

Towards October 2024

Summary of Contributions from
Dioceses and Groups of the Catholic
Church in Ireland



Presented to
the General Secretariat of the Synod

15 May 2024





PRAYER TO SAINT BRIGID

Saint Brigid you were a woman of peace.

You brought harmony where there was conflict.

You brought light to the darkness.

You brought hope to the downcast.

May the mantle of your peace cover those

who are troubled and anxious,

And may peace be firmly rooted

in our hearts and in our world.

Inspire us to act justly and to reverence all God has made.

Brigid you were a voice for the wounded and the weary.

Strengthen what is weak within us.

Calm us into a quietness that heals and listens.

May we grow each day into greater wholeness

in mind, body and spirit.

AMEN.

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Introduction

In response to the invitation by the General Secretariat of the Synod to deepen our reflection on the Synthesis Report (*A Synodal Church in Mission*), the Irish Episcopal Conference received contributions from all the dioceses of Ireland along with a further ten contributions drawn from associations of lay faithful, ecclesial movements, Church agencies etc. A number of characteristics are evident from a reading across the contributions in their entirety.

There is a strong recognition of the need for change. Furthermore, there is a sense that the change advocated would see the Church of the future as a synodal Church and that this reflects the vision of the Second Vatican Council. There is broadly a positive engagement with, and an affirmation of, the synodal process and the methodology proposed, in particular the ‘Conversation in the Spirit’ methodology. Engaging with the Word of God, and in particular Ephesians 4:1-16, supported a deeper reflection on the question, and the conversations were generally more faith-centred than previous consultations.

It must also be said, however, that there were some traces of apathy, hesitation, and fear of the process. There were also some challenges posed by the proposed methodology. It was felt that the time frame was too short. The particular focus on ‘differentiated co-responsibility’ and the recommendations on who to involve, brought its own limits to the responses received, insofar as they were dominated by the current experience of Church. People still struggle with the language of synodality. Indeed, to make the guiding question more accessible and to address the issue of enhancing differentiated co-responsibility we invited people to imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church’s mission in different ways. It is fair to say that in engaging with this question people struggled to understand the concept of co-responsibility and also struggled to imagine how the Church in Ireland might embrace its mission in a co-responsible way.

Having said that, the contributions were dominated by a clear sense of the significance and meaning of Baptism in the life of the faith community. Finally, co-responsibility is a very relevant theme in the Irish context as it offers a more effective way of addressing the many challenges faced by the Church here. Despite struggling to imagine a differentiated co-responsibility for mission, contributions demonstrated an impressive realism about the challenges ahead. Nevertheless, in spite of the

difficulties, it is striking that coming through is a sense of hope, of purpose, of energy, of tectonic plates shifting, of growing confidence¹.

Emerging Themes

The following is a compilation of the main themes identified from this phase of consultation and discernment. It aims to be true to the voices of those who contributed, while presenting faithfully that which has been communicated. A subgroup of the National Team of the Irish Synodal Pathway reviewed all the contributions in a spirit of prayer and discernment over Holy Week and early Easter. In the spirit of circularity, they presented these emerging themes to representatives of dioceses and groups at regional meetings at the end of April and to the members of the Irish Episcopal Conference in early May.

1. Baptism

The recent synodal process has offered deep insights into several key areas, reflecting a broad and participative dialogue about the future direction and identity of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Significant emphasis was placed on the Sacrament of Baptism, recognising it as not only a ritual of initiation but the foundational sacrament from which the diversity of gifts and vocations emerge. It was recognised that Baptism is the cornerstone on which Christian identity is formed. Through Baptism, active participation in the life of the Church flourishes. Although the profound significance of Baptism was acknowledged, there was an admission that many people do not fully understand the sacrament nor the dignity it bestows on them. A clear call for education and formation to promote a richer understanding of Baptism emerged aimed especially at young people, families, and parents.

In alignment with the spirit and teachings of the Second Vatican Council, when reflecting on the concept of co-responsibility its link to Baptism was notably emphasised. Contributions called for shared decision-making and active involvement of both the lay faithful and the clergy. Greater lay participation and leadership was urged along with the development of inclusive structures open to women and young people.

According to one contribution, *encouraging more people to participate in decision making and have a say in the parish will be difficult as a lot of people are walking*

¹ Many have suggested that the brief testimonies from the local Churches sharing the experience of synodality and good practice (see Appendix) are more hopeful about a differentiated co-responsibility for mission, and less focused on obstacles and challenges.

*away from the Church or have already gone.*² The development of a synodal Church reality in Ireland will be significantly influenced through the establishment of relationships and structures based on transparency and trust. The necessity to integrate everyone's voice and gifts was considered crucial with potential for conflict and improved lay formation recognised as major challenges.

2. Canonical Structures and Co-responsibility

To become truly synodal will require clarification of structures, processes, and practices. Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs) are a common feature of parish life in Ireland, but they are not mandatory. While contributions spoke of these as potential organs of synodality, there were many reservations concerning their effectiveness due to current canonical requirements. Many expressed the view that in reality, the PPC is an instrument of collaboration and consultation for the ordained rather than the means by which the lay faithful assume leadership alongside those in ordained ministry. *In fact, the Church in Ireland was often conceived solely as a clerical reality with the role of lay people envisaged as one of merely supporting or helping 'Father.'* Nevertheless, many expressed the view that when PPCs work properly, they work very well, although there is some uncertainty about whether current structures will remain – albeit, perhaps, in modified form – or whether new structures will emerge from the synodal process.

It was noted that while priests ministering in parishes give very generously of themselves in the service of mission, they can struggle to minister in a co-responsible way. This points to the need for a renewal of the formation programme that will form priests for mission in a synodal Church and for a fuller understanding of the role of the priest which is not limited to his sacramental ministry.

Some canonical changes will be required in order for PPCs and Diocesan Pastoral Councils to be embedded fruitfully in the life of parishes and dioceses. Contributions stated that the effectiveness of PPCs generally depends on the approach of the pastor. Amongst those who hope for this to be the co-responsible way of working in the future, there was equal concern and anxiety as to how this will play out in practice. *There is a strong perception that real differentiated co-responsibility is only going to be possible when the unique authority given to the Parish Priest in Canon Law is balanced with some definition of the authority of the faithful, in particular, structures such as the PPC.* Reading across the contributions

² Throughout this document, we have included direct quotations from the contributions received – these direct quotations, where they appear, have been italicised.

there emerges a tension as to whether co-responsibility is facilitated or impeded by Canon Law.

While the commissioned ministry of Catechist has been initiated in Ireland, the ministries of Acolyte and Lector have yet to be formally instituted for the lay faithful. While there was a call for Parish Pastoral Workers to be employed in all parishes to provide formation, ideas, planning, and support, it was noted that resources – both human and financial – are limited.

3. Formation for All for Mission

Ongoing faith formation for mission resounds throughout the contributions. The elements of formation, including religious education, catechesis, theological study, prayerful discernment, and adult faith formation were named as essential for nurturing individuals' spiritual lives and fostering a deeper relationship with God. Many contributions emphasised the importance of facilitating a personal encounter with Jesus Christ as fundamental to deepening people's relationship with Christ and their identity as members of the Body of Christ. They highlighted that faith formation should be accessible to everyone, regardless of their background, educational level, gender, or ecclesial status. There were calls for formation and training programmes to encompass a deep understanding of the Gospel message, the Church's mission in the world and Catholic Social Teaching, as well as formal catechesis to equip people with the skills necessary for pastoral accompaniment, evangelisation, social justice work, and the commissioned ministries of Catechist, Acolyte, and Lector.

Formation in prayer was emphasised as central to any, and all, activities. Ongoing formation in conversations in the Spirit, prayerful dialogue, and listening skills were deemed essential for seeking God's will and guidance, but also for developing decision-making skills, consensus-building approaches, and fostering a culture of shared leadership and responsibility for the Church's mission. Despite the emphasis on co-responsibility, the contributions acknowledge that the concept is not fully understood or embraced by all members of the Church. Investment in training and formation programmes must be prioritised in order to enable clergy, lay men and women, religious men and women, institutions, and groups (Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils, Clergy Councils, Seminaries, etc.) to actively engage in the various roles and ministries in the Church, whilst also cultivating a culture of openness towards synodality and co-responsible leadership.

4. Women

The theme of women's inclusion and participation in the life and mission of the Church is deeply intertwined with the concept of co-responsibility in the contributions. There was an emphasis on acknowledging and affirming the unique gifts, talents, and perspectives that women bring. This included their roles as educators, caregivers, spiritual leaders, and advocates for social justice, but there was a clear call for the empowerment of women within the Church, including their increased involvement in decision-making processes, ministries, and leadership roles, stressing the importance of formally recognising rather than simply acknowledging women's contributions. *Some women feel very empowered in the Church today and valued for the role they hold*, but it was clear in the contributions that *if women's voices are not heard at higher levels, nothing will change*.

While there was a growing recognition of the valuable contributions that women are making, significant challenges were named: the need for canonical and institutional reform, practices that are perceived as discriminatory, lack of representation in leadership roles, and traditional norms that limit women's participation in the Church. From a doctrinal point of view, the question of women's ordination to the priesthood and the permanent diaconate continues to be present in the Irish contributions. That these ministries are not open to women is seen by some as limiting their opportunities for leadership and decision-making roles, perpetuating a model of co-responsibility that is not fully inclusive. *Allied to a greater sense of co-responsibility, is an inherent right to have a greater role in how decisions are made in the Church. All who are affected by decisions should have a say in how those decisions are reached*.

The contributions highlighted the need for acknowledging and acting upon the marginalisation of women, advocating for a culture change that prioritises and identifies women for leadership roles. While formation for all is a necessity, a Church in which women are truly co-responsible must ensure that women have equal access to formation programmes and theological studies, and create opportunities that will enable lay women to hold positions of leadership within the Church.

5. Young People

Engagement with young people emerged as a universal theme and a tangible sense of anxiety was expressed in relation to the absence of young people from faith communities. With a few exceptions, the voices of young people were missing from the listening process. One contribution stated that the Church had *lost connection*

with a generation. Young people identify with Jesus Christ and see in him the *incentive for the Church's presence in Ireland of the twenty-first century.* Despite this, they often feel unheard, misinterpreted, and overlooked by the wider Church. Young people feel that their gifts and contributions need to be actively sought out and valued rather than being treated in a patronising or dismissive way.

For some young people the synodal process lacks clarity and is perceived as irrelevant to their daily lives, yet for others it presents a welcome opportunity for change. Young people from one community stated that *the role of young people in parishes should be seen as the same as others* and that *young people are not merely the future*, but are part of the *today and now* of the Church. The question of how the Church might *gather young people and explore...where they believed they were being called to Christian action* is an important one moving forward.

It is evident that the Church in Ireland faces significant challenges to successfully connect with young people today. Considerable commitment and resources are required for the future faith development and training of young people. Providing young people with opportunities to take up leadership roles and utilising contemporary communication channels are needed. Helping young people to participate fully in Church life as *joyful and courageous co-responsible members* is an urgent component of our mission that must be prioritised.

6. Listening and Dialogue; Welcome and Inclusion

The Irish National Synthesis that was submitted at the end of the diocesan phase named a sense of belonging as one of the strongly identified themes. Once again, the contributions in this phase of consultation articulated the tension between exclusion and inclusion, and there was a clear call for the Church to be more welcoming and hospitable especially to those who risk being marginalised or excluded. These include, among others, people who live in poverty, people who identify as LGBTQI+, young people, those in irregular unions, and women. *The gospel attitudes of welcome for all, inclusivity, respect, and care echoed throughout the sharing and discussions.*

There was a recognition that, due to the particular methodology and the focused nature of the question, *the voices of those of lapsed or no faith or marginalised in any way are not present in the responses.* *Finding ways of reaching out and including such groups in future discussions is important.* We need to embed a *culture of inclusion.* The Universal Synod is a step in the right direction in that it encourages

listening and dialogue which is essential to creating a space that is not only invitational but truly respects the dignity of each person.

7. Articulating a New Relationship Between the Lay Faithful and the Ordained

The relationship between the lay faithful and the ordained as it is currently constituted presents a challenge for co-responsibility. In seeking to imagine a truly co-responsible relationship, many contributions were unable to look beyond a merely collaborative relationship, while some expressed frustration at the canonical and hierarchical structures that maintain this relationship, thereby frustrating the charisms of the lay faithful for mission.

While there is great appreciation of the ordained, sadly there is also an acknowledgement of the damage to trust arising from the legacy of abuse and hurt in the Church in Ireland. In addition, the relationship seems characterised by a form of clericalism which determines the ordained minister's view of his role in terms of being the sole responsible leader, but which also determines the lay faithful's view of their role. In this perspective, co-responsibility is envisaged as a means by which the lay faithful assume liturgical and administrative aspects of the clerical role due to declining numbers of ordained ministers. *It is unfortunate when the call to co-responsibility is conflated with the issue of declining priest numbers, associating this with a narrative of scarcity and loss and a recourse to lay people that can appear utilitarian i.e. 'now that you are needed you can have more recognition for your role.'* In this context, the question remains as to *what changes would have to be made to how both clergy and the laity conceive of themselves?*

Some specific areas for consideration are the process for selecting candidates for the episcopacy, the accountability of the ordained for their ministry, and the commitment of the ordained to working co-responsibly with the lay faithful. Despite the difficulty in envisaging a co-responsible relationship, there is nonetheless a clear expression of the hope that the life and mission of the Church in Ireland will be enhanced when the lay faithful will *bear responsibility alongside clergy and be empowered to fulfil their baptismal calling.*

8. Clergy

The increased engagement by clergy in this phase of the Universal Synod enriched the contributions. Indeed, several contributions reported that the Council of Priests and the Diocesan Pastoral Council participated in the consultation together. There is deep appreciation for clergy and the work they are doing across their various forms

of ministry: *the role of the priest does inspire.* However, many, including clergy themselves, expressed a concern for their welfare and wellbeing not just from heavy workloads but also in some cases, due to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Depending on circumstances and the person himself, diocesan priesthood today (for both priests and bishops) can, for some, lead to isolationism. *There was a strong expression of empathy...for the situation of the priests. There was a sense that their situation needs to be considered in pastoral planning. It is not reasonable to expect them to be carrying greater responsibility as they get older and fewer. Consideration also needs to be shown to the younger cohort, who face into decades of ministry in very changing circumstances.*

As more governance is required, priests can feel overwhelmed with their administrative workload in particular. Many stated that help is needed in this area to move from being ‘totally responsible’ to being ‘co-responsible.’ Priests are still considered *the cornerstone of each parish* and, in order to facilitate this movement, they require guidance and support. *We recognise the reality of the ageing profile of priests but steps must be taken to inform and engage them on the need and benefits for the Church, and for them personally, of the laity working in co-responsibility for the Church’s mission.* It was suggested by a few that priests who have left the priesthood and married, could be welcomed back.

While priests remain committed to their ministry, there is a sense of frustration among them that needs to be acknowledged. *Many priests feel drained trying to maintain the older model of church and are unsure how the responsibility for mission can be shared more effectively with the baptised faithful. Priests need training in how to work more collaboratively, but also desire that the lay faithful will have adequate formation in the variety of ministries that are now required. While priests express the desire to share greater responsibility with the lay faithful in their parishes, there is a strong feeling that this transition to a different model of church is proving a challenge, both for priests and for people.*

9. Liturgy and Prayer

The frequent reference to liturgy and prayer in the contributions highlights their importance at the heart of the life of a synodal Church that is oriented towards mission. It is by gathering for the liturgy that the community comes to know itself as the *Pobal Dé*,³ in communion with God and with one another. But there is also a sense that parish liturgies can be individualised and privatised. Attention must be

³ The Irish language expression for “the People of God.”

given to creating space and time in and around the liturgy to foster human connections across generational, ethnic, and other divides. Non-Eucharistic liturgies or moments of prayer were seen as helpful in welcoming those who may not feel able or ready to participate fully in a Eucharistic liturgy, as well as those who experience a sense of exclusion.

Liturgy and prayer also foster synodal accompaniment. Specially organised liturgies for migrant groups, and other communities with pastoral needs, are a sign of the Church's desire to accompany such communities. The celebration of the Sacrament of the Sick is a sign of the Church's care for the sick, the elderly, and for those who care for them.

The potential of liturgy to create a shared sense of mission was also highlighted. A children's liturgy *is seen as critical to mission and passing on faith to children*. In this missionary perspective, liturgy can become a fruitful place for co-responsibility. It is essential, therefore, to form and empower the lay faithful to work co-responsibly with the ordained ministers in the liturgical life of parishes and other communities, in light of their baptismal priesthood and according to their charisms. The contribution of a youth movement reminds us that *everything good and fruitful in ministry springs forth from prayer – this must be just as central to the work that comes forth from the Synod as it is in the discernment*.

10. Communities Oriented Towards Mission

A joint contribution by nine movements/associations/agencies that support marriage and the family illustrated how their members live the call of their Baptism by accompanying married couples and families in a missionary spirit of joyful service. The contributions from the local Churches expressed a warm appreciation of the communities that nurture and transmit faith. While also expressing concern for the crisis of faith at the heart of family life, the contributions recognise those families that strive to live their vocation as domestic churches as an embodiment of the beating heart of the Church. There was a clear call for such families to be supported and resourced.

Faith movements and associations, prayer groups, and other forms of 'basic Christian communities' are seen as vibrant examples of co-responsible living of faith, evangelisation, and mission in the life of the Church in Ireland. These communities encourage and develop a strong awareness of the baptismal calling of their members and equip them for mission. Indeed, there is observed a stark contrast

in the awareness of baptismal calling between those who participate in such communities and those who rely solely on their experience of parish.

Despite the obvious limitations of the current model, an appreciation was also expressed – particularly by clergy – for the principals, teachers, and volunteer members of school boards of management who work co-responsibly to transmit the Catholic faith to children. Catechists, parents, and members of religious congregations also contribute to this area of formation. There is a clear call for formation and greater resourcing of all who give of themselves generously to the Church's mission to teach and transmit the Christian faith.

11. Language and How We Communicate

There was a call for better communication and more accessible and inclusive language both within the Church itself and when speaking to wider society. *We need to ask ourselves as Church, how inclusive is our language? Particularly in relation to these consultations, is the language accessible for everyone?* This call was sometimes accompanied by a recommendation to use social media and other modern technology as methods of communication for mission. Indeed, there was much discussion about the importance of using more accessible and inclusive language within the Church; that our language may unintentionally exclude certain groups or individuals, particularly those on the margins of society.

The contributions suggest that Church language should be inclusive and avoid alienating or marginalising certain communities to ensure that all members feel welcome and respected, regardless of their background or educational level. *The language used by the Church needs to be simpler so that it can be more easily understood by everybody. We need to stay real with it and keep it in plain English.* For some, attention to the language of the Church was seen as vital, *to ensure that it offers a message that is accessible and understood by everyone.* This applied not least to communication about the synodal pathway itself – *it was felt that a lot of language being used even in relation to the Synod is too specialist.*

There were several requests for Church documents including synodal material *to be in more simple language, which would lead to better communication and understanding of the Synodal Pathway for the ordinary parishioner sitting in the pew...the language of faith must be simplified. Clichés and technical terms must be replaced to communicate the practicality and relevance of faith in everyday life.* The liturgical life of the local community was seen as central to being a co-responsible

Church so there is also *a desire for a Church that speaks the language of the people and reflects their lives in its liturgies.*

12. Ecumenism

A number of contributions referred to the value of ecumenical relationships in a Church that is striving to be co-responsible for mission. A specific synodal dialogue on the theme of inter-church relations was hosted by two dioceses, in partnership with inter-church organisations and networks. Entitled ‘Journeying together as Christians in Ireland,’ it aimed to explore how synodality might strengthen our collective Christian contribution to reconciliation and the healing of our communities, with emphasis on the local church context. The conversations conveyed a deep appreciation for the hopeful nature of the synodal process and the way in which it was both recognising the good work that has been done to date in the area of inter-church relations, and also creating new opportunities for those who have not yet been reached in that work.

Participants reflected on how much Christians have in common across the different traditions, facing similar challenges in a context of increasing secularisation, a deeply polarised society, stark divides of socio-economic inequality and decreasing youth participation in church life. There was a consensus that the synodal process offers an effective methodology of encounter, with deep listening leading to mutual understanding and providing a foundation for collaborative action. It requires a significant investment of time and effort, but it was considered that this event demonstrated the benefits of that investment in the fellowship, solidarity and prayerful engagement with the issues impacting our communities that will strengthen our collective witness to our Christian faith in the public square.

Notable Issues Absent or Not Strongly Present

Conscious once again that the Holy Spirit also speaks in silence and absence, it is important that we consider what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through these. It was noted that the following issues did not emerge in a significant way or were absent.

There was no mention of co-responsibility and accountability of the Irish Episcopal Conference (national level) and how it might exercise that responsibility. The role of the Irish language in a co-responsible Church was not discussed.

Environmental issues and care of our common home was present in a contribution from a *Laudato Si* working group but only nominally mentioned in some diocesan contributions. The voice of religious men and women, as expressed through AMRI

(The Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious in Ireland) has been submitted through particular channels – the Unions for Superior Generals – and is therefore not reflected in this summary. Attention to lay men is nominal. As one contribution noted, *the inclusion of women should not become ‘exclusive’ in other ways. For example, marginalised women must be included in these conversations as must marginalised lay men.* The pastoral challenge of catechesis with sacramental preparation is referenced, though minimally. The outreach of mission overseas is referenced but in the sense of its historical contribution to the Church in the past.

Concluding Words

As we journey “Towards October 2024,” we trust that the discernment conducted in Ireland on the question of differentiated co-responsibility will be of assistance in elaborating the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the second session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. As we approach the Feast of Pentecost, we renew our prayer that the Spirit may *teach us the way we must go, and how we are to pursue it.*

Appendix

Keeping the Synodal Dynamism Alive - A Collation of Testimonies and Best Practice

Keeping the Synodal Dynamism Alive – A Collation of Testimonies and Best Practice in the Catholic Church in Ireland

With respect to the commitment of keeping the synodal dynamism alive, the Irish Episcopal Conference, collected the testimonies and good practices prepared by dioceses, groups, ecclesial movements and associations, and, without summarising them, include them with its submission to the General Secretariat of the Synod.

1. Diocese of Achonry

Since the commencement of the Synodal Process, every Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) has undergone significant formation, initially with a view to better understanding the nature and mission of the Church. The formation was conducted at cluster level. This has been followed by two sessions involving all of the PPCs of the diocese, when further formation was provided and participants had an opportunity to share their learnings and challenges to date. An additional training session was provided for all chairs and secretaries of the councils. All of these formation and training sessions have been greatly appreciated by the participants, which is evidenced in the very high levels of participation on each occasion. Now, all information pertaining to the pastoral activities in the diocese is communicated not just to the parish priests but simultaneously to all chairs and secretaries of the PPCs. This underlines the nature of parish leadership, reminding both priests and parishioners that they are all co-responsible, in varying ways, for the life of their parish.

The Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) has engaged with a number of the issues that have emerged from both the Diocesan Synthesis and National Synthesis, with a view to offering a positive response. In the training sessions offered to the PPCs they were encouraged to familiarise themselves with the diocesan and national syntheses in preparing the agendas for their meetings.

The DPC has encouraged the Diocesan Youth Commission in its outreach to younger people in the diocese, a need that was identified in both the diocesan and national syntheses. A part-time Youth Minister has been appointed, who is now coordinating the John Paul II Awards in the second level schools in the diocese and other activities for an older cohort (20+). Young adults participated in a pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick in July and a number of young people have already volunteered to participate and act as helpers during the diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes. Two young people from the diocese are taking a programme in Youth Leadership, validated by St Mary's College, QUB.

Among the voices that had not been heard in the first phase of the synodal consultations, were the Ukrainian refugees. Under the direction of the DPC, an outreach to them was made by way of a consultation with a number of Ukrainians living in the Cathedral parish, which has the largest concentration of refugees in the diocese. This has resulted in the establishment of a monthly schedule for them to celebrate the Divine Liturgy at the Cathedral. Those who participated in the Liturgy were really appreciative of the outreach that was made and for the opportunity to gather in prayer and fellowship. Already, two members of that community now act as organists in the Cathedral.

The Diocesan Liturgy Commission undertook a number of initiatives to extend the outreach of the parishes to young engaged couples and those couples celebrating significant jubilees by providing an opportunity for them to attend a liturgy of blessings in the Cathedral. This involved a Liturgy of the Word, a blessing and the presentation of a prayer card and flowers, after which hospitality was offered to all who attended. The intention was to reach those who may not feel comfortable or at ease in the context of a Eucharistic liturgy. A very significant number of couples attended and were very pleased with the event.

A celebration of the Sacrament of the Sick, for the sick and elderly of the Diocese, was celebrated in the Cathedral on one Sunday afternoon, outside of Mass, emphasizing the significance of the sacrament in its own right. This was attended by a very large congregation, followed by refreshments afterwards.

Each meeting of the DPC, the Liturgy Commission and the Youth Commission begins with a significant period of reflection on a scriptural text, following more a lectio divina format than a strictly ‘conversations in the Spirit’ format. It was felt that to follow a ‘conversations in the Spirit’ format would demand more time than most people can give at regular meetings. It is, however, something that may be considered for occasional meetings. All those involved in parish and diocesan committees have been encouraged to engage with the ‘examen’ on a personal basis, and to use the *Examen* App as an aid in doing so.

A series of three seminars, presented in Knock, entitled “Our Parish – Facing the Future” with international guest speakers who had participated in the Synodal Assembly in Rome, during October 2023. It was attended by about 60 people and provided an opportunity to explore the significance of synodality for contemporary parish life.

Three priests and a laywoman undertook training in synodality, which was offered by the Irish Synodal Pathway team in Maynooth.

2. Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois

Participants were selected in every parish by various means, including nomination by the pastoral councils and the priests. The Assembly consulted the people on the margins in each parish by visitation, invitation to meetings and recorded interviews. All members of the diocese were invited to submit their views on any aspect of the life of the church in the diocese. These were then discussed at an assembly of approximately 260 people consisting of laity, clergy, religious and the diocesan bishop and a report compiled. The *Diocesan Pastoral Committee – Journeying Together* is currently studying this report. All of this was conducted in an atmosphere of prayer.

Every parish in the diocese has now a representative group who have been part of the synodal process and we are hopeful that they will be a leaven in the parishes as we move forward. We are currently receiving suggestions from all parishes on the way forward.

Recently the council of priests, having reviewed the current situation in the diocese prepared the following report which was circulated to all parishes and the pastoral councils were invited to study and respond to it in the context of an ageing diocesan clergy. We are currently receiving reports from the parishes.

Parish Pastoral Workers

The Vision

It is Sunday 1st December 2030. In the Parish Church there is a Sunday Liturgy which the Parish Pastoral Worker will lead today. It is the First Sunday of Advent and the parish only has a Celebration of the Eucharist every second week. Today, there will be a Liturgy of the Word where Communion will be distributed, which has been sent out from the Celebration of the Eucharist in the neighbouring parish, the previous evening.

The parish is a vibrant community, the resident priest retired 2 years before that, and since then the parish has been part of a partnership of 4 parishes, where one priest is available full time. There is also a retired priest, who helps out when he is free; he had thought at first that he would be able to do more, but he felt that it was important to be able to assist a process of support for the parish that would live long after him.

When the parish first found itself in this situation, the Parish Pastoral Council became very involved. They saw the need to safeguard the faith community that had been there for so long, and they took on a lot of responsibilities to both maintain the needs of the present time, and plan for the future. In their training to take on this role they became aware that they were co-responsible with the priest for the care of all in the parish, and so they have broadened their understanding of the role. Some parishes have set up a joint Pastoral Council with their neighbouring parishes, to better achieve this goal.

Along with the Pastoral Council, a part of which is also a liturgy group; and the Parish Finance Committee, who arranged a rota to take care of the Sunday collection and have it recorded and lodged to the bank, there is a Parish Secretary who is based in the parish, but also looks after 2 other parishes, they work part-time and are based in what was up until 2 years ago the parish priest's house.

The sacristan also now has responsibility for the church supplies and heating of the church, they work closely with a parishioner who looks after the maintenance of the buildings in the parish. They also liaise with the choir and the parish safeguarding officer who has a small group of servers that some parents in the parish have trained.

A programme to train people to be Parish Pastoral Workers was initiated about 5 years ago. Not every parish has one, but they work as a team in the different Deaneries and ensure that all areas of the diocese are included. Some of these prepare liturgies that are led in parishes, while others run specific programmes for those preparing for the Sacraments and liaise with the various schools in the area, as well as projects like the Pope John Paul II Awards, and a youth programme that the Pastoral Development committee have been running for the last few years. There are also a small group who prefer not to be out in the public as much, but run small scripture reflection groups and other prayer groups, in not all, but some parishes, where a group of people have an interest to take part. They now have been leading prayers in the funeral homes and at the grave sides at funerals, and on a number of occasions have led a Liturgy of the Word for a funeral where the priest was unable to attend. The Parish Pastoral Worker leads the community in all these occasions. Just like in some countries there has been a growing need for them to also baptise as well, which they could always do in an emergency but now as well as helping the families of those to be baptised to prepare for the sacrament, they also celebrate the sacrament with them.

Even though the priest that is assigned to the community is not as involved as previously, they still are an important element of the parish life, and work in harmony with the Pastoral Workers.

It is interesting that as the years pass there still is the involvement of those who have been Ministers of the Word. They also prepare the Prayer of the Faithful and take Holy Communion to the house bound, Altar Servers and Choirs. The Pastoral Council ensures that each group is supported, with rotas, training and recruitment. They work alongside the Pastoral Workers who have taken on the role of training and found the charism to lead and develop this parish as a faith community.

The Proposal

The first thing to note is that for a parish community there are three levels to support.

1. The regular ministries where people have always taken a part, to preserve and support these.
2. The local parish key people like Pastoral Council, Secretaries, and Sacristans who have now to take on enhanced roles.
3. And finally, Parish Pastoral workers whose role is specifically to be trained as leaders of the Christian community, whether that is in large or small ways.

Before we can move forward to reach this goal, it would be good to define the various roles for each person in this vision.

The Priest

The priest is the cornerstone of each parish. The date of the proposed vision above is 2030, when there will be only 25 priests working in the diocese, half the number that are working now in parishes, where the youngest will be 57. Even if there was a major intake of seminarians over the next few years, or priests coming from other countries, it would still not be enough to cover all the parishes.

The Pastoral Council and other parish roles

The most important element of supporting a parish is the upskilling of Parish Pastoral Councils. Working as a group, along with Sacristans and Secretaries, they are the key element of keeping a parish alive. The Pastoral Development group have been working on a plan to resource and retrain Pastoral Councils to achieve this. The training will need to be based on looking at the proposed vision.

The Catechists

Some already have taken on this role, and might be interchangeable with Parish Pastoral Workers, but not in all cases. The primary role for the Catechist is to support the faith development of parishioners, whether as family ministry, lay formation, or youth projects.

3. Archdiocese of Armagh

In the consultation for the Universal Synod, *For a Synodal, Church, Communion, Participation and Mission*, the Archdiocese used a combination of small parish gatherings and large diocesan assemblies. While this worked well it was felt that we should consult at a regional level going forward. We identified five regions for this purpose. The goal of these gatherings was to foster deeper reflection and provide more people with the chance to engage in facilitated synodal processes. We used this regional model to revisit our diocesan synthesis during October and November 2023 to identify priorities for future pastoral planning. This format was very successful and we utilised it once more for the February and March discussions on "A Synodal Church in Mission." In preparation for these five regional meetings an open invitation was extended with a specific request that at least 5 attendees from each parish be members of the Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Committees.

Experiences Lived and Good Practice:

Synod Core Group

The Archdiocese of Armagh's ability to engage meaningfully with the Universal, National and Local synodal processes has been facilitated by the development of a strong synodal core group. The time and effort taken to accompany and form this group has paid dividends in relation to our ability to tackle the not insignificant workload involved in developing a synodal reality. The group is composed of lay, religious and ordained members that have strong, but diverse theological, pastoral and ministerial experience. The balance that has been struck with the Synod Core Group has led to an effective and prayer filled way of working and reflecting.

Conversation in the Spirit

The Archdiocese of Armagh has utilised the "Conversation in the Spirit" methodology for fruitful listening sessions. This method has been increasingly used by various groups within the archdiocese including the Synod Core Group, Diocesan Pastoral Council, Council for Priests, and Vicar Foranes. The methodology has been effective in addressing challenging pastoral issues and in encouraging parishes to work together in pastoral areas. Moving forward, the archdiocese feels it is important that a greater number of people experience this way of discerning and making

decisions. Simply experiencing this methodology seems to result in a change of perspective in the individuals and communities involved.

Deeper Listening to the Clergy/Clergy Wellbeing

During local and national listening processes concern emerged in relation to clergy wellbeing and their absence from synodal processes. Our own synthesis articulated “a deep appreciation of the important role the priest played in the local community” yet concern for the welfare and care of clergy was also expressed. Criticism emerged mainly from a desire for increased community involvement among all the baptised. There was a strong call for priests and deacons to be freer to perform the work of development and faith formation they were ordained to do.

Considering this, a process of reflection on clergy wellbeing was initiated in the summer of 2023. In November 2023 two priests from the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit (MSpS) visited the Archdiocese of Armagh. The priests work with the Rougier Foundation which assists priests who are experiencing crisis in their ministry. They also work in the area of ecclesial discernment, ecclesial change, and formation. Along with a religious sister they led a clergy gathering centred on wellbeing and priestly ministry. They stayed for a further ten days after the gathering meeting individual priests and various diocesan groups such as the Diocesan Pastoral Council and Synod Core Group. This exercise has proven to be a fruitful one and the feedback provided by the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit has offered fresh insight and clarity. The work of responding to this feedback is ongoing and will develop over the coming months and years.

The Role of Popular Devotions and Prayer in a Synodal Church

The Archdiocese of Armagh has promoted prayer as a constituent component of its synodal processes and has had the privilege to receive the relic of Carlo Acutis in St. Patrick’s Cathedral Armagh. More recently it has commenced a year dedicated to celebrating the life and legacy of St. Brigid and during Lent 2024 called for 1000 hours of adoration for vocations to the priesthood. The power of popular devotion to draw diverse people of all ages and backgrounds has been striking and it must be recognised that this kind of prayer plays a significant role in building a synodal Church because it serves as a unifying force, facilitating personal expressions of faith, and acting as an interface with those on the peripheries of the Church. Popular devotions, such as pilgrimages and the veneration of saints foster a sense of belonging and community among believers and encourage active participation in the Church's life.

Ecumenics

Given the strong inter church relationships that exist in the Archdiocese of Armagh it was surprising that Ecumenics was not mentioned in grassroots synodal listening. To this end the Archdiocese of Armagh is hosting an inter church gathering on the 25th of April 2024 to reflect on synodality and what inter church networks in Ireland can offer a synodal Church. Existing relationships are central to the planning process for this gathering and a separate report will be submitted at a later date.

Facilitative leadership training

Seven Delegates from the Archdiocese were registered for Synodal Leadership Training facilitated by the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

4. Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly

The Process

Three parish teams reflected on Co-responsibility with the aid of a video input from Fr. Éamonn Fitzgibbon. One parish team and one parish pastoral combination (consisting of five parishes) reflected on the question within their regular meeting. Two parish teams reflected on Co-responsibility within the theme of Synodality again at their regular parish team meetings. The Diocesan Synodal team consisting of five members held two gatherings to reflect on the feedback and contribute to the question.

Positives

The parish teams are very much at ease with each other and the reflection and feedback were open and honest. Eleven parish teams reflected on the question in addition to the Diocesan Synodal team.

Challenges

Some people found the question confusing and asked what does Co-responsibility mean?

Due to the timeframe all parish teams in the archdiocese were not consulted.

Prayer and Discernment

One of the parish teams prayed with St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:1-16) as did the Diocesan Synodal team at their second meeting. The parish team spoke of needing to be unified in what we do. We need to get the balance right. The image of being 'Blown here and there by every wind of teaching' spoke to one of the members

of the Synodal team. For another member the different gifts are seen outside the Church where the Kingdom of God is.

At the first meeting of the Diocesan Synodal team St. Paul's First letter to the Corinthians 12: 12-27 informed the discussion. One of the members said that 'everyone using their gifts in the service of the community' spoke strongly to her as it connected with the scripture passage referencing the unique function of each of the parts of the body. Another member of the team was struck by the statement 'we need to be unified in what we do'. It resonated for her with the line in scripture, '...we were all made to drink of one Spirit.'

'Conversation in the Spirit'

The Diocesan Synodal Team used the methodology of Conversation in the Spirit at both of its meetings. The meeting began with a reading from Scripture then a period of silence. The feedback from each parish was read out by one member of the team and each member shared what resonated with them without interruption. A period of silence followed each person.

One of the parish teams speaks of their meetings being steeped in prayer invoking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. 'Within our gatherings, moments of silence and reflection punctuate our discussions, fostering a deeper connection with God'. The Diocesan Pastoral development team has facilitated meetings with the Parish Pastoral Combinations and individual parish teams where synodal conversations were held comprising of prayer, attentive listening to each person without interruption and a period of silence after each person spoke.

Parish teams and Parish Pastoral Combinations are endeavouring to practise synodal conversations within their regular meetings. The Diocesan Pastoral Council and Council of Priests practised synodal conversations when reflecting on the Diocesan Synthesis for the universal synod and when discerning the make up of Parish Pastoral combinations.

Renewal

A listening process took place in the Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly in 2017 and the diocesan pastoral plan 'Seeds of Hope' emerged from that process. Seeds of Hope is inspiring a period of renewal in the archdiocese including the establishment of Parish teams and Parish Pastoral combinations, formation of Lay Pastoral

Ministers, courses of renewal for Ministers of the Word and Ministers of the Eucharist and inter-diocesan reflection and sharing of resources.

Formation in synodality

The five members of the Synodal team are undertaking a Facilitative Leadership training programme organised by the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Three members serve on their parish pastoral team and two members attend the diocesan pastoral council meetings as pastoral workers.

5. Diocese of Clogher

Each parish in the diocese of Clogher was invited to attend a gathering on 12 March 2024 in Monaghan. Parishes were invited to send two lay representatives, accompanied by the parish priest. 80 people from across the diocese attended the gathering. The meeting began with a brief introduction to explain synodality and co-responsibility. The meeting was planned around small group work (groups of 8). This was followed by feedback from each group, the contents of which contributed to Section 1 of this document. The gathering was a positive and an enthusiastic experience. Many commented on the value in coming together to discuss present and future experiences of church. As noted in Section 1, however, participants struggled to grasp the concepts of synodality and co-responsibility and found it difficult to imagine life in the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways.

Diocesan Initiatives to date:

- Prior to the National Synodal Process, the Diocese of Clogher had initiated a 'Clogher in Dialogue Process'. This process involved the gathering of pastoral area groups to discuss the future of Church in the diocese. Since then, the Diocesan Synodal Steering Group undertook the following initiatives:
- The group felt the need to initiate a move forward for the Diocese of Clogher and it was decided to invite a representation of clergy to meet with the group to ascertain their views, concerns, hopes and what they felt the Synodal group could do to assist. This meeting was held on 21 February 2023.
- Following this informative engagement, a sub-group was set up comprising steering group members and clergy representatives with the purpose of focussing on the care of the clergy in the diocese of Clogher.
- The sub-group engaged with Fr. Tim Bartlett from the Diocese of Down and Connor who facilitated a one-day conference for all clergy on 6 June 2023 in

the Four Seasons Hotel Monaghan. The main theme for the day was ‘Care of the Priest’ where an opportunity was afforded for clergy to express their concerns and hopes as the diocese faces the inevitable decline in clergy numbers in the years ahead. The general feedback from this day was one of positivity and hope without ignoring the many difficulties that need to be addressed.

- Following the conference on 6 June, another sub-group was formed to examine the current set-up of parish clusters and how best to ensure these clusters function effectively with care of clergy being the priority.
- Since then, the sub-group met with a number of Cluster Groups and this work is ongoing.

6. Diocese of Cork and Ross

Introduction:

Over the course of this process, I have had the privilege of engaging with several groups within the Church community, including priests, parish assemblies, deacons, funeral teams, Ministers of the Eucharist, Ministers of the Word, and the diocesan team. The Conversations in the Spirit allowed for openness, sincerity, and prayerfulness from all involved, as well as a willingness to listen to each other with the intention to understand.

Openness to Participation and Sincerity in Dialogue:

From the outset of this current process, I was struck by the genuine openness to participation and sincerity in dialogue that characterised our gatherings. Members of the various groups came together with a shared sense of purpose and a willingness to listen to one another's perspectives. Whether it was priests offering insights from their pastoral experiences, parish assemblies representing the voices of their parishes, or dedicated volunteers such as deacons, funeral teams, Eucharistic Ministers, and Ministers of the Word sharing their unique contributions, each participant brought valuable insights and perspectives. This atmosphere of openness and respect created a fertile ground for collaboration and mutual discernment, allowing us to engage in meaningful conversations about the future of our Church.

Prayerful Discernment and Rootedness in Co-responsibility:

Central to this was the practice of prayerful discernment which for some participants was a new experience. However, this practice is strongly encouraged and is being introduced to all new parish assemblies through our most recent formation programme. Parish assemblies are now encouraged that before engaging in

discussions or making decisions, they would begin each session with prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide their hearts and minds. This spirit of prayerfulness infuses deliberations with a sense of reverence and humility, reminding all that the goal is to discern God's will for the Church.

The roots of co-responsibility are evident in many aspects of the life of the Church in the diocese, particularly at parish level, one such example is *Grow in Love* which provides opportunities for school, home and parish to work together in helping children to understand that they belong to a parish community. Groups such as Connect and the Lourdes pilgrimage organising team exemplify the collaborative spirit of co-responsibility, bringing together members of the community to serve one another and bear witness to the Gospel. Additionally, the administration of the diocese and those who work and serve within it demonstrate a commitment to shared leadership and accountability, embodying the principles co-responsibility and synodality in action.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, my experience in this process has been a testament to the transformative power of collaboration, prayerful discernment, and co-responsibility within the Church community. As we continue our journey forward, may we remain steadfast in our commitment to listening to one another, discerning God's will together, and working collaboratively to build a Church that is rooted in love, justice, and mercy. Through our collective efforts, may we be empowered to bear witness to the Gospel and to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth.

7. Diocese of Derry

In terms of how co-responsibility is expressed, there is a strong awareness of the universal nature of the Church, but there is also the need to acknowledge and discover anew the gifts of local and particular Churches. Communication is also key to co-responsibility and mission, which often is lacking, either at universal or local level. This highlights the importance of digital communication and social media and how these platforms can positively play a role in the Church's life and mission.

The greatest challenge regarding co-responsibility is engendering and tapping into the dynamism of people. Events over the past decades have challenged this – the Troubles in the North, the uncovering of abuse in parish communities, the experiences around Covid-19 to name but a few. And yet, in many of our parishes, faith is alive and expressed positively by many people in the high moments of life,

but also in the ordinary daily experiences. This is a fertile ground on which to challenge the move to dynamic intentional missionary evangelisation that has co-responsibility as a core part. We noted that in some responses, people were quite passive, describing co-responsibility but for others. A shift is needed here by giving permission to ‘become co-responsible’ and using straightforward language to describe what that means. Some participants gave examples of specific programmes as being what was good in the Church as opposed to what we do as part of day-to-day life in parishes. We need to embed real conversations in the spirit moving forward, making this part of the routine of parish life and decision-making.

The Diocesan Pastoral Council has begun to have conversations in the spirit, as have some pastoral councils and groups in parishes. This is a group that has formed over several years and the conversations seemed deeper. It was highlighted that people are at sea in our complex world and come to Church as a haven to find simplicity and security in their lives: this haven is the role of a Church in mission. The importance of listening and accompaniment was highlighted, as well as training people to be able to do this. The invitation of Christ is to meet people where they are in their relationship with God – the challenge is how do we, as the Body of Christ, live and do this. It was felt that movement of the heart as opposed to the head is what synodality is about.

8. Diocese of Down and Connor

Down and Connor’s approach to its strategic planning process, *Pathways to the Future*, is a live example of synodality in action in the Diocese. The approach used is summarised briefly below.

Pathways to the Future: Pre-Consultation 2022

1. Synodality underpins the development of proposals and the discernment process for Down and Connor’s 20-year strategic planning process, *Pathways to the Future*. In October and November 2022, the *Pathways to the Future* Steering Committee undertook a two-month process of pre-consultation on its proposed approach to strategic planning, the development of a 20-year vision for the Diocese, and the Committee’s emerging priorities and proposals. The purpose of the exercise was to test the efficacy of the work undertaken by the Committee to date, and to refine the approach and proposals before embarking on a Diocesan-wide consultation process. Over 300 lay leaders and clergy from all parishes in the Diocese attended the spirit-led discussions, and in excess of 100 written responses were subsequently received and analysed.

Engagement and Listening 2023 to date

2. The pre-consultation was followed by a period of intensive and valuable listening, sharing, and engagement with clergy, parish leadership teams, Religious, Diocesan groups, Chaplaincies, and individuals in key areas such as education. The listening process is ongoing.
3. The listening and engagement process was extended to the wider faith community across the Diocese in November 202 when Pathways to the Future was launched with a Day of Prayer across the Diocese by our Apostolic Administrator at that time, Bishop Donal McKeown.
4. A series of eight (8) public meetings or “conversations” were held across the Diocese during November 2023, as well as a meeting with Diocesan staff. These were attended by in excess of 1,100. people, lay and clergy, with virtually every parish in the Diocese represented. The primary purpose of the meetings was to share and invite views on the Pathways to the Future vision of a co-responsible, synodal church in Down and Connor, made up of Families of Parishes praying and collaborating together to share the Good News of the Gospel and create disciples for Christ.
5. In the spirit of synodality, the meetings represented the beginning of a conversation to be continued within individual parishes and suggested Families of parishes through the 2024 year. A Pathways to the Future “mentor” has been appointed to accompany each of the suggested Families through a process of discernment, planning, and preparation as they work to establish and become co-responsible, synodal faith communities.
6. All views and ideas expressed at the November meetings and subsequently were captured and analysed as part of the ongoing discernment process. These are being explored and developed further in the local parish-led conversations that are now underway, supported by the *Pathways to the Future* team and the ongoing sharing of resources, advice, and communications

9. Diocese of Dromore

Over the period from the 26 February 2024 to 4 March 2024 there were four group meetings; two were Diocesan face-to-face Gatherings which took place in the north (Moyraverty) and south (Newry) of the Diocese; one face-to-face gathering JPPI Youth group; and, finally the Diocesan Synodal Core Group (DSCG) met via Zoom

to allow members to have the opportunity to reflect and respond to the question. The invitations to the two Diocesan Gatherings were issued via the Diocesan Office to the Clergy and Diocesan Groups, they were asked for 4-5 names, mostly only 2-3 attended. Within the invitation they were advised that:

the DSCG were currently working on the next steps to be taken forward in the months between now and the Second Session of the Synodal Assembly (October 2024). That the gatherings would be conducted using the methodology of Spiritual Conversation and they would be required to fully participate in the conversations, being provided with the opportunity to both speak and listen. It was important that this was stressed to ensure those attending were fully informed. Everyone was sent the question: **How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways?** Resources shared included:

1. *Conversation in the Spirit* advising how this approach was used at the Synod in Rome throughout October 2023 & www.synod.va link;
2. A member of the DSCG created & narrated a video on Synodality- Briefing on Synod Discussion Method.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nBtZiwB5Jx3MF84lgRUKZIxOInCfYzfC/view?usp=share_link
3. Archdiocese of Armagh's synthesis document which they kindly shared with us.

Overall, about seventy people attended the gatherings; it was good to see everyone, many of whom have been involved in the synodal process since October 2021 and had attended previous gatherings. We commenced with a reminder of the journey so far including sharing the National Synod video, taking a moment to reflect. We lit a candle that listed each parish in our Diocese with beautiful music & singing. We asked the guidance of the Holy Spirit in praying the **Adsumus Prayer** which has been a heartbeat to all our meetings. The work of the evening was to discuss the question using the methodology of Conversations in the Spirit. The practice was very positively received with many mentioning their desire to take forward Conversations in the Spirit within their own parishes. The **attendance** of Archbishop Eamon Martin and a good representation of Diocesan Clergy at the gatherings was most welcome.

Reflecting on what has happened in parishes so far in the diocese, people were pleased to hear that **Family Masses** are beginning to be celebrated across Parishes

once a month and this is seen as pivotal in celebrating rich liturgies by getting the clergy, families, schools involved. There is a **social media** presence in all Parishes either through the transmission of Masses via Church Services/YouTube or Websites/Facebooks pages, the number of **Parish Pastoral Councils** have increased across the Dioceses since the Synod was launched in 2021 but more is required to have a uniform approach and there is a desire to have a **central repository** to share information. There was an overwhelming response to nourish the **prayer life** of parishes, to pay attention to both the importance of community and ensuring we are a **welcoming Church**. One of the prompts from the synod meeting in Rome was for us to go back to the original synod exercise and think about how to engage those who weren't involved or were minimally involved in the original conversations. This is still an area that Our Diocese needs to focus on, including the question of **future of the Diocese**. The discernment process identified creating opportunities for greater **Parish involvement of young people; 'developing a Faith Community identity'** particularly looking at the GAA and how they foster community. Collaboration with schools, and others involved in work with young people were seen as a possible way forward.

Care of Priests, their heavy workload was acknowledged including the breadth of the roles and responsibilities currently being delivered by such a small number of overworked priests. There was a sense that some priests and parishioners have expressed a **reluctance to be involved in the synodal process**; while it may be a personal choice as to their alignment with this work of the church; there was uneasiness about how this left the People of God in some parishes deprived of, or even perhaps unaware of, opportunities that were available for Conversations in the Spirit and the development of an understanding of **synodality**. It's important that we pray for those members of the People of God so deprived and urge them to look to the words of Pope Francis who has clearly stated synodality as the way of being Church and an answer to the call of the Holy Spirit. We need to educate through parish resources that synodality is welcomed as a blessing. In doing so, attention to the **language of the Church** is vital, to ensure it offers a message that is accessible and understood by everyone. A wider formation in synodality is being asked for by many of the People of God. As time goes on and it is clear that synodality is here to stay, ambiguity about the word 'synodality' was raised again, as previously noted. There was an acceptance that people understood "journeying together" however work is required to explain this to others in a way that is clearly understood. The evenings followed the format of the suggested Agenda that was shared by the National Synodal Team and was conducted through music, prayer, listening, sharing

and discernment. Work will be ongoing on the message of the Holy Spirit to get on with the work required of the synodal journey within parishes and homes. Participants liked the process of ‘**Conversations in the Spirit**’ and thought this innovative process was the way forward for church engagement and vital for Parish discernment.

10. Archdiocese of Dublin

Following an open invitation through diocesan communications, the consultations in Dublin took the form of synodal *Conversations in the Spirit* with representatives of pastoral councils, parish synodal animators, pastoral workers, clergy and religious present. Prior to the *Conversations in the Spirit* participants were invited to prepare by prayerfully reflecting on two questions. First, where do you notice your parish is growing in co-responsibility? Second, what steps could be taken now to grow in co-responsibility? They were also invited to reflect on an address of Pope Benedict on co-responsibility (10th August 2012.) The gatherings were structured around 5 moments of prayerful engagement where participants were arranged in small groups in circles using the method of listening to understand. In the first part of the gathering participants practised listening to understand in a synodal manner. This led to a fuller sharing of insights, naming practical ways ahead as well as noticing further development needs.

Experiences Lived

Most parishes in Dublin have now experienced the *Conversations in the Spirit* method, sharing about the joys and sorrows of our reality and the hopes and fears for the future. Pastoral Councils are encouraged to be discerning about decisions, making use of the *Conversations in the Spirit* method in their regular meetings. Now in training and formation opportunities small group sharing is always utilised. The Synodal Pathway also helped to steer the course of our diocesan strategic planning. Our *Building Hope* diocesan renewal process has identified a strong consensus about the need to grow voluntary ministries, to develop further our understanding and practice of co-responsibility, adult faith formation and servant leadership. This is deeply rooted in the ways we are living our *Diocesan Statement of Mission* and the synodal principles that inform it. In keeping the diocesan family informed about the Synodal Pathway, Archbishop Dermot Farrell issued a Pastoral letter marking the opening of the First Assembly of the Synod on Synodality (Rome, October 2023.) On subsequent Sundays, *Synod Newsletters* accompanying the Synod as it progressed, were published online and distributed throughout the diocese. As well as a renewed focus on Pastoral Councils, we are intentionally developing the

ministry of catechist, and offering Servant Leadership training with sessions on baptism as the gateway to ministries, leading small groups and exploring co-responsibility in practice. There are also pilot projects modelling the difference between decision-making and discernment in parish partnerships.

Emerging Good Practice

In the responses submitted from this recent consultation there was a very strong consensus around the need to grow voluntary ministries and more fully embrace issues of formation for service and the promotion of lay leadership. However, there are also emerging pastoral practices in the diocese influenced by the synodal journey. These practices include:

- seeing the value of small groups to enable listening and sharing
- clergy taking part in small group sharing alongside laity
- taking time to prayerfully consider issues and directions
- encouraging the growth of an adult faith and prioritising adult faith formation
- building new capacities for leading and team ministries
- more lay people coming forward for training
- building pathways for young adults to share their faith
- a new emphasis on accompanying families for sacramental preparation

Growing in co-responsibility

There is awareness that we have not always managed to reach out to those beyond the gates of the parish. However, there are signs of growing in co-responsibility evident by the establishment of the Parish Partnership Pastoral Councils who engaged with the question: What can you do together that does not need to be done separately? There is also a new awareness of how our understanding of ministries rests on how we affirm and embrace the importance of baptism. This is a change from the model where only those ordained need be concerned with the tasks of ministry, to one where all feel called and responsible. This brings with it a sense of ownership for all which, in turn, encourages everyone to take the call to participation, and the need to invite others, more seriously. As we grow in responsibility, we grow in awareness of the gifts of all the baptised and what we lose when these are not acknowledged or utilised. The Synodal Pathway is enabling us to recognise the gifts in the People of God and promote them for the good of the community. (*Synodal Pathway Synthesis*, p.9 Archdiocese of Dublin).

11. Diocese of Elphin

- From the outset, the Synodal Process in the Diocese was entrusted to the Diocesan Pastoral Council as a key focus of its activity, and it was from the Diocesan Pastoral Council that the Synodal Working Group was established.
- The Bishop was present and engaged throughout, but the leadership of the process was synodal.
- We went to great lengths in 2022 to involve as many people as possible in the listening process. As well as having gatherings and focus groups with lay people who are actively involved in the life of the Church, and with clergy and religious, we made a particular point of engaging with people who, in one way or another, might be perceived to be on the margins. Listening with respect was very much a part of each gathering.
- There was significant energy and enthusiasm for the consultation process among most of those who took part with many people expressing their delight at being asked to take part in the synodal process.
- Most gatherings had a much higher percentage of women present.
- We were careful to practice Christian hospitality at each synodal gathering. All participants were welcomed and made feel that their presence and contribution were very important to the process. Refreshments were always served and an informal atmosphere prevailed. There was an absence of any pressure or judgement.
- We invested in facilitation training for twenty-six people, mostly lay women, to support the synodal process and the development of a more synodal approach in the mission of the Diocese.
- We tried to be faithful at every stage of the process to the methodology of “Conversation in the Spirit” and found this helpful.
- When it became necessary in 2023 to look at a renewal of our youth and young adult ministry, this was done by means of a synodal conversation, in advance of any executive decision.
- The Bishop has developed a series of weekly pastoral messages for Lent 2024, under the general title of “Enlarge the Space of your Tent”, with a focus on opening up our hearts and minds to the Church on the margins.
- There is however significant work to be done in order to reach the many people who feel they don’t have a voice or who no longer feel at home in our Church.
- Significant opportunities and challenges continue to exist in order for synodality to become the way of being Church in our diocese but there is a real sense of hope among those who are engaged that it will bear fruit and that the language,

processes and structures of synodality are beginning to take root in a gradual and steady way.

12. Diocese of Ferns

As we embark on the second phase of our synodal path I set out on a journey around the Diocese of Ferns. My lens is set to focus on signs of synodality already present, to focus on ways I see of people being together and supporting each other as we seek to fan the flame of faith in our living and worshipping, as we seek to live our faith and baptismal mission as fully and holistically as we can in the reality of today.

My first stop is St Mary's Church of Ireland Enniscorthy where bishops of different denominations lead prayer for unity among Christians. I am reminded of other times members of different Churches came together to listen to each other: of a day of retreat recently held for members of different Churches and indeed the women's breakfast last September which was attended by over 100 women from three Churches – Methodist, Church of Ireland and Catholic.

I next drop in to one of the many consultation sessions held with the Bishop throughout the diocese, sometimes at deanery level and sometimes in smaller groups. I hear the explanation of plans to move from parish to pastoral area and promote team work among priests. These sessions are open to all and people get opportunity to express fears, resistances, hopes and needs for clarification. Feedback is taken on board in the ongoing work. On a weekday morning I drop in to a country Church and find two lay women leading a liturgy. Their confidence, prayerfulness and respect create an experience worth remembering. Afterwards there is a cup of tea, a weekly event, in the pastoral Centre. I have a sense that for some present it is their weekly social outing and there was a great sense of belonging and welcome. At another country Church the buzz at a craft fair shouts the word 'community'

I next happened upon a gathering of about forty – a support morning for leaders of prayer groups throughout the diocese. A few years ago the Diocesan Pastoral Council launched an initiative to encourage and help set up groups of prayer and support throughout the diocese. The heart of these would be reflection and prayer on our lived experience and related to the scriptures and they would help to keep a community alive and active with less dependence on the presence of the priest. The theme of this morning was 'Fan into flame the gift that God has given you (1 Timothy) and began with a reflection on the gift of our Baptism. There followed a conversation in the Spirit on 'How is the Holy Spirit, working through our prayer

groups, helping us on the journey of building belonging, participation and fanning the flame of faith in our community?’

Strains can be heard from a Peace Choir preparing and practising. Not only do they provide music to enrich liturgies but as one member said ‘a great bond has grown between us’. There are a number of liturgies throughout the diocese enriched by the work of wonderful choirs.

A Parish Pastoral Council welcomed me. This group has been together for just over a year. It is obvious that the young layman leading the group draws each member in and encourages open discussion. The outreach of the pastoral team to those who are alone or ill is obviously an important part of their ministry. The plan to participate in and be a faith presence in the coming Fleadh Ceoil generates a lot of discussion and a collaboration with other bodies.

In the Pastoral Centre in Wexford I meet a group of thirty people from all over the diocese who have volunteered to follow the two-year programme offered by Maynooth University to train Catechists and Pastoral workers. These are now being guided in a discernment process in preparation for beginning the course in September. Their willingness and the willingness of many others to offer themselves for various roles and tasks shows an enthusiasm for a new way of being The People of God and their readiness to play their part to bring it to life.

Dropping into a Spirit Youth Group session I was struck by the sound of laughter. Spirit is a group that meets once a week for 4th/TY students from the various post-primary schools. It is a Diocesan faith-based group which runs a 40-week personal and spiritual development programme which allows a space for teenagers to first figure out who they are and where they are at and do it all within a spirit of openness, friendship, food and fun. To quote their leader ‘The basis of all we do is to provide as many doors as possible to enable our young people to connect with God. These spaces bring with them a sense of community, a sense of unity, joy, peace and love in an era of distraction.’

I end up in the Bishops residence where a meeting of the Diocesan Pastoral Council is in progress. Using the ‘Conversation in the Spirit’ method of the synod as their way of proceeding this body seeks to identify and reflect upon needs of the diocese and initiate and support appropriate action. I note the presence of people from different cultural backgrounds, the beginnings of an effort to represent the cultural

diversity in the community. Meetings between this body and the Council of Priests aim to foster co-responsibility.

Of course we know that is not the full picture. What I have seen on my journey does not include the majority of believers. The opinions, concerns and vision for our future Church held by young people and those who may not give expression to faith in traditional ways need to be heard. A sign of synodality is the fact that people voice their questions and unless they are heard and responded to I would have great concerns for the Church in our diocese and elsewhere for the future. There are questions about what is happening about the place of women in the Church and hopes that women and men will be treated with equality in all decision making and all ministries including ordination. Many wonder how we can put the central gift of the Eucharist before regulations which hinder its availability. Others have questions around inclusivity and welcome for difference. As we continue the journey we pray that we may face these issues with courage and openness to the Holy Spirit.

At many levels efforts are being made to move into team work, efforts need to be made to include and to clarify roles and expectations. We have a way to go and hurdles to overcome. There is also a real sense of the Holy Spirit leading and lessening the need among many to see clear outcomes. In Faith, we continue the journey towards building a sense of belonging of co-responsibility and of mission rooted in our Baptism. There are small signs seen in the ways we are together, in our prayer and worship and in our growing openness to difference and the richness of diversity.

13. Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh, Kilfenora and the Diocese of Clonfert

The current context is one where volunteers are few and far between and this is coupled with a history or culture of a lack of adult religious education/catechesis. The fact that this adult catechetical formation has been noticeably absent, along with increased demands from other areas of parish and diocesan life, are all very pressing issues. There can be no doubt that building an appropriate and capable infrastructure that adequately supports synodal conversation will take time. It is felt that this process has made many additional demands on local and diocesan communities to produce something without giving them the necessary time and resources to grow key personnel, form them, and engage in the process in a fulsome manner. This results in ad hoc gatherings of people, often the same as have been at previous gatherings, rushed processes and the production of reports for imposed deadlines, rather than an engagement in a real lived process. Against this backdrop,

consultation for this submission took place through meetings with priests in one of the dioceses and through discussion with the inter-diocesan synodal committee and various interested parties.

Throughout both dioceses, the synodal committee, conscious of its limitations, is endeavoring as best it can to raise awareness of the idea of synodality and associated topics among clergy and laity. We have introduced some dedicated spaces to the topic on our websites and on our social media platforms. It has been discussed at gatherings of clergy in both dioceses and is a topic on the agenda of both Councils of Priests with the Conversations in the Spirit methodology being introduced as appropriate to such gatherings. The methodology was also used at a recent gathering of the clergy from the Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora. This gathering also included priests from the Diocese of Clonfert along with lay personnel from our two Diocesan offices. While it took some participants time to get used to the “Conversations in the Spirit” methodology, all found it an enriching experience and this bodes well for the future.

In line with the opinion that Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees provide a fertile ground for synodality in practice, across both dioceses new norms have been published for such bodies, new Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees have been formed, and we have embarked on a series of training sessions. These sessions address in particular the topics of Synodality, Contemporary Ecclesiological Perspectives, Co-responsibility and Missionary Discipleship. It was felt by all who are attending these sessions that a co-responsible Church will, in a very real sense, grow out of the renewal of the Pastoral Parish Councils and Parish Finance Committees. These bodies are certainly seen as agents of change within the parish, within the church, given the right formation of both the clergy and laity involved.

There is a general desire to be a more welcoming Church, however a lack of human resources across the dioceses at the moment is hindering the work of reaching out to young people, those on the margins of Church and others, in order to find ways of creating more welcoming spaces within the tent. The ‘motto’ for our recent gathering in the Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora mentioned above was “Together Towards Tomorrow” — keeping this in mind and in practice at all our gatherings is proving to be a worthwhile endeavour.

14. Diocese of Kerry

The Diocese of Kerry responded faithfully to the call to participate in the Synodal Process. By far the most intense participation was during the consultation process of Spring 2022, when there were open consultation sessions throughout the Diocese. In addition there were focus groups, as well as on-line and written contributions. This led to the compilation of the Diocesan Synthesis report. Our Diocese's Synodal Team participated in the Pre-Synodal Assembly in Athlone. Since then we have used diocesan communication channels to keep people updated on the progress of the Universal Synod.

In preparing our diocesan response to *Towards October 2024*, we engaged in a more focussed consultation. This involved consultation with the following: people active in parishes; our clergy; those preparing for lay pastoral ministry; people involved in youth work and education; the Diocesan Pastoral Council and Diocesan staff. The period of consultation coincided with a broader diocesan consultation involving an open meeting in every parish chaired and facilitated by laity from the parish. The interim results of that consultation process have been fed into the production of this report.

Our experience as a diocese during the Synodal Process so far has been mixed, but encouraging. We have been heartened by the general goodwill of those who have engaged with the Synodal Process in various ways and by some concrete examples of the Synodal approach taking root where those in leadership have taken an interest. There is still a significant journey ahead with work to be done to enter into a truly synodal mindset and praxis. It will require a considerable degree of faith formation at all levels. More work remains to be done in sharing an understanding of Synodality as a concept.

A group from our diocese participated in the Leadership Training offered by the Irish Synodal Pathway as an initial step in embedding synodal practices in the Diocese. Our experience of this pilot programme gave us a positive insight into how the synodal methodology has much to offer the church at all levels. In addition to this, individuals in the Diocese have been taking advantage of the various on-line resources and training in the area of Synodality proposed by the Synodal Pathway.

This interest in synodal practice has already begun to bear some fruit in the lives of parishes. One parish expressed satisfaction with the renewal and restructuring of its Parish Pastoral Council. This was done through the application of synodal principles

and methods to their meetings. Another parish gave an account of receiving formation in Synodality from an outside speaker, and subsequently incorporating synodal methodology into Pastoral Council Meetings. The opportunity exists for the Diocese as a whole to learn from the experiences of parishes that are willing to adopt new approaches.

Earlier this year through Bishop Ray Browne's pastoral letter *Moving Forward in Hope* the Diocese began a process of discernment and renewal. The methodology adopted is explicitly synodal. It allows for both taking stock of the journey we have come in the past ten years and the formulation of a coherent vision of what is needed to respond to the challenges we face in the years ahead. Co-responsibility of laity and clergy will be key to its success.

The results of the process so far show a Diocese where the People have great enthusiasm and willingness to commit themselves to the life of their local Christian community. There is a lot of work to be done to channel that energy, form leaders for the future, and establish structures that will be at the service of all the baptized. Looking at what has already been accomplished by organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul and ACCORD, by Board of Management structures in schools, by events such as Catholic Schools Week and our annual *Ceilúradh na nÓg* youth celebration, and by the thousands of people engaged in lay liturgical and other ministries, there is ample evidence of a variety of ways in which faith is translated into service. Parishioners and clergy point to the growth in the role of parish secretaries in taking on administrative responsibilities, the service of effective parish finance councils throughout the Diocese and a good spirit of co-operation amongst laity and clergy who labour in neighbouring parishes, and priests who jointly minister in parishes served by the priests of the pastoral area.

A space has been created through this planning process for a thorough consideration of the life of the Diocese. The fact that 25 lay people from the Diocese are currently in formation for the ministry of Lay Pastoral Leader shows the opportunity that exists to allow the gifts and energy of the People of God to be placed at the service of the Gospel in a synodal way.

15. Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin

The following is a brief testimony of work carried out in the diocese at both a diocesan and parish level that may have something to contribute to supporting and encouraging the ongoing development of synodal processes and dynamism. This is

a curated rather than exhaustive representation of some initiatives and structures within Kildare and Leighlin.

Faith Development Services (FDS)

This diocesan service came into existence in September 2005, growing out of a previous service. This team of people have particular areas of responsibility within the diocese in the areas of sacramental preparation, primary and secondary education, youth ministry, liturgy, and pastoral ministry. As a team they have led initiatives and outreach in the diocese for the IEC2012, the Year of Faith, and the World Meeting of Families as well as on many occasions at the National Ploughing Championships. Individually and collectively, they work with a very large network of people across the diocese in supporting parish and school communities and resourcing various initiatives undertaken by these communities. The accompaniment that each FDS member gives to others in the course of their work in the diocese is a valued part of their role. For example, the DA's for primary and secondary schools offer an important spiritual and practical support to principals, RE teachers and RE co-ordinators as they grow deeper in the understanding of what it means to be a Catholic school and what is meant by a Catholic ethos. Alongside this, the FDS members provide important resources for teachers as well as an important linkage to diocesan initiatives and priorities so that schools can be invited to participate, whether that be in the Synod listening, WMOF preparation, and many other important diocesan initiatives, programmes and events.

In every area of their work, team members have developed on-going working partnerships with a considerable number of people. This has helped in a significant way to build a sense of shared responsibility with others for particular aspects of diocesan and parish life, while offering opportunities for formation and training to those engaged in their work.

Diocesan Pastoral Council:

There is a very active Diocesan Pastoral Council with 24 members who meet at least four times annually with the Bishop. Appointed in April 2019, this body is a mixed group of lay men and women, ordained clergy and religious. Additional new members were welcomed in late 2022. The DPC has undertaken significant training and is in the final stages of working with the Council of Priests and Faith Development Services in articulating a diocesan plan. A substantial amount of work by the DPC has laid the groundwork for this plan. The DPC enjoys the full support and active presence and leadership of Bishop Denis. It serves as an essential vehicle

for consultation in matters pertaining to the pastoral life of the diocese. In recent times it has been key in the establishment of the diocesan Synod team as well as the configuration of groupings of parishes into parish clusters in consultation with parish communities. Members of the DPC have facilitated parish cluster meetings where clergy and lay people can come together to discuss and plan for the future of parishes in the cluster, particularly in the areas of Sunday Mass provision and the sharing of resources and training locally.

A number of DPC members will undertake the synodal leadership training in the coming month to further equip themselves for their leadership role in the diocese.

Diocesan Commission for Liturgical Formation

The members of this very well established and respected commission in the diocese have been a very valuable resource for supporting liturgical ministry in the diocese. Resourced by a member of FDS, it has facilitated the training and formation of baptism teams, funeral ministry teams, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, Music Ministers and Parish Readers, as well as offering seasonal supports and resources to parishes. It is currently working on deanery familiarisation and training sessions for lay led liturgies. By beginning with familiarisation sessions, the commission is able to hear how people are responding to the material in order to help inform the final content of the material provided, as well as helping to highlight for the working group of the commission the primary areas of need in delivering future training and formation sessions for lay leaders of prayer.

A very significant piece of work undertaken by the DCLF very much followed a synodal process and is still bearing great fruit. In 2015 the DCLF undertook a series of round table conversations across the diocese on the subject of funerals and funeral ministry. Funeral Directors, parish staff and clergy, music ministers, PPC members and others were invited to these conversations. The findings of these conversations resulted in a Pastoral Letter from the Bishop which has supported parishes in working with families preparing to celebrate the funeral rites of a loved one. These conversations also prompted the creation of funeral ministry teams in a number of parishes with training and ongoing support provided by the DCLF. Three prayer cards were created to help support families to pray in the presence of a deceased loved one and these have been very well received. A team is currently being planned to ensure that the diocese provides continued ongoing support, accompaniment, and formation opportunities for new and existing Funeral Ministry teams.

This DCLF within the diocese provides a structure to review and support the ongoing liturgical life of parishes within Kildare and Leighlin.

Diocesan Education Council

This Council was first established in 2008 to facilitate the delivery of the Wellsprings, a programme that sought to deepen the awareness and appreciation of the identity and ethos of Catholic Primary schools. Its membership was renewed and strengthened in 2013 to include serving and retired principals, lay and clerical chairpersons of boards and members of religious congregations. Its main purpose is as an advisory group to Bishop Denis on educational matters and providing a forum to reflect and consider how best to continue to support the work of Catholic primary education in the diocese. The Council meets a minimum of six times a year and has also a number of subgroups focussing on ethos, ongoing formation of boards of management and the facilitation of conversations about the future of Catholic primary education in the diocese. The members of the Diocesan Education Council also serve as delegates to provincial and national gatherings of CPSMA thus ensuring that the diocese is represented at and engaged in the task of ensuring that Catholic education remains a viable option for those parents who seek it for their children. Members of the Council recently developed and delivered formation for members of the newly formed boards of management in our 162 Catholic primary schools. This work helps to form a sense of common purpose and identity among the almost 1300 volunteers who serve on boards of management across the diocese.

The work of the Council is facilitated and supported by two members of the Faith Development Services Team whose main responsibility is primary education.

Youth Ministry in the Diocese

For over 30 years, the diocese has provided peer ministry training for young people. The Meitheal programme, led by a member of FDS, offers a week residential training in peer ministry and subsequent, ongoing support - giving senior students in secondary schools the skills to work as a team in supporting First Years in the school as they make their transition from primary school to the end of their first year. With Micah 6:8 as their motto, this programme is instilling a sense of leadership, care for one another and walking together with an eye for the most vulnerable. Many young people return as trainers during college years and beyond, giving of their time generously and freely, and availing of many opportunities for prayer together and pilgrimages to Glendalough, Croagh Patrick as well as pilgrimages on the Camino. Alongside Meitheal, the John Paul II awards is very active in the diocese and has

been an opportunity for parishes to create spaces for the participation of young people. Three parishes have employed Youth Ministers. These Church employees have facilitated significant work with young people at local level. These youth ministers in turn are an invaluable, and frequently drawn upon, resource and point of contact with young people at a diocesan level.

Communications

The diocese makes a sincere effort in keeping its website and social media accounts up to date and active. Among the various pages on the website, we have a dedicated Synod page. Alongside this, in recent years the practice has emerged of a weekly email being sent from Bishop's House to parish clergy, staff, diocesan staff and other contacts. This is an invaluable tool. It contains administrative items and also parish newsletter items. It has enabled the sharing of regular synod updates, weekly Prayer of the Faithful and other resources for parish staff as well as parishioners and the sharing of seasonal inserts for parish bulletins among other things.

Whenever we train people for ministry and hold diocesan meetings, we give people the opportunity to provide their email address and give us permission to email them with relevant information. Contact people for PPC's and parish ministries are also included in this list. The Ministry Update is a four-page newsletter that goes out to people on this email list, as well as to all parish clergy and staff, and is posted on the diocesan website. This newsletter is very helpful in giving people advance notice of particular initiatives and giving some background information on them.

A working group of the DPC has facilitated training sessions and posted videos for parishes on how to set up parish Facebook accounts and other communications advice. The idea of digital missionaries as named in the Universal Synod is an important ministry that we will continue to explore.

Justice

Two deacons in the diocese are prison chaplains. This has enabled us to reach out to the prison community on a number of occasions. The deacons led the formation course for the WMOF in the Midlands Prison while the Bishop and a member of the WMOF diocesan committee brought the WMOF icon of the Holy Family into the prison and met and prayed with various groups of prisoners and staff for an afternoon. The deacon also led the listening session for the synod in the prison while he and Bishop Denis have continued to share diocesan seasonal and other pastoral resources with the prison community.

A number of parishes have accompanied and housed Ukrainian families in the last couple of years in parish property. One parish in particular has sponsored a Syrian family and has been designated a Church of Sanctuary. As they continue to journey with these families we have much still to learn about that experience and may need to create spaces to go deeper into those experiences and where they are leading us to as a Church. This applies equally to three parishes which actively support people and families in poverty through providing hot meals in St Clare's Kitchen or food via the Newbridge Parish Food Share. Portlaoise parish is also very active in PATH – Portlaoise Action for the Homeless. In all these instances parishioners are walking with the vulnerable and poor in our communities, as are the many St Vincent de Paul conferences across the diocese.

Building relationships

In the past couple of years there has been a growing sense of the need for key bodies of the diocese to come together to get to know one another, to support one another's work and to collaborate where appropriate. To this end members of the Council of Priests, the DPC and FDS met for a full day recently with a facilitator and the Bishop. Another day is planned in June. This has resulted in a commitment to finalise the diocesan plan together in order to ensure wider ownership of it, as well as a commitment to establish mechanisms for ongoing communication and support of one another and the work we do.

Prior to COVID, an annual day was held for clergy, diocesan staff, and parish secretaries. This was an important day to help build relationships between the various people working across the diocese as well as giving a valuable opportunity to informing all of any diocesan and/or universal Church initiative, policies, and new resources, as well as praying together and sharing a meal. During COVID online meetings were facilitated for parish secretaries to offer mutual support and to share good practices. This was very much welcomed by secretaries and is something we will continue to do as the need arises. These meetings were facilitated by a member of FDS and a parish administrator.

A number of parish sacristans have in recent times approached the DCLF to ask that a day retreat be organised for sacristans in the diocese. This will give them a forum to get to know one another, share ideas and concerns, to pray together and to name any ongoing supports or training needs they may have. This will be facilitated by the DCLF.

Regular meetings are held with parish sacramental co-ordinators. This body of people accompany families in local parishes as they prepare to celebrate the sacraments with their children. These co-ordinators give an important witness to lay people sharing leadership with clergy in this aspect of the pastoral and sacramental life of the diocese. They are an important group who bring important insights to diocesan reflection on sacramental preparation and celebration.

In conclusion, what has preceded in this report is offered by way of offering examples of areas of work and practice that are already in place in the diocese. These bear, already, some of the characteristics of the dynamism of synodality. On-going reflection and discernment can only serve to lead us deeper into that dynamism. In doing so, no doubt we will discover ever new ways of being together that build on and develop all that is good that is already in place.

16. Diocese of Killala

It is indicative of how far this journey has taken us as a diocese that at the meeting (in February 2017) that decided in favour of opening up what became the Placing Hope in Faith process, there was little or no sense that a decision of this magnitude could not be made by bishop and priests. After our exposure to synodality and its sister co-responsibility, we can now see almost instinctively that it would be not just inappropriate but unthinkable now for such a decision to be taken by the clergy alone.

The years since 2017 have been a time of conscientisation for everyone when the temptation to revert to a clerical mind-set gradually was set aside as lay members of the different groups involved in the process were prepared to challenge, respectfully and sometimes firmly, the clerical mindset based on position and precedent.

During the Placing Hope in Faith process, the primary focus came to be characterised as ‘real, respectful and transparent’, three words that became the touchstone governing the decisions that followed. It was a template that ensured the process was credible, that it was meant to do and would do what it said it would do – that is, to make a genuine and serious effort to carry through to completion and implementation the wishes of the people of the diocese and the promise that synodality represents for a new way of being church that respects fully the rights of all the baptised.

The Catholic population of the diocese is circa 36,000. There are 27 priests working in the 22 parishes and may be as few as eight within a relatively few years. Despite

the scarcity of resources and the effects of the downturn in terms of Mass attendance, priest numbers, the palpable decline in authority and the other various quantifiable data, gratifyingly significant numbers of people engaged with the Placing Hope in Faith/ Synodal Pathway process.

They included: 1,500 people, old and young, who took part in the main survey; the 300-plus who were elected as delegates by their parishes and who participated in the Diocesan Assembly; the 218 who are members of the new PPCs; the 120 people who volunteered as members of the ten Focus Groups; 70 volunteered for the Newman course; the Steering and Implementation groups; those who attended parish and deanery meetings; and not least the priests of the diocese who have remained loyal to their original commitment to facilitate the involvement of their people. It was extremely gratifying and represented a big step forward that a recent updating visit by the leaders of Placing Hope in Faith received an invitation from every PPC in every parish of the diocese.

There is a sense in the diocese that the synodal process began before it was initiated at either diocesan or national level. Much therefore of what has happened is simply in line with both the

During the recent updating visit to PPCs by the leaders of Placing Hope in Faith (mentioned above) part of the evening was devoted to an introduction of the proposed Conversation in the Spirit format. The results were promising in that PPCs recognised that, while it will need to be adapted to suit local circumstances, it offers a working template for resolving upcoming difficult and divisive issues. For example, PPCs are very aware that decisions regarding Mass numbers, Mass times and Mass locations as priest numbers, Mass attendance and finances decline will be hugely difficult to negotiate. Already in some parishes, especially in those where the PPC foresees difficult and potentially divisive challenges, the respectful Conversation in the Spirit format with its careful combination of times of prayer, periods of silence, individual contributions and attentive and uninterrupted listening is seen as an impediment to the loudest members to make multiple contributions and a challenge to the silent to contribute their opinions.

‘Spiritual discernment’ is as yet an unexplored landscape though we are lucky to have a prayer group with a background in Ignatian spirituality who contribute to Advent and Lenten prayer meetings and who organise retreats that include individual spiritual direction.

There is a growing consciousness that an essential part of the process at the beginning was outreach to those who feel that they do not belong within the tent – and the need to make space for them. Since then, while this remains a focus, the process within the diocese has to date focused more on the relationship between the Placing Hope in Faith team and their support of the Parish Pastoral Councils, together with supporting the Certificate in Lay Leadership.

During the training for PPCs after their election, the primacy emphasis was on synodality and its repercussions for PPCs. The priests and the parish pastoral councils have all been invited to attend the Certificate of Lay Leadership course. The response of the priests hasn't been particularly prominent, while that of the PPCs has been better.

17. Diocese of Killaloe

The process as engaged by the Diocese of Killaloe was one of invitation. It included Clergy, Ministers of Pastoral Care and Catechesis, Chairs of Parish Pastoral Councils, and members of Pastoral Area Councils. There were 15 meetings held across the diocese over a five-week period which engaged circa 200 people. These meetings were facilitated by the Bishop and the Director for Mission and Ministry. Each meeting was scheduled to last one and a half hours and followed an agreed structure resulting in a consistency of source material.

Prior to the National Synodal Group asking that this process be undertaken our diocese had already committed to undertake a listening process across the diocese. It was advantageous that we were able to dovetail our planned listening process with this project. The process enabled the diocese to provide a space in which people could speak in a manner whereby they experienced being heard by both their peers and by the diocese. In the feedback we received it was evident that people felt that the questions posed by the diocese were clearly articulated and that people understood what they were being asked. This clarity seems to have enabled people to name their reality. There was a real sense that people valued being given this opportunity and that they enjoyed engaging with others who had a vested interest in the mission of their Pastoral Area and the diocese.

There is no doubting that the timeframe in which we were to have this listening completed was a real challenge. To engage such a widespread listening process, for such a critical aspect of church life, in so tight a window of opportunity was a challenge. Despite our relatively large sample, we were left with questions as to how

representative the gatherings were and who were the voices that were missing from our conversations?

There is a sense that synodal methodology is incrementally changing the way we work as a diocese. Engaging people of the diocese in generative conversations is more and more the norm. A major development that has borne fruit is that prayer is now included as a core element on the agenda of meetings. This creates a space in which people can be enabled to truly arrive to the meeting. It also enables the participants to be sensitive to inviting the Holy Spirit into the conversation and discussions making process. Having periods of silence during these prayer times attunes the participants to listening for the Holy Spirit before they are called to listen to each other.

It has been noted how certain aspects of diocesan life has been augmented by the synodal process. A clear example of this is how catechetical programmes are now delivered in the diocese. No longer are these programmes merely didactic. Now we attempt to engage people in a conversation and process that enables them to articulate their belief. From there they are invited to discern where they are being called to deepen their faith in a manner whereby their relationship with God is enriched by encounter.

The synodal process has sensitised us to notice who maybe missing from our conversations. This has caused the diocese to adopt a concerted effort toward the involvement of women in key committees and key roles in the diocese. We have also seen the diocese refocus its efforts to reconstitute our Youth Councils in a manner whereby youth ministry will be synodal in its approach. Regarding those perceived to be on the margins of Church life we have collaborated with our neighbouring diocese to explore ministry opportunities to the LGBTI community. The theme of outreach can also be seen in efforts at local level to reach out to ethnic groups, to those from the Ukraine and to migrants.

A pivotal moment in our developing a synod methodology was an invitation we extended to the Bishop of Limerick to share his experience of Synodality during the Synod in Rome. This seems to have awakened us to the spiritual dimension of Synodality. It gifted us a growing awareness to the role of the Spirit in the life of the Church. It also enables us to create safe listening spaces in which difference is engaged not eliminated. We were re-awoken to the idea of discerning not deciding where God is calling us a diocese.

There is no doubting that necessity seem to be enabling the synodal process in our diocese. While we have noticed movement and development, not all communities are progressing at a similar pace or even in the same direction. Both the lack of a perceived need or the personalities involved can both impede engagement. While challenging, this gifts an opportunity for us to give expression to the patience and tolerance which Synodality enables us to exercise. It is hoped that by planning in a synodal way we will give synodal life to our communities of faith. There is keen awareness that training and ongoing formation is going to be key if the engagement of both lay people and clergy in this new way of being church is to be realised and sustained in the day-to-day life of our Church.

Since we began to listen in a synodal manner we have begun to notice areas of church life from which silence is the predominant sound. We have experienced how this silence has drawn us into carefully and respectful listening with members of the LGBTI community. It has also drawn us to hear again the story of those from Ukraine and people seeking International Protection. It has resulted in us being humble enough to realise that we are not the experts and that we can learning from those outside our circles of influence about such matters as the environment and ecology. Synodality has called us to engage with the blurred boundaries of life and ministry and in doing so experiencing the presence of an empowering God who is there before us to remind us that we are all equal and co-responsible. That as a community we can live distinct but united lives mirroring the life of the Trinity the empowers us.

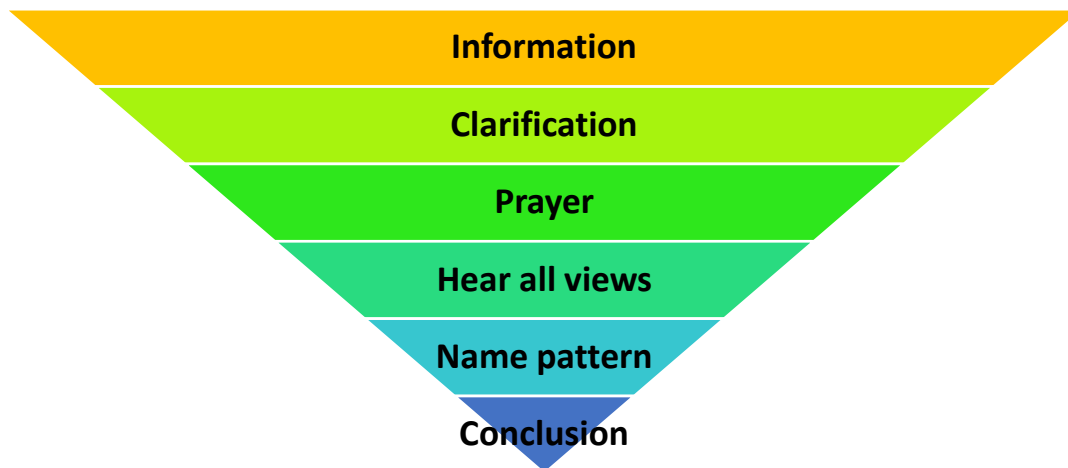
18. Diocese of Kilmore

1. Parish pastoral councils (PPC)

These are in place as a norm in each parish. These play a foundational role in the synodal process. They provide a direct link between the central structures of the diocese and the local parishes that takes pressure off the work of the priests. Especially where there is no resident priest, they have enabled synodal processes to function effectively.

2. Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC)

This offers a discernment space in the diocese for bishop, clergy, and lay people. It functions as a key place for taking stock of the synodal process and the on-going needs of the diocese. It operates a practical methodology that enables it deal with one major pastoral item per meeting, with prayer at the centre.



This involves:-

- presenting in summary form relevant information necessary for informed discussion.
- opportunity for clarifications so that all can participate.
- bringing the issue to prayer.
- Listening then to the views of all.
- Identifying the pattern in the views
- Clearly naming the conclusion of the DPC

3. Diocesan Synodal team

A small group that works directly with the bishop in developing practical approaches to the synodal process. These are then brought to the DPC for consideration and amendment as needed. The committee is part of the DPC.

4. Practical diocesan synodal process

For the two diocesan-wide synodal processes to date, the diocese has utilised practical methodologies that have enabled the work to be done in a sustainable manner, one that hasn't over-taxed central or local personnel.

- I. The bishop issues a communication (letter and video) to all the parishes of the diocese that outlines the question/challenge to be addressed.
- II. The synodal committee develops a broad approach to the consultations, and following a meeting with the DPC finalises the approach into a practical set of resources that describes and enables the local gatherings.
- III. The PPCs are asked to identify facilitators for the local gatherings.
- IV. The synodal committee in collaboration with diocesan personnel provides training for the local facilitators via zoom, offering them templates for each element of the consultation. These include a summary of the bishop's letter; a prayer process for engaging with the questions in small circles; a process

for open forum; a template for reporting back on the conclusions of the consultation.

- V. The committee summarises the reports into a draft document for on-line consultation with the facilitators.
- VI. The report is then published with a view to following through on its conclusion.

19. Diocese of Limerick

In many ways the renewed emphasis on synodality, which Pope Francis is championing, is continuous with much of the work that has been taking place in the diocese of Limerick. A Listening Process in the late 1990's instigated much pastoral development and renewal but it is in the recent Diocesan Synod (2016) that so many connections have been identified. The Diocesan Synod began with deep listening and consultation throughout the parishes and other communities in the diocese. A variety of listening methods in a lengthy process heard from approximately five thousand people. The data generated was truly inductive and was subsequently thematized to generate 101 proposals on the synod floor. There were many echoes of our process in the Diocesan Phase of the Universal Synod in 2021. The two years leading up to the three-day Diocesan Synod in April 2016 was a time of prayer, consultation, formation and discernment. Again, we believe our process was entirely congruent with the methodology enacted by Pope Francis in the universal Synod. However, it was in the actual event of the Diocesan Synod itself that the clearest similarities were evident. In Limerick, delegates were seated in small-group circles and were invited to carefully listen to each other as each proposal was articulated. There was much silence and prayer built in and in many ways, we adopted a form of the 'Conversation in the Spirit'. The prayerful, careful listening and speaking assured us that we were facilitating the voice of the Spirit in the conversation and decision-making. As we looked at the recent Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023, we were struck by so many similarities and were reassured that this Universal Synod is not a new path, but a new departure along the way that we have been walking – we continue on that path with renewed energy and confidence. The Universal Synod has enhanced and injected new life into our efforts to truly be a synodal Church in mission.

There have been many significant milestones on that path that speak to a real effort to develop co-responsibility – as a diocese we have adopted a new model of leadership based on Canon 517 whereby parishes work closely together in pastoral units, developing team-work in which priests work as Co-Parish-Priests with a Moderator. Lay people have undertaken formation for leadership and ministry and

this finds expression in various ways at parish and diocesan level; lay-led creative liturgies, scripture programmes, lay people leading aspects of the funeral liturgy, bereavement support, leading Alpha and other evangelization initiatives, youth ministry, children's catechesis, music ministry. Our group of 22 Lay Pastoral Ministers, who have completed the Certificate in Lay Pastoral Ministry and Diocesan formation programme, meet regularly to share experiences, challenges, and what is working well or not working well for them in their respective parishes and/or pastoral units. People can learn from each other and support each other. Ongoing training and formation will be offered to address gaps or needs identified. At a local level one pastoral unit has created a 'wisdom group' with their local Lay Pastoral Ministers to facilitate clergy and lay pastoral ministers working together at the local level to address challenges and support their faith communities. Our Diocesan Pastoral Council has recently gone through a renewal process part of which included a workshop facilitated by Dr Jessie Rogers. The Council has agreed to operate in a Synodal way and to use the Conversations in the Spirit methodology for our meetings and visits to pastoral units across the diocese. Our Terms of Reference are as follows:

- To listen intently to what the Spirit of God is calling us to at this time, in this place.
- To assist the Bishop in his pastoral care of the Diocese.
- To recognise the pastoral needs of the people of the Diocese and explore ways to respond adequately to those needs.
- To model, by its way of working, the full participation and shared responsibility of all people for the life of the Diocese.
- To call forth and animate the people of the Diocese to play their part in the mission of Christ.
- To collaborate with existing Diocesan groups and recommend new groups to address specific pastoral needs, as necessary.
- To oversee the coordinated implementation of our Diocesan Pastoral Plan "Moving Forward together in Hope".

Perhaps citing the example of a number of recent initiatives will give a clearer sense of the way in which the diocese has responded to the various documents of the Universal Synod.

Currently, there is a diocesan response to the Irish Bishops' 30/30 guidance regarding climate change and care of creation. A biodiversity project is being undertaken by a number of parishes.

The Universal Synod has encouraged us to accompany those who experience themselves as being on the margins of the life of the Church and hear the voice of those who may have felt silenced. A group has been meeting with LGBTQ+ people along with allies, family members, friends of LGBTQ+ people, to explore ways in which the Church can be experienced as more caring and welcoming. This group uses the ‘Conversations in the Spirit’ methodology in their meetings and finds it works particularly well with sensitive themes.

A group was formed to examine and study the role of women in the Church and they presented a report to Bishop Brendan at the conclusion of their work.

We are fortunate that Bishop Brendan was one of the two Irish Bishops present at the Synod Assembly in October 2023. On his return he has conducted many information sessions on that experience with clergy and lay people which serve to give people a greater sense of synodality and the working of a synodal Church. We continue to develop our capacity to use the Conversations in the Spirit method and we are pleased that we have ten diocesan representatives undertaking the Facilitative Leadership Training Programme provided by the Irish Episcopal Conference through the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

20. Diocese of Meath

In response to *Towards October 2024*, the Synodal Team of the Diocese of Meath organised four meetings across the diocese in March 2024. Clergy and members of Parish Councils (called “Parish Pastoral Assemblies” in the Diocese of Meath) were personally invited, but the meetings were open to any interested person. In addition, two meetings of clergy discussed the question given for discernment, and a parish-based youth group also devoted an evening to the question. Participants of the meetings appreciated very much the feedback on the universal and national synodal processes, responded very well to the reading of Eph 4:1-16, and engaged meaningfully in the conversations in the Spirit. Written feedback from all the discussion groups at each meeting was gathered and a writing group met to discern what was expressed.

The universal and national synodal processes have certainly given extra impetus to the establishment of Parish Pastoral Assemblies (PPAs) across the Diocese of Meath. This new model of Parish Pastoral Council benefitted from the experience of the diocesan phase of the universal synod and promotes a *modus operandi* based on prayer and spiritual discernment. Each parish was encouraged to form its new PPA

in a synodal manner by explaining what was involved, hosting meetings to discuss pastoral priorities, and to choose members according to their gifts. The formation of the new members of the PPAs placed a significant emphasis on mission and evangelisation.

In one parish in the diocese, a series of public meetings for parishioners was held during Lent 2023 to discern the pastoral priorities for the in-coming PPA. The national synthesis from the diocesan phase of the universal synod was used and over the course of the meetings, the parishioners discerned from the national synthesis four pastoral priorities for the in-coming PPA, as well as the qualities necessary in those who would become members of the PPA.

Conversation in the Spirit is gradually becoming familiar to those who participate in meetings concerning the synodal process. The gatherings for the diocesan and continental phases of the universal synod, together with the recent gatherings in response to *Towards October 2024*, have all availed of the methodology of *conversation in the Spirit* to guide discernment on the questions proposed. A team of priests in a large parish in the diocese now conduct their annual “team day” by using *conversation in the Spirit* to discern how they can enhance their living and working together for the sake of their mission. There is some evidence of PPAs using the method for discernment around important decisions and tasks. However, we are a long way off the point where we can say that *conversation in the Spirit* has become embedded in the life of the diocese. At a recent meeting of clergy to respond to *Towards October 2024* it was remarked that while the method certainly had potential for genuine spiritual discernment, nonetheless the method felt “stilted”.

There is a growing awareness in the diocese that questions concerning the future of parishes as places of ministry and pastoral care cannot be addressed in isolation by the Bishop and/or the clergy alone, but must be discerned by all stakeholders. The PPAs are therefore considered important instances of synodal collaboration in addressing questions about the future needs of the diocese rather than being purely focused on matters within the territory of their own parishes. Deaneries have begun to gather the PPAs of the constituent parishes in plenary style meetings to explore possibilities for closer collaboration.

While clergy in particular feel that they are continually “accompanying” people on the margins of the life of the Church through funeral ministry, preparation for the sacraments, school and hospital chaplaincy, etc., there is a sense that this kind of

accompaniment in the Irish context is lacking an effective missionary outreach. Those who are accompanied are grateful for the Church's "service" but do not feel the need to respond to the call of the Gospel. This disconnect is a source of weariness and frustration for many involved in ministry in Ireland. In this context, therefore, it is not possible to describe initiatives in the diocese of Meath *to "hear the voice" of those who feel that they do not belong "in the tent" or new forms of accompaniment for those on the margins of the life of the Church*. It is to be hoped that the Irish Synodal Pathway will offer the opportunity for an authentic discernment of the missionary dynamic necessary for pastoral accompaniment.

21. Diocese of Ossory

Reconstitution of the Ossory Diocesan Pastoral Council

When Bishop Niall Coll was appointed Bishop of Ossory in 2023 the Constitution of the Ossory Diocesan Forum was due for review. Established in 2004, the *raison d'être* of the Ossory Diocesan Forum is to encourage and enthuse all members of the diocese to live out their baptismal role as co-responsible for the mission of Jesus in the local church. The Constitution describes the Forum as "a pastoral initiative which hopes to provide a *forum* where the voices of all people of good will can be heard and enabled to shape the life of parishes and diocese." (*Ossory Diocesan Forum Constitution 2009*)

Originally the Forum was composed of *Pastoral Councils* at parish, deanery and diocesan levels. In 2022 the Deanery Pastoral Councils were replaced by Pastoral Area Councils. These councils are interconnected and work together collaboratively to identify and address pastoral issues.

Built into the Forum Constitution is a review in the last six months of each four-year term of office. Bishop Niall, in consultation with the out-going Diocesan Pastoral Council, decided to initiate the revision of the Constitution by beginning with the Diocesan Pastoral Council.

In June 2023 an ad-hoc Working Group, consisting of priest, religious and lay members was established, tasked with reviewing the format outlined in the Constitution and considering what type of Diocesan Pastoral Council would best serve the Diocese at this time. At the first meeting of the Group Bishop Niall stated that synodality lay at the heart of how the new Diocesan Pastoral Council should operate. The Working Group was asked to research current best practice in the formation of Diocesan Pastoral Councils in Ireland and elsewhere.

Over a number of months, the Group met regularly. They began by considering how the Diocesan Pastoral Council, mandated by the Constitution, had functioned in recent years, conscious of the strengths and weaknesses of that model and taking into account the experience of those who had been part of it.

They also spent time discerning some of the core qualities that should characterise a member of a Diocesan Pastoral Council and listed the following:

- a person of faith and prayer
- has an energy and a passion about Church
- has an understanding of what it means to be a synodal Church
- capable of engaging in a process of discernment
- able to think in terms of the whole diocese
- willing to reflect deeply on pastoral issues
- willing to participate in training for the role
- able to work as part of a team
- is accountable to the team
- able to work by way of meetings, planning, discussing, reviewing
- willing to engage actively in dialogue
- able to listen respectfully to different opinions
- has time to give to the role

They then consulted widely with other dioceses and pastoral advisers with a view to learning about effective practice in other places. Based on their research, their aim was to reach consensus on a model of Diocesan Pastoral Council they could propose to Bishop Niall.

In their final Report they recommended a Diocesan Pastoral Council composed of the Bishop, five other ex-officio members and eight lay members appointed by the Bishop.

The most significant change from the former model outlined in the Constitution was a move from appointing members who represented particular groups/areas in the diocese to choosing people who were perceived to have the necessary qualities and a willingness to engage in the work of the DPC. While some consideration was to be given to ensuring representation from different areas of the diocese, talents, skills and an understanding of the role of a DPC member were deemed most important. The new Ossory Diocesan Pastoral Council held its first meeting in January 2024. One important recommendation of the Working Group was that a newly formed DPC

would engage in an orientation and training session and this was planned for at the first meeting.

Citing the role of the DPC as outlined in the Constitution:

- To be a consultative group with whom the Bishop can explore and discuss pastoral matters
- To promote, support and coordinate the work of the Parish Pastoral Councils and the Pastoral Area Councils in the context of the Diocesan Plan,

When he announced the new ODPC Bishop Niall said “I look forward to working with ODPC and hope to do so, reflecting the emphasis of Pope Francis, in a synodal fashion, allowing us to serve together in a manner that will meet the needs of our Diocese at this time”.

22. Diocese of Raphoe

This part of the Synodal journey in the Diocese of Raphoe took place throughout the month of March 2024. Meetings were held in three venues around the Diocese and people were invited to attend through parish newsletters and social media. It is notable that all those who attended the meeting were coming from within the faith. Included amongst the attendees were lay people, clergy and religious. Therefore, it must be remembered that in the responses the voices of those of lapsed or no faith or marginalised in any way are not present in this document. Finding ways of reaching out and including such groups in future discussions is important. Conversation in the Spirit was the process used to discern the question ***How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church’s mission in different ways?***

As a method of discernment Conversation in the Spirit was a new process for most of the people at the meetings. The response to this process was positive and everyone engaged well with it. It is a process that involves a discipline which is quite new for people and it was noted that it could take time to become skilled in this method. The responses which the process yielded as seen from section 1 are considered and varied. It was seen as a positive way in which we could move forward as a People of God in our parishes and Diocese.

The synodal process launched in 2021 coincided with the Raphoe Diocesan Pastoral Plan ‘Ar Aghaidh Le Chéile’ It is interesting to note from the findings from the initial listening process in Nov 21 that some of the issues highlighted were already

addressed in the Diocesan plan. The formation of the plan itself took place over a 2 year period with input from clergy and the laity. This was followed by the formation of a Diocesan Pastoral Council and the formation of Parish Pastoral Councils. The process of formation of these councils is the very essence of synodality. Time was given for discernment and formation of each group. Each process was embedded in prayer and scripture which informed all that followed. The renewal of already existing PPC's and the establishment of many new PPC's is co responsibility in action.

The Diocese has also employed a Director of Pastoral Renewal which has enabled many features of the Pastoral plan to be realised and supported. In this way some of the items that were raised in the initial listening meeting are being brought to fruition. As mentioned in the synthesis documents, listening is one part of the process and action is the second part.

The methodology of Conversation in the Spirit has been introduced around the diocese. Our diocese was very fortunate to have had the experience of Bishop McGuckian at the Synod on Synodality relayed first hand. On his return from Rome the bishop held four meetings around the diocese to share his experience of Conversation in the Spirit at the synod. At each meeting Conversation in the Spirit was carried out. People engaged well with the process and it was recognised as a fruitful way of discussing important matters. Each person's voice is heard. It is realised that it is a methodology that will take practice. Conversation in the Spirit has also been used at meetings for clergy. As a result of the diocesan gatherings this methodology is being used at parish level by some PPC's to explore how to journey together as a people of God in their parish.

In conversation with people one of the challenges of synodality raised is the language that surrounds it. It is still a word and phrase that is not familiar to a lot of people. Even though a lot of parishes are existing and working in a synodal way they do not connect what they are doing with being synodal. Another challenge to the synodal process is the lack of engagement by some members of the clergy. If a local priest does not engage with the process it is difficult for his congregation to get involved.

There is hope and enthusiasm about the future and if we are to be a truly synodal people we must ensure everyone is invited to journey with us.

23. Archdiocese of Tuam

Although there have been numerous challenges around the language and concept of Synodality, processes that underscore Synodality in our parishes are slowly emerging. We are reminded that it is only by practising Synodality together that the Church truly shows itself to be synodal. Synodality involves a new style of being church together, a church that walks together as equals towards the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.

That image of a pilgrim people walking together in faith, attentive to the call of the Holy Spirit, is what guided our invitations to engage in further dialogue around Synodality. Through a pastoral letter focussed on Synodality from Archbishop Francis Duffy, all the people of the diocese were invited to hold gatherings in which the key question was discussed. Several parishes devoted time to the question and submissions received from Parish Pastoral Councils outlined many key issues: a desire that the Church could be a more hospitable place, giving greater welcome to established communities, but also to the marginalised and to those who are newly migrated into the country. Many of these new communities come from traditionally Catholic countries, such as Brazil and the Philippines. In recent times, there has been an increase in Catholics from India coming to live in our diocese, and there are seven Indian priests currently in ministry with us. There is a sense that the presence of Catholics from different countries can add fresh impetus and present new opportunities for the Irish Church.

The methodology of Conversation in the Spirit was firstly used with the Priests and Permanent Deacons of the diocese, with fruitful discussion emerging. Priests have been encouraged to use this as a method for ongoing discernment in their parishes, especially with pastoral councils. Clergy adapted to the method quite well overall, given their limited experience of the method to date. It is a process that requires time and energy to listen well to all the voices, whereas clergy have often been encouraged to make quicker decisions with less consultation.

Several Parish Pastoral Councils also submitted responses to the key question and the newly-formed Diocesan Pastoral Council also had an opportunity to engage in a Conversation in the Spirit, with participants there also finding that the methodology generated a positive reaction and was greeted with enthusiasm by Council members.

While progress has been made in developing a synodal model of church, many challenges remain. There is a strong sense that the language and methodology has

yet to connect with the majority of our congregations, with the inherent danger that a disconnect develop between parishioners and Pastoral Councils. The actual timeframe for engagement with participants also made it difficult to engage with groups on the margins or ecumenical groups, with the focus being more on developing the synodal process with those who might be classified as “already inside the tent”. Those who responded also saw the need for greater engagement and welcome for those who may feel at a distance from the Church – young people, LGBTI+, Survivors/Victims of Clerical abuse, those in second relationships – to name but a few.

Overall, we see these conversations as the starting point of a synodal way of being church. To date, one priest and three laywomen from the diocese have undertaken formation in Synodality, but there is a need to form more people in the method and practice of Synodality, so that it becomes the accepted model of Church throughout the diocese. Ongoing formation of lay people and clergy is essential and can only enhance a docility and openness to the Holy Spirit and help us to see that God is at the centre of all our life’s prayer and work.

24. Nine Marriage Movements Accompanying Couples

Accord CLG:

I think that whoever practices any kind of ministry in the church would do well to be instructed in the art and practice of person centred empathy (unconditional positive regard and active listening: acceptance, not judging, not criticising, not telling people what they should do). That way everyone has a sense of belonging.

For Accord I am working on two particular aspects of the document issued after the first Synodal meeting: the call for a ministry for marriage preparation and the call for a ministry of listening (paragraphs 8 and 16). It’s a challenging and exciting time. Old certainties are being replaced by new realities yet to be discovered. I’m sure ‘All will be well’ as Julian of Norwich put it. Being animated by the Holy Spirit is a challenge to our humility but should yield much richer fruits than we are otherwise capable of.

Cana Ireland:

During this time of rapid change, the decrease in interest in the CANA programmes leads us into an extended time of prayer and discernment. Our parent organisation, The Chemin Neuf Community, is founded on Charismatic Renewal and Ignatian Spirituality, so discerning the will of God is a normal part of life in

CANA. A new initiative is evolving as a fruit of this – the CANA Camino. It is a pilgrimage walk with an added CANA programme. The hope is to attract more people on the fringes of the Church, especially in a young age group.

Couples for Christ:

Last Tuesday night zoom meeting (12th of March) with other Marriage movement in Ireland enable me to understand how diverse is the Church today, that each of us coming from different background and representing our own group and mission gathered together in prayerful manner and engaged in a structured conversation that was inspired by Holy Spirit. I don't have personal experience or have been involved in any synodal process before, but the meeting make me realise that if we come together in unity and the willingness to do our part in humility and obedience our share of responsibility and close cooperation allow us to achieve the desired goal and to make some difference.

Encounters of Married Couples:

The Encounters of Married Couples mission is to strengthen marriage unity by improving the relationship and communication between spouses and their connection with God. It organizes activities like retreats and monthly meetings. Last year the entry retreat of Encounters of Married Couples program was organized in October to support, reaffirm, and deepen the marital bond.

Focolare Families:

Our planning sessions are now carried out using the process of the recent Synod: prayer, respectful listening, true dialogue. From this has come a focus on hospitality, where everyone is welcomed. Creativity in how we do this is also evident, whether it is music evenings for young adults, or orienteering with teenagers.

Recently, a newly married couple of our movement asked a more mature couple to be their sponsors and to accompany them in the early years of marriage. We try to stay close to any of our families going through a crisis. We are continually being formed in the synodal way, always breaking into small groups where everyone's experience is valued.

Marriage Encounter:

The structure of Marriage Encounter promotes co-responsibility. It is a lay-led movement with married couples and priests who provide joint leadership. "Spiritual discernment" is an integral part of the life of Marriage Encounter. We think, for

example, of “formation” and how it is cascaded, and the selection of ecclesial teams is another example. A new form of accompaniment has emerged for Marriage Encounter in Ireland in 2023 as the “Family Weekend”. One of our married couples was asked to join a new Mission group in the Derry Diocese as part of the synodal movement.

Teams of Our Lady / Equipes Notre-Dame (Teams):

From the start of our ecclesial movement (founded by Fr Henri Caffarel over 75 years ago), *Teams* has had a synodal-type approach to carrying out its original mission to Christian married couples. At each level of the lay movement (e.g. at the level of monthly meetings or at country level devising pastoral plans), guided by prayer, men and women, as couples, together with chaplains (normally priests) gather in Christian fellowship – underlining the importance of the two distinct vocations journeying together.

This approach has recently led to the introduction in Ireland of *Tandem Teams* – a 14-month programme for engaged and newly married couples which focuses on different aspects of their relationship and highlights the importance of having the support of similar like-minded couples (not necessarily *Teams*).

Another initiative was the decision to host three online evenings, in the lead up to St Valentine’s Day 2024, to mark International Marriage Week – a week which gets little or no mention in Ireland. The 1-hour sessions offered married couples, who may not be involved with any specific marriage movement, some dedicated and structured couple time to focus on different aspects of their relationship. While the initiative met with limited success, *Teams* may look to other movements for support if it is to be repeated next year.

Conclusion

Under the auspices of the Bishops’ Council for Marriage and the Family, 16 movements supporting marriage and the family (including the 9 which took part in this collaborative exercise), were invited to share their contact details and a brief description of their mission for a flyer which was launched by Bishop Denis Nulty on the occasion of the launch of *Accord’s* revised marriage preparation programme, on 12th Feb 2024. The intention is that the flyer will be offered during marriage preparation programmes, in parishes and in centres where couples gather.

25. The Association of Catholics in Ireland

- The Association of Catholics in Ireland (ACI) has wholeheartedly supported Pope Francis' Synodal Church initiative from Day 1. The ACI is committed to the reform and renewal of the Church in the spirit of Vatican II.
- Recognising that there was no understanding of the meaning of synodality, the ACI undertook a series of talks on Zoom to educate the laity so as to make meaningful contributions to the Conversations in the Spirit and the resultant parish, diocesan and national syntheses. These talks were open to all and promoted to our members, on our website and social media and to the media.
- We carried out our own Conversations in the Spirit and also made questionnaires available to members and on our website, for those who could not participate in the Conversations. All these inputs were included in the preparation of our synthesis to the national synthesis.
- Following this the ACI were invited to participate in the National Pre-Synodal Assembly in Athlone in June 2022.
- We are currently providing a series of talks on Zoom addressing concerns identified in the synthesis. There are initiatives in adult faith formation and workshops to inform of positive initiatives for practical faith expression that resonate with practicing church members and those on the margins and outside the Church tent.
- In Kildare and Leighlin Diocese there is constructive action in developing a synodal pathway with a St Bridgid's Day information letter outlining several initiatives which are similar to the Dublin Diocese synodal process. The diocesan synodal team is reaching out to lay people to gather feedback, collating progress and referencing best practice with local and lay group initiatives for further dissemination. However on a local parish level the process is patchy, dependant on already embedded structures or lack of them.
- Dublin Diocese have embarked on a programme of formation and training for parish pastoral councils, catechists, funeral team ministry, funeral leaders, ministers of the Word, ministers of Holy Communion, lay led liturgy ministry. Conversations in the Spirit are used in some of these training programmes.
- In Dublin Diocese a number of parishes have established funeral ministry teams. In some parishes lay members have carried out the committal at the graveside or in the crematorium. Interestingly, the Conversations in the Spirit have been used in the training of the ministry teams.
- However, the reality is that in many parishes around the country there has been no mention of synodality or the Synodal Pathway since October 2023. This will continue unless the clergy support the synodal process.

26. Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference

Members of the Council for Catechetics including a lay pastoral leader in the Archdiocese of Dublin were invited to participate via Zoom in this Synodal Conversation. The response and engagement from all participants was very positive. The format was structured around the opening prayer to the Holy Spirit, the reading from Ephesians, an overview of the methodology and process before commencing the three rounds of Conversations in the Spirit with times for silence. The meeting was organised and facilitated by the National Director for Catechetics, Dr Alexander O'Hara. Participants also included a representative from Dublin City University, a representative from the Catholic Education Partnership, a representative from the Dublin Archdiocese, a Catholic Parent Representative, and a Deputy Principal from a Le Cheile Secondary School. Participants made the point that synodal conversations should be broadened to include children and teenagers while it was felt that more opportunities for synodal conversations and more listening would be welcomed by all participants. The experience was a joyous, prayerful, and encouraging process for all involved.

27. Laudato Si' Working Group

Having shared our vision, here we offer some examples of practices that affirm both the experience of synodality and the deepening spirituality offered by the theology of Laudato Si':

- The Laudato Si' Animators program and meetings have been supportive for all who wish to live and learn together as Christians committed to co-responsibility for our Common Home.
- Diocesan Conferences, organised locally with parishes and shared with the wider faith community and indeed the wider world have been inspiring and encouraging.
- The Eco Congregation ecumenical movement has offered huge support, resources and encouragement to newly developing Laudato Si' faith communities, and put in practice the spirit of Laudato Si'.
- A liturgical calendar including the Season of Creation, Laudato Si' week in May and more has been a trellis on which the tender shoots of Laudato Si' parish groups can climb and strengthen.
- Engagement with senior politicians and decision makers regarding priorities at COP28 in the area of Loss and Damage, Fossil Fuel subsidies, Just Transition, Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty
- Inputs to diocesan Pastoral Letter "Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor"
- Publication of textbook: "On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si"

- Ongoing successful efforts by Laudato Si' Working Group to persuade dioceses to divest from fossil fuels
- Successful campaign to achieve 30% rewilding of church grounds

These gatherings, groups and initiatives have enabled us to keep the initial synodal dynamism alive and thriving as we work co-responsibility to build up the Kingdom!
“Do not abandon yourselves to despair. We are the Easter people and hallelujah is our song.” (St Pope John Paull II)

28. We Are Church Ireland

From the document ***Towards October 2024*** issued by the General Secretariat of the Synod:

We used the methodology of “Conversation in the Spirit” in a ZOOM meeting (22 February 2024) with 29 of our members. We used 6 Break-out rooms to address the question: What are your hopes for the Synod in October 2024?

There were 4 Rounds:

Round 1: Brief Introductions

Round 2: YOUR hopes for the Synod in October

Round 3: What struck YOU most in Round 2 and what moved you during the time of silence?

Round 4: What are the 3 or 4 common themes from what you have heard you can all agree on?

The main themes from the 6 break-out rooms were:

Main Themes:
a) Equality for women – including ordination
b) Optional celibacy and reintroducing worker priests
c) Embrace unity in diversity and in subsidiarity
d) Elections of bishops and shared decision making and taking

We have registered 5 of our Members to attend the Synodal Leadership Training Programme.

29. The Council for Justice and Peace (CJP) and the Northern Ireland Catholic Council on Social Affairs (NICCOSA)

- Where the experience of formation in discerning prayer and practices of communal discernment has generated a new energy and commitment among people who may previously have had a strong personal faith and personal

commitment to the Church but were living this in an isolated, individualistic way rather than having a strong sense of connectedness to the wider Church community.

- The way that NICCOSA engages with issues of justice and peace in Northern Ireland. Key characteristics include: consultation on the work plan with a broad and inclusive understanding of social justice; active listening in Council meetings; hospitality and respectful listening to invited speakers; cycles of listening, consultation and discernment in the development of documents and resources; engagement with diverse groups of people including those working at grassroots, those experiencing marginalisation and victims and survivors of violence; ecumenical engagement; using the position and influence of NICCOSA to amplify the voices of those listened to.
- The experience of ACCORD NI in undertaking training in the area of synodality and engaging in synodal practices to reflect on how ACCORD's work in the area of marriage preparation and family ministry relates to the wider mission of the Church. This has highlighted the opportunities for evangelisation that exist in this context and the contributions that priests and lay people can make. It has also identified challenges and barriers that might be addressed, notably the lack of connection between ACCORD and the parish context.
- The joint public statements of the Church Leaders Ireland Group. This group, in speaking with one voice on issues of justice and peace, sets an important example.
- CJP recently had the opportunity to learn about the collaborative working that is taking place in local communities to prevent modern slavery and human trafficking and ensure that victims and survivors can access the care that they need.
- The way in which Pope Francis has addressed his Social Encyclicals and Apostolic Exhortations to a wide audience beyond the Catholic Church (e.g. *Laudato Si* and *Laudato Deum*). This is something NICCOSA and CJP could learn from in their promotion and sharing of Catholic Social Teaching.
- The way in which the synodal process at the universal level is connecting people across borders and encouraging people to reach out across historic and traditional divides. There is a challenge for NICCOSA and CJP in thinking about the ways in which the border on the island of Ireland may limit our imagination and collaboration in the work of the Irish Episcopal Conference.

30. Youth 2000

For the purposes of this submission we gathered in small groups to have conversations- one of which was advertised as open to anyone who wanted to participate as long as they had some connection to Youth 2000 - but this was not the only gathering which contributed to these notes. Naturally, the open session attracted a different group of people than the other conversations so there was a variety of specific experiences, although the general feeling about the lived experiences of the synod overall was consistent.

The question is somewhat difficult to answer because the lived experiences within the structured official process of synodality for our young people are few. However, in terms of growth for missionary dynamism and the work of mission they have much to contribute.

There is general acknowledgement, as mentioned in the first section briefly, that reaching out to those who are not connected with the Church, or those who are discouraged or disillusioned has great value in terms of better equipping ourselves to be effective missionaries in leading people to the heart of the Church. However, the numbers of those who had engaged in any way with the process of the synod so far was minimal, and the experience of those who had wasn't encouraging. One person recounted going to a local meeting and taking along many members of their youth group, but feeling 'drowned out', and so they saw little point in going to other meetings or engaging further. Those who did engage are the most acutely aware of the disregard they felt was given to what they shared - again the idea somehow that their experience is some kind of exception or anomaly, even though it is a shared experience of so many of the young people they know in the Church. They acknowledge that they don't think this was intentional but noted there was something of an incapacity for those facilitating to really grasp their perspective, or to imagine that it could be true and was so it was interpreted through a lens which distorted their meaning: "It can be difficult to really put yourself in the shoes of someone whose experience is so different from yours", their frame of reference sometimes just doesn't allow for it. Many of the other people in the discussion don't even realise there are large groups of young practising Catholics at all.

The young people active in the Church are absolutely clear on and grounded in her mission. Many of them have devoted years of their life in service to the Church. They understand that sharing the Gospel, being joyful, loving, invitational and intentional witnesses to Christ is absolutely central to the call on their life by the

Lord -whatever their vocation or state in life - to participate in the mission of the Church to spread the Gospel. They actively live as missionaries to their peers.

As the Church in Ireland moves forward to do the same in synodality, she does so without the participation in the process of the majority of the young, faithful, enthusiastic Catholics who are here. They have many very real concerns. It is entirely possible that proponents of the synodal way, and people who are experienced and steeped in the process would be well-equipped to give sound and compelling answers to these questions. However, if that is the case then the connection has not been made to do so. Really reaching out to young people will be more than simply asking or inviting, but will require a winning over of the young people - a type of outreach that so often rightly discussed in terms of reaching people on the periphery, but to the people who are 'inside' and yet do not feel represented in the reports and synthesis they hear about.

Young people in the Church are living missionary lives, on their college campuses, in their schools and workplaces, among their families, in the world and in the Church. In places within the Church that feel like home for them- which are not trying to be something different - young people are at work in the mission, alongside and in support of many priests and bishops, and have been since long before they heard of synodality so they don't feel the necessity of it. They like the idea of knowing, supporting and engaging with their priests and Bishop, and sharing their experience, but the idea of synodality - at least what it has come to mean to them; the lack of clarity around what it ought to be (if that is different from what they understand); of its purpose; its limits etc - is a discouragement to them from participating. Irrespective of the synod, they are living differentiated co-responsibility in proclaiming the Gospel. They are at work in the Church, anywhere there is a space which truly acknowledges their desires and needs, rather than presuming what they may be, and that will continue irrespective of an their involvement with an 'official' synodal process.

They are active already in reaching out to people on the margins, those who feel excluded, those who feel unseen, those who do not know how loved they are by the Lord. At Youth 2000, young people come from every social and economic background that exists in our country and from every stage one can imagine in a faith journey; devout life long Catholics, reverts, converts and inevitably some agnostic or atheists, gathering together to engage with an authentic expression of the life of the Church which facilitates their encounter with the living God. Many of

our young people are those who might be thought of in the broad sense when reference is made to those on the margins. We have young people who are same-sex attracted, experience gender dysphoria, experience anxiety, illness, depression; everyone is welcome, no one is excluded and yet the faith is successfully and effectively presented and passed along unreservedly and in the fullness of truth that it holds. Anything that appears - whether or not that is the case - to undermine, challenge, or reject a faithful and authentic expression of the teachings of the Church cannot appeal to the same young people with this experience, but the narrative and promotion they hear and the experiences they have had when they engaged- leaves them with that impression.

This is not meant to be a criticism, but a recounting of conversations which acknowledge the reality of the level of interest and understanding among the young people that actually exists and would have to be addressed if there is a genuine desire for their participation. If that doesn't happen and the process moves on without them, they are generally content with that too. They are not demanding to be included, rather they are simply unconvinced and the idea or process has not in any way piqued their interest (this is the case for those who both had or had not participated in some way at the early stages in their local areas).

We understand that reaching out to Youth 2000 and similar groups to facilitate listening is an attempt to do that, but it is clear that on a more foundational level, the engaging of young people and the fostering of interest and confidence in the process hasn't permeated at least the majority of those who come to Youth 2000.

31. Trócaire

As the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Trócaire works in partnership with local organisations and communities to tackle the root causes of poverty, injustice and violence. We support people to use their own power to create positive and lasting change. We are very grateful to be part of the Synodal processes of the Irish Church and see this as a key moment in the Church's history in Ireland. This next stage of the process invites us to reflect on 'differentiated co-responsibility' and to identify 'the paths we can follow and the tools we might adopt in our different contexts in order to enhance the unique contribution of each baptised person and of each Church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today'.

We used the methodology of “Conversation in the Spirit” in an online meeting which took place on Monday 11th March 2024. There were 5 participants. The format was as follows:

- Opening prayer and reflection which included a reflection on ‘conversations in the Spirit’.
- An exploration of the term ‘differentiated co-responsibility’.
- A brief update on the October 2023 Synod in Rome, mostly in relation to the methods used.
- A brief discussion on the image of the Synod in Rome – round tables, movement from Bishops and Cardinals only to inclusion of lay people, men and women, with voting rights.
- Each participant was invited to share their views on the main question: ***How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church’s mission in different ways?***
- We left periods of silence after each sharing. The sharing was honest and from the heart, out of real experience of working at the grassroots in parishes around the country. Participants also shared their own personal experiences as members of parish communities and people of faith.
- We did another round of sharing for those who wanted to add further detail.
- We had a closing reflection: what have you heard? What is resonating with you? How do you feel now?
- Closing Prayer

