



ARCHDIOCESE *of*  
SOUTHWARK

| Diocesan Synthesis  
| SYNOD 2021 - 2023

Dear Friends,

It is a pleasure to be able to share with you this Southwark Synodal Synthesis. It has been an incredible process, not without challenge, but it has begun something momentous. Thousands of conversations and contributions, offered over a period of almost half a year, have encouraged and provoked, highlighted need and areas of hope. I am extremely grateful to all who have participated at the parish and diocesan meetings, to those who reached out beyond our parish boundaries seeking out our brothers and sisters on the margins of the Church. To the young people in parishes and schools who offered their wisdom too, thank you. I am extremely grateful to those who have enabled the synodal process, particularly the parish delegates and our clergy, and to those who have produced the final document. To my mind, it captures the multifaceted nature of our diocese and avenues for future discernment and activity. As we continue our journey together, let us pray for each other.

With gratitude and every blessing.

Yours sincerely in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by a cursive name that appears to be 'John Wilson'. There is a horizontal line underneath the signature.

The Most Reverend John Wilson  
Archbishop of Southwark

## Diocesan Synthesis

### Archdiocese of Southwark

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark covers the London boroughs south of the Thames, the County of Kent and the Medway Unitary Authority. It comprises 175 parishes and 170 schools and is shepherded by Archbishop John Wilson, the Eleventh Bishop of Southwark, installed on 25 July 2019.

### The Diocesan Phase

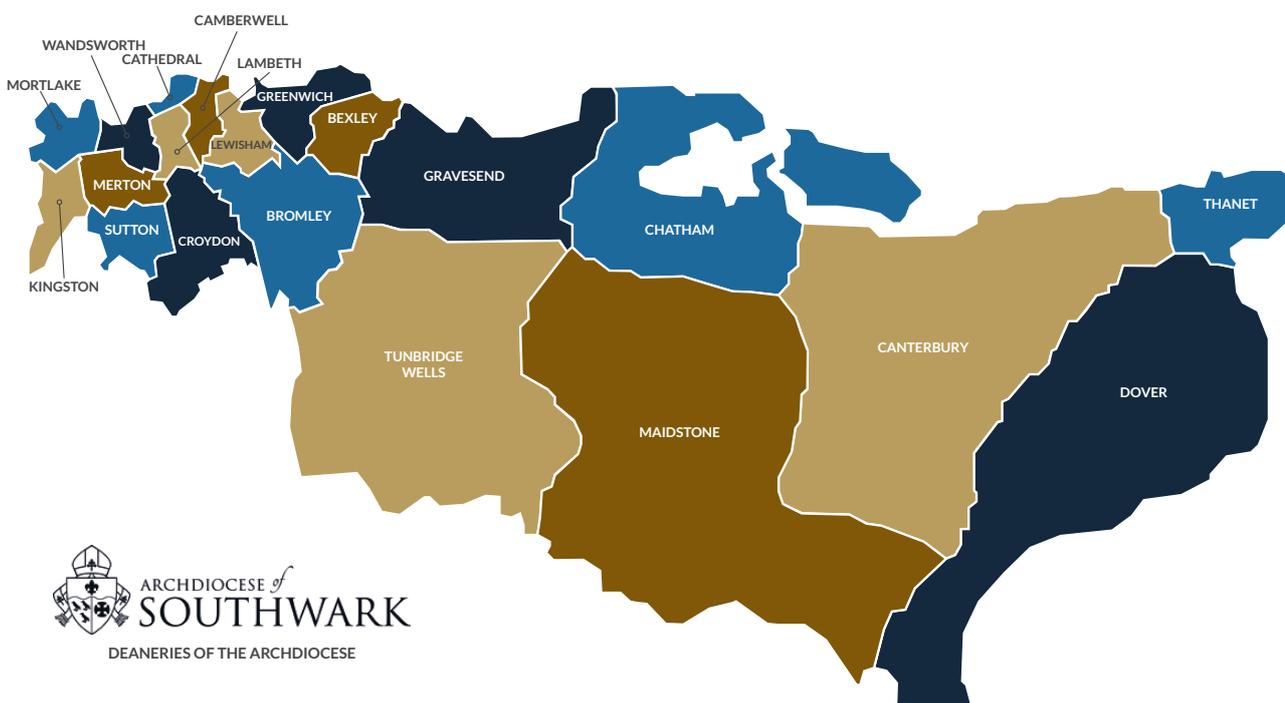
1. Archbishop John Wilson opened the Synod process in Southwark with a Mass in St George's Cathedral on 17 October 2021 followed by an online *Lectio Divina* (Mark 10:35-45) for the parish-appointed Synod delegates. Schools, prisons, hospitals, and individuals were invited to engage with the parish listening sessions conducted across the diocese. Where parishes did not or were not able to participate (22% of parishes), opportunities were provided for direct correspondence and online submissions. Some parishes entered into some form of the process without making submissions to the diocese. The emergence of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 played a role in reduced participation.

2. Resources on identifying parish delegates, walking the Synodal way, facilitating spiritual conversations, as well as adaptable prayer sessions and suggested questions, all around the themes of Communion, Participation and Mission, were created and made available at the launch of our shared Synod Journey. Through the months of the process, different parishes and individuals offered materials to support conversations with various groups, particularly young

people and children; these were circulated by the diocesan team to parishes and parish delegates with gratitude.

3. The extension for the submission of Diocesan Syntheses (announced in November 2021) permitted this amended timetable:

- 17 October 2021 – launch of the Synodal Process, Pastoral Letter and prayer with parish delegates.
- 18 October 2021 to 21 January 2022 – the local listening phase (primarily parishes, and schools where possible) comprising online or in-person gatherings as the organisers saw fit.
- 9, 10, 16 February 2022 – online meetings of delegates in SE-London, SW-London and Kent were held with Archbishop John. After *Lectio* (Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17), delegates contributed what had been heard in the local listening phase and were encouraged to send in parish syntheses by 18 February 2022.
- 18 February 2022 – deadline for all submissions contributing to the Diocesan Synthesis.
- 1 March 2022 – meeting of the Synod Listening Team to read and prayerfully discern the contributions received. *Lectio* (Luke 5:1-11).
- 17 March 2022 – presentation of the draft synthesis to clergy and parish delegates. *Lectio* (Luke 24:13-32).
- 8 April 2022 – Submission of the Diocesan Synthesis to the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.



The Synod Listening Team received:

- 137 parish submissions (P1-P137)
- 134 online individual submissions via the diocesan and Agency for Evangelisation and Catechesis websites (O1-O134)
- 12 group submissions, e.g. diocesan commissions, schools, retirement homes, disability groups and prisons (G1-G12)
- 68 postal/email individual submissions (I1-I68)
- notes and video recordings from the Delegate Area Meetings (AM-SE, AM-SW, AM-KENT)
- as well as works of art and music created by both children and adults (examples of which have been included in this document)

## Thoughts on the Diocesan Process

5. It became clear that, in the Synod process, the Church was being asked to learn or rediscover something anew. The practice of communal discernment, so familiar to parts of the Church and quite alien to others, is not a survey, nor a vote, nor in the ordinary sense a consultation, but rather an invitation to learn how to listen. The presence of much anger reflected, at times, a view that it is 'the Church' which ought to listen rather than all parties engage in a prayerful listening together. It was striking how many individual, online and parish submissions spoke about 'the Church' but did not assume either their belonging and involvement in it or write from a personal experience of how they had been accompanied by it.

6. The submissions suggest a keen desire to share ideas and to welcome change at the parish, diocesan and universal levels of the Church. Continuing to discern, together, will allow us to rest and wrestle with some of the themes mentioned in the synthesis, over time, and to act on others where competence and capacity permit. The Synodal Way and the work of prayerful discernment (cf. P130) needs a high level of trust. It would seem valuable to ask whether the Church is trusting enough to do this kind of exercise: '*we are too often a factional Church*' (O51). Engagement, in the Synod process, requires '*openness and humility*' from all involved (O124).

7. There was also a considerable amount of hope expressed as well as gratitude for the opportunity to '*listen to each other in non-judgemental way in light of Scripture and being open to the Holy Spirit*' (P133). There was a '*sense of achievement, almost excitement, that we had shared deep-seated concerns at a number of levels*' (P45).

## Have Parishes Engaged in a Synodal Way?

8. There is a clear variety in approach across the diocese. Adaptable and flexible approaches were suggested, in terms of format and choice of questions, so that local needs and circumstances were met. However, many felt that despite this, there was insufficient latitude in terms of topics provided by the Vatican, the diocese and, in some cases, the parish. The fact that some contributors felt that the process was 'controlled' might be a result of past frustrations or a general suspicion of 'consultation'.

9. Many parish delegates found that the variety of voices and opinions made parochial syntheses challenging to produce. Although only 78% of our parishes formally took part, other opportunities to participate were provided and some parishes entered into a form of the process without making submissions to the diocese.

10. Many comments recognised the lack of knowledge regarding the functioning of the parish, the diocese and the wider Church. People are unsure of the ways in which concerns can be raised appropriately, '*without the nagging sense that this is accusing of the clergy or disloyal to the institution*' (O51).

*'The process of listening opened up deep reflection, longing and for some, a range of complex emotions, from anger to hurt... It cannot be underestimated the cultural shift from a 'telling' church that many people have experienced from their formative years to a 'listening' church where each voice and experience really matters.'* (P32, echoed in P106)

11. With constant invocation of, and seeking after, the Holy Spirit (cf. Proverbs 3:5-6), the Synod process was considered to be a start of an ongoing discernment (P104), a point reinforced by Archbishop John at the Area Meetings (AM-SE, AM-SW, AM-KENT).

12. For the most part, submissions explored the questions that were offered under the themes of Communion, Participation and Mission and provided space for all contributions. The overarching question posed by the Synod of Bishops Office has clearly provided a healthy challenge to us all, namely:

*'A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, 'journeys together.' How is this 'journeying together' happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our 'journeying together'?*

# Communion

*'For nothing among human things is as powerful for maintaining our gaze, applied ever more intensely on God, than friendship with the friends of God.'*

**Simone Weil, Waiting for God**

*May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

**Romans 15:5-6**

## Introduction

13. The response here was broad with some only discussing/reflecting Communion as the Eucharist and prayer events, whilst others spoke of the broader Communion formed of people from all walks of life coming together united in Christ (P103).

14. The terms community and communion were used interchangeably in a number of submissions but others went as far as to define their terms: Communion *'is with God and with each other, this underpins community'* (P94) and it *'can be found in devotion to God'* (P134). The sense of the sacred, the supernatural power and the presence of God, was marked in the responses surrounding the area of Communion but noticeably weaker, or even absent, in Participation and Mission.

## Eucharist at the Heart of Communion and Community

15. The overwhelming majority of parish submissions highlighted the *'centrality of the Mass'* (P5, P25, P28) to our life as Catholics, it is at the *'heart of communion'* (P40), the *'perfect prayer'* (P129) and the *'main unifying force'* (P39). Indeed, it was noted that there was no Catholic community without the Holy Eucharist (P109); it is where *'we come together as a Catholic family'* (P64). Mass is a source of purpose and unites, it is *'an anchor in our lives'* (P3). It is *'far more than rituals and rubrics; it is prayer and worship and expresses the theology of Christian Faith, the Christian approach to life'*, offers one group submission, continuing, *'the Mass speaks to real-life but often we fail to make the connection: conversion, forgiveness, being nourished and transformed and with a mission in life'* (G10).

16. Access to the Eucharist, and the believer's relationship to the Eucharist, as a result of the decline in priestly vocations was raised as an issue for the future (P111).

17. A significant number of submissions mention the lack of reverence they see regarding the Eucharist

(O43, P24, P63, P91) and others seek an increase in *'devotion towards Jesus in the Eucharist'* (P5, P26, I46) and an *'improvement in catechesis'* (P42, P52, O26, O70, O96).

18. The majority of the individual submissions (e.g. I4, I6, I11) are clear that Communion is best expressed in the Mass and worship, where *'Parishioners are brought together... but there are numerous other activities as well.'* (I5), including *'popular children's liturgy'* (P8) *'which attracts a substantial number of families with young children to Sunday Mass'* (I13). Eucharistic Adoration was mentioned a number of times as a place where Communion can be deepened (I40). There is an understanding (I17) that the Mass creates a spiritual bond that impels the Church out into the world to work for the Common Good and engage in charitable activity. Another noted that where such activity is lacking, Communion is weakened (I45). Communion, Participation and Mission are notably linked in the Eucharist.

*'Where there is communion with the Lord and communion with the community there is participation and signs of mission.'* (AM-KENT)

*'A successful parish isn't just the numbers - it is a vibrant Christ-centred, love-filled, supportive community of fellow-travellers reaching out to others, whatever their story and affirming and celebrating their calling as God's daughters and sons.'* (P115)

**19. COMMENT:** In general, the submissions do not present a deep understanding of how we relate to Christ and the Church beyond participation in the Eucharistic community: *'There is less certainty about why we are here'* (P14). While there is a beautiful sense that the Mass is at the centre of belonging, baptism (P61) and unity of faith (I40) are infrequently mentioned in terms of Communion.

## The Role of the Parish (Relationship with the Parish)

20. As might be expected, the relationship that people have with their parish is multifaceted. For some, the parish *'serves as a place of rest in transitory community'* (P64) and a point of contact in changing times. The parish, as a praying community, provides strength for the individual believer (AM-SE) and without *'the church and their community of faith, life would be poorer'* (P33). *'Ultimately, my faith is at the very core of my life'*, shared one submission, *'and my parish is at the very core of my faith. We want to see our parish thrive and our faith thrive'* (P23).

21. Some parishes were described as *'vibrant and welcoming with good social cohesion'* (P24, P27), a *'listening parish'* (P40), another noted that home visits helped to care for *'the elderly in our midst'* (P6). For others, the parish experience lacked this vibrancy, it *'can be unfriendly and unwelcoming for new people, with a perception that established groups did not welcome new members... Mass in the parish lacks joy'* (P106). *'The parish does not really act as one, only very few people participate in the life of the church. However, Mass remains the centre point of the parish life'* (P66). We need to *'keep an eye open at Mass for those who are new to the parish or appear left out or lonely, and to make sure someone talks to them in a welcoming way'* (P80).

22. Some contributors felt as though the parish did not meet their spiritual needs (P55) and closures during the pandemic were deemed to have had a negative effect on spiritual and mental health (P2, P60). Simple care for each other was considered a key tenet of lived Communion, something experienced as *'much more evident during the pandemic'* by a few contributors (P71, P86, G4).

*'Under Covid it seems that the Holy Spirit has created opportunities for us to work together, more than before the pandemic, in new ways that we may not have imagined before, to take on new roles, and to open up new skills as well as becoming a more friendly, caring, tighter knit (not physically) community.'* (P35)

*'Many people no longer look for a Church in the geographical area in which they live but for a Church which suits their own personal wishes and style of worship.'* (P10)

**23. COMMENT:** Beyond the pandemic, the nature of modern life with shift and Sunday work caused many submissions to ask for creative and flexible ways to build Communion (with God and with each other) (P60). If there is *'no community without the Eucharist'*, (P109) and the *'centre of communion is the Eucharist'* (O6); it needs to be available at different times, and accepted when available.

## The Role of the Priest (Relationship with the Priest)

24. There is a sense that the priest is the determining factor in a parish; *'the key as to whether the parish will thrive'* (I12). The power and authority of the priest was seen as a positive or a negative depending on how it was embodied. Many clearly had a very positive experience with their priests (e.g. P26), varyingly described as *'dedicated and prayerful'* (P36), *'kind and inspiring'* (P110) and exhibiting *'good leadership'* (O23)

which can *'foster a sense of unity'* (P75); whilst others felt *'controlled'* (O22) and silenced by them, thus limiting their feeling of Communion and belonging (P79, P119, O67, I50). A tension was noted *'between priest as enabler and his power to veto'* (P119).

25. Priests were considered central to *'enabling full participation'* (P130) and the *'engendering of communion and community by the way they live together and with the lay people'* (I8), instilling *'reverence and encouraging community spirit.'* (P9). It was striking how the movement of priests from parish to parish can both enable and disable the community (the latter view predominating in the online submissions). The need for cooperation, collaboration or even co-responsibility was a recurring theme and clearly one dearly felt: *'need to work with parishioners and collaborate, avoiding appearing as dictators who see no need to explain their decisions or to seek advice'* (P36).

## Relationship with Jesus and the Church

26. A relationship with Jesus was mentioned more in this section (than Participation and Mission) though there was also recognition that sometimes a relationship with the Church and its rules was more pronounced and, for some people, even got in the way: *'Some baptised Catholics feel disconnected. They want to belong to Christ and the Church but find it difficult, see the Church even as a barrier'* (P15).

27. One concern, reflected in a large number of the submissions, is that there is a diminished view of the Church as a purely human institution. Many submissions noted glimpses of the divine in the sacraments (P20), *'sacred scripture broken open for us'* (O34), *'silence'* (P42), *'divine provision of volunteers'* (P43) and *'testimonies'* (P105) in the Church, however, frequently, structural and governance issues were articulated solely in corporate and practical language (e.g. O61). The *'need to see the greatness of Our Lord in our midst and all he is offering us'* is necessary for a shared vision of Church and Mission (P132). *'People lose connection with Jesus by losing connection with the Church. We have to help people to reconnect and re-trust the Church'* (P101).

28. The way the Church is understood and described, regarding Mission and Participation was at times quite charged. An exhortation to harmony and dialogue was made: *'Heartfelt differences should never lead to labelling, lack of charity and harshness'* (P109).

**29. COMMENT:** There seemed in many of the responses a disconnect between the Church and a deep, personal and living relationship with Jesus Christ. At times more of the responses were about structures and rules and practices, all of which are essential, but

not seeming to be rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The local church should facilitate various opportunities to nurture this relationship through experiences (prayer, retreats, pilgrimages, liturgy and community building) as well as building religious knowledge.

## Creating and Sustaining Community

30. Many ideas for the creation and maintaining of community were offered, from coffee mornings, shared spaces with the local community and shared work such as building and charitable projects. Submissions observed that: *'People come to church for purpose, compassion, a sense of belonging'* (P3).

31. **Small Groups.** A significant theme to address the anonymity, so often present in our parishes, is the development of small Christian communities (P130), a view echoed by another who *'would love to see our parishes thriving with small groups, that really help develop people's faith and spirituality'* (O113). *'Sunday communities'* are sustained by networks of smaller groups which meet in the week, some on an ethnic basis – some mixed more easily with each other, but not necessarily with the wider community – and others around particular activities. The overwhelming expectations on a single parish priest to coordinate all this is unsustainable, it was felt, and such activity must be lay-led and lay-owned (P73, G9). This was raised as a possible solution to many issues, particularly in rural Kent (I30, I48) and offered as a method to perpetuate the listening experienced in the Synod process.

32. The real challenge to build Communion and community in multi-church parishes, and those with many Masses, was also raised (e.g. I42).

## Distance Between the Bishop and the People, the Shepherd and the Flock

33. Some parishes felt disconnected from the Archdiocese and the Bishop and others said they *'didn't know their own deanery never mind the diocese'* (P73, I55). The lack of area bishops for Kent and more recently for the SE-London area of the diocese had increased this feeling of disconnect. The people want to *'see the bishop more often'* (P70).

## Diversity in Southwark

34. Across the various submissions, London and Kent, inner-city and rural, it is unsurprising to hear that both the presence and absence of diversity was raised. One submission noted that Mass provision doesn't always meet the needs of ethnic groups, with little accommodation for people with different languages,

and that *'ethnic groups are not included in parish councils or church meetings – maybe it's unconscious racism'* (O18). In some parishes, parishioners (who did not belong to the individual groups) felt excluded and wanted more celebrating together; others felt it would be fruitful to establish more *'international/multi-cultural groups'* (P85). In addition, one submission felt that religious images used in parishes don't necessarily *'reflect the diversity of the people in our parish'* (I13). However, there was a general acknowledgment that the diocese is enriched in terms of racial and cultural diversity. Parishes have many different active groups which make for a *'diverse, spiritual, cultural and linguistic parish with many nationalities, bringing with it a rich tapestry of experience from across the seven continents'* (P60). These groups *'make a huge contribution to the life of the parish and embody the universal Church'* (P131).

35. Those with neurodiversity and creative communicators (typically referred to as those with disabilities) highlighted the need for adapted rites and liturgies such as *'Faith and Light'* (G4).

## Language

36. A plea was heard regarding the use of plain English, accessible to all, especially for those who had English as a second/third language (P15, P80, O3). This request for simplicity – or language that can be *'understood by the chap on the Clapham Omnibus'* (P31) – extended to the questions offered for the Synod process itself. Words convey meaning - words that for some provided solace and richness, to others became a barrier to Participation and Mission: *'Complexity of language of the Church can get in the way of clear messages'* (P29), particularly as meanings shift in contemporary culture. An alternative perspective was offered, that the Church needs to be clearer, stronger and more united in messaging, in the tradition of the Church (O101), over-simplification or dumbing down can lose a sense of mystery.



# Participation

*Few souls understand what God would accomplish in them if they were to abandon themselves unreservedly to him and if they were to allow his grace to mould them.*  
**St Ignatius of Loyola**

*[Christ Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

**Philippians 2:6-8**

## Introduction

37. In many ways, participation levels are high, as evidenced by those taking part in the Synod process across the diocese. Hundreds of volunteers are involved in charitable work, catechesis and other aspects of the life of the Church. That said, across the diocese there were various expressions of feeling excluded, metaphorically and even literally, through church closure, in lockdown and currently. Some of the excluded groups mentioned were the elderly, housebound, women, young people, people who identify as having different sexual orientations, and the poor, particularly in terms of access to technology.

## Covid-19 and the Pandemic

38. The Covid-19 pandemic, against which background the Synod meetings in the diocese took place, was a common theme in the submissions. Whether the competence shown in transitioning to new ways of reaching out to parish and wider community, new forms of gathering in prayer or the practical challenges in maintaining a community where members are separated, the pandemic presented challenges and opportunities for creative solutions, suffering and a realisation of our interdependency. One submission talked about the Covid-19 pandemic in scriptural terms:

*'Like Jerusalem after exile, many of us are returning... though many remain comfortable in their exile. We need to look at how God inspired the returning Israelites to rebuild... [firstly] the temple... we need to build back our sacramental life in the church... [secondly] the exiles were taught God's word by Ezra... and thirdly building back the city walls. Our church needs new walls, new ways of fellowship.'* (O23)

39. For many the pandemic has been 'substantial and traumatic' (P81): 'we are able to slowly share the pain of what these two years gave us. Since return, we realise that there are many who have not returned' (P31, P45, P46), as a consequence there is an 'emptiness in our

hearts and churches' (P37). Priest moves, coupled with the pandemic, has caused in places a weakening of parish community life (P90), and 'a lot of frustration and disorganisation' (P66).

40. Many submissions noted the real and practical value of modern technology (e.g. P133), where live-streaming opened the doors of the church when they were physically shut (O18, P43) and the community were still able to meet, using Zoom (P97). In places where live-streaming did not take place (P52) or where it has been taken away despite being previously offered (P12), the lack of connection was keenly felt. As typical in our submissions, the antithesis was mentioned, that Zoom and online provision is a 'risk to building community as people are not meeting physically, nor getting to know each other and participate in other aspects of faith' (P29).

41. The need to both work and to pray for the return of our absent brothers and sisters was raised (P59). Others noted, with joy, the return of people as restrictions eased 'People [are] now returning to mass to receive the Eucharist, this is wonderful to see and lovely to worship together and feel part of it' (P109).

## Role of Women

42. There was extensive commentary on the role of women throughout the submissions. Two main themes emerged: women's ordination, which, owing to its doctrinal and universal implications, is covered in the final section on matters for the Universal Church, and the effective use of gifts and wisdom of women in the life of the Church which is noted here and also below (in terms of governance and skills).

43. Women continue to be the 'lifeblood of the church' (P69), and 'the work and collaboration of our religious sisters is treasured' (P27). However, it was felt that women can be 'treated as servants rather than equal partners and are key agents for delivering God's message and passing on faith particularly through the family' (P12).

44. The lack of leadership roles for women is frequently mentioned: 'There was a call for more roles for women in the leadership of the Church... as women feel excluded from the leadership of the Church' (P58, AM-SW). This perception of a lack of women participating in leadership is all the starker given the lack of participation of men in the Synod process in some parishes. One parish noted that all the participants in the Synod process had been women and a number noted that most of the participants were women.

45. The changing role of women, many of whom now work full time, has changed the social life of the Church, many feeling less available to support parish life (O8).

46. Some of the issues raised were to do with the role of the laity rather than the role of women, but within this there was clarity expressed on the different experiences – for some it was felt that *'the male laity are treated like second class citizens and the female laity are pushed to the margins'* (O28). The idea, that every role within the Church ought to be seen as one of service, rather than one of power, is important though under-represented.

47. The role of Mary as the most powerful example for Catholic women was also noted (O124): *For Catholic women Mary should always be the first role model. When God called her to motherhood she answered with humility... Unfortunately, the world has distorted the Biblical value of motherhood and female humility* (O100).

48. There is clarity across the vast majority of submissions that the Church, at all levels, ought to recognise and make better use of the gifts that women have, including in decision making and planning (P51, P62): *'Women in our parish are well represented in the variety of ministries for which they are currently eligible. However, there is great enthusiasm that women are an underused resource and this issue must be a high priority for change in the future'* (P71).

**49. COMMENT:** The understanding of the lay role, as expressed in many submissions, includes the Mission of the lay person in the world. This includes the particular and vital role women play in the family and the creation of a domestic church in the home. The role of fatherhood in the family and the creation of a domestic church in the home is not reflected in the submissions.

## A Place for All

50. In a large number of Synod responses there was a strong sense that the Church must be there for all, a *'hospital for sinners and a haven for saints'* (e.g. P15, P66). Without undermining the Lord's challenging call to repentance and holiness, it was felt strongly that the Church should embrace all its members, those at the point of entry, those on the peripheries and those bruised by our hurting world. Many parishes showed that the Church was already engaged in this ministry by highlighting the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, engaging in outreach work, and programmes for the parish needy, as well as making Mass times meet the needs of parishioners. A sense of marginalisation and pain were felt, in some way, from all parts of the Church, including those who value the traditional Latin Mass (G11). The needs of particular

minority groups were mentioned, including those who have been abused, people who are divorced and re-married, *'there is confusion over what is allowed for divorcees or those who are re-married in terms of how much they can participate'* (P58). This also includes same sex attracted persons, those who struggle with gender identity, people in difficult situations and those challenged by the moral teachings of the Church. Others saw the discipline of the Church as a loving call to conversion and a sign-posting of the way to happiness.

*'How do we relate to people who drift away? There may be tensions between the teachings of the gospel and people who have drifted away... There is also a tension between current social ideas... and the gospel, which people may struggle with. The same tension that exists in our practice/belief as Catholics and our day to day lives as members of society. How can we emphasise the message of love and empathy of the Church?'* (P36).

## Using and Identifying the Skills and Gifts of Parishioners

51. Recruitment for various roles and tasks within parishes was often considered opaque or a mystery, particularly when it came to committees in the parish (P106). Information is key to full Participation and co-responsibility (P5). Many gifts of a practical nature were not felt to be recognised and the development of a skills register was encouraged (P80, P133, I23). More than skills, others emphasised the gifts, talents and charisms (O24): *'we should work on identifying [these]... through a process of discernment'* (P41), *'encouraging people to come forward to utilise their skills and gifts for the good of the parish'* (P5) and for *'the work of God'* (P83). *'ALL the people of God thus the Hierarchy, clergy, religious and the lay people who should work together'* (O24).

52. Alongside the desire to get involved and the effective use of skills, which can lead to *'personal growth and satisfaction'* (P6), it was noted that many people: *'don't want to commit to things, which makes it difficult for the parish to be able to recruit people for its different activities, particularly if it means taking responsibility for something long term. There is a fear of being overburdened and unsupported and being unable to cope'* (P104). Some are willing to accept this challenge personally (O14) and others highlight that having a place for people *'who don't want to be involved is valuable – time in Church is important for prayer and reflection'* (O21).

53. The group of creative communicators (G4) were also adamant that their skills and talents are sometimes underutilised. This *'growing sense to embrace people through provision of sign language, recognition of disability and access'* was clearly stated (I54, AM-SE).

54. There is concern for the priests, particularly in terms of overwork (P44), and concern that the diocese does not have ‘*a mechanism for identifying priests who are struggling*’ with overwhelming administrative tasks (I59). There is a need for priests to be supported both in parish matters and in terms of their own welfare especially in retirement (P46). ‘*Laity need to be empowered to take on tasks that do not require ordination*’ (P119) particularly as projections suggest a time ahead ‘*when there will not be enough priests to celebrate Mass every Sunday*’ (P23) in every place now covered.

‘*As lay people, we cannot “lie back” in the belief that it is for our parish priest to “do everything”. Equally, if the laity are to be encouraged to participate more fully, to be more missionary and to foster communion, our priests and bishops need to be more open to our views.*’ (P23)

## Schools, Families and Young People

55. Many submissions noted the great riches that the young offer to the Community of Faith. The lack of Catholic pupils and teachers (role models) in our schools, however, was highlighted (P104, P97, AM-SE) especially where they lack comfort in the church setting (I11). Some frustration was expressed that people participated to get their children into Catholic schools then stopped once they were successful in their application, though others saw this as an opportunity to engage. ‘*Participation through gritted teeth will not last long*’, one submission notes, people must be helped to understand that ‘*my presence matters*’ (I19). The value of a local primary school was clearly appreciated and further connection was desired (P9, P13, P28, P46, P51, P65).

56. The traditional model of ‘Home/School/Parish’ connection was no longer considered a sufficient vehicle to enable Participation (P87); new bridges needed to be found and strengthened, particularly post-pandemic. One such ‘bridge’ might be young families in the school and parish communities (P131) being a point of contact. Another key ‘bridge’ is the relationship between the parish priest and the headteacher or school principal (P49). The restoration of Participation, especially from children, requires ‘*support from parents, not just the school*’ (P35). It was noted, however, that in order to foster Communion and community, parents required direction and help in nourishing their faith life if they are to be able to support their families (P34).

57. We need a ‘*focus on the family ... helping children to learn the faith and have a supernatural outlook*’ (I46) and the development of relationships between families, perhaps through a ‘*Family Photo Board*’ welcoming new

families to the parish (P22). The image of the family as a school of catechesis and evangelisation, where the parish community supplements what is prayed, learned and lived in the home, was strongly articulated, wherever present (e.g. P37).

‘*We see the fastest change in faith (underlying religiosity) and worship (participation at Mass) in our schools. Moving from “engaged” to “indifference” promoted by peer groups and lack of discussion or answers to fundamental issues relating to well-being and sexuality, and lack of role models.*’ (P48)

## Youth and Young People

58. There was clear and deep concern for the youth and young people. Few submissions highlighted the need for young people to develop a relationship with Christ – although one young person expressed Participation as ‘*giving my heart to Jesus*’ (G7). Rather the Church was seen as protection against the worst pressures and evils in society, for example: ‘*we need to find jobs for them in the church, with youth group, so they don’t fall in with street groups and become engaged in harmful activities*’ (P73). A young contributor said, ‘*When gathered, we feel belonging, safe, and part of something bigger*’ (P40).

59. Young contributors to the process expressed their concern that the Church felt ‘*segregated between old and young people*’ with different ideas as to what was of key importance (G1). Rather beautifully, a number of these young contributors noted the need to care for the elderly in our parishes, saying that they had been ‘*left behind by Covid-19*’ (G1).

60. Concern regarding the departure of young people, after Confirmation, was aired by a number of parishes (e.g. P90, P116) as was a determination ‘*to try to close the gap*’ (P120). There was a suggestion that this might be appropriately addressed at the deanery level (P30, P74), ‘*opportunities to collaborate with other local Catholic parishes, particularly on this issue, should be explored*’ (P30).

61. ‘*Spiritual vehicles*’ to foster participation and communion include devotions, Masses, Eucharistic Adoration, healing Mass for the sick, days of recollection, youth choir, altar serving (P18, P124) as well as the corporal works of mercy. Social incentives to garner young people (P25), such as youth groups (P51), were suggested, as was formation in faith aside from normal sacramental preparation (P91, P106, P133). A warning to ‘*find out what is “wanted” - don’t assume*’ was sounded (P106). The need to facilitate youth involvement, noting their passion and energy (P112), was key. ‘*Youth want to be involved, to have a response to their views*’ (P127) and ‘*good mentorship*’ (P101) would remedy the ‘*lack of confidence*’ (P133) that some young people felt.

62. The role of families, parents in particular, in the life of the formation of young people was mentioned on a number of occasions. Submissions stressed the need for parental commitment (P112), spiritual direction (G12) and community support in raising up the young as leaders (P64).

### Governance and Co-operation

63. The most common theme is the relationship between the clergy and laity, expressed as a desire for the laity to share in the governance (decision-making) of the Church (e.g. P39). In doing so it was felt that it would free 'the clergy to respond to the spiritual needs of their congregation' (P106). There is a sense, from a number of the submissions, that being unable to contribute to governance has directly impacted on a sense of Participation in the life of the Church. The point was made that 'no ownership, no responsibility, no authority, and effectively no status' discourages lay people from participating because they feel unheard (I9), 'it appears that the Parish Priests... run [parishes] according to their own precepts' (O10). Some parishes were very positive citing the accessibility and encouragement of our priests resulting in 'the openness of the parish - there is a role for all who want to participate' (P126). For some however, a 'working assumption that the answer to suggestions for new initiatives would be "no"' (P69) was voiced. Better accountability or supervision of those with ministries was highlighted (P56), as was isolation of priests due to the current leadership model (I15).

### Understanding the Lay Vocation

64. Connected to this area, is a general sense that the lay vocation is not understood either by the laity or the priests (e.g. I33, I42) and that it impacts Communion, Participation and Mission. 'Do people appreciate that their acts of service and prayer are in fact their participation in the priesthood of Christ?' (I52, I57). An appreciation of the complementarity of vocations is needed. There was a strong clear sense of the lay role not being confused with clerical ministry, the 'task of conforming the family and the world to Christ was strongly affirmed as the essential task of the lay vocation' (P111). There was minimal mention of priestly vocations except to note their decline, 'why have we never had a vocation to the priesthood or diaconate in the parish?' (P119); a greater number referenced the importance of developing the lay vocation and 'the specific call of the laity' (I57).

### Vehicles for Collaboration

65. Leading from the lack of perceived accountability and autonomy, structures to aid collaboration were

strongly recommended. 'The parish pastoral council (PPC) and the financial council' were considered to possess 'a synodal character' (O80) or the potential to do so. Several felt that Mission and outreach could be better achieved if a parish council were formed (P69). Others longed to strengthen existing parish councils (P38, P124, P129, O131), expressed an 'earnest desire for a parish council' (P55) and highlighted their absence and suppression or the need for its functions and membership to be reviewed (P80, P91, I18). Some submissions bemoaned the power this group has (P123) and how hard it was to either find out who they are, 'the PPC is a mystery' (P71), or work out how to do things differently in the parish (P62). The representation present in such councils, where they exist was questioned, especially in terms of ethnicity (O18). Others thought that school connections could be directly addressed through school parent involvement (P77). Guidance would be needed as previous models for parish councils have been 'tried but found lacking' (P114).

66. Some submissions requested bodies beyond the parish to discuss the needs of the local Church and shared responses. A revitalisation of Deanery Pastoral Councils (P49, G2) was suggested. The disbandment of the Laity Commission was felt in a submission to have left Deanery Pastoral Councils 'in the air, looking to carve out a role for themselves' (G2). Any structures for consultation must necessarily be integrated to other aspects of diocesan life. A formal mechanism for permanent consultation with the laity (G9) such as a regular (annual) consultation of the laity with the Archbishop and Priests in a shared forum (I29) or the establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council (I17) was put forward.

67. The development of *Some Definite Service*, the diocesan network to support evangelisation, catechesis and formation, was noted (I29) as a means of sharing responsibility and raising up new lay leaders, men and women, with particular reference to the fact that the Agency 'highlights evangelisation as "proclaiming the Gospel"' (I43). One contributor suggested that this network could also support young people post-Confirmation (I52).



# Mission

*Let not the toil of the journey, nor the tongues of evil-speaking men, discourage you; but with all earnestness and zeal perform, by God's guidance, that which you have set about.*

**Bede – Ecclesiastical History of England (Pope St Gregory sends St Augustine).**

*'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'* **Matthew 28:19**

## Introduction

68. A striking feature of the submissions was the widespread desire for Mission and outreach. There was, nevertheless, a clear indication that Mission – proclamation of the Good News and the making of disciples – was understood variously and insufficiently. Where Mission was articulated, contributors to the process often highlighted a lack of confidence in the how and what of sharing faith in our secular society (P41, O48). One parish submission used the phrase 'frozen Catholics' (P130) to describe this reality, 'we are struggling to live our faith, need renewal courses and training to strengthen our courage' (P130). There was not much mention of Jesus or a personal relationship with him impelling us to spread the Good News. It was unclear if this was already assumed by the contributors.

## Evangelisation and Caritas

69. There is a strong sense that the Mission of the Church is witness to Christ, albeit there is some division between those who regard this Mission as being principally theological/doctrinal/spiritual (I15, I23, I31, I33, I46) and those who see Mission in terms of tackling issues of social justice/charity/outreach (I13, I22, O75).

70. These emphases are not mutually exclusive. One parish highlighted the connection between evangelisation, charitable activity, and a life of prayer and liturgical Participation (P93). Another said 'We need a consistent emphasis on welcoming people into Christ's vision and getting them to think about what it means for their whole lives' (I15).

71. A number of parishes (P1, P10, P15 and P125) saw charitable works as a 'way of expressing mission' or as a 'major contributor to the parish's mission'. One parish noted, however, that this often comes from a fall-back on 'doing what we are already doing' (P30) as it is 'difficult to identify what we are doing or should do in terms of mission' (P77, I30).

72. A remarkably confident note was struck regarding Catholic Social Teaching. We need to each 'hear the liberating news that the public square is not a place to be frightened of but a market place where [the social thought of the Church] will outsell the other ideas' (I56) and to be a vital presence in the local community.

## The Missional Community

73. The strength and vibrancy of the worshipping community is itself considered a tool for Mission: 'If we build community the mission will be easier for people to contribute to effectively... Some leadership on this is needed' (P54). The role of the priest was seen as crucial: 'If the priest fails to bring the communities together the mission fails' (P73). Indeed, the call to Mission and to evangelise is often left with priests/nuns, because [the laity] do not have the necessary expertise (I42). However, there is 'recognition that the Church is made up of members, each called to ask, "am I playing my part?"' (P126) in terms of Mission and service.

74. At the parish level, Christian hospitality was considered a 'priority' (P131), a 'consistent emphasis' on welcome was needed (I15) as 'welcome and smiles makes for a sense of family' (P105). A small but significant number of parishes acknowledged that an emphasis on welcome, without a related focus on invitation, can lead the parish to be more inward than outward looking (P4, P8). It was noted that the lack of a church hall or other quality facilities can limit Mission (AM-KENT). The role of groups and programmes that support people in significant life events, such as 'Bereavement and Consolation groups, can draw people to the Church who haven't been before or for a while' (P15).

**75. COMMENT:** This lack of invitation and outreach may also be a result of a lack of implied or explicit permission to undertake Mission, 'Many feel like parts of a devoted but passive congregation. They would really like to be involved in the mission of the Church, but do not always feel welcomed, valued or encouraged to do so' (P20). Initiative can often be stifled by a lack of formation, a lack of confidence or a lack of understanding of the lay vocation in the world.

## Formation for Mission

76. The desire to explore faith and Mission, through study and discussion, was expressed in a number of places as a way of impelling and supporting the local Church in Mission. The level of knowledge and understanding in terms of the Faith varies hugely. Some

felt incapacitated due to fear of what people may think whilst others felt unworthy due to lack of knowledge, catechesis and formation, e.g., ‘we can’t promote our message if our understanding is poor’ (P36, I30, I29, I34, I42). Encouragement to read Scripture, for example, has ‘given confidence to share the word of God with others outside the parish’ (P132). This suggests that Catholics must do more than simply witness by their lives; they must actively proclaim. The reluctance to proclaim explicitly, using words only when ‘necessary’ as a form of gentle witness, could be used as an ‘excuse to avoid the divine commission to the Church’ (I42).

77. Particular areas for formation and catechesis were mentioned, such as the ‘lack of knowledge and understanding of Bible and teachings of Church’ (P24, P79), which can result in a lack of spiritual growth (P24). However, we must show that ‘adult formation can be joyful and exciting and [must be] appropriate to each stage of life’ (P123); sermons and programmes need to reflect the variety of people present in the community. Such teaching and proclamation also needs to be delivered with ‘love and care and competence, then this will aid parishioners as missionary disciples. It does help to understand the faith and apply it in our daily life’ (P66).

## Barriers to Mission

78. Mission would appear to be the least understood of the three themes. The submissions in this section are largely concerned with barriers to Participation (and because of that concentrate on doctrinal barriers) more than Mission. Whilst it is not explicitly expressed, the underlying implication is that the doctrinal questions which cause the most heartache are also the ones impeding Mission. There is a real need to demonstrate that the more challenging teachings of the Church are ultimately life-giving and transformative good news. ‘Adult formation and liturgy help parishioners to recognise their role as Christ’s missionary disciples’ (P128, also I5 and G5 on encouragement and P28 on prayer feeding mission).

79. **Confidence.** There is a general sense that the Church has lost her voice in the public square (I23, I46) and that it must recover it in order to present its unique teaching (I19). There is also a general feeling that people feel ill-equipped to evangelise (I29, I34, I42). Others were saddened that people left the Church but didn’t see it as their job to bring them back (P46).

80. **Abuse.** The scandal of child sexual abuse has resulted in a deficit of trust and is a major barrier to Mission (I13, I20, I27). These scandals have ruined the Church’s reputation and authority (P58) and scarred the people (P66). There is some difference to how the crisis appears from the ‘inside’, many noted the

progress made (P17) and the mainly, though shamefully not only, historical nature of allegations. Whether or not the Church in England and Wales has moved in the ‘right way’, there can be no complacency and more accountability is required: ‘Scandals occur in the shadows where the light of openness and scrutiny is not allowed to penetrate’ (P106).

81. **Pandemic.** There was a sense that the pandemic had made people more inward looking (P9) and until their own parish was in order (P38) they couldn’t look outwards. Missionary endeavour was curtailed, in a formal manner, by the pandemic, including the suspension of evangelisation committees (P103) and postponed implementation of parish visions (P120), where such shared visions were even developed (O10).

**A strong theme was the sense that everyone feels the lack of the sense of community and mission, but no one knows how to fix it and are nervous about trying things.’ (P54)**

**82. COMMENT:** The Listening Group noted the pain, apparent in the submissions, such as hurt at personal treatment; pain at wrongdoing, separation and loss. This directly affects motivation to reach out for those who have remained and is an obstacle to the return of those who have left the practice of the Faith.

## Working with Other Churches and Ecclesial Movements

83. **Apostolates.** Openness to new Catholic apostolates (P70), movements (P13) and organisations (P60) was seen as a key to engendering both Participation and Mission.

84. **Cooperation.** A desire for Deanery cooperation in terms of formation and outreach, as well as youth work, was evident as a common thread (P74, I59). In broad terms, the widespread autonomy and lack of interconnection between parishes and between diocese and parish were lamented – ‘to the average parishioner, the diocese has little relevance’ (I59).

85. **Ecumenism and Environmental Issues.** The work of ecumenism ‘was felt by all to be central to our witness of faith and love, in our charitable work and outreach’ (P33). There is a need to break down barriers which have arisen through a lack of knowledge and misunderstanding. Working together with other Christian denominations and faiths, as well as linking with Catholic parishes overseas (P1) is considered desirable, examples include ‘Eco Church’ (O92). It was a surprise that so little was said about *Laudato Si’* (which perhaps deserves a synodal focus of its own) – and more frequent joint acts of witness such as occur on

Good Friday (P30) and throughout the Liturgical Year (P102). Learning from how other churches attract,

engage and retain new members as well as how community is built could be beneficial.

## Issues for the Universal Church

*'The thorny problems that wait upon men's solution, have remained the same for almost twenty centuries. And why? Because the whole of history and of life hinges on the person of Jesus Christ. Either men anchor themselves on Him and His Church, and thus enjoy the blessings of light and joy, right order and peace; or they live their lives apart from Him [leading to] confusion in their lives, bitterness in their relations with one another, and the savage threat of war.'*

### Pope St John XXIII – Opening Address of the Second Vatican Council

86. A number of parish and individual/group submissions recorded voices asking for a reconsideration of the Church's official teaching on a number of specific topics, particularly concerning human sexuality, contraception, homosexuality, gender identity and women's ordination (both to the presbyterate and the diaconate). While the Synod process does not consider matters of universal doctrine within its scope, it has been important to take the 'temperature of the diocese', and let all voices and opinions be heard. The most common and underlying points regarding these stated matters were first, the expressed need for the Church to be more inclusive and welcoming to people whatever their situation in life and/or starting point, and secondly, the divergence between the Church's teaching and present societal views and lived experiences.

87. Regarding the first of these underlying points there was a strong desire to avoid unnecessarily excluding people and to express the patience of the Lord and his open-hearted love for all: *'tolerance...of imperfection is needed'* (P79). At the same time, others noted the importance of repentance and the reality of the Gospel's challenge to conversion of mind and heart.

88. On the second matter of the divergence between the Church and the world, while many voices would prefer to see the Church's teaching shift, many other voices in the Synod process were calling for better formation, catechesis and explanation of doctrine to bridge that gap. There was a strong call in many submissions to uphold strong values and to teach with greater clarity and confidence, joy and positivity (e.g. P4, P126, P129, I15).

*'You will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.'*

### Deuteronomy 4:29

*'Come then, follow, seek him...Believe and you have found him...Therefore seek him confidently, seek him faithfully, 'The Lord is good to the soul who seeks him' (Lam 3:25). Seek him in your prayers, follow him in your actions, find him in faith.'*

### Bernard of Clairvaux, On the Song of Songs.

## Next Steps

1. Develop a shared understanding of Mission (para 78) and the relationship between welcome (§ 74) and invitation (§ 75).
2. Develop a diocesan approach to the support of charitable activity in our parishes, schools and other institutions (§§ 71-72).
3. Identify and utilise the skills and gifts of the faithful (§§ 51-54), perhaps through a charism discernment process. Increase lay-participation and the development of lay leaders, particularly women (§ 44), for the building of the Body of Christ.
4. Deliver better and broader formation and education on different aspects of the Faith, notably on the Holy Eucharist (§§ 17-18) and the Church (§ 27) and Mission (§ 76).
5. Develop and sustain fresh models of Youth and Young Adult Ministry (§§ 60-62) encouraging cooperation across parishes, families and schools (§ 84).
6. Ensure that all our parishes and institutions are properly inclusive and mirror the welcome of the Lord as they echo the proclamation of the Gospel. Particular attention should be given to racial inclusion in our diverse Archdiocese (§ 34) and to reaching those on the peripheries and the marginalised (§ 50).
7. Recalibrate priestly ongoing formation to include and encourage collaborative ministry (§ 63).
8. Strengthen the roll-out of *Some Definite Service*, the diocesan network to support evangelisation, catechesis and formation (§ 67) as a means of raising up new lay leaders.
9. Focus on the development of family ministry (§ 57).
10. Explore and propose models for parish pastoral councils – drawing from what we have learnt from the Synodal process (§ 65). Consult and discern other structures beyond the parish, in the deaneries and diocese, for lay and clerical cooperation (§§ 63 and 66).

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*Artwork supplied by Lorenza  
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