

LEADERSHIP AFTER
THE SYNOD

ANNE BENJAMIN & CHARLES BURFORD



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technologies.

Synodality was not widely heard as a term before Pope Francis, yet its roots extend back to Vatican II, deep into Church tradition and ultimately into the Bible. While it may sound new, it is ancient; while it may appear a human strategy, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. It calls us to listen in new ways that enable us to speak and act with Gospel power. These pages offer a well-informed and practical guide to the synodal path God is opening—not only to bishops, but to all the baptised.

— The Most Reverend Mark Coleridge, Archbishop Emeritus

Synodality requires people to take initiative. Each of the faithful must be willing to ‘rock the boat’ and create waves in ways that reflect their expertise, gifts, personality and context. That is certainly what Charles Burford and Anne Benjamin have done. I welcome this book for its accessible language and the engaging way the authors weave together reflection, personal experience and practical suggestions.

— Dr Jos Moons SJ, Boston College, author of *Witnesses of synodality: good practices and experiences, The future of synodality: how we move forward from here* and *Synodality and the Roman Catholic Church: an academic bibliography 2013–2026*

If synodality is to amount to anything substantial, it will need people to lead it. And those talents won't emerge like magic, miraculously. Though this book might broker some real ‘miracles’ of personal growth, to serve the Church of the future. Let's hope!

— Geraldine Doogue, Australian journalist and broadcaster

Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford draw on a lifetime of experience to share a fresh vision of synodal leadership. Underpinned by conversion, mission and openness to the Holy Spirit, their work combines theological grounding with insights from the secular world. A timely work as we take the next steps on our Synod journey.

— Avril Baigent, director of pastoral development, Diocese of Northampton, UK, and co-director, School for Synodality

Through the lens of social science, Charles Burford and Anne Benjamin offer a valuable resource for leaders of a synodal Church. Leaders at all levels are challenged to reflect on how the organisation of the Church can deliver God's mission in a time of profound change. The book opens the door to broader lay involvement, renewal of church practices, and a hope-filled understanding of what it means to be Catholic in the 21st century.

— Louise Wellington, parishioner

*It has been said that synodality is Vatican II in a nutshell. In a similar vein, *Leadership After the Synod* offers ‘formation in synodality’ in a nutshell. Synodal leadership requires commitment, patience and genuine participation. Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford guide readers into a reflective and grounded approach to synodality in vocation and mission.*

This book is a guide to forming a culture of synodal leadership and decision-making within agencies and communities. It explores both the possibilities and complexities of responding to the invitation of synodality, making a valuable contribution to leadership in a diverse Church and a challenging world. The conversations and practices that flow from this book will be important.

— Rev. Anthony Mellor, dean, Cathedral of St Stephen, Brisbane

Grounded in the real practice of synodality, this timely work offers clear considerations and practical insight for those entrusted with implementing the Church's shared mission.

— Qwayne Ybe Guevara, facilitator, National Centre for Evangelisation, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (coordinator of the Parramatta diocesan synod in 2023)

Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford highlight the deep relevance of synodality for the future Church, particularly through their emphasis on education and leadership for all Catholics. Their vision is both inclusive and expansive.

— Kevin Liston, co-chair, Council of Australian Catholics, (previously known as Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform)

*A healthy Church is one in that its leaders are well formed, not only in Scripture, theology, governance and church teaching, but also in the social sciences, other disciplines, and have the skills and insights informed by good decision making made with commitment, courage and foresight. Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford's recent book *Leadership after the Synod*, goes a long way in helping to achieve such outcomes, including reflective exercises and activities.*

This book presents the challenges and opportunities that confront Church leadership today and into the future. It offers skills to move forward in a radically changing and secular society, one that is often in opposition to the Church and one that requires leadership that is inclusive, formative, transparent, transformation and motivational.

As has been said, ‘Leaders are not born but made’ and so this book is a must read for church leaders and those aspiring to leadership, whether in the church or beyond.

— Rev Barry Dwyer OAM, parish priest, Parkes NSW

Anne and Charles have given our Church a valuable resource. It leads us on a very real and accessible journey into synodality, addresses honestly the realities of the Church and the wider world and offers practical ways to live synodality in our faith communities and our daily lives. It is a book to return to again and again, drawing upon the wisdom it shares.

— Lisa Bright, synodal consultant

Two experienced teachers and writers here provide a thoughtful and comprehensive framework for Leadership after the Synod. Synodality does not enjoy universal embrace and take up varies but this book canvasses the major initiatives on synodality since Pope Francis launched this new way of listening and travelling together.

It does so with a hopeful heart and provides an objective assessment for much needed future directions.

In so doing it is perfect for thinking parishioners and every Catholic who seeks movement in the Church. Moreover, it is an essential guide for every church leader, especially clergy.

It is a ready-made handbook for parish discussion groups, complete with activities and discussion topics.

— Justin Stanwix, deacon, Diocese of Wollongong NSW

Leadership After the Synod takes us on an insightful and practical journey through the opportunities, hopes and challenges facing all Church leaders, lay and ordained alike, as we navigate our way towards a more synodal and co-responsible church on mission.

— Steph Jorna, synod coordinator and project officer (inclusion), Archdiocese of Brisbane

As I read this comprehensive study of Synodality by Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford, I recalled the opening lines of the signature song by the Carpenters, 'We've only Just Begun'. It is evident through all the pages of the book that the authors regard the Vatican II Council (1962–1965), as a significant timeless treasure in the fertile field of our Catholic Faith Tradition. Through their published documents, the Council invited all the People of God to retrieve the foundational synodal culture which defined the lived reality of those in the early Church. However, after just over 60 years we are still striving to realise many of the cultural and ecclesial changes foreshadowed by the Council.

The impetus for the book Leadership after the Synod, springs from a twofold hope. The first is a response to the final document from the XVI Synod of Bishops, Synod for Synodality (2024), which emphasised that priority needs to be given to formation. Both authors have had long and credible

careers in this field. The second which is related to the first, emerges from the authors' concern for the next generation as they seek to find meaning and relevance in our Catholic Faith tradition.

Through the lived experience of the authors and their trustworthy academic studies, they recognise the importance of good leadership in building and embedding within all Church structures, a participative culture defined by synodality. Effective power they note resides, in relationships with the people who are being served.

While the book draws on the best of current scholarship especially in the field of leadership, it also is written in a broad accessible style. It is structured in a way that allows individual readers or groups to pause at the end of each chapter. Here readers find activities framed within questions which aim to personalise responses to the material presented in the chapter.

I am personally grateful that such a book has been written both for present and future generations. It has the capacity to strengthen synodality which is found to be at its best when communities are open to learn and are willing to live their faith in a way that is forever unfolding.

— Patty Andrew OSU, vicar for consecrated life,
Diocese of Parramatta

Anne and Charles wear their hearts on their sleeves in a way that I find humbling and inspiring. It is accessible in that it talks directly to the reader in a way that makes difficult concepts understandable, complemented by tasks and exercises to stretch our minds and our imagination. It is practical in that it doesn't pretend that synodal leadership is an easy task.

— John Warhurst, a director of the Council of Australasian Catholics, member of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia 2020–22 and member of the Governance Review Project Team
for Light from the Southern Cross



Contents

Introduction	2
Chapter 1	
Hopes and possibilities	4
Chapter 2	
The Synod on Synodality 2021–2024	12
Chapter 3	
The backstory on synodality – the Second Vatican Council	22
Chapter 4	
It’s all about mission	34
Chapter 5	
Conversion as change	44
Chapter 6	
Learning and formation	54
Chapter 7	
Leading for co-responsibility and participation in mission	66
Chapter 8	
Discernment, listening, dialogue and decision-making	80
Chapter 9	
Transparency, accountability, review	92
Chapter 10	
Going forward	104
Acknowledgements	113
List of Activities	114
List of Figures and Tables	114
Further Reading	115
About the Authors	116



Introduction

Together with Anne Benjamin and Charles Burford, I share a commitment to the renewal of the Church and am honoured to have been invited to write this introduction to their book, *Leadership after the Synod*, which builds on their earlier work, *Leadership in a Synodal Church*. Anne and Charles bring a wealth of skills, talents and charisms to their role as authors, offering thoughtful insight into leadership in this era of synodality.

Both authors bring their general knowledge and love of the organisation in question: the Catholic Church in Australia. Beyond knowledge, they have had significant personal involvement in practical examples of synodality within the Church, such as assemblies and synods. They have lived the spirit of the 1960s Second Vatican Council throughout their adult lives and, more recently, took part in the extensive lay contributions to the Australian Plenary Council (2018–2022).

Anne and Charles want to play their part in the future of their church, and they are too modest about the part that a book such as this can play. They offer belief and valuable professional expertise in the study of leadership through the application of the social sciences. Consequently, they pose hard questions born of love and make tough and challenging suggestions about ways forward. This is a journey undertaken much like human migration, which resonates deeply within our multicultural society – often embraced more for the sake of children and grandchildren than for oneself. They understand that this journey will not be concluded, indeed may be hardly begun, in our lifetimes.

Their starting point, with which I fully identify, is a blend of ‘irrepressible hope’ and ‘realistic caution’. For me, the balance between these is never static, but shifts from day to day; we all experience both good days and bad.

Such ‘guarded optimism’ or ‘measured participation’ is entirely appropriate in the circumstances. We live in a world which has lost trust in institutions, including the churches. Any reading of the world around us, secular and/or religious, must be cautious about the possibility of citizen participation in the cause of reform and the willingness of officeholders to listen (through consultation and other methods) and understand the aspirations of so-called ‘ordinary’ people (in this case the People of God).

Progress will be slow and uneven. This will apply, as Anne and Charles say, to both the pace and process. Yet we must never excuse or glorify such a slow and uneven pace. Instead, we should get on with it.

The Church is a complex organisation; indeed, some in the Church do not even agree to describe the Church as an organisation, and synodality is a challenging idea to those wedded to the status quo. There will be passive and active resistance, including from some parish priests and bishops who are willing, for various reasons, to 'ignore priorities set by Church authorities'. In this case the priorities were established clearly by the Synod on Synodality and adopted by Pope Francis and his successor, Pope Leo XIV. Synodality after the Synod is not an option. It is decreed by the highest Church authority and there is now a plan laid out with markers along the journey towards an end point. It has been strengthened by the reports of the Synod Study groups which have been published in 2025 and 2026.

The Synod is the authors' lodestar. They believe in it as an event and an approach to church life, and I urge readers to sympathise with their starting point. Some influential people in the Church in Australia do not sympathise with this and make a point of talking it down, sowing confusion among clergy, religious, and lay Catholics in their domain.

Given this starting point, their premise is clear: 'authentic synodal leadership must start with the best of contemporary leadership practice'. Here, Anne and Charles are firmly in the intellectual tradition of *The Light from the Southern Cross: promoting co-responsible governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*, the official church report on governance which reported to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia (August 2020). It too identified the principles and structure of good governance, including but not restricted to accountability and transparency, consultation, inclusiveness and participation, and good communication and relationships. Synodality was the framework for exercising co-responsibility within the Church.

This report and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which both preceded it and to which it was a response, made clear that synodality (or co-responsibility) is about cultural change above all else. The task is a large one, but 'without good leadership practice synodality is at risk'.

It is not a 'how to do it book', but one which offers perspectives and principles, recognising diverse situations in dioceses and parishes. There will be passive dioceses containing active parishes, and active dioceses containing passive parishes. That is the situation of the Church today for all of us. In each situation, however, as the Final Synod Document leaves no doubt, there must be both a will and a way. There can be no going back.

The heart of the book is in the chapters that lay out the perspectives and principles of synodal social science leadership. Their chapter titles echo the central principles. But these chapters are set within a spiritual and ecclesial context. Synodal activity is never for its own sake. The end purpose of synodality is the mission of the Church. The synodal journey of each of us must be a spiritual one that invites us to be converted to it and formed in its principles.

I would describe the style of this book as personal, accessible, and practical. It is personal in that it draws on the Church lives and aspirations of the authors. Anne and Charles wear their hearts on their sleeves in a way that I find humbling and inspiring. Their writing is accessible in that it talks directly to the reader in a way that makes difficult concepts understandable, complemented by tasks and exercises to stretch our minds and our imagination. It is practical in that it doesn't pretend that synodal leadership is an easy task.

Wisely, it returns in the final chapter to the recognition that one of the hardest tasks of synodal leaders is always to bring people together and to try to bridge the yawning gap between 'those who welcome synodality and those who fear it'. Fear of the other is a defining feature of our era and such fear is a powerful driver in Church circles. Synodal leadership should have no higher priority than to deal with it.

- Professor John Warhurst AO

SAMPLE



Chapter 1

Hope and possibilities

Possibilities

We are parents and grandparents who are people of faith living in a diverse, complex and troubled world. Over decades in our professional lives, each of us has been working towards the style of Church heralded at the Second Vatican Council and in the mandate towards synodality. This style was initiated by Pope Francis and confirmed by Pope Leo XIV. At this stage in our lives, anything less than this vision seems to us to run counter to the gospels. Anything less than this vision runs the risk of draining life from the Church's future.

We are excited by the call to synodality for our Church. At the same time, we have lived long enough to be realistic about how change happens in organisations. We do not expect overnight transformation in our Church, which is as burdened as it is gifted by its long history. We are committed to the journey, the walking towards a Church whose culture more truly reflects the spirit of Jesus as found in the gospels. This patient pragmatism, however, is in conflict with our impatience as elders to see timely change in the Church, a necessary change if it is to be a community in which our granddaughters are welcomed and in which they feel valued.

In our previous book, *Leadership in a Synodal Church*,¹ we laid out the foundations to support our conviction. These convictions are that the discipline and good practice of leadership in the world at large have much to offer the Church in its efforts to become characterised by greater synodality. This book is based on the same premise: synodality describes a culture that is focussed on mission (reaching out, rather than constantly looking inward); a culture that is lived as a companionship of disciples, open to dialogue and conversion as they discern, under the guidance of the Spirit, where the gospel of God's love is needed now. The emergence of such a culture needs leaders who have both the will and competence to build it. Above all, it needs leaders who breathe the Jesus gospel of a God of compassion. We argued that synodality will be

extremely difficult to achieve without attention to leadership and, by corollary, formation for leadership. Our insistence on formation for leaders for a church striving to become more synodal has now been confirmed. This confirmation came with the strong emphasis given to formation throughout the Final Document from the XVI Synod of Bishops, the ‘Synod on Synodality’.²

The style of this volume attempts to serve a wider audience than our first rather academic volume because it is our granddaughters and grandsons who bring us to this second book. We write this for all leaders in any ministry in our Church, ordained and commissioned, in the hope that it might assist and encourage them in their leadership. Every leader has an influence on the people with whom they work and interact. Knowingly or unknowingly. In a way that gives life or saps life.

The responsibility and privilege of leaders in ministry is for their influence to build the vitality and faith of their communities, and to call their members – the grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, young adults, children – to be their best as a community of followers of Jesus Christ.

Hoping for better this time round

Both of us have lived through the promise of Vatican II and the subsequent six decades. For much of the same time we have taught, researched and practised leadership and the social sciences within Catholic institutions. From our perspective, as members of the laity, we are disappointed by what has often been a lackluster reception of the documents and spirit of Vatican II particularly at the level of the local church.³ We know there have been developments in structures, in addition to the very dramatic changes in liturgical practice. These post-Vatican II initiatives seem to have occurred mostly at the universal and national Church levels such as, in Australia, including various iterations of a structure to promote the work of social justice.

One of the most significant changes following Vatican II was the curricula used in schools for religious education. The curricula picked up the spirit and style of the Council wholeheartedly. One could wonder if this creative and faithful implementation of the Council served to highlight in sharper relief what was not happening in many parishes and dioceses.

After the first liturgical reforms, the visible implementation of the spirit of Vatican II in parishes where Catholicism for most people is lived was very patchy. Weakest of all was serious commitment to education and formation in faith for adult Catholics. We believe the Church is reaping the fruits of this neglect as many adult Catholics are strong in faith, but it is a faith lived out in changed and complex times. It is balanced somewhat precariously on understandings of Scripture, liturgy and ecclesiology that were learnt as children. We concur with Kevin Liston who wrote in 2025 that the ‘level of theological literacy among Catholics generally is woefully inadequate for developing a mature spirituality in today’s socio-cultural environment. Jesus and our faith deserve better’.⁴

A Church in need of better organisation

More concerning is the apparent trend in some dioceses and parishes over the past twenty years to show signs of denying the authority of Vatican II as the magisterium of the Church and to seemingly want to revert to a pre-Vatican II style Church. We still hear firsthand accounts from friends, highly experienced and faithful parishioners, whose initiatives to talk about synodality in their parish were quashed by a parish priest young enough to be their son. We still hear how the priorities of a parish community are often abandoned or changed with the arrival of a new pastor.

Equally concerning is our observation, even in the mid-2020s, of very poor practice in some Church organisations and agencies: practices in recruitment (or non-recruitment), development (or non-development), as well as reviews and separation that shows little respect for staff as fellow professionals, and which is simply poor leadership practice. Some instances of change management in Church organisations exhibit the worst of corporate practice. By way of example, we know of changes in office structure where those most affected were not consulted in advance or honoured with a clear explanation for the change; and where staff numbers were reduced (all for good reason no doubt) with the affected staff given no proper acknowledgement of their service. Another poor practice occurs when there is an undue delay between a bishop reaching the mandatory retirement age and the appointment of his successor. Since there is a set age, all that is needed is a process that begins in the years before the bishop turns 75. The impact here can be to put pastoral initiative in that diocese more or less on hold. These consequences have damaged not only good and faithful servants of the Gospel, but also the Church’s reputation, credibility and pastoral action.

Culture takes shape in organisations by design or by default. The Church is an organisation. Choosing not to take initiatives develops a culture just as effectively as taking appropriate action does: it is a very good way to kill such directions, whether it be, for example, Vatican II teaching or the call to synodality. Similarly, leaving the emergence of synodality simply to come ‘in God’s good time’ is counterproductive. Leaders have a responsibility to act deliberately to promote the culture to which the Church is being called. Incidentally, as people who have worked in and led large organisations, we find the fact that some bishops and parish priests ignore priorities set by Church authorities (or magisterium) confusing. This may come through a church council, a synod, a pope or a bishop, often involving a diocesan plan. Significant decisions impacting families, parishes and staff are still reportedly being made by Church leaders without consultation. The Church might be very hierarchical, but it is often deficient as an efficient and well-ordered organisation. We surely can’t blame the Spirit for this. The chaos brought by the Spirit always leads to new life.

Amongst others, Monsignor Tomas Halik has suggested that the Church needs to re-think the territorial parish as the

primary focus for Christianity. While parishes will continue to exist, he has argued, pluralistic, postmodern and post secular societies will require Christianity to look for new forms of expression.⁵ We are not refuting this. In fact, Halik's argument is simultaneously informed and challenging. It is true that, especially in more urbanised areas, and post Covid, many Catholics already have made choices in terms of the community in which they choose to worship. We wish to clarify that we are not dealing with the future of the parish structure per se in this book. This is not our purpose.

In this book, we are considering elements of life within parishes (dioceses and other faith settings) and how that life might be lived to honour the challenge to exercise our mission at our best in a synodal style. We consider structures and processes within parishes, dioceses and other Church communities only within that context. In particular we reflect on some implications for those in any kind of leadership in the church, whether they are ordained or hold other leadership positions.



Above: Opening the Torah, Synagogue, Jerusalem.

Seeking truth wherever it can be found

The challenge of our Church becoming more synodal is too important to be left to the theologians. It is too important to be left to the ordained. It is too important even to be left to the women. It is too important to become solely an agenda of spirituality. Of course each of these is important. Each is necessary, but in themselves they are not sufficient.

As the Final Document from the XVI Synod acknowledges a number of times, the human and social sciences have something to offer this journey into synodality.

Our premise is clear: authentic synodal leadership must start with the best of contemporary leadership practice. There is much more of course, in terms of baptismal calling, mission, discipleship, personal faith and spirituality, but without good leadership practice synodality is at risk.

From the perspective of the academic and practical fields from which we come, we suggest that the gap between what the Second Vatican Council signalled, and its implementation, might have been reduced had the resources of good leadership theory and practice been utilised. Perhaps it is understandable that Church leaders who had been schooled and trained rigidly to turn their backs on the world and secular society would not instinctively turn to secular sciences to resource the implementation of the changes Vatican II bought. This is despite openness to society and its wisdom being one distinctive change of attitude that Vatican II taught. This is what co-responsibility is all about. No-one should expect those called to spiritual, pastoral and liturgical leadership to be experts in fields of management and administration, just as no-one should expect them to be financiers, architects or musicians. However, it can be expected that we recognise and draw on the contribution of these other disciplines. Similarly, the apparent incontestable territorial authority of bishops and parish priests doesn't make sense in the modern world, let alone in a Church striving to be synodal.

We observe that an openness to the Spirit at work in human sciences still sits somewhat uncomfortably in Church discourse. For example, we read a recurring guardedness in the Synod's references to the human and social sciences. While some readers might expect us to write in more theological terms, that is not our goal. Nor is it our area of expertise. As representatives of the human and social sciences, particularly as it relates to leadership and education, we believe we have something to offer, even if it challenges traditional Church ways of thinking. Yet 'truth' is 'Truth', whether it comes in theological language, in the language of various sciences, or in the languages of poetry and the arts. God is truth. And we seek God wherever truth and wisdom can be found.

As social scientists who are people of faith, we 'get' it. Synodality is a business of the heart and soul. It is intensely spiritual. It calls us as individual believers and as local faith communities to constant conversion. Its processes of dialogue, listening, discernment and decision-making are:

- not simply exercises in management,
- not the same as a parliament or the processes of democracy,
- not something that can be corralled into a Gantt chart.

They are part of a Godly process characterised by a humble listening to the Spirit in the service – always in the service – of the gospel of God's surprising love.

At the same time, in the spirit of the Incarnation, these Godly processes can be informed and enhanced by knowledge from the human and social sciences. A friend and mentor, Professor

Don Willower of Pennsylvania State University predicated all his work on leadership by pointing to its essential *moral* purpose. When advocating for the formation of leaders he taught that the most important issue in such formation is the capacity to choose morally between competing options. The challenge for a leader at any level is to challenge the group, institution or organisation that they lead, to question what that group, institution or organisation would like to be ‘at its best,’ and then work towards encouraging them to reach that ‘best’.

We write from this philosophical position. We are committed to help all leaders in their search for truth (where God indeed resides) through the utilisation of human and social sciences so as to help us interrogate what we might look like ‘at our best’. The context of ‘best’ for our faith communities must clearly be Godly in the insights these communities offer about human behaviour, about how communities work, about how change can be managed and cultures developed.

Are we there yet?

Over recent years since Pope Francis stirred our hearts with this vision of synodality, we have heard people ask: *Synodality is wonderful, but what will it look like?* We have asked each other: *what will a synodal parish (ministry, diocese) look like?* It is understandable that the method of implementation of synodality is unclear. We are still finding our way in a major cultural change. It will take generations. It will help its realisation if Church members are invited to reflect on what a more synodal community might look like ‘at its best’, if we call each other to imagine the possibility of such a community.

For example, if a parish or ministry were to become more synodal, how do we imagine casual observers might speak of us? Would we want them to say, these are people who welcome all kinds of faithful – the regular and devout, the charismatic, the culturally diverse and the ‘Christmas Catholics’? Would they say we attend to those living with disability, mental health struggles, addiction, domestic violence and poverty? Would they see us as a Church who acknowledges that in the past we have not welcomed the LGBTQIA+, the gender diverse, the divorced and children of gay parents? Would they describe our leaders as humble, walking without pretension with their people? Are we seen as finding joy in each other’s presence, in being attentive, willing to listen and to learn from children and the outliers? Would casual observers note that our community accommodates liberal and conservative views without politicising one against the other? Would they see that we keep space for dissent? Would they note that we are people of prayer who cherish the richness and diversity of our tradition and rituals? Would they know us as people who contribute to our local communities and engage with human issues such as homelessness, sexual abuse, domestic violence, uneven wages, the environment and climate? Would they know they could look to us to speak out against injustice, war and oppression wherever they occur and look for ways to correct these evils? Would they see in our walking with people of other faiths

and people of none, hope for a more harmonious world? And would they say, ‘see how these people care for our earth and its future?’

Of course, there are communities and individuals to whom all or many of these things already apply. Do they characterise us as a whole Church now? As social scientists, we are usually guarded in giving definitive answers. In this case, we can. There are two answers we can give: No, we are not yet a synodal Church. Yes, we are synodal in that many Catholics earnestly desire to move towards becoming better at synodality. Thus the journey is underway.

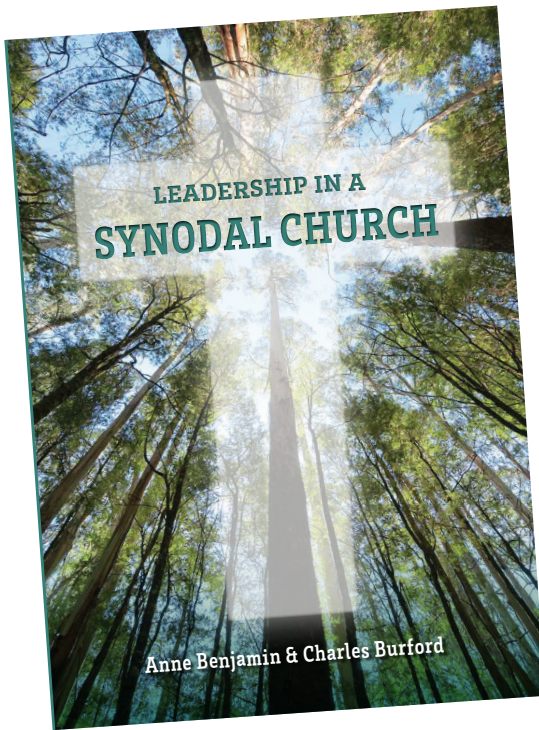
You will note that throughout this book we tend to write about *becoming more synodal* rather than becoming synodal. This is because synodality is not the terminus for the train we call Church, a fixed end point. Rather, synodality is a culture, a way of living our faith as the communion of the baptised, in a certain way which is forever unfolding. Also, we respect how in different times and places, communities of faithful and their leaders have lived or are already living elements of a synodal culture. For this reason we have included stories in this book that predate 2015 which was when Pope Francis first announced the priority of synodality saying it ‘is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.’⁶

Why this book?

At one of the Australian Plenary Council consultations a few years ago, a fortyish-something man was voicing the thoughts of many engaged Catholics when he said: ‘If nothing comes of this and nothing happens, that’s the end for me.’ For this man, this was the last chance he was giving to the Church’s ordained officeholders. This was his response to the invitation from the Australian Bishops to search out ‘What is God asking of us at this time?’

We don’t want this man to be disappointed. We don’t want the 222,000 Australian Catholics who contributed to the Plenary Council consultations to be disappointed. Nor the millions of faithful around the world who contributed to the Synod on Synodality consultations, assisted by the diligent work of theologians. We are encouraged that Pope Leo XIV has already committed to continue on the same pathway. We know that change takes time. Deep change that involves attitudes, beliefs and culture, takes a long time: decades. A generation at least. We also know that change comes unevenly at different rates and in different ways in different places. Readers can no doubt cite instances of one parish that celebrates liturgy in the spirit of Vatican II and involves parishioners in collaborative decision-making, while in the next street and next parish, parishioners kneel at an altar rail, put out their tongue for Communion, Father does all the readings and there is no parish council.

Leadership in a Synodal Church (a predecessor to this book) was written during 2019 and 2020. A lot was happening and has happened in the Catholic Church since then. In brief, the Church has been engaged in the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, an historic process



from 2021–2024, under the theme of ‘For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission’. More or less parallel to this, the Australian Plenary Council, which in 2018 began asking the faithful in Australia ‘to discern what God is asking of us at this time,’ concluded its second assembly in July 2022.

In the years since the book was published, we have had the joy of speaking to many groups, including parish priests and parishioners, deacons, seminarians, and those involved in education, welfare, health and governance, about the importance of leadership in the Church’s growth towards synodality. The term ‘synodality’ is now much more familiar to a wider group within the Church and generally there is a clearer understanding of what it means, even if the implications for practice, processes and structures are less clear. This is to be expected.

We believe it is timely now to build on the foundations which we laid in our earlier work and to take its key concepts further. Our purpose in writing this book is to offer further background that might assist those in leadership roles in the Church at all levels, from bishops to ministry leaders, parish priests and parish council members, to be at their best by understanding what is involved in cultural change and the challenge of their leadership. We want to contribute our mite to the exciting journey that our Church is making. We don’t want parishioners, such as the forty-something man we mentioned earlier, to think that nothing has happened. All the efforts of the Church around the world, led by Pope Francis to journey towards synodality, must lead to meaningful change in order to revitalise our faith.

Let us add a disclaimer. While we argue for the need to attend to leadership and formation for leaders who can promote synodality, we also understand that synodality is essentially a spiritual experience. In offering the knowledge and insights from social sciences, we are NOT saying, ‘Hand over synodality

to the managers.’ We know that synodality is about conversion, humility, faithful discipleship, listening to the Spirit as we walk in the companionship of the Way. However it is also about a culture. And over the decades human inquiry’s search for truth (Truth) has come to some insights and consensus about culture, how to promote it, disrupt it, influence it and make it ‘the best’ we can. We believe those insights are worth sharing.

What to expect

This book deliberately has an Australian and Pacific flavour. That is the place from where we write. We hope others from further afield might also find in it stories and insights that can contribute to the development of leaders for a more synodal Church in their place, whether that is India, Canada, Ireland, Peru, Ghana, the USA or the UK.

We mentioned that we are heartened to see that both the *Synthesis Report* from the October 2023 Synod Assembly and the *Final Document* from the 2024 Synod Assembly speak to the importance of looking to the social sciences as a resource in pursuing the path of synodality. Still, despite being people of irrepressible hope, and being realistic about the uneven pace and processes of change, we are cautious. If Vatican II was implemented so unevenly over sixty years, does a similar risk exist for the Synod on Synodality?



Above: Baptised into a community of faith, Easter Baptism, Diocese of Parramatta.

In sharing our insights, we are responding to the questions and challenges that have arisen through the Synod on Synodality, the Plenary Council, and the work that has begun in local churches and ministries to grow towards becoming closer to our best synodal selves. *The Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod* (October 2022) documents leadership as a recurrent issue raised in all continental submissions in preparation for the First Assembly. It is also clear from submissions made to the Second Assembly of the Synod (Oct 24) from national churches that leadership continues to be a significant issue. In particular, we bring our background in leadership research, theory and practice to respond to the challenges that emerged from the XVI General Synod of Bishops (or the Synod on Synodality as it is sometimes called).

The chapters of this book echo the shape of the Final Document from the XVI Synod. We commence in Chapters 2 and 3 with brief contexts on the Synod on Synodality and the Second Vatican Council whose spirit is encapsulated in synodality. Chapter 4 locates the whole discussion of leadership for synodality within the perspective of 'mission', which is the end purpose of synodality. We focus on important elements from the Final Document from the perspective of leadership, covering conversion (Chapter 5), learning and formation (Chapter 6), co-responsibility and participation (Chapter 7), listening, dialogue, discernment and decision-making (Chapter 8) as well as accountability, transparency and review (Chapter 9). Finally, in Chapter 10 we attempt to bring all these together.

Women, leadership and synodality

What about women? Some might ask where is the chapter on women? Believe us – we are very conscious of the strong call for greater recognition of women as leaders in the Church. This cry from the heart has been recorded in the XVI Synod Consultations and its Final Document as well as in the Decrees published after Australia's Plenary Council process and discussions. The place of women was celebrated in a watershed moment in Sydney on 6 July 2022 when the disappointment and grief of about 80 Council members challenged the Plenary Council process. The respectful silent protest was sparked when a motion 'considering women for ministry as deacon – *should Pope Francis authorise such ministry* in light of the findings of the reconstituted Study Commission on the Female Diaconate'⁷ failed to win sufficient support from the Australian Bishops. Sr Patty Fawkner's account of this watershed moment tells the story with pain and grace.⁸

Parrhesia is a concept present in ancient Greece and Jewish history. It refers to speaking out boldly, even if it comes at a cost, but always for the common good. At the beginning of the journey for the 2021–2024 XVI Synod, the Preparatory Document invited everyone to speak 'with courage and *parrhesia*, that is, integrating freedom, truth, and charity'.⁹ *Parrhesia* of the Spirit is required for the People of God on its synodal journey to enter into the unity of God.¹⁰ It is important to add that this moment of *parrhesia* in the Plenary Council in Sydney in July 2022 provoked a response of sensitive leadership and openness to the Spirit.¹¹ There were, of course, other issues. In his discussion of the overall Plenary Council as an exercise in theology, Richard Lennan (who participated in the Council as one of the theological experts – or *periti*) concluded that the 'assembly of the Plenary Council in Sydney was a shining moment when

Below: Easter Light



the Catholic Church in Australia came together to listen to the Spirit and discern ways in which the whole ecclesial community might more faithfully and creatively live its mission'.¹²

At the personal level, we are writing for our daughters and granddaughters. We have lived long lives in a Church framed by a male hierarchy, sometimes at personal cost. We approach this in a similar spirit to that expressed by Julie Trinidad in her excellent paper on one diocesan experience of women in ecclesial leadership.¹³ Following her interviews with women who had held these senior ecclesial leadership roles, one of her recommendations was that:

'women's increased participation in the governance of dioceses, parishes or other ecclesial structures [should] not be framed as due to a lack of clergy or limited to increased gender justice awareness, but instead be an expression of the commitment of the whole Church to enhancing the link between ministry needs and the availability and discernment of charisms for ministry among all the baptised for the sake of the mission of Christ in the world'.¹⁴

We couldn't agree more.

Yes, we know the issues about women, leadership and synodality. You will find women on every page of this book. Everything we write about leaders applies to women as much as to men. We do not distinguish. And yes, while the hope that our granddaughters might see women ordained as Catholic priests is a bit 'out there', we still hope that we, their grandparents, will witness women ordained to deaconate in our lifetimes.

There is no manual for synodality

This book does not provide detailed instructions of 'how to do' synodality. We cannot answer the question: 'What will a synodal parish look like?' because it will look different in

each culture and time. As Hong Kong Cardinal, Stephen Chow SJ, observed, 'If I tell you what to do, it's not synodality'.¹⁵ A parish and diocese in Bengaluru will express their synodal characters in a way that is distinctive to that part of South India, and it will not be the same as a parish and diocese in Trissur in Kerala, just as a parish and diocese in Germany will express their synodal characteristics in a way that reflects their circumstances and culture. The synodal journey is a process of discernment-in-communion; it is different for each local community because the gospel of God's love that is called out in each place at any given time is particular to that place and time. The Final Document makes it clear that 'local churches need to **find ways** to implement these changes' (FSC #94). There is no formula; there is no one way of being synodal. There is only the journey of searching together. And journey and search we must, because, as the Synod stated, if there are no 'concrete changes in the short term, the vision of a synodal Church will not be credible, and this will alienate those members of the People of God who have drawn strength and hope from the synodal journey' (FSC #94).

Our book is written in hope. It is a response to the inspiring vision of a Church that is constantly seeking conversion to be more attentive to the Spirit, to keep the gospel Jesus central, to be more relational, more open and hospitable, more missionary, more humble, more engaged within the various places in which communities of disciples live. And it responds from the perspective of leadership 'at its best'.

In the following chapter, we give a brief recap on 'synodality' and an overview of the XVI Synod while naming some of the present realities within Church life and practice which pose a challenge to synodality. This seems useful background for our discussion of the implications and challenges synodality presents for leadership in the Church, which is the main focus of this book.

Endnotes

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5. Halik T (2024) *The afternoon of Christianity: the courage to change*, University of Notre Dame Press, ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 98, 193.
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15. Chow S sj (2025) 'On bridge building', conversation with R Leonard sj, Parramatta, 15 September.