The Catholic Diocese of Ballarat: Progress in Introducing Synodal Practices

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Introduction and Context

The Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, which covers the western third of Victoria from the Murray River to the Southern Ocean, has been navigating the challenge of embedding synodal practices within a community. This has been against the background of a community still recovering from one of the most damaging clerical abuse scandals in Australian Catholic history. The diocese's 89,124 Catholics, representing 19.8 per cent of the area's population, are served by 23 parishes, 99 church communities, and 25 priests. This is in a geographically dispersed and ageing population where 22.8 per cent of Catholics are 65 or older. Understanding synodality in Ballarat means understanding it against this backdrop: a community whose trust in hierarchical Church leadership has been severely tested, and which has responded to global and national synodal impulses with cautious but genuine engagement.

The diocese entered a new chapter on 19 March 2026 when Bishop Mark Freeman was ordained and installed as the ninth Bishop of Ballarat at St Patrick's Cathedral, in a celebration that brought together bishops, clergy, parish representatives, ecumenical guests, civic representatives, and members of the wider community. Freeman was the first new Australian bishop appointed by Pope Leo XIV, having been named on 7 January 2026. At his installation, Freeman quoted Pope Leo's vision of Church leadership: that the supreme rule is love, not domination; listening, not imposition; participation, not exclusion. These words set a notably synodal tone for his episcopate from its very first moments.

The Burden of the Past

Any assessment of synodal progress in Ballarat must reckon with the profound damage wrought by the sexual abuse crisis. Case Study 28 of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, published in 2017, focused specifically on the diocese and ran to 240 pages. The Commission concluded that former Bishop Ronald Mulkearns had seriously mishandled abuse allegations, acted to protect the Church's reputation rather than victims, and that his conduct amounted to an ‘extraordinary and inexcusable failure’. The consequences for the diocese's moral authority and community standing were severe, and the wounds have not fully healed.

Bishop Paul Bird, who led the diocese from 2012 until his departure in early 2026, was appointed in the aftermath of the Commission and appears to have operated largely in damage-control mode by implementing reforms carefully and without confrontation. His role as lead bishop in the High Court case *Bird v DP* (decided 13 November 2024), in which the Court found that a priest is neither

[1] The case study is based on interviews in Ballarat with Bishop Paul Bird, a senior priest in the diocese and other discussions with parishioners. It also draws heavily on a summary of a range of key documents, produced by Claude AI. The summary of documents related to the recent introduction of Diocesan Pastoral Council has been crosschecked by a diocesan staff member and changes made to bring them up to date.

an employee nor an agent of the diocese, reinforced the perception in some quarters that the institution was still prioritising legal protection over moral accountability. Community trust, according to senior clergy interviewed for the source document, remains volatile and vulnerable to adverse media coverage.

The legacy of ribbons attached to the cathedral railings by survivors and supporters, a visible, public protest, became a symbol of the unresolved tension. Bishop Paul negotiated their removal only recently, prior to a fence repainting. The impact of the abuse scandal on the community's engagement with the wider population of Ballarat continues to be significant. One indication of this is the fact that the only Catholic-named organisation in a January 2026 listing of 136 Ballarat community groups in the local newspaper was an abuse survivors' and supporters' group.

Diocesan Vision Statement

Bishop Paul Bird, together with the Bishop's Advisory Council, endorsed a consultative process to develop a Vision for the Diocese. The resulting Statement is as follows:

> *We are a community of communities from the Murray to the sea. Inspired by the Gospel and nourished by the Eucharist, we follow the example of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, reaching out in joyful and humble service, caring for all of God's creation, growing in love day by day and looking forward to life with God forever.*

Along with the vision statement, the following principles are important as guides to good governance in all areas of diocesan life:

> *In living out this vision, all of Christ's faithful combine their gifts for the good of the whole community. 'For the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in His Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. For those ministers who are endowed with sacred power are servants of their brothers and sisters, so that all who are of the People of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian dignity, can work toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, and arrive at salvation' (Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, par 18).*

To enable all of God's people to be co-responsible in fulfilling this vision, governance in parish and diocesan organisations must include the following elements:

Participation of all members of the Church

Dialogue and discernment in the process of decision-making

Solidarity and Synodality involving the breadth of the diocesan community

Subsidiarity in fostering local expressions of the Church's common mission

Transparency and accountability in stewardship of resources

Observance of properly established ecclesial, civic and corporate **standards** of behaviour

Formation appropriate to responsibilities

Support to enable effective administration and inclusive participation

The 2022 Diocesan Synthesis: A Community Speaks

The first formal expression of synodal listening in the current cycle came in 2022, when the diocese contributed to the global Synod on Synodality process initiated by Pope Francis. A leadership team conducted ten regional meetings across the diocese, involving 259 parishioners in Horsham, Mildura, Ballarat, Warrnambool, and Swan Hill. The demographic of participants was revealing: three in five were aged 60 or over, and the same proportion were female.

The submissions called for structural change: mandatory diocesan and parish pastoral councils, greater decision-making authority at parish level, the inclusion of women in leadership and ministry at all levels, more accountable governance of bishop appointments, and proactive rather than reactive parish planning. Participants were candid about the perception that the Church was ‘an organisation dominated by conservative male clerics’. The synthesis concluded with a clear recommendation for ‘a new governance structure such as a working diocesan pastoral council that can make decisions’.

The 2024 Diocesan Assembly: A Milestone in Synodal Method

A highly significant synodal milestone under Bishop Paul Bird was the Diocesan Assembly of November 2024, convened as part of the diocese's 150th anniversary celebrations. Some 150 delegates attended over two days at Federation University in Ballarat, representing parishes, diocesan agencies, Catholic education, health, aged care, social services, clergy, and religious congregations.

The Assembly was preceded by regional preparatory gatherings in Mildura, Horsham, Colac, and Warrnambool that introduced participants to "Conversations in the Spirit," the synodal dialogue method developed during the global synodal process. The Assembly itself adopted this methodology: table groups of up to eight delegates, with trained facilitators, responded to structured questions punctuated by periods of silence designed to promote deep listening. The emphasis on active listening and speaking from the heart was central to the experience.

Delegates reported that the atmosphere was unexpectedly hopeful. As one delegate wrote afterwards, what she found was "something much more hopeful and spirit filled than I had anticipated… a living, breathing moment of grace" oriented not toward preservation but toward ‘reimagining, discerning, and flourishing’. The image of the Holy Spirit as a ‘wild goose’ , drawn from Celtic tradition, was said to have captured the assembly's energy: unpredictable, passionate, unable to be contained or controlled.

The Assembly's deliberations were organised around seven key themes: Mission and Identity; Relationships; Transformation and Conversion; Formation; Structural Change; Trust; and Existing Challenges. The theme of loss of trust was notable for its bluntness. The Assembly report stated plainly that ‘trust in the Diocese is viewed as very low’, and called for a comprehensive rebuilding effort involving humility, transparency, and accountability.

The structural recommendations from the Assembly echoed those of the 2022 Synthesis: consultative bodies at every level of the diocese, collaborative rather than hierarchical leadership models, decisions made at the level most appropriate to the community affected, clear communication channels, and the meaningful participation of women and young people. The

challenge of follow-through was explicitly named in the final report as an existing concern. This was the worry that the Assembly might prove ‘merely symbolic rather than a meaningful process of change’.

Analysis of the 56 individual delegate commitments submitted at the Assembly's close is instructive. Only eight of those commitments were explicitly focused on reaching beyond existing parish communities, the majority instead were oriented inward. This suggests that, however enthusiastic the Assembly's spirit, its practical outward-facing ambition remained limited.

What Was Still Missing: The Pastoral Council Gap

A significant measure of structural synodality is the existence of parish pastoral councils. These are the bodies that give lay people a genuine consultative role in parish governance. Bishop Paul Bird acknowledged in interview that many parishes in the diocese did not have one. Although he had asked all parishes to establish councils in 2025, there was no systematic follow-through to verify compliance. Similarly, the diocese under Bishop Bird had not yet established a Diocesan Pastoral Council as the key structural body for synodal governance at diocesan level. This was despite this having been recommended since the 2022 Synthesis.

The Diocesan Pastoral Planning Panel was described as working on establishing such a council, but no timeline had been set as of January 2026. By contrast, the dioceses of Sandhurst and Sale had moved further along the same path, a gap that Bishop Paul himself acknowledged, describing Ballarat as ‘one to two years behind’.

Post-Assembly Developments: Formation and New Initiatives

Despite the structural gaps, several concrete post-Assembly initiatives demonstrated that the diocese was translating synodal aspiration into practice. A Parish Administration Day in September 2025 incorporated synodal conversation methods, centring on the question of what transformation of parish administration was needed.

In November 2025, the Pastoral Office partnered with the Catholic Theological College to launch a Formation in Synodality Pilot Program, funded by the Therese D'Orsa Mission Fund. This was itself a direct response to the Assembly's findings about the need for synodal leadership formation. The program, which began in February 2026, comprises three modules: Scripture, Synodality and Belief in a Secular Age. The second module requires each participant to undertake a practical synodal project in their own faith community, aligned with one of the eight Assembly priorities. In 2024, the diocese also offered six scholarships for lay people to pursue a certificate in Pastoral Ministry or Youth and Young Adult Ministry as part of the Lay Pastoral Ministry Program, a modest but meaningful investment in the formation of non-ordained ministers.

Formation Program announced for 2026-27 will deepen participants' understanding of synodality as a way of being Church, exploring listening, relationality, discernment, and the practical challenges and opportunities of fostering synodal practice in parish and ministry settings. The program in 2027 will also provide theological and pastoral tools for interpreting contemporary Australian society and ecclesial life in the light of the Gospel. The aim is to support participants in discerning appropriate pastoral responses within their own parish contexts.

The most recent initiative, reported in May 2026, is the ‘Schools that Listen’ forums conducted by Catholic Education Ballarat. These face-to-face student forums, held in Ballarat, Warrnambool, Horsham, and Robinvale. The forums placed student voices at the centre of school improvement, asking what makes a great school for all. The forums followed online workshops involving students, teachers, and parents, and asked students to take their insights back to their schools for implementation. This represents an extension of synodal principles of deep listening, active participation, co-responsibility into the educational sphere, reaching roughly 18,000 students across 63 Catholic schools.

The Arrival of Bishop Freeman: A New Chapter

Bishop Mark Freeman expressed that he was "ready and willing to continue learning" as he began his new role in Ballarat. His words at his ordination quoting Pope Leo's vision of a Church where no one dominates, no one imposes, everyone listens, and everyone participates were interpreted as a strong signal of his synodal intent.

The concrete tasks that awaited him included establishing the long-promised Diocesan Pastoral Council. Also, important was ensuring meaningful follow-through on parish pastoral council formation. Another challenge will be building on the Formation in Synodality program as a long-term investment in cultural change. The 2024 Assembly and the follow-up action by diocesan staff provide good starting points but translating these into durable structural reform requires the active leadership of the new bishop.

Ballarat Diocesan Pastoral Council

In early October 2026, Bishop Freeman announced in a letter to the diocese the formation of a Diocesan Pastoral Council. The following summary of the new Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC has been drawn from the Council's founding documents. These include the Bishop's letter, Purpose, Statutes, Role Description, Good Governance Principles, Expression of Interest form and formation details.

Why it was set up

Bishop Mark Freeman's letter and the introductory statement gave the background. Over recent years the Church has been through three processes of renewal: the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, the global Synod on Synodality, and the diocese's own 2024 Diocesan Assembly. The Council is presented as the next step from these. The documents call it ‘an important milestone in the life of our diocese’ and ‘a significant step forward in our Diocese's commitment to synodal governance’.

The setting up of the DPC also has a basis in canon law. The statutes for the DPC quote Canons 511–513, which say that a diocese should have a pastoral council. Under the bishop's authority, the council ‘investigates, considers and proposes practical conclusions’ about pastoral work in the diocese. Other support for the DPC is *The Light from the Southern Cross* (2020), the national report on co-responsible governance in Australian dioceses and parishes.

Objectives

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:

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.

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.

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’.

An information and listening hub. Feedback from across the diocese is to be treated ‘as a voice of the Spirit speaking through the community’.

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: participation, dialogue and discernment, solidarity and synodality, subsidiarity, transparency and accountability, proper standards of behaviour, formation, and support for inclusive participation.

Membership

According to its statutes, the Council has up to 18 members:

> **Ex officio (3):** the Bishop, the Vicar General and the Executive Officer (a member of the Pastoral Planning Panel).
>
> **Appointed:** up to 12 members chosen by the Bishop.
>
> **Additional:** up to 3 more at the Bishop's discretion.
>
> **Support:** a minute secretary attends every meeting.

Terms run for three years and can be renewed once with the Bishop's approval. Ex officio members have no term limits.

How members are selected

> **Eligibility:** anyone in the diocese aged 18 or over who is active in its Catholic community. They need a current Working with Children Check (or an exemption, such as VIT registration) and must be available for all meetings.
>
> **Applying:** people submit an Expression of Interest/Recommendation form. It asks for details of their church involvement, the gifts and skills they would bring, and a statement of up to 250 words on why they want to serve. Under the DPC statutes, applicants must also name two referees, one of whom is an active diocesan priest.

Selection: the statutes state that a panel chaired by the Bishop, with up to three others, is to assess applications. The Bishop discusses candidates with the Pastoral Planning Panel and makes the final choice after considering its recommendations. Interviews are planned.

Diversity sought: a spread of regions, ages, cultures and vocations (lay, clergy, religious), plus young adults, First Nations Catholics, migrant communities, rural communities, and people from the education and social service sectors.

Not representatives: members do not represent any interest group. They are expected to serve 'the best interests of all members of the diocese'.

Qualities sought: wisdom and sound judgement, and the ability to think beyond local interests. The documents also stress openness (to the Spirit and to new things), humility, and being outward-looking.

Commissioning: the Bishop formally appoints members, and they are commissioned at the annual Mass of the Oils or another suitable time.

Key dates

Step	Date
Expressions of interest opened	Thursday 8 October 2026
Applications close	5pm Friday 13 November 2026
Interviews and appointments	to be confirmed
First formation session	5 December 2026
First meeting	early 2027

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 Catholic Diocese of Ballarat presents a picture of genuine synodal progress. This has been shaped at every turn by the gravity of its abuse history, the challenges of geographic dispersion, an ageing and depleted clergy, and the slow work of rebuilding community trust. The 2022 Synthesis gave the community a voice; the 2024 Assembly gave that voice a method and a set of documented priorities. Post-Assembly initiatives, such as the formation pilot program, administration day conversations, lay ministry scholarships, and ‘Schools that Listen’ forums, have demonstrated institutional follow-through at the operational level.

Now that Diocesan Pastoral Council has been set up to make or meaningfully inform decisions, the next step is to ensure that parish pastoral councils are also operating across all 23 parishes and are implementing a synodal way of working. These are the tests at parish level by which synodal progress will ultimately be measured. The arrival of Bishop Freeman, the first bishop appointed by Pope Leo XIV in Australia, and one who has spoken unambiguously about the importance of a synodal Church, offers the diocese a genuine opportunity to close the gap between aspiration and structure.