

# **The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst: becoming a more synodal Church<sup>1</sup>**

A Case Study by [Sense of the Faithful Ltd](#) 19 January 2025

## **Executive summary**

The case study aims to encourage the Australian Church to adopt a synodal path by deepening understanding of synodal processes and outcomes, using documentary evidence, statistics, and interviews. The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst is notable for its synodal initiatives under Bishop Shane Mackinlay, who played a significant role in the global Synod on Synodality and has led major reforms in diocesan governance.

The diocese covers northeast Victoria, with 84,607 Catholics (20.6% of the regional population). The Catholic population is aging, with a high proportion of elderly and a declining share of children. Many priests are from overseas; parish amalgamations have reduced the number of parishes from 40 to 35.

The new Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) has developed a set of Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals. The Council drew on extensive prior consultations with over 900 parishioners who proposed over 250 recommended actions. The five-year goals are to guide diocesan activities in parishes, schools, and other entities, with the DPC to monitor and evaluate progress. A Formation Support Plan has also been developed for 2025 and 2026 based on ten practical projects. These include parish workshops and diocesan gatherings focused on community and belonging.

Key findings include the success of the Parish Visitation Program based on a three-step process: preparation, visitation, and follow-up, aiming to foster reflection, planning, and renewal in parishes. Initial episcopal visits have shown positive results, supporting parish renewal and collaboration. Synodal processes have facilitated the merger of a parish, increasing lay involvement through committees for major parish functions, leading to restructured parish leadership.

Six recommendations are offered to respond to gaps in the evolving set of synodal practices. Needed are better reporting on women's roles in parishes and the diocese, more information about and more support for lay pastoral leadership, and making public data on key diocesan indicators on Catholic involvement in the parishes and links with Catholic social services. More opportunities for lay formation and clearer feedback on the evolving role of priests are also needed. The final recommendation highlights the importance of a greater focus on activities at both the diocesan and parish levels that extend beyond the church community to promote the common good. Sandhurst has made significant progress towards becoming a more synodal Church. However, continuing future success will depend on more lay engagement at the parish level and the leadership style and synodal experience of the next bishop.

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the case study is Dr Richard Curtain. The editorial committee of the Sense of the Faithful provided valuable feedback. The contributions of Professor Peter Sheehan and Dr Robert Carey in particular are gratefully acknowledged. Peter took a lead role in the interviews of key people involved in introducing synodality into the diocese, and in the feedback on the key findings. Robert provided detailed editorial feedback. Archbishop Mackinlay; the Diocesan Administrator Fr Brian Boyle; Dr Chris Cotter, Head of Mission and Pastoral Life; Ms Kate Fogarty, CEO of Catholic Education Sandhurst; Ms Kerry Stone, Diocesan Caritas and Social Justice Coordinator; Mr Francis Moore, former Executive Director of Administration for the Archdiocese of Melbourne (2007-2019); Fr Nathan Verallo, Parish Priest Christ the King Catholic Parish Wangaratta; and Mr Frank Burke provided valuable feedback and additional information.

## Table of Contents

The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst: becoming a more synodal Church.....	1
1. Why conduct a case study .....	3
2. What is synodality? .....	3
3. Why select Sandhurst Diocese? .....	4
4. Social profile of the Diocese .....	4
5. The demographic and social profile of the diocese.....	5
6. The history of the diocese .....	6
7. Sandhurst's bishops and their impact .....	7
8. The blueprint review commissioned and adopted by Bishop Mackinlay .....	8
9. Establishing the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council .....	9
10. The prior preparation and consultation .....	10
11. The diocesan Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals 2024-2028 .....	10
12. The Diocesan Formation Support Plan .....	11
13. Catholic schools and their connection with parishes .....	12
14. Demographics of parish life .....	13
15. The role of the bishop's parish visitations.....	16
16. Feedback on the value of the parish visitations.....	17
17. Changes affecting how parishes are functioning.....	18
18. Using synodal approaches to support parish amalgamation .....	19
19. Sense of the faithful assessment of the synodal changes .....	23
20. Recommendations .....	25
21. Conclusion.....	28
Appendices .....	29
Attachment 1: Location of parishes in the Sandhurst Diocese.....	29
Attachment 2: The Selection Process of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council .....	30

## 1. Why conduct a case study

The purpose of the Sense of the Faithful case studies is to encourage the Australian Church in its adoption of a synodal path. We want to do this by helping dioceses and parishioners deepen further their understanding of what a synodal approach involves. The focus of the case studies is on identifying the key features of a synodal process and outcomes in the diocese under study and the factors supporting or hindering their further adoption.

Introducing and expanding synodal practices in Australian Catholic dioceses, viewed from a social science perspective, is an exercise in organisational change, albeit with an important spiritual dimension. The case study method is widely used in education, sociology and business studies to help people seeking to make organisational changes to understand the complex situations relevant to them. Case studies are particularly appropriate for explaining the interplay between the context shaping the organisation, the nature of the changes and the role of the people involved.

These case studies of synodality in dioceses undertaken by the Sense of the Faithful Ltd are based on documentary evidence, available statistical data, and person-to-person interviews with the bishop, if he is available, with members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, if possible, diocesan staff, parish priests and active parishioners. The final input is an assessment of the lead investigator, with feedback from the Sense of the Faithful editorial committee. A group in the Sandhurst Diocese can then review a draft of the case study and provide a response. The group will include the immediate past bishop, the head of Mission and Pastoral Life in the Diocesan Office and others able to provide feedback.

## 2. What is synodality?

Synodality in the Catholic Church has a long history, from the earliest centuries to even the reforms of the Council of Trent. Vatican II's document on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) emphasised the need for dialogue within the Church and with the world. The final document of the Synod of Bishops 2-17 October 2024, '*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*' noted (para 28) that:

*The terms 'synodality' and 'synodal' derive from the ancient and constant ecclesial practice of meeting in synods. According to the traditions of the Eastern and Western Churches, the word 'synod' refers to institutions and events that assumed different forms over time, involving a plurality of agents and participants. This variety notwithstanding, what unites them is gathering together to dialogue, discern and decide.*

The form of synodality promoted by Pope Francis has been based on an extensive consultation process, involving the whole Church, ranging from each diocese to national episcopal conferences and then to continental meetings. Given this extensive preparatory stage and the form of the conduct of the final synod in Rome, Pope Francis declared that the final document is now part of the Church's official teaching or magisterium. The document defined the meaning and dimensions of synodality in these terms:

*Orientated towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and communal discernment. It also involves reaching consensus. [and] in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. ... synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church ... In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ (Para 28).*

The key changes to move to a more Synodal Church proposed by the Synod of Bishops involve not only processes related to ‘mutual listening, dialogue, and communal discernment’. The changes also called for ‘spiritual renewal and structural reform’ at all levels in local Churches to become more ‘participatory and missionary’.

### **3. Why select Sandhurst Diocese?**

The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst is prominent among other dioceses in Australia for its synodal initiatives. Its bishop, Shane Mackinlay, whose tenure as the Bishop of Sandhurst extended from October 2019 to September 2025, is now the Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane. Bishop Mackinlay was one of the two Australian bishop delegates nominated by the other bishops for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, for both the October 2023 and 2024 sessions. In addition, he was elected as the Oceania representative on the Commission responsible for overseeing the drafting of the Synod's all important Final Document. He has noted the importance of this document:

*This set out conclusions arising from the discussions that have taken place over the four years of the synodal process. It contains important proposals on decision making within the Church, the importance of greater welcome and participation, especially for and by women, the collaborative exercise of responsibility, processes for enhanced accountability, and a commitment to formation and mission. I believe the work of the Synod will bear much fruit as our Church moves forward, inspired by the Holy Spirit, with a greater ability to listen to each other and work together to build up the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>*

As the following case study shows, the Sandhurst Diocese has taken significant steps to introduce synodal structures and practices into how it operates at the diocesan, parish, school and social service levels. As Bishop Mackinlay stated in his Chrism Mass homily on 25 March 2024 commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the diocese:

*At a diocesan level, we have taken significant steps towards this by establishing our Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Council, which was commissioned at this Mass last year. Responding to the Pope's call to become more synodal is also prompting renewal and conversion in the life of our parish communities, and also in the way that we shape and govern the work of our school communities and of our social services.*

### **4. Social profile of the Diocese**

The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst is one of the three regional, “suffragan” dioceses in the Melbourne province, with Australia’s largest diocese, the Archdiocese of Melbourne as the “metropolitan” diocese. The Sandhurst Diocese covers a region in the northeast of Victoria up to the Murray River.

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<sup>2</sup> [The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst 2024 Year in Review](#). Page 9.



The total population of this region recorded in the 2021 census was 409,994, of whom 84,607 self-identified as Catholics, or 20.6 per cent, close to the Catholic national share of 20.0 per cent. The share of Catholics in the national population has declined over time from 27 per cent in 1996 to 25.3 per cent in 2011 and 22.6 per cent in 2016. In Sandhurst, the recent decline in the Catholic share of their population has been slightly greater, down from 23.5 per cent in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

The Sandhurst Diocese includes the large regional centres of Bendigo, Wodonga, Wangaratta, Shepparton and Echuca, as well as many smaller communities with Catholic parishes. These include the townships of Beechworth, Benalla, Cohuna, Corryong, Euroa, Kerang, Kyabram, Mooroopna, Myrtleford, Nagambie, Numurkah, Rochester, Rushworth, Rutherglen, Tallangatta, Tatura, White Hills and Yarrawonga.

The Diocesan publication Year in Review 2024 lists 48 clergy, of whom some 35 were in full-time ministry in 2024. In addition, there were nine Religious Congregations, and 34 Religious. Many priests are from overseas, including the Philippines (10 are listed in the 2024 Year in Review), as well as from Nigeria, India and Uganda.

In 2025, there are now 35 parishes, down from 40 parishes, after parish amalgamations underway in Bendigo and formalised in Wangaratta. These parishes are grouped into three deaneries: the Western, Goulburn Valley and the North Eastern region. The diocese has 56 Catholic schools, colleges and early childhood centres, educating 19,751 students. There is one Catholic Hospital and six aged care facilities. In 2024 the CatholicCare Victoria (CCV) team provided care, support and guidance to 3,144 individuals.<sup>4</sup>

## **5. The demographic and social profile of the diocese**

The makeup of the Catholic population has a profound effect on shaping the pastoral needs of the diocese. Information on the Catholic population's age, gender, marital status, country of birth, indigenous origin, length of residency and annual income can help understand the past, present and sometimes the likely future facing the diocese. One way to highlight key features of the population of the Sandhurst diocese is to compare the above key variables with the other 27 Catholic dioceses.<sup>5</sup>

Catholics in Sandhurst are older than Catholics in most other dioceses. Nearly one-in four (23.5 per cent) Catholics are aged 65 and over in 2021 compared to 19.9 per cent of all Catholics in

<sup>3</sup> The data source is the National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2023, [Diocesan Social Profile based on the 2021 Australian Census](#): Diocese of Sandhurst. Page 3.

<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst Year in Review 2024, p 26.

<sup>5</sup> National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2023, [Diocesan Social Profile based on the 2021 Australian Census](#): Diocese of Sandhurst.

Australia. The median age of 46 ranks the Sandhurst diocese as the fifth oldest diocese in Australia. The share of children in the Catholic population at 17.7 per cent is down from 20.1 per cent in 2016. This places the diocese behind 19 other dioceses with a larger share of children in their populations.

There are 89.2 males per 100 females which is the same as the national Catholic population of 89.1 but far below the national total population of 97.4 per 100 females. So, Catholic women are living longer in an aging population. More than one-in-ten (11.4) of the Catholic population in Sandhurst in 2021 were living alone, up from 10.4 per cent in 2016, placing the diocese in the top seven dioceses on this key social indicator.

Other distinctive social features follow from this aging population. The older population and the lower cost of housing have resulted in a higher proportion of the Catholic population (77.6 per cent) owning or purchasing their own home compared with the national Catholic population (73.0 per cent). This feature of the Catholic population in Sandhurst placed the diocese in the top four dioceses in Australia. Moreover, median monthly housing loan payments were among the lowest for Catholics in Australia, compared with 23 other dioceses.

Catholics in the labour force in Sandhurst were the least likely to be unemployed compared with other Catholics, only 3.1 per cent in 2021, compared with 5.5 per cent for Catholics nationally. On this indicator, the diocese rated better than 25 other dioceses. The youth aged 15-24 years unemployment rate at 6.2 per cent was also low compared with 8.9 per cent for all Catholics, placing Sandhurst Catholics ahead of 24 other dioceses.

The indigenous population's Catholics resident in the diocese only number 1,581, but this is an increase from 1,348 in 2016. The 2021 number places the diocese below 23 other dioceses in terms of the size of their Catholic indigenous populations.

## **6. The history of the diocese**

The Sandhurst Diocese was established in 1874 and celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2024. Sandhurst was the name given to the township in the Bendigo goldfields in 1853, but the town in 1891 changed its name to Bendigo. The diocese, along with the Diocese of Ballarat, was created after Melbourne became an archdiocese in that year. These changes were in response to the large population growth in Victoria's interior due to the wealth generated by goldmining and expansion of the pastoral industry. The initial five missions with seven priests were in Bendigo, Beechworth, Wangaratta, Heathcote and Echuca.

Indeed, the diocese continues to benefit from the early Gold Rush era through the endowment left by German-born, Rome-trained priest [Dr Henry Backhaus](#), who was given gold by his parishioners and was able to acquire land over nearly thirty years to 1882. The diocese's Year in Review 2024 records that the Backhaus Estate contributed \$1.6 million to diocesan income for the financial year 2023-24. In 2022-23, the Backhaus Estate contribution to income was \$1.8 million. The amount of \$1.6 million in 2023-24 was one quarter (23.1 per cent) of the diocese's revenue in that year. The amount of \$1.8 million was just over one fifth (21.7 per cent) in 2022-23. These shares of total income for the diocese were far more than income from parish levies of \$200,000 and donations of \$200,000 in each of these years.

The Backhaus endowment is based on funds generated by a number of properties he purchased.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Jackson Summers, 2021, '[The vision and ministry of Sandhurst's first priest, Henry Backhaus, continues in 2021](#)'. Catholic Education Sandhurst Library Learning Centre. Malachy J. Nolan, 2006, See also Malachy J. Nolan, 2008, 'Henry Backhaus- A Different Type of Pioneer Priest' *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 85 (1):56-68. He left an estate in Brighton of 23 acres to the three bishops in Victoria in trust to provide a retirement home for priests. The funds from the sale of the estate were not used for that purpose. 'The Golden Legacy of Dr



He left in his will real estate valued for probate at £75,000 to accumulate over 20 Years before it could be disbursed.<sup>7</sup> Funding from the endowment was then used by the first Bishop of Sandhurst, the Irish-born Martin Crane, to build a [grand, Gothic Cathedral, which is said](#) to be one of Australia's largest churches and the second-tallest after Melbourne's St Patrick's. Continuing benefits from Dr Backhaus' legacy include the Sacred Heart Cathedral Choir and the [scholarships and bursaries available](#) to support new choir members.

## **7. Sandhurst's bishops and their impact**

Bishop Shane Mackinlay, appointed in July 2019, has been the eighth bishop of Sandhurst, with a tenure of six years (2019-2025). A distinctive feature of the office of the first five bishops of Sandhurst is their long duration, with an average of 25 years tenure. The first three bishops died while holding the office. Much shorter durations for a bishop's tenure became the norm from 2010, with the sudden death of Bishop Grech aged 62 after nine years as bishop. Bishop Tomlinson retired after seven years as bishop (2012-2019).

As with the Catholic Church elsewhere in Australia, each bishop brought his own governance style. This partly reflected the Church's practices that they were familiar with. But the bishop's approach to governance was also based on his own preferences, as canon law gives bishops a high level of autonomy in how they govern their diocese. The Report of Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that '...The powers of governance held by individual diocesan bishops and provincials are not subject to adequate checks and balances. There is no separation of powers, and the executive, legislative and judicial aspects of governance are combined in the person of the pope and in diocesan bishops'.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Difference in the governance of Bishops Grech and Tomlinson***

One way to highlight the extent of the changes in the Sandhurst Diocese under Bishop Mackinlay is to provide some background on how the diocese fared under the two previous bishops. These two bishops had major differences in their approach to diocesan governance. Bishop Grech (2001-2010), a leading stalwart of the charismatic renewal movement in Melbourne and abroad, set a new precedent by establishing a Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) on 7 February 2004. The DPC consisted of two elected members from each of the diocese's six regions and the deans of the three deaneries, the Vicar General of the Diocese, the Chair of the Council of Priests and a Religious Order representative. An executive committee of six was led by Bishop Joseph Grech.

The eight goals of the new DPC started with noting the primacy of baptism as the basis for supporting the roles of all the faithful in the Church. Next came the goal of a broader vision of parish communities 'that are welcoming, healing, inclusive, interconnected, ecumenical &

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Henry Backhaus', *The Australasian Catholic Record* 83 (2):154-166. The land occupied by the estate in Brighton is still recognisable from the street names between South Road and Holyrood streets, in what is now Hampton. The streets in order are called Backhaus, St Kilian, McCarthy and Bendigo. They are bounded by Margarita St (the name of Backhaus' mother). St Kilian is the name Backhaus gave to the parish church he had founded in Bendigo in 1855. He named the church St. Kilian's after the Irish missionary who evangelised in Germany, thus creating a link between his German roots and his predominantly Irish flock. [John] McCarthy was a long-term bishop of Sandhurst 1917-1950). Land was also provided for a School/Church, now St Mary's Church and primary school, in Holyrood Street, Hampton.

<sup>7</sup> A. E. Owens, 'Backhaus, George Henry (1811–1882)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/backhaus-george-henry-43/text4199>, published first in hardcopy 1969, accessed online 24 November 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Report of Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Final Report: Volume 16, Religious institutions Book 2, p 681) cited by Susan Pascoe, 2019, Keynote Address: 'Best Practice in the Governance of Catholic Agencies', Paper delivered to Principles and Practices for Church Governance Workshop, Yarra Theological Union and University of Divinity, Melbourne, 3 March, p 2.

reaching out to link those who actively participate in the worshipping community & those who do not'. The goal of enriching liturgy was described as working towards a 'life-giving, participative, inclusive liturgy, based upon Vatican II principles & sound liturgical spirituality, and underpinned by well-resourced & formed ministries'. The goal of lifelong education & formation in faith was to be fostered through becoming 'learning communities, providing diverse, flexible & accessible opportunities to explore scripture, Vatican II theology, Catholic social teaching, & a spirituality which connects prayer, faith, life, culture & mission'. The last of the eight goals focused on 'engagement with young people in Church life & mission', stating that 'We will seek to understand – through dialogue – the culture, challenges & concerns of young people, & foster their active engagement at every level of church life & mission'.

However, when Bishop Grech died in office, Bishop Tomlinson did not 're-establish' the DPC, the technical term under canon law. Bishop Tomlinson's approach to diocesan governance was much more conventional and minimalist. This approach to governance is shown by the arrangements described and the changes proposed in the report '[\*Go Forth: A review of the strategic, consultative and administrative structures of the Diocese of Sandhurst\*](#)'. Bishop Mackinlay commissioned this review in May 2020, shortly after he began his tenure in October 2019. The report notes that Bishop Mackinlay prioritised the establishment of two key structures: the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council and an intentional approach to parish visitations. The *GoForth* report endorsed and developed these initiatives as part of its review of the consultative and administrative structures of the Diocese.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of the review was to advise on the structures that 'will best suit the present and future ministry, pastoral, organisational and administrative needs of the Bishop and the Diocese and allow the Diocese to embed contemporary standards of good governance, respecting the authority and responsibilities of the bishop, observing the requirements of the Code of Canon Law'. The review made 56 recommendations which were all accepted by the new bishop. Due to delays caused by Covid-19, the report was not released until 7 December 2020.

## **8. The blueprint review commissioned and adopted by Bishop Mackinlay**

Author of the report Francis Moore, the former senior lay administrator of the Melbourne Archdiocese 2007-2019, noted that only two diocesan consultative structures were operating: the College of Consultors and the Diocesan Finance Council. He also noted that consultative structures required or recognised by the 1983 Code of Canon Law were not operating in the diocese: the Council of Priests (required but not yet re-established) and a Diocesan Pastoral Council. The terms of reference for his review asked him to review the diocesan curia which was 'not currently co-ordinated in a formal way'; Council of Priests (not yet re-established by the new bishop), College of Consultors (operating); Diocesan Finance Council (operating); Diocesan Pastoral Council; Parish Visitation by the Bishop; Chancery responsibilities, positions and structures, and the staffing of the bishop's office.

The review found that there were 'opportunities to foster enhanced collaboration and alignment of the consultative bodies to advance the pastoral priorities and strategic planning and direction of the diocese consistent with the bishop's strategic direction, vision and mission for the diocese'. The recommendations included reviewing the current vision statement of the diocese. The review also recommended that the diocese look to ways to pursue a new direction for the diocese by 'fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion', and 'structures where there is life' and 'forms of pastoral dialogue out of a desire to listen to everyone' with 'the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.'

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<sup>9</sup> Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council Meeting 6 on Saturday 20 April 2024, at the Parklake Hotel, Shepparton. Report on the Meeting, p 2.



### ***The review proposed significant changes in diocese structures and focus***

The review found there was ‘a strong desire’ from those consulted to establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council, representing the diversity of people of the diocese and including the range of skills and experience required for it to undertake its role. The review further recommended that the Diocesan Pastoral Council develop through consultation and discernment a diocesan pastoral plan and an action plan for its implementation.

The review proposed that the consultative structures in the Diocese operate according to a range of principles endorsed by the report on Church governance [\*Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia\*](#), commissioned by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). These are the ecclesial governance principles of the global Church: subsidiarity, stewardship, synodality, dialogue, reflection and discernment and leadership. Also needed are reference to the principles for good civil governance: integrity, accountability and transparency, risk management, ethics and culture, consultation, inclusiveness and participation, communication and relationships.

The review further proposed that the diocese needed to embrace being in a state of mission (cf. Matthew 28: 19-20), with structures that were mission focused, where administration supported mission. This should be done by establishing a new role of Director of Mission and Pastoral Life, reporting directly to the bishop. The director should be responsible for co-ordinating the activities of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Council, the parish visitation program, the engagement with the Plenary Council and the existing roles of Adult Faith Formation, Youth and Communications.

The review also recommended that the bishop undertake a structured parish visitation program. It proposed that this should involve three phases: preparation by the parish, the visit by the bishop and follow-up within 90 days by the bishop. This would take the form of a post-visitation letter to the parish priest to review progress on specific agreed actions.

Other recommended changes were that the Council of Priests be constituted by all priests of the diocese holding a current appointment meeting in assembly. The Council of Priests now meets twice per year and all priests with a ministry appointment in the diocese are members. Also proposed was that the College of Consultors have laity attend as advisors and participants and the Council of Priests as required by the occasion or the issue to be considered. There are now six priest Consultors and two lay people, one of whom is a woman. The lay Director of Mission and Pastoral Life also participates.

### **9. Establishing the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council**

The new Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) is called the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC). It comprises 16 members, which include the Bishop as President, the Vicar General (ex officio), and members from each of the three deaneries, one clergy member and three lay members. Up to two additional members will be selected by the bishop. Membership is a term of three years. Each council member is to be a representative of the Diocese and not solely of the parish, deanery, region, or agency from which they come. The statutes for the Council were based on the Code of Canon Law, the Light from the Southern Cross Report, the Go Forth Report, the outcomes of the Plenary Council, and feedback from the preparation and consultation meetings. An executive has also been set up to carry forward the business of the Council between meetings. The executive is to comprise the bishop, chairperson and the Director of Mission and Pastoral Life, who is to be the executive officer. The selection process for the council members is described in Attachment 2.

## **10. The prior preparation and consultation**

A plan for a year of preparation and consultation took place over the 12 months from April 2022. The plan included these steps: (1) Prayerful preparation to 24 July 2022, (2) Preparation and Consultation Meetings 24 July-13 December 2022, (3) Diocesan Assembly 15 February 2023, (4) Discerning, appointing, and commissioning members of the SMPC 15 February-4 April 2023 and the (5) First meeting of the SMPC on 28-29 April 2023.

The consultation process conducted by the members of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Life Team was extensive. Fifty-two meetings were held in local parish churches, parish and school halls and other venues across the diocese, including two meetings conducted online. Meetings were held with representatives from 38 of the 40 Parishes, seven high schools and Catholic entities across the diocese. Feedback was obtained from 905 participants. Over 300 parishioners, all active clergy, professed religious, school principals and staff of Catholic entities took part in a Diocesan Assembly in Shepparton on 15 February 2023. Some 252 recommendations for action from the Assembly participants were presented to the new Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council. Information on what the consultation involved can be found in a detailed report on the process and outcomes, available on the diocesan website [here](#).

The Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council is expected to meet four times a year. Reports of its ten meetings up to 30-31 May 2025 can be found [here](#). One member of the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) offered this assessment of its operation:

*The major change in the DPC was to move from a wish list of items that related to parish life to developing a strategic focus and strategic goals at the diocesan level. A major achievement has been in getting the goals finalised. The challenge now is to ensure that these goals are implemented. The DPC has become much more cohesive over time leading to a more positive experience.*

One way the operation of the DPC has changed is how the meeting commences. Initially the council meeting started with a Mass. This meant some of the priest members and the bishop concelebrated Mass facing the lay members. Some were not happy with this arrangement as the only form of liturgical prayer for the Council and so it was agreed that every second meeting should start with a liturgy other than the Mass.

## **11. The diocesan Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals 2024-2028**

Bishop Mackinlay in introducing the Goals on 22 November 2024 states:

*The Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals will guide, encourage and inform our missionary and pastoral initiatives and activities at the Chancery, in parishes, schools and other movements and entities throughout the Diocese for the next five years. The Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council will monitor, review and evaluate progress towards the goals.*

Presented below are the ten goals grouped under three strategic directions: (1) Gospel mission and pastoral outreach, (2) Belonging and sense of community, and (3) Life-giving and empowering formation.

### **STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1**

**Gospel mission and pastoral outreach.**

- 1.1 Informed and inspired people committed to missionary discipleship.
- 1.2 Renewed forms of participation in the life of the Church, with particular attention to those who are marginalised, or who feel disconnected or excluded.
- 1.3 Thriving Christian communities that embody synodality and witness to the Gospel.

### **STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2**

**Belonging and sense of community.**

- 2.1 Parishes that build welcoming, flourishing, and inclusive communities where the love of Jesus can be experienced and celebrated.
- 2.2 The gifts and wisdom of women are valued and included as fundamental to our Church.
- 2.3 Renewal of how our parishes and other ministries collaborate to build sustainable and life-giving communities.
- 2.4 Creation and implementation of an effective Diocesan Communication Strategy.

### **STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3**

**Life-giving and empowering formation.**

- 3.1 Formation of the People of God to be informed, confident and Spirit-filled missionary disciples.
- 3.2 Coordinated faith formation that is readily available and responds to the lived realities of people throughout the Diocese.
- 3.3 Ongoing formation and encouragement for people to take responsibilities in liturgy and leadership.

## **12. The Diocesan Formation Support Plan**

In consultation with the Council of Priests and the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council, a Formation Support Plan was developed in 2025. It outlines ten practical projects which will occur in 2025 and 2026. The Formation Support Plan will have a parish focus initially but in time will include adaptations for use in other diocesan faith communities, such as the schools.

One clear finding from the diocesan-wide consultations that led to the establishment of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council was the need for more opportunities for formation. Bishop Mackinlay, in an accompanying letter to the Formation Support Plan, dated 17 June 2025, defined formation as the ‘practices, activities and learning experiences that help each one of us live as disciples of Jesus Christ, grow in our discipleship, and discover what it means for us to be “missionary disciples” for our world today (see Goal 1.1)’. He also noted that: ‘Importantly, formation was also the key focus of Decree 6 of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia (2022) and Part V of the Final Document of the Sixteenth Ordinary Synod of Bishops “For a Synodal Church” (2024).

. The initiatives include five projects for 2025 outlined below:

- Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals Familiarisation Workshops,
- Parish Based Planning Processes to implement Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals,

- Processes and workshops for Synodal Decision-Making and Conversations in the Spirit,
- Diocesan Formation Gathering to enrich capacity to grow a sense of community and belonging, and
- Evangelisation and Formation for Young People through the Australian Catholic Youth Festival with pre- and post- festival formation for pilgrims and leaders.

The workshop facilitators are volunteers who will be paid for their time in conducting the workshops.

The fourth activity for 2025 noted above is the [Diocesan Formation Gathering](#) which took place at Notre Dame College, Shepparton on Saturday, 11 October 2025. The activity was based on the questions: Why are community and belonging important in the mission of the Church today, and what can a parish do to grow the sense of belonging amongst its parishioners? Six workshops were organised on the topics of: Building Communities of Belonging by learning from what others have discovered; A Community of belonging for Young People; A community of belonging for Children and Families; Parish–School Partnership in building communities of belonging; Building communities of belonging local strategies in practice; and Welcome, hospitality and belonging in Scripture.

Participants heard from parish leaders about how they are welcoming, inviting and supporting engagement within their parishes. For example, two parishioners from St Mary’s Parish in Echuca spoke about the success of a men’s fellowship initiative, based on the Australia-wide [MenALIVE](#) groups, a National Catholic Ministry to Men. The aim of the group has been to enable men to build a strong connection with each other. Through prayer, dialogue and fellowship, the Men’s Group at St Mary’s Parish has encouraged men to engage more fully in parish life and to be missionary disciples in the wider community in which they live and work.

### **13. Catholic schools and their connection with parishes**

As noted above, the ten strategic mission and pastoral goals are to guide, encourage and inform activities in the schools as well as the parishes and elsewhere in the Diocese.

The Diocese set up a separate education agency from the parish in 2021 called Catholic Education Sandhurst Ltd. The role of the new agency was to be underpinned by Shared Mission Agreements between parishes and the schools. There are 38 parishes and 56 Catholic schools, accommodating 19,751 students in Catholic schools.

The Shared Mission Commitment Statement, introduced in 2021, is between a parish and its school(s). Its purpose is to spell out shared mission of the school and parish in the local context, formalise partnership arrangements and clarify respective roles. It is also intended to be reviewed annually or when a new parish priest or principal is appointed.

The suggested commitments (provided in the diocesan document) include: priest participation as a significant partner on the school advisory council, collaboration on Catholic identity, liturgy and sacramental programs, and joint approaches to youth ministry and staff/parent faith formation.

The Agreements also can cover shared use of facilities (church, parish hall, car parks, meeting spaces), joint event planning, communication strategies (sharing calendars, newsletters, websites) and clear arrangements for child safety and supervision when students are on parish property. The framework for the statement recognises the unique identity of each parish and school, so it avoids prescribing a single template model.

Priests and Principals Dialogue Day, held in 2025 in Shepparton on 14 May, provides a forum for Sandhurst priests and school principals to listen and dialogue about their shared mission. The agenda included input on the reality of living the missionary imperative in the current social, cultural and religious context, an overview of Catholic Education Sandhurst (CES) Ltd governance and operations, and an introduction to the Sandhurst Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals. Time was allocated for priests and principals to review current Shared Mission Agreements between parishes and schools.

These synodal changes also apply to how the CES operates at the Board and senior executive levels in the governance processes.

### ***Religious education through the Catholic Dialogue School method***

An important initiative of the CES together with the Catholic education agencies in the regional Dioceses of Sale and Ballarat in Victoria is the continuing support for the [\*Enhancing Catholic Schools Identity \(ECSI\) Project\*](#). The project is managed by a research group at KU Leuven which is a Catholic research university in the city of Leuven, Belgium.

Also known as the Catholic Dialogue School, the project has been running in Victorian Catholic dioceses for more than 20 years. However, [\*a new consortium\*](#) representing more than 210 Catholic schools in the dioceses of Sale, Ballarat and Sandhurst entered a partnership with the Catholic University of Leuven based on a commitment through to 2028. Catholic schools' identity project aims to bring 'a renewed and living Catholic faith tradition into dialogue with diverse religious traditions and worldviews in a culture of increasing secularisation'.<sup>10</sup>

The new partnership will also enable Catholic education offices and schools to enhance their Catholic identity. This will be done through practical support projects, on-site professional development modules and whole school projects. The support will also include professional formation via the annual ECSI Intensive Courses in Leuven, an ECSI helpdesk, working visits throughout Victoria, and a new series of ECSI Master Classes.

The project aims to provide a valuable set of concepts and tools for helping Catholics and others in Catholic schools to identify what their own faith means to them. The teaching modules explain different forms of religious belief, focusing on cultivating a [\*post-critical belief\*](#). This is defined as being aware of other faiths and criticisms of religion. But this is done in the context of affirming the value of one's own relationship with God as expressed through the teaching and sacraments of their Catholic faith community. An assessment of the effectiveness of this approach by academics at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) is presented below in the section on 'More access to better lay formation opportunities needed'.<sup>11</sup>

## **14. Demographics of parish life**

The key features affecting many parishes in Sandhurst, especially in small towns, is the low number of the self-identified Catholics, their decline in size over time and the changes in their composition. Fifteen small towns with parishes have Catholic populations of fewer than 1,100 people, ranging from 377 in Corryong and 383 in Pyramid Hill to 1,039 in Heathcote and 1,078 in Rochester. The 2021 Mass attendance rate of 6.6 per cent for the Sandhurst Diocese may be lower than expected, due to effect of Covid. If a 10 per cent attendance rate of the Catholic population was applied, the number of Mass attenders in these small parishes would

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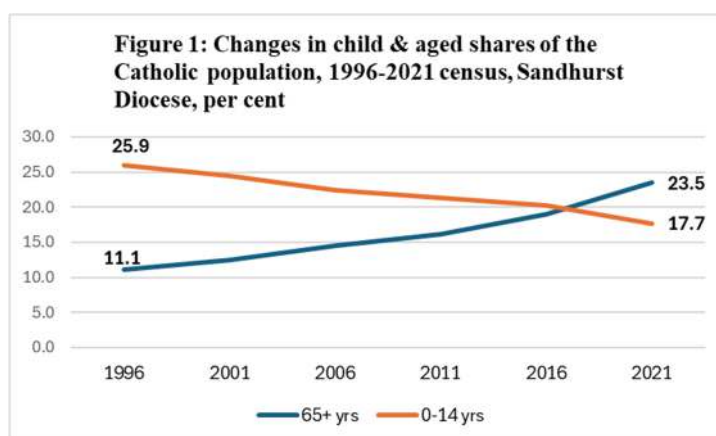
<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ceosand.catholic.edu.au/what-s-on/latest-news-events/195-catholic-dialogue-school-consortium-brings-international-experts-to-bendigo>

<sup>11</sup> Robyn Horner, Teresa Brown & Christopher Reed (10 Sep 2025): 'One minute to midnight: the future of Catholic education', *International Studies in Catholic Education*, DOI: 10.1080/19422539.2025.2553655



only range from about 40 to 100. This means that most priests in full-time ministry need to serve several Mass centres.

While the region's population has increased significantly, the Catholic population has decreased, falling from a high of 93,803 in the 2011 census to 84,607 in 2021. The changing composition of the Sandhurst Catholic population is reflected in the changes in the relative size of their child and older age groups. Figure 1 below shows the overall picture for the Sandhurst diocese over the 25 years to 2021, using census data. The orange line shows the share of young children aged to 14 years has declined from just over one in four (25.9 per cent) in 1996 to just over one in six (17.7 per cent) in 2021 of the Catholic population. Over the same period, the dark blue line shows that the share of the older population aged 65 and over has risen from just over one in ten (11.1 per cent) to near to one in four (23.5 per cent) of the Catholic population.



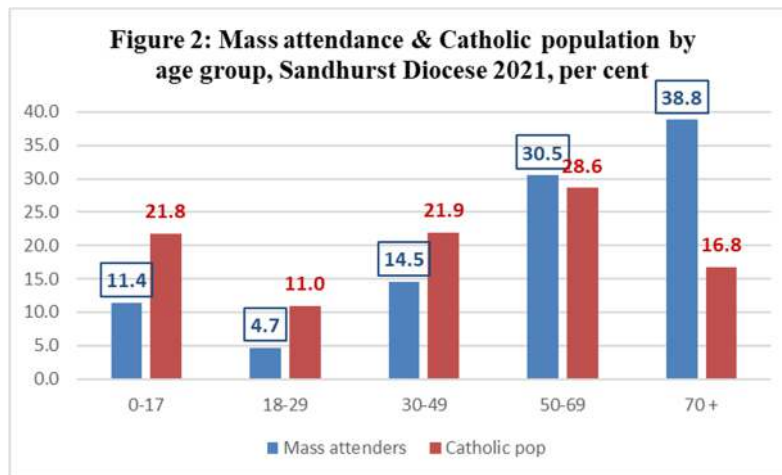
Source: Diocesan Social Profile based on the 2021 Australian Census: Diocese of Sandhurst, the National Centre for Pastoral Research, Canberra, p 3.

These changes are more marked for the towns in rural Victoria with smaller populations. This is shown in the median ages of the Catholic population in a large regional centre compared with a rural village. While parishes in Bendigo have median ages of 48, 43, 42 and 41 and as low as 39; in contrast parishes in Bright, Beechworth and Benalla have media ages of 55, 53, and 53 respectively. Heathcote parish has the highest median age of 58.<sup>12</sup>

The other major indicator of the changing population structure of parishes in Sandhurst is the overall Mass attendance rate and the age structure of the Mass attenders. As noted above, the 2021 Mass attendance rate for the Sandhurst Diocese was 6.6 per cent of the Catholic population which is much lower than the 2016 attendance rate of 9.5 per cent. Covid is a factor in the drop in the attendance rate but it is possible that this will have an ongoing effect. The age profile of the Mass attenders in 2021 is shown in Figures 2 and 3.

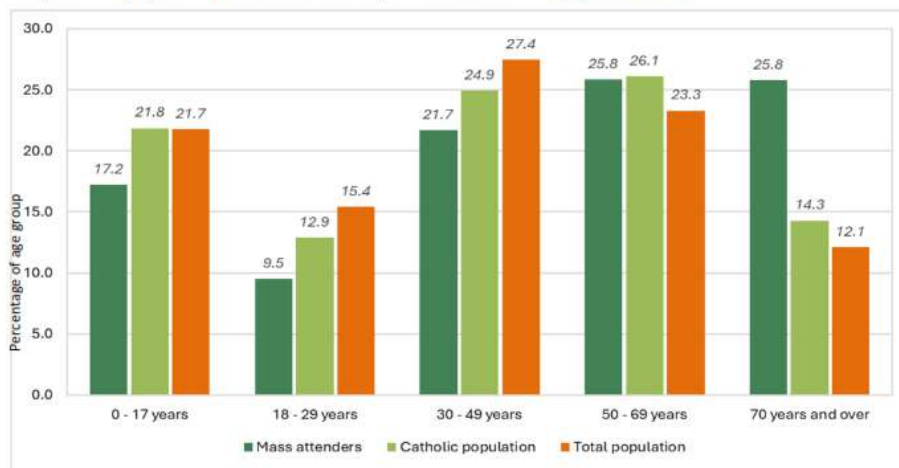
<sup>12</sup> The data source is the National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2023, [Parish Social Profiles](#) for the Sandhurst Diocese.





Source: [National Count of Attendance May 2021](#) and the [National Catholic Census Project 2021](#).

**Figure 3: Age profile of Mass attenders, Catholic and total population, 2021**



Sources: ACBC National Count of Attendance, 2021; ABS Census, 2021.

Figure 2 shows that the three under-represented age groups among the Mass attenders compared with the total Catholic population in 2021 are the younger age groups: the 0–17-year-olds, 18–29-year-olds and the 30–49-year-olds. The two oldest age groups are over-represented among the Mass attenders: the 50–69-year-olds and the 70 and over age group. Figure 3 shows the overall data on Mass attendance by age compared with the Catholic and the region’s total population. These data show a longer-term trend. Younger age groups are turning away from regularly taking part in the parish as a community. Figure 3 also shows that these younger age groups also include many who no longer see themselves as Catholics, having ticked the no religion box in the Census.

Mass attendance is now dominated by older Catholics. The next national count of attendance will be in 2026. Age-specific attendance results will be one measure of the impact of recent changes emanating from the Diocesan Pastoral Council and parish level initiatives. Another more readily available indicator of parish life would be the trend in the number of marriages, baptisms, first communions, confirmations and funerals taking place over time. These statistics are collected for the Statistical Yearbook of the Church, published by the Vatican.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* (Statistical Yearbook of the Church) is edited by the Vatican’s Central Office of Church Statistics. The volume provides quantitative data on pastoral activities worldwide, including the number of marriages, baptisms, first communions, and confirmations.

## 15. The role of the bishop's parish visitations

The 2020 'Go Forth' Report recommended the formalisation of the bishop's pastoral visitations to parishes. These are the visits that the bishop is required by canon law to make at least every five years. The six recommendations on parish visitation are shown in the box below.

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| 46. | That a structured parish visitation program by the Bishop be introduced commencing in 2021 under which the Bishop visits each parish once every five years.   |
| 47. | That the focus of the visitation program is pastoral in nature allowing the Bishop the opportunity to encourage the clergy and people in their faith.   |
| 48. | That prior to a visit each parish is to be invited to undertake a process of discernment to decide what needs to be brought to the attention of the Bishop in the parish report to be provided to the Bishop prior to the visit. This period of preparation can also be used for developing or reviewing the existing parish mission and vision statements and pastoral plan. |
| 49. | That the Director of Mission and Pastoral Life is to be responsible for co-ordination of the arrangements for the parish visitation program.  |
| 50. | That the visit include an opportunity to meet with parishioners, parish leadership and groups and people in schools, aged and disability facilities located in the parish.  |
| 51. | That the Director of Mission and Pastoral Life have responsibility for following up on any matters identified during the visit.   |

### *Recommended three-step process for the parish visitation*

The review recommended the parish visitation be organised in three stages: (1) preparation, (2) visitation and (3) follow-up. The first stage was described as the parishioners, through a listening and discernment process, deciding on what needs to be brought to the attention of the bishop. The review suggested the preparation stage should also be used to develop or review, as appropriate, the existing parish mission and vision statements and its pastoral plan. The parish should also be asked to prepare a report for the bishop, with assistance if required by diocesan officials. Ten topics related to parish life were suggested: (1) pastoral and administrative organization of the parish; (2) clergy life and ministry in the parish; (3) liturgy and sacramental life; (4) laity; (5) youth; (6) adult faith formation; (7) safeguarding; (8) disability, aged and vulnerable persons; (9) financial state; and (10) parish goals (para 8.1).

The recommended visitation duration was 'a period of two or three days during which the bishop would celebrate parish Masses and meet socially and speak with parishioners after Mass'. The aim of the visitation was to allow the bishop the opportunity to meet with and listen to the parish clergy and the following parish individuals and groups: the parish leadership team; the parish pastoral council; the parish finance council; the principal and council of parish school(s); safeguarding leaders; those responsible for the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process; and members of religious communities in the parish. The review also recommended that the visitation should also include pastoral visits to the schools, aged and disability facilities located in the parish (para 8.2).

The third and final stage of follow-up to the parish visitation is described as follows:

*Areas identified during the visitation for follow-up action by the Bishop, Parish or Diocese should be identified in a post visitation letter from the Bishop to the Parish Priest and coordinated by the Director of Mission and Pastoral Life with a follow up within ninety days by the Director of Mission and Pastoral Life to review progress on particular actions (para 8.3).*

### *The response*

Commencing in November 2023, the Office of Mission and Pastoral Life, with the aid of a dedicated working party of priests, Chancery staff and parishioners, developed and piloted the Parish Visitation Program (PVP). As Dr Chris Cotter, the Sandhurst Director of Mission and Pastoral Life has stated in the Year in Review 2024 report (p 12), the PVP has been structured so that it is ‘an opportunity for parishes to reflect on all dimensions of their life and activity, with the assistance and guidance of Chancery staff, to undertake planning for the future and to set goals to guide their endeavours’. The PVP allows the bishop to listen deeply to the parish priests and parishioners. The aim is to:

*understand their strengths and challenges, and to discover new ways of providing pastoral and missionary outreach. It is our hope that the PVP will encourage and support the ongoing renewal of our parish communities and provide an experience of what it means to be a synodal Church in mission (pp 12-13).*

### **16. Feedback on the value of the parish visitations**

Two parish groupings participated in PVP pilots between May and September 2024: Eaglehawk and Inglewood-Marong parishes, and the Wangaratta, Wangaratta South and Moyhu parishes. Members of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Life (MPL) Team provided administrative, research and facilitation services to support the participatory and consultative processes undertaken. Dr Cotter notes that the pilot visitations were positive experiences for these parishes. The visits have enabled the working party to refine and improve the PVP documentation and processes.

In the same Year in Review 2024 report, Bishop Mackinlay offered his assessment of the Parish Visitation Program:

*In July of this year, I commenced a new program of pastoral visitation to parishes, beginning with Eaglehawk, Inglewood-Marong, Wangaratta, Wangaratta South and Moyhu. This renewed approach to visitation assists communities to engage in a reflection on all aspects of their parish life, with my visit giving an opportunity to discuss this and set future goals with the community. I was able to meet with parishioners in both formal and informal settings and hear their concerns, hopes and aspirations for our Church while attending and presiding at parish liturgies, or visiting schools and health services. I was moved by the dedication of the People of God in Sandhurst who are deeply committed to their parish communities and long to share this gospel experience with others. Some of our communities are facing difficult decisions about the continued use of small churches, and ways in which parishes can collaborate more effectively with one another. I look forward to visiting three more parish groupings in 2025 and plan to complete the visitation of all parishes in the Diocese over the next four years (p 9).*

The DPC Meeting Report 30-31 May 2025 noted that: ‘The learnings about our parishes arising from the Parish Visitation Program are significant and future budgets will need to continue to support this program’. One DPC member also supported this assessment:

*The Parish Visitation Program has been a highly successful way to get parishes to think about the issues that were of real concern to them. The process of the bishop making an extended visit meant they had the incentive to resolve the outstanding issues or turn to him for his advice on how to resolve it. One parish and primary school was able to use the forthcoming Bishop’s visit to reach a Shared Mission Agreement between the parish and the school despite the conservative parish priest*

*who had previously resisted agreeing to changes.*

Another illustration of the impact of the parish visitation programs is presented below in the process of amalgamating three parishes into one.

## **17. Changes affecting how parishes are functioning**

Many dioceses and their parishes in Oceania, Europe and North America face a shortage of priests as ministers of the sacraments. They also face a declining population of people who identify as Catholics and, more so, those willing and able to be active parishioners. This is due in part to the encroaching mortality of the aging baby boomer population, born before Vatican II. As already noted, it is also due to loss of interest among younger age groups in being parishioners. It even extends to those baptised as Catholics not wanting to turn to the Church to celebrate major life events such as marriage, birth and death. This was shown in the declining numbers of Church marriages and baptisms in Australia over the last three decades to 2021.<sup>14</sup> The fall in the number of parishioners also means fewer financial resources to support parish staff such as a pastoral associate or lay coordinators.

Regional dioceses in Australia also experience the additional difficulty of parishes being dispersed over a wide geographical area. As noted above, many rural parishes in small towns and villages have small and declining Catholic populations. They cannot support a resident priest serving only one community, so they are reliant on priests travelling long distances to administer the sacraments. The shortage of Australian-born priests also means that many dioceses are increasingly recruiting priests from overseas. However, in regional areas especially but also elsewhere, the traditional role of the priest has changed from being a resident pastoral and community leader to one of becoming mobile sacramental service provider.

The traditional roles of the parish priest as pastor and community leader are exemplified to a high degree in this recent description of Bendigo-born Monsignor Francis “Frank” Marriott OAM:

*For more than six decades, Monsignor Frank’s influence reached far beyond parish walls. He made an enormous contribution to central Victoria, strengthening local institutions, championing social cohesion, supporting families, engaging in grassroots activism, and offering pastoral care to people from every background and walk of life. His leadership in education, interfaith relations, civic advocacy, social justice and community wellbeing made him a respected and unifying presence across the region.*<sup>15</sup>

Both the Australian-born and foreign-born priests in full ministry cannot perform their traditional roles, as in the past, of meeting the needs of their parishioners and the wider community. Their role has, of necessity, been changed to that of narrow service providers spread across many locations operating under tight time constraints. Instead of expecting to perform a range of pastoral and community functions, ministering priests are now required to focus narrowly on their role as a Mass celebrant servicing many Mass centres. This narrower sacramental service role for priests means they do not have the time, or even if they have the interest, to play a broader role in the parish or the wider community. In addition, foreign-born

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<sup>14</sup> Vatican Statistical Yearbook of the Church presents statistics on baptisms, first communions, confirmations and marriages for 1991 to 2021. For Australia, there has been a fall in the number of Catholic Church marriages from just over 20,000 a year in 1991 to only 5,460 marriages recorded in 2021. Marriages between Catholics have fallen by 73 per cent over this period and between Catholics and non-Catholics by 82 per cent. The number of baptisms has fallen by nearly half from just under 80,000 a year in 1991 to just 40,000 in 2021. Source: National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2025, [Pastoral Research Online Issue 68](#), March, p 3.

<sup>15</sup> Sandpiper e-News: The News from the Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst Issue 112, 28 November 2025.

priests are also likely to be reluctant to take on a broader role due to their limited familiarity with the local community.

The scarcity of priests and their more limited role as service providers highlights the need for more lay involvement in the parish. Lay parishioners need to take on the leadership roles that a parish priest and assistant priests took on in the past.

## **18. Using synodal approaches to support parish amalgamation**

The following account of the formation of a new, merged parish gives some idea of the changes many smaller parishes will need to make in the future. The synodal steps described below helped a newly formed parish to make more effective use of its available priests and increase the level of lay involvement in the parishes. The reasons for proposing amalgamation stemmed in part from the large number of Mass centres and their declining Catholic populations in and close to Wangaratta.

### ***The context for the amalgamation***

St Patrick's Parish Wangaratta dates from 1863, before the Diocese of Sandhurst existed. The parish of Holy Cross in Moyhu was established in 1955 although the town itself dates from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Parish of Our Lady Mother of God and Our Lady's Primary School in Wangaratta South were established in 1958. This parish was set up to meet the needs of the new residents in houses built in the early 1950s for workers and their families. It was identified as a low socio-economic area.

The Catholic populations of the three parishes, as recorded in the 2021 census, are as follows: St Patrick's Wangaratta (Catholic population 4,611), Our Lady's Wangaratta South (1,711) and Holy Cross Moyhu (347). The first two parishes are in the 'Rural City of Wangaratta' with a population of nearly 30,000 in 2021. Moyhu is a small town of 437 people in 2021 and a population 1,889 people in the surrounding district. The town is 25 minutes drive from Wangaratta. The actual number of parishioners attending Mass is much smaller, at less than 10 per cent of the Catholic population. This includes the boost in numbers for St Patrick's from migrant families from the Philippines and India, who are drawn from a wider region.

The Catholic population of each parish has fallen between 2016 and 2021. However, it was the smallest parish of Holy Cross Moyhu that has experienced the greatest fall in numbers of 25 per cent. This compared with a 13 per cent decrease for Our Lady's Wangaratta South and 5 per cent decrease for St Patrick's Wangaratta. Each parish has a high proportion of parishioners aged 65 and over, with Holy Cross Moyhu the highest at 29 per cent, compared with 25 per cent for each of the other two parishes.

The number of Catholic families resident in the parish of Holy Cross Moyhu has fallen significantly between 2016 and 2021 from 182 to 129. This compares with a smaller decrease over the same period from 736 to 712 Catholic families in Our Lady's Parish, Wangaratta South. There was a slight increase in the number of Catholic families for St Patrick's Wangaratta (to 1,809 in 2021 compared with 1,800 in 2016). Together with the fall in the number of families in the parish of Holy Cross Moyhu, the proportion of children aged 0-14 had dropped from 18 per cent in 2016 to 11 per cent in 2021.

### ***The formation of the new parish***

A new parish of Christ the King Catholic Parish Wangaratta was established on 15 December 2024, amalgamating Wangaratta, Wangaratta South and Moyhu. A young Filipino priest Fr Nathan Verallo was installed as the parish priest after the former parish priest retired due to health problems and intervening period of seeking the services of priests from overseas. Fr

Verallo suggested to Bishop Mackinlay that three parishes should merge as the workload of supporting them with separate activities had become too much. For example, there were six meetings every two months involving the three parish pastoral councils and the parish finance councils. Also, the timing of the Masses in seven Mass centres needed to be better coordinated to enable the two priests to cope with the travel involved. Fr Nathan proposed that he be the parish priest of the newly formed parish after preparing the individual parishes for the changes. After some initial concerns from some senior priests about Fr Verallo's lack of experience, Bishop Mackinlay agreed to make him the parish priest.

### ***The synodal process undertaken as a series of steps***

A series of steps led to the parish amalgamation: the preparation by each of the three parishes for the parish visitation by the bishop, the visitation itself, and the follow-up feedback from the bishop. Next came a parish assembly to discuss the formulation of a new parish vision and mission statements and the discussion of a new model of lay leadership for the new amalgamated parish.

The preparation for the bishop's parish visitation included an extensive process of listening, discussing and discerning what issues to discuss with the bishop. At Fr Nathan's request and in collaboration with him and his team, the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Life team developed surveys, processed and interpreted the data and provided detailed reports to the parish communities, as well as designing, delivering and facilitating two of the three parish assemblies.

The first in steps were taken May 2021 with 30 people participating in a zoom meeting for each of the separate parishes. Father Verallo then asked parishioners to complete a questionnaire, distributed at Mass. The results of the survey were discussed at a parish assembly. Three parish assemblies were held as part of the process of amalgamating the parishes.

Bishop Mackinlay conducted a parish visitation in September 2024. He came without accompanying diocesan staff and stayed in the parish from Wednesday to Sunday. The visitation was a mix of formal visits to Catholic entities such as a school and aged care facility, welcoming liturgy, as well as conversations and social time with parishioners. This allowed for constructive conversations to identify key issues about the merger of the parish.

In the 2024 Year in Review, Bishop Mackinlay in discussing the parish visitation program made a comment relevant to his visit to the Wangaratta and Moyhu. He noted that: 'Some of our communities are facing difficult decisions about the continued use of small churches, and ways in which parishes can collaborate more effectively with one another'.

Moyhu congregation in their discussion with Bishop Mackinlay made it clear that they wanted their own priest. So, in the follow-up letter he proposed that the merger only involve two parishes at this stage. His approach was to listen first and then provide feedback consistent with what he had heard. However, when the Moyhu Parish Pastoral Council saw they were not to be part of the merger, they changed their minds. They decided that they now wanted to be part of the new merged parish.

The next step in the amalgamation process was to invite parishioners to agree on a new vision and focus for the parish. Another key objective was to outline an expanded role for the laity in its operation. A parish assembly was held on 5 April 2025 at which 50 parishioners representing all seven Mass centres participated. Its purpose was to start formulating vision and mission statements for the new parish using a synodal methodology. The assembly also discussed Fr Nathan's proposed new committee structure for the parish based on different areas of ministry. These functions were: (1) Service, (2) Worship and Liturgy, (3) Education and Formation, (4) Finance, (5) Temporalities/Properties and (6) Youth and Social Media. The acronym SWEFTY



was used to describe the new committee structure. The assembly participants also were invited to comment on the concept (without the detail) of a four-year plan for each of the committees.

Fr Verallo proposed that the leaders of each committee would automatically become members of the Parish Pastoral Council. They, together with the Parish Finance Council and the Clergy, would form the Parish leadership group. The write-up of the Assembly in the Diocesan Newsletter *the Sandpiper* did, however, acknowledge ‘...the reluctance to change and the varying levels of engagement across all the church communities’ and concluded that ‘The challenge is to actively engage all parishioners’.

### ***Future directions for the new parish***

Fr Nathan emphasised in an interview that the functions of the SWEFTY committees addressed a much broader range of functions than those dealt with previously by the parish. The three outgoing PPCs were said to be focused narrowly on administrative issues. The wider agenda for greater lay involvement was based on feedback from the parishioners.

The amalgamation of the three parishes has reduced the administrative workload and broadened the ways lay leaders and active parishioners are involved, as reflected in the list of functions managed by the new committees. The next change is to reduce the number of Mass centres to achieve a more merged parish. This would result in fewer costs for building maintenance. The reduced number of Masses would mean for the priest less time lost travelling between Mass centres on a weekend. This will require, for example, parishioners having to travel farther to find a Mass time that suits them.

### ***The internal or external focus of feedback on the parish vision and mission***

The challenge for any parish leadership team is to work out what parishioners expect of their parish as a community. The new Catholic Parish of Christ the King has parishioners with a range of backgrounds and set attitudes to their faith. These stem from parishioners who are from different age groups, stages in their lifecycle, and individual faith communities or groups within the parish. For example, the parish includes a long-established Latin Mass group.<sup>16</sup> Other parishioners include recent migrants from the Philippines and India with their own distinctive religious traditions and local community needs.

The assembly participants’ feedback, in the form of open-ended responses on a draft parish vision and a mission statement, gives some idea of parishioners’ expectations. One way of viewing these responses is to apply the lens of whether the feedback reflected an internal or external focus for the parish. The internal focus refers to ways of meeting the needs of the parish and the parishioners as a community. The external focus refers to parishioners engaging in activities which connect to either those in need in the parish community, or to the wider local community or broader afield.

A prominent Melbourne diocesan priest, Brendan Reed, is the author of a major international study of a four-part typology of parishes and parishioners. He has proposed and tested by detailed survey analysis in Melbourne and Belgium four types of parishes – the ‘convinced’ and the ‘engaged’ parishioners are externally or publicly oriented; the ‘devoted’ and ‘consumerist or service’ parishioners are internally or privately oriented.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The Latin Mass Group has recently moved from Our Lady’s Parish to St Joseph’s in Glenrowan still within the parish. The officiating priest is from the Sandhurst Diocese but is not part of the parish clergy team. A member of the Latin Mass group is on the PPC.

<sup>17</sup> Reed, Brendan, 2018, *Engaging with the Hopes of Parishes: A Systematic, Empirical and Practical Search for a Parish Engagement Scale (SPES)*. Vol. 2. LIT Verlag Münster.

### ***Attitudes reflecting the desire for an internally focused ‘devoted’ parish***

An internally focused ‘devoted’ parish perspective is illustrated by the following feedback on the draft parish vision: ‘faith formation and bible study for both adults and youth’, ‘encourage a more devotional and Eucharistic community life’ and ‘encourage a more sacramental community’.

### ***The desire for an internally focused consumerist or service-oriented parish***

Another set of internally focused parishioner feedback reflected a focus on the delivery of services based on a consumer orientation. One parishioner requested ‘a warm welcome at the Masses, shorter and straight to the point for sermons, shorter ceremonies for Easter Mass and Christmas, youth involvement and the availability of discussions on the Gospels reading program’. Another parishioner wanted the parish to provide specific services such as ‘... adult faith education to understand our faith more; something for youth ministry; Bible study groups available’.

### ***The desire for a more forthright statement of and promotion of the Catholic faith***

Other parishioners wanted a formal statement of what their faith stood for in more meaningful and understandable language:

*Live out Christ’s mission to the world within the parish, which is calling people to repentance and conversion, turn back to God, and embrace Jesus’ gift of eternal salvation. Therefore, we the parishioners and clergy of Christ the King Catholic Parish commit ourselves to celebrate. Grow and serve through (a) Missionary discipleship (b) Inclusive participation; c) Collaboration and witness.*

One parishioner wanted the parish vision statement ‘to adopt a synodal approach to boldly proclaim the faith’.

### ***The desire for an engaged parish***

Some parishioners wanted to include words such as ‘engagement and inclusion’, ‘enthusiastic engagement and kindness’, ‘include mercy and compassion’, ‘add inclusive participation’, [parish] family ‘radiates mercy’, refer to ‘All’ instead of ‘followers of Christ’. One participant proposed this vision statement:

*Christ the King Catholic Parish is a warm and welcoming community, embracing the gospel values of missionary discipleship, enthusiastic engagement, a gathering that shines with the compassion of the Beatitudes, inspires joyful participation and cherishes the journey of faith.*

Another participant made this comment: ‘My honest opinion of what our parish vision should be is that we live our faith showing caring and loving inclusion of all. Going out and involving everyone – old and young’.

### ***Resistance to an external focus for the parish***

Other parishioner comments showed a strong resistance to the parish taking a public or external focus. The term ‘to evangelise’ was rejected by several participants such as: ‘Get rid of the word evangelization!!! Too Aggressive’. Another comment was similar: ‘The Evangelisation word needs to be changed to some simpler wording, e.g., ‘keep it simple’. ‘Can there be another word instead of “evangelisation”? it reminds me of people knocking on my door with the bible in hand’...Another comment, however, did not reject an external focus for the parish, merely the use of the word: ‘Delete Evangelise, Insert Celebrate. Share, Grow, and Serve. Missionary discipleship’.

There was also resistance to the term synodality: ‘synodality/witness – take off. Focus on participation and inclusion which might prove achievable and concise’. Another stated: ‘I would like to recommend to change ‘synodality’ and ‘witness’ to layman’s terms like collaboration and testimony’.

### **19. Sense of the faithful assessment of the synodal changes**

Catholicism is going through a change of era, as Pope Francis discerned, not merely an era of change. The elements of the old Catholicism are still evident alongside new directions that are emerging from the bottom up, often in haphazard ways.

One lens to apply is the well-known Vatican II distinction of *ecclesia ad intra* and *ad extra*. The terms could be translated as the Church turned towards itself and its internal affairs in contrast to the Church turned outward to engage with the world. Synodality has two dimensions. It is encouraging Catholics in parishes and schools to engage in a process which fosters dialogue. The second dimension is to promote structural reform of the Church to become more participatory and missionary. As noted above, from Para 28 of the Final Documents of the Synod on Synodality

*In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ.*

#### ***What an ‘ad intra’ focus in a parish involves in practice***

The *ad intra* or internally focused lens for viewing the Church was the primary orientation of the traditional Church parish which was a clerically led entity operating in a well-defined territorial space. The parish’s main function in the past was to provide the sacraments, ceremonies, devotions, services such as primary schooling and facilities for the social activities of parishioners. Lay participation was encouraged to raise and manage finance for church and school buildings. Lay associations were also active but mainly as sodalities based on devotions and good works.

A parish as a self-contained community is an *ad intra* way of being Church. This was the theme ‘Building Communities of Belonging’ of the Diocesan Formation Gathering of 120 participants in Shepparton in early October 2025. As the Sandpiper Newsletter reported: ‘...participants heard from parish leaders about how they are welcoming, inviting and supporting engagement within their parishes’. Two examples were given.

*Fr Junray Rayna, Parish Priest of St Kilian’s Bendigo, spoke of his personal challenges and his parish’s journey “[from moribund to magnetic](#)”. He touched on his learnings from [Divine Renovation](#), and how simple gestures such as greeting people and walking into the Church with them can make a difference. He spoke of the Community Garden, the Parish Café and the five hospitality groups, which cater for those seeking connection after Mass, and the way people in all these groups have developed deeper connections beyond the Liturgy.*

The second example, cited above, is that of men’s fellowship initiative of St Mary’s Parish Echuca. The Sandpiper Newsletter describes the benefits of the group in these words: ‘By providing space for prayer, dialogue and fellowship, the Men’s Group has encouraged even the more reserved men to engage more fully in parish life’.

#### ***Combining both ad intra and ad extra elements***

The parish of St Mary’s Echuca has an impressive list of 34 ministry groups or teams on its website together with a name of a parishioner individually or jointly responsible for that group

or activity. These include 14 groups, teams or individual coordinators focused on parish functions. These are baptism preparation, a bereavement team, kids and youth coordinators, liturgy committee, music group, sacramental program team, Rite of Christian Initiation for Children and for Adults, maintenance and gardening, Aged Care liturgy, G'Day Weekend Coordinator, and a communications team as well as the Pastoral Council and the Finance Committee. The remaining ministry groups listed in the parish appear to have an *ad extra* focus, either within the parish or the wider community. These are: Sophia Sisters, Men's Ministry, home visitation, hospital visits, three aged care visitation groups, family groups, Teams of Our Lady, Social Committee, Care for Creation Team, Social Justice Team, Vinnies (St Vincent de Paul), playgroup, hospitality space, community connect, Couples for Christ and an events coordinator.

### ***Catholic Earthcare Program in Sandhurst parishes***

For some parishes, a significant *ad extra* parish activity is the development and implementation of a Laudato Si action plan. [Caritas Catholic Earthcare](#) provides an accompanied journey to a Laudato Si Action Plan (LSAP) and ultimately to the international platform. The initial Self-Assessment Tool includes Australian elements such as the parish's relationship to First Nations People and other local activities such as Project Compassion, Vinnies, Landcare, and Clean Up Australia Day. The program has been commended for its clear structure, user-friendly resources, and focus on building local networks and community-led change for environmental stewardship.

Kerry Stone, from St John's Parish Numurkah, is the National Coordinator of the Caritas Catholic Earthcare Parish/Diocese Community. Kerry is also the Caritas and Social Justice Coordinator in the Sandhurst Diocese. Sandhurst Diocese launched its response to the LSAP in 2022. The launch on the Broken Creek was attended by 150 or so participants from parishes and schools. This led to 24 parishes registering as Earthcare parishes but only about 7 parishes are currently active in October 2025. These are Beechworth, Echuca, Rushworth, Shepparton, the Cathedral Cluster, St Kilian's Bendigo and Wodonga Combined Parishes. It is notable that most, but not all, of these parishes are in larger, built-up urban areas rather than in the smaller, rural parishes. The Diocese launched its own LSAP in May 2025 with the plan now uploaded onto the international platform.

Kerry, in an interview, noted that the implementation of a parish action plan required at least one passionate parishioner. However, she also noted that support was needed from the top as well. The bishop and parish priests needed to encourage parishioners to get involved by speaking regularly about living Laudato Si. [St Kilian's Earthcare Team](#) has a supportive Parish Priest. There are now six or seven parishioners involved in the group, managing initiatives like waste reduction and recycling. They also run a community vegetable garden which distributes vegetables every Wednesday to those in need. The Parish Earthcare Team has produced an [action plan for 2025-2027](#) with some 30 or so actions ranging over the seven Laudato Si Goals. These are listed under the headings of People, Place and Practice. The actions include working with other parish groups and the parish as a whole on achieving their goals.

### ***Responding to this diversity of different views of the roles of the parish***

Each of these variations on how parishioners understand the value of parish life to them needs to be respected and, if possible, catered for. With the scarcity of priests, amalgamating of parishes and closure of Mass centres, new forms of lay parish leaders are needed. As already described, one approach now in place for the new merged parish of Christ the King has been to set up committees with leaders also on the Parish Pastoral Council to take care of specific parish functions. However, a repeated comment recorded at the parish assembly where the concept as

first presented was the query: ‘will there be enough volunteers to take on these roles’?

## **20. Recommendations**

Six gaps in the above account of the synodal practices and changes in Sandhurst can be identified. These gaps refer to the need for (1) more information about actions taken to change the roles of women in parishes and the diocese; (2) the need to support and expand roles of pastoral associates and lay coordinators; (3) the use of key indicators of parish and diocesan performance; (4) more and better lay formation opportunities; (5) more concerted focus on the changing role of priests in the synodality changes; and (6) more attention should be given to promoting activities at the diocesan and parish levels which connect with other faith communities and non faith-based groups in the service of the common good.

### ***Annual reporting needed on the changing place of women in key roles in parishes and the diocese***

The annual Sandhurst Year in Review is a welcome change from the lack of information in dioceses in the past about who in the diocese is doing what and how well the diocese is performing on a select group of indicators. However, more information is needed on the key changes needed in a synodal Church. This applies especially to the role of women in parishes and the diocese. The report of the first session of the universal Synod in Rome stated that: ‘It is urgent to ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry’ and ‘Women’s access to formation programmes and theological study needs to be considerably expanded’ (Women in the life and mission of the Church, Chap 9, *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report* First Session, XVI Synod of Bishops October 2023).

The scoping document for the second session of the Synod in Rome highlighted the need for dioceses to produce an annual statement on the performance of the mission.<sup>18</sup> It proposed that this includes coverage of initiatives related to ‘Promoting women’s access to positions of authority and their participation in decision-making and taking processes’.

### ***Annual reporting needed on non-clerical leaders in parishes***

Given the scarcity of priests and their narrower service provider role, non-clerical leadership in the parishes is crucial to their functioning. The Final Document of the 2024 Synod stated: ‘A missionary synodal Church would encourage more forms of lay ministries, that is, ministries that do not require the sacrament of Holy Orders, and this not only within the liturgical sphere’ (Para 66).

*The lay faithful, both men and women, should be given greater opportunities for participation, also exploring new forms of service and ministry in response to the pastoral needs of our time in a spirit of collaboration and differentiated co-responsibility (Para 77).*

There is only passing information available in the Year in Review reports about the pastoral associates and lay coordinators, their numbers, and roles. There is no information provided about the type and extent of support the diocese gives them, including their ongoing formation. The 2022 Year in Review states that the Pastoral Associates and Lay Coordinators Network has committed to four meetings in 2023. The first meeting was to establish a working party to set agendas, record minutes and prepare future meetings, source professional learning and organise a regular retreat experience for members. The 2023 Year in review notes that ‘... a group of

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<sup>18</sup> *How to be a missionary synodal Church to be a missionary synodal Church*. Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Session, October 2024, para 79, p 34.

Pastoral Associates has been meeting in person and online to consider ways to support Pastoral Associates and other lay people involved in ministry in parishes across the Diocese'. But there is no further detail of what forms of support are needed. However, in the 2024 Year in Review there is no mention of pastoral associates, lay coordinators or their network at all.

The 2023 Year in Review also mentions in passing the Rushworth Parish Lay Coordinators and notes that 'After two years in their role and a very positive review of the arrangements, they were officially installed by Bishop Shane on Sunday 29 May at a parish Mass in Rushworth'. However, no information has been provided about what these arrangements are and what their roles are within the parish.

The placement of paid lay leaders in parishes where there is no priest in residence should be accepted as an obvious option for isolated rural parishes. It is an important to find new ways that long-established Church communities can continue to meet and pray together, as affirmed by the Final Document of the Synod:

*Traditional territorial bonds are being redefined, blurring the borders of many dioceses and parishes. Living in these places, the Church is called to rebuild community life, to put a face to faceless entities and to rebuild relationships in this milieu. To this end, we must not only continue to value still-useful structures; we also need "missionary creativity" to explore new forms of pastoral care and identify concrete processes of care. It remains the case that rural contexts, some of which constitute genuine existential peripheries, must not be neglected and require specific pastoral attention (Para 111, For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document, 26 October 2024).*

It may be necessary for the merged parishes to sell buildings no longer used as Mass centres to provide an investment fund to support the work of lay coordinators in a small community.

#### ***Annual reporting needed on key measures of Catholic life in parishes and the diocese***

Valuable information on key indicators is needed to work out what resources are needed where. Examples of such indicators are the number of active parishioners (i.e., involved in a parish related activity). This would include not only baptisms, marriages and funerals and Catholic children in Catholic primary schools by parish and in aggregate for the diocese. It should also include parishioners' connections to other catholic service providers and involvement with wider community activities. This will help let Church leaders in the diocese and parishes know to what extent self-identified Catholics are continuing to maintain a connection with the Church and the wider community and what form it is taking.

#### ***More access to better lay formation opportunities needed***

The executive director of Catholic Education Sandhurst, Kate Fogarty, suggested that there was considerable potential to invite parishioners to take part in formation activities that the education agency conducts. For example, there was a full day recently where teaching staff were engaged in formation workshops, and some schools had invited parishioners to take part. She agreed that next year they would open up this much more to other parishes. The education agency has more than 200 hours of one-hour sessions which could be used for the formation of parishioners. There are 100 or so teachers with theology qualifications who could take part in a parish formation process.

However, notice needs to be taken of the conclusions of a recent article by Melbourne-based academic researchers entitled 'One minute to midnight: the future of Catholic Education'.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>19</sup> Robyn Horner, Teresa Brown & Christopher Reed (10 Sep 2025): 'One minute to midnight: the future of



article notes the Enhancing Catholic School Identity research findings that most young people in surveyed Catholic schools in Australia take a relativistic, or non-believing approach to religion. Also noted in the article is the recent evidence showing that most of their teachers agree with them. Professor Robyn Horner and her colleagues highlight the special conditions needed for Catholic Identity Dialogue approach to have the desired impact:

*...while dialogue is generally attractive to adults, both staff and students prefer the kind of dialogue that does not include any serious discussion of commitment to a religious tradition. Dialogue involves hard work as well as knowledge, understanding, and a preparedness to present and justify one's own position without discrediting the other's. Dialogue does not take place between people without any commitments – that is just light conversation. Dialogue occurs between people who explicitly come from different positions or worldviews (p 11).*

### ***Need for a focus on the role of priests in the synodality changes***

The fifth gap is the issue of feedback on the extent of clerical acceptance of their changed role and how they can better take on the role of servant leaders. This issue was addressed in the Final Document of the 2024 Synod in two separate paragraphs:

*A more active distribution of tasks and responsibilities and a more courageous discernment of what properly belongs to the ordained ministry and what can and must be delegated to others will enable each ministry to be exercised in a more spiritually sound and pastorally dynamic manner. This perspective will surely have an impact on decision-making processes, enabling them to have a more clearly synodal character. It will also help to overcome clericalism, understood as use of power to one's own advantage and the distortion of the authority of the Church which is at the service of the People of God (Para 74).*

*... it is necessary to have structures and methods for regularly evaluating the exercise of ministry. Such evaluation is not a judgement upon an individual. Rather, it allows a way of assisting the minister by highlighting positive aspects of their ministry and bringing to light areas for improvement. The evaluation also assists the local Church in learning from experience, adjusting plans of action, determining the outcomes of its decisions in relation to its mission, and remaining attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit (Para 100).*

One such structure and method for regularly evaluating the exercise of ministry is the episcopal parish visitations. However, to be effective in the short-term, these need to be conducted more regularly, at least every 12 months. If the bishop is not available, the vicar general or other senior priest should be asked to deputise for him and report back. This would enable more regular visits to take place, with feedback collected and discussed with the parish leadership team. This will provide a level of accountability to the bishop that will help to identify and resolve problems at the parish level.

### ***Need to promote activities that form a bridge to others in the wider community***

Another theme of this assessment of the state of synodality was to apply the lens of the church focused on both inside and outside activities. This referred to the challenge of generating activities that are not only focused inside the church. Activities are also needed at the diocesan and parish levels that are directed outside the church. This refers to ways that the local church can build bridges to connect with other organisations and communities in the service of the

common good. This was a major theme of Vatican II and especially of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, known by its Latin introductory words as *Gaudium et Spes* (The joys and hope... of this age...). The vision of *Gaudium et Spes* was that:

*...the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life.*<sup>20</sup>

At the diocesan level, the pastoral goals refer to ‘Renewed forms of participation in the life of the Church, with particular attention to those who are marginalised, or who feel disconnected or excluded’. However, more explicit reference should also be made to the need for the Church in the Sandhurst Diocese to work more closely with other faith communities and with other groups non-faith groups in the service of the common good. Similarly at the parish level, activities involving an Laudato Si Action Plan should include involvement with other community-based groups in fostering ways to improve our common earthly home.

## **21. Conclusion**

The Sandhurst Diocese has taken significant steps in setting up a framework for making synodality the main way of operating for the diocese in its parishes and schools. The groundwork was laid though extensive consultations which are being continued in a series of planned formation workshops for the parishes in particular. The response of the parishes will depend on well parishioners respond to a broader vision for their parish with the new opportunities for greater involvement in the parish and the wider community.

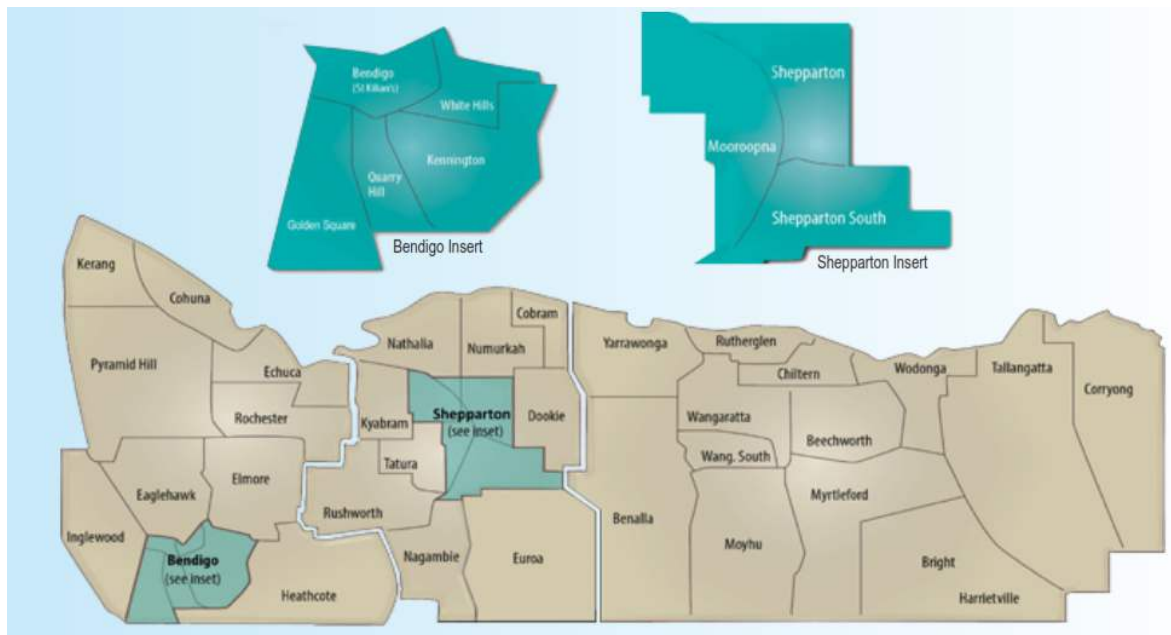
The departure of Bishop Mackinlay to take up his appointment to the Archdiocese of Brisbane has halted temporarily the work of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, awaiting the appointment of a new bishop. However, the Diocesan administrator, Fr Brian Boyle, has stated he is committed to continue the synodal process initiated by his long-time colleague. This commitment includes the implementation of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Goals and the Formation Support Plan. The future of synodality as a mode of working and focus on outcomes will depend on the new bishop. A key indicator will be whether he is a leader who is practised in using the synodal process and achieving its outcomes, not just someone who declares he supports it.

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<sup>20</sup> Cited by Megan Clark, 2023, ‘Gaudium et Spes’ offers wisdom for a divided church - U.S. Catholic”  
<https://uscatholic.org/articles/202301/gaudium-et-spes-offers-wisdom-for-a-divided-church/>

## Appendices

### Attachment 1: Location of parishes in the Sandhurst Diocese



## Attachment 2: The Selection Process of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council

*Preparation and consultation:* A year-long process involved consultation meetings across the diocese to explain the proposed council and encourage people to express interest in joining. *Expressions of Interest:* Individuals submitted expressions of interest to become a member of the council. Membership panel: A panel, chaired by the Bishop and including the Vicar General, the Episcopal Vicar for Education, and three lay members, reviewed the expressions of interest. *Selection criteria:* The panel used specific selection criteria and a skills matrix to evaluate candidates. The selection criteria specified in the statutes for the council are specified in the box below.

### **Attributes and skills of members, expressions of interest, membership panel.**

Members are to have the following personal attributes:

- 4.1.1 A baptised person of faith and actively involved in the Catholic community of the Sandhurst Diocese.
- 4.1.2 Demonstrated leadership capabilities.
- 4.1.3 A commitment to synodality.
- 4.1.4 A preparedness and ability to be present at each meeting of Council.
- 4.1.5 A preparedness to continue or to take up a consultative process with the deanery and/or the community base from which the member is called.
- 4.1.6 Have attained the age of 18 years.
- 4.2 Members must hold a Working with Children Check current in the state of Victoria or provide evidence that they are a member of a group exempt from holding a Working with Children Check.
- 4.3 Prospective members will submit an Expression of Interest addressing the personal attributes in 4.1, provide relevant information as required and nominate a priest in the diocese to act as a referee.

Source: Statutes Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council

Of the 15 Members of the Council nominated, five are clerics, including the bishop and 10 are lay members, in 2025 three men and seven women. Members were selected by a membership panel which included the bishop, Vicar General, Episcopal Vicar for Education and three lay people. The selection was from a list of people who had responded to a call for expressions of interest in joining the council, and who met the selection criteria specified in the statutes for the council