EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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EVALUATION REPORT

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIONS IN 'WOMAN & MAN: THE BISHOPS RESPOND' SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY STATEMENT 2000

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NCPR
National Centre for Pastoral Research

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians who have walked upon and cared for this land for thousands of years. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to this Country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this publication contains names of and information about deceased persons.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project was commissioned by the Bishops Commission for Evangelisation, Laity and Ministry (BCELM) and undertaken by the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR). Its purpose was to evaluate the implementation of actions outlined in the *Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000 (SJSS2000)*—the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's (ACBC) response to *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* (1999). The study sought to:

- Assess progress on the nine Decisions that the ACBC committed to implementing at the national level.
- Determine the extent to which dioceses and eparchies adopted the 31 Proposals recommended for local action.
- Identify gaps and critical areas requiring attention.
- Explore new opportunities for women's participation in the life and mission of the Church.

The evaluation used a two-stage mixed-methods design to assess progress on the actions outlined in the Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000. Responses were received from 20 of Australia's 28 geographical dioceses, along with contributions from congregations and ministerial public juridic persons (MPJPs), proving a substantial national evidence base while also reflecting the diversity of local Church contexts.

Stage 1 examined the implementation of the nine national Decisions through surveys and analysis of documentary evidence from ACBC agencies, their archives and other relevant sources. Data was collected between May and August 2024. In total, 646 documents—including minutes, reports and publications—were gathered to assess progress on these commitments.

Stage 2 examined the adoption of the 31 Proposals recommended for dioceses and eparchies, drawing on survey submissions, supporting documentation and semi-structured interviews. An online survey conducted from March to May 2025 received 74 submissions and 244 supporting documents. To supplement this data, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and September 2025 with key personnel from across the Church.

A Research Reference Group guided the project, and the Christian Research Association Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval. The study was undertaken as a formative evaluation, focusing on both implementation and emerging outcomes across diverse Church contexts.

Key Findings

Overall, this review revealed that while significant progress had been made in implementing some of the commitments outlined in the *SJSS2000*, many actions remained incomplete or were unevenly applied.

Of the nine Decisions, only three were fully implemented. The remaining six had some fully implemented components and others that had only progressed partially or not at all. Significant achievements included the establishment of the Commission for Australian Catholic Women (CACW), guidelines for lay preaching, pastoral resources for marriage and family life, and initiatives promoting inclusive liturgy and integrating First Nations cultural elements into liturgical celebrations. However, gaps remain in areas such as gender balance on councils, collaborative ministry, supervision for lay ministers and pastoral care guidelines for those struggling with male-only ordination.

The evaluation found uneven adoption and variable implementation of the *SJSS2000* Proposals across dioceses over the past 25 years. A small number of Proposals were widely adopted, most notably those aimed at achieving a better balance of women and men in councils and leadership roles and those providing faith education opportunities for women in rural communities. While uptake of these Proposals was broad, the strength of implementation ranged from weak to strong and was shaped by local leadership commitment, resources and priorities.

A larger number of Proposals were adopted by several dioceses, but implementation was typically uneven and inconsistent. These included initiatives to strengthen gender and role balance on Diocesan Pastoral Councils; encourage women to act as Church spokespersons and guest speakers; appoint and train women for marriage tribunals; foster collaborative ministry and leadership formation; promote contemporary Catholic female role models; advance cultural education for clergy and inclusivity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in decision-making; expand pastoral and professional services for women; and oppose the unjust treatment of women in social and economic life. In many instances, initiatives depended on particular individuals or short-term programs rather than being embedded as ongoing diocesan practice.

Several Proposals showed more limited uptake, having been adopted by some dioceses only and generally implemented weakly or inconsistently. These included developing and promoting Parish Pastoral Associate roles and ensuring fair employment contracts; requesting theological institutions to engage with the Woman and Man report; involving women in pre-marriage programs; developing a database of Catholic women and their skills; prioritising women's participation through financial resourcing; supporting attitudinal change regarding gender equality; fostering the reunion of families affected by the Stolen Generations; increasing employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women; and supporting solo mothers through greater inclusion in Church life.

Two areas displayed distinctive patterns. The role of Parish Pastoral Associate was adopted by several dioceses in the early years following the *SJSS2000* but declined significantly over time, reflecting changing pastoral priorities, financial pressures and structural shifts. Initiatives encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to share their stories and charisms were adopted nationally and by some dioceses, though implementation remained uneven and ad hoc. One area—the appointment of lay women and men as marriage celebrants under canon law—was not adopted, due to ongoing structural and canonical constraints.

Positive Drivers of Implementation

Several key factors supported the implementation of many actions. Increased leadership opportunities for women and initiatives led by women themselves created pathways for participation and visibility. Practical support and resourcing by bishops—such as funding programs, endorsing councils and promoting leadership formation—signalled strong commitment. The influence of women religious and MPJPs was particularly significant, as they acted as role models and advocates for inclusion. A broader attitudinal shift within the Church toward co-responsibility and synodality also encouraged collaborative approaches, while positive experiences of partnership between clergy and laity reinforced the value of shared leadership. These drivers collectively fostered an environment where progress in implementing the actions, though uneven, was possible and often sustained by strong local networks and episcopal leadership.

Barriers to Implementing Decisions and Proposals

Despite notable achievements, several systemic and cultural barriers limited the full implementation of the *SJSS2000's* commitments. Structural changes within the ACBC—particularly the major restructures in 2006 and 2016—shifted priorities and responsibilities, resulting in a loss of continuity and institutional memory. This led to partial implementation of some actions and uncertainty about what remained outstanding. Ambiguous language in the original Decisions and Proposals compounded these challenges; phrases such as "a better balance" lacked measurable criteria, making progress difficult to assess and left room for minimal compliance. Cultural and attitudinal barriers, including persistent clericalism and gendered expectations, further restricted women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles. In many cases, lay involvement remained optional and dependent on local leadership priorities, with resistance to a synodal style of inclusive governance evident in some contexts. Financial constraints, competing pastoral priorities and declining volunteerism also hindered efforts to sustain initiatives such as Pastoral Associate roles and structured vocational pathways for women.

Across the evaluation, sustained progress was found to depend less on the passage of time than on intentional leadership, adequate resourcing and clear accountability structures. Where actions were embedded in ongoing processes and supported by monitoring and shared responsibility, more enduring change was evident. These gaps underscore the need for clear accountability, measurable standards and intentional strategies to overcome entrenched attitudes and systemic limitations**.**

Personal Influence and Current Impacts

Many interview participants reported that the implementation of the *SJSS2000* had positively influenced their participation in the Church, particularly through initiatives that provided female role models, funded education and created leadership opportunities. Programs such as the Young Catholic Women's Fellowship were cited as having a lasting impact.

For some, engagement with the *SJSS2000* in its early years led to meaningful change, though progress often stalled when initial momentum faded. Others felt the document continued to serve as a framework for action, offering confidence and purpose in promoting inclusion. However, not all participants experienced its influence; some attributed their involvement to personal initiative or broader societal changes, while others expressed frustration at the lack of cultural shift toward valuing skills over gender. The presence of visible female leaders and formation pathways was also found to shape the expectations and participation among younger generations, even where broader structural change remained limited.

Actions Taken Beyond the *SJSS2000*

The research uncovered numerous initiatives taken by dioceses, religious congregations and Church organisations over the past 25 years to extend the outcomes of the *SJSS2000* beyond the original commitments. These included programs such as *Called and Gifted* and the Areté Centre for ministry development, diocesan pastoral plans emphasising inclusion and expanded opportunities for lay leadership. Women's visibility was promoted through national networks, mentoring programs, awards like the Magdalene Award and innovative platforms such as the *Australian Women Preach* podcast. Scholarships for theological studies, leadership formation and digital engagement strategies further strengthened participation. These actions demonstrated creativity and adaptability, responding to emerging needs and fostering co-responsibility in the Church's mission.

Addressing Challenges and Planning for the Future

Participants identified synodal practices as essential for strengthening lay involvement and overcoming barriers. Recommendations included mandating diocesan and parish pastoral councils, expanding formation for collaborative ministry and promoting inclusive language in liturgy and pastoral documents. Suggestions also addressed new pastoral priorities, such as supporting families affected by domestic violence, assisting couples experiencing infertility and enhancing marriage preparation programs. Broader cultural change was seen as critical—challenging stereotypes, addressing clericalism and recognising diverse forms of engagement. Some participants called for admitting women to priestly ministry or the diaconate, while others emphasised mentoring programs and intentional planning to ensure women's gifts are fully utilised. Across all responses, strong episcopal leadership was viewed as vital for meaningful and lasting change.

The release of the Synod on Synodality's Final Report of Study Group 5 on women's participation, published in March 2026, provides an important contemporary reference point for this evaluation. The Study Group 5 Report emphasises that efforts to strengthen women's participation must be attentive to local ecclesial contexts and structures, rather than applied uniformly. This emphasis closely aligns with the findings of the present evaluation, which demonstrates that progress in implementing the *SJSS2000* has been shaped by local leadership, resources and context. Read together, the two documents highlight the importance of local discernment, synodal practice and intentional leadership in supporting the full and co-responsible participation of lay women and men in the life of the Church**.**

Limitations

This study faced five constraints that affected the comprehensiveness of its findings. First, the scope of the data was limited to documents and responses submitted during the research process; additional relevant material may exist but was not available for inclusion. Second, the ambiguous wording of some Decisions and Proposals—such as phrases like "a better balance"—made it difficult to measure progress or confirm completion. Thirdly, responses were not obtained from all dioceses, congregations and MPJPs, limiting the ability to present a complete national picture. Fourth, the scope of the project did not extend to the systematic collection of grassroots voices, and these perspectives were therefore not included in the evaluation. Finally, structural changes at both the ACBC and diocesan levels—including staff turnover, access to historical records and the absence of embedded reporting requirements in the *SJSS2000*—meant that a complete and fully accurate historical account of implementation was not possible.

Despite these limitations, the research offers valuable insights into areas of progress and highlights ongoing challenges that require attention. The findings underscore the need for a renewed commitment, structured accountability and adequate resourcing to ensure that the equal dignity of women and men is not only affirmed but fully realised in practice. As the Church moves forward, these insights provide a practical roadmap for implementing the decrees of the Plenary Council and actions from the Synod on Synodality to respond to emerging priorities through dialogue, innovation and intentional action.

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Trudy Dantis, Stephen Reid, Katherine Jelavic and Carole Gan.

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Carole Gan was a Research Assistant at the National Centre for Pastoral Research at the time of the project. She contributed to data checking and analysis, as well as to the writing and editing of this report. Carole also provided support with various other tasks to help bring the report to completion.

The National Centre for Pastoral Research

The National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) is an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference whose mission is to assist the Catholic Church in Australia at all levels in understanding the cultural, social and personal dimensions of religion in the changing contemporary context. The work of the NCPR is overseen by the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research which, in turn, reports to the Permanent Committee of the Conference. The NCPR was established in 1996 and was previously located in Melbourne, before moving to Canberra in 2018. Previous research studies conducted by the NCPR include *Thriving (& Surviving) in Ministry: A Profile of Catholic Clergy in Australia: Health and Wellbeing* (2025), *Synod of Bishops: Australian Synthesis* (2022), *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying: Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase 1* (2019), *Understanding Religious Vocations in Australia Today* (2018), *Our Work Matters: Catholic Church Employers and Employees in Australia* (2017) and *Called to Fullness of Life and Love: National Report, Australian Catholic Bishops' Youth Survey* (2017).

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