

Summary of *The Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst: Becoming a More Synodal Church*

Sense of the Faithful case study 19 January 2025

Purpose and method of the case study: The Sense of the Faithful case studies aim to encourage Australian dioceses to adopt synodal practices by showing how synodality can be embedded in local structures. Synodality is treated as a form of organisational change, requiring analysis of context, leadership, and participation. Evidence is drawn from documents, statistics, interviews with diocesan leaders, clergy, and parishioners, plus investigator assessment and editorial feedback. A diocesan review group—including senior leaders and possibly the former bishop—will provide collective responses to the draft.

Why Sandhurst Diocese was selected: Sandhurst stands out nationally for its synodal initiatives. Bishop Shane Mackinlay (2019–2025, currently Archbishop of Brisbane) played a prominent role in the global Synod on Synodality, serving as Oceania’s representative on the drafting commission. His leadership emphasized welcome, participation, accountability, and mission. In the Diocese of Sandhurst, he established the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Council, renewed parish governance, and encouraged synodal practices in schools and social services.

Social and demographic Profile

- **Population:** 409,994 (2021 census), with 84,607 Catholics (20.6%). Catholic share has declined faster than nationally.
- **Geography:** Covers northeast Victoria, including Bendigo, Wodonga, Wangaratta, Shepparton, Echuca, and smaller towns.
- **Clergy and Religious:** 48 clergy (35 full-time), 9 congregations, 34 religious. Many priests are overseas-born.
- **Parishes and Institutions:** 35 parishes (down from 40), grouped into three deaneries; 56 schools with nearly 20,000 students; one hospital; six aged-care facilities; CatholicCare Victoria served over 3,000 individuals in 2024.
- **Demographics:** Older Catholic population (median age 46, fifth oldest nationally). High home ownership (77.6%), low unemployment (3.1%), and relatively small Indigenous Catholic population (1,581). Women outnumber men, and more Catholics live alone compared with other dioceses.

Historical background: Founded in 1874, Sandhurst grew out of the Bendigo goldfields. The diocese benefited from the legacy of Dr Henry Backhaus, whose estate continues to provide substantial income (over 20% of diocesan revenue in recent years). His endowment funded the Sacred Heart Cathedral and ongoing scholarships. The diocese celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2024, marking its historical roots in Victoria's gold rush and agricultural expansion.

Bishops and different governance styles: Sandhurst's bishops historically had long tenures, but recent ones have been shorter. Governance styles varied:

- **Bishop Grech (2001–2010):** Established a Diocesan Pastoral Council with broad goals emphasizing inclusivity, liturgy, education, and youth engagement.
- **Bishop Tomlinson (2012–2019):** Did not re-establish the DPC, preferring conventional minimal governance arrangements.
- **Bishop Mackinlay (2019–2025):** Commissioned the *Go Forth* review (2020), which recommended modern governance structures. He prioritised synodal changes, including diocesan-wide consultations, the formation of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC) and a system of formal parish visitations by the bishop.

The *Go Forth* Review and Structural Reforms: Francis Moore's review in 2020 found only minimal consultative structures operating. Recommendations included:

- Establishing a Diocesan Pastoral Council to represent diverse voices.
- Developing a diocesan pastoral plan.
- Aligning governance with principles from *Light from the Southern Cross*: subsidiarity, stewardship, synodality, dialogue, accountability, transparency.
- Creating a Director of Mission and Pastoral Life to coordinate synodal initiatives.
- Instituting structured parish visitations with follow-up.
- Expanding the Council of Priests and including male and female lay advisors in the College of Consultors.

All 56 recommendations of the report were accepted, marking a decisive shift toward synodal governance.

Establishment of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC)

The SMPC, launched in 2023, comprises 16 members (bishop, clergy, laity, ex officio appointments). Members represent the diocese as a whole, not individual parishes. Statutes governing the Council draw on canon law, national reports, and diocesan consultations. An executive (bishop, chairperson, director of mission) manages business between meetings.

Consultation Process:

- Year-long preparation (2022–2023).
- 52 meetings across parishes and schools, with 905 participants.
- Diocesan Assembly in Shepparton (Feb 2023) with 300+ participants, producing 252 recommendations.
- SMPC meets quarterly; reports from 10 meetings (to May 2025) show progress.
- Shift from parish wish-lists to strategic diocesan goals. Meetings alternate between Mass and other liturgies to balance clergy-laity dynamics.

Strategic Mission and Pastoral Goals (2024–2028): Introduced in November 2024, these goals guide diocesan initiatives across parishes, schools, and agencies. The SMPC monitors progress, ensuring alignment with mission and pastoral priorities.

Diocesan Formation Support Plan: Consultations revealed a strong demand for formation opportunities. Bishop Mackinlay's 2025 letter defined formation as practices that help disciples live and grow in mission. The plan, aligned with the Plenary Council and Synod documents, outlines ten projects (five in 2025, five in 2026). Initial focus is parish-based, extending later to schools and other entities in the diocese. Projects include workshops on strategic goals and parish planning processes.

Recommendations: The case study identifies six major gaps in the Diocese of Sandhurst's current synodal strategies and reporting practices and makes recommendations. These cover areas where transparency, inclusivity, and accountability need strengthening.

1. Changing roles of women in parishes and the diocese. While recent Synod reports emphasize the urgency of expanding women's participation in decision-making, pastoral care, and theological formation, diocesan reporting on these issues remains limited. The Diocesan Year in Review 2024 provides only general updates. Lacking are more detailed accounts of women's leadership roles in parishes or the diocese, showing where progress is being made toward greater inclusion. The Synod's call for dioceses to produce annual statements on mission performance, including women's access to authority, has not yet been met.

2. Non-clerical leadership in parishes: With fewer priests available, lay leadership is increasingly vital. Synod documents encourage new forms of lay ministry beyond liturgical roles, stressing collaboration and co-responsibility. However, diocesan annual reports make only passing mention of pastoral associates and lay coordinators, with little detail on their support, formation, or responsibilities. The absence of any mention of their roles in the 2024 Year in Review further underscores this gap. Paid lay leaders in rural parishes are an obvious solution to the communities affected by parish mergers, aligning with the Synod calls for "missionary creativity" in sustaining community life.

3. Key indicators of diocesan performance: Current reporting focuses narrowly on Mass attendance, omitting broader measures of Catholic life. Indicators such as baptisms, marriages, funerals, school enrolments, and other forms of active parishioner involvement such as group activities would provide a clearer picture of diocesan vitality and resource needs. Such data would help the diocese leaders assess how Catholics can maintain connections to the Church and guide pastoral planning.

4. Lay formation opportunities: Catholic Education Sandhurst offers short teacher professional courses in religious education which have significant potential for parishioner formation, with hundreds of hours of sessions and qualified theology teachers available. Some schools have begun inviting parishioners to participate, but broader access is needed. Research on Catholic school identity warns that dialogue must involve genuine commitments to faith traditions, not superficial exchanges. Effective formation requires structured dialogue to apply Catholic responses to a range of contemporary issues students and parishioners are facing.

5. Role of priests in synodal changes: Finally, there is little public feedback on how priests are adapting to their evolving role as servant leaders. Synod documents stress the need for

clearer distribution of responsibilities and the evaluation of ministry to overcome the vestiges of clericalism. Regular feedback through more frequent parish visits by the bishop or by another senior priest such as the vicar general are needed. This would support priests and lay leaders to resolve any outstanding issues in delivering their pastoral mission and fostering the continued use of synodal decision-making.

6. Need for 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.

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.

Conclusion: The Sandhurst Diocese exemplifies how synodality can be embedded in diocesan life. Through Bishop Mackinlay’s leadership, structural reforms, extensive consultation, and the establishment of the SMPC, Sandhurst has moved from a minimal governance approach to a participatory, mission-focused model. Its demographic challenges—aging population, parish amalgamations—make synodal structures even more vital for sustaining Catholic life. The case study highlights both the opportunities and challenges of becoming a more synodal Church, offering major lessons for other dioceses across Australia.