

KNOW THE DIOCESES IN 2020

DIOCESE of GERALDTON

In 1898 a land area of 1,187,413 sq. Km. in the mid-western section of the Archdiocese of Perth was excised to establish the new Diocese of Geraldton.¹ It is 2nd largest diocese in Australia, after Darwin (1,222,868 sq. Km.). It is one of 3 suffragan dioceses – with Bunbury and Broome – of the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Perth and the 4 dioceses together form the ecclesiastical Province of Perth.

Demographics: At the 2016 Census 126,104 persons lived in the diocese, with 27,596 self-identified Catholics (21.9% of total). Since the 2001 Census (114,662 and 27,129 (23.7%)), the general population has increased by 10% and the Catholic population by 1.7%. The Catholic population peaked at 29,317 in 2011, but as a proportion of the total population it has fallen by 1.8% since 2001. In 2016 the diocese ranked 26th in Australia's Catholic population with the median age of Catholics at 36 years. Australia is the birthplace of 77.5% of all Catholics, including 3,332 Indigenous Australians (12.1% of all Catholics), while the biggest groups born outside Australia are from the Philippines (5.7%), New Zealand and the UK excluding Nth Ireland (each 2.6%), all Ireland (1.9%), Italy (0.8%), and India (0.7%). Catholic males outnumber females 115.3 to 100 in the diocese, the highest of any diocese.

Bishop: The bishop is Michael Morrissey, born in Australia in 1952, ordained a priest for the Diocese of Geraldton in 1981, and ordained a bishop in 2017. He was installed as the 9th bishop of Geraldton in 2017. He prepared his most recent *Quinquennial Report* for his June 2019 *ad limina* visit, but has not made it public.

Structure and Governance: At 31 December 2019 the diocese had 16 parishes, one of only 6 dioceses with 20 parishes or less.² The larger parishes are situated along the coast, while those inland in the wheat, pastoral and mining areas are small and isolated with and highly itinerant populations. Vast distances and high mobility make communications and building a sense of identity difficult. At 13 February 2021 just 6 parishes had a full-time resident priest, the others having to share a priest. The diocese has a Financial Administrator, College of Consultors, and Council of Priests, but no Diocesan Pastoral Council. The diocese has never had a diocesan synod since its establishment in 1898, but from 1994-1996 the previous bishop convened two diocesan gatherings in the north and south of the diocese for the purpose of renewal. They produced a Diocesan Vision Statement with the goal of working within a framework of evangelisation and collaboration to develop stronger faith communities. That vision continues to be implemented by the Parish Life and Mission Office.

Priests and Deacons: At 31 December 2019 there were 19 priests, including the bishop, listed as resident in or belonging to the diocese: 15 diocesan and 4 religious. Thirteen (excluding bishop) were in active parish ministry, while 6 lived in retirement (1 in another diocese), 1 worked outside the diocese, and 1 was on leave. At 13 February 2021, 13 priests (excluding the bishop) were in active parish ministry, including 4 religious priests and 9 born overseas (4 in Vietnam, 2 in Kenya, and 1 each in India, Poland, and the Philippines). There has been a significant turnover of priests in parish ministry in the last 10 years, mainly due to retirements and transfers. The presence of overseas-born priests has also increased substantially (+50%) since 2011. When another Australian-born priest, ordained in 1967, retires shortly, only 3 Australian-born diocesan priests will remain in parish ministry, leaving the diocese almost totally reliant on priests born overseas. The diocese has a Vocations Director, but currently there are no diocesan seminarians in formation. The diocese has never had a permanent deacon. If only the priests actively ministering in parishes are counted, there are an estimated 1,971 Catholics per priest.

Lay ministers and officials: At end-2019, 5 lay women were holding responsible positions in the diocesan curia, 1 lay woman was the Pastoral Leader in a remote parish without a priest, and 4 religious sisters were ministering as pastoral associates in 3 parishes. Seven lay religious congregations have ministered in the diocese over the years, but since 2001 their member numbers have decreased significantly. The number of

¹ This data is from the NCP's 2016 National Census Project (called Statistical Area 1's). This area is slightly larger than Colombia (1,141,748 sq. km). Geraldton is the third largest in the world by land size.

² The others are: Bathurst (17), Wilcannia-Forbes (20), Darwin (16), Port Pirie (16), and Broome (9).

religious sisters has decreased from 35 to 16 in 2019 (-54.3%) and the religious brothers from 10 to 0 in 2019. At present there are few young religious sisters and brothers in Australia.³

Mass attendance and liturgy: In 2006 the typical weekend Mass attendance was 2,150 (9.3%). In 2016 the typical attendance was 1,962 (7.1%) – a decrease in both numbers (-188) and rate of attendance (-8.7%). Each priest active in full-time parish ministry currently ministers to an average 150 regular Mass attenders.

Seminary and Seminarians: The Perth diocesan Seminary of the St Charles Borromeo provides formation for candidates for the diocesan priesthood to all four WA dioceses. Geraldton's most recent ordinations of 3 Vietnamese-born seminarians were in 2019, but no candidates are currently in formation.

Pastoral ministries: The diocese has a Parish Life and Mission Office which offers support, education, formation and resources for enabling leadership through the development of personal gifts and the challenge to community action. It also has an office for Youth Ministry.

Plenary Council: A total of 239 persons – 45 as individuals (84% women and 13% men) and 194 in 9 groups – responded to the Plenary Council's Listening and Dialogue phase. They identified the top 10 priority issues for the Council as: greater inclusion of all; care of neighbour; putting Gospel values into action; remaining faithful to church teaching; modernizing church teachings; outreach to youth; being a witness in society; greater trust, faith and hope in God; care for the family; and ending celibacy and allowing priests to marry. No one from the diocese was selected for the Discernment and Writing Groups, but 4 persons have been called to participate in the Council sessions: the bishop and vicar general, and 2 lay women (Mrs Catherine Jones and Mrs Dearne Gould).

Education: The diocese has 11 Catholic schools – 7 primary, 3 secondary and 1 combined – educating 3,442 students: 1,777 primary and 1,665 secondary. Of all Catholic children of school age, only 45% attend Catholic primary schools and 50.1% attend Catholic secondary schools. In 2019, on the recommendation of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA), the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia (CEOWA) transitioned on 1 January to a company structure, Catholic Education Western Australia Ltd (CEWA), as the coordinating body for Catholic education in WA. CEWA fosters the continuous development and improvement of WA Catholic schools, and acts on behalf of the Catholic community for the benefit of all Catholic school-aged children, in Catholic schools or not. CEWA has a regional office in Geraldton. CECWA governs the CEWA system and has responsibility for providing leadership, directing the development of learning communities according to the Bishops' Mandate, developing, promulgating and evaluating school policy and programs, and providing responsible governance.⁴ All WA dioceses collaborated to produce CEWA's *Strategic Directions 2019-2021, Commitment Statement on Child Safety, and Child Safe Framework*. Only 4 of the 11 lay school principals in 2019 were women (36.4%). Total income for all Catholic systemic schools in WA in 2019 was \$1.16 billion, with \$889.6 in recurrent and capital funding coming from government grants.⁵ No information is published on allocations to the various dioceses. The diocese does not have a Catholic tertiary education institution in its territory.

Health and Welfare Services: Centacare Family Services, with offices in 4 centres and some 40 staff, is the main provider of welfare services in the diocese, offering counselling to individuals, couples, families and victims of crime. It also provides emergency relief and education programs. Its income for FY 2017/18 was \$3.7 million with 92% coming from government grants. Other welfare services are provided by Centacare Men's Hubb, St Vincent de Paul, and the Pallottine Community, with an Aboriginal Ministry. St John of God Health Care operates 1 private hospital at Geraldton, and the Sisters of Nazareth operate a nursing home and hostel accommodation at Bluff Point. In 1996, 6.9% of all Catholics in the diocese were 65 yrs and over; in 2016 the proportion had increased to 9.5%.

³ A 2015 study of 93 religious congregations of men and women, with a total membership of 4,427, representing 64 per cent of all religious in Australia, found that only 4% of the women and 11% of the men in the participating congregations were aged under 45 years at the time of the survey. <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CVMA-Report-Final-report-Feb-2018.pdf>

⁴ CEWA Ltd incorporates the operations of 147 Diocesan schools, CEOWA, Catholic Schools (WA) Long Service Leave Fund, Catholic Schools (WA) Co-responsibility Building Fund, Teacher Housing and the Catholic Education Commission of WA Trustees Inc (Block Grant Authority).

⁵ [AnnualReport2019_SpreadsWeb_LR.pdf \(cewa.edu.au\)](#)

Finances: The diocese is registered with the Charities Commission (ACNC) as The Roman Catholic Bishop of Geraldton. As a 'Basic Religious Charity' it is not required to answer the financial questions in the Annual Information Statement, submit annual financial reports, or comply with any Governance Standards. However, a 2018 Annual Report of the Bishop of Geraldton (Corporate Sole Diocesan Finance Office) shows income and expenditure of \$1.1 million each and net assets of \$20 million.⁶ The diocese has a Catholic Development Fund (CDF). A search on the diocesan website automatically links its CDF to the CDF of the Perth Archdiocese. The relationship is unclear.

Communications: The diocese has a website, and publishes a print only version of *The Sower*, the official quarterly magazine of the diocese. The diocese does not publish a diocesan annual report.

Safeguarding and Child Sexual Abuse: The Royal Commission did not identify the diocese as a significant setting of abuse, but its June 2017 *Analysis of Claims* reported 9 claims made against the diocese with 3 payments made for a total of \$126,681 (average \$42,227 per payment).⁷ The diocese published a diocesan *Safeguarding Handbook* in 2018 with 17 forms for protocols and procedures. It has a Safeguarding Office and Director to ensure compliance with the Safeguarding Program. All safeguarding policies and protocols are informed by the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards across all its parishes. During 2021 the diocese will transition from the *Towards Healing* protocol to the new *National Response Protocol*.⁸ A total of 50 diocesan entities are registered participants in the National Redress Scheme as part of Australian Catholic Redress Limited.⁹

Table 1: Statistical data for Geraldton Diocese: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2019 and 2021

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2019	2021 at 13 Feb.	Change 2001 to 2019
Total Population (at Census)	114,662	101,184	126,536	126,104			+10.0%*
Catholic Population (at Census) (% of Total)	27,129 (23.7%)	23,004 (22.7%)	29,317 (23.2%)	27,596 (21.9%)			+467* -1.8%*
Number of Parishes	16	12	16	16	16	16	No change
Diocesan priests	10	16	14	15	15		+ 50%
Religious priests	10	8	3	6	4		-60%
Total Priests	20	24	17	21	19		-5%
Priests in active parish ministry (% of Total Priests)			16 (94.1%)		13 (68.4%)	13	-18.8%**
- Australian-born			10 (62.5%)		4 (30.8%)	4 (30.8%)	-60%**
- Overseas-born			6 (37.5%)		9 (69.2%)	9 (69.2%)	+50%**
Parishes with full-time resident priest			9 (56.3%)		6 (37.5%)	6 (37.5%)	-33.3%**
Catholics per priest in parish ministry			1,832		1,971 (est.)		
Permanent deacons	0	0	0	0	0		No change
Religious Sisters	35	36	28	17	16		-54.3%
Religious Brothers	10	10	4	3	0		-100%
Diocesan Seminarians	1	5	4	3	0		-100%
Diocesan Pastoral Council in operation		No	No	No	No		No change
Last Diocesan Synod (Diocesan Assembly)	Never (1994-6)	Never (1994-6)	Never (1994-6)	Never (1994-6)	Never (1994-6)	Never (1994-6)	No change
Diocesan Pastoral Plan in place					No		
Catholic schools	13	11	11	11	11		-15%
Students in Catholic schools	3,198	3,264	3,507	3,726	3,442		+7.6%
Hospitals	1	5	1	1	1		No change
Nursing & Residential Facilities for Aged	0	1	1	1	2		+200%
Typical weekend Mass attendance		2,150 (9.3%)	2,248 (7.7%)	1,962 (7.1%)			-188*** -8.7%***

⁶ https://acncpubfilesprodstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public/a43f1c96-39af-e811-a95e-000d3ad24c60-612e3e93-874c-4eb4-8fdc-0d56812415c9-Financial%20Report-35de7461-8bc5-e911-a97b-000d3ad24182-RCBG_DFO_Audit_2018.pdf

⁷ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Analysis of Claims of Child Sexual Abuse Made with Respect to Catholic Church Institutions*, June 2017. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/CARC.0050.025.0001.pdf>

⁸ [file \(catholic.org.au\)](file://catholic.org.au)

⁹ https://www.nationalredress.gov.au/institutions/search?search_api_views_fulltext=catholic+diocese+of+geraldton

(% of all Catholics)							
----------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Sources: *Official Catholic Directory* for 2002/03, 2007/08, 2012/13, 2016/17, 2020/21. Data is accurate at 31 December of the previous year, namely, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2019; diocesan website; ACBC, PRO, *Mass Attendance in Australia*, September 2008; ACBC, PRO, *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*, December 2013; ACBC, NCPR. 2016 *National Count of Attendance – National Summary*, Pastoral Research Online, Edition 44, April 2019. Notes: * Change from 2001-2016; ** 2011 to 2021; *** Change from 2006 to 2016

Sources:

Geraldton diocesan website: www.geraldtondiocese.org.au

The Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia, 2020-2021 (data is accurate at 31 December 2019)

ACBC, NCPR, *Diocesan Social Profile, Based on 2016 Australian Census: Diocese of Geraldton*, Canberra, September 2019.

https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Geraldton_2016-Diocesan-Profile.pdf

ACBC, NCPR, *Final Report for Phase I: Listening and Dialogue A Report to the Diocese of Geraldton*, Canberra, January 2020.

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Diocesan-Final-Report-Phase-1-Geraldton.pdf>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Proportion of Priests and non-ordained religious subject to a claim of child sexual abuse, 1950-2020*, June 2017 (revised version) :

https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/CARC_0050.025.0283.pdf

Charities Commission: <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/topic-guides/basic-religious-charities>

2020 Annual Progress Report on Implementation of the Recommendations from the Final Report of the Royal

Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: [FINAL Catholic Church Annual Report to NOCS.pdf - Google Drive](#)

Text and table prepared by Peter J Wilkinson (March 2021)

Note: The draft profile of the Diocese was forwarded to Bishop Morrissey with an invitation to correct any errors and to provide advice on any recent changes made or future plans being contemplated in relation to the recommendations in *The Light from the Southern Cross*. The Bishop responded with only one suggested correction, which was not accepted based on more accurate information to hand. He provided no updates or future plans.