



A FUTURE full of

# HOPE



*Pope Francis invites us to participate in a world-wide Synod - every person in the Church is called to respond.*



# LISTENING WITH THE HEART

## Clifton Diocese Synodal Response





# A FUTURE FULL OF HOPE CLIFTON DIOCESE

Synod  
2021  
2023

The Church of Clifton  
is called to be a people  
who believe in Christ,  
who celebrate Christ,  
and who live the way of Christ.

The Church is created by God,  
to live  
not for itself,  
but for others;  
To be a people who share  
in the mission of Christ  
to proclaim the Kingdom  
and to make disciples  
so that the world is transformed  
according to God's plan.



Our Parishes and Communities  
should be places  
where Christ is celebrated,  
shared,  
proclaimed and lived,  
where everyone is welcomed  
and valued  
and all have a sense of responsibility  
for the life of the community and the world.



We are called to be disciples  
who not only know about Jesus,  
but also come to know him in prayer.  
Our liturgies  
should be celebrated in such a way  
that Christ's word is heard,  
His presence known,  
and which are so connected  
to our lives  
that we joyfully  
take up the command  
'Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.'

*Synodality enables the entire People of God to walk forward together, listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, to participate in the mission of the Church in the communion that Christ establishes between us. Ultimately, this path of walking together is the most effective way of manifesting and putting into practice the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God (Synod Preparatory Document 1).*

## THE SYNODAL JOURNEY

Following the invitation from Pope Francis to participate in a worldwide Synod on Synodality, Bishop Declan Lang opened the Synod with Mass at the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul on the 17th October 2021. Parishes, schools, prisons, and chaplaincies across the diocese were invited and encouraged to participate. It quickly became evident that many amongst the laity and clergy were sceptical that such participation could be fruitful. In addition to the fact that parishes were still constrained by Covid-19, it was believed that the Synod would be ‘just another talking shop’ with little or nothing emerging from the experience. Reports going to Rome would not represent the thoughts or views of the laity but would be ‘white-washed’ by the bishops to suit their own needs. Some thought that specific groups with single item agendas would dominate and drown out the voices of others. Another issue arose from the very limited consultation time that was initially given by Rome. This was later changed following feedback and Clifton Diocese extended the period of consultation to reflect the new timeline. Although used by the diocese, the Synod prayer was met with considerable hostility by several people who viewed it as a way of stifling conversation.

Recognising these issues every effort was made to provide the support needed:

- The Synod Team offered information sessions both online and in person around the diocese to ensure that as many people as possible could learn about the process and the vision of the Synod.
- With guidelines offered, the clergy were asked to identify delegates to represent their parish and to act as conduits for providing the feedback.
- A formation day for delegates took place to further their understanding of the process and what was being asked of them.
- Formation to support people in the role of facilitation were held to ensure that listening conversations could run smoothly and appropriately.
- An emphasis was placed on the role of Scripture and silent prayer prior to any conversations taking place.
- Guidance was offered regarding how to facilitate a ‘listening’ conversation and recording of group sessions.
- The questions for the groups followed the guidelines given in the Synod documents with additional materials offered to support parishes and groups.
- Resources for a time of reflection during Advent were provided in preparation for running the conversation sessions in January.
- Support was available throughout the process from the Synod Team which had a dedicated page on the website and its own email address.
- Towards the end of the time of consultation, four area assemblies took place across the diocese to hear from facilitators and delegates about the themes that were emerging. This helped Bishop Declan and the Synod Team to begin the process of synthesising the reports submitted.
- People were encouraged to submit their feedback using an online form on the diocesan website. However, feedback in any format was welcomed. Very few people used the online form. Most parishes submitted their feedback by email using a template provided by the Synod Team. Approximately 15% of submissions were received from individuals either by email or post.



# For a synodal Church

communion | participation | mission

## FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH

### COMMUNION

Through our Baptism we are members of the Church - members of the family of God. This mirrors communion in the Holy Trinity. As baptised members of the Church we are ultimately on a pilgrimage to Heaven. In communion, we are called to participate – to participate in the life of the Church. We are called to ‘journey together’.

### PARTICIPATION

Through our prayer, our engagement with the Sacramental life of the Church, our reflecting on the Scriptures and the study of our faith, we can participate more fully in the life of the Church, recognising that Christ is at the heart of all that we do.

### MISSION

Our mission is to proclaim God’s love to other people, drawing on our resources of sacraments, Scripture, and our personal life of prayer. “Go make disciples of all the nations.”

## EXPERIENCE OF THE ‘JOURNEYING TOGETHER’

80% of parishes in the diocese took part in the Synod. Depending on the size of the parish, its location (rural or suburban) and the commitment of the clergy, the number and size of groups varied from one or two small groups up to twenty groups. Some parishes made a point of inviting every active group in the parish to participate, with varying degrees of success. Some parishes organised themselves to run sessions after Mass or online. Others managed to run evening sessions and daytime sessions to try and engage as many people as possible. Some parishes had display boards where people could respond to some questions using post-it notes. Others had paper, pens, and a box for people to provide their thoughts anonymously.

It is a source of joy that two prisons participated with the help of their chaplains. In some areas of the diocese, people of other denominations were invited to contribute their thoughts and in one parish local councillors were given the opportunity to contribute their experience of the Catholic Church. Approximately 65% of schools in the diocese participated reflecting on a particular set of questions. Children, young people, staff, and governors responded.

The experience of participating in the Synod was largely positive. While there was an initial reluctance and fear that only dominant voices would be heard, in practice, participants felt that, for the first time, they had been given a voice. In places where time was given to silence and prayer, the impact was particularly positive. Consistently, it has been reported that this process is a good one that people want to continue with. The opportunity to spend time listening to one another enabled people to speak from the heart in an atmosphere of calm and non-judgement. People who were anxious at the start about sharing their thoughts and feelings, grew in confidence and found that they could speak of things that they had never been able to speak about.



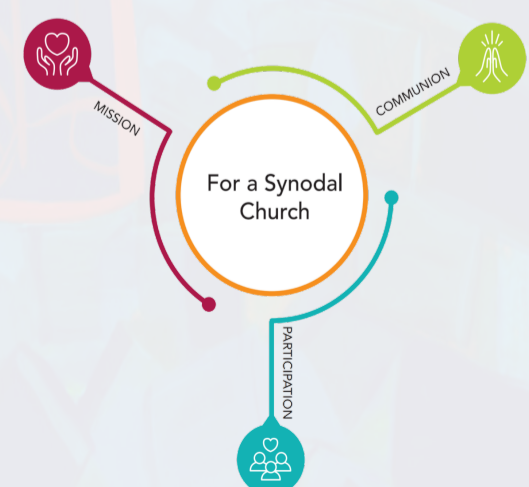
An example of this would be the ability to speak about the challenges that a family faced having a gay child and a transgender relative, challenges made more difficult considering Church teaching. The opportunity to share this with others and feel listened to had provided solace and encouragement. This kind of experience was replicated time and again. At the same time, there are many stories which express the deep sadness and hurt that people have experienced within the Church. Responding to the question on listening, one participant shared her own painful story of being “stonewalled” when she approached a priest, to talk to him about the complicated situation her son was facing over being able to marry in the church. She knew there were complications but the “complete lack of compassion or how some kind of empathy was needed and how some understanding might have made a difference, showed immediately – it was a subject he closed arbitrarily.” She reported that it had left her hurt and angry and drove her son from the Church. The lockdown with Covid consolidated her own negative feelings and she herself has now left the Church. She wept with grief as she relayed her story.

The opportunity to gather, in what seemed to be impossible timing because of the backdrop of Covid-19, was welcomed by those who participated. Where people felt too vulnerable to meet in groups, they appreciated the generosity of those who worked hard to facilitate online conversations. The opportunity to contribute by responding to questions and writing anonymous post-its was something that several parishes offered. This was very successful in some parishes, but one parish reported that no one had responded using this method.

While most parishes opted to use the main resource for the listening sessions, others used other options offered by the Synod Team and some chose to use resources that they had found on other diocesan websites. Although not voiced by every group, there was a significant number that commented on the inaccessible and ecclesial language of the questions which hampered their engagement. Some struggled with the concept of the Holy Spirit speaking through the process, others found it hard to respond to questions about hearing God speaking to us. Others questioned the concept of ‘journey’, wondering what this meant. A particular criticism or complaint framed itself around the idea of women being included in the list of people to be found on the peripheries. Even though the role of women in the Church was raised as an issue in almost all parish submissions, this was not seen as women being on the periphery, rather that their voices are frequently not heard or are ignored.

Gathering and synthesising the material from the different conversations, was a challenge for many delegate teams. It was important for them that no voice be omitted and that all views were represented. Consequently, many of the reports sent to the central Synod Team incorporated all comments made by individuals. Wishing to remain faithful to the commitment by the Synod Team that no issue raised would be ignored, this report is an attempt to honour the feedback, highlighting the concerns that people have, both locally and universally. It also aims to promote the joys and the desires that the people of Clifton have expressed.

The three themes of the Synod weave in and around each other. They are not separate entities. This diocesan report aims to reflect the movement between these three themes, the joys and the sorrows which may be hindering or enhancing our commitment as parishes to be the People of God. Each section of the report will focus on the local situation and then those issues which cannot be responded to locally, because of their doctrinal nature. Finally, the report suggests areas for support and development going forward within the Diocese of Clifton.





# communion

*The entire People of God shares a common dignity and vocation through Baptism. All of us are called in virtue of our Baptism to be active participants in the life of the Church. In parishes, small Christian communities, lay movements, religious communities, and other forms of communion, women and men, young people and the elderly, we are all invited to listen to one another in order to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who comes to guide our human efforts, breathing life and vitality into the Church and leading us into deeper communion for our mission in the world. As the Church embarks on this synodal journey, we must strive to ground ourselves in experiences of authentic listening and discernment on the path of becoming the Church that God calls us to be.*

*Vademecum 1.2*

*“Never has the need to “walk together” felt so important than at this present moment”*

*Parishioner*

Almost unanimously, parishes commented on the centrality of the Eucharist to their lives and the life of the parish, particularly in relation to journeying together. The joy of coming together as a faith community was highlighted time and again. ‘The Mass is the foundation of the community, without Mass there is no community.’ The loss of this opportunity during the pandemic was a time of great sorrow for many. Some were angry that church buildings were closed and felt that the hierarchy of the Church were too easily swayed by secular expectations. However, the parishes that responded creatively to the situation were able to maintain their community using technology (such as live-streaming Mass) and social media groups. Where these means were not utilised parishioners felt isolated and bereft. The lack of a strong data base meant that communication with parishioners in some communities was patchy.

In some parishes, the fact that congregations are not back to their former numbers is a cause for concern, particularly as those who have not returned appear to fall mainly into the brackets of youth and families. Participants repeatedly raised the question as to how this might change and what could they do to bring them back.

Throughout the responses parishes highlighted the need and desire for our churches to be welcoming and friendly, a place of sanctuary, warmth, and acceptance. The key elements of this focused on:

- a desire for the sacramental life of the church to be enriched through the addition of regular adoration, more frequent opportunities for confession and a variety of prayer opportunities both formal and informal.
- a desire to encourage people to see that everyone has gifts and strengths to offer and provide opportunities for people to use their gifts both for the parish community and for the work of outreach.
- a desire to see parishes regain their sense of identity and ‘place the heart of the Lord’s mandate for his Church at the heart of everything it does’.
- a desire for parishes to be vibrant and prayerful, attractive to the young, to families and embracing of the elderly.



- a desire to build community by more social and informal activities.
- a desire for parishes to be inclusive towards those in society who find that their life choices or circumstances separate them from the parish community and might prevent them from being 'in communion' with the Church.
- a desire for greater and more effective communication which informs the community and provides outreach to those beyond the church walls, including those on the margins, those from different ethnic groups and those with mental health or disability issues.
- a desire for greater engagement with other Christian denominations.

These desires were highlighted by almost every parish in some form or another. However, it was noted that whilst these desires are prevalent there is the presence of barriers which hamper their fulfilment within the current structures. The barriers identified were often expressed with sorrow and frustration. It must be added that when people refer to the 'Church' they are often speaking of the hierarchy rather than the people who make up the Church – that is all the faithful.

- the lack of clergy and the perceived unwillingness of the hierarchy to look at other options such as voluntary celibacy which would enable married men to present themselves for the priesthood.
- the role of women in the Church and their apparent exclusion was often mentioned. Sometimes this expressed itself as a desire for women to be considered for the priesthood. For others, a desire for women to be able to preach at Mass was expressed.
- although some parishes have a parish pastoral council, this is something that has diminished over the years. There is a desire for these to be renewed and for them to be truly pastoral in their work with a commitment that seeks to support the spiritual and pastoral life of the community.
- a lack of transparency in parishes is a concern for some. It was often commented on that some people appear to know the workings of the parish, but there are many who do not, including having a knowledge of the financial state of the parish and how money is allocated to different projects.
- some parishes reported the frustration of a lack of volunteers. This was put down to a belief that people fear getting involved because they may be increasingly asked to do more to the point of being overwhelmed.
- the perceived lack of compassion and inclusion by the 'Church' of those who are divorced and remarried without having an annulment. This was expressed not only by those directly involved, but other parishioners who do not believe that this should be a barrier to receiving the sacraments.



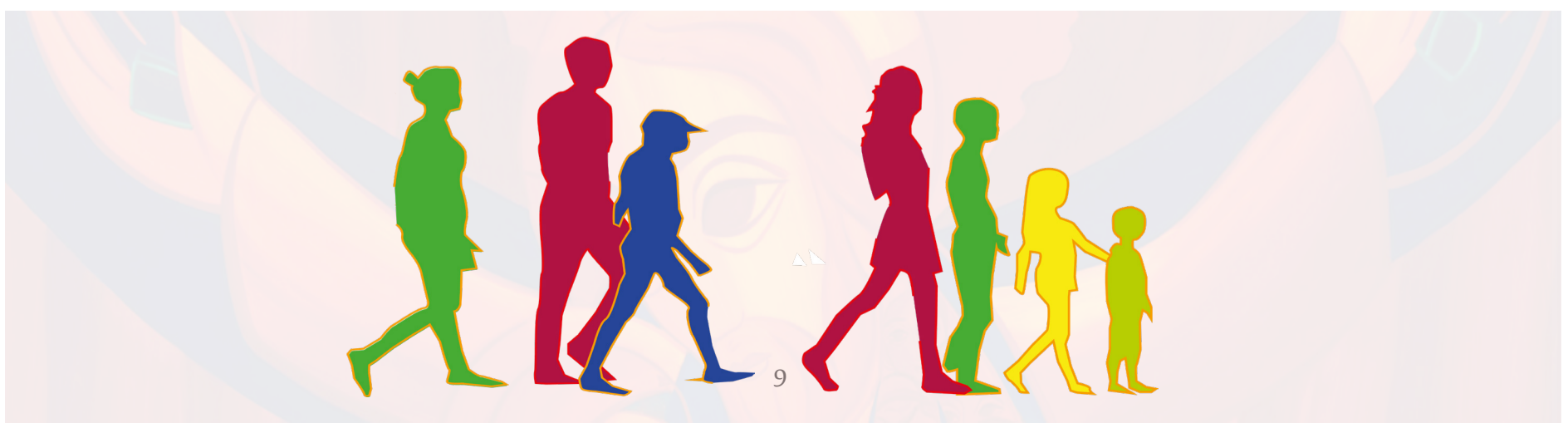
- in addition to those who are divorced and remarried, great sadness was expressed in many reports that people who define themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ community, are excluded from the sacramental life of the Church and often feel ostracised by the ‘Church’ because of their sexuality. People feel that times have changed and so should the ‘Church’ in relation to its teaching on homosexuality. Family members with sons or daughters, nieces or nephews who are gay or lesbian expressed a particular sadness and fear of speaking out believing that they too would be ostracised or judged.
- although the ‘Church’ has taken and is taking action to safeguard against abuse there remains considerable dismay at the apparent lack of support for those who have been abused by priests. There remains a belief that the ‘Church’ continues to protect the abuser, is not sorry for what has happened, and lacks the humility to believe that it can and still does happen.
- although many reports acknowledge the positive contribution that their Parish Priest makes to the community, clericalism is seen as a particular barrier to development in parishes. ‘Clericalism’ in the reports is primarily directed at those clergy who are the dominant voice in a parish, who will only allow activities to flourish if it fits with his thinking, who determines what or how the liturgy is celebrated, or who is not readily available to parishioners. It was also acknowledged in the reports that lay people can also promote clericalism by insisting that it is only if the Parish Priest agrees to something that it can happen. One participant wrote: “The Church is too clerical. Too often an ignorant priest tells a well-informed lay person: “I know what I am talking about because I am a priest, and you don’t know anything because you are not ordained.” In these scenarios a top-down mentality appears to exist which stifles initiative and growth.
- fear of speaking out on any issue was named in several submissions. This fear of being ridiculed or judged prevents people from offering their thoughts and views regarding the running of the parish.
- the sorrow at the loss of young people in the Church was expressed in almost all parish submissions. Young people are recognised to be key to the on-going future of the Church, but they are absent. People are unsure as to how to deal with this problem. There is some recognition that the ‘old ways’ are no longer fit for purpose, but the people needed to re-engage the young do not appear to be available.
- time poverty is a barrier to participating more fully in the life of the Church. Family life is fraught with demands that make engaging with the parish difficult. Repeatedly it was said that the structures of the Parish do not lend themselves to facilitating these many demands. It was noted that often weekend Mass times clash with other activities such as football, rugby or other club activities, meaning that families must make almost impossible choices.
- Personal or hidden difficulties can be a barrier – these include a lack of confidence, hurt, spiritual or mental suffering, material poverty, or “simply not having a baby-sitter”.
- A practical barrier raised by some participants was the lack of a church hall – a place to meet and develop activities. In addition, people noted the lack of succession planning and the need for developing leaders.



## ROLE OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Most of the issues raised within this section can be addressed within the local parish or diocesan structures. Other issues, however, require the Universal Church to discern. These issues specifically include:

- **Clerical Abuse and the response of the ‘Church’.** It is clear from the reports that it is not only those who have suffered directly at the hands of an abuser, but many Catholics who feel hurt and betrayed by the ‘Church’ because of the abuse scandal. One person reported, ‘I am mostly embarrassed to be a Catholic, so I live my life being a good Catholic as I can be without anyone knowing.’ Another wrote a personal response in which she said that she had grown up believing priests to be ‘holy, good and trustworthy people – only to find that quite the opposite was true’ She then gave an account of how her young, vulnerable brother, an altar server, was regularly sexually abused and that other priests knew of and ignored what was happening. Another respondent wrote: “The Church is humiliated by the abuse crisis. Is that why it is never preached about? We are all ashamed. We need it to be acknowledged from the pulpit”
- **The requirement for priests to be celibate** is consistently challenged. In many reports the answer to diminishing numbers of clergy is to allow them to marry. The Ordinariate was cited in several reports as an example of how it is possible for men to be married and be a priest at the same time. Those who commented on this issue favoured voluntary celibacy.
- **The role of women and the opportunity for them to be ordained as deacons or priests.** Almost all reports proffered the desire for women to have a greater role in the Church. Many questioned why lay people and in particular lay women are not allowed to preach at Mass. It was argued that 50% of the adult Mass going population is not being heard by this ‘rule’. Some participants felt that defining women as “peripheral” or “marginalised” was itself indicative of the Church’s understanding of women as “inferior”.
- **The rules impacting upon those who are divorced and remarried.** Many reports questioned why the ‘Church’ appears to be rigid in refusing to allow those who are divorced and remarried (without an annulment) to receive the sacraments. Many comments suggested that there should not be such a barrier to receiving the sacraments, especially when the first marriage may have been ended by one party and not the other. Comments about the annulment process reported that it is difficult, takes a long time and is a painful process.
- **The teaching of the Church in relation to those who identify as LGBTQ+.** Given that it is perceived that society in the UK accepts people who identify as gay or lesbian, many reports expressed the belief that they are too often excluded in our parishes. Those who identify themselves as LGBTQ+ often find themselves on the margins of the Church, unable to access the sacraments and judged for who they believe God created them to be. “Where does it say that being gay is a sin?” (80yr old respondent) Another said, “The Church is ‘one body’ – LGBTQ+? How can we claim this if our Church excludes these children of God?”





# participation

*“and they recognised him in the breaking of the bread”*

*Luke 24*

*The current Synodal Process we are undertaking is guided by a fundamental question: How does this “journeying together” take place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allowing the Church to proclaim the Gospel? and what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?*

*PD 2*

*In this light, the objective of the current Synod is to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. We do so by listening together to the Word of God in Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church, and then by listening to one another, and especially to those at the margins, discerning the signs of the times. In fact, the whole Synodal Process aims at fostering a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility, where a diversity of gifts is brought together for the Church’s mission in the world.*

How are we journeying together? This fundamental question of the Synod refers to the way we walk alongside one another as the People of God. Within this, the theme of participation has a particular focus on our sacramental life, the opportunities we have for coming together as the faithful on a Sunday or for other sacramental moments, our engagement with Scripture and our prayer life more generally. As with the theme of Communion, many desires were expressed in relation to these areas of our faith life. The impact of the pandemic has caused people to re-evaluate their prayer life. Many speak of the variety of resources that started to appear online which facilitated this. Noticeable in the feedback from the schools was how many families took the time to pray together and what a joy this had been for them. The live-streaming of Mass, initiated at the start of the pandemic, continues to be appreciated by many, enabling people to experience Mass in many different places. Some respondents suggest that having this facility has enabled families to participate in ways that previously were more difficult because of the clash of priorities. However, some reported that the continuation of live-streaming might stop people from returning to their parishes and this was a situation of great concern to them, especially given the desire to rebuild communities.



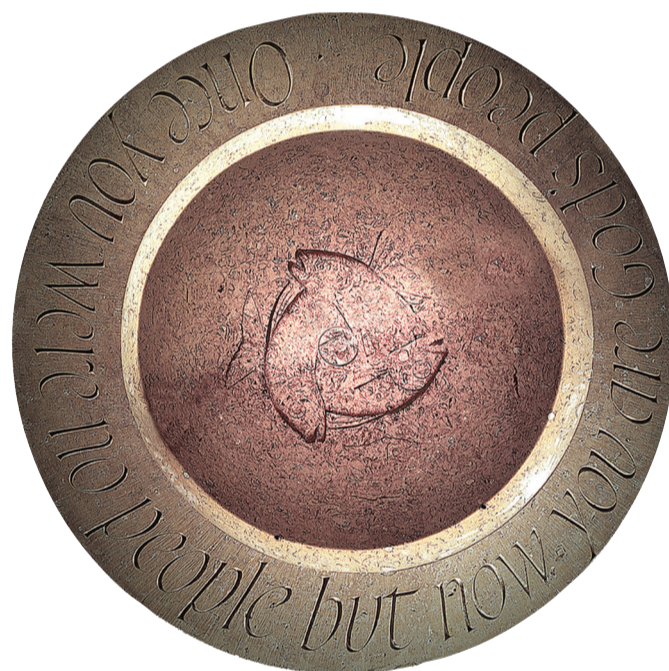
For a synodal Church

communion | participation | mission



Rebuilding communities pervades many of the reports and much of this is related to the opportunities for developing a strong spiritual life. The following represent some of the desires which have been reported by parishes:

- the desire for the sacramental life of the church to be enriched through the addition of regular adoration and Benediction.
- more frequent opportunities for confession and in some cases a view that some consideration be given to the ‘Church’ rethinking its stance on parishes being able to hold liturgies of reconciliation with General Absolution.
- variety of prayer opportunities made available – lectio, shared prayer, Taizé.
- regular prayer groups offered at different times of the day to cater for different needs.
- the desire for Bible Study groups.



Several parishes reported on the importance of music in the liturgy – how good it was to be able to sing once more after the pandemic. There was great respect for how music “helps parishioners to pray and to engage in the Mass.” A few comments recognised that music does not help everyone, as some people prefer silence and do not like to sing. Although in general there was a desire for more music, some people did comment on the need to provide a high standard of music. It was also acknowledged that the choice of music can be subjective, that what works for one group may not work for another. Some felt that the choice of music could be dominated by the priest and that this was not always helpful.

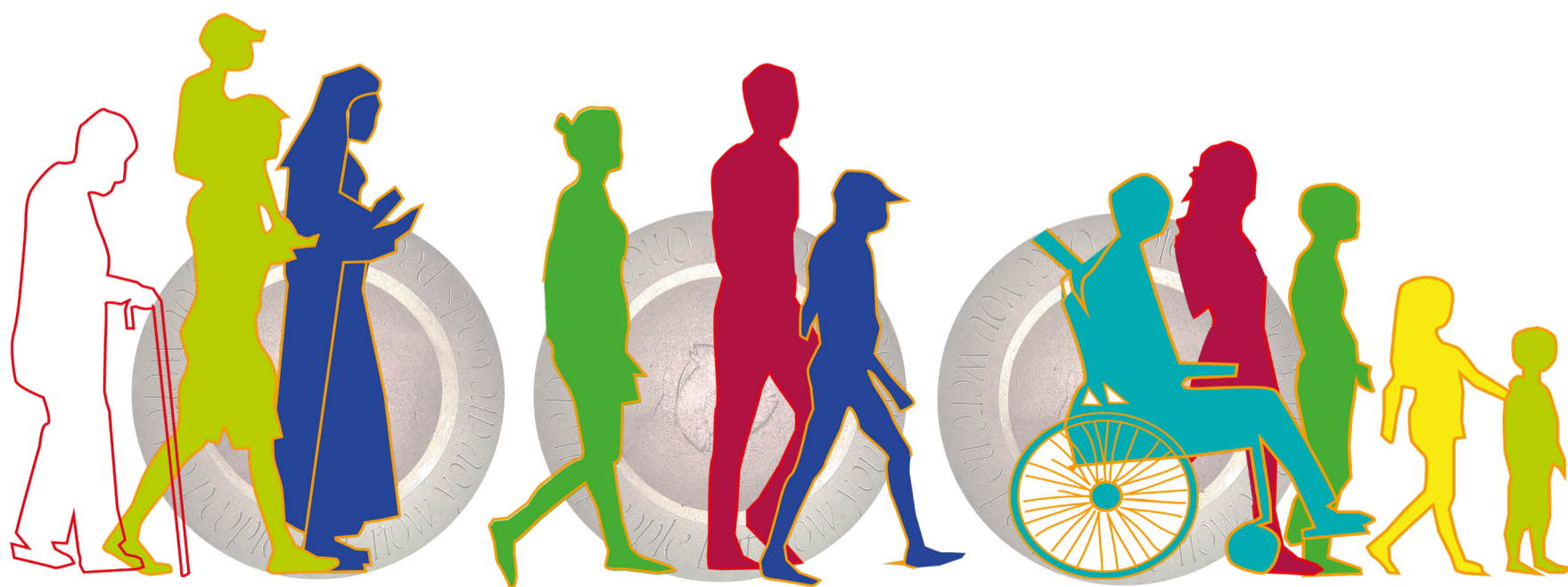
Some reports commented on the importance of the quality of the church building and the potential for it to inspire reverence by its beauty. While some expressed the quality of reverence in their parish as uplifting, others felt that there was insufficient reverence in the liturgy. This is a particular issue for those who wish to celebrate Mass in the Extraordinary Form.



The loss of the opportunity to celebrate the “Latin Mass” within the diocese, has caused great pain for some individuals and families. There is anger, frustration and sadness at this prohibition. Whilst these groups are not seeking to replace the current Mass, they do not see why it should be banned completely. One person shared that they no longer go to Mass in the diocese on a Sunday, preferring to take their family across the border, where they can attend with other families and provide their children with the opportunity to experience “the beauty of the Gregorian chant and to see the liturgy of the Mass done with great care and love, centred on Christ”. Another person commented that it would create division by restricting its use, not remove division. Additionally, it would “cause even more to leave the Church and many will find another way to celebrate the Holy Mass”. Another said that “Modern liturgy is tedious, dull, impoverished, casual and uninspiring.”. The loss of the opportunity to participate in the Tridentine Rite was expressed both by those who want it and those who feel sympathy for a group they believe has now been excluded.

Many parishes comment on a desire for more formation opportunities particularly in the following areas:

- Understanding the Eucharist – “many or most Catholics have grown up with the Obligation to attend the Mass – it is what we do – but more explanation should be given to the nature of Eucharistic celebration, as a united action of the local (or wider) assembly of the People of God.”
- Formation in prayer, how to pray, and different schools of prayer with opportunities to pray together.
- The teaching of the ‘Church’ to better understand why it says what it says. It was noticed that while some people mention Vatican II very few people mentioned any of the fruits of the Council – specifically any documents that emerged from the Council.
- Clear Bible teaching.





Meeting the needs and valuing the contribution that different ethnic groups make is highlighted in a few reports. This was expressed in terms of the language we use in our liturgy and how we can enable those for whom English is not their first language, to be embraced and accommodated. Some parishes do seek to offer opportunities for people to hear the readings at Sunday Mass in a different language, but this is not common. Although some parishes are able to embrace and engage the different cultural groups within their community some reports raise the question about what we might do to ensure these groups are fully integrated and recognise that they too have something to offer our parishes.

Aligned with the way parishes embrace the needs of different cultures is the concern raised by many parishes regarding those people who are hard of hearing or deaf. This group is often referred to as being isolated and not given due regard. Their experience of the Mass can be hampered by an inadequate sound system or poor readers. Socialising after Mass is often marred by the loudness of such gatherings which prevent people who have little or no hearing from participating in conversations, adding to their sense of isolation from the world.

In several reports a thirst for good homilies was expressed. What this looks like varied from parish to parish. Some parishioners are seeking shorter homilies, others are seeking relevant homilies which help people to relate faith and life, still others seek homilies which reinforce theology and doctrine. One person in their comment reflected the voice of many, “Sermons should challenge the laity to mutual care and support for each other and to be active in the organisations that provide outreach to the poor, the suffering and those in all kinds of need.” In essence there is a desire that they would inspire and lead us to mission.





# mission

*‘Everything we do should be at the service of Evangelisation’*

*Pope Paul VI*

*We wish to confirm that the task of evangelising all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church’*

*Evangeline Nuntiandi Pope Paul VI*

Our mission is to proclaim God’s love to other people, drawing on our resources of sacraments, Scripture, and our personal life of prayer. “Go make disciples of all the nations.” When we journey together in communion with one another and our prayerful celebrations take us beyond ourselves to Christ, we will inevitably be drawn to embrace the great mission of Christ. We are called, as the People of God, to live and work in such a way as to proclaim the Word of God.

This synodal process has highlighted a limited understanding of and commitment on the behalf of parishes to Mission. Those reports which comment on any aspect of Mission do so in the context of supporting food banks and outreach to the poor. These are signs that there is a desire to be outward looking and Missionary focused but the connection between reaching out to the poor and proclaiming the Gospel is tenuous. Parishioners are not confident in speaking about their faith, a comment of this nature is recorded in many of the reports. The language of being a missionary disciple or evangelisation rarely appears. It is felt by some that the Church needs “to proclaim its mission more loudly, harness good PR and promote the faith much more strongly to the children and young.” Harnessing technology both in the Church globally and locally is recognised as one way of promoting the faith and reaching more people in the process.

Given that the diocese has been actively promoting care for the environment, it is a surprise that very few comments were made on this aspect of Mission. It is, however, a strong element of the responses from the young people in the schools.

Throughout the reports is a concern that our parishes need to develop a meaningful understanding of what it means to be a welcoming community. Several comments suggest that such a community would see the need to open its doors to everyone who is intrigued, inspired, or seeking to come in, embracing them without judgement.

One area of mission represented in many of the reports is the desire for greater links with the ecumenical community. Ecumenism in the context of most parishes is the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations. Some parishes already have strong links within their local communities, but others say it is lacking and something which could be developed. The aim of such relationships would be to foster mutual understanding and knowledge of one another; to support one another to meet the needs of the wider community, to share prayer and other forms of worship and promote unity wherever possible.

A major area of concern for all parishes is the loss of young people. Parishes are fearful of losing their young people altogether and their desire to reach out to the young has become the strongest area of Mission. The following part of the report focuses on this aspect.



## YOUNG PEOPLE

Reflecting on the absence of the young people, many reports highlighted the liturgy as being a problem for young people, who are being attracted to the worship styles celebrated in other Christian churches. Within the Catholic Church many young people find the liturgy dull, often unintelligible and musically without soul. They speak of going to church and feeling that they are the only young person present. Most parish groups found it difficult to engage the young people in these synodal conversations and express a concern that their voices would not be heard. This was something that the Synod Team were conscious of at the start of the Synod so made a point of engaging the schools in the process. Approximately 65% of the schools including the primary schools participated. Primary school children were overwhelmingly positive about Church. Singing in church, being near to God, “seeing my dad and brother serve in church” lighting candles, thinking about God and being able to forgive and say sorry were all recorded by the younger children. Concerns that younger children had include: “too much kneeling”, “Church might stop again” (KS1 Children) “people are less interested in the Church”, “people blame God for Covid”, “no more prayer”, “technology will interfere with the Church” (KS2 children).

The comments from the secondary schools give something of a picture of what teenagers are thinking and feeling. There were many positive comments from them including, but not exhaustively:

1. “God entering my heart the moment I receive Holy Communion.”
2. “Enjoying the silence so that I can speak to God.”
3. “Praising God and feeling his presence.”
4. “Celebrating Mass with other members of the community”
5. “Church is a place where you can mentally expel the thoughts and worries you have over your life and others.”
6. Togetherness.
7. Seeing how passionate the priests have been.





Other comments appear less positive but equally thoughtful:

1. “The Church is too hierarchal and is becoming less relevant. They can’t cover up abuse. People my age don’t want to go to church. They sometimes look down on religion, especially Christianity. If it is part of your culture, it is seen differently, for example Muslim people seem to have it as part of their culture.”
2. “Priests don’t acknowledge the youth. My priest never speaks to me, and I don’t understand his sermons.”
3. “Many people do not follow the Catholic faith because of the rules about gay marriage and gay relationships. It can make certain communities feel excluded. There is also a strong male influence – only men becoming priests. Some people see this as the Church seeing men as superior to women, as sexist and this can alienate some communities.
4. “I don’t understand why women like our chaplain, can’t be a priest. A lot of people who go to Church are older and I don’t understand the things the priest is talking about sometimes.”
5. “Its reputation is harmed because of its history.”

The comments of young people also included many relating to how we reach out to other people. One comment, particularly pertinent to Mission came from a secondary pupil who said; “help young people with opportunities to understand their purpose and evangelise.”

Our mission to young people has become a source of anxiety to adult parishioners but the comments made by the young people in our schools is a sign of hope. The need to seek their thoughts and views, rather than trying to provide answers without talking to them, is essential if we are to engage them as respected members of the communities we belong to and serve.



communion | participation | mission



## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Synodal Journey has been a challenging process for the parishes in the Diocese of Clifton, not least because it has felt to be a very rushed starting phase. However, whilst there has been scepticism on the part of some, those who have embraced the opportunity have done so with enthusiasm and dedication. Many people have worked incredibly hard to capture the voices of different groups, reaching out to as many groups as could be thought about including those who are no longer practicing their faith, those who are elderly or vulnerable, those on the margins, ecumenical groups, different faiths, and the many people who form our parish communities. Approaching 1500 pages of reports were submitted and every page has been read by the Synod Team. This report has tried to faithfully capture the thoughts, ideas, and views of all those who contributed.

The feedback is varied but there are common themes emerging. Many parishes identified ways for moving their parish forward. Some have already started to implement these, and it is hoped that every parish will set about devising a plan of action to bring about some of the hopes and dreams that people expressed.

To facilitate these plans, the Synod Team recognises that there will be needs which cannot only be met at local level but will need support from a diocesan level. To that end the following areas have been highlighted:

### COMMUNION

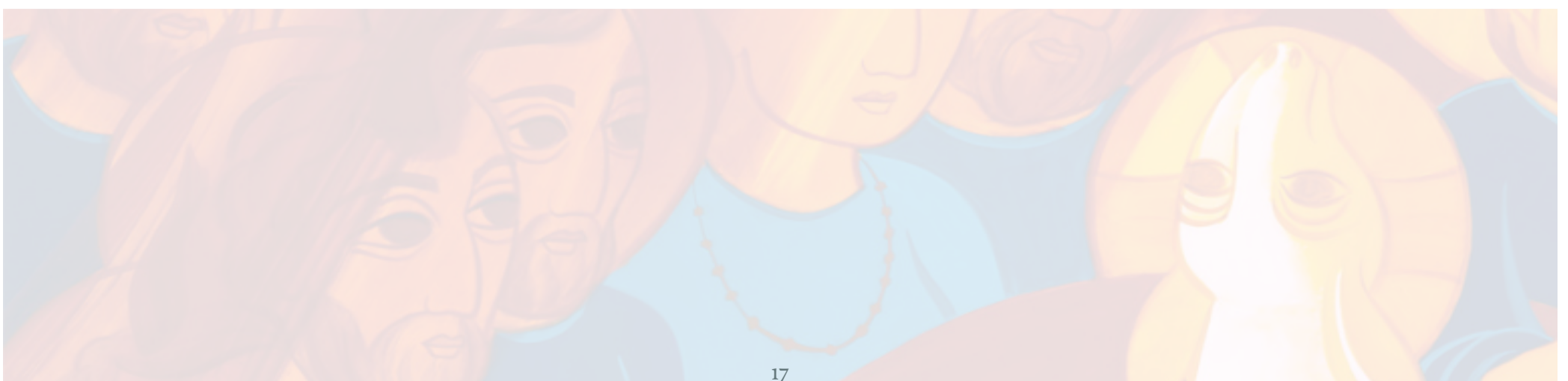
- Support and resources to help parishes to develop a Parish Pastoral Council.
- Supporting parishes to identify formation needs and how these might be met.
- Resources to support the building of communities.

### PARTICIPATION

- Formation and Resources for parishes to grow in their understanding of the Eucharist.
- Support to develop the prayer life of parishes to include different forms of prayer.
- Opportunities and resources to develop an understanding and knowledge of Scripture.

### MISSION

- Formation in an understanding of the role of evangelisation within the Church.
- Support for the development of outreach projects in parishes.
- Formation in Catholic Teaching and Catholic Social Teaching to grow the confidence of the laity.





With these potential areas for development, the Synodal journey will continue. Identifying an appropriate path to encourage this will be at the forefront of diocesan thinking and planning. Developing and providing accessible resources and listening tools that can be adapted in a variety of contexts is seen as crucial. Clifton Diocese has a 'Future Full of Hope' and as a Diocese we will continue the journey of listening to one another and recommitting ourselves to the three themes of 'Communion, Participation and Mission' as given to us by Pope Francis.

+ Declan

Rt. Reverend Declan Lang, Bishop of Clifton  
Chair of the Clifton Diocesan Synod Listening Group

Date: 8th April 2022









# PRAYER FOR THE SYNOD

*Pope Francis, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2021*

Come, Holy Spirit!  
You inspire new tongues  
and place words of life on our lips:  
keep us from becoming a 'museum Church',  
beautiful but mute,  
with much past and little future.

Come among us,  
so that in this synodal experience  
we will not lose our enthusiasm,  
dilute the power of prophecy,  
or descend into useless and unproductive discussions.

Come, Spirit of love,  
open our hearts to hear your voice!  
Come, Holy Spirit of holiness,  
renew the holy and faithful People of God!  
Come, Creator Spirit,  
renew the face of the earth!

Amen.

**A FUTURE  
FULL  
OF HOPE**  
CLIFTON DIOCESE

communion | participation | mission