

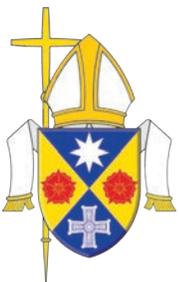


SANDHURST MISSION  
AND PASTORAL COUNCIL  
Preparation & Consultation Meetings  
**FINAL REPORT**

*A Church which goes forth, is a Church whose doors are open*

**Pope Francis,**  
The Joy of the Gospel, 46





Office for Mission & Pastoral Life | Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst

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Included in this report, are photographs taken at the Preparation and Consultation Meetings across the Diocese.



**Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council  
Preparation and Consultation Meetings  
FINAL REPORT**

**Dr Chris Cotter**

*A synodal Church is a Church which listens,  
which realises that listening is more than simply hearing.*

Address of Pope Francis at the  
Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops,  
17 October 2015



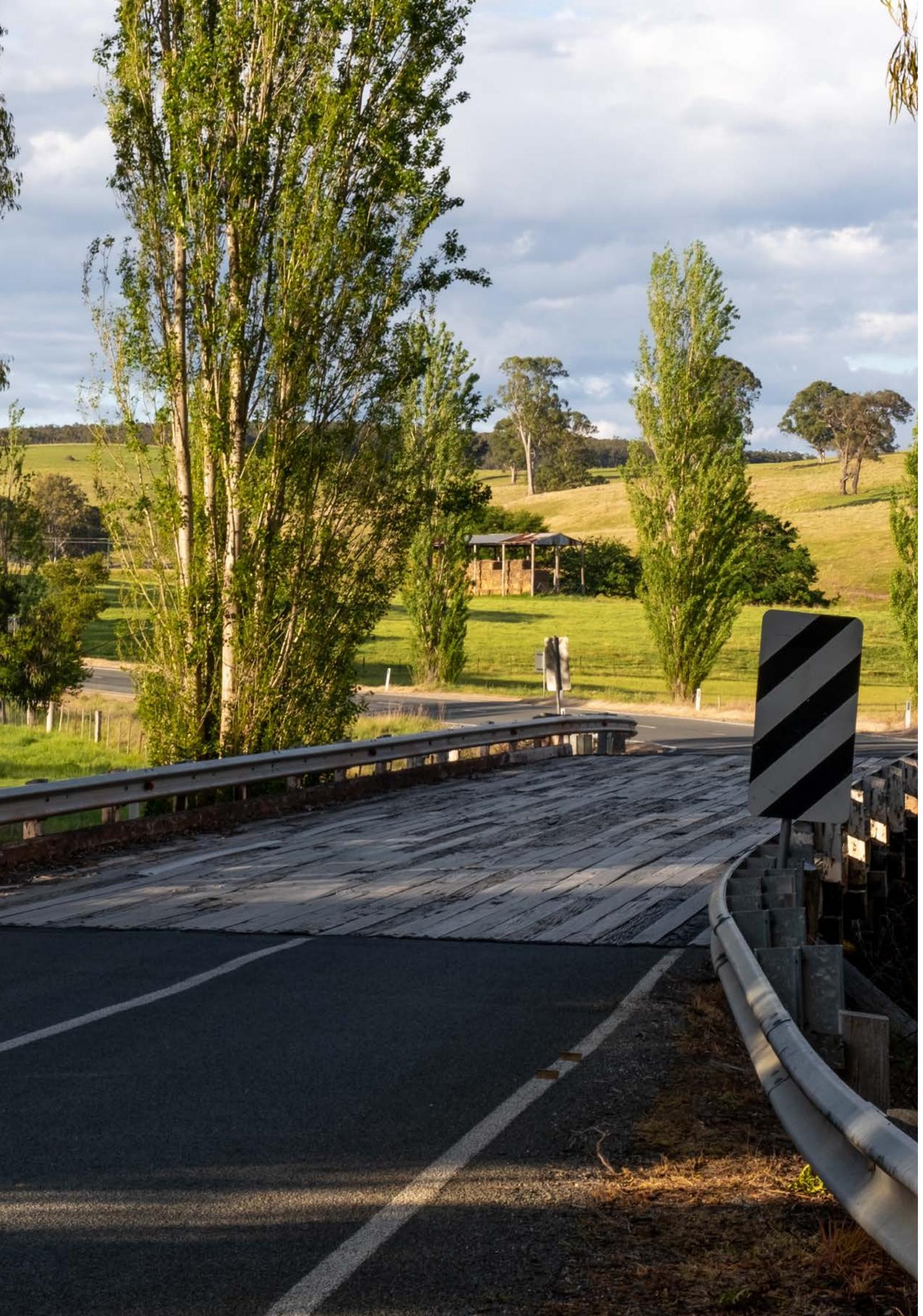
## Acknowledgement of Country

The Diocese of Sandhurst recognises the traditional custodians of the lands upon which we live, serve and worship. We acknowledge the people of the Northeastern regions of our Diocese, Djilmathang, Minjambuta, Duduroa and Waywurru. We acknowledge the people of the Southern regions of our Diocese, the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Taungerung. We acknowledge the people of the Northern regions of our Diocese, the Yorta Yorta and Bangerang. We acknowledge the people of the Western regions of our Diocese, the Baraparapa peoples.

We respectfully honour and acknowledge their ongoing custodianship and their connections to the land, waters and animals. We pay our respects to their culture, their Elders, past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of their peoples. We express our gratitude in the sharing of this land, our sorrow for the personal, spiritual and cultural costs of that sharing and commit ourselves to actively working alongside First Nations People for healing, reconciliation and justice.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Staff of the Diocesan Chancery and the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Life Team have worked diligently preparing, facilitating, processing and reporting on the Preparation and Consultation Meetings. Thanks to: Ms Jill Doncovio and Mrs Leslie Cooper for booking accommodation, printing support and data entry; and Ms Katrina Strong for printing and communications support. A special thanks to Ms Ruth Lawlor who assisted in the development and design of the Preparation and Consultation Meetings and co-facilitated almost all of them. Ruth travelled with me across the Diocese, giving up many weekends and evenings, putting Youth Ministry projects on hold to ensure that this important component of the Year of Preparation and Consultation for the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council was accomplished.

The Preparation and Consultation Meetings were possible only with the cooperation of the parish priests of the Sandhurst Diocese, Mr Paul Desmond Chief Executive Officer of Catholic Education Sandhurst Ltd, and the principals of Catholic Education Sandhurst secondary Colleges. Your generous assistance is deeply appreciated.

Finally, to the people of God in the Diocese of Sandhurst. You showed up to the meetings on cold winter nights or stayed on after mass on Sunday. You participated in the listening and dialogue process and provided the rich feedback that informs this final report. Not even the devastating Victorian floods in October and November prevented your involvement. My sincere thanks to you.

Dr Chris Cotter  
Director of Mission and Pastoral Life  
17 January 2023





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Preparation and Consultation Meetings for the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC) were facilitated by members of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Life Team between 24 July 2022 and 13 December 2022. Fifty-two meetings were held in local parish churches, parish and school halls and other venues across the Diocese, including two meetings that were conducted online. The Meetings were designed to be a prayerful experience for participants, providing information about the proposed SMPC; time for personal reflection and listening and dialogue in small groups; and the opportunity to give written feedback. A total of 905 participants provided almost 1000 small group responses, the fruit of their prayerful listening and dialogue.

Overall, the proposed SMPC was well received by the people of God, as was the commitment by the bishop to broad consultation on the initiative through the Preparation and Consultation Meetings held across the Diocese. Many of the faithful also raised concerns. These concerns can be summarised as follows:

Would an advisory body, such as the SMPC:

- be truly representative of the entire portion of the people of God in the Diocese?
- be equipped to stay in touch with pastoral and cultural realities?
- provide an adequate strategic response to the opportunities, problems and challenges facing the Catholic Church in Sandhurst?

## **Five key themes emerged from the feedback.**

### **Authentic listening and dialogue:**

The people of God experienced authentic listening and dialogue through the Preparation and Consultation Meeting, and sincerely hope that the SMPC, once established, will practise authentic listening and dialogue.

### **Inclusion and openness:**

The people of God named the process of Preparation and Consultation for the SMPC as inclusive and open but expressed concern that the voices of many people may not be heard. Many stated that the Church has often intentionally or unintentionally excluded people, has failed to respond adequately to socio-cultural realities and has not listened sufficiently to the experience of the marginalised. The people of God hope that the SMPC offers direction and advice that lead to a more inclusive and open Church.

### **Communication:**

The people of God identified communication as a major challenge for the SMPC.

**A bias for action:**

The people of God are weary of talk and wish to see decisive action from the SMPC on a range of pastoral matters.

**Hope in the face of hurt and cynicism:**

The people of God see hope in the establishment of this Council but some are wary, cautious and even cynical based on past experiences.

**These themes will help inform the establishment, operations and workplan of the SMPC.****Establishment**

- Ensure that information regarding Expression of Interest in becoming a member of the SMPC is promoted widely, made freely available and easily accessible.
- Ensure proper representation on the SMPC from all deaneries across the Diocese, large parishes and small country parishes and other Catholic entities in the Diocese.
- Ensure diverse representation on the SMPC whilst respecting the requirements of the Code of Canon Law.
- Ensure the appropriate representation of women on the SMPC.

**Operations**

- Embrace processes that enhance authentic listening, dialogue and discernment.
- Provide formation for members of the SMPC in processes that support and enhance authentic listening, dialogue and discernment.
- Establish and maintain effective communication channels with clergy and the lay faithful in parishes, College of Consultors, Council of Priests, Pastoral Associates Network, Diocesan Finance Council, Chancery staff, Catholic Education Sandhurst staff and boards, principals and schools, CatholicCare Victoria and other related entities.
- Establish and maintain effective systems for consultation, feedback and reporting.

**Workplan**

- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the missionary and pastoral outreach to families, young people, marginalised groups and those who are baptised but are no longer active in parish life.
- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the promotion of the equal dignity of

women and men; to enhancing the role of women in the Church in Sandhurst; and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality.

- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese aimed at strengthening the connection between parishes and schools, parishes and Chancery, Chancery and Catholic Education Sandhurst, and other Catholic entities in the Diocese.
- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the initial and ongoing formation of the faithful in missionary discipleship, missionary and pastoral outreach, theology and liturgy, ministry, listening, dialogue and discernment.





# INTRODUCTION

All the baptised share responsibility for the mission and for structures that facilitate the living out of the mission entrusted to the Church. A key learning from the listening and dialogue phase of the Plenary Council of Australia and the Synod for a Synodal Church is that the people of God are seeking inclusion and opportunities to exercise co-responsibility for governance and leadership of the pastoral life of the Diocese.

Establishing the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC) is a significant commitment by the Diocese to create a structure that supports synodal governance, leadership, and decision making. As steps are taken to establish these structures, it is also important to inform, prepare and consult the people of God along the way. Bishop Shane Mackinlay announced a year of Preparation and Consultation for the SMPC on 27 April 2022, the Feast Day of the Patroness of the Diocese of Sandhurst, Our Lady of Good Counsel.

The primary objective of the Year of Preparation and Consultation is to make progress towards the formulation and establishment of the SMPC. The process aimed to build on the significant work already undertaken within Sandhurst via the Review of the Strategic, Consultative and Administrative Structures of the Diocese, as described in the “Go Forth” Report (December 2020), the Listening and Dialogue Phase of the 5th Plenary Council of Australia, and the Diocesan Consultation for the 19th Ordinary Synod of Bishops on Synodality. The Year of Preparation and Consultation seeks to empower the people of God and enhance the sense of co-responsibility and synodality across the Diocese. It also aims to encourage expressions of interest in becoming a member of the SMPC.

## **There are five main stages in the Year of Preparation and Consultation:**

1. Prayerful preparation – 27 April 2022 to 24 July 2022
2. Preparation and Consultation Meetings – 24 July 2022 to 13 December 2022
3. Diocesan Assembly – 15 February 2023
4. Discerning, Appointing and Commissioning Members of the SMPC – 15 February 2023 to 4 April 2023
5. First Meeting of the SMPC – 27 April 2023

This final report relates to the Preparation and Consultation Meetings for the SMPC conducted throughout the Diocese by members of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Life Team. <sup>1</sup> It draws on the feedback of 905 participants: ordained, professed religious and lay faithful, across 39 parishes, 10 Catholic secondary Colleges, Catholic Education Sandhurst principals, religious education leaders, office staff, Catholic Education Sandhurst Limited and Sandhurst Catholic Early Childhood Education and Care Limited Board Members, and Bendigo St John of God Hospital staff. <sup>2</sup> The Meetings were planned to run for 90 minutes, although an abridged 60 minute version was made available for some groups. An adaptation of the Meeting was developed for use with secondary school students.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that an Interim Report was presented to the Diocese on 7 October 2022.

<sup>2</sup> It is acknowledged that the following did not participate in a Preparation and Consultation Meeting: Sacred Heart Parish Corryong, Catholic Aged Care residents or staff, CatholicCare Victoria staff, and parishioners needing to use languages other than English.

**Participants at each Preparation and Consultation Meeting:**

- were provided with information about the proposed Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council;
- experienced a process of listening and dialogue (as used in the first phase of the Plenary Council) in small groups; and
- were given the opportunity to provide written feedback about what they had heard.

The entire meeting was conducted in the context of prayer.

**Typical Preparation and Consultation Meeting Flow**

|   |
|---|
| Acknowledgement of Country<br>Welcome and introductions<br>Prayer   |
| <b>Information</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Purpose of the meeting</li><li>• Why, what, how will the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council be constituted and function?</li><li>• Membership: qualities/expectations/responsibilities</li><li>• Process for Expression of Interest and selection</li><li>• Timeline</li></ul>   |
| <b>Silent Reflection (Guided)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What encourages you? What challenges you?</li><li>• What questions do you still have? What would you like to know more about?</li></ul>   |
| <b>Listening &amp; Dialogue (Plenary Council Listening and Dialogue process)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflect on your responses to the reflection questions.</li><li>• Share your responses and listen to others’ responses.</li><li>• Reflect again on how others’ responses have influenced your perspective.</li><li>• What encourages you? What challenges you?</li><li>• What questions do you still have? What would you like to know more about?</li><li>• What questions do you still have? What feedback do you want to give?</li></ul> |
| <b>Conclusion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Next steps, stay connected, pray</li><li>• Concluding prayer and blessing</li></ul>   |

**The written feedback was produced in small groups of three or four participants, towards the end of the ‘Listening and Dialogue’ under the following headings:**

- 1. We are encouraged by ...**
- 2. We are challenged by ...**
- 3. The following questions remain unanswered ...**
- 4. We would like to know more about ...**

This final report is compiled and presented in a way that is similar to the syntheses produced during the Consultation for the 19th Ordinary Synod of Bishops. It aims to reflect the diversity of views and opinions expressed, paying particular attention to the lived experiences of meeting participants, both positive and negative. The report seeks to be faithful to the participants’ voices and to whatever emerged from the listening and dialogue process. It also seeks to capture the small voice or minority perspective. <sup>3</sup>Points of view that are contrary to one another are not omitted but are acknowledged and stated as such.

The body of this final report is in three parts. The first part provides demographic information on the Preparation and Consultation Meetings, including the location and parish or other group, e.g., school, Chancery, Catholic Education Sandhurst, Board, for each meeting. The second is an overview of the feedback from the collected group responses under the four headings. The third part draws out themes from the written feedback from across the four headings. These themes will provide direction and guidance for the work plan of the SMPC and the way in which the SMPC is established and will operate.



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<sup>3</sup> “Indeed, sometimes the perspective of what we could call the ‘minority report’ can be a prophetic witness to what God wants to say to the Church.” Appendix D, *Vademecum* for the Synod on *Synodality*.



# DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| 905     | Participants   |
| 50.3yrs | Average age of participants (Youngest - 12yrs, Oldest - 93yrs) |
| 61%     | Female   |
| 37%     | Male   |
| <1%     | 'non-binary'   |
| <1%     | preferred not to say if Male or Female                         |
| 1.1%    | Identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander             |
| 9.6%    | Not born in Australia  |
| 1.6%    | of total participants born in India                            |
| 1.3%    | of total participants born in the Netherlands                  |
| 1.1%    | of total participants born in the United Kingdom               |
| 1%      | of total participants born in the Philippines                  |
| 0.8%    | of total participants born in New Zealand                      |

## 29 Total Meetings with Parishes

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Wodonga, Sacred Heart<br>Mount Beauty, St Joseph's<br>Tallangatta, St Michael's                           | 27 July   |
| Wangaratta, St Patrick's<br>Wangaratta South, Our Lady Mother of God<br>Moyhu, Founding of the Holy Cross | 6 August  |
| Benalla, St Joseph's  | 7 August  |
| Euroa, St John's  | 9 August  |
| Nagambie, St Malachy's  | 10 August |
| Rutherglen, St Mary's   | 25 August |
| Chiltern, St Mary's   | 25 August |
| Yarrawonga, Sacred Heart  | 28 August |
| Shepparton South, St Mel's  | 30 August |

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Shepparton, St Brendan's<br>Dookie, St Mary's   | 31 August    |
| Nathalia, St Mary's   | 7 September  |
| Numurkah, St John the Baptist   | 7 September  |
| Cobram, St Joseph's   | 21 September |
| Myrtleford, St Mary's<br>Bright, Our Lady of the Snows<br>Beechworth, St Joseph's                   | 11 October   |
| Mooroopna, St Mary's  | 26 October   |
| Rushworth, St Mary's<br>Cornella, Sacred Heart<br>Murchison, St Brigid's<br>Stanhope, St Laurence's | 27 October   |
| Kennington, St Therese's<br>Axe Creek, St Joseph's<br>Axedale, St Mary's                            | 2 November   |
| Eaglehawk, St Liborius'   | 9 November   |
| Kerang, St Patrick's  | 11 November  |
| Rochester, St Joseph's<br>Elmore, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart                                      | 16 November  |
| Echuca, St Mary's   | 16 November  |
| White Hills, Holy Rosary  | 17 November  |
| Bendigo, St Kilian's  | 24 November  |
| Bendigo, Cathedral Cluster  | 29 November  |
| Bendigo, Cathedral Cluster  | 30 November  |
| Heathcote, Mary Help of Christians  | 3 December   |
| Cohuna, St Mary's<br>Pyramid Hill, St Patrick's   | 7 December   |
| Kyabram, St Augustine's   | 10 December  |
| Tatura, Sacred Heart  | 11 December  |

## 23 Total Meetings with Chancery and Catholic Education

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Bendigo, Diocesan Chancery  | 24 July      |
| Wodonga, Catholic College Wodonga   | 27 July      |
| Wangaratta, Galen Catholic College - Students and Staff <sup>4</sup>  | 5 August     |
| Benalla, FCJ College  | 10 August    |
| Shepparton, Notre Dame College - Students and Staff   | 30 August    |
| Kialla, St Anne's College   | 31 August    |
| Catholic Education Sandhurst - Office Staff (conducted in Shepparton)   | 29 September |
| Myrtleford, Marian College  | 12 October   |
| Bendigo, Marist College - Students and Staff  | 7 November   |
| Catholic Education Sandhurst - Religious Education Leaders Network (conducted in Shepparton)  | 10 November  |
| Echuca, St Joseph's College - Students and Staff  | 16 November  |
| Catholic Education Sandhurst – Principals (conducted in Shepparton)   | 17 November  |
| Bendigo, Catherine McAuley College - Students and Staff   | 21 November  |
| Catholic Education Sandhurst Ltd and Sandhurst Catholic Early Childhood Education and Care Ltd Board members (conducted in Bendigo) | 22 November  |
| Nathalia, St Mary of the Angels College (Students and Staff)  | 23 November  |
| Online Meetings   | 13 December  |

<sup>4</sup> 'Students and Staff' after the name of the college indicates that the meetings with students and staff were held separately and at different times at this college. In all meetings at the secondary colleges (including colleges where separate meetings were held for students and staff), supervising staff attended the prayer, information and feedback components of the student meeting with the students but met separately for the listening and dialogue component.



# OVERVIEW OF GROUP FEEDBACK

Towards the conclusion of each Preparation and Consultation Meeting, participants were asked to reflect on the information provided at the meeting about the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council, and the listening and dialogue in their small group of three or four. Participants were then invited to provide written feedback based on the fruits of the listening and dialogue experience in their small groups. The written feedback was captured by the group on a Collected Group Response form and collected by the facilitators at the conclusion of the Meeting. The feedback was de-identified and entered into a spreadsheet.

**The following is an overview of the feedback under the four headings.**

## **1. We are encouraged by ...**

279 written responses received.

28% of responses reported that they were encouraged by the process being used to establish the Council. Small groups remarked that they found the process open, transparent, consultative, synodal, strategic, invitational, dialogical, considered, hopeful and prayerful.

18% of responses mentioned the bishop, with many groups reporting that they felt encouraged by the leadership of Bishop Shane and his genuine consultative and inclusive leadership through the Preparation and Consultation Meetings and the establishment of the Council.

16% of responses reported that there were encouraged by the openness of the Church in the Sandhurst to consultation, the inclusion of laity and clergy, development, listening, change and a missionary response to the challenges facing the Catholic Church.

14% of responses mentioned feeling a sense of encouragement, hope and optimism about the Council, its inclusive structure and commitment to ongoing listening.

13% of responses were encouraged by the fact that they had a voice in the process of establishing the Council and that many diverse voices are being heard, from different age groups and locations across the Diocese.

10% of responses were encouraged by being given the opportunity to learn about the Council and have their views listened to.

10% of responses viewed the establishment of the Council as an encouraging change or an encouraging response to change in society and culture by the Church in Sandhurst.

## 2. We are challenged by ...

274 written responses received.

24% of responses reported that a major challenge for them and for this Council was the Catholic Church itself. The challenges identified included: dwindling number of active parishioners, baptised Catholics who no longer participate in parish life, the lack of families and young people present in parishes, lack of outreach to those who feel marginalised and excluded from the Church e.g., divorced and remarried, single parents, LGBTQI+ people, people with a disability, hypocrisy and scandals within the Church, clericalism, the lack of recognition of women and their gifts and contribution, exclusive and difficult formal language and liturgy of the Church, the lack of action when things need to change. With the Code of Canon Law stipulating that a diocesan pastoral council ceases to function when the “see is vacant”,<sup>5</sup> some expressed concern, cynicism and even bitterness about the lack of continuity and the apparent waste of time and effort should Bishop Shane vacate the see.

14% of responses identified specific challenges for the Council relating to diversity, representation and communication. Many wondered how the Council will be diverse and truly inclusive when membership requires baptism and active participation in a parish community. Many questioned how the Council would listen to diverse voices when it ran the risk of lacking diverse representation due to strict prerequisites for membership. A small number of responses expressed fear relating to small parishes in small communities being overlooked if their voices were not represented or heard by the Council. Others were concerned about communication with parishes and expressed the view that the Council could become elite, academic, insular and insulated from the life of ordinary people.

8% of responses mentioned time as a challenge for the Council. Some groups were concerned that the proposed four meetings per year would not allow enough time for proper consideration of all the important matters by the Council. On the other hand, other groups took a different view, wondering how those called to the Council could be asked to give up so much time to prepare, travel and participate in the meetings.

8% of responses raised youth and young people as a challenge for the Council. Many groups wanted to ensure that the voice of young people is heard by the Council and others recommended that the Council focus on mission to youth.

A small number, approximately 1%, were challenged by the lack of information provided in the meeting about the purpose and direction of the Council. One group noted that there was a lack of opportunity for robust discussion and collaborative feedback in the meeting.

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<sup>5</sup> CIC 513 n.2

### **3. The following questions remain unanswered ...**

249 written responses received.

Most of the collected group responses under this heading restated the challenges outlined in heading 2, this time in the form of questions.

46% of the questions submitted related to the formulation, operation and scope of the Council itself. These included: How will the Council be established as a truly representative body? What authority will it have? What formation will be given to members? What process of discernment will the Council use? Will the Council be open to learn from other Dioceses' experiences and the previous Diocesan Pastoral Council in Sandhurst? How will the Council function, make decisions and communicate effectively, especially with parishes? Will the Council have sub-committees? How will it avoid becoming inward-looking? How will it listen to diverse and marginal voices and stay connected with pastoral realities? What will the Council's influence and connection be with clergy, Catholic Education, Catholic Health and CatholicCare? How will it develop, implement and review strategic and pastoral plans, measure success and improve? How will the Council accept feedback? What additional financial and administrative resources will be required to operate the Council?

25% asked questions relating to the agenda for the Council. All of these referred to challenges relating to the mission and pastoral life of the Church described above in the first response to heading 2.

9% of responses asked questions relating to change and the Catholic Church. Some groups expressed concern about the urgent need for change, other groups wondered if there was an appetite for change in the Church and other groups questioned if change is even possible through a Council. For example, one group asked: "Why talk about it so much yet nothing changes?" Another group asked: "what will this [council] change?" Another group noted that there are different views among the faithful relating to change and then asked a question: "There will be people for change and people that are against change. How far are we prepared to go to keep our faith and church relevant in the future?" One small group rejected synodality, viewing it as incompatible with the tradition of a hierarchical Church.

### **4. We would like to know more about ...**

197 written responses received.

Almost all the collected group responses under this heading restated the challenges and questions outlined in headings 2 and 3, this time in the form of requests for further updates and more details. Many of these related to the Council itself: membership, operation, communication, terms of reference, relationship with parishes and other Catholic entities, agenda, work plan and impact. Some wished to have additional information about the Diocesan Assembly. Other groups reflected on the Church more broadly and the challenges to the "missionary aspiration of reaching everyone".<sup>6</sup> For example, one group wanted to know: "How do we mend the disconnect between church and the people." And another group wanted to know: "How [does] the church recognise and support people with disabilities? Is it a church for everyone? Supporting families with dementia, etc., who no longer attend church."

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 31.



HOW WILL THE COLE BESSHEEP  
Final command and shared by the Bishop reflecting  
the Vice-Chancellor, Elizabeth Vair, O. The people  
Presented papers of the committee regarding the  
Preservation and Continuation process will include  
the membership requirements and criteria

## KEY THEMES

### **Authentic listening and dialogue**

The people of God in Sandhurst felt that, through the Preparation and Consultation Meetings, they were being listened to and heard by the bishop. There was a shared belief among some that the practice of authentic ‘listening and dialogue’ had once been a feature of diocesan leadership, but not in recent times. Many expressed relief and felt encouraged that a genuine effort is being made by the bishop to listen to all: parishioners, clergy, school students and staff, employees of the Diocese and the office of Catholic Education Sandhurst. Many groups voiced their hope that once the Council is established, the practice of listening and dialogue would continue and become an integral part of its operation, both within the SMPC and with parishes, other diocesan entities and with the culture and society more broadly. Given that the proposal in the SMPC Preparation and Consultation Plan states that meetings of the Council will be held quarterly, some questioned if this could be achieved. Quarterly meetings of the SMPC were, in the eyes of some, far too infrequent to achieve a consistent and authentic practice of listening and dialogue. Others expressed concern that once the Council is established, it will only listen to voices that are familiar, the dominant and educated few who will be listened to and given the privilege of speaking: “a club of the usual suspects” as one group commented. These hopes and concerns are expanded and amplified in the following section: ‘inclusion and openness’.

### **Inclusion and openness**

The themes of ‘inclusion and openness’ were consistent and recurring in the collected group responses submitted. In the first instance, there was a perception by many that the Preparation and Consultation itself, at least in its intent, was both inclusive and open. The fact that diocesan staff were sent by the bishop to inform, consult and take feedback from the people of God on the proposed Council seemed to be, for the most part, very well received. As one group expressed it, they were grateful that the bishop understands the need to “reach the ordinary people”. The importance of diocesan staff ‘reaching out’ beyond the Chancery to be physically present to clergy, parishioners, school students and staff in all parts of the Diocese cannot be underestimated. One group expressed genuine surprise that diocesan staff would go to such trouble. Many groups also acknowledged the efforts of the facilitators to be inclusive by offering flexibility in terms of the scheduling of meetings. Responses also conveyed a sense of relief that the lay faithful had been included and listened to in the preparation and consultation for the Council and that the bishop understands the importance of inclusion and openness with such a significant undertaking for the Diocese.

Many groups embraced the commitment to ‘openness’ both through the Preparation and Consultation Meetings and in the intent that the purpose of the SMPC was “not an ecclesiastical organisation but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone”.<sup>7</sup> Numerous groups also wondered how the SMPC would operationalise this missionary intention when membership requires baptism and active participation in a parish faith community. Many wondered if members of the SMPC would or could be

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 31.

truly open: able to know how and where to reach out and find out what was going on in the world, to read the signs of the times, to discern and provide advice relating to effective missionary outreach. As one group response asked: How will the Council “listen to the small voices”? Another group explicitly mentioned that the SMPC must avoid disempowering the local parish by diminishing the authority of the parish priest and the parish pastoral council. For a significant majority of the people of God consulted, this Council must do two things: find ways to stay close to the lived experience of the faithful and remain appraised of the socio-cultural reality of the times.

Many responses also advocated for the inclusion of particular groups in terms of both the preparation and consultation for the Council, and in the agenda and processes of the Council itself: women, young people, young families and school staff members, people who identify as LGBTQI+, divorced Catholics, Catholics who have walked away from parish life and were not present at the meetings. A brief mention of some of these groups is made below. Many responses expressed concern that the proposed Council would struggle to reach, be open to and include these groups of people when they were not present at the Preparation and Consultation Meetings to have their voices registered. One group response expressed it this way: “What conscious efforts have been made to engage with and consult with those who live on the periphery of our communities and those we have pushed out?”

### **Women**

The sense of the faithful consulted was that the gifts and experience of women must be reflected in the Council membership, and strategies for the ongoing and meaningful inclusion of women in the mission and pastoral life of the Church prioritised in its agenda and workplan. Some responses expressed a fear that the inclusion of women on the Council would only be for the sake of appearances and that their contribution would be ignored.

### **Young People**

There was a sense of encouragement and gratitude from parishioners and staff and students in schools that the bishop was open to hearing the voices of young people in the Preparation and Consultation Meetings. Many group responses suggested that a strategy aimed at the inclusion and involvement of young people in the life of the Church should be a priority for the Council.

### **Parish-school relationship, families**

The relationship between parish and school and the involvement of families in the life of the local parish was raised as a focus area for the SMPC. Many of the faithful expressed a longing for the presence of school staff and families in the life of the parish and an overall strengthening of the connection between parishes and schools. Some expressed concern about maintaining and enhancing the Catholic identity of schools in the current cultural milieu. Many wondered what kind of connection and influence there would be between the SMPC and Catholic Education Sandhurst office staff. Some expressed the hope that the bond between Catholic Education Sandhurst and the Diocese at all levels, school, parish, education office and governing boards, might be enhanced and strengthened by the Council.

### **Small parishes in small communities**

A minority voice in the feedback, but an important one is the inclusion of small parishes in small communities. As one group asked: “will smaller parishes be heard”? A fear expressed in more than one collected group response was that the hopes, needs and concerns of small parishes in small communities will be overshadowed by the large parishes in larger centres.

### **Catholics who are no longer active in their local parish**

A strong sub-theme of ‘inclusion and openness’ related to baptised Catholics who, for whatever reason, are no longer active in the parish community. The sense that this group is a great loss to the Church was a powerful one and was referenced in many responses. Some small groups questioned the wisdom of this group being excluded from becoming members of the Council. Other groups wondered how this group could be reached by the Council and invited to share their experience.

## **Communication**

Communication was raised as a concern by many small groups. Most concerns constellated around how the Council will communicate with the people of God and how the people of God will communicate with the Council. For example: “How will the issues discussed, and decisions made be communicated to the wider community?”, and “How does the Council accept feedback, criticism and praise? How are decisions informed by the parishes?”. Underlying this concern seems to be a fear from some that the Council will become disconnected from the “ordinary people” across the Diocese, providing advice and making decisions based on the experience of a few well-educated elites. A minority reflected on how the use of theological and sophisticated language in official documentation, such as the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council: Preparation & Consultation Plan, had the potential to exclude those less educated and those for whom English is not their first language. Some also expressed concern about the use of digital communication and the way it can exclude older members of the community.

## **A bias for action**

Some groups felt encouraged by the action relating to the Year of Preparation and Consultation for the SMPC. At the same time many group responses reflected a fear that the commitment to listening in the Preparation and Consultation Meetings and by the Council once it is established, would not be matched by an equal commitment to action. One group expressed it this way: “The inaction in the past. The listening with no action. The perception [that] the previous consultation has not been authentic.” Another group asked: “What will be visible actions we will see and what will be the impact on the ground?” One group made an explicit link between action and inclusion: “This process and the establishment of a SMPC will be academic if it does not affect or touch the ordinary and marginalised people.” A significant number of the people of God consulted in the Diocese are wary of talk and are seeking meaningful action from the Preparation and Consultation Meetings and the SMPC. A minority noted the way that action which results in change can affect people, and expressed a view that the Council must consider and care for the needs of those who find change difficult.

## Hope in the face of hurt and cynicism

The apparent contradiction of hope in the face of hurt and cynicism is neatly captured in the following quotes from two collected group responses:

“We are encouraged by the fact that this council is to be a vibrant voice to the bishop, who has listened to and is reflective of the ‘signs of the times’. There is a sense of hope and optimism surrounding the formation of the SMPC and the feeling that there is an open and transparent response to the ‘Go Forth’ report.”

“Will this new Pastoral council just be another ‘box ticking’ exercise, or will we be really listened to?”

The poles of hope and cynicism articulate a pastoral reality for the people of God in the Sandhurst Diocese. Among some there is also a cherished memory of the previous Diocesan Pastoral Council. This seems to be a symbol of an energetic, consultative and hope-filled pilgrim Church; this would be named today as an experience of a ‘synodal’ Church. Several group responses expressed the concern, based on their lived experience that if the bishop leaves the Diocese, the time and effort to establish a Council will be wasted. Some of the faithful consulted in the meetings expressed cynicism about this possibility, perhaps revealing an underlying hurt, and maybe even a sense of dissatisfaction about the fact that the authority to govern a Diocese is constituted solely in the office of the bishop.

Establishing the Council is clearly a sign of hope for a great many of the faithful in Sandhurst. Many see the SMPC as a chance for the Church to face reality, to be strategic and responsive and, as one small group expressed it, “to be real and meaningful to all people”. Many also fear that the SMPC will be unrepresentative, not accountable or transparent, inward-looking, ineffective, and short-lived. Some of those consulted appear to hold both hope and fear in their hearts for the SMPC.



# CONCLUSIONS

There are implications for the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council from this Report on the Preparation and Consultation Meetings conducted throughout the Diocese. These relate to the way the SMPC is established, as well as its operations and workplan.

## Establishment

- Ensure that information regarding Expression of Interest in becoming a member of the SMPC is promoted widely, made freely available and easily accessible.
- Ensure proper representation on the SMPC from all deaneries across the Diocese, large parishes and small country parishes and other Catholic entities in the Diocese.
- Ensure diverse representation on the SMPC whilst respecting the requirements of the Code of Canon Law.
- Ensure the appropriate representation of women on the SMPC.

## Operations

- Embrace processes that enhance authentic listening, dialogue and discernment.
- Provide formation for members of the SMPC in processes that support and enhance authentic listening, dialogue and discernment.
- Establish and maintain effective communication channels with clergy and the lay faithful in parishes, College of Consultors, Council of Priests, Pastoral Associates Network, Diocesan Finance Council, Chancery staff, Catholic Education Sandhurst staff and boards, principals and schools, CatholicCare Victoria and other related entities.
- Establish and maintain effective systems for consultation, feedback and reporting.

## Workplan

- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the missionary and pastoral outreach to families, young people, marginalised groups and those who are baptised but are no longer active in parish life.
- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the promotion of the equal dignity of women and men; to enhancing the role of women in the Church in Sandhurst; and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality.
- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese aimed at strengthening the connection between parishes and schools, parishes and Chancery, Chancery and Catholic Education Sandhurst, and other Catholic entities in the Diocese.
- Provide a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the initial and ongoing formation of the faithful in missionary discipleship, missionary and pastoral outreach, theology and liturgy, ministry, listening, dialogue and discernment.



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# APPENDIX

## A FACILITATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

On release of Interim Report Ruth Lawlor reflects on the consultation phase of SMPC

\*This reflection first appeared in the Sandpiper eNews on 10 October 2022

When the Second Assembly for the Plenary Council ended, many members breathed a sigh of relief. They knew their role in the Council was, for the most part, finished. But for me there was a different feeling. Finally, we were able to move beyond the national conversation about the realities and future of the Catholic Church towards a more practical implementation stage within Sandhurst.

So, Chris Cotter and I began travelling around the Diocese to meet with people in parishes as part of the Preparation and Consultation phase for a Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC).

An interim report on the findings of these Preparation and Consultation Meetings has been made available this week for anyone who would like to read it. It details some of the data we have gathered during our meetings so far. The data is interesting, insightful and worth looking at. The final report, when it is finished, will prove invaluable for the creation of the new SMPC and help provide the new members with a clear snapshot of what Chris and I have heard in our travels. But for me, the data and the report is only one small part of what we have gained through our travels.

The people of Sandhurst are wonderful. They are resilient, hopeful, passionate, caring, and so many other positive things. They are also hurt, disillusioned and worried. In short, they are experiencing a wealth of human responses to the current world we live in. I have gained so much more insight into our Diocese by listening to the stories from our parishioners. Stories of pain and stories of hope. It is the stories that humanise the data. Unfortunately, the report, based on the data we gathered, has been unable to capture these stories.

From one parishioner I heard the sorrow they felt after feeling they had said the wrong thing to a parent during a sacramental program. From another I heard the concern that possible membership to a council would be limited if the Diocese does not consider the real commitments people have outside of Church, particularly for those who have full-time employment or are studying. From another parishioner I heard the pain they felt for their grandchild who walked away from the Church due to being a member of the LGBTQI+ community and feeling unwelcome. There are so many stories like this in our Church community that need to be shared and acknowledged.

Not everything we heard told stories of pain, sorrow or concern. There were also the stories of people finding community in their parish after the death of a spouse, or a loved one. Stories of parish communities rallying around someone when they were in need. There were stories of volunteers and parish groups sharing meals and coming together to share their lives. And that is, to me anyway, what

a Parish should be; a place where we can belong in both the highs and lows of our lives. These stories reminded me to not only tell the stories of hurt in our Church; we all need to share and listen to the stories of hope.

And this doesn't even touch on what we have been learning from students in the Secondary Schools we have visited so far. Maybe I'll save that for another reflection, but the responses have not been all that different from what we've heard in the parishes.

So, what do all these stories have in common? Whether they are stories of pain or joy, or a combination of both, they have all reminded me that everyone who has attended one of the Planning and Consultation Meetings loves our Church. We may not always like it, but we still love it. And that love comes with a sense of hope that maybe we, as the Body of the Church, can do better in the future. It can be easy to focus on the challenges we face, but what I am hearing as I travel around and meet with people is that I need to remember to focus on the hope; I am going to continue seeking out stories of hope in our Diocese for our Church. And when I see you next, I hope that you know I would love to hear your story as well.







CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SANDHURST