Becoming a Parish-in-Council

Bringing synodal processes to a local faith community in mission



Walking Together

At its heart, our Church is meant to be a people who walk together. That is what synodality means – to walk together. And so synodality is not just an event, or a program, or a project. It is a way of being Church.

A way of being Church where we listen to one another, we attend to what is stirring beneath the surface, and together, we listen for the voice of the Spirit – not just individually, but communally.

So what sustains this way of being?

Communion
How we relate to one another as members of the Body of Christ. A sense of belonging, being connected to one another in Christ. Synodality begins here – not with structures, but with trust, listening and mutual respect. Without communion, everything else becomes mechanical.

Participation
The invitation for the whole People of God to have a voice. Not just the confident, or the articulate, or the appointed. Participation asks: Whose voices are being heard? And whose are still missing? It is not about debate or persuasion, but about creating a space where each voice can be offered freely and received with care.

Mission
Because synodality is never inward-looking. We listen and discern so that we can be sent to serve, to heal, to witness to the Gospel in the world. Our listening always leads outward.

Communion grounds us. Participation engages us. Mission sends us. These three are not separate ideas; they are deeply connected – each one holding the others in place. And importantly, they are not abstract. They come alive through concrete practices.

At the heart of synodality is a very simple, and very humbling, conviction: God is already alive and active in the world, and in the Church. This means that when we gather, we are not trying to make something happen; we are not manufacturing outcomes. We are learning how to notice, receive and respond to what is already stirring, to what God is already doing. This changes everything. It changes how we listen, it changes how we speak, and it changes how we hold silence.

And this is why synodality is not just a project, but a way of being Church. A way that places relationships at the centre. Not structures first, not documents first, but people walking together. It calls us to build relationships, not just exchange opinions, and to grow in a deeper way of listening to one another, and together, for the movement of the Spirit.

What does walking together actually mean for us as Church? It means recognising that, through Baptism, we belong to the People of God and so have a part to play in the life and mission of the Church.

We are a community of Charisms. St Paul reminded the Corinthians that there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; varieties of service, but the same Lord. The Church is not a collection of individuals competing for influence, nor is it an organisation in which a few make decisions while the many remain passive recipients. It is a living communion in which each member has something distinctive to contribute.

We have different vocations, different responsibilities, different gifts. And those entrusted with leadership have particular responsibilities for teaching, guiding and making decisions. But all of us are called to participate. And if we are going to walk together, then we need to learn how to listen to one another.

Pope Francis spoke frequently about the importance of listening in a synodal Church. And he made an important distinction. Listening is more than simply hearing. We can hear somebody without really listening to them. We've all experienced conversations where, while the other person is speaking, we're already preparing what we're going to say next.

Synodal listening asks something different of us. It asks: Can I listen with enough openness that what you say might actually affect the way I see something?

And in the Church, there is another dimension. We are not only listening to one another. We are listening with one another. Because underneath all our conversations is a deeper question: What might the Holy Spirit be saying to us?

That changes the purpose of the conversation. We're not simply asking: What do I want? Or: What does the majority want? Or even: Who has the best idea? We're asking: What are we hearing when we listen deeply to one another, and what might God be inviting us to notice through that listening?

Why does the Church need this? Pope Francis said this is what God expects of the Church in the third millennium. Because the Church is made up of many voices and many experiences.

Some voices are heard very easily. Others less often. Some people are very comfortable speaking. Others need to be invited. Some have been involved in parish life for decades. Others have only recently arrived. Young people may see things differently from older parishioners. Families, single people, people from different cultures and backgrounds, people deeply involved in ministries and people who quietly come to Mass each week – all experience the life of a parish differently. No one person sees the whole picture.

And that is one of the insights at the heart of synodality: we need one another. If we want to discern well, we need to create spaces where we can hear more of those voices.

Pope Leo affirms the call to a synodal Church. He says: "We must all listen to one another. We are all called to participate."

This means more than consultation. Parishes, of course, have always consulted people. We have Parish Pastoral Councils, committees, meetings, surveys. All of those can be valuable. But the Church calls us to synodality.

We don't just ask the question: "What do you think?" We ask a deeper question: "What seems to be emerging among us?" That is discernment. And discernment is different from voting. It is different from debating. It is different from trying to persuade everybody else that my idea is the right one.

And it doesn't mean that everyone makes every decision. Different people within the Church continue to carry different responsibilities for decision-making and leadership.

Synodality is a way of being and a way of being for the Church. So it is about how we journey towards those decisions: how well we have listened, whose voices we have heard, what we have learned from one another, and how attentive we have been to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

And ultimately synodality has to become a concrete experience for all who participate in the life of the Church.

So the practical question becomes: How can a parish create spaces and a way of being Church at a truly local level, where many people can come together, pray together, listen deeply to one another and discern together about things that matter to the life and mission of their parish?

Being a Parish-in-Council

How can we create a way of being Church where not just the Parish Priest, the Parish Pastoral Council and ministry leaders contribute, but where the whole parish community can actively shape the future and fully live out the mission of their parish? One way of doing this is being a Parish-in-Council.

What Is Parish-in-Council (PiC)?

Let's start by exploring what PiC is not.

Parish-in-Council is NOT a town hall meeting. It is not a space for open microphones, stating positions, venting or debating competing opinions. PiC is instead a prayerful, structured gathering, grounded in listening and discernment, not in argument or persuasion.

Parish-in-Council is also NOT a forum for parish operational matters. It is not where operational issues such as the liturgy, parish staffing, property and maintenance, parish finances and budgets, or complaints are discussed.

Those matters are important, of course, but they belong in the appropriate operational and administrative channels, including the clergy, parish staff, Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Committee. PiC instead focuses on mission, direction and discernment, not management.

And finally, Parish-in-Council is NOT congregationalism. It is not about voting, majority rule or "the loudest voice wins". Authority is not transferred from the clergy to the people. Instead, PiC is a synodal process where all listen together for the voice of the Holy Spirit, with ordained leaders exercising their role with that shared discernment.

Parish-in-Council IS a synodal way of being Church, where parishioners come together in prayerful listening and conversation, and communal discernment about matters important to the life and mission of the parish.

Parish-in-Council is a gathering of the whole parish community. PiC is deliberately broader than the usual parish leadership groups, committees, ministries and even most parish events. Each PiC is an open invitation to everyone who participates in the life of the parish, whether they are actively involved or simply attend Mass each week, to come together as a whole parish community.

In our experience, PiC is about so much more than listening and discernment. Just as importantly, it is about building community, strengthening belonging and nurturing a parish where everyone feels known and valued – not just within a cultural group, a ministry or a particular Mass time, but as a parish gathering together as one.

Parish-in-Council is a prayerful space. Prayer isn't something simply done at the beginning and end of a PiC. Prayer, silence and attentiveness are woven into the conversation itself. We are trying to create enough space not only to listen to the person speaking, but also to notice what may be stirring within us.

Parish-in-Council is about deep listening. Everyone who comes to PiC is invited to contribute. But more importantly, everyone is asked to listen. And there is a structure that helps us do that, so that the loudest or most confident voices don't take over the conversation, and so that the shyest, quietest voices are also heard.

Parish-in-Council is about communal discernment. We don't gather simply to collect a long list of opinions or ideas. We are interested in what begins to emerge when people have had an opportunity to reflect, to speak and then really to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit.






Parish-in-Council II
Creating a true sense
of belonging for all


We are each
called to be
stewards




Our three discerned actions




10




5



Our Chatswood Experience

Synodality requires us to be attentive not only to what we already know, but also to what we have not yet imagined. It calls us to listen for the voice of the Spirit in unfamiliar places, to be open to possibilities. Our task is to discern faithfully the future into which God is inviting us.

That requires both the courage to experiment, to change and to take risks, and the humility to acknowledge that no individual or group possesses the whole truth of what a parish is called to become. Being a PiC is a powerful way for synodality to become real at the local level.

It has been more than five years since we began to imagine together what it might mean to be Church at **Our Lady of Dolours Parish, Chatswood, in Sydney, Australia (Diocese of Broken Bay).**

Emerging from the disruptions of the pandemic, and conscious that our parish was entering the second century of its life, we recognised that we were being presented with an extraordinary opportunity. We could simply return to familiar patterns of parish life, or we could allow ourselves to ask a more searching question: what is God calling our parish to become?

That question gave birth to our journey of 'Being Church in the City: We Journey Together'. It invited us to look beyond the maintenance of existing activities and to consider more deeply our identity, our purpose and our relationship with the wider community in which we are situated.

Through conversations, consultations, surveys and gatherings, we began to discover that the future of our parish could not be adequately discerned by a small group acting on behalf of everyone else. If the Holy Spirit is at work throughout the whole People of God, then the voices, experiences, hopes and insights of the whole community must have a place in our discernment.

This conviction led us in August 2023 to inaugurate Parish-in-Council at Chatswood Parish.

Since then, through ten gatherings and with over 1,000 parishioners participating, we have been learning a different way of being Church together.

We have discovered the value of listening before speaking, of making room for voices that might otherwise remain unheard, and of allowing our understanding to be enlarged through the experience of others.

Across our ten PiCs so far, we've gathered together around very different questions. We have explored themes such as belonging, evangelisation, young people, creating a culture of generous, joyful giving, and most recently, enhancing the beauty of our church's interior.

We've also found ways of bringing younger voices into the conversation through **Kids-in-Council** (which runs in parallel with every PiC), **Youth-in-Council** (run in our local high schools) and **Young Adults-in-Council** (run by our youth groups).

In doing so, we have begun to build a growing sense of belonging, participation and co-responsibility, benefited greatly from wider, deeper and richer discernment, and felt a tremendous sense of positive, Spirit-filled momentum and growth – a resilient foundation for us to continue building upon.










YOUTH-IN-COUNCIL II
Hope: Doorway to the Future
SHRINE OF HOPE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE




COMMUNITY
there is always
Prayer



Our Journey So Far

2023



Saturday 26 August

Chatswood holds its first PiC – **Parish-in-Council I 'Being Church in the City: Towards our Parish Vision'** – with 108 parishioners participating.



Saturday 18 November

Chatswood holds its second PiC – **Parish-in-Council II 'Creating a true sense of belonging for all'** – with the Key Question of "What immediate, concrete actions might we take to create a true sense of belonging in our parish?"

2024



Saturday 18 May

134 parishioners gather together for Chatswood's **Parish-in-Council III 'Belonging in Community: Charisms, Connection & Contribution'.**



Saturday 31 August

Chatswood holds **Parish-in-Council IV 'Igniting Young Hearts'** – gathering together to consider how God might be calling us to ignite young hearts and help them to feel a true sense of belonging in the parish.



Sunday 10 November

Chatswood holds its fifth PiC – **Parish-in-Council V 'Called to be joyful, generous stewards'** – to discern the actions we might take to create, nurture and sustain a culture of joyful, generous stewardship.

2025



Saturday 5 April

145 parishioners gather together for Chatswood's sixth PiC – **Parish-in-Council VI 'Renewing our church building for future generations'** – to discern what principles might guide decisions for the renewal of our church interior, ensuring it reflects our mission.



Sunday 29 June

Chatswood holds its seventh PiC – **Parish-in-Council VII 'Reaching out with Love'** – to consider the actions we might take to share what we love about our faith with others and to invite others to our parish.

2026



Saturday 25 October

Chatswood holds its eighth PiC – **Parish-in-Council VIII 'Finding Hope & Belonging in the City'** – exploring the top two or three actions God might be calling us to take so our parish grows as a place of hope and belonging for those who feel marginalised.



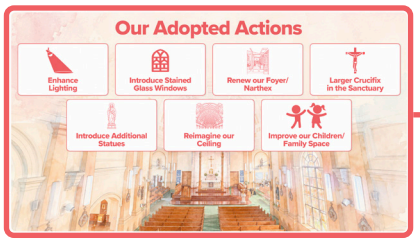
Saturday 16 May

167 parishioners gather for Chatswood's **Parish-in-Council IX 'Come, follow me: Getting to know Jesus more'.** Participants reflect on the many ways we encounter Christ — in prayer and Scripture, in the Eucharist, in our relationships with one another, and in the ordinary moments of daily life.



Saturday 27 June

The Good Shepherd Parish Plumpton holds its first PiC – 'Belonging' – with the Key Question of "What is God calling our parish to do to help people feel more welcomed at Good Shepherd?"



Saturday 15 August

Chatswood celebrates its tenth PiC – **Parish-in-Council X 'Our Lady's Church Renewed in Beauty'** – with the Key Question of "What might we do to enhance the beauty of our church's interior?"



Saturday 31 October

The **Parish of Lower North Shore** holds its first PiC, bringing together more than 100 parishioners to explore the theme of 'Belonging'. This event marks an important step towards strengthening relationships across its three church communities and nurturing a deeper sense of belonging as one parish family.



Saturday 21 November

The Good Shepherd Parish Plumpton will gather for its second PiC – 'Participation' – exploring how the parish might become a place where the gifts of the Holy Spirit are put to use, with people moving from the edges of parish life towards its heart – from attending to participating.

PiC Themes

Each PiC has a carefully considered Theme, which is always focused on the parish's mission – never on parish operational matters, nor on theological or liturgical questions. Through the exploration of each Theme, participants seek to discern how they individually, and together as a parish, might more fully live out the parish's mission.

Focus, Objective & Key Question

Once a PiC Theme has been discerned, the next steps are to discern the…

Specific Focus within the chosen Theme.

Objective we hope will arise from the PiC. In addition to bringing the parish community together as one, each PiC aims to discern a set of clear, specific actions for review and adoption by the Parish Priest.

Key Question, on which the Table Discernment Report is then based.

Informing & Inspiring Towards Discernment

While informative, PiCs are not 'information sessions'; instead, PiCs seek to inform not for information's sake, but with the aim of guiding and inspiring the parish community towards rich discernment.

We next consider…

- How might we best inform and inspire participants, creating a Spirit-filled environment that enables everyone to fully consider the Focus and discern what God might be calling us to do?
- How might we ensure that the Focus is wide enough to bring rich table conversations, but not too wide, so as to avoid diffuse, unproductive conversations?
- How might we develop the three Conversation in the Spirit rounds and questions so that participants are best prepared to discern a set of specific actions from the Key Question?

Scope

To address these questions, we carefully consider what the Scope of the PiC might be.

The Scope of a PiC is like a highway with guard rails. Using this analogy, our road (or Scope) should be…

- One way, with participants journeying together in the same direction.
- Wide with many lanes, although not so wide as to detract from participants journeying together.
- Clearly signposted, so that every participant is on the journey and no-one is left behind.
- Securely bounded, with guard rails that keep us all focused as we journey towards and then consider the Key Question – ensuring that no-one veers off track to the detriment of rich table conversation.

Chatswood Parish-in-Council Themes So Far



PiC I

Being Church in the City: Towards our Parish Vision

Saturday 26 August 2023



PiC VI

Renewing our church building for future generations

Saturday 5 April 2025



PiC II

Creating a true sense of belonging for all

Saturday 18 November 2023



PiC VII

Reaching out with Love

Sunday 29 June 2025



PiC III

Belonging in Community: Charisms, Connection & Contribution

Saturday 18 May 2024

PiC VIII

Finding Hope & Belonging in the City

Saturday 25 October 2025



PiC IV

Igniting Young Hearts

Saturday 31 August 2024



PiC IX

Come, follow me: Getting to know Jesus more

Saturday 16 May 2026



PiC V

Called to be joyful, generous stewards

Sunday 10 November 2024



PiC X

Our Lady's Church Renewed in Beauty

Saturday 15 August 2026

The Rhythm of a PiC

Because Parish-in-Council is not just a meeting but a way of being Church, it follows a deliberate rhythm — one that balances relationship, prayer, listening, reflection and discernment. This rhythm reflects the synodal journey itself: gathering as community, opening ourselves to God, listening deeply and responding together.

The PiC Agenda

The PiC Agenda is designed to embody this rhythm. Each element is intentional, helping the community move step by step from welcome, to encounter, to discernment and finally to sending forth.

The Welcome grounds the gathering in hospitality and shared purpose.

The Community Lunch strengthens communion through a shared meal and conversation.

The Liturgy places God at the centre and opens us to the Spirit.

The Keynote Presentation offers input and context for reflection.

Conversation in the Spirit allows us to listen together for what the Spirit is saying.

The Close gathers insights and entrusts the journey back to God.

Taken together, this rhythm ensures PiC is deeply human, deeply spiritual and deeply communal — a space where the Spirit can move and the parish can grow together.

Conversation in the Spirit

Because PiC is about serious communal discernment, it cannot rely on a loose or informal way of talking together. Listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit requires more than good intentions — it needs a deliberate, prayerful and well-formed process.

So at the heart of PiC is the methodology of Conversation in the Spirit.

This method creates the conditions for deep listening, respectful sharing, silence and discernment, so that voices are heard without debate and the Spirit's movement can be recognised together. In this way, we don't just drift into opinion-sharing or problem-solving alone.

Conversation in the Spirit unfolds in three rounds, each round having a specific purpose.


LITURG


OPENING
LITURGY








Prayers
of the
Faithful








TABLE 11







From Discernment to Action

How does a conversation around a table become something that can actually contribute to the life of the parish?

During PiC, many conversations are happening at the same time. Each table is listening to the same question, but people bring different experiences and perspectives to it. So each table identifies what seems to be resonating and emerging for the group, and presents these shared discernments in a Table Discernment Report to the wider gathering.

But then, what happens next?

If PiC is going to be meaningful, the conversation can't simply end when the chairs are packed away. After each PiC, every table's contributions are carefully synthesised so that the bigger picture can emerge.

What emerged repeatedly across different tables? Where was there strong convergence?

The purpose of this synthesis isn't simply to produce a long list of everything everybody said. It is to help us find out: What did we hear as a parish? What is the Holy Spirit guiding our parish to do?

Once the discernments are synthesised, though, who actually makes the decisions? Who decides which discerned actions will be adopted by the parish?

Discernment and decision are related, but they are not the same thing. This is a very important distinction.

PiC does not replace the Parish Priest, the Parish Pastoral Council or other structures of parish leadership. What PiC does is create a way for the wisdom, experience and discernment of the wider parish community to contribute meaningfully to the life and direction of the parish.

Those responsible for leadership and decision-making in the parish – ultimately the Parish Priest – receive and consider the discernments, and determine which discernments will be acted upon and implemented by the Parish Pastoral Council, ministries and parishioners.

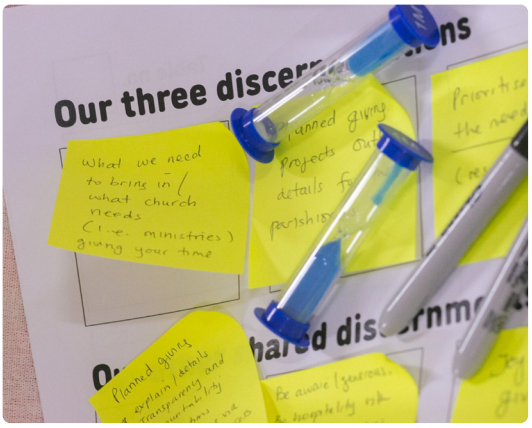
Depending on the question being considered, some things that emerge from PiC may be relatively straightforward to act upon. Others may require more exploration. Some may take time. And occasionally something that emerges may not be possible to implement at all.

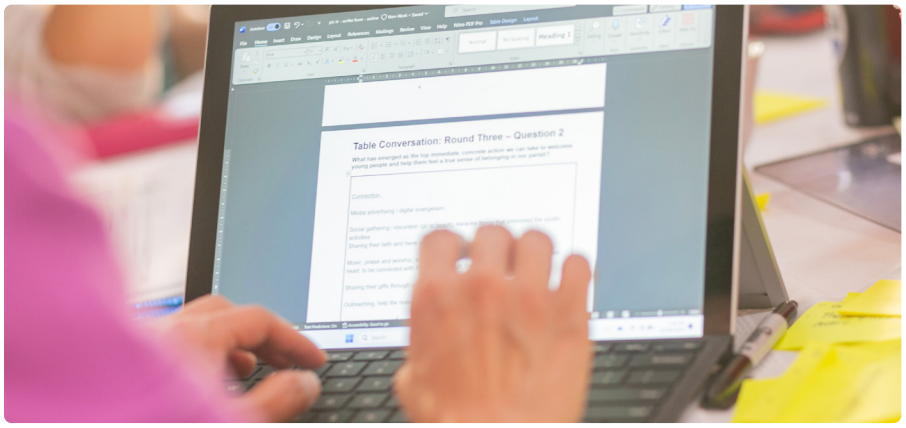
That's part of the reality of discernment. PiC isn't a promise that every discernment will be adopted. But it is a commitment to listen seriously to what has emerged.

And there is one more part of the process that is particularly important. The parish community needs to hear back. If people have given their time, spoken honestly and listened carefully, they should not be left wondering: "Whatever happened to all of that?"

Effective PiC practice involves closing the loop with the whole parish community. What did we hear? What is being taken forward? What needs further exploration?

That feedback builds trust, because people begin to see that their participation was not simply symbolic – that whether or not their discernment was acted upon, they were genuinely heard and genuinely contributed to the future of their parish.





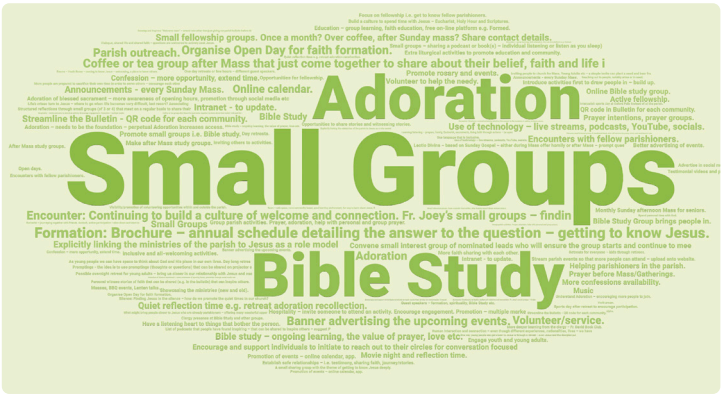




ROUND THREE

What are the top 2-3 actions God is calling our parish to take to help people know Jesus more?





Serving our Community

ADOPTED ACTIONS



2. Build Relationships

Building on all the good things we are already doing to create a true sense of belonging for all.

We will...

- Grow our monthly Community BBQ's and Morning Teas after Mass, reaching out further and inviting the local community.
- Strengthen our Welcoming Ministry Team, including Welcomers at each church entrance.
- Consider how we might form a Social Ministry to further develop our parish social activities.
- Host a Community Dinner in 2026, inviting people from our local area to come, get to know one another, and build new friendships.
- Create and promote more opportunities for companionship, conversation and connection, such as in the PEW Garden after Mass and over coffee on weekdays.
- Launch a bi-annual Welcome Morning Tea for newcomers to our parish community.



Our Lady OF DOLOURS

TABLE DISCERNMENTS

Called to be joyful, generous stewards



ADOPTED ACTIONS

Create a Joyful Stewardship Committee

We will form a parish Joyful Stewardship Committee, an end to end, action orientated team of skilled, passionate parishioners with responsibility for nurturing a culture of joyous, generous stewardship including...

- Developing and maintaining high quality parish giving materials, ensuring consistent language and design across print and online
- Continuously reviewing ways we can give - making giving more visible, accessible and simpler for all e.g., tap & go at parish events, a swipe card for children to contribute, ministry fairs, wills/bequests
- Seeking further discerned ideas from the parish community
- Developing and implementing an annual parish giving calendar
- Creating and maintaining a giving portal on our parish website with easy to understand, powerful scripture based messaging, simple ways to give online and the ability to set reminders/notifications

Share stories of joyful stewardship

We will share testimonies of joyful, generous stewardship within our parish and opportunities to give including...

- Regularly featuring quotes, Q&As, profiles and personal testimonies across our bulletin, website, social media and weekend masses
- Offering examples on how we each can be role models of joyful, generous stewardship to one another, especially for our children and young people
- Thanking people for their stewardship, recognising that everyone's contribution is valuable
- Profiling ministries in each weekly bulletin, sharing what each ministry is doing and highlighting opportunities to give our time, talent and treasure

Continue the conversation

We will widen the joyful, generous stewardship conversation started at Parish-in-Council V, to the whole parish community via our weekend masses including...

- Sharing the joy of giving and our call to be joyful, generous stewards in homilies through the year
- Clearly explaining the purpose of each collection - Clergy & Parish - at every mass
- Regularly explaining, prompting and updating the parish community on all the different ways to give
- Incorporating tap & go machines into our collection baskets/trays

Regular transparent & accountable reporting

We will report more regularly on our parish needs, goals and finances - not just once a year in the Annual Report - including...

- Sharing our parish's prioritised needs, vision and goals for each year
- Regularly reporting in the bulletin and website on our parish finances (income and spending) including progress towards the goals and celebrating when we achieve the outcomes
- Using simple, easy to read infographics including highlight pages in the bulletin, website and Annual Report
- Providing greater background clarity on spending decisions and how they relate to fully living our parish mission

A Shared Journey

Every parish is unique, with its own context. Every parish's path to being a Parish-in-Council will be different. But our journey is shared.

And so we have been sharing our practical experience and learnings with other parishes as they discern how they too might become a Parish-in-Council.

We are not simply trying to reproduce what Chatswood has done, but instead offer a tested process, some guiding principles and helpful lessons they can draw upon and apply within their own unique communities.

So far we have actively supported two other parishes in Sydney to bring Parish-in-Council to life...

The Good Shepherd Parish Plumpton
Diocese of Parramatta

Parish-in-Council I: Saturday 27 June 2026 – Belonging

Parish-in-Council 2: Saturday 21 November 2026 – Participation

The Parish of Lower North Shore
Diocese of Broken Bay

Parish-in-Council 1: Saturday 31 October 2026 – Belonging

Continuing the Conversation

This booklet is only a brief introduction to Parish-in-Council. We would warmly welcome the opportunity to continue the conversation and delve deeper into this way of living synodally at a truly local level.

Our contact details are...

Very Rev Dr David Ranson
Chatswood Parish Priest | Diocesan Administrator
david.ranson@bbcatholic.org.au

Yvonne Corpuz
yvonnecorpuz@gmail.com

Brendan Tertini
brendan@churchinthecity.com.au