



Synod
2021
2023

For a synodal Church
DIOCESE OF CORK AND ROSS

*Submission to the
pre-synodal process from
the People of the
Diocese of Cork and Ross*

May 2022

The Lord reminds us that we will change when we deepen our relationships with him. He said we cannot put new wine into old skins.

The call from Pope Francis to all in the Catholic Church across the world to become truly synodal – to walk together as a people of faith – has brought us to engage in life-giving conversations about our faith across our diocese.

I'm very grateful to the many people who have been part of our synodal pathway to date, including all who contributed in so many ways. I'm thankful to the Synodal Steering Group for guiding the process to this stage.

This document is our diocesan submission to the national and universal synodal path but it will also be a corner stone of our faith community's discernment in our diocese for the coming years.

"I am quite certain that the One who began this good work in you will see that it is finished" (Phil 1:6)

✠ *Fintan Gavin*

Bishop of Cork and Ross

Synodal Steering Group

- Elizabeth Garry Brosnan, Facilitator
- Elaine O'Sullivan, Chaplain, MICC, Dunmanway
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- Sr. Mary Usifoh OLA, Mission and Vocation Animation Coordinator, Ardfoyle Sisters

Introduction

As we set out on our synodal journey in the Diocese of Cork and Ross we placed our emphasis on the call of Pope Francis to focus on a vision which supports all God's people "to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, to learn from one another [and] awaken a dawn of hope."

The Synodal Steering Group engaged in conversations to explore how we could hear the voices of as many people as possible in the time we had available to us and have compiled this report in our attempt to represent the voice of the Holy Spirit working through the people of God in the Diocese of Cork and Ross.

There were three routes for contributing to the synodal listening process in our diocese:

- An online questionnaire.
- Two listening meetings with a random sample of parishes across the diocese, urban and rural.
- Focus groups with people from a cross section of society both those who feel a connection with church and those who experience disconnection and/or marginalisation.

Fifty-five percent of the people who completed the questionnaire were over the age of 50 and 215 people participated in round table conversations representing 21 of the 68 parishes across the diocese. More than 100 young people in the 13-18 age group responded to a questionnaire through the post-primary schools. Conversations were facilitated and recorded by volunteers from parishes and school chaplaincy.

In all face-to-face conversations, we took time to unpack the themes of Communion, Participation and Mission as it was the belief of the steering group that there is not a common understanding of these terms among the faithful – particularly our understanding of mission.

A number of notable insights and comments from these gatherings included the fact that people were so happy to be together (post COVID) and engaging in these conversations. *'Lord, it is good for us to be here'* (Matt. 7:14).

Each table was invited to create a 'prayer space' for the group to gather around and become aware of listening to the movement and prompting of the Holy Spirit, and to each other in a prayerful, reflective way, and focus on creating a 'sacred space' seemed to impact the way in which the groups engaged with each other.

Facilitators reported being really impacted by the deep level of sharing, the honesty, and the sense of hope for our future that was expressed. Participants reported feeling respectfully listened to and having the belief that this could be the start of a new chapter for the Church. Clergy reported feeling 'safe' to express their views and felt 'listened to'.

This part of the synodal journey was presented as the beginning of a much longer and deeper discernment journey developing a synodal pathway in the diocese. Therefore, there were many questions about 'next steps' and there was a positive response to the question of how people could contribute their gifts and talents to a renewed faith community.

One of the challenges of the journey thus far has been the difficulty of engaging with those who are marginalised or disengaged. Efforts to meet with groups from the Traveller community, LGBTI+, parents of young children and established clubs/groups for young people and young adults were largely unsuccessful. A key issue appeared to be the challenge of getting beyond the representative bodies and the difficulty of meeting the individuals. Anti-religious, non-denominational or non-religious stances were given by those contacted as the reasons for non-engagement.

It would have taken more time to build rapport and connections, have conversations and gently to open these doors. This is an area that we plan to return to and work with over time.

It also emerged that there were noticeable differences between the rural and more urban parts of the diocese when it came to sitting together in prayerful reflection and discussion. The city parishes' meetings had a notably different dynamic. There was a good mix of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds which led to good engagement.

However, it is notable from all of the conversations, online and face-to-face, that the content of the conversation and invitations to reflect on the mission of the church going forward were responded to from an operational perspective and suggestions were mainly functional. Conversations largely did not reflect a deep level of spiritual discernment.

During the steering group's contemplation on the process it emerged that it is likely that the people who contributed to this process are not used to having such open faith-based conversations together or reflecting on our spiritual growth and development as a community of faith. Most people were aware of difficulties in our church, but finding solutions is a much longer process that we will be revisiting.

The question of the relevance of 'church' as an institution to people and their current daily lives was reflected loudly in our discernment as a steering group. People across all age groups commented on the relevance of language used in and by the church and the relevance of the formal organised church for the current young generation. The steering group in discernment following the listening journey, questioned the relevance of the questions posed to the people who responded to them, both online and at in-person gatherings – it appeared that people did not always relate the question to themselves and their own personal experience, but to some other people 'out there'.

The experience of journeying together as a pilgrim people though this somewhat solemn process, was one that could be likened to a rising out of the Lenten period and beginning to glimpse the potential of Easter. This was a joy-filled experience for many of the participants.

Communion

Seventy seven percent of respondents reported that being part of their local parish nourishes and encourages their faith life. In the responses from young people, their perception of parish was the geographical area and much of their engagement relates to sports, and other non-faith-based experiences.

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People identified their engagement in Ministries of the Word, Eucharist, finance, church cleaning and sacristan duties as a factor in them feeling a part of their community. Being part of the local parish life provides an experience of solidarity, forms an important part of their engagement and connection with community, particularly post COVID. For others being involved in RCIA groups, Alpha and Life in the Spirit is what nourishes and deepens their faith.

The importance of the support of parish clergy and the local community during times of difficulty was repeatedly stated. Attending Mass at Christmas, Easter and special occasions is important to the majority of respondents. It is perceived by the respondents that courses run by Parish Assemblies during Advent and Lent help people to learn about – but not necessarily deepen – their faith.

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Forty three percent of respondents report experiencing some form of hurt or disappointment from our Church. Others stated that while they didn't have an experience of hurt or disappointment, they could empathise with those who have. Words such as "ashamed", "saddened", "distressed" and "frustration" were used.

While there was some mention of the hurt caused by historical abuse within Church, the majority of hurt and disappointment relates to feelings of exclusion and the lack of experiences of connection and engagement and spiritual nourishment and formation opportunities.

Many of the people who chose to complete the online questionnaire stated that they feel no real engagement with their parish or their faith community other than going to Sunday (or in some cases daily) Mass. The opportunity to meet and engage with people socially after Mass, particularly post-Covid, is an important way to create a feeling of engagement with the community. Comments such as

*"There is really nothing in place for building up one's faith.
We only attend Mass."*

reflect the sentiments of many of the respondents. The themes of 'welcome' and 'invitation' repeatedly arose. There is a sense of people needing to feel personally invited to engage and participate in parish/Church life.

The individual nature of people's practice of their faith is leading to a sense of isolation and disconnection. The theme of 'guidance' and 'leadership' also figured largely, with people reporting an experience where lack of guidance and leadership has led them to disengage with relative ease.

*"There is room for greater involvement and participation
in decision-making by the laity."*

The call for more lay involvement in leadership and decision making was loud, yet for many it did not relate to themselves. When asked what people think about when they think of 'church' the main responses were the physical building, the hierarchical Church, God and the saints. There was almost no awareness that "we the people of God" are church, highlighting the lack of awareness of the need to take personal responsibility for leadership, growth and change in our faith communities.

Participation

When asked to identify who is missing from our church, fifty nine percent of

respondents identified young people and young adults as the number one missing group. While women form the largest part of church going congregations, this listening process highlighted that people feel that women are missing from the Church – missing from leadership and decision-making for a at parish and diocese level (beyond child safeguarding).

Among those that are missing from our faith communities, alongside young people and young families were: the LGBTI+ community, women (and the connection was made with the male dominated hierarchy of our church), ethnic groups including Travellers, those who are divorced and people in second unions. Cultural differences were highlighted as a reason to make people feel excluded.

References to being “let down” by the institutional Church was repeatedly made and there was a clear call to promote a culture of invitation, diversity, equality, and inclusion with those who hold different views on controversial issues such as birth control, divorce and homosexuality.

It was commented on that young people don’t want to be identified as church-going because of the risk of being criticised by their peers for taking part in church activities.

It was noted that “middle-aged” people are drifting away from the church, partly because of apathy but also because of an almost total lack of faith formation and development in the church as a whole. It was highlighted that habit and tradition would appear to not be enough to keep people connected and enthusiastic about their faith. The notion that the Church is somehow stuck in a different time and not current or relevant to young people arose regularly.

“The spirituality of the 60s and 70s has no relevance to today’s younger generation. (not to mind myself in my 70s).”

The issue of the language of the Church arose again with many commenting on readings and the language of prayers being difficult to understand. There was a clear call to change the language of the Church to a simpler, more user-friendly vocabulary that all the community will be able to easily engage with. There is also a call to use social media to communicate the message of the gospel to a wider audience. This was evidenced by the successful use of technology to bring people together in faith formation and celebrations during the pandemic. The need for meaningful and relevant homilies was frequently voiced across all age groups that participated in this process.

Using Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube was proposed frequently when referring to engaging with young people but was at odds with the findings from the listening exercise with the 13–18-year-olds. They see social media as completely connected with their social life and not connected with faith life or faith formation. Similarly, the call to bring more music into our faith expression and celebration as a way of re-engaging young people was not echoed by the young people themselves. There seems to be an assumption being made by adult respondents, that will need to be explored further. The solutions offered to the lack of participation in the life of our Church by young people seem superficial and simplistic.

A similar hypothesis was being presented in terms of re-engaging with the adult population. What is very clear is the need for a sense of invitation, community, connection, engagement and participation — and the immediate response of people is to seek to build relationships through social activities.

The theme of gratitude figured largely among many of the responses. There is a sense

*“I personally need to feel I belong, I used to, but somehow that is no longer the case... When I heard about the Synod, I did pray, and asked for a word to describe how I now felt about church, so here it is for you to decipher:
“THEY NO LONGER KNOW MY NAME”*

that some people feel their efforts and contributions are taken for granted. It would appear that they need gratitude and appreciation for their contribution from parish clergy and from the diocesan leaders – as opposed to their fellow parishioners.

Throughout the listening process the need to make our Church community a warmer, more compassionate and inviting place and experience, was frequently highlighted. According to Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, before we can move to meeting the higher needs of ... we must have our need for love and belonging satisfied. This listening journey has really highlighted people's feeling of disconnection and therefore the need to establish a sense of belonging before we can move to the more fundamental questions our faith invites us to consider.

The most common recommendation to satisfy this need for belonging was to provide some sort of social gatherings e.g., tea/coffee after Mass, visible signs of welcome, being greeted by the priest at the entrance/exit to church, family friendly gatherings, music worship, concerts in the parish and welcome committees.

“stop hiding our light under a bushel and to speak up for the faith a bit more without being condescending”

Mission

Among those who responded to the invitation to participate in the listening process there was a great sense of a need to let go of a past that doesn't belong in the present. *“Do not cling to the past or dwell on what happened long ago”* (Isaiah 43:18). People want to have hope for a life-filled Church where they can feel they are welcomed, they belong, and have a voice in the decisions that impact them. *“Watch for the new thing I going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now”* (Isaiah 43:19).

People are very aware of the need to reach out in the Spirit of communion and participation to be inviting, inclusive, relevant, and dynamic in our ever-changing world. The call to be courageous in our faith, to be visible and use our voice was repeated regularly. The call to *“stop hiding our light under a bushel and to speak up for the faith a bit more without being condescending”* was frequently articulated. The call to have courage, stop being afraid, or being shy about proclaiming ourselves as believers in the word of God was clearly pronounced.

In recognition of the current reality in our diocese, with many priest retirements this year and a move towards developing families of parishes, the need to stop and 'to think outside the box' was articulated. This, alongside a realisation that we will need to *“stop being over reliant on priests and will need to help out more in parish life especially since more parishes are being amalgamated”*.

The re-invigoration and development, training and support of Parish Pastoral Councils / Assemblies was identified as a way to continue to develop the process of the synodal journey in our dioceses. There is much concern about the various levels of involvement of Parish Pastoral Councils/Assemblies in the leadership of our parishes and diocese. Experiences vary from really strong teamwork with clergy and lay people working together in the ongoing pastoral and liturgical life of faith community to situations where lay people believe they have little or no influence or real role in the mission of our parishes.

There is concern about the sacramental preparation in schools. Many people believe sacramental preparation should happen within parishes and outside of schools. This highlights the challenge in providing a body of trained people who will take responsibility for this and who have the level of catechesis to lead sacramental preparation. Do we need to employ catechists for the role? The role of 'Sunday School' was discussed and its merits need to be explored more fully.

There is a hunger for small communities of faith where people believe they would achieve a better sense of belonging and connection, where they could share their gifts and talents to better support each other's spiritual growth and development. Taking opportunities to come together "*even when a priest isn't available*" is a challenge that will need to be embraced.

The need to "*find more hope, love, consolation and relevance*" in being part of our local faith community and to show this in our everyday lives is an important feature of our mission. The need to encourage others to participate more, to be more invitational and attractive as a faith community so that those who do not have a sense of love and belonging can be enfolded in the embrace of our faith communities. Having the courage to proclaim the Good News, the strength to stand up for what we believe and to consciously be witnesses through our lives needs to be nurtured through adult catechesis, engaging in formative conversations and making the connections between faith and our everyday lives.

Concerns about an "anti-Catholic agenda" in the mass media were regularly named. How to be a strong voice for the positive in our Church is a challenge for many. The issue of rebuilding trust in the Church and a concern that we can truly believe that such "*cover-ups*" will not occur again is challenging for some people.

The invitation to listen to the movement of the Holy Spirit within and among us and to become aware of listening to each other with the 'ears of our heart' – without judgement – is not something that we are explicitly aware of or naturally able to do due to our tendency to judge. As we commence this synodal journey in our diocese, this awareness will be likely to better inform our plans, actions, and intentions. One participant expressed the desire to listen with intention in this way:

*"It's not who we listen to...it is how we listen, what we hear
and what we do with what we are being told."*

Conclusion

The desire to put our faith into action, to reach out and walk with others is strong. The attention to the operational needs, (organisational and structural) is very evident in the majority of responses in this listening process. It appears that there is a dearth of awareness of the need to build a Church where the spiritual, lived experiences of the people are paramount. We need to move from the strong expression of a personal faith to integrate it into a community of believers.

There is a great sense of loss of full churches, of meaningful liturgical experiences and rituals from the past. There is a loss of the experience of community where people now don't know their neighbours and don't engage meaningfully with them. The societal changes of individualism, isolation, status, materialism, being constantly busy, and consumerism leave many people experiencing disconnection and stress in our modern world.

The challenge we face is to create a meaningful and relevant "Church Experience" while faithfully honouring the gospel values, so that the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit can be recognised and flourish among us.

It was strongly expressed that if we fully respect women in Church, we need to move from limiting their contribution to some ministries (e.g., the Word, Eucharist and

church cleaning) to a broader understanding of their leadership roles and decision-making abilities. There is a voice highlighting the need in our Church for ordained women, who can stand equally with their brother priests in serving the People of God.

There is conflicting evidence regarding the experience of lay participation in the leadership of our Church at local parish level (Parish Pastoral Councils / Parish Assemblies). Some are very active while many are inactive or dormant. There needs to be a plan to support clergy in developing their capacity and abilities to help the people recognise their baptismal right to hold meaningful leadership roles with appropriate responsibility and authority. *“We carry this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us”* (2 Corinthians 4:7)

*‘We carry this
treasure in
earthen vessels’*

There was a regular acknowledgement of the lack of and need for a continuing adult faith formation. This is desired in order to engage in generative dialogue which will develop the capacity of people to evangelise. The Alpha experience as a way to achieve this was suggested a number of times. People wish to be able to proclaim the Good News with confidence and authority. This will then lead to capacity building, for sacramental preparation at parish level, to provide a more enriched and vibrant experience for those preparing to receive a sacrament.

In our ever-changing world, the themes of diversity, equality and inclusion are key emerging challenges and opportunities. There was a high level of energy around the lack of inclusion of people from other cultures and ethnic groups. People from these groups who participated in the listening process, experienced a lack of appreciation of their own cultural rituals and practices, especially during the celebration of Sunday Mass. There is a strong message expressing the need to invite, welcome, and include all those who may currently feel marginalised, alienated or excluded from our Church.

In many cases it appears that there is a limited view of what practicing the faith means and it may be little more than attending Mass on Sunday.

The theme of ineffective communication across the diocese was consistent in the conversations. The value and importance of clear communication and leadership within the parish and within our parishes and within our diocese has been highlighted. The rich range of methods of communication were highlighted and modern trends will need to be explored and utilised to the full.

From this journey it appears that we may know what the Holy Spirit is guiding us towards, and what the scriptures asks of us in our lives today. In a natural way, there is a reluctance to take risks and make the changes that are required for the mission of the Church to bear fruit. There has been a frustration and an impatience with the pace of change in our Church.

The impulse to do things better is often accompanied by an assertion that we need to change faster. However, it has been acknowledged that we are at a tipping point, ripe with opportunity, and for the mission of the church to thrive, we need to embrace many of the ideas contained herein and translate them into action by creating and implementing practical and relevant plans, stated in a language that all can understand.

A deep need for belonging underpinned all conversations. The need to feel invited and welcomed and encouraged to engage and participate was expressed as a hunger which is symptomatic of where people are at in our world today.



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