

SA Catholics for an Evolving Church



Contribution to the Synod on Synodality

A Synodal Church in Mission

South Australian Catholics for an Evolving Church (SACEC) is a group of South Australian Catholics concerned for the future of our faith and church. It is a member of the *Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform* (ACCCR). This is SACEC's contribution to the diocesan consultation requested in preparation for the second Assembly of the Synod on Synodality. We were disappointed that the invitation to contribute was not issued more widely, as many of the Australian dioceses have not been very active or participative in making contributions to the synod.

Consultations that we are aware of have not achieved any depth and have involved very few of the faithful. The vast bulk of those 222,000 (Australia-wide) who made submissions to the Plenary Council and the more than 90% of those who professed to being catholic in the 2021 census, let alone "all the baptised" (i.e., all Christians), are simply not represented in this important consultative process.

Increasing disillusionment with the process of change

It is now 28 years since the "Woman and Man" (1996) report and 5 years since its "retrospective" (2019); seven years since the damning recommendations of the Australian Royal Commission report on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017); eight years since the first consultations for the Plenary Council (2016); four years since the "Light from the Southern Cross" report on governance in the church (2020) and two years since the conclusion of the Australian Plenary Council (2022). In dioceses and parishes, women, those in "irregular relationships", LGBTIQ+ people and others continue to experience "one man band, autocratic, hierarchical, abusive relationships with their pastors". They need meaningful responses.

Adelaide Archdiocese

We acknowledge and appreciate changes made since Patrick O'Regan became Archbishop in May 2020: two diocesan assemblies; a new Diocesan Pastoral Council; a council of Priests; documents spelling out approaches for the diocese and relationships between parishes and schools and now regional assemblies. Whilst welcome, these have had little effect on the ground. Change is very slow and the future direction of the church in Adelaide is not at all clear. Historical structures have been dismantled and synodal practices of collaboration by lay Catholics and organisations of the faithful with the diocesan hierarchy are not accessible or clear.

We need hope

Many Catholics have simply given up trying to work within church structures and processes that are couched in obscure “church-speak.” Such usage gives enormous scope for maintaining a changeless status quo, and resistance to any significant and urgently needed change. Catholics, and indeed all Christians, are crying out for the second Assembly of the synod in October this year to provide some hope, some leadership in clearly understandable language and processes that enable practical, tangible progress in responding to the urgent issues raised in all submissions made to the Plenary Council and the Synod.

SACEC contribution

This contribution is presented under the headings used in Adelaide Diocesan consultations on 14 March 2024. Ten subheadings were listed in three Parts. Numbers in brackets refer to the Synthesis Report of the Synod. We urge that reviews and consultations are undertaken with a commitment to transparent and inclusive processes. Where the goal of being inclusive seems difficult to achieve, SACEC (and others) could be consulted on how to undertake such consultations/reviews before launching into a rushed or narrow process.

Part 1. The Face of the Synodal Church

1.1. Synodality: Experience and Understanding, and Gathered and Sent by the Trinity (1-2)

Issues

Many church practices, Canon Law and the Catechism are anachronistic and discriminatory and without theological, anthropological or socio-cultural basis.

There is much confusion about what a ‘synodal church in mission’ means.

A theology and spirituality that liberate and create opportunities for personal growth are not well promoted.

Contextual theology and the sense of the faith of the faithful as promoted in Pope Francis’ Motu Proprio, 1 November 2023, is not widely appreciated.

Proposals for the Synod

Demand a full review of church practices, Canon Law, the Catechism and liturgical language.

Clarify the meaning of ‘synodal church in mission’ in the language of human experience.

Promote theological reflection among the faithful, including discussion on core church doctrine and moral positions.

Proposals for the Diocese

Conduct a public review of church practices, Canon Law and the Catechism to identify and correct those elements that can be corrected at the local level.

Conduct an open review on the reasons why more people are walking away, without official comment while the church is focused on synodality, as the way to proceed.

Promote theological reflection among the faithful, including discussion on core church doctrine and moral positions.

1.2. People in Poverty. Protagonists of the Church's journey, A church 'out of every tribe, tongue, people and nation' (4-5)

Issues

Continuing discrimination against and exclusion of women and other groups such as LGBTIA+ and repartnered Catholics.

Poor people do not feel welcome in our churches.

Proposals for the Synod

Admit women to all positions and ministries in the church.

Cease discrimination on the basis of the depersonalising Canon Law and sacramental formulas.

Proposals for the Diocese

Advocate with Vatican authorities for changes to Canon Law.

Insist on not using attendance at Mass or the sacraments as criteria for 'practising Catholics.'

Ensure that the elimination of poverty and homelessness is a priority for the diocese and for parishes.

Advocate more strongly for realistic government strategies to lift people out of poverty.

1.3. On the road towards Christian unity (7)

Issues

As the grounds for Christian solidarity are in our love, care and concern for each other, the common strategy of relying on creating formal relationship structures between church organisations is inadequate.

The church organisation is widely seen as a divisive institution because of its discriminatory and exclusionary practices, language and anachronistic positions.

Proposals for the Synod

Recognise love, care and concern, wherever and in whoever they are found, as the basic and core characteristics of Catholicism and Christianity. Let the focus be on attitudes and behaviour rather than 'identity politics.'

Proposals for the Diocese

Undertake a program of reorienting emphasis from church going and doctrinal positions to justice, care and concern.

Part 2. All disciples, All missionaries

2.1 Church is mission (8)

Issues

Number of Catholics engaging with the church is declining rapidly.

Many Catholics do not feel welcome in our churches.

The vast majority of Catholics, including clergy, do not see the Synod as relevant for them and have no interest in it any longer.

Proposals for the Synod

Refer to 1.1. above on theology.

Remove the exclusionary, discriminating elements in church practices, Canon Law and the Catechism.

Deal transparently with the issues raised in the submissions made by Catholics at the outset of the Synod process and for the Australian Plenary Council.

Proposals for the Diocese

Engage with the life issues that concern SA Catholics.

Explain the mission of the church in contemporary language.

Introduce practical changes that improve the quality of the experience of Catholicism in SA.

Communicate with people on how their concerns are being addressed in practical terms.

Ensure that preaching and formation programs include 'a fundamentally contextual theology, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which women and men daily live,' (Pope Francis, Motu Proprio 1.11.23) alongside scripture and tradition.

2.2. Women in the life and mission of the church (9)

Issues

Women continue to be discriminated against even though there is no theological reason why women should not have access to every position and ministry in the church.

Women are refused opportunities for achieving 'the fullness of life' (Jn 10:10).

The community is being denied the benefits of an abundance of gifts and talents.

Women are being stymied in their desire and efforts to serve others more fully.

Women are still being considered as an issue rather than as equal partners.

Proposals for the Synod

Open every position and ministry in the church to women.

Admit women to the diaconate and priesthood.

Proposals for the Diocese

Enable and encourage the provision of homilies and reflections during Mass by women.

Advocate strongly for the removal of unethical discriminatory rules and laws.

2.3 Consecrated life and lay associations and movements (10)**Issues**

Lay associations do not receive the recognition they deserve.

The reservation of sacramental ministry and governance to the ordained, which was not a feature of the early church but established by administrative decree in later centuries, continues to restrict Catholics in their appreciation of the liberating Gospel and undermine their confidence in living it to the full.

Proposals for the Synod

Promote an understanding of Christian ministry that enables committed

Catholics to exercise it in all its fullness while recognising that, for the sake of order, some have a formal delegation to lead.

Refer to 1.1. and 2.1. above on Canon Law.

Proposals for the Diocese

Encourage and facilitate people in consecrated life and lay associations and movements to be creative in using their gifts and charisms to the full.

Part 3. Weaving bonds, Building communities**3.1. A synodal approach to formation (14)****Issues**

Formation is seen as primarily a top-down exercise where people are trained according to a pre-determined format.

The personal gift of a sense of the faith, deep in the heart of all Catholics, is most often, not recognised.

Preachers and commentators too often adopt an attitude of 'not disturbing the simple faithful.' Too much preaching and commentary is clearly not done with an awareness of how Catholics live their lives.

Poor efforts at formation and disrespectful preaching have been the reason for many Catholics disengaging from church preaching and the Eucharist.

Proposals for the Synod

Ensure that the sense of faith of the faithful, as expressed through the worldwide consultation is truly reflected in Synod discussions and decisions.

Promote Pope Francis' Motu Proprio, 1 November 2023, widely.

Proposals for the Diocese

Provide formation programs based on the experience and sense of faith of the faithful.

Encourage and facilitate preachers and commentators to discuss their homilies and commentaries with lay people.

3.2. Towards a listening and accompanying church (16)

Issues

The church organisation, through its hierarchy, local clergy and administration is often seen as the primary source of Catholic authority instead of conscience and personal conviction.

Clergy and the hierarchy are not generally seen as listening to the people.

Most Catholics feel disillusioned by the Synod process.

Proposals for the Synod

Re-emphasise the primary purpose of church organisation is enabling and supporting people in their efforts to become authentic, thinking, responsible and loving human beings.

Proposals for the Diocese

Promote personal growth and authenticity in all aspects of human living.

Refer to 1.1. above on investigating why people disengage.

Be creative and innovative in finding ways to connect with the disengaged.

3.3. Mission in the digital environment (17)

Issues

Developments in the digital environment change how people communicate, form communities, learn and organise their lives. Information is almost instantaneously available. These are major factors in the current change of era. Change itself is happening far faster than ever before.

Dioceses and parishes have not adapted and are being left behind.

Proposals for the Synod

Cease trying to restrict access to information as, for instance, by keeping issues off the agenda or sidelining them to commissions.

Proposals for the Diocese

Use the technology available to develop ways of reaching a wider audience, educate people and clergy, make recent advances in spirituality and theology more widely available and in readily accessible forms e.g. Zoom and MS Teams for meetings and small group activities, liturgies and theology in dialogue.

Develop systems for improving our knowledge and understanding of our people.

3.4. Structures for participation (18)

Issues

Pastoral and governance/administrative functions are often confused; pastoral authority and responsibility is often used to justify administrative decisions and vice versa.

The current consultation process is subject to invitations by bishops to participate and contributions are to go through bishops exclusively (*Towards October 2024*).

Proposals for the Synod

Distinguish pastoral and governance functions while ensuring collaboration.

Proposals for the Diocese

Provide clear and distinct role descriptions and responsibilities for clergy, pastoral councils and pastoral workers.

Encourage all Catholics, individuals and groups to make their own contributions. To be synodal, contributions should cover local issues as well as global matters.

Provide sufficient time for real collaboration, exchange of ideas, viewpoints and submissions.

Concluding comments

SACEC requests that the proposals addressed to the Diocese are acted on without waiting for the next Synod Assembly. In particular, we seek the establishment of forums where lay people and organisations can engage in meaningful exchange with our local curia, Diocesan Pastoral Council, Council of Priests and theologians. Our journey can only be enriched, especially if we can also move together with other (non-Catholic) Christians.

Kevin Liston, Convener, SACEC (SA Catholics for an Evolving Church)

Good Friday, 29 March 2024