



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Report captures history of diocesan pastoral councils in Australia

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The first ever historical analysis of diocesan pastoral councils in Australia is seen as an important contribution to an ongoing conversation about the role of such councils in the life of the Church now and in the future.

As part of its response to *The Light from the Southern Cross*, a national review of diocesan and parish governance and management, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference said it would gather information on the theological foundations for diocesan pastoral councils and their history in Australia.

Historian Damian Gleeson was engaged to write a report on the history of diocesan pastoral councils, which surveys the period since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Dr Gleeson's report, *Diocesan Pastoral Councils: An Australian Historical Study*, reveals that while a significant number of archdioceses and dioceses have had pastoral councils during that time, only five are operating currently.

The Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle had shown the longest continuous commitment to a council, stretching from 1990 until late last year.

Dr Gleeson said much was written about diocesan councils in *The Light from the Southern Cross* and in the Bishops Conference's response to that report, but both seemed to underestimate their achievements while they were operating.

"Diocesan pastoral councils have generally had a solid track record of shared decision-making, respectful engagement between clergy, religious and laity by working in 'harmony' with the Ordinary (Bishop), and implementation of faith-focused and broad pastoral services across the Australian landscape," he wrote.

Dr Gleeson indicated that councils flourished because of supportive bishops, effective executive committees that focused on mission to drive initiatives, strong partnerships maintained with parish and regional councils and relationships built with other diocesan organisations, as well as appropriate consultation and decision-making procedures.

The research also suggested strong achievements from councils with a majority of elected or appointed lay members.

Dr Gleeson concluded that the "attitude, energy and enthusiasm of a bishop are the largest factors influencing the existence, meaningfulness and longevity" of a diocesan pastoral council.

Based on his research, Dr Gleeson drew up lists of exemplary characteristics for councils, and other attributes that contributed to their success.

The report [has now been published online](#).

Trudy Dantis, the director of the National Centre for Pastoral Research, said her agency has prepared additional material on diocesan and parish pastoral councils to help create a holistic picture of their past and present contributions.

"Dr Gleeson's valuable research helps progress the work being undertaken by others to create fertile soil for developments in diocesan pastoral councils in coming years," she said.

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“One thing we have discovered across the breadth of the research is the diversity of models for such councils and the diversity of needs for various contexts.”

The National Centre for Pastoral Research looked at existing data from its vast archives, including the Building Stronger Parishes project, submissions to the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia and the National Church Life Survey.

In their response to *The Light from the Southern Cross*, the Australian bishops referred the matter of diocesan pastoral councils to diocesan synods that will occur in the five years after the conclusion of the Plenary Council. The Council’s second assembly will be held in July this year.

Fr Stephen Hackett MSC, general secretary of the Bishops Conference, said the several resources on diocesan pastoral councils, including Dr Gleeson’s report, will assist in the development of plans at the local level.

“In the years ahead, dioceses will be looking to new models for pastoral councils, not just new variations of what has been used before,” he said.

“The dioceses will do so with a thorough understanding of diocesan pastoral councils, gathered from a series of reports and analyses, and they will also rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to find the model suited to their gifts and needs.”

[Click here to access Dr Gleeson’s report.](#)