



DIOCESE OF DERRY

Diocesan Synthesis

What has been heard?

1. Introduction:

Preparations to answer Pope Francis' invitation to participate in the Synod 2021-2023 were initiated in the Diocese of Derry in early November 2021, with the formation by Bishop McKeown of the Diocesan Synod Working Group. Initial studies of the Synod documentation highlighted key areas of attention including: working within the timeframe; sourcing examples of engagement from other dioceses around the world; and planning a strategy of engagement and support within our own diocese with the resources at hand.

Searches on social media identified the Archdiocese of Washington as already on the pathway of engagement. On contacting the Archdiocese of Washington, they very kindly shared their Synod resources with us, and these resources were adapted and developed further to suit our context here.

The Diocese of Derry consists of 51 parishes, gathered in four deaneries. The deanery structure was identified as the most efficient method of managing communication and engagement with the parishes. Alongside this, the diocese's Youth Ministry team engaged with youth across the diocese, and the diocesan Catechetical Centre worked with all Catholic primary and post-primary students and teachers.

In early January 2022, all parishes in each deanery were invited to attend one of four online information meetings outlining the purpose, the theology and what was being asked of each parish. These were held online due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and rules. Feedback from this online process was mixed ranging from - "too long", "don't understand the language", "we are going to find this very difficult" to - "thank you for explaining the theology", "looking forward to the process". We weren't off to the best start.

In February and March 2022, four in-person information and facilitation training gatherings (one in each deanery) were led by Bishop McKeown and managed by two professional facilitators with expertise in restorative justice in the community and church, and the study and theology of Synodality. These training gatherings were very well attended and feedback given was positive. Many fears and challenges were expressed including: what if no one turns up; what do we do if a disclosure is shared; how do we handle an aggressive contributor; what if we don't agree with the opinions expressed; and much more. Guidance on addressing those concerns was

explored and solutions found within each gathering.

Parishes were encouraged to hold their ‘listening gatherings’ in an atmosphere of prayer, welcome and hospitality. Parishes could choose and adapt any number of questions from those supplied that they felt appropriate to their audience. Some parishes also used questionnaires. The responses from these sessions were submitted by the end of April. This was followed by four facilitated deanery gatherings where parish findings were shared, prayed with and discerned together under the themes of Communion, Participation and Mission.

35 of our 51 (over 68%) parishes held ‘listening gatherings’ along with many individuals - young and old, small groups, organisations and schools. A few parishes expressed their disappointment at the numbers that attended despite the work they did to promote the gatherings. Some parishes that used the strategy of explanation and invitation by a layperson at Sunday or weekly Masses reported high numbers of attendees. There may be learning to be considered in this.

Taking into account the fears and apprehension shared at the beginning of this process, the response and participation in the process has been very positive and encouraging. The following is a synthesis of what has been heard and shared.

2. Synthesis:

a. Communion

‘The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.’ (Lumen Gentium 1)

Building communion comes when people, no matter how diverse, gather to share their faith and live out God’s call. There was a strong desire among those who participated in the Synodal process for improving communion and connectedness. The Church should be a safe environment for all. Parishes within the Irish Church benefit from other strong communities that are very much integrated into the weekly life of many, most notably in community life outside of Derry City such as the voluntary sporting organisation the GAA, as players, volunteers and supporters of all ages. The Church is seen as ‘*a firm anchor*’ providing guidelines for living.

In the conversations, the celebration of Mass was recognised by many as central to the practice of their faith. Participants felt it was important to maintain and build our Mass-going community. They expressed joy at participating in the Mass and this was missed by many during the pandemic. It was shared that thankfully, people are returning but some are not - some due to fear, with others having formed new habits or found alternative ways to spend a Sunday morning. For some, it was the importance of community that is bringing them back and gathering as a

community is essential. Others said that they aren't getting nourished deeply in the Church - '*they are hanging on by their fingertips.*' It was said that some people feel wounded, but they are still passionate about their church. They described the Church as losing touch with '*the simpleness of Jesus*' and this gap encourages people to look for communion/community elsewhere, to '*hang in with people who are broken.*' One person commented that the Church was '*like a field hospital.*'

People expressed that they gather in communion to encounter God in the Mass and through others although some did not experience this. Many said that it is important that everyone feels welcomed into our communities but were not sure if we are always openly welcoming. People can experience a sense of believing but not belonging. Many spoke of belonging to one parish community and the importance of maintaining that identity in times of change. It was said that we are a middle class, educated Church and that we need to widen roles for lay people to use everyone's talents, '*a welcome for all by participating through lived experience.*'

Participants spoke of some people feeling judged or excluded by the Church or faith community - or felt the need to exclude themselves - because of their life experiences, their experiences of Church or church community or their life choices. This prevented some individuals from coming to Mass or volunteering to be part of parish ministries. Many spoke of their disappointment and shame associated with historical abuse within the Church as well as in other organisations.

There was frequent mention of the possibility of providing hospitality on a regular basis after Masses and more social events to increase the sense of community and welcome.

The importance of a physical welcome through being able to easily access our church buildings was mentioned. How thoughtfully do we ensure good access for those with mobility difficulties, parents with prams, those with hearing or sight difficulties? The church building should be welcoming with relevant information clearly displayed, for example the name of the church, Mass times, what is happening in the parish, contact information.

People welcomed how technology and social media, used correctly, has enhanced the sense of communion although it was recognised that it could not be accessed by all. It is being used to share information, both practical and spiritual, and it can be used to invite and engage with a wider audience. Its reach is shown to be far beyond the physical boundaries of a parish and diocese and creates a sense of communion with those further afield, especially family living abroad. However, it is recognised that technology cannot replace the importance of gathering in person as part of the community. Webcam at Mass had a very important role to play during the pandemic, serving as an '*emotional and spiritual connection,*' and continues to be for those who are unable to attend church. There are those who hadn't engaged with Mass before who started to engage during the pandemic because it gave access to community.

The young people who participated in our Synodal pathway have expressed, along with others, the importance of youth within our Church communities. It was felt that there should be a process that supports them in their faith development from Baptism all the way through to other sacraments such as Confession, Communion, Confirmation and beyond – *‘we need a group to nurture people and support them on their way, on their faith journey.’*

There was recognition that currently many parents don’t have a full understanding of faith themselves and so do not feel equipped to pass on the faith or walk with others in faith. There may now be two generations who feel disconnected from the Church. Parents and grandparents shared a sense of failure and sadness at not having passed on the faith to the next generations. There is a disconnect between faith being learned in school but not practised or discussed at home or in the parish. Older people are worried about having lost the young people in the Church; they miss having young people there.

“Youth need positive Catholic community in a secular world.” - Synod participant.

Separately, young people shared their sense of disconnect and exclusion from gathering with older people and of being misread. It was clear that there is a need for increased engagement between the older and younger generations, so that the faith tradition that their predecessors value so much can be handed on to young people. The older generation can be receptive to the enthusiasm and wisdom of young people. Their mutual presence enhances each other’s sense of belonging to a wider faith community.

Our engagement with young people has shown that they feel a sense of belonging to Church within their schools and parish although they may not feel this at home. They said that this sense of belonging is tangible through various liturgies, for example, at start and end of school year Masses. Some participants commented that we are blessed to have strong teaching of the Catholic faith within primary schools but that at post-primary level, the learning may be too exam-focused. Some of the teachers acknowledged that they themselves do not practise their faith. Parishes recognised and acknowledged the important work and role of Catholic schools but felt that this needs to be complemented by parish-based formation for school-age children and parents.

Our young people spoke of wanting to have other people of their own age that they can talk to about God. They often do not feel comfortable saying that they are a practising Catholic as they feel people can then put them into certain categorised boxes. Young people mentioned needing places to meet where they can support each other, talk and learn about their faith. They are keen to learn. They sought opportunities to come together outside of Mass which would involve more diverse leadership within parishes, not just from the priest.

Like many others, young people felt strongly about the perceived exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community and women within the Church. They spoke of a strong sense of

condemnation by the Church, especially of women, particularly around sexual issues like pregnancy outside marriage, contraception and abortion.

It was stated by our young people and in the wider listening that women have a lack of power in the Church and that this imbalance needs to be addressed. There were many references to the lack of meaningful roles for women within the Church. Despite being very visible in a range of volunteer roles in the parish, it was highlighted that women are absent in decision making and leadership roles.

“Women have been the mainstay of almost every team and committee I have been involved in over the years” - Synod participant.

The groups mentioned most frequently in parish conversations as being excluded from the Church were gay people, those who are divorced or separated, and those in second relationships. Irish speakers, liturgies and prayers in Irish were also mentioned.

In the conversations in the Derry City deanery, it was expressed that many people in our diocese are still suffering from the effects of the Troubles. The problems of addiction issues, suicides, tragedies involving young people, and poverty are very prevalent. Those affected by such issues may feel isolated, are searching for connection and feel helpless. The usual support networks of family and community may be failing them, and although they may have an underlying faith, they may not be physically or mentally able to practise it or even to experience that they are an important person loved by God. Some priests shared that they have to move between dealing with very emotionally difficult situations to more joy-filled parish events at a moment's notice. Participants expressed a concern that parishes need to reach out more actively to those who feel scarred by poverty and loss.

Building communion requires work from all the baptised. The priest may not be any more skilled than his parishioners to do this alone so it requires effort from everyone. Developing the work of Parish Pastoral Councils/ Leadership Teams was mentioned. All of this was recognised as being a challenge. By getting to know more people and building relationships, we can also identify those who can become more actively involved in various aspects of parish life.

b. Participation

We celebrate substantial lay involvement in many areas within our parishes including Eucharistic Ministers, readers, music ministry, flower arrangers, baptismal groups, organising rotas, cleaning. We have heard that the laity, especially women, should be involved in other more significant leadership and teaching roles. This is not just because it will take some of the burden off the priest, but because it is part of each person's mission as a baptised Catholic. It was said that people like to be asked to participate, though personal invitation is often needed; the response

may be better if the request is from ‘a recognised person’ within the parish, e.g., a priest or sacristan. In some cases, the laity may be better placed to communicate to others in less ‘churchy’ language. This type of communication led by a lay person speaking at Masses in the parish was demonstrated successfully in at least three parishes who participated in this listening process.

What hinders people from being active in your parish? “Fear of standing out” – Synod participant

While it is recognised in canon law that the ultimate accountability for the parish lies with the parish priest, it is felt that the responsibility should be shared. It was felt that a gulf exists between being a listening Church and the current model of Church, and both lay people and priests will need support in walking this path. There was frequent mention of the positive leadership, the affection and the respect that people hold for their priests and the Bishop, and the importance of the role of the priest in the parish. Several people spoke of being encouraged by their priest to become involved in parish ministry. Lay people have a wide range of skills that can complement the work of the priest and it was recognised that lay skills and knowledge need to be supported and developed in parishes.

There may be a reluctance from some priests to let go of some of the roles that they have always been involved in. One priest spoke of a question about the identity and role of the priest in a Synodal Church where the voices were mainly lay. He described how some priests are feeling ‘*edged out*’ with diminishing power and relevancy and that is ‘*sore on the psyche*.’ He said that priests need assistance in being a priest in a different way in a Synodal Church. Other participants spoke of the importance of priests and lay people walking together in learning about and living out a Synodal Church. This collaborative way of being parish could support both priest and people in further deepening their pastoral and spiritual lives. Parishioners may also be hesitant about certain roles being carried out by laity. Some priests wanted to allow the laity to speak openly and honestly and so took a step back in the Synodal process to facilitate this. There is a psychological and theological shift needed to adopt the Vatican II model of Church as the people of God, where everyone is using the gifts they have been given by God. There was a widespread belief that a circular model of parish is better than a hierarchical model, where priest and laity work alongside each other.

The permanent diaconate role was raised in many conversations, along with the ministry of catechist, the ordination of women, allowing priests to marry and welcoming back married priests as a means of addressing the falling numbers of priests and the decline in vocations to the priesthood compared to in times past. It was understood that a formal method of formation of laity is recognised as a necessary requirement if they are to take on more significant roles. This formation should be ongoing, for both priests and laity. Formation would give the laity confidence and knowledge to competently carry out a variety of other recently introduced

ministries, e.g., Lector, Catechist, and Acolyte. There is recognition that this would require financial commitment from parishes and/or the diocese; we have traditionally devoted resources to upkeep of buildings, but much less has been spent on faith formation.

Many spoke of there being great grace and value in having young people participating in various groups and ministries. They bring fresh ideas and perhaps challenge the more traditional mindset. We have faith initiatives such as the Pope John Paul II Award. This Award enables young people to develop their faith and to participate in their parish and wider community. The key is to make this participation sustainable so that connections which have been established are nurtured and expanded. Young people indicated that they are interested in other areas such as environmental issues and social issues which tap into their natural sense of justice.

Young people and women have so much to offer but roles are limited within the Church. It was said that the focus has often been on vocation to the priesthood and religious life rather than other vocations that God has called people to do, even if on a temporary basis.

The other aspect of participation is being more fully engaged in the Mass and other liturgies. This is greatly enhanced if there is a better understanding of our faith. There was a widespread desire among participants to learn more about their faith and many believed that adult faith formation should be available within, and between more parishes. This will be a refresher to those who learned it at school but may be the first time that some people have gained an understanding of the riches of Church teaching. This may be offered to parents of children participating in the Sacraments, and developing their own faith and helping them to discuss it with their children. This deeper understanding could have a ripple effect within the parish, touching other parents and leading to more active participation in other roles. Faith participation programmes such as ‘GIFT’ and ‘Do this in Memory of Me’ have been mentioned frequently as examples of engaging with children and parents. It was felt that young people respond to projects and through projects faith can be deepened. With further training and investment, parishes felt such programmes could bring more lay leadership and build the parish faith community. It was mentioned that the diocese could learn from the organised faith formation programmes of the Syro Malabar community among us.

An enthusiasm for introducing children’s liturgies at Mass was widely expressed as well as more opportunities for ‘tailored’ Masses and liturgies for specific audiences such as children, young people, cultural groups, people with special needs, families of and those with addictions. This would help build more inclusive communities and recognise that one type of liturgy does not necessary fit all. Many highlighted that we need to continue to come together to listen all the time as opposed to a one-off exercise.

The topic of the homily was raised. In order to enhance the liturgy, it should be based on the scripture just proclaimed and, in particular, its relevance to the listeners' lives today. If the homily is overly long or a very theological script, it is difficult for the listeners to actively listen throughout its duration. A few relevant, succinct points are of more benefit.

It has been indicated that some people have taken their faith for granted, expecting the sacraments when they want them but having little understanding of their own responsibilities as baptised Christians. Organised diocesan and parish pilgrimages, prayer vigils, retreats, missions and novenas were frequently mentioned as powerful sources of community and sharing of faith.

c. Mission

There is a sense that people want a broader definition of mission in the Church. It isn't just about those who are perceived as belonging to 'the club' – there is a need to outreach to those who are not active members of the church community. Sunday Mass attendance is not the only measure of the health of the Church. The definition of a 'good Catholic' usually revolved around whether they attended Mass on a Sunday, but there are many good people who express their faith in other ways but don't attend Sunday Mass. They feel more comfortable at other Masses or liturgies for particular purposes, e.g., Masses for those suffering from addiction or mental health issues, Masses for some minority groups and Mass in different languages. These may be Masses which are held less regularly than on a weekly basis.

One parish specifically mentioned '*a deepening awareness of the hidden existence of financial hardship within the parish.*' This '*reality of such suffering hiding in plain sight*' has prompted them to focus on this through a parish mission.

Mission to other world faiths and to non-believers was described as something that younger people are more comfortable with than are older people. It was felt that there is good engagement in providing support to those in poverty through food banks, sponsorship and over-seas aid projects.

During our listening process, we have heard very contrasting views on what it is to be Church. This exists among people of all ages, not just among the older generation and across our four deaneries. People want an invitation to grow and they have many hopes and dreams. But one person's hopes and dreams of Church may be another person's fears, and there is a need to be respectful to all involved. Learning from the work of baptism and bereavement groups and other examples of good practice across the diocese was referenced.

Participants wanted to feel empowered through training and formation, though not necessarily professional, theological training. They said that training needs to be more focused on developing the individual's gifts as well as understanding and reflecting on the basics of the faith, rather than getting an academic qualification.

“[Do] we know enough about our faith to discern the will of God?” - Synod participant

It was felt that there are many who need healing within our communities and clarification about the type of Church they are returning to. One person highlighted that when inviting people back to church we cannot invite them back to the same model of Church that they left. Many felt strongly that we need to reach out to those who are marginalised to help them experience the love and acceptance of Christ but do not know how to do this. Their presence in the Church enriches the community. Imaginative ways could be used rather than the more traditional forms of being church. For example, there may be scope to use some church grounds for allotments to help with mental health issues and engage with some groups. This would also link with our responsibility to the earth and creation.

Mission can start small using the example of ‘cells’ from the early church. This may be an environment in which some feel more comfortable to practise their faith. This can also start at the family level, recognising the importance of parents and grandparents in faith development. Formation of small prayer groups was mentioned. These pockets of faith can grow and have a huge impact at parish and diocesan level.

Small gestures can be powerful, leading by quiet example - ‘Preach the gospel every day, sometimes use words’. There was a recognition of the need for agape (selfless love putting the other first) and commitment. We need to recognise and reach out to those who are lonely.

The idea of mission can be counter-cultural. It is often not easy to speak of church especially in the Northern Ireland context. There are significant challenges to mission including secularism, relativism, liberalism, media, lack of confidence/access and lifestyle choices. All of these can lead to fragmentation in people’s lives.

There needs to be an authentic mission. It is important not to dilute the message of the Church just to be popular. However, the message of the Church can be expressed in many ways, ranging from the very traditional preaching of rules to a mercy-filled message which should fill everyone with love and hope. The message should be delivered with compassion keeping in mind what Jesus would say and do. This might lead to a better model of Church.

3. Conclusion

- For those who participated in the journey, this turned out to be a process marked by much more enthusiasm than rancour. The findings in many ways were in harmony with the three parts of the 2018-2021 Diocesan Pastoral Plan ‘*God is Love*’¹. The deliberately prayerful

¹ [Diocese of Derry - God Is Love \(derrydiocese.org\)](https://www.derrydiocese.org) The Plan’s pastoral themes were - Build Welcoming and Inclusive Communities: Be Disciples of Jesus Christ, Growing in Faith Together: Work to Make Jesus Known and Loved.

context of the conversations was generally helpful in making this a God-centred process. The Church in the Diocese of Derry is in a period of transition. There is recognition of the need for a new model of Church which may require a certain mind-shift in all of us. This period of transition may also involve conversion at both personal and community levels.

- There is much to celebrate and be positive about in the Church at present. There was an articulated desire to be a more ministry-rich diocese. The people who participated in this process care and are passionate about their faith and the Church, and many are deeply committed. Some people experience frustration because they genuinely want to belong to the faith community but are still struggling with feelings of alienation, exclusion and lack of access. However, this indicates a real, underlying care for their faith and the Church rather than indifference or apathy. People DO have real dreams and hopes that the Church to which they belong will be more inclusive and merciful.
- There is a clear realisation that people need to be empowered to engage in the Church. Personal invitation is key here and provides a sense of permission for ordinary/lay people to be co-responsible along with the local clergy for faith development in their respective parishes and in the diocese as a whole. To this end, formation and training are essential if people are to build the necessary confidence which will encourage them to use the full range of gifts that they have for service in the Church. Plans for developing a programme of adult faith formation are already well underway in the diocese.
- Communication is a clear priority. We must learn to speak into the secular age in a relatable manner so that our mission is relevant and so that it can really change hearts and minds. There are clear challenges for the Church in the modern world but we must remain positive and be prepared to roll up our sleeves and get stuck in.
- The responses are clear about the need to make a concentrated effort to reach out to those in the margins, and find ways of building bridges that will make it easy for them to return to full communion with their faith communities, especially those who have for whatever reason felt a sense of unworthiness. There is a real concern for those in the 20 - 45 years bracket who can appear indifferent or disconnected. These members of our faith communities must be encouraged to engage in the next steps of the Synodal process.
- Many people who participated in this process expressed their desire for more Synodality - “walking together”. This is heartening. There is a huge onus on all of us to take co-responsibility for honouring people’s expectations about what the process can achieve. People genuinely want to see their ideas being actioned, they want the faith community to deliver. We must always remember that the Church ultimately belongs to Christ and that we are all called to be docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.