

DIOCESAN SYNODAL COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT PROCESS FOR PARISHES

August 2026

Background

- In October 2021, Pope Francis opened the worldwide Synod on Synodality and invited every diocese to enter a process of listening and dialogue with their communities.
- Here in Christchurch, Bishop Paul established a small diocesan team to guide our diocese through this process. This led to the publication of the Diocesan Synthesis Document in June 2022.
- Following the diocesan, national, and continental stages, the first global assembly met at the Vatican in October 2023, with a second assembly taking place in October 2024. Bishop Paul was one of New Zealand's delegates to these assemblies.
- The Final Document was approved by Pope Francis on 26 October 2024.

Where to now?

In his first address following his election, Pope Leo XIV said: *"To all you brothers and sisters of Rome, Italy, of all the world, we want to be a synodal church, walking and always seeking peace, charity, closeness, especially to those who are suffering."* (Pope Leo XIV, 9 May 2025)

At the end of June 2025, the document *Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod* was released with the endorsement of Pope Leo XIV. It sets out the next steps for helping synodality take root in our local Churches.

The implementation phase focuses on:

- **Embedding synodal practices:** Developing sustainable structures for dialogue, discernment, and co-responsibility.
- **Strengthening formation:** Equipping clergy and laity alike to live and lead synodally, grounded in Scripture, prayer, and discernment.
- **Enhancing mission:** Renewing pastoral priorities to reflect listening, inclusion, and missionary discipleship.
- **Fostering accountability:** Creating mechanisms for review, transparency, and feedback within the life of the Church.

All participants in this implementation phase are encouraged to:



Pray: Root every step in communal prayer and discernment.



Listen: Create space for diverse voices, especially those often unheard.



Collaborate: Strengthen communion between clergy, religious, and laity.



Act: Move from consultation to tangible renewal in pastoral and missionary practice.



Reflect: Continually assess progress and share experiences to foster a learning Church.



Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Scripture tells us that we should listen to the Holy Spirit and hear what is being said to the Church (Revelation 2:7).

I commend this process to you and invite you to prayerfully engage in the *Conversation in the Spirit* as we reflect on the vision and priorities of *worship, catechesis and witness*.

This process offers us a sacred opportunity to listen deeply to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and to discern together the path God is setting before us as His Church.

May this be a time of grace for all our communities of faith in our Diocese.

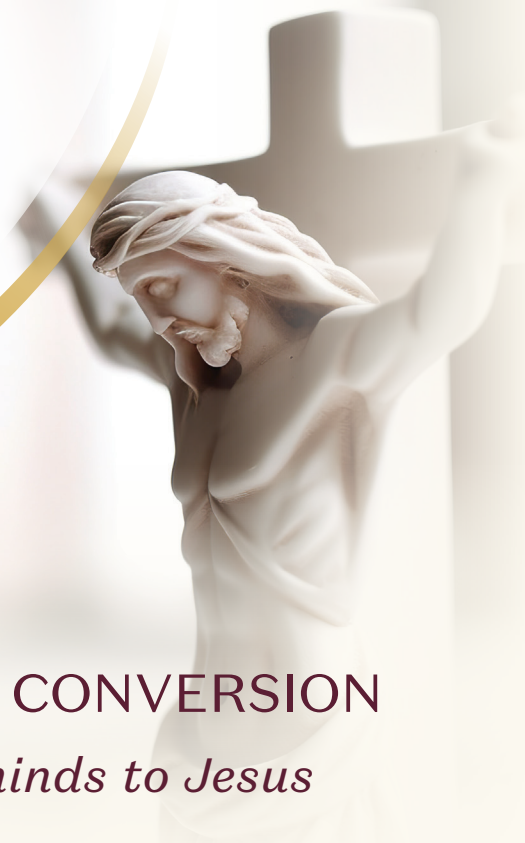
+ Michael Gielen

+ Michael Gielen DD
Bishop of Christchurch



BISHOP MICHAEL'S VISION FOR THE DIOCESE

Bishop Michael has reflected over a period of time and come to a vision for the diocese.



Metanoia – CALLED TO CONVERSION *Converting our hearts and minds to Jesus*



My vision is to lead a Church that reflects the heart of the Early Church (Acts 2:42) — one that has been shaken by the love of Christ, is nourished in the Eucharist, and empowered by the Holy Spirit through signs and wonders. As the Body of Christ, we answer the call of *duc in altum*—to put out into the deep, where each person is called to radical trust in Jesus through the sacraments. A church where we prioritise community, welcoming all, especially the lost and the broken, and strengthening those within. We will form hearts and minds through the richness of Catholic teaching, with hearts open to the Spirit's guidance, trusting that the Lord will add to our number day by day, building His Kingdom on earth.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

THREE PRIORITIES THAT COME FROM THIS VISION:



WORSHIP

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”

(Rom 12:1)



CATECHESIS

“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

(Rom 12:2)



WITNESS

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

(1 Pet 3:15)

Acts 2:42

Pope Leo is calling the Church to communal discernment—listening to the Holy Spirit and walking together in mission, participation, and communion.

Bishop Michael now asks that in the first instance parish leadership (Parish Pastoral Council, Senior Leadership Team or a group of parish leaders) gather and have a spiritual conversation based on the vision and the following question:

How is the Lord calling our parish to worship, catechesis and witness?

How does this fit with what you are already doing?

Some parishes may have a vision and priorities already in place. The Bishop's vision is envisaged to weave its way into the life of a community that may already have a vision.

The Spiritual Conversation

The Spiritual Conversation process is from the Ignatian tradition. If parishes have a trained facilitator they are welcome to lead this process themselves. Alternatively trained facilitators are available to come to you to assist if you prefer. Please contact Mike Stopforth in the Bishop's Pastoral Office for facilitator details.

Purpose

1. To provide a forum and process for parishes to reflect on the Bishop's vision and priorities
2. To form people in the use of the Spiritual Conversation process, that it might be a discernment tool to listen to the Holy Spirit.

Timeframe

In order to fit in with the Vatican timeframe for the Implementation process, please complete these Spiritual Conversations during September or October 2026.



Feedback

We seek your group feedback on the following points.

- Provide a short reflection (2-3 paragraphs) on the experience of the Spiritual Conversation. How was the process for you?
- What tangible/practical outcomes may have come from the discernment?

This will be helpful as we provide feedback to the wider evaluation assembly in early 2027.

Please provide feedback to Mike Stopforth by **Friday 20th November 2026**.

**CATHOLIC DIOCESE
OF CHRISTCHURCH**

BISHOP'S PASTORAL OFFICE



◀ SCAN

OR VISIT
▼

[cdoc.nz/news-events/
synodal-communal-discernment](https://cdoc.nz/news-events/synodal-communal-discernment)

Need more information or assistance?

Contact Mike Stopforth, Bishop's Pastoral Office.

Email mstopforth@cdoc.nz or phone 027 5398 542

CONVERSATION

IN THE SPIRIT

*Listening together
to the Holy Spirit*

*A simple process of prayerful listening and discernment
as we seek to hear what the Spirit is saying to our Church*



Preparation

- Allow a good amount of time for the process – e.g. 1.5 hours
- Form small groups – 6 to 9 people.
- Ensure as much as possible there are separate and quiet spaces for each group.
- Plan for facilitation – is this pre organised and a person briefed about it or is a facilitator assigned from the group?
- Either the facilitator or a member of the group needs to take notes
- People are welcome to make notes during each round.
- Circulate the reflection material approximately a week beforehand to allow for prayerful reflection.



Introductions & orientation



Prayer

Begin with Acts 2:42 scripture and a time of reflection, entrusting this time to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.



Round 1: 'What would I like to say'

- The facilitator reminds everyone there is *no discussion in this round* and asks all participants to simply listen deeply to each person and attend to how the Holy Spirit is moving within oneself, the person speaking and the group as a whole.
- Participants are invited to share one at a time with each person sharing 2-3 minutes each from the fruits of his/her prayer in relation to the question circulated. Care should be taken not to share a personal response to someone else's sharing.



Round 2: 'What I heard from others'

- Before starting round 2 there is a pause for silent prayer.
- The facilitator asks each participant to share what struck them most in the first round that *someone else has shared*. It is important in this round that people don't reiterate their own idea or introduce any new ideas. It is simply sharing what was heard from Round 1.
- This is a time of listening with no interruptions or discussion between sharing (1–2 minutes).



Round 3: 'What themes are emerging'

- Before starting round 3 there is a pause for silence
- The facilitator asks participants to reflect on what themes seem to be resonating from rounds one and two.
- Some dialogue now occurs, while the same spiritual attentiveness and respect is maintained.
- Note the 2-3 common themes that have emerged, particularly from Round 2. Are there convergences, questions still open.
- Have the note taker write up these themes which reflects discerned movements, not majority votes.



Conclusion:

Take some time to reflect on the experience