

The Australian Plenary Council is ahead of England and Wales' Synodal Pathway on listening and discernment. It also has lay members, so what can we learn?

Penelope Middelboe offers us this brief report on the first of two stimulating panels recently run by WATAC and ACCCR in response to the 1st Assembly of the Plenary Council of Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 3-10 Oct 2021

The lay speakers at **Harnessing the Energy for Renewal, Convocation 3** were all members of the 280 strong Plenary Council, planned before Pope Francis initiated his synodal process. Unlike a synod a council has legislative and governance authority.

A Listening and Dialogue phase had ended in May 2019. A Discernment and Writing phase on 6 themes chosen by the bishops, involving lay people, priests and religious, had followed and produced papers. The themes were: Missionary and evangelising * Inclusive, participatory and synodal * Prayerful and Eucharistic * Humble, healing and merciful * A joyful, hope-filled and servant community * Open to conversion, renewal and reform. Neither these papers nor the evidentiary data collected during the Listening phase were made available to the delegates attending in October.

The agenda, described by one speaker as 'anodyne,' is illustrated in the diagram (*we hope to get this added in here*). It was drafted without input from the lay delegates, and there was no structural process to enable delegates to put forward, let alone agree, reforming action at the Plenary. At the very start of the Council two archbishops made interventions from the floor 'to draw lines in the sand'. The only mentions of women in ministry, LGBTQ+ equality, the exclusion of divorced and re-married people were in interventions from lay people. After a session on clerical sexual abuse delegates (many online) were given an afternoon in which to conduct personal reflection, which one speaker described as 'a lonely business'. No actions were mooted or agreed. Since October the bishops have met privately to discern the October Plenary and decide what to discuss in July 2022.

Asked what would be the sign of a truly synodal church, the speakers answered: 'lay-people believing and acting as co-responsible', 'inclusion of the excluded', 'justice at every level', 'access to the Eucharist for all who seek it', 'transparency and accountability at every level'.

Speaker Francis Sullivan, former CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, said 'This cannot conclude in Sydney in July,' and added 'the church will continue to be irrelevant in most people's lives until ordinary Catholics say we will participate and support *only* if we're treated as equals and our skills and competencies are used in decision-making at all levels.'

The Australian Plenary Council is ahead of England and Wales' Synodal Pathway on listening and discernment. It also has lay members, so what can we learn?

Penelope Middelboe's brief report on the second of two professional panels recently run by WATAC and ACCCR in response to the 1st Assembly of the Plenary Council of Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 3-10 Oct 2021

This overall session was called **Harnessing the Energy for Renewal, Convocation 3**. The second panel talked about frankly about governance. By failing to implement good governance (justice, transparency, accountability) the church was now actually preventing people coming to God. Lack of good governance (resulting in the phenomenon of clerical sexual abuse amongst other issues) had created a loss of trust and credibility. 89% of Catholics no longer go to church. And yet, the speakers pointed out, Catholicism is being *lived*: in Catholic social action groups, schools and hospitals. Which seems appropriate since Jesus spent most of his time talking about social issues.

There was a great deal of frustration at the Plenary Council becoming yet another talking-shop when so much work had already been done on this subject. Back in May 2020 a report from the Australian bishops called 'The Light from the Southern Cross' (written by 14 lay Catholics including theologian Massimo Faggioli, and 4 clergy members) had delivered a blue-print for good governance. It borrows the best practice from civil government and makes the laity co-responsible. 'It could be done in 6 months' said one speaker, 'if they put their minds to it.' [<https://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2020/06/the-light-from-the-southern-cross/>]

Thanks to Eleanor Flynn for your positive comments about the Root & Branch Synod and the Bristol Text, and our move towards R&B DIY 'ecclesial groups.'

