

Summary Report of the 2024 Adelaide Diocesan Assembly

This report is a synthesis of the notes recorded in the spiritual conversations held at the Diocesan Assembly 2024. Where possible comments have been assigned to what appears to be the most appropriate of the themes for each discernment question to avoid duplication. However, some responses apply to more than one topic and are repeated where this adds significant emphasis.

Discernment Round 1

Q1. What does a synodal Church on mission look and feel like?

1.1 Qualities of a Synodal Church

A Synodal Church is welcoming and inclusive, generating a sense of belonging and being known and loved. Such a church would be free from fear and judgement. It would also accept diversity and understand the needs of those living with specific disabilities.

There would be opportunities for practical vibrant participation, recognising that everyone has something to give. The Church will be supportive and empowering of local change.

A Synodal Church is a place where there is a spirit of learning and growth that is open to challenge and change. We recognise that the traditional models of church are 'not hitting the mark' for many people. How flexible can we be and still be true to Church teaching? This was a discussion that highlighted different approaches and will require respectful dialogue.

The dignity of all people means that all voices are seen as equal. A consultative church is called to listen to and hear the cry of the poor, marginalised and suffering people. We are called to have special care for refugees, homeless people and First Nations people. We must honestly ask ourselves how open we are to those outside our walls.

All members of the church share responsibility for each other and the mission of the church. We can invite people to events and activities associated with our Church communities without insisting they attend Mass. This may, or may not, come later.

A synodal church collaborates with other faiths. It is open to sharing with and learning from others. Offering hospitality creates opportunities for building connections.

A Synodal Church is life-giving, vibrant, joyful, and active. It will be a place that people are drawn to because we are joy-filled and alive. It is a place of outreach and formation that looks and feels messy. Children are obviously welcomed, and their families made to feel at home. A Synodal church is a collection of communities that fosters faith relationships through inspiring people not imposing our beliefs.

Such a church would be authentic and vulnerable. At the heart of such a church Eucharistic celebration would be joyful, inclusive, relevant and nurturing.

1.2 Processes for Building a Synodal Church

A very strong theme was the centrality of authentic dialogue that involved deep listening that resulted in connection. This kind of listening would help find out what other people's needs are, to become aware of those who are hurting. We need to review the language we use within Church (liturgy) and beyond Church (communicating who we are) since language can alienate.

This kind of listening is essential for dialogue with and between parishes about mergers. We need to work together in communion. Parishes could be more pro-active about sharing resources with each other. We need to recognise and celebrate what we have achieved.

If we are to be truly synodal the Church must recognise the extent to which many women are excluded from leadership roles and even certain ministries in some parishes. The church needs to address clerical and hierarchical barriers caused by misogyny, no matter how covert this is.

We also need to be aware of different and potentially divisive views. Some people expressed concern that a lack of rigour meant that 'church teaching is being diluted', while others spoke of a Canon Law informed response to a pastoral concern resulting in hurt and alienation.

A Synodal Church would "spread our tent." Our outreach towards the community and the natural world would contribute to a stronger church. We would find ways to engage and support young people. We would use multi-modal methods for providing information, reflecting cultural, language, technical abilities and accessibility requirements.

There was strong support for continuing the spiritual conversations model of the Diocesan Assembly to facilitate ongoing dialogue in parish and school communities.

1.3 Leadership for Change

Groups identified the importance of faith formation and the development of leaders willing to drive change. Parishes need to be open to new opportunities and able to consider actions that might challenge limiting barriers to shape a different future. One of the purposes of formation is to change hearts and minds (metanoia) so that these people will live this change through action.

Education and formation are necessary for all those to be involved – teachers, school parents, ministers, those providing pastoral care. All Catholics are called through Baptism to formation that can change their hearts and minds.

The importance of the PPC was affirmed by several groups and it was suggested that Parish Councils take resources from this gathering and use it for mission planning. One group described the need for a 5-to-10-year Action Plan, with measurable objectives, at Parish Level lead by the PPC, and engaging the whole congregation to identify and become the mission. Ideally parishes would develop a clear vision and mission with one year and five-year goals for accountability.

1.4 Bridging the gap between church, school and wider community

There was a sense that the “Parish” is more than the worshipping community. The school, other Church ministry groups and organisations and the wider community need to be better connected through dialogue to identify and undertake shared outreach for mission. Schools were seen as resources for building this outreach given their commitment to social justice and environmental sustainability.

Being *Church Together* is considered a way to bridge the gap between schools and church communities. Strong collaboration with schools can enable multi-generational faith formation through the sharing of stories.

1.5 Focus on Faith in God and Following Christ

A theme running through all the group responses was the central place of the Sacrament of Baptism in coming into a relationship with Jesus. Across the groups there was a sense that we, the Baptised, are the Church. It is from baptism and our formation in faith that we can build the foundations of the church and Catholic communities in schools, health care and care for people and the environment. There was a sense that when people approach the church seeking baptism for their children this is an important opportunity for connection and relationship building so the parish can continue to support parents in nurturing the faith of their children.

Several groups suggested that administering the Sacrament of Confirmation to children in Secondary School could strengthen the links between schools and parishes beyond primary schools.

In considering the question, “what is our faith and mission?”: participants suggested that this is to make obvious the love of God and the love of people. For many the mission is all about relationships with God and others. They describe ‘bringing God to people and people to God.’

A focus on the Church as the Body of Christ with the Gospel at its heart underpins the mission of the Church. The Church is guided by the Spirit and is called to be prayerful and radiate God's love. Christians are to be carers for our world and our environment.

1.6 Wider Church Governance

Some groups commented on the barrier created by a mindset that the Church is about "My parish and my parish priest" which leads to competition between parishes. We need to think and plan beyond our little patch and work more as a team. Recognising that the Church is more than just a building or those who attend Sunday Mass will require cultural change.

The whole system needs to establish and support structures that promote subsidiarity and devolved power while allowing diversity and individuality of parishes.

1.7 Resources Needed to Achieve this Vision

The following suggestions were noted:

- Support for parishes to create effective teams to welcome people and communicate about the opportunities for connection and participation.
- Provide accessible formation for people from different languages, cultures and ages.
- Formation needs to be available and relevant to 20- to 40-year-olds. This formation will need to explain traditions using language that works for them.
- Find ways to use available resources for formation for Parish Council members and volunteers.
- Investigate and address solutions to blockages that stifle growth.

Discernment Round 2

Question 2: What would be the most important changes needed to church structures at the local and diocesan level to foster synodal parishes on mission?

2.1 Understanding Synodality

Many comments related to the need to communicate what is meant by synodality. There was a desire for formation in how to be synodal and support from the archdiocese for parishes to make the changes needed to be truly synodal. They are looking for diocesan leadership on governance and policies. They want the diocese to develop and disseminate resources to parishes, schools and communities on how to be synodal. It was acknowledged that it can take a long time to change cultures. Building relationships will provide the foundation that enables people to be empowered to assume responsibility.

It will be important to address the structures and people that get in the way of being synodal. Structures should not be dependent on the personality of the priest. This might require formation for parish priests regarding the importance of the Parish Pastoral Council. (PPC)

2.2 The role of PPC's in Parish Governance

There was very strong emphasis on the essential role of the PPC and the need for sound governance including:

- Transparent and diverse representation
- Accountability
- Terms of appointment
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Self-evaluation
- Succession Planning
- Participation in governance training and ongoing formation
- Communicate and display vision and mission statements

2.3 Engagement at the Parish level

Parish leaders should create opportunities for people to share ideas and suggestions through forums, assemblies and suggestion boxes. At discussion forums it will be important to encourage sharing around circular tables with food to encourage collegiality.

Bringing people together for connection and exchanges will help build a sense of inclusion. The DPC could develop a Statement of Inclusion which parishes, schools and Church organisations can use to create action plans in response to the statement. These should be published, promoted and reported on for accountability.

2.4 Resources to support structural changes for synodality

The following resources were suggested:

- Diocese to provide information about the resources available to support parishes with local pastoral planning.
- Recognition of diversity of needs will need targeted responses for parishes and the ability to cluster resources.
- Support for clergy and parishes to develop increased delegation to empower lay people to support and sustain Pastoral Planning.

Question 3: What does a parish on Mission look like?

3.1 Outward Facing

During the conversations people suggested that a parish on mission prioritises looking outward and going out to meet people in safe, neutral places where they do not feel intimidated or afraid of a Catholic church agenda. It was recognised that a parish on mission understands the specific needs of its local community. It knows which people might be lonely (even among those who go to Mass), and it provides social activities that engage them.

The central focus should be on” Mission rather than Mass.” Mass is seen as important, however interactions and connections around issues that matter is also important. We need to understand the Good News ourselves so we can share this in ways that people can relate to.

3.2 Focused more on Pastoral Care than interpretations of Canon Law.

Several groups discussed the desirability of priests and church representatives taking a pastoral approach to people who have been affected in the past, or are still being affected, by Church teachings and traditions (rules of Canon Law) that impact negatively on their relationship with the Church, such as marriage, divorce, baptism, sexuality and access to the Eucharist. The interpretation of Canon Law needs to be understood through a pastoral lens and explained in meaningful ways to people.

A parish on mission would demonstrate humility and compassion for humanity. It would be inclusive and respectful. Sadly, this is not everyone’s experience of the Catholic church.

3.3 Unity in Diversity

A synodal church on mission is alive and breathing the Spirit. There is a gathering of people from different ages and cultures. It is truly diverse and while people share the same faith, they respect each other’s ways of practicing their faith.

Question 4. What does collaboration and co-responsibility between ordained and non-ordained look like in a synodal parish on mission?

4.1 Relationship between priests and laity

It was noted that it will be important to build strong relationships between priests and laity so they can understand each other's roles and can share these, as necessary. Diversifying leadership structures could allow the laity to give the sermon sometimes. Priests need to give the Parish Council autonomy to make decisions. Broader representation on Parish Councils will make sure that the voices of all interest groups are heard, including schools, other parish ministries and activities.

4.2 Skills for Leadership

In a synodal Church on mission parishes will recognize when people with specific skills are needed to promote collaboration. Such parishes will utilize the strengths and gifts of people of all ages. The concept of synodality is a 'paradigm shift' that needs communication and formation. We need to work out how to collaborate and be co-responsible particularly regarding issues that matter to the wider community, such as mental health, domestic violence, women in leadership. Consistency of leadership needs to involve review, feedback, and continuous learning.

4.3 A more loving culture

A number of groups suggested that Canon Law needs to be interpreted in the light of the Gospel to drive a more loving culture. The focus should be on the gospel first, not Canon Law. There needs to be some kind of statement of invitation and inclusion, based on this gospel interpretation, that parishes promote to their communities. Some participants suggested that Church leaders should be willing to take more risks in speaking out on respect and inclusion.

Question 5. Pastoral Planning

Acknowledging changing realities, what should we consider as we plan for the archdiocese and the parish of the future?

5.1 Formation for Mission

Many of the conversations focused on the essential place of formation to enable people who want to get involved in distinct roles as volunteers, ministers, and leaders. The Church needs to harness the gifts of the Spirit present in all the baptized. Resources from the archdiocese are needed for formation, and these could be shared between parishes and at a regional level. The church needs to invest in these areas.

It was considered essential for parishes to form a leadership that is relevant to, and represents, all the groups and individuals in their communities.

5.2 Future Models

It was suggested that parish geographical planning may not be relevant and that as a diocese we need to be brave in rethinking sixty parishes into ten. Sharing resources across parish boundaries would overcome the frequent thinking and acting as separate silos to solve problems. Some people noted that there needs to be a positive reason for bigger parishes. People are looking for clear leadership from the Archdiocesan level about the process of mergers.

Some groups asked questions about how the archdiocese is planning for the population growth that is happening in new suburbs at the fringes of the existing metropolitan area.

There is a tradition of small groups meeting to share and celebrate faith. This can be further developed by parishes and the archdiocese for pastoral care, support, study and to provide different models for worship and prayer. The African Mass at the Cathedral is an example of the kind of cultural gathering that supports diversity.

5.3 Pastoral Care and Communication

There was dialogue about the use of technology from embracing technology for on-line teaching and accessible liturgy while making sure that technology does not leave people out. For example, card payments should not exclude those who wish to give cash. Social media can be an effective way to reach certain cohorts.

Participants identified the need for pastoral care in a number of key areas, including elderly people moving into residential care, for those who have left the church through hurts, in welcoming new families and young people to our communities and in supporting the integration of overseas priests and religious into Australian and parish cultures. Each parish will have its own vulnerable groups and so it is important that parish leaders understand the demographics of the community with which they are planning.

It would be helpful to have an accessible directory of agencies and local and regional groups which are able to provide care and support.

Question 6 Local Action and Responsibility

What does a synodal parish on mission do to promote engagement and productive relationships in the parish?

Many of the responses to this question reaffirmed earlier conversations and tended to be presented as a kind of summary. Accordingly, this report has chosen to represent them as overarching themes in dot point form, as follows:

- Being Church together involves responsibility, connection, and shared action.
- We must go out to “those beyond” – those who no longer attend Mass, non-Catholics, families with children in Catholic schools.
- Stronger and more effective relationships between Catholic Schools and the worshipping church community – both are the parish.
- Open and active communication that is relevant and accessible.
- Active listening and acting on what we have heard.
- Locally responsive to the needs of our community.
- Inclusive and welcoming in every way.
- Liturgies with inclusive language, engaging music, structured to enable participation of people of different ages, cultures and abilities.
- Recognize places of meaningful connection and build on these – life transitions such as marriage, baptism, sacraments in primary school, entering and graduating from secondary school.
- Leadership and formation to equip all Catholics to live their baptismal call to be bearers of the Good News.