pastoral Councils Handbook*, November 2021.

²⁸ DJ Gleeson, *Diocesan Pastoral Councils: An Australian Historical study*, September 2021, p.63.

²⁹ <https://parracatholic.org/contribute/governance/>.

³⁰ *Catholic Outlook*, 18/3/2025, <https://catholicoutlook.org/new-deanery-structure-in-the-diocese-of-parramatta/>.

communities, to discern together and to share wisdom”. According to Alison, the creation of smaller and more local deanery structures had been itself “the result of synodal listening” during a prior review which she had led.

Parish pastoral councils have been a familiar part of the landscape of Parramatta parishes for many years, although some parishes do not have them. Diocesan officials estimate there might be “five or six” parishes without pastoral councils out of 45 parishes in total. According to Alison Ryan, about a third of parishes had already taken a lead themselves in introducing synodal practices, another third had expressed a mild enthusiasm for doing so and another third were continuing in a traditional managerial model, attending to lists of business, rather than making use of practices of listening and discernment. While the former style was not discounted, synodal practices needed to be used to inform the business discussions, she said.

Bishop Long considers that an effective way of bringing about attitudinal change was “leading by example”. He said that in the diocesan curia (“the highest decision-making body of the diocese) ... I endeavour to include women and lay people that weren’t included before.” He said some lay people had “aided and abetted clericalism” by giving away the power of their own agency. Modelling synodal leadership meant not simply involving people in various roles and bodies within the church but to “lead in a certain way to empower others to take their rightful places”. Bishop Long is well known in Australia for his advocacy of women in leadership roles in the Church.³¹ This can be seen in the high proportion of women in senior leadership roles in the diocesan offices. “Three quarters of the mission team are women,” one official noted.

Feedback from many sources to the Sense of the Faithful interviewer suggested that an atmosphere had been created under Bishop Long’s leadership that had created a space to breathe where “things can happen”. There was a widespread belief that the bishop was serious about synodality and set a consistent tone; it was now up to the “the good people” to bring about the changes necessary.

The seminary

The student enrolment of Parramatta’s Holy Spirit Seminary is small (currently about seven men). In the immediate future at least, it is most likely that new diocesan clergy will continue to be brought in from overseas or from religious congregations. Nevertheless, the seminary has a critical role to play in the formation of the priests who will lead the diocese along a synodal path and should be considered here.

Holy Spirit Seminary, based just south of Parramatta city, provides the students’ pastoral formation only. They travel to the Catholic Institute of Sydney in Strathfield for their academic studies. The seminary’s motto, “forming seminarians in synodal leadership, for synodal parishes”, signals its alignment with the diocesan pastoral plan. However, the seminary rector, Fr Paul Marshall, suggested that dictum may not be so well aligned with the students’ academic formation. Nevertheless, he has sought to model a synodal style in multiple ways. These include sending students out for extended parish placements, earlier than was once the case, and appointing more women to the seminary staff. When the time came for the students to be enrolled in the order of acolyte, instead of the all-male ceremony, in the traditional progression to priesthood via “minor orders”, Holy Spirit students were admitted to the order of acolyte

³¹ Cf. Bishop Long’s 2019 message to the Catholic women’s group “Voices of Faith”: “Until we have truly incorporated the gift of women and the feminine dimension of our Christian faith, we will not be able to fully energise the life of the Church” (<https://www.goodsams.org.au/article/balanceforbetter-women-and-leadership-in-the-church/>).

with other lay people, male and female, in a ceremony in the parish church in which the seminary is located.³²

Fr Marshall concedes these tweaks to the seminary system do not add up to a total renewal package for synodal clerical leadership. Instead, he suggests that, while importing priests from other countries might be fine as an emergency measure, the long-term solution to the challenge of identifying and forming priestly ministers for synodal parishes must begin with the formation of lay leadership in parishes.

Catholic schools

In January 2023, Bishop Long established a new governance system for Catholic schools in Parramatta, creating “Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese” (CSPD). Its 80 schools educate “around one in four students in Western Sydney”.³³ Following the diocesan Synod, a joint document of the diocese and CSPD was published: *Walking Together: A Framework for Partnership in Mission for the Catholic Parishes and Schools of the Diocese of Parramatta*. The document acknowledges Parramatta’s pastoral plan and said it ...

... aims to reaffirm and strengthen the relationship between parishes and schools, and to support parish and school leaders in cooperating and working effectively together to educate students holistically ... [and] ... outlines guiding principles for effective shared Mission in education and details key areas of interest for effective collaboration between parishes and schools.³⁴

Deacons

Parramatta currently has 16 permanent deacons, who are part of a growing number of ordained deacons in the Australian Catholic Church.³⁵ Deacon John Collins is the head of formation for deacons in the Parramatta diocese and said his role was also “to form synodal leaders for a synodal Church”. In the North Rocks parish, he was principally involved in adult faith education, prayer groups and sacramental preparation. Other deacons have had roles in leading parishes in the absence of a priest, but he emphasised priests had “a different sort of leadership in parishes. We [do] servant leadership, and part of it is trying to empower and encourage the lay leadership.” Deacons are the focus of innovative models of pastoral leadership in Parramatta, as will be seen in the next section.

Catholic Outlook

Catholic Outlook, Parramatta’s online news site and the diocese’s official publication, sees itself as assisting in the implementation of the pastoral plan “by example”.³⁶ The publication combines local diocesan stories by staff and local writers with relevant stories sourced from national and international publications republished with permission. Curia member Sr Ailsa McKinnon said the Communications and Engagement team which publishes *Outlook* intentionally published stories which provided examples of what synodality looked like. “You can’t expect every parish to come on at once,” she said. *Outlook* stories were meant to “provide a kind of impetus ... and be a leaven, to gradually develop.”

³² Cf. the 2021 Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis, *Spiritus Domini*, 10/1/21.

³³ <https://www.parra.catholic.edu.au/about/our-story>

³⁴ *Walking Together*, 2024, p.7.

³⁵ The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference approved the statutes of the new Australian Catholic Deacons Association in April this year.

³⁶ <https://catholicoutlook.org>

Parish reception

At the parish level the path toward synodality becomes less straightforward; it is where the *style* of synodality – “the Church’s ordinary way of living and working”³⁷ – is most tested. It is evident that synodal practices are flourishing in many parishes, local organisations and in the lives of parishioners – whether arising spontaneously from an innate sense of mission or deliberately chosen as such. At the same time, in many other parishes business as usual seems the natural order. Sr MacKinnon said parishes were where synodality was “mostly happening ... but in particular parishes. It’s a slow process.” This is not unexpected in a very large diocese, with mixed ethnicities and ages, and with a heterogeneous community of priests. This uneven response at parish level is evident especially given an ambitious plan to move a Catholic culture in a new direction: to renovate what membership of the Church means and to promote the Church as a prophetic voice in the world.

The synodal journey at the parish level is most often taken in small steps. Christ the King Parish at North Rocks, established in 1970, is at the eastern end of the diocese. It has an ageing population, largely Australian-born. The parish council currently is encouraging parishioners to wear name tags at Sunday Mass, “to be more welcoming and inclusive of people”.³⁸ It was an initiative encouraged by the diocesan pastoral plan, according to parish council member Lorraine Murphy.

In parishes with younger, growing populations, community-building often occurs in a more dramatic fashion. Such is the case in the newly-established Parish of Marsden Park, in the middle of the diocese.³⁹ The parish is sited in a significant growth area with a richly multicultural population, a quarter with Indian ancestry. The parish does not yet have a permanent church, and fund-raisers featuring the food of many nations are regular events, to raise funds for the church building to come. Parish Council member Tessie James, who was also a member of the Diocesan Synod, said the introduction of synodality in the parish “happened organically” and began in the period when it was designated a “parochial district”.

Deacon Tony Hoban, formerly in North Rocks parish, was appointed administrator of the parochial district in 2018. With his wife Annette as collaborator, parishioners always understood they had a husband-and-wife team leading them, and the word “synodal” was gradually introduced in homilies and conversations and parish meetings. “Now I find people in my parish constantly using the word synod. They want to talk about a fund-raising event, they sell it using the word ... oh, we need to work synodally!” Tessie James said. Tessie identified 12 separate formal “ministries” which were the subject of twice-a-year recruitment drives, which the parish holds “like an expo”.⁴⁰ The new parish priest, Fr Gayan Thamel, is building on the work of Tony and Annette Hoban.

The nearby Sacred Heart Parish in Mount Druiitt South provides another example of a deacon-led community. In 2022, Deacon Roderick Pirotta was appointed as its Pastoral Director, when closure of the parish was threatened. Deacon Rod told *Catholic Outlook* recently that one of the joys of his ministry was sharing his witness to the parish with his wife, Kathryn Fitzgibbon. “We share the decision-making, the experiences, the successes and the disappointments in the ministry, and she often spends a few hours a week helping me at the parish as well,” he said.⁴¹

³⁷ Synod of Bishops *Final Document*, No.30.

³⁸ Christ the King Parish newsletter, 27/7/25.

³⁹ The Marsden Park “Parochial District” officially became a parish in January this year.

⁴⁰ These ministries included: newcomers, music ministry, children’s liturgy, readers, logistics, acolytes (men and women), finance committee, youth ministry and social media.

⁴¹ *Catholic Outlook*, 3/4/24, <https://catholicoutlook.org/cuppa-with-a-deacon-deacon-roderick-pirotta-sacred-heart-parish-mt-druitt-south/>.

A different picture is seen at the Western end of the diocese, in the Blue Mountains. The three former parishes in the newly-merged parish of the Upper Blue Mountains had seven churches. While there might be a natural community-mindedness in the Indian, Filipino and Pacific Islander communities of Marsden Park, a more individualistic Catholic posture, the heritage of a European ancestry and piety, characterises those in the pews in the Blue Mountains. At the launch of the diocesan pastoral plan, Blue Mountains representative Len Blahut said he was handed a banner to be displayed in the church on his return. He said he found himself reluctant to do so as it would have meant little to the parishioners “until this significant event was brought to awareness by the pastor with an opportunity for reflection on the plan ... most people would say the people in the pews haven’t heard the word [synodality] being mentioned at all since the Parramatta Synod.” The role of the priest was “pivotal in bringing the thinking undergirding synodality into a forum for reflection,” he said.

However, the listening may have begun in the Blue Mountains, with the newly-merged parish just announcing a plan to form local “Church Community Pastoral Teams” at each church, which would manage liturgy, maintenance, pastoral care and communication with the parish.⁴² Alison Ryan, who is to assist in the planning, said this was an opportunity to develop “local lay-led pastoral teams”, supported by the clergy team and accountable to it and the parish pastoral council. “My hope is to be able to offer formation around what lay-led communities can look like in a synodal church.”

A singular parish in the diocese, just south of Marsden Park is Mount Druitt. The area is “home to over 6,400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – more than 5.6 per cent of the local population, well above the national average.”⁴³ Mt Druitt’s former parish priest Fr Paul Hanna is honoured in the diocese for his ministry among them. With other parish and community leaders, he was instrumental in initiating the annual Blacktown Council “Reconciliation Walk”.⁴⁴

Clergy reception

Among the 195 members of the recent Diocesan Synod were a large number of priests and deacons, representing most of the parishes in the diocese. At the same time, Sense of the Faithful heard from many priests and diocesan officials that the diocese could have been more proactive in involving and consulting the priests in the synod’s preparation. It was suggested this had presented an impediment to the ready implementation of the diocesan pastoral plan. There had been a communication problem, at the least. Several priests and diocesan officials expressed an opinion that not all priests were on side with the synodal project as envisaged by the diocese. “Everybody likes the thought of it in theory,” North Rocks Parish priest Fr Ian McGinnity said. But he acknowledged a reticence among older priests with bad memories of earlier renewal programs. There was also a suspicion among some younger priests who feared losing their traditional authority as a parish priest and the potential “watering down” of doctrine.

A less than enthusiastic response to synodality from every priest suggests a problem that has not yet been well addressed. The synodal invitation to a partnership in mission and parish leadership proposes an untrodden path for both priests and laity and, for some priests, this raises a troubling question: “If everybody’s job is leadership, then what’s *my* job?” Addressing this question is a matter for the wider Church in Australia and beyond the scope of the present study.

⁴² Catholic parish of the Upper Blue Mountains Bulletin, 17/8/25.

⁴³ *Catholic Outlook*, 11/6/25, <https://catholicoutlook.org/mt-druitt-parish-celebrates-60-years-of-faith-family-and-fraternity-with-first-nations-peoples/>.

⁴⁴ Fr Hanna is now retired, after 23 years of ministry in Mt Druitt.

The challenges - Sense of the Faithful feedback

While enthusiasm for the pastoral plan and synodal practices are evident in Parramatta, obstacles to progress can also be seen, both among clergy and laity. Some priests are wary, and there are laity who are quite content with the way things have always been. A climate for change can be created through the restructuring of diocesan agencies, the employment of people already imbued with enthusiasm for the synodal path and the publishing of a plan with an inspiring vision. But real cultural change can only happen with attitudinal changes and new ways of thinking and acting. Synodality had “animated lots of people in parishes,” Deacon John Collins said. “I think there’s a change of thinking. The genie is out of the bottle and the clerical culture is being gradually transformed – (there’s) not as much resistance. We’re trying to bring at least a space where conversation can happen.” Yet clearly there is a way to go before seeing a full alignment of the clergy body with the diocesan plan, and for its message to filter down into all the parishes and organisations. If there has been progress, it was yet “hard to measure”, Bishop Long said. The pastoral plan was about setting “targets, benchmarks that we would like to see the parishes or the agencies or the diocese as a whole move towards”. Growth was mostly happening in parishes, but in particular parishes,” Sr Ailsa MacKinnon said. “It’s a slow process.”

The People

“Synodality is communion,” one diocesan facilitator said. Creating the sense of parishioners’ deep communion with each other in the Body of Christ – moving out of postures of mere personal devotion at Sunday Mass to see communion, participation and mission at its heart – was a great developmental challenge. Parishioner passivity was not necessarily confined to parishes of European background but was also seen in multi-ethnic parishes, where, according to one parishioner, one group might dominate another.

The need for people to sit down together and to *listen* in a new, open and prayerful way was a constant refrain from those promoting the pastoral plan – and the listening had to take place, especially, with priests and laity together. This simple message appears to be a critical key to the diocese moving any further significant distance along the synodal path. The process depends not just on people being willing to sit down together but in believing they need to do so. A clerical culture which excludes lay people from decision making and a lay culture which colludes in this arrangement makes for a significant barrier on the synodal path.

Parramatta Diocese is ahead of some other dioceses in having a high proportion of parishes with pastoral councils, deanery pastoral councils and a diocesan pastoral council as a well-established practice. Nevertheless, a challenge remains to bring a more synodal mode of operation into these councils than has been the practice to date.

Youth

This case study has described a vision for a Church of disparate parish communities and organisations, distinguished by ethnic origin, pastoral practices and levels of enthusiasm. The Church in Australia more generally is also differentiated by members in age groupings defined by very different life-cycle stages and supporting cultures of those age groups. Given an ageing Church population, a diocesan plan for future flourishing should surely include a strategy for better inclusion of young people and for the passing of leadership onto its younger members. The Parramatta Synod passed one resolution specifically regarding this age group – “to prioritise the allocation of resources towards sustaining existing youth ministries and co-creating new forms of engagement with young people within parishes, schools and beyond”. The pastoral plan has some worthy youth objectives and examples (*see appendix*), but focus on the participation and mission of youth is, perhaps, not yet sharp enough.

The Church's mainstream communication and relating methods are the heritage of a former era and mostly not the methods of younger generations. While *Catholic Outlook* is a powerful communication tool, its reach is unlikely to embrace the generations for whom newspapers, even online ones, are not the first source of news and information. There is a significant representation of the younger generations in senior roles on the diocesan staff, and their focus includes outreach to this group. Senior Facilitator for parish engagement, Rachael Kama said Parramatta's "FaithFeed" program, which has been running for several years, was a "very simple evangelisation (for) entry into the faith again, especially for those disaffiliated, those who have gone away when in their 20s, 30s and 40s."⁴⁵ A new version of this program, Faith Feed Echo has added music into settings with which younger generations more easily feel at home. While committed to creating spaces for young people to express their faith in their own way, Rachael also has her eye on future Church leadership: "Our ministry leaders are getting to a stage where they need to be handing things over, but there is no one to hand it over to as well. That's a thing – how can our diocesan plan support those parishes that need that?"

First Nations People

Parramatta will not be able to claim any success in its missionary enterprise if the diocese is not found to be walking with the most long-term marginalised people in the Australian community – its indigenous population, who are a significant presence in the diocese. A Catholic Church ministry with First Nations people has been in Mount Druitt for a number of decades, and, in Parramatta's Catholic schools, "Aboriginal education is incorporated on a daily basis into the curriculum".⁴⁶ The First Nations Program Coordinator at Oakhill College, Castle Hill, Karen Isaacs, said there was an estrangement between the Church and First Nations People, which was "a trust issue". The only way this could change was "by forging the first relationships". No relationship was forged by talking across table, she said. "If you're on a journey, **walk** – physically walk with the people." Such estrangement was evidenced at the Synod in debates over Indigenous concerns, which saw a divided floor when the time came to vote on resolutions. (The division was likely aggravated because Synod voting was held on the same day as the Australian Referendum on the Voice to Parliament.) There appears to be a way to go in achieving a "joined-up" policy in the diocese regarding First Nation's people.

Mission

The diocesan pastoral plan calls for "a culture of welcome, hospitality and meaningful connection for those in the LGBTIQA+ community" and Bishop Long is well known for espousing the Church's inclusiveness of this often-marginalised group. He sees "a church that embraces people at the margins, a church that goes to the peripheries" as not simply about taking the good news to the needy but allowing people at the margins to evangelise those holding positions in the centre:

I think the more you engage with the peripheries, the more you interact with those places of meaning and divinity. Unless we become a church without walls, we can become very insular and a very irrelevant Church. If we're not engaged with the outside world, with the people beyond the pews – the marginalised groups, whether they are diverse gender, the LGBTIQ+ group, or the divorced and remarried ... people who are of other faiths and other traditions ... that kind of engagement can only enrich one another.

⁴⁵ Further information at <https://www.thefaithfeedparramatta.com.au>.

⁴⁶ <https://www.parra.catholic.edu.au/learning/specialised-learning/jarara>.

The future - driving the vision

Parramatta is a region with a large and still highly visible Catholic population within which it can build a synodal Church and a base for dynamic mission. Even if diocesan leaders feel unable to point out major outcomes of the diocesan pastoral plan at this early stage, they might be reassured the diocese is on the right track with synodality, since other dioceses have sought out Parramatta's leaders for assistance with their own synodal plans.⁴⁷ Indeed, the vision has good hope of bearing fruit, at the least because of its alignment with the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops. Bishop Long has given it his full endorsement and presides over a diocese in which basic structures supporting synodality have been long in place. At the same time, he has introduced pioneering structures, such as Parramatta's deacon-led parishes, which he hopes "will add to the rich tapestry of Catholic pastoral landscape rather than [be] an aberration". Deacon-led communities and the formation, as in the Blue Mountains, of clergy-supported, lay-led pastoral teams around Mass centres, are initiatives that will be watched by other dioceses – especially where the closure of churches and parishes is thought to be the only way of maintaining the leadership of Catholic communities.

The bishop's vision of a Church that reaches beyond its own boundaries in mission to the wider world is supported by pastoral plan implementation facilitator Mike Schembri. The goal of the four-year journey of the current plan, he says, is to have "re-engaged the community of Parramatta ... so they see us as a welcoming, safe and Christ-centred place". Nevertheless, the task is especially challenging in an Australian Catholic Church frequently more comfortable with rearranging the deckchairs than steering the ship into the deep.

Producing the 2024 diocesan pastoral plan consumed much diocesan energy. Since the Synod, "there is a shift in dreaming, in imaging things in different ways and also inviting other voices into meetings", Rachael Kama said. Nevertheless, there is also some sense that the diocese is taking a deep breath to contemplate the yet long journey ahead and to work out the best way of overcoming the inertia that might stall its forward direction.

Among the challenges is the need to address the reticence among some of the ordained leaders in taking a leading role in a synodal journey. While diocesan lay leaders are engaged in restructuring programs and strategies to implement the pastoral plan, institutional change among the ordained has been slower. Might synodal practices, along the lines of "conversations in the Spirit", be adopted on clergy formation days and clergy meetings; and might a more formal "synodal checklist" be integrated into episcopal visitation of parishes, such as proposed by the recent Synod document on implementing the Synod reforms?⁴⁸ Needed also, according to some diocesan leaders, were more prophetic advocates for synodality who would drive the vision forward, "converts" who had begun the journey already and could speak from an experience of new discovery and purpose.

The subtext of *Behold I Am with You Always: Diocese of Parramatta's Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church* is a radical program that would, when fully implemented, represent a significant change in the culture of parish communities. Bishop Long is exercising the patience of one well aware of the profound cultural change needed in the people and in its leaders to make a synodal Church a reality. It is a long-term project, made, as Alison Ryan observed, "one conversation, one cup of coffee at a time".

⁴⁷ At the invitation of the Diocese of Geraldton, Alison Ryan helped facilitate last year's historic first synod of the diocese, and she says other dioceses have made similar invitations.

(Cf. <https://cathnews.com/~documents/media-releases/media-releases-2024/240826-geraldton-diocese-subject-catholic-diocese-of-geraldton-concludes-historic-first-syno>.)

⁴⁸ Cf. *Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod*, 29/6/25, no. 3.2.

APPENDICES

DIOCESAN RESOLUTIONS PASSED AT THE SYNOD ASSEMBLY

(Extracted from *Diocesan Synod Summary Report*, Dec. 2023)

Theme 1: An Inclusive and Welcoming Church

1A. To take active steps to build a culture of welcome, hospitality, and meaningful community across the Diocese.

1B. To create a safe and welcoming environment for all, especially the divorced, people with disabilities, refugees and asylum seekers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and members of the LGBTIQA+ community.

1C. To intentionally seek out the gifts and talents of the members of our parishes to strengthen communion, participation, and mission.

1D. To prioritise resources that support parishes and ministry groups in our work with families in all their diverse structures and circumstances.

Theme 2: A Humble and Healing Church

2A. To continue to offer, its unreserved and deepest apologies to those who have been betrayed through sexual, other forms of abuse by clerical and lay representatives of the Church, and to further processes for safeguarding, healing, and support.

2B. That, given the high population of Indigenous people in our Diocese, we continue meaningful dialogue with local Aboriginal communities, to find opportunities to listen and share stories and learn from their wisdom and relationship with the land.

2C Revised. That, in the service of reconciliation, parishes and diocesan agencies discern appropriate ways of acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land.

2D. That, parishes will help build united and harmonious civic communities by working collaboratively with like-minded organisations and individuals for the common good.

Theme 3: A Listening Church

3A. To prioritise the allocation of resources towards sustaining existing youth ministries and co-creating new forms of engagement with young people within parishes, schools and beyond.

3B. To commit to working collaboratively with other faith-based and civic organisations at local levels to promote care for the earth and more sustainable stewardship of our common home across every parish, school, and agency, especially by joining the Laudato Si' Action platforms.

3C. To promote the rich and faith-filled multicultural diversity within the Diocese and explore ways to integrate cultural traditions in our parish ministries, while respecting our theological and liturgical principles.

Theme 4: A Church Renewed in Spirit and Prayer

4A. To strengthen adult faith formation through regionally focused programs that draw on Biblical studies, rich and diverse Catholic spiritual traditions, Church history, liturgy, theology and Catholic social teaching.

4B. To continue preparing and commissioning women and men in various liturgical ministries including lectors and acolytes. (Spiritus Domini 2021)

4C. To enhance the experience of liturgy through resourcing and preparing those involved in the celebration of the Mass that inspires communion, participation and mission.

4D. To re-affirm the importance and impact of the homily on our daily lives and explore synodal ways of enhancing its relevance to all.

Theme 5: A Church That Reaches the Margins

5A. To strengthen our commitment to respect and protect the dignity of human life, from conception through to old age and natural death.

5B. To strengthen our commitment to welcome, support and advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers and work together in partnership with current and new agencies

5C. That each of our local communities will take steps to reach out and identify the greatest needs of their people and prioritise and allocate resourcing to address those needs.

5D. To engage experts in research, social sciences and organisational best practice in exploring emerging models of pastoral care, leadership and ministry.

Theme 6: A Church Walking Together

6A. To provide ongoing formation that enhances a culture of synodality for those preparing for ordination, clergy and all others in leadership roles in parishes, agencies, ministries and councils.

6B. To engage experts in ecclesiology for facilitating discussion on models of parish and faith community to better respond to contemporary pastoral care, leadership and ministry issues.

6C. To provide women with opportunities for mission, formation and education in a variety of leadership roles in the Church, supported by appropriate resources.

6D. To institute, where absent, a pastoral council at the diocesan, deanery and parish level (including ethnic chaplaincy), as a principal form of collaboration, dialogue and discernment (Christifideles Laici #25) in accordance with the law of the Church.

6E. To continue to promote interfaith and ecumenical dialogue and shared endeavours among our parishes, schools, agencies and ministries.

PASTORAL PLAN - OBJECTIVES AND COMMITMENTS

(Extracted from *Behold I Am with You Always: Diocese of Parramatta's Pastoral Plan for a Synodal Church*.)

IN PURSUIT OF THE SIX SYNODAL OBJECTIVES, THE DIOCESE OF PARRAMATTA COMMITS TO ...

DIOCESAN PRIORITY: PRAYER

- Support opportunities for prayer and renewal through retreats and sabbaticals particularly for key leaders and teams. 4A
 - Encourage and support prayer groups such as Lectio Divina or Lenten Groups. 4A
 - Deepen our experience and appreciation of the homily as a source of teaching and inspiration. Furthermore, we commit to developing suggestions for best practice and other resources to support quality preparation and delivery, especially for all clergy and seminarians. 4D
 - Explore the establishment of a Diocesan retreat house, offering opportunities for retreat, prayer and formation for the community. 4A
 - Increasing opportunities to access: 4C
- (a) Eucharistic Adoration by exploring the further establishment of Adoration Chapels or other times for Adoration especially before and after Mass.
- (b) the Sacrament of Reconciliation by exploring ways to increase availability, especially before and after Sunday Mass.
- (c) safe spaces in every deanery for prayer, reflection and worship outside of usual hours.
- Create opportunities to pray together as a Diocese for discerned causes. For example, such causes could include those seeking refuge, those who feel alienated from the Church, the distress of Earth, our planet home, dialogue with our sisters and brothers of other faiths or those caught in situations of violence and conflict. Prayer opportunities could include Holy Hours, Lectio Divina, praying the Psalms, Adoration, the Rosary and any number who gather in the name of the Lord, who has promised to be with them (Matthew 18:20). 3B

DIOCESAN PRIORITY: MISSION

- Explore options for a dedicated space or centre for youth and young adults for gathering, access to support services, formation, and retreats. 3A
- Explore the establishment of ethnic chaplaincies for all significantly represented cultures in our Diocese to better understand diverse cultural expressions of our faith, enabling us to walk together towards deeper communion, fuller participation and greater openness to fulfilling God's mission in the world. 3C
- Explore support structures which pastorally respond to the needs of all families, in their diverse structures and circumstances. For instance, reimagining and enhancing sacramental programs to engage all families through strengthened faith formation and structures of support and accompaniment. 1D
- Discern and co-develop an official "Statement of Welcome" to strengthen a culture of welcome that is enriched by and celebrates difference. The "Statement of Welcome" may be utilised by all communities within the Diocese and is displayed prominently across the Diocese. 1A
- Shift cultural blocks and adapt structures that honour the gifts of all the baptised, women and men, at all levels of leadership within the Diocese. 6C 1C

- Expand the existing work of the 'Diocesan Journey Walking with Refugees and People Seeking Protection' group to find concrete ways to create a culture of welcome, hospitality and meaningful connection for refugees and people seeking asylum. 1B
- Expand the existing work of the 'Pastoral Working group' to find concrete ways to create a culture of welcome, hospitality and meaningful connection for those in the LGBTIQA+ community towards deeper communion and fuller participation in the life and mission of the Church. 1B
- Support women and families of all structures and provide more equitable leave policies for new parents and carers to help families during challenging periods. 6C

DIOCESAN PRIORITY: FORMATION

- Educate the People of God about the Eucharist as the source and summit of our faith. 4A
- The ongoing development of formation in synodal leadership and practices for all who exercise leadership within and across the Diocese. Formation programs will include three synodal modules: Communion, Participation and Mission. 6A 6D
- Continue partnerships with experts and adult faith formation providers to produce high-quality programs that draw on Biblical studies, diverse Catholic spiritual traditions, Church history, theology, and Catholic social teachings. Emphasising prayer, scripture, and liturgy, we will continue to prioritise face-to-face formation, while also offering virtual options. 4A
- Grow our capacity to be a synodal community through embedding synodal practices such as Table Talks and Spiritual Conversations into the practice of each parish, ministry, and agency. 4A
- Create a spirit of hospitality and welcome for new clergy from overseas and across Australia by providing them with formation and training in local customs, cultures and the diverse and rich tapestry of our Diocese. 1A
- Work with priests and liturgists to develop liturgical resources that prioritise community engagement and effectively support participation in the liturgy. 4C
- Work with priests, deacons and adult faith formators to explore and establish formation and training opportunities for enhancing homilies, building towards local 'best practices', with guidance provided in *Evangelii Gaudium*. 4D
- Provide seminarians, clergy and faith leaders with formal studies in interfaith dialogue, recognising that we live in one of the most multicultural and multi-faith dioceses in Australia. 6E
- Sponsor equal numbers of women and men from the Diocese in studies of ecclesiology, theology, models for pastoral care, leadership and ministry. 5D
- Resource the ongoing expansion of youth ministry across the Diocese with a focus on faith formation and accompaniment towards leadership, service and mission. 3A
- Promote liturgical training for ministries like lectors and acolytes, with a particular focus on increasing the participation and representation of women in these roles. 4B
- Ongoing formation in ecological spirituality, which integrates faith with environmental stewardship, learning to live in harmony with creation, and actively working towards the care and preservation of our common home. 3C

DIOCESAN PRIORITY: LISTENING, DIALOGUE AND DISCERNMENT

- Ensure that each parish establishes a Pastoral Council in accordance with the Diocesan guidelines (for Pastoral Councils) 29 by the end of 2025. With support from the Diocese to optimise their effectiveness, Parish Pastoral Councils will encourage the participation of the

baptised in the life of the parish through the development of a pastoral plan, supported by subcommittees and/or action groups. 6D

- Host an event that brings the old and young together where they can listen to and learn from each other, sharing joy, energy and wisdom. 3A 5A

- Recognise the different needs of marginalised groups in our Diocese through listening and dialogue, with a focus on the human dignity of each person, that leads to greater inclusion and participation within our local communities. 1B

- Review the current functionality of parish, deanery and diocesan pastoral councils to enhance their capacity for collaborative work in a Synodal Church. Take steps to embed in the Church in Parramatta a culture of listening and collaboration as well as good administrative and governance practice. With support and resources, these pastoral councils will identify ways to increase the capacity for ministry, mission, and liturgy at all levels of the Diocese. 6D

- Continue to resource programs and processes like Listening Circles for healing and support of abuse survivors, and for those enduring violence in their relationships and homes. Develop expressions of deep sorrow and lament at specified liturgical and other gatherings for the grave harm committed against many while in the Church's care. 2A

- Support parishes to undertake a pastoral assessment including its synodal structures, and resourcing of key support roles with the aim of identifying ways to increase capacity for ministry, mission, and liturgy. 6D

- Establish a First Nations Advisory Council, perhaps in partnership with Christians from other churches and communities, to guide and support the ongoing work of reconciliation, healing and dialogue with our First Nations peoples. Potential outcomes include establishing new opportunities or ways to listen to our First Nations People, engaging in truth telling, and developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). 2B 1B 2C

- Improve transparency by requiring Pastoral and Finance Councils to report to their parish and deanery. This will expand participation and help identify the support needed in local communities. 6A

- Acknowledge major feasts of other faith traditions (e.g. Eid and Diwali) as a gesture of respect and recognition for those who coexist within our local parish communities (e.g. notice in Parish bulletins or announcement before Mass). 6E

- Promote and resource a variety of ways for young people to increase their involvement in the life and ministry of the Church through greater participation in parish ministry, advocacy programs, policy development, decision-making and diocesan leadership. 3A

DIOCESAN PRIORITY: COMMUNITY

- Map all current programs and support services that seek to protect the dignity of human life, to identify and address any gaps either directly through the provision of more service or in partnership with other agencies. 5A

- Aid and support full participation by meeting minimum accessibility requirements across Diocesan properties. 1B

- Work with First Nations people to help local communities embrace a place-based approach to ecological justice, reconciliation and truth telling. 2B 1B 2C

- Strengthen local community access to grants by working with civil partners and ensuring that local leaders are aware of the financial support that is available to them. 2D

- Support young people through strengthened partnerships (particularly Catholic Youth Parramatta and Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese) that promote ministry and outreach

opportunities designed to encourage continued engagement in the life and mission of the Church. 3A

- The establishment of a Laudato Si' Action Plan for all large agencies, ministries and companies within the Diocese by the end of 2025, which includes commitment to targets to reduce the ongoing impacts of the ecological crisis. 3B
 - Enhance support services for family counselling, financial assistance, and refugee support programs. 1B 5B
 - The ongoing support of refugees. Guided by the Diocesan Walking with Refugees Steering Group, we will continue to build an inter-agency approach to co-create and deliver ways to address the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. 5B
 - Partner with organisations, like Catholic Care, which provide support at the local level to those experiencing domestic violence and/or violence against women. 1B 1D 5C
 - Celebrate International Day for People with Disabilities (3 December) to raise awareness and honour the needs of people living with disabilities and their families. 1B
 - Ensure that voices from our ethnic and migrant chaplaincies, the Diocesan Liturgical Commission, and Diocesan Interfaith Commission are involved in the decisionmaking processes and are heard on issues dealing with domestic violence, ecology and climate change, and aid for refugees and migrants. 6E 5B
 - Improve technology infrastructure across the Diocese to support better collaboration and communication, cybersecurity, and improve operating efficiencies in local communities to increase capacity in ministry and community engagement. 6B
 - Enhance the digital literacy of local communities by working with experts in digital platforms and digital communications, including social media, to enhance the experience of those working in our Diocese and the communities they serve. 5D
-

REFLECTING AND DISCERNING LOCAL COMMUNITY PRIORITIES: EXAMPLES TO INSPIRE LOCAL COMMUNITY ACTION

SYNOD THEME: AN INCLUSIVE AND WELCOMING CHURCH

- Local faith communities to discern and make intentional efforts to create a culture of 'welcome, inclusivity and meaningful community', including in the online space (i.e. social media such as Instagram and Facebook).
- Establish and grow opportunities for small group accompaniment as an entry point for the non-baptised (e.g. family circles, support groups based on 'season of life' or 'life-experience').
- Develop retreat programs and pilgrimage opportunities that focus on the development of a culture of welcome, hospitality and meaningful community; or that help local communities to 'intentionally seek out the gifts and talents' of the community and strengthen communion, participation, and mission.
- Host a 'recruitment drive' to allow the People of God to register and volunteer, so that a database can be created of the people, their skills, talents, and gifts within the local community.
- Apply a talent-mapping framework and process to support succession planning and handover/transitions between leaders/roles.
- Create a team focused on strengthening community and meaningful connection (i.e. event team, outreach team, or welcome team). They could lead initiatives such as 'Name Badge Sunday' or be welcomers as people arrive at Mass.

- Discern ways to emphasise that “all are welcome” at significant events (such as weddings, funerals, or baptisms) that are attended by a wider range of people.
- The official “Statement of Welcome” of the Diocese to be used in local communities - for example permanently published in the weekly bulletin or on the parish website.
- Discern the best form of physical signage to re-emphasise welcome, hospitality and meaningful connection in the foyer of the church, school, and agency facilities.

SYNOD THEME: A HUMBLE AND HEALING CHURCH

- Celebrate regular Healing Masses that include special prayers of intercession for those whose trust has been betrayed through abuse or violence as well as ritual gestures that will help all who seek healing in body, mind, and spirit.
- Gather as a community in prayer during NAIDOC Week and extend a special invitation to local First Nations people to attend.
- Ensure the community and its leaders are familiar with Diocesan Safeguarding policies and meeting mandatory training requirements.
- Ensure that good safeguarding practices are included in all ministry formation and training.
- Establish formal relationships with local organisations, like The Shed at Emerton or the Women’s Shed at Quakers Hill, for the purpose of supporting their work and providing safe places for activities, like yarnning circles.
- Organise opportunities for young people or family groups to participate in bush-walks to learn more about traditional custodians e.g. Kings Tablelands or Red Hand Caves in the Blue Mountains National Park or the Hawkesbury (Dyarubbin) or the Nepean (Yandhai) Rivers.
- Embed the practice of Spiritual Conversations into your community’s prayer life as a way to nurture faith, strengthen community, identify possible partnerships in the local area, and to more effectively respond to local needs.
- Provide different experiences for community members to share faith, ask questions, seek clarity, and become better informed.
- Organise a structured listening activity such as Table Talks or Listening Circles as a way of engaging with the marginalised, disengaged or wounded members of the community.

SYNOD THEME: A LISTENING CHURCH

- Offer the Prayers of the Faithful in the diverse languages spoken by community members to celebrate cultural richness.
- Establish a Youth Group or find ways to expand current youth initiatives in the local community.
- Host a youth listening forum or Table Talk on key issues facing them in their lives.
- Develop ministry opportunities for young people, including social justice initiatives, liturgy, and music groups.
- Employ paid youth ministers to support and nurture the spiritual growth of young people in the community.
- Ensure youth have a voice by including them in Parish Pastoral Councils and School Leadership Teams.
- Host local interfaith and/or ecumenical events such as dinner dances and trivia nights to foster community bonds.
- Implement local Laudato Si’ Action Plans or engage with Caritas’ Catholic Earthcare initiatives to promote ecological stewardship.

- Utilise parish and school halls as 'cooling centres' during extreme heat to support community members suffering from heat stress.
- Establish community garden programs to encourage sustainable living and strengthen community ties.
- Engage the community in a waste education program focussing on the 7 R's of waste management (reduce, return, re-use, repair, refill, refuse & rot).
- Work with local organisations, such as Vinnies, to organise second-hand clothing sales for the community.
- Organise community events like sausage sizzles as opportunities to gather with people from different backgrounds.

SYNOD THEME: A CHURCH RENEWED IN SPIRIT AND PRAYER

- Form a Prayer and Liturgy Committee that will focus on developing the quality and experience of liturgy in your community.
- Develop and facilitate prayer and reflection programs that engage the community and align with the liturgical season of the Church.
- Share online resources which communicate different forms of prayer that communities can explore.
- Engage the community to explore topics that respond to their spiritual and pastoral needs. These can then be incorporated into homilies.
- Establish connections with other community groups to create common opportunities for prayer.
- Invite volunteers to share in leading the community prayer such as the Rosary and Children's Liturgy.
- Introduce programs like Alpha into the community.
- Create opportunities for quiet prayer, Adoration, and Adult Faith Formation.
- Review your community's engagement with the sacramental program and consider how best to invite others into this important element in the life of the Church.
- Encourage local community leaders to attend liturgical formation courses in various ministries.

SYNOD THEME: A CHURCH THAT REACHES TO THE MARGINS

- Establish a Pastoral Plan for your community which focuses on responding to the needs of the marginalised.
- Establish groups to visit the sick, housebound, and grieving.
- Offer opportunities for older and retired community members to participate in the community through service projects.
- Establish a Social Justice Committee whose members engage in formation around Catholic Social Teaching, and training in how to access resources from other organisations and agencies such as the Sydney Alliance.
- Encourage volunteers for after-school tutoring for migrant children.
- Assign seminarians to work in identified social outreach programs throughout the Diocese.
- Involve others in any process that seeks to identify local needs.

- Become informed about the kinds of services and support programs available locally to people across their lifetime. For example, Catholic Care's Project Elizabeth, Houses to Homes as well as Project Rachel, Pregnancy Help Australia, Palliative Care, Marist 180, chaplaincies, counselling, domestic violence refuges.
- Support existing partnerships (or form new ones) with organisations that are responding to needs. For example, Vinnies, Wayside Chapel, Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Project Rachel.

SYNOD THEME: A CHURCH WALKING TOGETHER

- Encourage Pastoral Councils to look to organise prayer and pilgrimage opportunities.
- Include professional development opportunities within existing meetings, especially as formation material is developed.
- Each local faith community will identify the different Diocesan agencies and works in their area and look for ways to increase contact and communication between them all, so that collaboration is more effective.
- Develop a Synodality Checklist to help evaluate how well the local community is undertaking synodality.
- Commit to providing more opportunities for local communities to nominate suitable people to receive scholarships to train as Spiritual Directors to help our Church community members draw closer to God.
- For each Pastoral Council, encourage the assignment of an interfaith portfolio to one or two members, to encourage the participation in and advertising for interfaith formation opportunities and practical ways of carrying out this missionary apostolate.
- Working with other Christian and non-Christian communities to support local charities. For example, nursing homes, craft groups, or the local community garden or kitchen.