

Diocese of Ballarat

Pastoral Planning Panel Report

This report offers an overview of the key pastoral, leadership, and strategic initiatives undertaken across the Diocese of Ballarat during 2025, in the wake of the Diocesan Assembly held in late 2024. It reflects on a year that was both purposeful and reflective, while also outlining key priorities and forward planning for 2026.

The year 2025 marked a significant period of consolidation and discernment for the Diocese. Attention was given to receiving and reflecting on the fruits of the Assembly, embedding more synodal ways of working, and establishing strong foundations for the next phase of pastoral life. Central to this work was a deepening commitment to shared leadership, mission, and a renewed sense of purpose across diocesan communities.

Throughout the year, emphasis was placed on strengthening relationships with clergy and fostering a shared understanding of leadership and mission. Opportunities were created for dialogue and discernment, exploring what collaborative leadership could look like in practice and how parishes might more fully embrace their missionary identity.

Looking to 2026, with a new bishop beginning his ministry, the Diocese remains committed to building on this foundation—further strengthening leadership and governance, deepening engagement with parish leadership in its many forms, fostering a culture of ongoing discernment, and advancing strategic planning across the Diocese.

Strategic Themes & Highlights

Leadership & Governance Renewal

Building on the priorities articulated at the Diocesan Assembly, a significant focus in 2025 was placed on reviewing and strengthening leadership and governance arrangements to better support pastoral mission, accountability, and collaboration.

- **February:** Review of Diocesan Assembly outcomes and strategic follow-up, including engagement with Assembly facilitators to clarify the intent of delegate recommendations and to ensure fidelity to the Assembly's discernment.
- **March - November:** Zone meetings focused on leadership and governance, providing local opportunities for clergy and lay leaders to reflect on Assembly themes and practical implications for parish and diocesan life.
- **August:** Establishment of the **Leadership & Governance Working Group** to explore future leadership and governance structures for the Diocese of Ballarat. This group has served as a key forum for integrating Assembly insights with canonical, pastoral, and practical realities.
- **September:** Formation session for diocesan commissions and committees on purpose and effectiveness, aimed at clarifying roles, improving collaboration, and aligning diocesan structures with synodal practice.
- **September:** Administration Day in Horsham to strengthen governance practices and shared understanding of diocesan administration.
- **November:** Presentation of a draft governance structure to the Leadership & Governance Working Group, followed by the creation of a collaborative online platform to allow continued refinement.
- **December:** Developing the necessary documents and operational frameworks for the formation of the Diocesan Mission and Governance Council.

Together, these initiatives have provided a substantial body of reflection and draft material on diocesan governance that may assist the bishop in discerning future directions and priorities.

Clergy Succession & Well-being

Recognising the central role of clergy in the life of the diocese, significant work in 2025 addressed succession planning, sustainable leadership, and priestly well-being.

- **February:** Early planning for parish transitions, retirements and evolving leadership structures.
- **March:** Parish Priest–Pastoral Planning (PPP) visits commenced, enabling direct listening to priests' experiences, challenges, and hopes regarding leadership and parish life.
- **April:** Support provided to the Personnel Board in clergy retirement planning, alongside development of a broader succession strategy.
- **May:** Clergy succession plan forwarded for inclusion on the Personnel Board agenda.
- **July:** Continued focus on clergy well-being, renewable leadership models, and access to formation and support resources.
- **October:** Clergy Forum scheduled for 29 October to discuss pastoral priorities and future directions.
- **December:** Outcome of Clergy Forum was a review of the zones – “Reimagining the zones” was distributed for comment with facilitation of review to be conducted early 2026.

This stream of work has begun to establish clearer data, common language, and shared awareness regarding clergy sustainability in the Diocese.

Synodal Practices & Parish Engagement

In response to the Assembly's strong emphasis on listening, participation, and shared discernment, 2025 included several practical experiments in synodal practice across parish and agency contexts.

- **March:** Engagement with Catholic agencies, leading to agreement to trial synodal conversations with hospital staff.
- **April:** Trial of synodal practices at St John of God Hospital, Ballarat.
- **June:** Spiritual Conversation session held in Wendouree, which was well received and recommended for wider diocesan use.
- **May–July:** Ongoing PPP visits with priests, combined with parish engagement to support leadership development rooted in listening and dialogue.
- **September:** Formation session for diocesan Commissions and Councils, facilitated by Fr Justin Driscoll, focusing on diocesan structures, consultative bodies, and synodal practices.

These initiatives have begun to build confidence and shared skills in synodal processes, offering practical models that may be expanded or adapted in future pastoral planning.

Formation & Engagement Planning

A focus on strengthening formation and engagement initiatives to ensure alignment with Assembly priorities while preparing for the next stage of diocesan mission.

August: Submission of a proposal to Catholic Theological College for a Synodality Formation Pilot Program.

November: Distribution of expression-of-interest materials for participation in synodality-focused formation.

December: Expressions of interest received, with participants advised of key dates for 2026.

Achievements

- Follow-up and dissemination of the Diocesan Assembly report.
 - Zone meetings conducted across the diocese to deepen engagement with Assembly themes.
 - Formation initiatives delivered for both clergy and lay leadership.
 - Development of clergy succession planning and draft strategic frameworks.
 - Strengthened engagement with Catholic agencies.
 - Introduction and trial of synodal practices in parish and agency settings.
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Acknowledgements

We extend our gratitude to Bishop Paul, Diocesan Assembly delegates, facilitators, clergy, diocesan commissions and councils, and Catholic agencies for their commitment, generosity, and collaboration throughout 2025. Their contributions have helped lay important foundations for the Diocese as it enters a new chapter of episcopal leadership.

Looking Ahead

Planning for 2026

1. Diocesan Assembly – Ongoing Implementation

a) Diocesan Parish Engagement Plan

- Deepen parish engagement with Assembly priorities through listening, formation and feedback.
- Ensure parish realities continue to shape diocesan pastoral decision-making.

b) Continued Engagement Plan: Zone Meetings

- Use zone meetings as key spaces for consultation, formation, and shared discernment.
- Strengthen two-way communication between parishes and diocesan structures.

c) Diocesan Pastoral Council

- Embed Assembly priorities into the purpose and practice of the DPC.
- Ensure the DPC emerges from parish and zone leadership, not separate from it.

d) Review of Diocesan Commissions and Councils

- Clarify relationships between commissions, councils, and the DPC.

- Strengthen coherence, collaboration and mission alignment.
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2. Re-imagining Diocesan Zones

- Review zones – maybe as **relational and pastoral networks**, not always primarily administrative groupings.
 - View zones as:
 - Places of listening and consultation
 - Formation hubs for clergy and lay leadership
 - A critical link between parishes, diocesan processes, and the DPC
 - Regular zone meetings could include prayer, formation input, structured listening and clear pathways for communication into diocesan discernment.
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3. Formation Across the Diocese (Parish and Diocesan Leadership and Governance)

Formation will support:

- Parish and ministry district leaders
- Clergy and lay leaders engaged in diocesan processes

Focus Areas

- Synodality and shared responsibility
- Discernment and consultation
- Role and purpose of the Diocesan Pastoral Council
- How parish and zone insights inform diocesan planning

Formation may be delivered through a variety of avenues, including **regional gatherings**, supported by written and digital resources.

4. Establishment of the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC)

- Build on substantial work already completed by the **DPC Working Group**
 - Finalise:
 - Purpose and role
 - Membership and representation
 - Relationship with zones and parish councils
 - Provide formation for DPC members to ensure a shared understanding of synodal leadership.
 - Embed the DPC as a key advisory body supporting the Bishop.
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5. Parish Succession Planning

- Support proactive planning at both parish and diocesan levels.
- **Clergy considerations include:**
 - Age profile and future workforce planning

- Ongoing consultation forums (including exploring another “*Priest in Parish*” forum)
 - Welcome Pack for newly appointed priests
 - International Priests
- Strengthen forward planning through shared discernment with clergy and parish leadership.
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6. Parish Planning

i) Merging of Parishes

- Support parishes through merger processes with clear pastoral leadership, communication, and formation.

ii) Looking Forward

- Assist parishes to discover more mission-focused planning rather than transactional.

iii) Review of Merging Parishes

- Reflect on recent and current mergers to identify learnings for future practice and diocesan policy.
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7. CTC – Diocese of Ballarat Program

Synodal Formation Update

- Receive updates on the synodal formation initiative.
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8. Parish/Priest – School Relationship

- Collaborative Leadership with the Diocese - Working jointly with diocesan leadership ensures alignment in vision, policy, and pastoral priorities across parish, school and wider Church.
 - Building Community and Engagement - Partnership encourages participation of families in parish life, strengthening relationships and fostering a vibrant, connected faith community.
 - Shared Mission and Identity - The parish and school together support the faith formation of young people, ensuring education is grounded in the Gospel and the life of the Church.
 - Strengthening Faith Formation - A strong priest–school relationship helps connect students and families to sacramental life, liturgy, and parish community.
 - Visible Leadership and Connection - The presence and engagement of the parish priest in the school builds a sense of belonging and unity between parish and school communities.
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Shared Diocesan Pastoral Process

- Continue the synodal framework of **listening, reflection, and discernment**
 - Connect parish, zonal, school and diocesan planning
 - Support the work of the diocesan bodies
 - Remain flexible and responsive to differing parish contexts
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