

Synod on Synodality

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission

Archdiocese of Armagh

Synthesis of Feedback from Consultations

29th May, 2022

Introduction

In October 2021 Pope Francis launched the Synodal Pathway for the 2023 Synod of Bishops in Rome, which focuses on the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”. The diocesan phase of the Synod was introduced in every parish across the Archdiocese of Armagh on October 17th, 2021.

In the diocese we were already preparing for a diocesan assembly in either 2024 or 2025. Preparation began with the launch of a “Year of Reflection and Prayer” in 2020. The year was dedicated to listening to what God was saying to us as individuals and as a faith community. It was not a time for big events or large gatherings, but a time to let God’s Spirit rest in us and prepare us for the road ahead.

The year however was marked by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic which had a significant impact on Church life including the closure of public worship for many months. The response to the pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in the Church’s structures and processes. The challenges and the difficulties we faced long before 2020 accelerated during the pandemic so we recognise that we must find new ways to communicate and live out the teaching of Jesus in the twenty first century. We now know that we need to protect what is essential, lifegiving and inspiring in our faith, especially the importance of communal bonds.

The diocesan phase of this consultation for the universal synod gave us an opportunity to assess the strength of Church life in the diocese as we emerged from the pandemic. A core group was established in June 2021 to plan for our diocesan assembly, and they have been central to organizing our response to the universal synodal process. The group is made up of lay faithful of all ages, religious men and women, and clergy from across the diocese and they have endeavoured to work in a synodal fashion.

The major challenges we faced were in conducting a substantial listening process in a time of continuing uncertainty around Covid-19, in a relatively limited time span, and in the face of a less than enthusiastic response from our Church community and from the wider society.

Despite the challenges, some fifteen hundred people responded to the questions posed by the Diocesan Synodal Core Group and responses seemed to come, in the main, from those already engaged with Church at some level. It is noteworthy that peripheral and marginalized voices emerged mainly from the one hundred and sixty online responses and the five hundred responses from young people.

For many there was a difficulty understanding what synodality meant and how it would realistically impact on the life of the local Church. This created tension and mistrust at first, but as the journey unfolded, understanding deepened and a new vibrancy around the process emerged.

Overall, the synodal process has been a period of grace for those who have been involved in its organisation and for many of those who participated. A short and general synthesis of the feedback from the consultation is contained in the following pages but we as a diocese are committed to revisiting the many themes and sentiments that emerged. This process has provided many nuggets of wisdom and information as we embark on our own synodal process in the diocese.

Theme 1: The Journeying Companions

Those who participated in the consultation displayed a deep respect and love for the Church and many seemed to be involved at some level in its life and practice. Most, however, did not feel that there was real equality within the faith community. They felt they had a duty to participate in the Church, but that they had little say in how it was administered. There were times, such as at a funeral of a loved one, a wedding or a baptism where they felt welcomed

and included but it was not a consistent feeling. Many felt that there was an inner circle of lay people and clergy who dominated Church life within their parish and that there was a sense of exclusion because of that.

For many of the respondents, the priests and deacons they knew in their own parishes were very open and welcoming. There was a deep appreciation of the important role the priest played in the local community and the pressure the priest was under in a time of declining numbers of clergy. Concern for the ongoing welfare and care of clergy was expressed. If there was criticism it sprang for the most part from a desire to see the priest and deacon more involved in the community and freer to do the work of faith formation and development that they were ordained to do. Some felt, however, that the clergy did not do enough to make people feel comfortable or included in the local Church community.

Many people perceived that those who were not living within the limits of traditional morality, for example, those who were in a second relationship, had children outside of marriage or were from the LGBTQI+ community, were not welcome to participate in Church life. There was a call from some respondents for the Church to reassess its teaching on these matters. Young people felt that there was little done to make them feel part of the faith community, and women, though involved and committed in many ways, felt they were marginalised and had little say in the decisions that were made. The Church's hierarchical and male dominated structures were an obstacle to people feeling that there was real equality and that they could participate in a shared journey with others in the faith community.

Theme 2: Listening

Listening, and the desire to be listened to, emerged as a dominant theme in the synodal consultation. A significant percentage of respondents affirmed the transformative effect that moments marked by authentic listening have had on their lives and the life of their community.

They expressed a desire for the development of structures and practices in the diocese that facilitate a deep listening that is designed to hear the voice of all.

Concerns were expressed around the nature and transparency of listening that currently takes place in parish and in the diocese. There was a strong sense that communication structures and mechanisms currently adopted were rigid, autocratic, and did not support or enable a deep listening that could transform the lives and mission of individuals and communities.

There is a desire for those in positions of leadership to truly listen. The role of clergy and hierarchy in offering a listening ear in an open and honest way was clearly articulated. It was felt by many respondents that current models of listening were not sufficiently inclusive or robust in nature.

Theme 3: Speaking Out

The importance of communication and the shortcomings of current communicative dynamics within the diocese clearly emerged in the feedback. The fact that this emerged as a dominant theme seemed in some instances to come from a deep desire among the participants to feel a greater sense of belonging within the local faith community and to be more aware of what is happening in the parish and the diocese.

Many respondents articulated their own unique stories of when they had the opportunity to freely express their views and they stressed the transformative nature of that experience. This however is not the norm, and many felt that they were not afforded sufficient opportunities to speak with any degree of freedom and honesty. Deep hurt and a sense of sadness around clerical and institutional abuse, along with significant concerns around the culture of silence that surrounded these issues, was expressed.

A deep desire for transparency and for the creation of an environment where everyone can speak was clearly articulated. There is a strong sense that all are not given the opportunity to

express themselves within the faith community. Opportunities for lay people, women, the young, and other marginalized groupings to highlight their views are limited. Those who responded expressed the need for respectful, tolerant, and less rigid structures so that all voices could be heard.

Deep concern around how leaders are selected and their ability to assume leadership in ministry was stated. This applies to all levels of leadership, clerical and lay, from members of Pastoral Councils to bishops. The composition and appointment of Pastoral Councils was highlighted and transparency around how they and other significant groupings in the Church were chosen was of particular concern. A sense has emerged from this journey that all the faithful want to speak out, to help and to be involved yet they feel that many councils and forums are not transparent enough. A suspicion around decision making was expressed with many asking whether this synodal process will be acted upon.

Theme 4: Celebrating

The celebration of the Eucharist is central to who we are as a Christian people. For many of those who responded to the consultation the weekly Sunday Mass is their main contact with the Church. For others, funerals, weddings, and special times such as Christmas and Easter were their only contact. Some had a longing for the drama and mystery of the devotional practices of the past and they felt that something important was lost in the post Vatican II liturgical changes. What is clear, however, is that good liturgy is essential. Many communities throughout the diocese do try to enhance the quality of people's participation in the Sunday Mass particularly where there are good choirs and strong lay involvement in the liturgies.

One of the striking issues to arise was the reaffirmation of the importance of preaching, of linking the Word to the lived experience of people. Many respondents felt that priests and deacons need to put more thought into the preparation of their homilies. Often, they were overly

long, abstract, or simply a repeat of the gospel. Short homilies related to real life were always more effective and appreciated.

Lay involvement in the liturgy was also crucial, but Ministers of the Word and of the Eucharist needed to be properly formed so that they had a deeper understanding of their ministry. The idea that their ministry existed simply to help the priest needed to be challenged and changed. Those actively engaged in parish life need to appreciate the importance of their role as the public face of the Church and of how they could do much to welcome people and make them feel included in the liturgical and prayer life of the community. Most respondents displayed a limited understanding of lay ministry in that it was confined to liturgical roles. There was little appreciation that every task that assists the mission of Christ in the world today is a ministry in its own right.

Many respondents expressed their feelings of disappointment and hurt that the permanent diaconate and the priesthood were not open to women. They questioned how such a policy could be justified, practically or theologically, particularly in a time of falling vocations. Some respondents felt that women were excluded from the Church and as a result they viewed the institution as sexist and perhaps even misogynistic.

Theme 5: Co-Responsible in the Mission

There was little sense from the feedback that the respondents felt co-responsible for the mission of the Church. Even where they did, they felt unable to be actively involved in the mission. Reasons for this include, a lack of leadership that builds confidence and the absence of appropriate formation and education. Many faith communities seem to be more interested in maintenance and the continuation of services to cater for the sacramental needs of the baptised, rather than reaching out to the uncatechised, the marginalised or the disaffected. The task of being a missionary disciple, which we are all called to at baptism, is often seen as a task for

others, especially the ordained and commissioned few. The provision of proper formation could enable the lay faithful to become active evangelisers in their homes, communities, and workplaces. Some respondents expressed a willingness to be involved as volunteers.

The over reliance on an ever-dwindling number of ageing clergy in the Church has left it lacking in the energy necessary for a new missionary impetus. Many priests are often tired and weary from doing the tasks that many in the lay faithful could do with the appropriate education and formation. Leaders must acknowledge the current situation and plan for the future in a more realistic way. They need to encourage parishes to have a missionary outlook. This will involve identifying what is essential for evangelisation and taking the difficult decisions needed to refocus on mission. How will parishes operate in the future with very few priests and with little sense of co-responsibility among parishioners?

There are also sizable communities of Polish, Indian, East Timorese, and other ethnic groups in the diocese who are attending the sacraments but who are without representation on diocesan or parish councils and committees. Is there enough being done to make these people feel welcome and included?

Theme 6: Dialogue in Church and Society

The Archdiocese of Armagh's synodal journey has identified that there are limited structures for dialogue in the diocese. There is a deep reverence for the sacraments and the liturgical moments in Church life and yet these moments do not seem to generate or foster opportunities for dialogue, or conversations around faith, in the many communities across the diocese.

Finance councils and pastoral councils represent, for the most part, the only venues for dialogue. Concerns were expressed around the nature of these forums and their ability to engage with the specific pastoral and societal issues each community faces. Lay involvement,

the quality of that involvement, the issues of cliques, transparency, trust, and the nature of relationships, represent key concerns.

Theme 7: With the Other Christian Denominations

This issue was not high on the list of priorities for most of those who participated in the consultation. Relationships at a parish level are for the most part cordial but distant. This is noteworthy considering that there are large faith communities from other Christian denominations living beside Catholics throughout the diocese.

Theme 8: Authority and Participation

The Church both at a local and universal level is perceived by those who engaged in the process as very hierarchical. Most people do not feel that they have any meaningful say in how it is administered or in the decisions it makes. Even where lay people are involved on Pastoral Councils, Finance Committees, and Diocesan Committees there is a feeling that there are a select few who have always been involved and will not challenge the status quo. There is a perceived lack of transparency and clarity regarding such matters. Questions emerged surrounding the ability to challenge decisions which may have a detrimental effect on the community.

It was felt by respondents that the Church is very outdated in its decision-making processes and only the views of a particular few are welcomed. There are no mechanisms within the diocese or in parishes to listen to the voice of those who have contrary views and as a result many have walked away.

The Church purports to be welcoming and inclusive, but through the way it teaches and is administered it was felt that it comes across as disrespectful and alienating. A lack of adult education and formation also leaves people unaware of their important role in the life and mission of the Church and they often work out of a *'pray, pay and obey'* model of participation.

It was felt by some that leadership at a diocesan level is distant and not doing enough to encourage the involvement of lay people whereas leadership at a local level is often about maintaining control and influence, excluding the voice of the wider community.

Theme 9: Discerning and Deciding

There is a clear sense that the skills necessary for discernment which are crucial for making decisions in a synodal style are lacking at all levels. Structures and decision-making are perceived as autocratic, and decisions are often made using methods that are not grounded in prayer and spirituality. Discernment is not utilised in a collaborative and co-responsible way and deliberation on decisions has been assumed by a small circle. A real sense of mistrust in the decision-making mechanisms and consultative practices utilised in parishes has emerged from the consultation. There is a focus on the fact that Church structures for decision making are seen as outdated and clerical in nature. There is a clear call for transparency, and an obvious need for formation and education in the whole area of discernment.

Theme 10: Forming Ourselves in Synodality

The issue of religious education and formation is one that was touched on frequently in the responses and conversations and there is a sense emerging that formation in the areas of scriptural literacy, spirituality, and discernment, along with their connection to the lived reality of each community, is the primary task that the diocese is charged with.

It emerged from the responses of young people to the consultation that a strong Catholic ethos exists in many schools across the diocese. It is noteworthy that the many young people who took part in the consultation have deep faith, and have a connection with God, scripture, and prayer. Despite this they still do not feel, for the most part, a close connection to the Church. Many of these young people identified with the person of the parish priest and desired engagement and dialogue with them. Significantly they articulated a deep respect for preaching

that is inspirational, accessible, and understandable. The catechetical role of preaching cannot be underestimated.

Notably adult faith formation has been given attention through the provision of accreditation in theology, yet these efforts have not borne much fruit in terms of discernment and spiritual practices across the diocese. Greater opportunities need to be provided in parishes for those with a theological qualification and formation. A clear sense of a Church that is clerical and hierarchical has emerged in the consultation. A significant cultural shift in terms of co-responsibility, discernment and scriptural awareness will be necessary in the diocese if synodality is to become our way of being Church in this new Millennium.

Conclusion

In concluding this phase of our synodal journey the Archdiocese of Armagh returns to the overarching question posed by Pope Francis back in October 2021: *A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together:” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?*

From the responses and from the experience of the diocesan synodal moment, love for the Church and a strong belief in God clearly exists. There is, however, a deep longing for more vibrant welcoming communities, and for a greater inclusivity and transparency in decision making building on increased listening and dialogue. In light of this and given the deep hurt that exists around sexual and institutional abuse, the diocese reaffirms its commitment to its safeguarding procedures to help prevent abuse inside and outside the Church. The task of accompanying survivors in the process of reconciliation and healing shall remain an integral part of our ongoing synodal process.

In concluding this synthesis, it is striking that the question of how the Archdiocese of Armagh can champion the role of women and accompany those who are marginalized takes on greater significance. The process initiated by Pope Francis in October 2021 has been a challenging but fruitful one for the Archdiocese and there is an acknowledgement of significant issues that it faces. Having honoured the spirit of synodality throughout the process the diocese needs to continue to utilize the insight and wisdom that has emerged. It has become clear through the process that a great need exists for formation and accompaniment in the ways of synodality and for more creative ways to identify, nourish and grow the gifts of all lay, religious, and ordained persons.

This synthesis document has been crafted, not as a teaching document, but as an accurate and faithful reflection of the thoughts, hopes, hurts, dreams, and visions of all those who generously responded across the Archdiocese of Armagh. There are no readymade solutions for the issues contained in it, but an emerging sense of hope and vibrancy has surfaced. Building a Synodal Church that manifests a community and liturgical life grounded in the teaching of Jesus Christ must become a priority for the Archdiocese of Armagh. As this stage of the synodal journey concludes another local and national phase begins where the fruits of this consultation will be reflected on, analysed, and orientated towards appropriate action.