

Diocese of Cork and Ross

Prayer, Listening and Discerning 2024–2025

This report is a thematic summary of the responses provided by parishioners and clergy at three gatherings in the Family of Parishes which includes Ballyphehane, The Lough and Togher.

The three gathering were held in the Spring of 2025 in response to Bishop Fintan's Pastoral Message of September 2024. The Bishop called for prayer, listening and discernment centred on three topics:-

- A. **How can we make baptism the gateway into life in our faith community?**
- B. **How can priests, deacons and parishioners prepare for and celebrate the Sunday Eucharist so that we are nourished and strengthened to tell others about Christ?**
- C. **Session 3 was a review of the families of parishes and posed seven questions for consideration.**

Themes under each topic are given in order in which they are highlighted in the responses.

A. On Baptism:-

1. Pre-Baptism Preparation and Catechesis

- **Widespread emphasis** on meaningful preparation for baptism—meeting with parents, explaining the sacrament's meaning, symbolism (water, oil, candle, white garment), and responsibilities.
 - *Ballyphehane*: Suggests Baptismal Teams, school involvement, and helping parents understand the richness of the sacrament.
 - *Togher*: Proposes a phased approach including courses, leaflets, visuals, and preparatory meetings.
 - *The Lough*: Highlights parish Baptism Teams, pre-baptism meetings, and use of printed material.

There is a strong consensus that **deepening parents' understanding** of baptism through structured pre-sacrament catechesis is vital.

2. Ongoing Engagement After Baptism

- Ideas for **continuity** post-baptism:
 - Annual Masses for newly baptised.
 - Regular family gatherings or tea after Mass.
 - Cards or mementos on baptism anniversaries.
 - Special Masses grouped by age (e.g. 0–5, 5–10 years).

- Invitations to participate in parish events.

The desire to **avoid baptism as a “once-off event”** is strong. Many parishes suggest **yearly touchpoints** and structured follow-up to maintain connection.

3. Creating a Welcoming Parish Environment

- Making churches more **child-friendly** and welcoming to **young families**:
 - Cry rooms or spaces with toys or drawings.
 - Mass leaflets or colouring materials for children.
 - Normalising children’s noise during Mass.
 - Welcoming families at the door or through buddy systems.

Many parishes recognise that **fear of disruption** prevents families from returning to church. There’s a clear push for **inclusivity and hospitality**.

4. Integration with the Parish Community

- Baptisms during Sunday Mass were seen as:
 - A **public welcome**.
 - A way for the whole community to witness and support.
 - A symbolic **integration** into the faith family.

There is growing interest in **celebrating baptisms communally**, not privately. Parishes are seeing this as a **missed opportunity for evangelisation and community-building**.

5. Involving the Wider Family and Community

- Encouragement of:
 - Grandparents’ involvement in faith transmission.
 - Siblings taking roles during the ceremony.
 - Involvement of school principals or teachers.
 - Formation of lay Baptism Teams.

Baptism is seen not just as the parents’ responsibility, but a **whole-community effort**, including older and younger generations.

6. Use of Symbolism and Joy

- Aesthetic, emotional and spiritual **emphasis on joy, welcome and sacredness**:
 - Create joyful, celebratory atmosphere around baptism.
 - Visual displays in church around baptism themes.

- Gifts (medals, cards, prayer books, holy water) as spiritual souvenirs.

There's a push to ensure **baptism is more than just ritual**, but a **deeply joyful and meaningful event**.

Challenges Highlighted

- Parents often do not understand the meaning or implications of baptism.
 - Gap between **baptism and First Communion** is a vacuum for many families.
 - **Lack of church attendance** from young families remains a major obstacle.
 - Competing **cultural/sporting priorities on Sundays** make regular Mass attendance challenging.
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Notable New Suggestions

- **“Faith friends”** or parish mentors to accompany families on their child's faith journey.
 - WhatsApp or online communication channels for families.
 - A **“Baptism Sunday”** or annual diocesan celebration of baptism.
 - **Dedicated coordinators** for all baptismal preparation and follow-up.
 - **Visual displays and signage** in church reinforcing baptismal identity and messaging.
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Conclusion

Across Ballyphehane, The Lough, and Togher, the responses show a clear desire to:

- **Transform baptism from a private event into a communal, lifelong journey.**
- **Deepen catechesis** for parents and godparents.
- **Build hospitality and visibility** around baptism within the parish.
- **Reimagine the church** as an inclusive, child-friendly, and joy-filled space.

Each parish echoes the hope that if baptism is approached with **intention, education, and community**, it truly can become the gateway into vibrant faith life—not just for the child, but for their entire family.

B. The Eucharist

1. Preparation for the Eucharist

- **All three parishes** emphasize the importance of **reading the Sunday readings beforehand** as a means of spiritual preparation.
- **Togher** is particularly structured, suggesting advance access to readings from Thursday, encouraging early arrival for prayer, and distributing Gospel reflections.

2. Active Participation & Inclusivity

- **Ballyphehane and Togher** highlight structured roles for laity: readings, Prayers of the Faithful, bringing up gifts.
- **The Lough** encourages inclusion more broadly, supporting older adults and valuing all who come to Mass, even those who prefer solitude.

3. Music and Atmosphere

- All three stress the **power of music and singing** as uplifting and communal.
 - **Ballyphehane** calls for more music before and during Mass.
 - **Togher** focuses on congregational singing even when no choir is present.
 - **The Lough** emphasizes the cantor's role in leading singing and its unifying effect.

4. Youth Engagement

- Youth involvement is a **critical theme** in all parishes.
 - **Ballyphehane** advocates for monthly special Masses for young people.
 - **Togher** recommends blessings for children, children's liturgies, altar server inclusion, and visual storytelling.
 - **The Lough** highlights challenges with youth retention but values intergenerational worship.

5. Welcoming Environment

- All parishes emphasize **welcomers or greeters** as important.
 - **Togher and Ballyphehane** mention greeter teams and “hello” culture explicitly.
 - **The Lough** recommends reinstating greeters post-COVID.

6. Reflection and Quiet

- **Ballyphehane** asks for more silence post-Communion.
- **Togher** stresses silence both before and after Mass.
- **The Lough** calls for reflective takeaways like “thoughts for the week.”

7. Connecting Eucharist to Daily Life

- **All three parishes** stress the Eucharist as a call to live the Gospel.

- **Ballyphehane** seeks action for the poor.
- **Togher** connects Eucharist to home practices like family meals and prayer.
- **The Lough** encourages living out faith through love and service.

Comparative Summary

Aspect	Ballyphehane	The Lough	Togher
Preparation for Mass	Encouraged via readings and earlier arrival	Suggested via reflection and bulletin highlights	Strong emphasis – advanced access to readings
Youth Involvement	Monthly youth Mass, school linkages	Valued, but concern over disinterest	Extensive: blessings, Mass roles, storytelling, visuals
Music & Singing	More pre-Mass music, congregational singing	Choir and cantor appreciated	Inclusive singing with or without choir
Welcome & Hospitality	Welcoming group, post-Mass tea	Welcomers pre-COVID, sense of inclusion	Greeter team, emphasis on visual welcome
Lay Participation	Readers, Eucharistic Ministers, catechesis	Inclusive but less structured roles	Strongly encouraged: readings, reflections, processions
Reflection/Silence	Silence post-Communion	Reflections for the week	Silence before & during Mass, ponder time
Action Beyond Mass	Focus on social justice, community engagement	Visit the sick, help others	Eucharist as daily life: home prayer, thankfulness

Overall Trends

- There's **broad alignment** across all parishes on the **need for preparation, participation, youth inclusion, and reverence**.
- **Togher** stands out for its structured and creative approach to **visual, symbolic, and intergenerational engagement**.
- **Ballyphehane** is particularly active in **community outreach and calls to action**.
- **The Lough** values **consistency, inclusion, and personal connection**, often emphasizing interpersonal support.

C. Summary & Analysis of Responses to the Seven Questions posed in Session 3: A review of the Family of Parishes model

1. How has the Family of Parishes supported parish life in your parish?

Across the three parishes, the Family of Parishes has generally been seen as a means of increased **collaboration, support, and mutual enrichment**.

- **Ballyphehane** values shared meetings and idea exchange, noting how engaging with neighbouring parishes offers different perspectives. However, there's a sense that more sharing is still needed, with one voice noting minimal impact so far.
- **The Lough** highlights cooperation among priests and shared communication tools (e.g., Facebook), although several people feel that engagement remains limited to a small circle of active members.
- **Togher** emphasizes the **practical benefits**—priests celebrating Mass across parishes, joint events like penitential services, and shared training sessions. They appreciate the growing relationships and see this as preparation for a future with fewer priests.

2. How is your parish supporting the Family of Parishes?

Support efforts vary, with all three parishes contributing through **priest collaboration, shared resources, and participation in diocesan meetings**.

- **Ballyphehane** highlights meeting attendance, encouraging youth participation, and inter-parish prayer. There's also recognition that broader lay involvement is needed.
- **The Lough** references diocesan engagement and idea-sharing but admits improvement is possible.
- **Togher** acknowledges that most support is still led by clergy and parish secretaries, though some lay involvement through Mass attendance in other parishes and training sessions is happening. There's room for greater parish-wide integration.

3. What have been the challenges for your parish since becoming part of the Family of Parishes?

Responses show a **spectrum of experience**, from minimal perceived disruption to challenges around **communication, change, and identity**.

- **Ballyphehane** reports some internal struggles around leadership changes (e.g., loss of their parish priest), communication gaps, and lack of inter-parish engagement.
- **The Lough** sees relatively few challenges, suggesting that changes have been gradual and non-disruptive. Still, the parish continues to operate quite independently.
- **Togher** identifies more **structural and cultural challenges**, such as persistent silos, resistance to change, and lack of awareness about what other parishes are doing. However, there's also optimism and a call for deeper relationship-building.

4. How can we celebrate sacramental life as a Family of Parishes?

There is strong support for **joint sacramental events**, shared services, and collaborative planning.

- **Ballyphehane** proposes more joint services throughout the year and increased informal interactions around the Mass.
- **The Lough** suggests a structured approach with rotating events across the three churches and more strategic planning through a working group.
- **Togher** provides practical ideas such as inter-parish ministry teams, rotating sacraments, shared novenas, and combined newsletters to better connect the faithful.

5. As a Family of Parishes how do we encourage younger people to participate in the faith community?

Engaging youth is universally recognized as a **critical challenge**.

- **Ballyphehane** calls for **early engagement through schools**, more child-friendly Mass formats, and giving young people meaningful roles in liturgies.
- **The Lough** proposes greater school and college outreach but recognizes how difficult it is to sustain interest.
- **Togher** shares several innovative ideas: **evening Masses**, more youth-targeted events, leveraging RE teachers, and introducing youth awards and themed liturgies. However, there's acknowledgement that coordination remains weak across the parishes.

6. In our Family of Parishes how can our ministries be further supported?

The emphasis across all parishes is on **shared training, better communication, and recruiting new volunteers**.

- **Ballyphehane** suggests WhatsApp groups for better coordination, more visible enthusiasm, and joint training events.
- **The Lough** supports ministry through ongoing invitations, training, and a database of available ministers.
- **Togher** stresses that **shared training** would be most effective, along with consistent communication, leadership development, and regular review processes.

7. What do you hope our Family of Parishes will look like in the next five to ten years?

A **vision of greater unity, lay leadership, and vibrancy** emerges from all three parishes.

- **Ballyphehane** hopes for more youth participation, better relationships among the parishes, and fuller churches. They envision a parish where volunteers feel connected across boundaries.
- **The Lough** imagines a **lay-led, resilient faith community** that remains active even in the absence of priests. Their hope includes greater involvement from lay ministers and deacons.

- **Togher** envisions a **cohesive, flexible, and interactive community**, with merged liturgies, more parishioner involvement, and shared events like newsletters, sacramental celebrations, and social gatherings. There's a strong call for regular inter-parish contact.
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Conclusion

While each parish is at a different stage in its experience of the Family of Parishes, several **common themes** emerge:

- **Priest collaboration** is strong, but **lay integration** is still developing.
- There's a shared desire for **better communication, more joint events, and stronger youth engagement**.
- Challenges lie mainly in adjusting to change, promoting deeper inter-parish relationships, and building sustainable **lay leadership** structures for the future.