

## Lay Pastoral Forum

Dear Bishop Robert,

Herewith we present the Lay Pastoral Forum's collation of the many responses submitted from the Synodal listening undertaken over the past few months.

Our lay synodal journey has provided us with submissions from 14 of our 18 partnerships, one from an Episcopal Area, and one from the African community in the Diocese. Three responses were received independently from parishes. The coming together for the Synodal process was enjoyed by many and gave them a welcome opportunity to talk together about the development of their communities. They discussed how better to serve their fellow parishioners; how to welcome new people and how to welcome back those who had needed to withdraw or shield during the pandemic.

They have eloquently expressed their concern for their parish and partnership families, and have realised that the parish and partnership communities are strong, valuable and transcend the bricks and mortar that are their physical expression, and that real community exists amongst the people.

However, the number of parishioners engaging with the process in many parishes was low, we estimate around 1 in 5 people have engaged, and in some places less than 10%. Moreover, it was estimated that the congregations have reduced by perhaps 30% of their regular attendees prior to COVID whom we miss and with whom we would wish to re-engage. We have realised that the tools we need to keep in touch with our people and provide information about help, support, and aid (contact details, parish records and census) are essential but are not in place everywhere. Parishes have recognised that they need to carry out a new census and have contact details to be prepared for future challenges. Indeed, the pandemic has exposed several concerns that were probably present before the pandemic began but were not voiced.

The technical means to provide live streaming of the Mass and online groups and meetings were seen as a welcome innovation especially by the housebound and those in remote communities, and there is a general agreement that we need to continue using such tools in appropriate ways as a fundamental part of our mission and outreach. But we recognise that a sizeable proportion of parishioners do not have access to the internet, and that personal contact will remain the most fundamental form of building community together.

People have missed the real Mass and the community surrounding it. They have realised what an important part of their spiritual life it is, and they continue to be afraid that as there are fewer active Priests that there will be fewer Masses. Going to Mass is not an end in itself however, and many of the laity recognise that they need to learn how to be the leaven in society and to be visible agents of evangelisation in the world. They have stated that the Church is not just for Mass but should be about developing communities and social interactions to provide hospitality and support for all the People of God in their infinite diversity and situation.

So, the role of the laity was universally discussed and was very high on everyone's priority list. There was a clear respect for the clergy, and much concern for their welfare and the stresses upon them. At the same time, we have seen during the pandemic how people have risen to the challenge of keeping their communities running and this shows that often the laity are more than able and very willing to play a key part in the Church, complementing

the clergy and working with them, recognising their different vocations and charisms. We should ensure that we encourage and nurture this continuing relationship in rebuilding our parishes. There may be a ready opportunity to develop lay roles in better administering parishes and relieving the priests of part of their now heavy workload so that they can devote more of their time to the sacramental needs of their parishioners.

As the number of Priests available continues to drop in the future there was great concern that Mass will become less and less available. The Diocese is currently inviting Priests from Missionary Orders in to look after parishes, and this is helpful. There were numerous requests for liturgy that might be used when Priests are not available, such as Services of the Word with Holy Communion, and the less well-known Liturgy of the Hours.

There are also lay people who don't appreciate that their role in the church's mission should be a very active one (c.f. Lumen Gentium) and need to 'step up to the plate' more often.

To do this we need more formation that is widely accessible. Spiritual development and practical formation in what the Church teaches is needed for adults and long-term Catholics as well as for our children and new converts. Adult formation is a clear priority.

There was robust (and not always charitable) comment on liturgical preferences, both in favour of more contemporary styles on the one hand, and more traditional on the other. The input from the African community was relevant here – however we celebrate our liturgy should be filled with enthusiasm and reflect the joy of the Gospel. We are not a homogeneous community and should value the many different expressions of our faith and be open to them, particularly those forms of worship which encourage youth participation.

The role of women in the Church needs to be better understood and articulated. It will not surprise you to know that this was a universal point and often robustly put. Clear respect for them and their contributions will be essential. There were vocal demands that consideration of the ordination of women should begin, but also in places emphatic support for the long-established view of the Church on this.

The issue of racism was felt strongly by the African community, who emphasised how it is often ignored, dismissed, and not openly discussed nor addressed.

There is a clear tension expressed with concepts of Hierarchy, and often a lack of trust; a lack that can be in both directions between clergy and laity. This was often expressed in terms such as "we won't be heard" or "the clergy will suppress unwelcome comments". "We'll write directly to the Bishop (or Pope)" was not an unusual comment. This needs to be explored and worked upon with some urgency as it directly affects any sense of working together, and hence the core of our synodal purpose.

The responses show a great concern for our young. Not just the children in our Sacramental preparation groups, but all our teenagers, the young adults, and young families. They are rarely as present in our churches as we would wish and we desperately need to understand why, and learn from other diocesan communities, who keep them engaged, how to reach out to welcome and support them. There is a missing generation here, and perhaps a golden opportunity to reach them.

In our schools we see great good being done academically, and we see the children formed in good ways to consider those around them, and being full of goodwill and energy, but this

does not translate into taking a full part in parish life, or lead to vocations. Perhaps for many 'school is church'. Our schools are popular with parents for their ethos and academic results, but the same parents do not engage with their parishes. Barely 10% of those in Catholic education are practising Catholics. This needs urgent consideration.

Parishes are very much aware of the urgent need to reach out to those who have stepped aside from the Church for whatever reason, and to ensure that there is a welcoming and hospitable Catholic community for all. Inclusiveness and Equality were mentioned many times, and many felt that the church excludes people because of divorce, separation, or their sexuality. This is an area where formation and communication are so important. Do we understand the same thing by different words? Are people hurt because they pick up the wrong message from our lack of clarity or charity in teaching? This is a difficult and sensitive subject, and we must address it if we are going to reach out properly to those around us.

Overall, there is no doubt that the laity wishes there to be change and development if given the opportunity (the status quo is clearly unsustainable) and we suggest that careful consideration is given to research and planning of new initiatives in our diocese as a follow-up to this synod process. It is essential that the local stage of the synod is followed by tangible actions that can be monitored and reviewed at regular intervals.

It was also noted that to wish change is one thing, but many are reluctant to change; this needs careful planning, consultation, explanation, and working with people to bring it to fruition.

Communication will be vital; it has been badly missing in the past and the laity feel that they are not involved in the decisions of "their church" and often do not understand them. We need to create clear and accessible channels of communication that ensure dialogue and understanding. Outreach, particularly to the young, will be supported by the use of social media channels.

The parishioners struggle with the legacy of past abuse. There were several requests for the Church to apologise for past abuse and to put in place mechanisms to prevent recurrence and cover up.

In reviewing this Synodal process it is clear that all those who have taken part have found it thought provoking, challenging, but also rewarding. It has rekindled our feeling of community and a sense of purpose though it also highlights many problems and difficulties that we face. We thank Pope Francis, and you Bishop Robert, for the opportunity to take part, to listen, discern and to 'be heard'. We offer our prayers and goodwill to you as you continue the process of discernment over the coming months.



Lay Pastoral Forum

8<sup>th</sup> March 2022

Nigel Lightfoot (Chair)

Joe Ronan (Northumberland Vicariate)

John Hardy (South Tyneside and Gateshead Vicariate)

Julie Humphrey (Cleveland and South Durham Vicariate)

Rachel Blackburn (Newcastle and North Tyneside Vicariate)

Mick Davison (Sunderland and East Durham Vicariate)

Kelechi Dibia (African Community)