

# Synod Report for the Diocese of Northampton

*'We recall that the purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but "to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, [and] allow hope to flourish..."'*<sup>1</sup>

Dear brothers and sisters,

Since the end of the Second Vatican Council, there have been thirty bishops' synods. The next one will take place in 2023 and the theme is synodality itself - journeying together as a synodal Church in the areas of communion, participation and mission. So clearly, this is not a discrete event, but a seeking from the Holy Spirit of how we live together as missionary disciples with the ancient task given to us by the Risen Lord, *go and make disciples of all nations*. This missionary mandate is at the heart of what it means to be the Body of Christ in our world today. We are not called to be navel-gazers, but a communion of communities that looks beyond themselves and reaches out to those who do not know Jesus and the Kingdom he came to establish.

And so it is imperative that we need to become a synodal diocese, building upon the conversations we have held over the past few months. What questions do we need to focus upon in the months ahead? These will become clearer as we continue to discern together where the Holy Spirit is leading our diocese. There is already much for us to ponder as we reflect upon what has been said in this first part of the journey.

I want to express a heart-felt word of gratitude to all those who took part in the synodal conversations. You contributed from parishes, schools, various pastoral and spiritual groups, and a number of individuals. The data became a book of some four hundred pages! My sincere gratitude to the diocesan synodal listening group. Under the leadership of Canon Francis Higgins and Ms Avril Baigent, they have worked with a group of trained listeners to gather the views of many participants. There has been a focus on gracious speaking and gracious listening. This group has sought to listen to the listeners and what you will read here are the ten pages of material we have been asked to forward to the Conference of Bishops of England Wales.

And so we call upon the Holy Spirit to guide us in the next stage of our pilgrim journey together as a diocese. In the words of the Prayer for the Synod, 'Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it' and 'Let us find in You our unity so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right.'

May our crucified and risen Saviour continue to be with us in this journey.

Yours devotedly in Christ Jesus,

✠ David



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<sup>1</sup> Preparatory Document, For a Synodal Church

## The Synod Process

Our diocesan processes were inspired by Pope Francis' homily on the opening of the Synodal Path, and focussed on encounter, listening and discernment. We encouraged the use of spiritual conversation as a tool across the diocese to enable people to share their stories, their wounds and their dreams. The process was mostly lay led, and most of the listeners who came forward for training were women. 93% of parishes engaged in the process, albeit sometimes in very small numbers. Some parishes struggled to get anyone to come to a session, while in other places listeners were surprised at the numbers taking part. At the same time, we recognise that this process is not a statistical survey, but, as the Handbook for the Synod put it "First and foremost, synodality denotes the particular *style* that qualifies the life and mission of the Church".<sup>2</sup> So although some of the numbers were small, we hope that this will be the beginning of a synodal way of being for our diocese. The spiritual conversation method produced many generous and warm encounters, with a sense of being inspired by the Holy Spirit. People said they had never before spoken about what it meant to them to be Catholic, and some parishes have asked for more resources to continue the conversations. This response from a listener was typical:

*Not always a good uptake in a large parish, but the quality of feedback was amazing.*

Outside of parishes, Synod listening groups were held in across the diocese, reaching schoolchildren, teachers and parents, priests, deacons, the diocesan disability group, prisoners, women in ministry, diocesan staff, the religious communities, young people and young adults. An effort was made to reach beyond our usual communities to those on the margins. In total there were 57 parish responses, 13 schools, 42 groups, and 87 individual responses, with an additional round of listening and discernment which happened at our Diocesan Synod Gathering. The process revealed often polarised positions, with the majority for change, but with strong voices for more traditional perspectives: Latin Mass v vernacular, clerical v lay involvement. Despite this, people still had a sense of belonging as in a family. Quite a few parishes have not wanted to wait for diocesan or universal Church encouragement to start to address the issues raised in their listening exercises. The process has emboldened us to use substantial times of Scripture reflection, silence and discernment in meetings. We hope to promote this further through the diocese.

The work of creating this diocesan report entailed discerning the key themes and prophetic voices from 400 pages of returns (available from the diocesan website). We have chosen to use the three main Synod headings of Communion, Participation and Mission together with the 10 Synod themes to help our discernment. The report was produced by the Synod Team, the Director of Education and the Bishop's Council together with Bishop David Oakley.

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<sup>2</sup> Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches, 1.2

## A. Communion

### Companions on the journey

*How do we walk together?*

*Who are those who 'walk together'? Who are those who seem further apart? How are we called to grow as companions? What groups or individuals are left on the margins?<sup>3</sup>*

### Belonging

We asked people to consider what it meant to them to be a Catholic. Their answers were wide-ranging, bringing together traditional devotion with a sense of wider belonging. They included a knowledge of God and a personal encounter with Christ; Mass and the sacraments; Our Lady and the Saints and the guidance of the Pope, bishops, and priests.

*It is important to me that I am part of a church that traces its lineage directly back to Jesus's apostles.*

*Being a Catholic means being nurtured by 2,000 years of wisdom and prayer.*

At the same time there was deep sense of community, of being part of a family, both across time and space, which brought a sense of comfort, security and identity. Being Catholic also formed their values, and gave them a sense of support and stability. Many people considered being a Catholic a privilege, and something to be proud of:

*Being Catholic was the most wonderful feeling of coming home.*

*I truly belong in this massive community.*

The Church is there for us in good times and bad: "We can laugh and cry together", "I'm so grateful for the Church's teaching on suffering". Amidst the joy however, there was sadness about numbers declining, especially among the young.

Responses highlighted the importance of the role of the priest in gathering and forming community, for example making time at the end of Mass to chat.

*Our good, holy parish priest is available when needed, listens to people, is good with them.*

*We have our priests who hold us and work so hard.*

The contribution of religious sisters and deacons in the diocese is invaluable, although there was also a call for more recognition of the contribution of women religious to parish ministry. The restoration of permanent diaconate was welcome, and deacons were named as sources of energy and charity in parishes. The sense of being part of a world-wide family was encouraged by the diversity of our parish communities, with one parish having counted 42 different ethnicities. Communities were a "safe haven during the pandemic", and in general were felt to offer stability in difficult times. They were felt by some to be welcoming those with disabilities and to offer support for the bereaved. However there were many other voices asking for parishes to improve their welcome for those new to the parish, those with disabilities, returning Catholics and seekers. There is a need for community social events, home groups and other good ways to develop a sense of belonging, particularly after the past two years. Overall, we need a greater demonstration of mercy and compassion to all.

### Concerns for clergy

Many reports addressed the shortage of clergy in our country and diocese. Priests are currently spread too thinly in our current structures and many are elderly. Vocations are dwindling. Both clergy and people spoke of the increasing workload of priests and the fear of burn out. There were concerns for them as managers (which they had not necessarily been trained for) rather than being able to focus on pastoral and spiritual care. Decreasing numbers of clergy led to a nostalgia and sadness for times when priests could get to know their communities, visit homes and know people by name: "Priests don't know me now". There was an anxiety from priests facing retirement of possible loneliness and what provision there will be for them. There was also concern over seminary training and ongoing formation:

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<sup>3</sup> The italicised text after each heading is taken from the Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Church

*We need men who choose the smell of the sheep more than those who choose incense and bells, with a real interest in service rather than in being put on a pedestal... And a concern about seminary training, hoping that it is really preparing new priests for whom service is a priority.*

The role of the priest was felt to be so pivotal to communities that people could contemplate radical changes in order to maintain priestly numbers across the diocese, including: the lifting of compulsory celibacy; women deacons and priests; deacons and religious sisters to be able to say Mass. Ordaining married priests was hoped to bring the benefit of the experience that married clergy can bring to the Church *“for priests to have a life just like ours”*.

Groups on the margins

The Synod documents called repeatedly for the voices of those on the margins to be heard. It was a dream of many of those in the process for our churches to be open and welcoming to all:

*Would like the Church to be a place of mutual collaboration where everyone can experience God’s love through our hospitality supporting each other and to follow Jesus and do God’s work on earth.*

The Diocesan Disability Group shared stories of feeling excluded from sacramental programmes and parish activities. They felt there could be more support for families with family members with challenging behaviour, although they also shared that

*Big and little examples of a welcoming attitude meant a lot to us and provided encouragement, continuity and support.*

There were particularly strong voices in favour of becoming more inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community. While there were some voices saying that the Church should never allow same sex marriage, many more voices were unhappy at the Church’s teaching:

*I do not want my children to listen to homophobia. I want them to learn what the Gospel says about love God and your neighbour...that means everyone.*

Some would like to see same-gender marriage available to gay people in faithful partnerships. *“Jesus loved everyone, but the church doesn’t always show that”*. A few voices spoke out against what they saw as *“a drive towards gender and LGBTQ ideology”*.

Listening

*How is God speaking to us through voices we sometimes ignore? How are the laity listened to, especially women and young people? What are the limitations in our ability to listen?*

Sexual abuse crisis

We cannot begin to speak of possibilities for moving ahead, without first acknowledging the deep anger expressed by majority of respondents, and the lament of the people over the scandal of sexual, physical and emotional abuse by clergy and religious in our country.

*People did not want to be part of a Church where protecting and sheltering priests and nuns who have committed these crimes is considered more important than openness, honesty and real care for the victims. This issue is more important than the Church seems to realise and is a continuing source of pain and frustration for many Mass goers.*

*“We are saddened and shamed”, “Repentance and cleansing needed”, “negative stigma around being Catholic”* (High School pupil). The initial inadequate response of the Church to these revelations has been judged shameful, and compromised both her position and her mission. It *“has caused many people to walk away and increased anti-Catholic feeling outside the Church”*. The people feel it deeply.

Divorced and re-married Catholics

Church teaching on divorce and annulment causes great pain. A lack of mercy is felt for those who remarry after getting divorced under difficult circumstances, denied the sacraments and are not comfortably able to practice their religion.

*The whole marriage-divorce-remarriage question needs looking at carefully and with more compassion.*

Teaching on contraception was also felt to be out of date. As a community, we can do more to listen to the needs of vulnerable and blended families, especially where one parent is not a Catholic.

#### Racial Equality

Our diocese benefits from the lively and faith filled Catholicism of people from other countries. However, there was felt a need for racial justice, especially more diverse representation on prayer cards/holy images. Voices also asked for more diverse liturgies with people being able to pray in their own languages, and using the music of different communities.

#### Young people

Children in primary schools felt they contributed well to Catholic life, with one saying "I'm not invisible, I'm not ignored but included". Teenagers were less likely to feel listened to: "There's not a lot of young children or teenagers like myself" was a common reflection. Teenagers also find it hard to express their beliefs to their peers:

*Within my generation there's a massive stereotype amongst Christians, Catholics and Anglicans, which is the fact there's still a lot of communities that are either racist and/or homophobic. Which puts a bad images on the religion altogether. My parish is not like this but I've met other people from parishes who are and this needs to be fixed.*

Overall, it was felt that

*The Church needs to reform situations where it marginalises members because of their gender, sexuality or marital/relationship status, disability or social status. It needs to speak out against injustices.*

#### Celebration

*How do prayer and liturgy inspire us? How do they inspire the most important decisions? How do we promote the active participation of the faithful in the liturgy? What space is given to participating in the ministries of lector and acolyte?*

#### Joy of sacraments

Much of the joy of being a Catholic lies in experiencing the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist:

*Mass and the Eucharist are at the centre of our lives - everything comes from that.  
Even people who are not Catholic but attend Mass feel a sense of belonging.*

The priest groups spoke about "the privilege of preaching the Gospel" and how "awesome it is to minister the sacraments". One of the key joys of the priesthood was 'the power/value of the Sunday liturgy'. For the laity too, many responses mentioned the importance of the liturgy, and the desire for the Mass to be uplifting and attractive. There was a call for preaching to be more relevant and engaging: "Homilies must reflect how Scripture is working in my life". Music played a key role, for good and for bad. One suggestion was for "Every parish to have a wide variety of music to cater for all". Overall there was a desire for more opportunities to develop a personal relationship with Jesus. In fact, so important is Mass to many respondents that there were multiple requests for daily Mass at a time that working people could get to, with a similar set of requests for a regular time for confession:

*The Sacrament of Reconciliation helps us to be purified and come back to God. These are treasures that we should never lose.*

At the same time, there were numerous requests for General Absolution to become the norm, with individual confession for those that required it. Others expressed a desire to recover some of the traditional devotions to Our Lady, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. There was a sadness about these disappearing, and over closed churches. The Latin Mass received positive mentions, although there were also concerns about it splitting communities. Even those who are not regular Mass goers appreciated the liturgy. Some primary school children do not go to Mass on Sunday, but like going to Mass at school. "When I receive communion it feels as if the Holy Spirit is in me". They also say "all the readings are for adults" and ask for more relevant preaching. There was much appreciation for the work that goes into parish sacramental programmes, from both clergy and catechists. However, there was some concern over the age of confirmation, and post-confirmation formation was seen as a particular gap in our diocese.

Opportunities for conversion

In addition to (or sometimes separate from) Mass and the sacraments, there were many mentions of the power of small groups for faith sharing and support to provide moments of conversion. Groups submitting responses included an Ignatian prayer group and a Praise and Worship group. The Charismatic Renewal, Bible study groups, home groups, and a men's group were all mentioned positively. One of the primary school children said

*I pray to God and he keeps me safe. I always have someone I can talk to - I don't go through things alone.*

There were also many examples of individual formation, particularly online. The Universalis App, Word on Fire, Formed Catholic App, Catholic podcasts, and Fr Mike Schmitz's Bible in a Year series were all mentioned, as well as daily Mass online. However, there was a need felt for training for lay leaders to encourage the formation of missionary disciples.

Opportunities for more effective liturgies

On the other hand, it was recognised that our Sunday liturgies had room for improvement with many calls for 'more engaging services...uplifting music'. One person commented

*Mass attended offers basic spiritual maintenance that alone is not going to set anyone on fire.*

Our hopes are for more experiences of God at church:

*I dream of a church that is not hiding behind closed doors... a church in which people are free to pray and follow the Holy Spirit, more spontaneous and joyful in every aspect of the liturgy and creative. A Church that is attractive for the quality of preaching, for the quality and variety of music and the warmth of welcome.*

To offer those opportunities for conversion, in addition to more effective Sunday liturgies we should explore possibilities for para-liturgies, allowing greater participation in leadership and prayer. There was a desire for better disabled access to our liturgies, from the practical such as large print Mass sheets to more fundamental change, such as training for clergy on autism. There was also sorrow expressed of those excluded from the sacraments.

## B. Participation

Authority and Participation

*How does our church identify the goals to be pursued? How is authority or governance exercised? How is teamwork put into practice? How are lay ministries and the responsibility of lay people promoted? How do synodal bodies function at the level of the local Church (pastoral councils, Presbyteral Council etc)?*

Authority of the Church

In many of the responses there was a feeling of pride in the authority of the Church. For some this was due to its unchanging moral stance and historical teaching in an otherwise confused world - some responses compared the Church's teaching on faith and morals as being a rudder in stormy waters. For others it was due to the leadership of Pope Francis - his readiness to speak on key topics, travel and reach out to everyone with his merciful approach:

*Thank the Lord Pope Francis was elected.*

*The influence that Pope Francis is having on the Church gives me great hope for the future.*

The Second Vatican Council was frequently referred to as positive, including for many who lived through the changes who felt that the Church developed a culture of love and forgiveness, and engaged with the times. One person commented:

*Vatican II changed my life.*

However, throughout the responses there were many references to the Church as rigid and judgemental, a Church of rules and regulations, uncaring and inconsistent, overly authoritarian and patriarchal, rather than consultative and merciful.

*The Church is perceived as old-fashioned and treats people as it did in the past - as if they are uneducated.*

Lay people sometimes feel as if key knowledge is withheld from them. "Man-made rules" are regularly mentioned, particularly in connection with access to the sacraments. These were often based on personal experience, and inconsistency gave rise to bitter encounters for people. A particular stumbling block was Boris Johnson being allowed to marry in church.

Lay Vocation and Ministry

Alongside the decline in the numbers of clergy is a recognition and a willingness for the laity to play their part more fully. The key question is: how do we use their skills to the best?

*Here I am, Lord, ready to do your will.*

*We do have talents and skills which are needed if the church is to thrive.*

The Synod process itself was seen as prophetic of greater lay involvement:

*What laity can do when they are empowered/invited. This has been mostly a lay-led process.*

One response from the Synod Gathering Day was "We are the agents of change!". Lay people are seen as essential to the Church going forward, but there is a subtle divestment of power that is required of all parties, including lay people who have been in ministry for years. Among the range of experiences were those who volunteered but were not wanted; those who were never asked; and those who for whom "volunteering is forever". There were stories of years of volunteering experience being stopped abruptly by a new priest. There was also frustration from those trying to get new people involved and feeling that people would rather rely on the priest. If we are to move forward with clergy and laity together, we must find better ways of treating people, as well as more effective ways of bringing new people forward.

Indeed some felt that one solution to clergy shortages is to find suitable lay people:

*The church should allow parishioners, accountable to the Bishop and the diocese, to continue to administer local churches when there may no longer be a priest available, as long as there is a viable number of parishioners with necessary skills and competence.*

Women in the Church

There are many voices calling for a radical reassessment of women's roles in the Church:

*Most of the women agreed that they would like to hear women preaching. One mentioned a friend who wrote homily notes for preachers and found herself listening to her own writings at Mass! Women aren't trusted to preach. Some Doctors of the Church are women, but they wouldn't be allowed to preach at Mass, even now in the 21st century.*

The desire for a female diaconate is expressed ("As a priority, the Church should legislate for the ordination of women deacons.") in several reports and a clear call for women priests in many submissions. In addition to clerical ministry, there was also discussion of women's role in decision-making in the church. Women felt their voices were not heard, "In our parish you need to ask a man if you have an idea", and they "dreamed of proper recognition for their intellectual abilities...not to have to leave my intellect at the door".

*Women to be given more authority and responsibility in the Church even if it means restructuring the Curia.*

*Women in the Bible assumed very important responsibilities, why not now?*

They would like more exploration of Biblical women and saints: not just Deacon Phoebe in the early Church but recognition that 'The Woman at the well was actually the first evangelist; Mary the first witness to the Incarnation; women, the first witnesses to the Resurrection.' There were some voices saying "no women priests" but many other responses welcoming women as deacons and priests. Moving forward, this involves acknowledging, celebrating and developing the role of women in our diocese.

## Discerning and Deciding

*What methods and processes do we use in decision-making? How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchical structures? What tools and procedures do we use to promote transparency?*

### Current Decision-Making

Many responses were very positive about the Church's response to the pandemic, and the initiative used in live-streaming and other online resources – this was seen as an encouraging experience of the Church modernising. However, it was felt that the Church generally does not react well to change, with authority and decision-making held centrally. There were examples of this at all levels, from the institution of the new translation of the Mass and banning the Extraordinary Rite to individual pastoral decisions by priests.

Often change is often only precipitated by an emergency, for example the closure of a church. There were several examples of this being badly handled in the responses, with hurt still being felt many years later. Finances are another bone of contention. Financial improprieties at the Vatican have tarnished the Church's standing, and the treatment of property and maintenance are given as examples of poor, non-consultative governance:

*The church asks for money but is not transparent about how it is used.*

On a parish level, there is a lack of consistency between priests in different parishes and from priest to priest in a parish. This causes confusion and disappointment, for example a priest refusing to bury someone as they did not attend church, or a priest in Ireland refusing to issue a letter of freedom to enable a Catholic parishioner to marry a non-Catholic.

*It pains us that priest act as mini-dictators in parishes and there's a lack of consistency from priest to priest.*

*New priests can stop good things happening in parishes.*

### Need for better structures

Overall it is clear that there is a need for more transparent discernment and decision making processes in the Church:

*Following the pandemic we need parishes to be questioning how we can progress without going back to the old normal so that we can restore and recover as a parish together.*

People are keen to be trusted with our current reality:

*The Church should stop being so secretive and come clean on the real cost of running a parish/diocese, thus help understanding. This would help develop a collaborative approach with lay people.*

There was a call for a strategy to plan for the shortage of priests into the future and a need for creativity in meeting current challenges:

*If the Holy Spirit is not calling men to be priests, we must think how to keep our sacraments alive for us all.*

One suggestion is to have

*A forum in which groups come together to share experiences, outline needs and formulate plans of action in harmony to maximise their strengths 'may they all be one'.*

Without better ways of discerning together, we will struggle to go forward:

*We have no vision statement and don't know what is planned for the future.*

When both clergy and laity recognise the gifts and talents that each bring to the Church we can work together proactively for mutual benefit and respect. This requires being open and honest, looking at the bigger picture, and supporting one another especially in difficult and challenging times. Together we are a 'dream team'.



## Forming ourselves in Synodality

*How does our church community form people to be more capable of listening to one another, participating in mission, engaging in dialogue? How do we form people to foster discernment and exercise authority in a synodal way?*

One way to move forward with better models of discerning and decision making is to ensure more synodal structures throughout the diocese.

*Perhaps the Holy Spirit is urging a new look at some established traditions to ensure a Church for now.*

Some responses voiced previous failures to listen to the laity: *“not enough chances for parishioners to voice their concerns” “to let people say what they really want”*. However, even within our parishes we have dissonant voices. A couple of parishes shared a genuine fear of division in parish between Latin and English mass with one side saying *“Latin Mass should be curtailed”* while others regret the lack of provision more widely across the diocese. One respondent urged us to

*Stop fighting and arguing over who is best between Church groups, movements and communities.*

The Synod brought a new method of spiritual conversation to these difficult situations, and was often quoted as an example of what the Church does well.

*The Church needs to be more Spirit led, like the Synod.*

*Listen graciously to each other, we can always learn from different perspectives.*

We need a new readiness to re-think the way we do things.

*Better listeners = more effective evangelists.*

*We need to create a different type of Church to provoke people to look inside themselves; we can do something as individuals, not relying on the institution of the Church.*

*The Synod form/process is a sign of the promise and hope for the future.*

Through this process we have discovered that Synodality is a way of being Church, in fact, it is *the* way of being Church. It is the implementation of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning the Church in the modern world. Learning how to speak and listen graciously has shown us that spiritual conversation is a good ‘tool’ for use in parishes, pastoral areas and the diocese. It meets people where they are with pastoral sensitivity. It is important that it continues to inform how decisions are made and the type of consultation that takes place. It relies on trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding us, and trust of those within the Church to listen attentively, but that trust is fragile. Formation in Synodality is key for all parts of the Church. Learning to journey together in this way will involve setting up synodal structures at all levels including the parish and the diocese. This will help to build relationships and trust.

## C. Mission

### Mission

*What hinders the baptised from being active in mission? What areas of mission are we neglecting?*

Social outreach - Church as field hospital for the world

There was a good deal of pride in the responses that the Church is one of the great charitable institutions of the world, providing education, healthcare and missionary care through its social outreach. Nearer to home it supports charities and food banks. CAFOD and the SVP received many, many positive mentions with community work in hospitals, schools and prisons also praised. Catholic Social Teaching is seen as invaluable and not well enough known.

The need for mission

When it came to evangelising activities, the responses were not so positive. There was a general feeling that the Church should reach out to those who are not so involved:

*We would like to see a more vibrant and active form of community that gets out into society.*

*A neighbourhood church - remove the walls!*

*This doesn't mean we must all go into the town centre with trumpets blasting, but we must all find ways to sow seeds to enable the Holy Spirit to bring people into our church.*

The work of evangelising was associated with a certain change of emphasis to reach people more effectively:

*We must accept where traditions need to change so that the Church moves its focus away from ceremonies and traditions and becomes more welcoming to those whom the World disregards.*

There was recognition of many good programmes like Alpha but it was felt that a lot more was needed: "Catholics are sacramentalised but not evangelised". Formation for mission was desired to provide "the tools to go out to people":

*The Gospel is inherent in the Mass but do people have the invitation and opportunity to respond and know what to do to connect to the faith community and grow as disciples?*

There was also a need for creativity in our response, including those for moving into the new housing estates:

*Rather than bringing people 'back' to the Church and bringing the young 'back', we discussed the idea of creating opportunities for people to meet Christ. How can we do it? We don't know but we recognise the importance.*

Young people

The Church's struggle to engage at depth and retain younger people is a huge concern. We dream of "a church full of youngsters". Young people were a key area for mission in the responses. The work of the Catholic schools in the diocese is praised and recognised by many:

*The Catholic school is faith in action, it is like a model for how the Church should be.*

High School students spoke about love and support, about serving Jesus, and about the Church as a safe place.

*Being part of it fills a void in my heart.*

*Even though I'm an atheist I can learn to be the best person.*

For others there was uncertainty about the purpose of Catholic education, as so many young people do not come to church. What are we getting wrong? One response spoke of RE taught as a subject rather than as a way of life.

*Our religion and its expectations must become more relevant and meaningful to children and young people.*

There are also concerns on the place of children and young people in parishes, and how well families are equipped to pass on the faith.

*Parents are relying on schools to pass the faith to their children. Parishes don't always recognise appreciate and use the potential of their schools.*

*Young people need a more active role in the Church. We need to gain a proper understanding of their needs, not just as we see them. We also need to have conversation with young parents.*

Many teenagers are reluctant to attend Mass after Confirmation, even when they have some faith. One spoke of being "forced to do Confirmation". A variety of reasons for this reluctance are suggested, and there is a sense that we need to explore the issue urgently. We dream of "a church that understands and attracts young people". To be Catholic is to be an evangelist and to spread the good news, but learning to be more missionary will involve an understanding of a personal vocation from baptism, and a personal encounter with Christ. It will also require training in specific skills of evangelisation for both clergy and laity. Evangelisation recognises the action of lay people in the world, and draws on their gifts and charisms. We should explore opportunities for ecumenical outreach programmes. We urgently need better ways of reaching young people and connecting between schools, families and parishes.

*Catholic should mean that we are evangelisers - spreaders of the Good News of Jesus - but we aren't very good at it.*

## Speaking Out

*What helps or hinders courageous speaking? When and how do we manage to say what is important to us? How does the relationship with the local media work?*

### Speaking out within Church structures

Lay people do not always find it easy to speak courageously within the community of our Church. At our Diocesan Synod Gathering people spoke of the Synod process bringing joy because of “Being able to speak openly - feeling safe”. They reported being disheartened by “Fear of saying the wrong thing”. Where the people have wanted to speak out, there has been a failure to listen. “To let people say what they really want”, “There is an attitude of ‘the priest knows best’.” The Gathering was surprised at “how much the young people who took part wanted their voices heard.”

### Speaking out in the World

The Synod Office has asked us to investigate the ways the Church speaks out, but there were more concerns about not speaking on the big issues. The Church is not seen as good at social media and there were criticisms of silence from the church on key political/world situations or injustice:

*My dream for the Church is of joyful, well-informed people who know, understand, love and defend their faith, rather than looking to change it.*

*We are in a cultural battle which we are losing.*

*We do not hide the fact we are Catholics, but are met at the best with apathy.*

Catholics of all ages felt out of step with secular culture, or found their Catholic identity torn between their own reality and outside perceptions. Young people especially find it embarrassing to admit to being a Catholic because of the scandals: “It is a source of embarrassment, teasing from friends”. One response said

*The Church needs to find its voice in the world to influence societal change.*

In the Synod responses there is a call for the Church to speak out on the big issues, speaking the truth of the Gospel, and becoming “ever more outgoing”. There was a call for

*A welcoming Church for all as a drop-in centre/outreach for those on the margins/lapsed Catholics/divorced/those with disabilities. Work closely with and shore with other denominations, other faiths and cultures, and share resources and venues.*

## Church and Society

*To what extent do different groups of people come together for dialogue? How does the church dialogue and learn from other sectors of society: in politics, economics, culture, civil society, and those who live in poverty?*

The Synod process has built confidence to talk what faith means to us individually. It has opened dialogue with excluded groups, seeking to become more pastorally sensitive. This is necessary to rebuild trust in the Church. It has also built trust in the process of spiritual conversation and opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit:

*The Holy Spirit is the power in the Church - will work wonders.*

*Being Catholic defines the way we live and gives a richness for our lives beyond words.*

It also suggests lines of further engagement with neighbours and partners of other faiths, including secular bodies.

### Environment

One example of an area to engage more widely is on the environment. Many submissions asked for a “focus on climate change and poverty”, and would welcome more sermons on green issues, as well as the Church taking action to reduce our carbon footprint, eg solar panels for church heating. They appreciated Pope Francis’ leadership in this area.

## Ecumenism

*What relationships does our Church community have with other Christian traditions and denominations? How do we walk together, and how can we do this better?*

Many of our church communities experience positive ecumenical relationships with individual responses naming friends from other denominations who have been important in their faith lives. There are also positive experiences of shared churches. Emerging from the responses was a call to seek unity with all Christian faiths, working with them on social projects and engaging with people on their level.

We recognise that we can learn from other Christian denominations.

*I dream of Christian Unity and the power it brings if we work together on major and minor issues.*

## Continuing the Synod Process in our Diocese

We recognise that many new questions have arisen as a result of the first Synod process. There is a need to engage with a wider group, including the various marginalised groups, to discover what their experiences are and what possibilities there might be into the future. There is also the need to explore more synodal processes of discernment and decision-making at all levels in the diocese. Some of the requests of the Synod process refer to Catholic doctrine and cannot be resolved at diocesan level. These will be passed on to broader Church structures.

Bishop David sees becoming more synodal as essential for the future of the diocese and as a result he will meet with the Synod team after Easter to explore the practical ways in which the themes expressed will be further explored by diocesan synodal listening.

- 1) These themes include:
  - a) The role and life of the priest in the post-pandemic Church especially workload, vocation and pastoral care.
  - b) More lay participation in the decision-making structures at all levels of the diocese, including the establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council and synodal structures at parish level (including pastoral councils).
  - c) An open conversation about finances, numbers of priests and parish life as we become more missionary and community minded.
  - d) What women's ministry exists and how this might develop, including the new roles of Catechist, Lector and Acolyte.
  - e) Outreach to marginalised groups including the traveller community, disabled people, the LGBTQ+ community, divorced and remarried Catholics, the Latin Mass group, to hear their recommendations for better engagement.
- 2) In addition, a number of the appropriate departments across the diocese will continue and find new ways of:
  - a) Recognising the harm that clerical sex abuse has caused to the whole Church as well as survivors and their families.
  - b) Enacting the new Youth Strategy.
  - c) Developing mutual transparency in parish and central finances.
  - d) Bringing together current adult formation opportunities and identifying new possibilities.
  - e) Developing more resources for mission and social action.
  - f) Supporting parishes in developing a culture of welcome and vibrant lay ministry.
  - g) Supporting more joyful liturgies and training musicians, Eucharistic Minister and Readers.
- 3) Practical next steps will include:
  - a) Asking the Synod team to continue to be responsible for the Synod process in the diocese, co-led by Fr Francis Higgins and Avril Baigent, working with the Bishop's Council to develop Synodality for our diocese.
  - b) Providing resources to help parishes reflect on the diocesan report and their own submission, engaging local listeners where they are happy to continue, and creating local plans to respond to the listening.
  - c) Working towards a diocesan assembly in 2023 at which all who have been involved in the practical implementation of the listening will report on what has happened to put in place ongoing synodal structures for accountability.
  - d) To recognise a strong call in the diocese for renewed reflection from the Universal Church on areas of pastoral sensitivity such as women deacons and priests, married priests, communion for divorced and re-married Catholics, and outreach to the LGBTQ+ community.