



DIOCESE OF MAITLAND-NEWCASTLE

A Synodal Church in Mission

XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

TOWARDS OCTOBER 2024

HOW can we enhance the differentiated co-responsibility
in the mission of all the members of the People of God?



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INTRODUCTION

In response to the Synthesis Report, ([ACBC Page](#)) this paper outlines the feedback received from some members the diocesan community to live out the collaborative and co-responsible call to be missionary disciples.

It was suggested that reference be made specifically to Chapters 8-12, 16 and 18. However, comments have also been made to Chapters 1, 3, 4, 7, 14 and 17 as groups who met provided comments on how to enhance the differentiated co-responsibility. Chapters 13, 19 and 20 have been allocated to a National Response.

Eleven group responses were received, mostly from our various Diocesan Councils and groups. Disappointingly we received only one parish and one school response. A good distribution of male and females formed part of the groups that responded.

The groups found the process of spiritual conversations engaging and worthwhile.

This document reflects the voices of the people who met to discuss the question. We believe that this document is a fair representation of the reality of the people of God who participated in the spiritual conversations afforded to them by this process. However, we acknowledge that this document is not a consensus of all Catholics of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, but an expression of the views of those people who responded to the invitation to discern on the Synthesis Report.

The submitted diocesan summary was to be no more than eight pages consisting of 5 to 7 key points. Our diocesan submission will inform the National Summary.

This extended diocesan report includes quotes from the Synthesis Report to provide the context for the spiritual conversations that took place in the diocese in the first part of 2024. Also provided is a commentary on the raw data, providing some of our diocesan reality which may not have been apparent to those who provided feedback as part of the process.

PART 1 - THE FACE OF THE SYNODAL CHURCH

1. Synodality: Experience and Understanding

In its broadest sense, synodality can be understood as Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity. Its orientation is towards mission, and its practice involves gathering in assembly at each level of ecclesial life. It involves reciprocal listening, dialogue, community discernment, and creation of consensus as an expression that renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit, each taking decisions in accordance with their responsibilities. (Section 1, (h))

The Synodal Culture. It has been apparent in recent years that despite the term ‘synodality’ becoming more and more prevalent within our Church, there is a very broad interpretation of what the term means. The predominant hierarchical and democratic Western parliamentary culture will always trend to interpret it as close as possible to the ‘majority rules – minority loses’ (or listen and vote) mentality. Of paramount importance to the success of all the proposals in the Report is that this culture changes and a clear model of synodality is offered.

We support the recommendation for education and leadership skills to be developed to facilitate this.

Establish ‘schools’ of spiritual conversation. The relationship between conversation and conversion is the basis for renewal and structural change. These respectful conversations provide the necessary elements for synodality.

Pastoral Councils to be mandated in every diocese and parish. These Councils are essential in monitoring the evangelising, mission, and pastoral priorities of the local church.

Formal synodal processes in dioceses for change and renewal embedded in local law.

Once a year, a question for ‘**synodal conversation**’ could be sent to parish/diocesan pastoral councils – thus, forming our communities in this way of being as well as being an effective tool for pastoral planning.

Commentary

The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle intentionally began its synodal journey at the end of the 1980’s with a view to embedding the theology and ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. It held formal sessions of Synod in 1992 and 1993 with the view “*To hear God’s people and empower them to participate fully in God’s mission*”. The documents from this synod process were promulgated by Bishop Leo Clarke. Hundreds of people were actively engaged in the processes leading up to and beyond this synod, with a focus on renewing the church.

Having a formal synodal process which embedded local law around pastoral planning in the diocese has been an essential and ongoing process for change and renewal. The outcomes of this synod and the ensuing synodal journey have been vital in the development of how the local church in this Diocese would function and bring about God’s Kingdom in this place.

Essential to this synodal journey has been the diocesan ‘Ten Theological Principles’ which provided a framework for its self-understanding of what it means to be a church in the 21st century.

Emerging from this synodal journey has been the Pastoral Planning Framework with its foundations in Acts 2:42-47 giving us the tools for organising diocesan and parish life. This Five Foundations Framework is:

- Identity and Community
- Worship and Prayer
- Formation and Education

- Mission and Outreach
- Leadership and Structure

These five aspects of diocesan and parish life are essential for our understanding of life in our local church and if one of those areas area is lacking, then the life of the church is compromised.

The formation of a Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) and Parish Pastoral Councils and Teams, to oversee the Diocesan Pastoral Plan has been critical and these Councils have existed since 1993.

The Diocesan Synod (2019-2021), *Building the Kingdom of God Together* in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, was initiated by Bishop Bill Wright and the Council for Mission (DPC) and was planned to be held in three sessions. The Synod invited the People of God to carefully listen and discern together “What the Spirit is saying to the Church of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle”, and to agree on common goals and actions for the coming years. The third session was postponed due to the death of Bishop Bill Wright in November 2021.

This synod accompanied the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia at the local level as well as the Bishops Synod on Synodality.

2. Gathered and Sent by the Trinity

No Responses

3. Entering the Community of Faith: Christian Initiation

Christian initiation is the journey by which the Lord, through the ministry of the Church, introduces us to Easter faith and draws us into Trinitarian and ecclesial communion. This journey takes a variety of forms depending on the age at which it is undertaken. (Section 3, (a))

Diocesan Liturgy Councils to reimagine how initiation can be placed at the heart of the Church’s life and therefore at the heart of parish life. A vibrant ‘**Christian Initiation**’ process is essential for the life of the parish.

Commentary

To facilitate RCIA across parishes a diocesan Christian Initiation Forum has been established so as to:

- Grow in its knowledge and understanding of the RCIA
- Reimagine the Sacraments of Initiation of children through the lens of the RCIA
- Engage in ongoing contemplative dialogue with parish communities
- Provide a forum for all parish Christian Initiation ministers
- Engage in strategic planning to promote the growth of Christian Initiation in the diocese

4. People in Poverty, Protagonists of the Church’s Journey

Those in poverty ask the Church for love. By love, they mean respect, acceptance and recognition, without which providing food, money or social services represents forms of support that are certainly important but which do not fully take account of the dignity of the person. Each person needs to be enabled to determine their own means of growth rather than be the object of the welfare action of others. Being afforded recognition and respect are powerful ways of enabling this. (Section 4, (a))

Connect the work of CatholicCare/Centacare to our parishes, schools and local communities. Christ’s mission is lived out through CatholicCare which values children, young people, families and individuals, by walking along side of them.

The possibility of Dioceses becoming **Community Housing Providers** to be explored.

Commentary

CatholicCare Social Services Hunter-Manning is the official social services agency of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. It exists to continue the mission of Christ by providing opportunities for growth, healing, and hope to all people.

CatholicCare Social Services Hunter-Manning listens and responds by working with local communities to build a stronger, fairer, and kinder society that values children, young people, families and individuals. Through Christ's mission it seeks to provide opportunities for people to realise their individual potential.

CatholicCare has several offices across the diocese and provides the following services to anyone who connects and needs assistance:

- Child, Youth and Family Services
- Counselling and Clinical Services
- Alcohol and Other Drugs and Mental Health Support Services
- Domestic and Family Violence Support Services

A significant part of the work done by CatholicCare is supporting children, their families, and foster carers when family connections are fragile, by walking alongside them.

In line with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, the foundation of its work is striving for a world where people are fed, housed, safe, healthy, and happy, and have positive relationships in their community.

Christians have a duty to commit themselves to active participation in building up the common good and defending the dignity of life, drawing inspiration from the Church's social doctrine and working together in various ways, through engagement in civil society organizations, trade unions, popular movements, grassroots associations, in the field of politics, and so forth. The Church is deeply grateful for them. The community has a duty to support those who work in these fields in a genuine spirit of charity and service. Their action is part of the Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel and bring about the coming of the Kingdom of God. (Section 4, (g))

The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle is an active member of the Hunter Community Alliance which brings together diverse community organisations, environmental groups, unions and religious organisations to advance the common good and achieve fair, just and sustainable cities and regions. It does this by providing opportunities for people to have a say in decisions that affect them, their families and everyone working and living in our cities and regions. Its membership represents about 250,000 people in the Hunter region.

Hunter Community Housing is an initiative of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle which supports people across the Hunter who need a home including young people, families and the elderly. It seeks to provide crucial housing and additional support to those most in need.

5. A Church “out of every tribe, tongue, people and nation”

No Responses

6. The Eastern Churches and Latin Church Traditions

No Responses

7. On the Road Towards Christian Unity

We are in an ecumenical Kairos to reaffirm that what unites us is greater than what divides us. (Section 7, (a))

There can be no synodality without an ecumenical dimension (Section 7, (b))

Churches live in increasingly multicultural and multireligious contexts. This necessitates finding ways to create dialogue between religions and cultures, with which Christians should engage alongside the many groups that compose a society. Living the Church's mission in these contexts requires a style of presence, service and proclamation that seeks to build bridges, cultivate mutual understanding and engage in evangelisation that accompanies, listens and learns. In the Assembly the image of "taking off one's shoes" to cross the threshold towards encounter with the other resonated as a sign of humility and respect for a sacred space, on an equal footing. (Section 5, (c))

At every level of church (national, diocesan and local), there is a critical need to have an appropriate body to educate, form, promote, build and sustain ecumenical and interfaith relationships. In our context, this is the **Ecumenical and Interfaith Council**.

Ecumenism. The Church should strive to encourage local action through parish bodies forming long-term relationships with other Christian denominations through shared liturgy and celebrations such as through joint Taizé, Easter celebrations, prayer events, etc, and good works initiatives. This goes beyond 'Ministers Fraternal' meetings and should be initiated through Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs).

Inter-Faith and Secular Activities. Similarly, there should be active encouragement for inter-denominational and inter-faith initiatives through such agencies as Social Justice Ecology and Peace groups, the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC), Spirituality in the Pub and other secular community action groups. These are all mainstream portals to relevance and effective evangelisation.

Gather in solidarity with other Christian denominations and other faith traditions, to witness to faith in our lives.

Continue to be aware of and responsive to community issues (such as international conflicts or social pressures) with the hope of standing in solidarity with other people of faith (and of no faith). Local examples include the Service for Peace and belonging to the Hunter Community Alliance. We need to be mindful of the language that we use when engaging in dialogue outside our own familiar spaces.

Commentary

The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle has had an active Ecumenical and Interfaith Council since the 1992/93 diocesan synod. This Council provides opportunities for gatherings and dialogue not only with other Christian Churches but also with other faith traditions. It is recognised that "faith matters" and what we hold in common is greater than what divides us. The activities of this Council build up harmonious relationships with people of faith and more importantly with the wider community.

Within the Diocese there exists The Hunter Interfaith Network which provides opportunities for leaders of the Abrahamic Faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to gather for dialogue and prayer. Connections are also made with the Hindu, Buddhist, Bahai and Sikh communities.

Local parishes also actively seek to build relationships with their local Christian churches by gathering on significant Christian occasions e.g. the Way of the Cross.

PART 2- ALL DISCIPLES, ALL MISSIONARIES

8. Church is Mission

They are all disciples, all missionaries, in the reciprocal vitality of local communities who experience the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing. The exercise of co-responsibility is essential for synodality and is necessary at all levels of the Church. Each Christian is a mission on this earth. (Section 8, (b))

Recognise that our equality and dignity and giftedness in mission flow from our baptismal call.

The Way Parishes Function. Representatively elected Parish Pastoral Councils (PPC) need to be mandated for all parishes. Informed by regular (3-4 yearly) Parish Assemblies to provide the parish strategic direction, PPCs need actively to lead the development needs and external activities of parishes. This is not the role of the Parish Priest (PP), who is only one member, but never the chair, of the PPC. The role of the PP on the PPC is one of providing spiritual, theological, pastoral, and doctrinal guidance. Parishes need to be led by their PPCs which have a longer and better-informed tenure than priests who are assigned for 6 years or so. PPCs need to function under Synodal/Sociocratic principles.

Local community initiatives that are:

- a. **Informed:** search reports such as findings of the Australian Plenary Council to which so many contributed to submissions. Encourage co-responsibility and not be afraid of talking to people about what we feel is important in our Faith development. Learn about what being Synodal/ Church in Mission means.
- b. **Involved:** reach out, deep listening and respect of similarities and differences amongst community members. Participate in local faith development seasonal groups, organised by the laity.
- c. **Inclusive:** who isn't amongst us? How can we walk with others who may feel isolated? Why do the same people keep turning up to activities, groups etc?
- d. **Imaginative:** with a focus on hospitality, invite clergy to family homes/community gatherings. We discussed how Pope Francis is asking for greater family involvement from clergy to break down what we see as destructive clericalism. Move forward with opportunities of different experiences for prayer/ contemplation in our communities.

Recognise the ways Dioceses are already promoting participation in the mission: CatholicCare Social Service; Parish life; the Hunter Community Alliance; St Vincent de Paul Conferences; Chaplaincy; the Diocesan Councils; Caritas; Catholic Mission; Catholic Health Care; Catholic Hospitals, Catholic Aged Care; our Sustainability Plan; and the LGBTQI Forum.

Recognise the value of our 'Lay Vocation' received through our anointing in Baptism and celebrate the gifts of our missionary disciples and examples of best practice of differentiated responsibility.

Provide opportunities for young people to engage in works that promote the lived expression of Catholic Social Teaching.

Commentary

Many of our parishes have Parish Pastoral Council who act in an advisory role to the parish priest, who is canonically responsible for the parish. In most parishes, decisions are made through a process of discernment involving the voices of the parish.

While Australian life looks secure from those 'looking in', for many this is not the case, as individuals and families struggle to maintain the image that 'all is well'. Consequently, the Diocese through its Parishes and CatholicCare offers a range of programs to support individuals and families who are

struggling. Some of the following programs, mostly provided by volunteers, are available across the diocesan community:

- Community Kitchens which provide food services and support. Almost 1000 meals are served each week across several locations. All are welcome.
- Community Refugee Hub plays an integral role in the settlement of refugees in the Newcastle and Hunter region. The services provided aim to walk with refugees to support and empower them on their journey to independence. It offers language support, pathways to employment, tutoring and men's and women's programs.
- Foster Care Programs support families when they are struggling to manage the demands of caring for their children.
- Counselling Services, through the Rosewood Centre, support people in the community to improve their mental health and wellbeing.
- Social Enterprise currently operates two projects – a commercial cleaning service and a café that also offers catering. It provides opportunities for employment pathways for vulnerable people in our community.
- Pastoral Placement Program offers those who are seeking to explore ministry in the church the opportunity to participate in a year-long formation program which is both experiential and reflective.

These initiatives along with many others are at the service of mission.

9. Women in the Life and Mission of the Church

Our synodal path shows the need for relational renewal and structural changes. In this way we can better welcome the participation and contribution of all – with lay and consecrated women and men, deacons, priests, and bishops – as co-responsible disciples in the work of mission. (Section 9, (g))

Pastoral accompaniment and vigorous advocacy for women should go hand in hand. (Section 9, (c))

ACT – many reports have identified the issues. The time for reports is over and we need to see action.

Hear the voices and experiences of women in all important aspects of Parish, Diocesan and Church Life. Women have a unique perspective that can enrich the life of the Church. Special attention should be paid to hearing their voices while giving consideration to those women who are not seen. Hear what women are saying in their own words, listen to their stories and experiences at every opportunity, including during Mass.

Introduce and adopt inclusive language in liturgical texts and Church. Words, images, and narratives that proclaim the experience of women are simple actions that will enable the development of co-responsibility in mission.

Commit to gender equality in leadership roles in parishes, Dioceses, agencies, and the universal Church. Women's wisdom and unique perspectives provide insights into how we might reimagine mission. Identify the ways and commit to being open, supportive, and champion the place of women in key leadership roles. Proclaim their roles so they may be role models and mentors for future generations. 81% of employees within the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle are women. Whilst they have large representation in managerial roles the key decision-makers are overwhelmingly male, a situation that diminishes the Church.

Promote and support the theological and liturgical formation of women. Identify and address the barriers preventing their participation. Commit to the removal of barriers and put in place structures and processes that help women overcome barriers, thrive, and make a contribution to Church communities. Women need to continue to play a role in the seminary formation of priests.

Acknowledge and celebrate women past, present, and future and communicate their achievements widely. Their key roles include but are not limited to Music Ministry, Welcoming, Eucharistic Ministry, and keeping our churches running, a role that is not always appreciated. These women have specific talents and skills and need to be heard by the Clergy and congregations who rely on them. Where women are employed, just remuneration for their work must be instituted.

Move forward with the introduction of the female diaconate and the ordination of women. Women have equal dignity with men and their intelligence and commitment to ministry should not be underestimated. The time for action and change is now.

Supporting and valuing the role of mothers in the form of mentors/life coaches, building mother's networks for support and faith formation.

- a. The establishment of a mother's voice to be present within parish and diocesan structures, whether through a council or by employing a representative person that will service the needs of mothers and will be an advocate for mother's voices.
- b. That accommodations be made for mothers who wish to work for the church or take up leadership positions within the church.

The existence of gender inequity in the Church and current rules and practices make our female students feel like they cannot be fully involved in the future of the Church because they cannot be in key leadership roles.

Commentary

Since the 1999 Australian Report on the Research Project, *Woman and Man: One in Christ*, and the 1992/93 Diocesan Synod, women have been active participants in the life of the church at parish, diocesan and agency levels. 81% of over 5000 employees in the Diocese, are women, who serve God's mission in our local church.

Key leaders among diocesan staff are mostly men while women form the higher percentage of those who are managers. Given The Trustees are all priests, then our key governing body for all agencies is 100% male. Across the diocese, both women and men are justly remunerated for the roles in which they are employed.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference established the Council for Australian Catholic Women (CACW) in 2002 with our diocese forming a CACW Contacts Group committed to ongoing dialogue regarding the participation of women in the Catholic Church. Since the dissolution of CACW in 2019, a Council for Women was formed in the Diocese to recognise, advocate, and support women and their participation in leadership, decision-making and ministry in the Church. Its vision is to promote a united and inclusive Church that educates, encourages, responds to, and supports all women in nurturing their God-given gifts.

The Diocese has been blessed to have many women from Religious Orders serve in our diocese and parishes. Two religious sisters have served as Chancellor of the Diocese. The Sisters have been a source of inspiration and nourishment.

The Diocese is aware of the ongoing research and conversations occurring in Rome on the diaconate.

10. Consecrated Life and Lay Associations and Movements: a Charismatic Sign

No Responses

11. Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church

In a synodal Church, ordained ministers are called to live their service to the People of God in a disposition of proximity to people, welcoming and listening to all, while cultivating a deep personal spirituality and a life of prayer. (Section 11, (b))

The Role and Responsibilities of the Priest. The role of priests must change radically as must the accountability of PPs, as outlined in the report 'Under The Southern Cross' (2020).

The following specific recommendations are emphasised:

- a. The expectations of leadership and management placed on PPs are simply unrealistic in contemporary society. They should have a clearer definition of their roles and duties, and these should specify that they have just one of many leadership roles in a parish community – that related to the liturgy, sacraments, and doctrinal and theological matters.
- b. The need for the PP to operate within and not outside of the PPC for all other matters.
- c. We question the so-called 'dangers' of sharing ministry with the laity who are being called in this document to recognise and exercise their charism for ministry. We accept the mission imperative of all the Baptised but believe there needs to be more discernment of how they can be best organised and led to proclaim the Gospel.
- d. The priest should be provided with a mentor and a supervisor and there should be a three yearly assessment of the role and performance of the priest in the parish. This should be conducted in conjunction with the PPC and be open to scrutiny by the parish and in accord with the recommendation in Under the Southern Cross Report.
- e. Finally, PPs need to be made accountable to the bishop, in association with the Chairs of PPCs as a shared leadership partnership.

These proposals prescribe a more egalitarian model with a servant leadership based on Sociocratic, synodal principles. These changes will require changes to Canon Law but are essential for effective Church reform.

Implement a Diocesan Commission for Orders and Ministry made up of ordained and laity. Ensure that all clergy participate in continuous development and supervision. These bodies and processes ensure the mentoring, review, professional development, faith and ongoing formation and oversight of those in ministry.

The implementation of Parish Audits on a rotational basis around the bishop's visitation cycle.

Commentary

Like most Australian dioceses, the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle has invited priests from overseas to minister among us. Cultural differences have created some difficulties for the priests from overseas and for the people of the diocese. This has also coincided with the results of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the COVID pandemic and the ongoing reduction in numbers of worshipping Catholics.

To respond to these realities our Diocese has implemented:

- [A Commission for Orders and Ministry made up of ordained and laity](#)
- [Individual and Parish Review Cycle](#)
- [Continuous Professional Development and Supervision](#)

These bodies and processes have been formed to ensure the mentoring, review, professional development, faith and ongoing formation, and oversight of those wishing to minister in the Diocese and those who are already in ministry.

Those who are ordained to the Permanent Diaconate in the Diocese are appointed to serve in specific ministries across the diocese e.g. prison chaplaincy, university chaplaincy, while being available to assist in parishes.

The Diocese is exploring introducing Parish Audits on a rotational basis based around the bishop's visitation cycle.

12. The Bishop in Ecclesial Communion

The bishop is, in his Church, the one primarily responsible for proclaiming the Gospel and for the liturgy. He guides the Christian community and promotes pastoral care of those experiencing poverty and defence of the most vulnerable. As the visible principle of unity, he has, in particular, the task of discerning and coordinating the different charisms and ministries sent forth by the Spirit for the proclamation of the Gospel and the common good of the community. This ministry is realized in a synodal manner when governance is accompanied by co-responsibility, preaching by listening to the faithful People of God, and sanctification and celebration of the liturgy by humility and conversion. (Section 12, (b))

The "one" Episcopal ministry values the participation of "all" the faithful, through the contribution of "some" who are more directly involved in discernment and decision-making processes.The bishop is called to be an example of synodality for all. (Section 12, (c))

A culture of accountability is an integral part of a synodal Church that promotes co-responsibility, as well as safeguarding against abuses. (Section 12, (j))

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The Way Bishops Function. Similar to Parish Priests, the hierarchical imperatives of the Church place impossible burdens of leadership on bishops. The limitations of their leadership role should also be recognised. Many are called to lead and be responsible for large business organisation, to be expert in governance, management, and human resources. They too should be required by Canon Law to form Diocesan Pastoral Councils with appropriate lay, clerical, and religious representation that provide a joint, co-responsible leadership forum for each diocese. While these are occasionally in place, they may not operate on true synodal principles. Pope Francis is asking for a Synodal Council to be established in every diocese. Bishops need to be servant leaders who empower and trust others who are appointed for their skills and capabilities. For larger diocese that may require several circles of leadership forums to advise such a council. This should allow bishops to focus more effectively on providing clear objectives and goals for the diocese to be implemented over a period of six years and then evaluated. Bishops also need to be leader-facilitators and moderators for parish leadership and to monitor the welfare and performance of the faithful.

Revision of the Canons so that better processes for dioceses are employed during an **interregnum**. Our own synodal systems and processes needed to cease for a significant period of time when our bishop passed away.

Commentary

In May of 2017, our then Bishop, William Wright, met with his diocesan senior leaders, a mix of clergy and lay people, in an attempt to review diocesan structures and governance. A process known as Many Parts. One Body. One Mission. emerged from that meeting so as to have a constant orientation towards mission. This change process began and continues to be imagined and re-imagined so that those who accept roles of leadership are also aware of their co-responsibility for mission.

The aim of this process was to bring to together the parishes and agencies of the diocese to better serve each other and the community.

Bishop Wright died in November of 2021 and Bishop Michael Kennedy was installed into the Diocese in March of 2023. Significant processes associated with the diocesan synod and the Many Parts. One Body. One Mission. stalled during the interregnum and this proved to be a difficult period for the diocesan community.

The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle is one of just a few dioceses across Australia that has had a Diocesan Pastoral Council or equivalent body functioning since the 1992/93 Synod.

13. The Bishop of Rome in the College of Bishops

No Responses

PART 3 – WEAVING BONDS, BUILDING COMMUNITIES

14. A Synodal Approach to Formation

Every baptised person is called to take care of their own formation as a response to the gifts of the Lord, making use of the talents they have received in order that they bear fruit and put them at the service of all. The time the Lord has dedicated to the formation of His disciples reveals the importance of this ecclesial formation. (Section 14, (a))

Formation for a synodal Church needs to be undertaken synodally: the entire People of God being formed together as they journey together. There is a need to overcome the 'delegation' mindset found in so many areas of pastoral ministry. Formation in a synodal key is meant to enable the People of God to live out their baptismal vocation fully, in the family, in the workplace, in ecclesial, social, and intellectual spheres. It is meant to enable each person to participate actively in the Church's mission according to his or her own charisms and vocation. (Section 14, (f))

Formation of Lay and Clergy. Statements on the need for the formation of the laity and clergy are strongly endorsed. Vitally, a more sophisticated understanding of Scripture and our evangelical mission needs to be broadly addressed. The simplistic, even fundamentalist understanding of Scripture by a majority of the faithful, forms a major impediment to evangelisation. Lay resources available to address this need to be recognised. Current research demonstrates that 60% of those with theology degrees in Australia are not members of the clergy. There are sometimes members of a congregation who have had more developed scriptural and theological qualifications than the clergy.

Appointment of Foreign Clergy. The statement on the importance of *'seminaries and other programmes of priestly formation remain connected to the daily life of the community'* points to another vital reform. It sits at odds with the widespread practice of importing priests from foreign cultures. It requires instead a recognition that we are long past the colonial era when this approach worked and that priests must now be 'grown' from the communities and cultures they will ultimately serve. Overseas trained priests need formal intercultural training such as is provided by the Columban Fathers who send Australian and others to work in "mission" countries. The question of why Australian men do not want to be priests probably needs to be researched.

Need for a More Mystical Church. While there is much emphasis in the report on liturgy, nothing is said about the arguably greater need for ours to return to becoming a mystical faith – one that encourages a continuous spiritual growth towards an intimate connection to Christ. A more sophisticated faith that stresses a deeper understanding and love of God at an intimate level and the importance of connection with all of Creation. Pope Francis, tapping into the spirit of the age, has invited theologians to work on developing a theology for the 21st century which takes into account scientific advances, the impact of Quantum Physics, and our management of our environment woven into our spirituality.

That 'Theology of the Body' be promoted within schools, parishes, teacher formation, mother's circles to acknowledge the unique and yet complimentary roles that males and females have been given by God.

Ongoing opportunities for faith formation:

- a. The significant need for formation for parish communities on identifying gifts and calling people to share those gifts. This may also form part of the RCIA journey. Communities also need pathways to allow those called by the Spirit to grow in their vocation/participation/leadership.
- b. The significant need for formation around Catholic Social Teaching and what that means for the baptised. This awareness is not just to be shared with communities but also learning is required by our leaders and decision makers.

- c. Consider how we form the conscience of people particularly about social justice and missionary discipleship.
- d. Provide leaders and communities with formation and support so they can engage in outreach activities.
- e. Provide formation opportunities for lay preachers and women deacons.
- f. Introduce formation programs for growing intentional missionary disciples (particularly young people)

Commentary

Workers for the Harvest, a diocesan report, invited the diocesan community to explore inviting priests from overseas to mission and serve among us. Since then, several priests have come to diocese with open hearts and hands to explore their ministry here. Over the years, various programs have been explored to assist with their inculturation. We are grateful for their courage to leave their homes and to persist God's love.

Faith Development as a Life-Long Process is one of the ten theological principles of the diocesan 1992/93 Synod. By 1994 the Lochinvar Sisters of St Joseph formed the Tenison Woods Education Centre (TWEC) as a response to the synod and the need for ongoing formation for all:

Formation is not the privilege of a few but the right and duty of all.... Possibilities of formation should be proposed to all, especially the poor who can be a source of formation for all. (Christifideles Laci, 1988)

Since 1994, formation for all in the diocese has been offered, as part of the Christian Formation Course along with many Taste and See opportunities across parishes. To accompany this journey, a Faith Formation Council was formed to explore further opportunities for all to grow in their faith. After almost 25 years of commitment to this ministry, when the Sisters could no longer continue to resource it, the Diocese established and staffed a Formation and Education Office which now provides many faith formation, education, spiritual and development opportunities for the people of the diocese. Many lay people are engaged in providing and participating in these programs.

We now have a Diocesan Resource Centre which includes a Diocesan Library, by bringing together the many previously fragmented resources.

A College of Assistant Masters of Ceremony made up of commissioned lay men and women has been created to assist the bishop and the liturgical life of the diocese.

15. Ecclesial Discernment and Open Questions

No Responses

16. Towards a Listening and Accompanying Church

Being deeply listened to is an experience of affirmation and recognition of dignity, and is a powerful way of engaging people and communities. (Section 16, (b))

It opens the possibility of listening to the voice of the Spirit of God that speaks to those beyond the borders of the ecclesial community, and can initiate a journey of change and conversion. (Section 16, (c))

Authentic listening is a fundamental element of the path to healing, repentance, justice and reconciliation. (Section 16, (f))

Adopt and embed spiritual conversations as the preferred method for parishes, Dioceses, and agencies as the way of engaging with each other. This should not be restricted to pastoral and liturgical matters, but also include financial and property matters. (as was witnessed in the Plenary Council).

Establish Small Christian Communities in local communities which provide spaces where people can talk with and not be talked at or about. These groups may provide ‘seeds for renewal’ for our ecclesial life.

A Listening Community:

- a. Open the doors for greater participation or relational renewal for all – laity, priests, bishops, religious.
- b. Existing leaders of the Church need to come to where the people at- in places like schools- (and not wait for the priest to come to the Church)- to listen to the lived-realities of the people connected to their Church, but not necessarily engaged and, have this influence and inform how they do things.

Engagement with young people:

- a. Provide financial incentive for any parish that wants to create a space for young people.
- b. Parishes to host a ‘reflective dialogue’ (perhaps using this synodal tool) to listen to the voices of young people.
- c. Provide intergenerational experiences where young people are invited to participate as members of the whole community. Maintain our ‘mountain top’ experiences, for example, World Youth Day and the Australian Catholic Youth Festival.
- d. Consider a local annual event – festival, retreat, or day out for young people.
- e. Organise and run retreats and reflection days to offer opportunity for youth – short in length/run by dedicated diocesan personnel employed for this purpose.

Listening to the voices of our young people:

- a. The Church needs to ensure that its entire entity and activity (mission) is known to the community. This should be possible in a structure which has a school system like the one which is in Australia. It is a very important part of the engagement process for young people. This would include more effective sharing across the Diocese of functions and activities that prove to be effective, e.g., youth groups.
- b. Everyone in the Church should have a place and it should be more open. One way of doing this would be to spend less time doing everything in established buildings like churches and use parks and other facilities.
- c. The length of Mass and structure should be considered. There is a need to analyse whether this is still likely to engage people in the future. While accepting the basic doctrinal aspects of it, there may be ways of making it more community oriented. Certainly, there are simple things like selecting songs that are easier for people to sing.
- d. The message of the Church needs to be clarified around inclusion. It is true that God created female and male in God’s likeness, but this statement is not meant to be exclusive of anyone. More communication needs to be put into the process, to ensure that the message is clear.
- e. The Church should revisit the stories of Jesus and ensure that they are understood in the modern context. Life was greatly different in the time of Jesus and if the stories are not rewritten in a way more suitable to current thinking, young people will not engage with them.

The voice of LGBTIQ Community:

- a. That the Church use the term LGBTIQ in documents that are for and/or about the whole People of God.
- b. That each Diocese foster a LGBTIQ pastoral ministry to accompany and nourish LGBTIQ people

and their families, friends and supporters. That Church Leaders, especially homilists, promote a culture of openness, change and accommodation to establish the conditions for welcoming different people in the Church.

- c. That the Church provide formation, support and delegated authority to enable local communities and interest groups to actively engage in pastoral ministry within and beyond the Catholic Church
- d. That each Diocese engage with their LGBTIQ Catholics to organise suitable liturgical celebrations.

Commentary

The Listening Assemblies provide by our own Synod processes, the Plenary Council and the Synod on Synodality have provided the people of the diocese with a way to listen to the voice of the Spirit.

The people of the diocese have found the beauty and joy in using the processes involved in Mystagogical Reflection as a way of listening to each other and to the Spirit.

Many Parish and Diocesan Assemblies have taken place over the past 30 years and once again these processes have involved deep listening, discernment and collaboration. We have tried to be a church which accompanies and walks with others.

True to God's mission as lived out in the person of Jesus Christ, we accompany those who are sick in hospitals and aged care facilities, those who are in prison and the seafarers who come to our port. These works of mercy are gratefully received by many who feel abandoned and invisible.

We actively seek to fulfil the ministry of listening and accompaniment in our diocese and parishes.

Accompaniment takes place across our 58 schools to the more than 21000 students and their families every day.

In recent years a LGBTIQ Catholic Forum has been established in the diocese.

We are presently exploring a Neighbourhood Companions Program in our parishes to reach out to those who are housebound and in aged-care facilities.

St Vincent de Paul, Caritas and Catholic Mission are well supported by our diocesan community.

In 2006 the Diocese established the Diocesan Child Protection and Professional Conduct Unit which has now become the Office of Safeguarding. As part of this move towards ensuring children and vulnerable people are safe, the Diocese has a Healing and Support Unit (Zimmerman Service) which accompanies and provides support and assistance to Survivors and their families impacted by child sexual abuse.

The Year in Review provides the diocesan community with a report on the many good works of the diocese throughout the year.

17. Mission in the Digital Environment

Digital culture represents a fundamental change in the way we conceive of reality and consequently relate to ourselves, one another, our surroundings, and even to God. The digital environment changes our learning processes as well as our perception of time, space, our bodies, interpersonal relationships and, indeed, much of our way of thinking. The dualism between real and virtual does not adequately describe the reality and experience of people, especially the youngest, the so-called "digital natives." (Section 17, (a))

Promoting the Digital Culture for Communication. We now find ourselves in an institution that much of society and an increasing number of Catholics see as irrelevant for our times. It fails to

attract young people and those on the fringes of our society for whom Christ had special concern. While not the cure for the problem, the communication of any reformed agenda will need to be savvy in use of the digital culture to predominate our evangelising communication if we are to compete with secular influences. It needs to be more than a peripheral add-on to our communication modus operandi.

Grow/engage missionary **social media/internet influencers**.

Look more closely at how **social media may play a role in engaging young people**.

Commentary

The Diocese has a large and experienced Communications Team who provide communications assistance to the Bishop's Office, Pastoral Ministries, and Diocesan Agencies, so that the good works of the Church are promoted across the diocese and wider community. This is done digitally, in print and through social media channels.

18. Structures for Participation

As members of the faithful People of God, all the baptised are co-responsible for mission, each according to his or her vocation, competence and experience. Therefore, all contribute to imagining and discerning steps to reform Christian communities and the Church as a whole. In this way, the Church experiences "the sweet and comforting joy of evangelising." The purpose of synodality, in the composition and functioning of the bodies in which it takes shape, is mission. Co-responsibility is for mission: this attests that we are truly gathered in the name of Jesus, this frees the bodies of participation from bureaucratic limitations and worldly logics of power, and makes gathering fruitful. (Section 18, (a))

Appropriate governance processes be explored for canonical, pastoral, safeguarding and civil governance at the service of the diocesan and wider community.

Formation for synodal governance be provided for church leaders and communities so as to embed its practice at all levels across the diocese.

That **canon law be amended** to ensure that Catholics have recourse to accessible and effective appeal processes when they believe that Church leaders have not behaved in a synodal manner.

Empower the laity to help in the role of decision-making.

Commentary

The ongoing review of diocesan structures of participation has been built around the Congregation for Bishops, Directory of The Pastoral Ministry of Bishops, "*Apostolorum Successores*", 2004.

Over several years the diocese has been attempting to imagine the place of both pastoral and civil governance structures at the service of the diocesan and wider community.

The following initiatives have been key to improving our pastoral and governance structures:

The Diocesan Synod – this was covered in Section 1 on Synodality

The Diocesan Curia – Over the past six years we have been growing a deeper sense of identity in the diocese, especially by those who serve the parishes and wider communities. The following structures make up the Diocesan Curia:

- The Catholic Schools Office
- CatholicCare Social Services
- St Nicholas Early Education
- The Office of Safeguarding

- Catholic Community Fund
- Hunter Community Housing
- The Bishop's Offices including the Bishop's Office and Pastoral Ministries
 - Vicars General
 - Chancellor
 - Diocesan Tribunal Office
 - Office of Safeguarding
- Shared Services
 - Communications & Marketing
 - Data & Analytics
 - Enterprise Portfolio Management
 - Finance
 - Governance
 - People & Culture
 - Property
 - Technology Services

Diocesan Councils

- Council of Priests (Presbyteral Council)
- The College of Consultors
- Diocesan Pastoral Council/Council for Mission
- Diocesan Protection and Safety Council
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Ministry Council
- Council for Women
- Diocesan Council for Ministry with Young People
- Ecumenical & Interfaith Council
- Faith Formation Council
- Liturgy Council
- Social Justice Council

The Bishop, Administrator of the Ecclesiastical Good of the Diocese

- The Diocesan Advisory Board (The Diocesan Finance Council) and the Finance Officer
- The Diocesan Leadership Group (DLG) provides support to the bishop in the strategic and operational elements of diocesan life.

19. Groupings of Churches within the Communion of the Whole Church

No Responses

20. The Synod of Bishops and Ecclesial Assemblies

No Responses

