Outback diocese sows the seeds of a 'Harvest of Hope'

Better communication, open books, stronger school-parish ties and a fresh push for young people and vocations are among the twelve recommendations put to Bishop Columba Macbeth-Green by the Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes Synod.

Meeting from 30 September to 2 October under the banner *Harvest of Hope*, Synod members voted on four priorities that together point to one goal: spiritual renewal across one of Australia's largest and most remote dioceses. Every recommendation passed with at least a two-thirds majority.

The Synod opened with a Welcome to Country from the local Catholic Wiradjuri community, followed by an Opening Mass celebrated by Bishop Macbeth-Green. 81 Members then spent three days in prayer and small-group discernment before casting their votes.

Honest listening

The recommendations grew out of months of consultation from surveys and deanery gatherings. People were asked a simple question, such as, "In your experience of Catholic life, what brings you joy?" The answers were full of faith and community. But the listening also brought hard truths to the surface, including fears of spiritual crisis, isolation and voicelessness, concerns about the Church's relevance and public face, and whether in 10 years, they would survive or thrive. The Synod report is frank that the gathering "does not solve all problems", describing it instead as one step on a longer journey.

Workers in God's paddock

Fittingly for a diocese of farms and vast country, the Synod drew on the language of the land. Its report recalls St Paul's words that some plant and others water, but God gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6-7), and calls every Catholic to take their part as a worker "in God's paddock". Each priority carries its own farming image.

Between the Branches and the Roots: Communications, Finance and Governance. Members asked the diocese to invest in communications staff and media as a ministry in its own right, so regular news reaches every corner of the diocese. They also called for open financial reporting at diocesan and parish level, with parishioners treated as genuine stakeholders, and for pastoral councils to be strengthened.

Watering the Crop: Catholic Education, School/Parish and Formation. The Catholic Education Office, Red Bend Catholic College and parishes are asked to do more to support teachers as witnesses of faith. Schools and parishes are urged to work together regularly as one community forming the next generation, and the diocese to make faith formation accessible to all.

Producing Fruit: Outreach, Mission and Valuing Cultures. Members called for new ways to serve those who are suffering, a formal and ongoing partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and a real voice for the diocese's cultural communities in parish and diocesan life.

Replenishing the Soil: Youth, Vocations and Co-Responsibility. The final priority looks to the future: reigniting youth ministry, equipping every parish and school to invite and accompany people with gifts for ordained and lay ministry, and forming clergy and lay people alike to share responsibility at every level of Church life.

What comes next

Diocesan and parish councils have already started assessing how the recommendations could be put into practice. That work will now be shaped into Action Plans, while Bishop Macbeth-Green will discern the Decrees and Declarations that flow from the Synod.

The diocese has entrusted the road ahead to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and asks the wider Church to keep its people in prayer.