



Synod Newsletter No. 7

Friday 4th February 2022



Introduction

This will be the first of two 'special editions' of our parish Synod newsletter. Both will include a synthesis of all the feedback provided by everyone who has participated. This one includes the summaries shared with the Diocese today. In the next edition, you will find details of the issues that the parish will now need to consider. We do not have to wait for the Synod to end in October 2023 before we find ways to react.

This is a bumper issue, so make yourself a nice cup of tea or coffee and settle down in a favourite chair before reading any further...

1) Journeying companions

Our parish is a large and diverse one, and is the better for it. It includes people from all generations and varied cultural backgrounds. We benefit from having a thriving parish primary school adjacent to the church. For many families, the school is their principal experience of Church.

Those on the periphery of the parish include:

- ◆ young people (roughly aged 15 to 35);
- ◆ those who feel harshly or unfairly judged by the Church, for example because of their sexual orientation or lifestyle choices;
- ◆ the vulnerable, for example the elderly, housebound or lonely;
- ◆ those yet to return after Covid lockdowns (Sunday Mass attendance remains below 50% of pre-pandemic levels).

We recognise that this list may well omit other significant groups, simply because their absence means they have not yet participated in this

Synodal process. To engage these groups and enable them to become active members of the Church, we must listen to them, address their concerns and allow them to play a leading role in any changes that need to be made.

Most parishioners value being part of their community, especially when they perceive it as an active and vibrant one. Parish activities have been extremely curtailed during the pandemic and we may benefit from developing a Covid recovery plan to re-establish previous activities and introduce new ones. The more we can live out our faith and fully participate in the Mission of the Church, the more our community is nourished and nurtured.

Becoming an even more welcoming community is crucial. People need to feel comfortable every time they visit the church, whether for the first time in their lives, returning after a period of absence or attending regularly. There is a need for a welcoming ministry, but everyone needs to be involved in this endeavour. Ensuring people experience high quality liturgy is important, so that they want to return for more. Finding ways to involve people in the life of the parish by using their unique skills and abilities is also an important way of integrating people into the community and keeping them here. Currently, this process only happens for some. We need to be more inclusive.

This Synodal process needs to be a dynamic and continuing one. It has unearthed a thirst for such an approach and there is a great desire for parishioners to engage. However, given the current constraints, those who have participated so far do not represent the richness to be found in our parish community. We have more work to do to reach everyone and authentically involve them in this period of renewal.

2) Listening

Listening attentively is hard and requires a conscious effort. We need to be given, or create for ourselves, the opportunity for listening to happen. This is increasingly challenging in a loud, distracted and contentious world. During the Covid period, it has been even harder. We can



listen more easily to people with whom we have developed a relationship.

We benefit from listening to a range of views, from both inside and outside the Church. We need to listen to those on the edges of the Church to learn how they can be fully included. We need to listen to those outside the Church to better understand their needs and desires. God does not only speak through religious people.

Our parish would benefit from having a greater profile in the local community. This would better enable us to listen to what others are saying and also allow them to hear our voice. Other Christian churches often do this better than us.

Many Catholics lack a deep knowledge and understanding of scripture. This can restrict our ability to listen to the Word of God. Silence and time for reflection often help us to hear the voice of God more clearly.

This Synodal process has shown that we desperately need more opportunities to discuss with and listen to each other. The Church needs to show it has listened to people by explaining how it is responding to what they say. We understand that this does not always mean doing what is being asked, but at least an explanation should be given as to why not.

Sadly, the abuse scandal has damaged the Church's ability to be listened to in the world.

3) Speaking out

We recognise the crucial importance of communication within and beyond our parish. During the Covid period, our weekly parish newsletter has become even more important than in normal times. It keeps people connected with our parish community and with what is going on.

Effective communication needs all available methods to be used well. We need the ability to communicate with everyone, so a range of approaches is necessary. The parish website is becoming increasingly important, though under-used and needs refreshing. Our parish has too low a profile on social media and we need to access specific expertise to address this issue.

More broadly, the Church needs to have a greater and more vibrant online presence. Communication technology evolves at a great pace and the Church needs to keep up. We should better publicise all

the good work that the Church does, partly to balance the negative press the Church sometimes attracts.

Clear and timely communication helps to bind a community together. Going forward, we hope it can also be used increasingly to signpost opportunities that exist outside the parish, including for formation. During the Synod discussions, participants have identified many such opportunities, none of which are widely known within the parish.

It can be difficult to openly share our faith with others. Most parishioners express their faith through the way they live their lives, sometimes in what they describe as small ways. However, during the discussions, we have also heard encouraging examples of times when people have taken a risk to discuss their faith with others, leading to positive outcomes.

This Synodal process points the way to a better way of communicating with the laity, by more authentically involving them in discussions about how the Church needs to develop and grow.

4) Celebrating

Liturgy is generally of high quality in our parish. Commonly identified strengths include:

- ◆ creation of a spiritual and prayerful atmosphere (especially common in feedback from children);
- ◆ homilies that successfully 'break the Word' (especially when they make insightful links between scripture and our daily lives);
- ◆ use of music, with some expressing a desire that music is used in every Mass.

Livestreaming has made it easier than ever to (virtually) visit other churches and experience other approaches. This allows us to 'benchmark'



what we are doing and gain ideas of how elements of our liturgies could be even better.

As Catholics, we place prime importance on the Mass and this should never change. However, there is value in also having a range of other liturgies, e.g. reconciliation services, Advent services, liturgies for small groups. These also lend themselves better to sharing ecumenically.

It is important to be actively involved in the liturgy, especially but not exclusively for younger people (95% of children in our school said they like being actively involved). This helps Mass become a more communal experience, rather than one centred on the priest (crucial though his role is). Listening attentively to the words of the Mass also deepens the experience. Some have found this easier to do when livestreaming rather than being in church.

Covid restrictions have temporarily diminished the quality of our liturgies, e.g. lack of singing, no kneeling, no sign of peace. One positive aspect of this is that we now value elements of the Mass we may have insufficiently appreciated previously.

Many would welcome further formation to enhance our understanding of the liturgy. For example, some of the language is challenging and becomes much more meaningful when properly understood. Similarly, many would like to gain a deeper understanding of scripture, maybe through a Bible study group. Frequent attendance at Mass leads to greater understanding of the Eucharist.

Although, Mass brings us closer to the Lord, sometimes people fail to be inspired by it. One commented, 'When, if ever, do our celebrations reach the pitch of joy of a football crowd celebrating a goal?' Such comments were often linked to feeling a lack of involvement in the liturgy.

People want the Eucharist to be the centre of their lives and, for many, it is. Some feel that God is the centre of their life, rather than the Eucharist. Others see the Eucharist as their 'daily spiritual bread'. Churches closing during lockdowns has powerfully reminded us of how we are nourished by the Eucharist.

At its best, we leave Mass more engaged with the world. There is beauty in people leaving Mass together, as a 'wave going out into the world'. However, we have yet to reach the point where this is consistently the case.

Our personal prayer lives are important to us. It can certainly lead to a deeper encounter with God. Even private prayer also helps us to grow closer to each other.

5) Co-responsibility in the Mission

We all have some understanding of the Church's Mission. However, many find it difficult to articulate exactly what this is and most struggle to identify their precise role in fulfilling the Mission. For others, apathy or lack of understanding prevents them fully participating. Amidst busy lives, it is all too easy to be distracted from the Mission.

Historically, sharing the good news has often been seen as the job of clergy. Although we now realise that it is everyone's responsibility, there is still a tendency to rely too much on clergy.

We desire to use our specific individual skills and talents for the task of spreading the Word of God. We are not all great orators; so, for most, this will not be through preaching. Typically, we try to follow Pope Francis' advice to 'spread the Gospel and sometimes use words'.

People attempt to live holy lives and be good role models for others. We seek to be useful and charitable. Helping others in adversity is a powerful way to express our faith, for example supporting those who are bereaved or suffering ill health. Some spoke of the power of prayer in helping them to respond to Jesus' call.

Many are reluctant to talk openly about their faith, either through insecurity in their understanding of it or fear of a negative response. Generally, people are reticent about being overtly religious in their daily lives and miss chances to evangelise. A few participants talked positively about times they had taken the risk to do so and reaped benefits as a result.



Several people commented that participating in the Mission is easier to undertake with the support of a group. There is strength in fellowship and communal action. It is worth noting that Jesus sent out the disciples in pairs.

Better formation is essential for us to more fully live out our Mission. For most, formation has been limited to programmes of sacramental preparation. Formation is not seen as an on-going process, needed by all (indeed, a right for all the baptised). Effective formation will give us the confidence and understanding to proclaim and defend our faith in the wider world.

Through discussions, it became evident that there is a wider range of opportunities for formation available than most realised; these need to be better signposted. We also recognise that formation can take many forms, including retreats, courses and private reading. Another powerful source of formation, revealed through these Synod discussions, is meeting as a group, ideally with a skilled facilitator.

6) Dialogue in Church and Society

Our perception is that the Church is often seen in a negative light by the media. The abuse scandal continues to distract from the Church's attempts to enter into productive dialogue with the world. However, Pope Francis is held in high esteem and is one of the Church's main assets. We admire his ability to seek international dialogue and his success in doing so, particularly on issues such as climate change and how the pandemic has highlighted long-standing inequalities.



Parishioners believe that the Church has much to offer the world, though many either do not see it as their responsibility to be part of this process or are scared to do so. They do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable to defend the Church's position in all areas. Better formation would empower people to enter into dialogue with confidence.

The Church often needs to be counter-cultural and proffer alternative views. However, it must do so using accessible language in order to be 'of the world' rather than merely 'in the world'.

We see many benefits accruing through increased dialogue within our parish. This would help us to grow as a community and strengthen our faith, individually and collectively. Too frequently, we only know the people who sit near us at Mass.

We embrace the current Synodal process as a welcome opportunity to engage in dialogue with our Church.

7) Other Christian denominations

A range of well-established ecumenical activities happens locally. For example, a Good Friday walk acts as a powerful witness of our shared Christian faith to the wider community. Parishioners who have participated in various activities have found them valuable, both in terms of the event itself and in developing relationships with other Christians. However, as a parish, we are not as involved as we could, and probably should, be.

It is not clear why our involvement with ecumenical activities is at a relatively low level. Possible explanations include lack of awareness, apathy, insufficient formation, a possible wariness of other denominations, and a feeling that we have to 'get our own house in order' before engaging with others.

We recognise that we share a common enterprise with other Christians, though we journey in different ways. We can achieve more in service of our local community by collaborating with other churches than we can on our own.

Potentially, we have much to learn from other churches, e.g. how to better engage our congregations, how to evangelise, the value of having women in leading roles, and how to broaden our range of liturgies. The local Methodist Church is particularly impressive. They

demonstrate a clear sense of mission and are fully engaged in the community.

8) Authority and participation

Historically, the laity has obeyed Church authority through fear and respect, but this is becoming less the norm. This is partly due to an increasing lack of respect for authority generally in society.

Many see authority in the parish residing solely with the parish priest. Clericalism remains a feature of the Church. Sadly, some have come to mistrust clergy, partly due to damage done by the abuse scandal, and have left the Church. We need to change these perspectives and involve more, ideally all, parishioners in decision making.

Priests cannot do everything and we know that, with declining numbers of vocations, this observation will become ever more relevant. Our parish priest is an excellent delegator but, crucially, he delegates not merely tasks but also responsibility and trust. This genuinely empowers others to carry out meaningful actions. They have co-authority with the priest because they have agency over what they are leading on.

The role of women in the Church needs to develop. They should have more influence and undertake authentic leadership roles.

To develop the way that authority is exercised in our parish, structural changes to the way we are organised may be needed. For example, many have suggested the reintroduction of a parish council. The successful way in which our primary school is run may offer us a model of how authority can be effectively shared with others.

Often the work of the parish is left to a small subset of parishioners. This is partly because we rely on volunteers (which precludes many from participating) and partly because of lack of

formation. Our aim must be for all members of our parish to be active in their faith. This means more than weekly attendance at Mass, important though that is. Retaining younger people in the Church is a particular priority.

The primary school RE curriculum is successful in helping children to make links between their faith and how they live their lives. Parents are the most important influence in developing their faith. Children typically live out their faith through the way they treat others. Formation for children in our school is effective.

The success of sharing authority more widely is critically dependent on better formation for all. We have well-developed and successful sacramental preparation programmes. However, overall, formation is disjointed. Most do not even recognise the need for adult formation. Nevertheless, we are aware of many existing opportunities for formation, including some excellent online resources and useful group discussion activities. We can readily identify additional formation activities that would complement those that already exist.

However, there are two challenges to overcome. Firstly, how do we achieve a wider range of formation activities aimed at people of all ages and all roles? Secondly, how do we ensure everyone knows about these opportunities and feels motivated to participate? A possible solution to these challenges may lie in adopting a more professional approach, perhaps by employing a formation coordinator to work across our deanery.

9) Discerning and deciding

This Synod has given us a valuable opportunity to revisit and review the relationship between Deity and laity. Discussion groups have shown us how important talking together is to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us. We feel empowered by the process.

Although our parish routinely collects information from new parishioners about their individual gifts, we are not systematic in how we follow up on what is being offered. We should be. Nevertheless, many do exercise their gifts in the Church. This is best done in pairs or teams; sometimes, people are left slightly isolated.

Some feel they have the freedom to exercise their



gifts in the Church, but do not do so. Others feel they do not even have the freedom. Reasons for this include feeling distant from the Church, having views they regard as being unwelcome in the Church (for example, about divorce or the role of women) or resistance to embracing the ways they want to become involved.

Most parishioners are unclear on how decisions are made. They do not feel the process is transparent or know who is accountable for what. Many participants called for a parish council to be re-established, to address this issue by formally involving the laity in the decision-making process. Such a council would need to be truly representative of the parish and have clear terms of reference. Some noted the potential dangers of merely creating a 'talking shop' or delaying decisions through prolonged discussions. Several participants also suggested that improved communication would lead to increased transparency about how decisions are made.

We do support priests and bishops, but would appreciate being more frequently invited to be part of the decision-making process. Often, when the laity makes suggestions, nothing seems to happen. It can appear that the Church is not addressing contemporary issues.

10) Forming ourselves in Synodality

Everyone needs to spread the key Christian message that God loves us. Doing this together is much easier than doing so alone. By building up our parish community (for example, getting to know each other through social events), we will be better able to become missionary disciples in our local community.

More and better formation will also empower us. Formation in apologetics will help us to confidently counter arguments we encounter in wider society. We need to engage in topics that can appear 'taboo' in the Church, such as homosexuality and women priests.

A parish catechetical programme is in place, though it seems to be a sequence of one-off events, rather than integrated into a bigger formation programme. Our primary school is very effective in introducing children to their faith. This process continues well with effective preparation for confirmation. But then something 'goes wrong' and many young people begin to see the

Church as irrelevant to their lives.

These Synod discussions have reminded us that talking together is a powerful way of deepening our faith and increasing our understanding of it. Providing further opportunities for such discussions to occur would be very worthwhile for our parish.

For the Church to be truly Synodal, to enable us to journey together, it needs to listen without judgement and genuinely care about us and our views and opinions. Disruption, debate and disagreement can be healthy. Younger people and women also need to play a greater role in decision making.

This Synodal process must continue. There is a thirst for it and it can quickly grow if nurtured. We have lit a flickering flame that must now grow to become a shining light that illuminates every part of the Church.

Contact us

If you have any comments, suggestions or questions about the Synod, please talk to Fr Bill, Fr Stephen or Chris Donovan (synod@st-josephs-epsom.org.uk).

Prayer for the Synod

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
as we gather together in Your name.

With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.

We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.

Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth
and what is right.

All this we ask of You,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever. Amen.