



Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes Synod Testimony 2024



The Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes was so named in 1917, taking in the Diocese of Wilcannia and six extra parishes. It covers western, central and south-western areas of New South Wales, and is the largest geographical diocese in this Australian state, 414,398 sq km. According to the 2021 Census, of a general population of 105,894 people, there are 25,271 Catholics. These are spread across towns, stations, outback communities and one remote city (Broken Hill). There are 21 parishes administered by 16 priests, with 18 diocesan Catholic primary schools, 1 Catholic secondary school, 12 CatholicCare offices, as well as branches/groups of other Catholic agencies and private organisations.

Bishop Columba Macbeth-Green was born in Forbes and ordained as Bishop in 2014, currently residing in both Forbes and Broken Hill (over 800kms apart). He says, “The Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes is a unique Diocese full of strong, faith-filled people from all walks of life. The people of the bush in my Diocese have much to offer, particularly in terms of their faith. Generally, this faith has been formed by tough times and a tough environment and manifests itself through resilience, good humour, and a ‘down to earth’ spirituality. Theirs is a faith that has endured unique challenges and their insights concerning Catholic life are precious and of great value to me.” (www.wf.catholic.org.au/bishop/bishops-welcome/)

The Diocese became involved in systematic synodal processes through the Plenary Council, concluding in Australia in 2022. There were a number of parish, inter-parish, school, Catholic agency and other groups who participated in ‘conversations in the spirit’ in order to contribute to the ‘Listening and Dialogue’ and ‘Listening and Discernment’ phases. Local resources were created, such as clergy reflections and youth interpretations of the National Themes. In 2020, Bishop Columba established a Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) to “collaborate with the Holy Spirit to aid the Bishop with the pastoral governance of the Church.” (DPC Statutes)

This Council has produced a Vision and Mission for the Diocese, and worked through the Plenary Council decrees as a basis for local action. A key part of that has been to support the clergy and the Parish Pastoral Councils in mission with all the people of God. So the Synod Consultation has been an important step in a much longer synodal journey. Synodal consultation discussions were conducted for both the 2023 and 2024 Synods. In 2024, they built on acquired discernment skills and targeted key diocesan groups, as well as allowing for anyone to be involved through local groups or online diocesan gatherings.

A request was to make the Synod Consultation process simple, with clear language. So the given questions were modified to:

- How can all people in our Church better work together to strengthen our mission?
- What structures and processes do/can make this possible?
- What roles and groups can be renewed or started to enable this?

A modified slideshow was then used by groups to use in their consultation gatherings.

The Vicar for Clergy coordinated the synod consultation among the priests, which was done by deanery to ensure maximum participation in a natural and smaller gathering. This was a significant step forward from previous clergy involvement in Plenary Council and Synod consultations. The DPC provided avenues for consultation with the Catholic Education Office (CEO) and CatholicCare (CC). However, other major Catholic agencies and organisations were not able to participate due to the short timeframe.

The information and invitation to be involved were put out through the regular diocesan communication channels, which resulted in one parish group, a diocesan Lenten group, Catalyst for Renewal (CfR) and two diocesan Synod-specific Zoom opportunities. Two submissions (Lenten and CfR) included participants from other dioceses. Most groups were small (3-8 people), and included clergy, laity and religious. No participants were under 18, and there were a number of cultural backgrounds, especially amongst the clergy. For greater transparency, the draft of the Summary was sent to all participating groups as well as the Diocesan Pastoral Council before submission to the national process.

A highlight in all these processes has been a sense of ownership and co-responsibility in God's mission, through the Church established by Jesus Christ and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Individuals have felt listened to, connected to the wider Church and valued in living out their lives of faith. There has been, and continues to be, a suggestion that lay people have not been listened to enough, and that developing these channels of communication and participation are extremely important.

At the same time, in the most recent Synod Consultation, there was an increased participation by clergy, mostly within deanery groups. Many of the sentiments expressed in the clergy contributions were mirrored in the lay contributions, with both asking for more opportunities to build relationships with each other. A number of the Key Points made in the Summary were calls not just to the Synod, but to the Local Church. The DPC is working on these, and encouraging other groups and strategies such as a future Diocesan Synod.

Testimony prepared by: DPC chair, Louise Cormie, and secretary, Elizabeth Young RSM, April 2024.