

Introduction: Rereading the Synodal Experience

In June 2021, shortly after the announcement of the Synod on Synodality, the Administrator of the Diocese of Charlottetown appointed a four-person Synod Committee. The committee was comprised of Fr. Chris Sherren, Chancellor of the Diocese, Fr. John Molina, a parish priest, Charlene Peters, Diocesan Catechetics Coordinator, and Lauren van Vliet, Diocesan Youth Ministry Coordinator. Members of this committee had already been having conversations about the need for pastoral vision, which made the announcement of the Synod timely.

The Synod Committee was acutely aware that many in the Diocese would be unfamiliar with what a synod is, and with the methods Pope Francis was specifically inviting us to use. Therefore, the first step was to help the faithful understand the Pope's invitation to participate. This included offering a series of facilitated workshops to give clergy and lay leaders an experience of intentional listening.

The first five meetings were organized regionally in June 2021. Members of the Synod Committee facilitated the gatherings for a few parishes in central locations across the Diocese. This allowed for smaller groups, with a smaller time commitment from participants. Pastors were invited to bring representatives from their parishes. The session included a brief explanation about the Synod, and an opportunity to have spiritual conversation in small groups. Material to prepare for the spiritual conversation was sent to pastors in advance, to share with their representatives. These meetings were generally well received, and in some cases, those who participated went on to facilitate the synodal process for their parish/pastoral units.

After the release of the Vatican's preparatory materials in September 2021, the Synod Committee adapted the resources to create a smaller document, tailored to the needs of the people in our diocese. This included discussion questions related to the Synod's guiding question, and organized into four themes, listening, participating, community, and taking action.

After the release of the Diocesan Synod Guide in October 2021, the Synod Committee organized two meetings at the Chancery Office. One meeting was held specifically for pastors who were interested in organizing synodal conversations in his parish or pastoral unit. The second meeting was a ministry development workshop for Lay Pastoral Associates in the Diocese. Both meetings included a time for sharing a meal, prayer, learning about the synod, and engaging in a spiritual conversation. The intention was that those inspired by their experience would facilitate the process in their own parishes.

Both meetings were fruitful, although only a few pastors attended. The shared meal was an intentional time to build community, particularly considering the Covid-19 pandemic. During the meetings, particularly at the beginning, there was skepticism about the efficacy of the process. Questions such as, 'what difference will our participation (individually and collectively) make?' were raised. However, after the meetings, there was great enthusiasm from participants about engaging in the synodal process. Throughout the meetings, the Synod Committee continually emphasized that, although the synod was being called by Pope Francis for the universal church, it was a model that could be implemented broadly in our diocese, and specifically within parishes and pastoral units. Pope Francis' invitation to participate was an opportunity to explore how it might be useful in our context.

As part of the invitation, the Synod Committee encouraged wide consultations across the Diocese. The hope was that groups which were already meeting, such as the Catholic Women's League (CWL), Knights of Columbus (K of C), pastoral councils, bible studies, etc., would use this as an opportunity to

experience another way of being church, and build deeper relationships. There was uptake from some CWL groups, as well as congregations of women religious, and other faith-based small groups, such as the Atlantic Association of Spiritual Exercises Apostolate (AASEA) and Christian Life Community. Some parishes had the conversations with their pastoral councils, while others gathered people specifically to have a synodal conversation.

The groups noted various consolations and desolations throughout their conversations. Desolation expressed itself as hopelessness in the face of exclusion, clericalism, and the lack of participation in various decision-making processes. These were often expressed at the beginning of the conversations, with many experiencing a movement to consolation as the conversation continued. The consolations came in the form of joy that came from sharing and listening deeply to each other, and hope and gratitude for Pope Francis' ministry, and the synodal process itself. Many noted enthusiasm to implement the fruit of the conversation, and a desire to continue having small group conversations about faith topics.

The overwhelming feedback from participants was that the synodal process itself was one of deep consolation. There was tremendous gratitude for the opportunity to gather in small groups and have the opportunity to listen and share with one another in a safe space on topics of life and faith.

Although the specific formats varied from group to group, the basic structure of the synodal conversations included a time of personal preparation before the conversation, communal prayer, spiritual conversation, and a closing prayer. This was the model offered by the Synod Committee. Some groups met once, while others met over a series of weeks.

The consultation process was significantly hampered by the spread of Covid-19. Strict public health measures made it difficult for groups to gather in person. Many groups reported that their intended meetings were impacted by the restrictions put in place by provincial health authorities. Some groups addressed this by meeting virtually, while others waited for the public health measures to lift. Genuine fear and concern about the spread of Covid-19, as well as the restrictions dampened the enthusiasm generated by earlier meetings. It also limited the resources that were available, particularly the ability for the Synod Committee to travel in order to better support communities wanting to participate. These factors reduced the amount of time which groups had to organize their sessions.

Another challenge for broad consultation was that not all parishes shared information about the synod. The invitation was shared through various means, including email, parish bulletins, and the diocesan website and social media. Pastors were encouraged to talk about the synodal process during the opening weekends of the synod in October 2021. However, in some parishes, there was no mention of the synod throughout the consultation process. Some parishes had limited or no representation, whether priests, lay pastoral associates, or other parish leaders, at the various meetings held.

A small number of participants were concerned about how the synodal process might impact, and potentially compromise, the Church's teaching on controversial subjects, such as the blessing of LGBTQ+ unions. Concerns were raised about how the thoughts and opinions of particular interest groups might not reflect the views held by all the faithful in the Church. Additionally, there were questions about how the reporting structure from the local parishes/pastoral units would be able to reflect the concerns of the faithful, both in the diocesan report and the reports presented at the Vatican.

Body of the Synthesis: Discernment of the Collected Contributions

Throughout the process, four key themes appeared: the Church as servant, transparency, inclusiveness, and the role of the laity. These themes are interconnected. Taken together, they create a picture of the Church as a welcoming community which, rooted in Christ and Tradition, engages the modern world.

Overwhelmingly, the synod conversations reported the need for the Church to be **inclusive** of all. Although there were many examples of ways that parishes are already journeying with each other, each acknowledged that there was more to be done. Some noted a desire to reach out in service to the community at large, while others noted engaging with specific groups, such as youth and senior citizens. The conversations identified several key traits of an inclusive church: being an inclusive Church means that the faithful must meet others where they are, not only metaphorically in their walk with Christ, but literally in our communities. This raises the question of how the church community participates in the life of the broader community, which must be answered locally. Secondly, an inclusive church seeks to show the love of Christ to all people, regardless of ethnicity, orientation, or political affiliation; all are welcome in the Church.

A second major theme, deeply connected to the first, is **the nature of the Church as a servant**. The Church cannot be a truly inclusive space, welcoming of all, if she is not willing to serve those who come, especially those from the margins. To serve, we must first understand a person's needs, which requires a personal relationship – which is the very heart of synodality. Moments when the church failed to serve individuals were shared with hurt and desolation.

It was noted that these synod conversations helped to deepen relationships, knitting the community together more closely. A close-knit community allowed for the synod conversations to happen more easily, and by contrast, a lack of inclusive, personal relationships would hamper synodality.

A third major theme that was present was the need for **transparency** within the Church. It was noted multiple times how the lack of transparency caused desolation among the participants, especially around the clergy abuse scandals and the residential schools. The lack of transparency hinders the ability for the Church to welcome individuals and build meaningful relationships with them, both of which are necessary for synodality. The frustration caused by lack of transparency is especially poignant when decisions are made without consultation.

The lack of transparency is fueled by clericalism at various levels in the church. In the lived experience reported by many, the parish community served the priest, changing to suit his needs, instead of the priest serving the community. This is especially harmful to the community when a priest is reassigned. Ministries that thrived in serving the community under the current pastor, may flounder or cease entirely without the support of the new pastor. In response to clericalism and the lack of transparency, there were repeated calls for ongoing formation and renewal for the priests of our diocese, that would support them in their pastoral ministry.

Many conversations reported the need for a functioning pastoral council as a possible antidote to the lack of transparency. These councils would be comprised of representatives of the parish community, who are able to build relationships with, and listen to a more diverse number of parishioners. Having heard more voices, the pastoral council would be able to set meaningful pastoral directives for the parish/pastoral unit. However, for these pastoral councils to function effectively, they need to be able to set long-term pastoral direction and goals. This means that pastors must have the humility to journey

with the people in the parish/pastoral unit in carrying out the pastoral vision. This is especially true when a new pastor arrives in a parish community.

The final major theme was **the role of the laity** in the Church. To journey together, the members of the community need to be able to serve in meaningful ways, offering their God-given gifts and skills to the community. Participating in the life of the parish, whether volunteering in a ministry, attending fellowship groups, and/or exercising leadership, helps to build the relationships necessary to be a welcoming, inclusive church that can journey with individuals. The laity need to be empowered to participate, often through the development of personal relationships and invitation.

It was noted that there are lay people in our diocese who have ministry formation, and/or a theological education. However, many of these people are not invited to exercise their call to ministry in the parish community. The need for transparency and pastoral direction becomes apparent when considering how lay leaders can help to build the life of the parish community. Pastors cannot personally offer ministry to meet the needs of everyone in the parish, but he can foster a culture of trust and encouraging initiatives to further the pastoral outreach. Another stumbling block for these lay leaders is precisely their state in life, as laity. They need to be able to materially support themselves. Parishes need to be realistic about supporting these professional ministers, whether through offering fair employment, or other means.

Many lay faithful acknowledged a desire to continue forming themselves in the spiritual and intellectual traditions of the faith. They noted that the lack of access to ongoing faith formation, for themselves and their families, was a hindrance in their faith journey.

In addition to these themes, there were topics mentioned several times, including the desire for reinstating the use of General Absolution, the role of women in the church, outreach to specific groups within society (including youth, seniors, Indigenous Peoples, and those identifying as LGBTQ), and care for the environment as a particular social justice issue. The frequency of repetition was noteworthy, although many of these specific topics also fit into the themes noted above.

Conclusions: Next Steps

As part of their conversations, the discussion groups identified next steps for their unique situations. Often, these were generalized statements, such as becoming a more welcoming church, or calling for specific changes, like the re-institution of a pastoral council or to re-introduce regular use of General Absolution. Some noted that sub-committees had been formed to begin implementing the fruit of their conversation(s).

This process has presented the diocese with the opportunity to respond to pastoral needs identified by the faithful. Compiling this summary of the conversations is one step in this response. As a Synod Committee, we concluded the summary process by engaging in further prayer and spiritual conversation in order to discern next steps.

As we, the Diocese of Charlottetown, moves forward, our collective response to the Synod is to continue cultivating a culture of synodality at all levels within the diocese. Cultural shifts require support from both the grassroots, and leadership. This synodal process highlighted the need for a pastoral vision to give direction to the ministries and activities of the various diocesan offices. This pastoral vision can be rooted in synodality and journeying with people across the diocese, and give rise to programming and ministries that support them in their faith journey, both through their parishes and at the diocesan level.

Cultivating a culture of synodality in the Diocese requires three things. Firstly, it requires trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we discern how we are being invited to build the Kingdom of God. Secondly, it needs to be communicated effectively and widely so that all can be touched by the joy of the Gospel. Lastly, it requires that personal relationships be put at the centre of all we do, both a personal relationship with Jesus, but also with all in our communities.

Practically, cultivating a culture of synodality also requires that resources of time, talent, and funds, be put towards initiatives that support the process. In the short term, the Synod Committee is committed to empowering faith groups in the diocese to continue journeying together. Possibilities of what this might look like in specific local contexts will be explored as part of sharing the results of the diocesan synod process. It will likely mimic the early, regional meetings, held in June 2021 that first broached the idea of the Synod on Synodality, with a focus on building relationships and empowering communities to continue the process locally.

In the long term, resources need to be put towards enacting pastoral visioning and planning for the Diocese. Although keen to accept Pope Francis' invitation to participate in the synodal process, members of the Diocesan Synod Committee, are engaged in other ministries. Investing resources in building the culture of synodality could be done through the creation of a dedicated diocesan position to support parishes, faith groups, clergy, and diocesan staff in enacting the pastoral vision.

Unfolding and enacting the fruit of these conversations will take time as we await the appointment of our next bishop. The members of the Diocesan Synod Committee are optimistic that the fruit of this synodal process will continue to unfold and bring renewed life to our diocese.