

Synod Consultation Summary 2024: Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes

Part 1: The Consultation Process

The Synod consultation was an important step in a much longer synodal journey. The Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes, led by Bishop Columba Macbeth-Green, has been developing mechanisms for co-responsibility in the mission of all the members of the People of God. Although there was only a short timeframe for this consultation, there were several good synodal discussions, resulting in 10 submissions. The process began by consultation with the Vicar General for the clergy and the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) for the broader faithful.

An early request was to make the Synod Consultation process simple, with clear language. So the 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 sent out for 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 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 this Summary was sent to all participating groups as well as the Diocesan Pastoral Council before submission to the national process.

The Chapters of the Synthesis that were chosen for the submission:

- Chapters 8 and 9: CEO
- Chapter 11: Priests in deaneries (x3)
- Chapter 16: Diocesan Zooms (x2), Lenten, CC
- Across Synthesis: Parish, CfR

Part 2: Key Points: Calls to the Synod and us, the Local Church

- 1. Let us all develop our understanding of, and contribute to, the Church's mission.**
- 2. Let us value our equality in Baptism, and find ways to recognise and nurture our God-given gifts and talents for ministry and leadership, including women and men.**
- 3. Let us update governance models to allow co-responsibility, accountability and transparency, with participation in decision-making and a healthy culture of synodality and mutual relationships.**
- 4. Let us intentionally welcome, involve and reach out to people on the margins and of various ages, cultures and family structures, nourishing the wider community with our service.**
- 5. Let us find better ways to communicate between different groupings in the Church and come together for cross-fertilisation of ideas.**
- 6. Let us create opportunities for spiritual enrichment, learning, commitment and Christian togetherness to support each other in faith, prayer and community.**

Part 3: Summary of Submissions

- **Mission**

Several groups discussed the question, "How can we be a synodal Church in mission?" in depth and wanted to see "a better understanding of our mission as Catholics." This included highlighting the Kingdom of God and "A greater awareness of today's world...a church for a new era in dialogue with the gospel of Jesus Christ." One submission called for "moving/transitioning from a maintenance church to a missionary church."

A group mentioned that many do not understand our mission, but "If we have a clear focus and understanding, then we will be better placed to act on it, especially in an increasingly secular world." Another group explained that "we need to come to a common understanding [of the Church's mission] and be equally involved in it. We all have something to contribute and a responsibility in this." Another group called for "Active interactions between parishes and all schools to align in mission".

- **Called from Baptism: Gifts and Talents, Ministry and Leadership Roles**

All the submissions spoke in some way to “our equality and dignity and giftedness in mission flow[ing] from our baptismal call.” This starts from the “rewarding” preparation for Baptism, in which those involved “learn as much as they teach – witnessing how the Holy Spirit is moving in people’s lives.” Also “Identifying cultural difference as a basis for learning and aligning similarities and accepting the unique differences.”

We “all have a vocation through baptism” and something to offer. Submissions called us to value and nurture our gifts and talents, with appointments and recognition, including strategies of commissionings and formal thank yous. This includes those exercising their gifts beyond the parish church - for example, in Catholic schools. We can better distribute roles according to abilities and “give people opportunities to participate that don’t put pressure on them.” This can start with a tick-form, but people must be followed up and supported. Sacraments are also an opportunity for commitment - from families and those making their own commitment in Confirmation.

Suggestions for more ministry involvement from one deanery included liturgical music, readers, “reflections of the word of God in some occasions”, chaplaincy, sacristy duties and legal experts. Other submissions called for lay preachers and expanding roles for lay people such as permanent Catechists, Acolytes, outreach leaders and leaders of other church usage. Two submissions mentioned female as well as male deacons and two more further leadership roles for women; “Limitations of individual aspirations within an organisation should not be restricted by man-made outdated laws that do not meet the needs of our society.”

- **Structures of Decision-Making, Review, Accountability and Ecclesial Relationships**

All submissions contained (particularly strongly from two deaneries) the notion of the need for reform in terms of avoiding clericalism and outdated governance models, proposing instead the revival of essential parish and diocesan synodal groups and processes, placing value on “the Church expressing unity in diversity - that we don’t all think the same, but can come together and listen to each other synodally”. For the body of Christ to strive to meet people where they are at and embrace “less judgment and more inclusion”.

One benefit was stated as being that smaller leadership groups could provide sustained encouragement to remain steadfast in mission and continually improve. One parish submission rejoiced “that we have many of the foundations of co-responsibility in a missionary church.” There was also a strong desire for accountability, appraisals and transparency.

Both laity and priest contributions proffered the importance of making decisions together. That participation in Councils, committees and various lay ministries instills a “sense of ownership and contribution [that] resonates with an individual’s sense of purpose and acts of faith. People responding to the notion they are permitted to participate in decision-making”. Existing bodies (such as Parish Councils) need to be revived and supported.

Ideas for greater accountability included finances, in order to encourage greater contribution; priest submissions welcomed the increased focus in our Diocese of engaging in professional supervision; one submission mentioned performance reviews.

One deanery commented “synodality is what it is all about. All supporting each other”. That the Church can “work as family of God, modelled on the Blessed Trinity” with priests celebrating sacraments, and with laity and religious supporting all other various ministries. Another deanery said: “To let God take control in the parishes, and priests do their part.” It highlighted priests’ needs to be holy and faithful to their vocations.

Five submissions contained suggestions for improving relationships between our clergy and laity, in what was termed “relational renewal”. It was expressed that “Lay people would like to be listened to more, and to participate more in co-responsibility with the clergy.” Another submission emphasised that such reform cannot happen without the participation of priests and bishops. This requires organised engagement; “We yearn for more authentic ways of being human together.”

One submission called for building healthy cultures, which includes seminaries. A strategy is for “a high level of the Church to name the unhealthy cultures and work on change management to create the culture that we wish to see.” It suggested that “Laity also need to listen to clergy about their experience and cultures. Deaneries to communicate with the laity the struggles and difficulties they have, and why they do what they do.”

Two deanery submissions talked about the “family of God” and the need for Christian communities to “support their priests with prayer, friendship and collaboration” to ameliorate loneliness and isolation. Simple strategies were suggested for mutual support.

- **Welcoming, Outreach and Involvement of People on the Margins, Various Ages and Family Structures**

Most of the submissions made several suggestions for becoming a more welcoming and inclusive Church, where more “feel a sense of belonging within our Catholic Faith community.” This could be through a hospitality group and formal ministries/processes for welcoming new people at Mass. One submission mentioned “appreciation of the Third Rite of Reconciliation when it was offered, as a positive way of receiving this sacrament.” Another spoke of inviting all to Mass, valuing diverse backgrounds and encouraging younger people. “How do we access and tap into, value, utilise and nurture skills and contributions of those who are available and seeking a place of belonging”?

In one submission there was “Clarification sought about Church position on relationship statuses.” Where there are many varied family structures, “misinformation and misunderstanding of Church teachings leads to people self-excluding.” While there was support to “protect the family unit”, there are “heart-wrenching experiences” that lead to relationship breakdowns. Such people need support, options, welcome and overcoming of myths.

Several submissions mentioned variations of ‘small Christian communities’ as a return to models from the early Church, where “Christians practised ‘the Breaking of the Bread and the prayers’, proclamation and witness, and works of charity.” These were seen as enriching spaces for conversation and sharing of life.

Beyond those attending liturgies, there are ways for people to better “own their membership of the Church.” Another submission said, “There is a continuum from being welcoming and accepting of all and the greater commitment and responsibility of a smaller group (eg. Jesus’ disciples).”

A deanery submission noted that we live in “small, struggling and ageing communities”, where there is less church engagement, even with the schools. Rather, it suggested that clergy go out to meet people in the community where they are; “Living in proximity to the people, be welcoming, cultivating a life of prayer” and welcoming new people to town. Another deanery submission reiterated, “The priests need to be seen visible by the people...become more proactive, visit the people in their homes if possible, going to the level of the people.”

Three submissions called for being proactive about ecumenism and interfaith activities, such as World Day of Prayer and Stations of the Cross. Another said, “Parishes should outreach beyond the church, and use parish resources and venues for those who are struggling.” One submission spoke of the value of ministry with elderly/shut-ins. It asked how to increase this ministry and

find ways to involve such people, especially appreciating their “rich prayer life contribution.” Young people could also be involved and service works are “often appealing to the young.” For all ages, engaging in praxis “in and within the Church...allows them to feel nourished by their actions.”

- **Communication and Transparency**

Five submissions stated and clearly elaborated on a need “to find better ways to communicate.” The “lack of communication is a problem, at smaller parish level and also the macro level.” Some good practices were mentioned, such as the DPC, diocesan Facebook/website and parish bi-annual newsletters, but much activity “appears to be in silos” and could be shared better. “We want to know the good things that are happening in other parishes for cross-fertilisation.”

Some suggestions included:

- Diocesan magazines
- “Diocesan email going out to a bigger list (advertise in bulletins, could include a digest of diocesan Facebook posts)”
- Better use of diocesan/parish websites (including sharing links to good Christian resources and inspiring podcasts/movies), Zoom opportunities, a portal
- “We would like to see a Diocesan Synod/Assembly/Conference to share the mission with each other and feed off the richness of good ideas” (repeated in another submission)
- Follow-up and communicating what is happening from parish/diocesan groups, surveys, structures and Councils
- Listening to, and sharing from, the church ministries and organisations that are attending to the cries of the poor and marginalised; “How are the workings of the Holy Spirit and precious insight and information about the reality and needs of society fed back into the church for understanding, analysis and prayer?”
- Mechanisms to capture the learnings/insights from such groups “to understand societal trends and accompany where people are actually at, in order to find ways to evangelise”
- At a national level, “is there an Australian Catholic Centre of sociology?”

- **Formation and Catechesis**

Clarity of our calling and Mission overlapped with one submission stating “There was also a difficulty expressed with the term ‘formation’. Not only those in leadership roles have the answers, but lay people have much to offer - wherever two or three are gathered, Christ is present”. A deanery also stated, “Catechesis to be a shared job” between parishioners, priests and teachers.

Several submissions called for an increase in spiritual enrichment opportunities for adults. Positive evangelising tool examples included ALPHA, Catholic Adult Faith Education (CAFÉ), RCIA, Bible Study, Spirituality in the Pub, Catholics Come Home and devotions such as Eucharistic Adoration, with additional comments around these working best when a form of hospitality is incorporated. Another submission suggested one-day retreats, family groups, and “study of Vatican II documents”. Another; “We should hear more/do more about Catholic social justice principles and applications.”

Greater opportunities for significant catechesis was a common theme, that there is a clear need to require more substantial preparation of parents and children for sacraments: “It does take responsibility and commitment to be a Catholic, it is not always easy and involves more preparation and liturgical attendance”. To highlight the abundant grace offered to all through having a personal daily relationship with Christ. One submission called for seminary training “to include theology *for a new era*, the social sciences, and remain connected to the daily life of communities.”

A couple of submissions noted the importance of trying multiple ways of fostering Christian togetherness in faith and support of each other, with a “need for a church that is in dialogue with the gospel of Jesus Christ and has a deeper understanding of the modern world”. Sentiments included the support and connectedness that is felt in basic ecclesiastical small communities; that “we can’t recognise ourselves in the words of the church. Many of us find enrichment in small Christian communities that are based in real, lived experience”. Others called for both small groups and “a diocesan formation team”. A deanery submission suggested: “Bring back the natural religiosity to the community, regular hearing of confessions, daily rosary, Holy Hour even if there is no-one there.”

Submissions spoke of the importance of the formation and culture of synodality. “For this task... we all need to be formed and learn to pray more deeply. We will need to walk the path of Christ more bravely than we have. We may need to experiment in the ways that we come together as Christian communities to nourish our faith and support each other...we recognise our need for lifelong learning and the courage to fully incorporate this fundamental call.”

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