

Overview of the Process

In 2021, Pope Francis announced that the theme of the next Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops would be “For a synodal church: communion, participation and mission.” He asked for dioceses to conduct listening sessions to gather input from as many people as possible, and particularly to consult groups that are not generally included in church life and leadership. In January 2024, dioceses were once again asked to conduct listening sessions in an effort to deepen and broaden the discussions begun two years earlier. The Faith Formation Office of the Diocese of Erie hosted four virtual meetings, one for those who had served as parish facilitators for the original listening sessions and three for the general public. Those trained facilitators who participated in this second round of listening sessions were also invited to facilitate listening sessions in their own parishes. Seven parishes opted to do so. Other opportunities were organized with priests, with religious sisters, and with college students. Not all sessions reported attendance, but those who did ranged from 8 to 45 participants. It should be noted that

the sample size of participants is small and comprised almost entirely of people who are both actively engaged in the life of the Church and interested in the synod, although one parish that had not participated in the first sessions did participate in the second. Nevertheless, many of the suggestions and concerns discussed are shared by others across the diocese.

Participants in most sessions were asked to focus on the following guiding questions, modified to fit our particular diocese. The priests had their own format.

“Our diocese identified these four major themes in the participatory phase of the synod: welcome/inclusivity, communication, leadership, and mission/outreach. Do these resonate with you? Since these were identified, what successes and distresses have you experienced around these themes?”

“How does or could the Church walk alongside you in the major concerns or needs of your life?”

Welcoming and Inclusivity

As in the first round, many people were concerned about creating a welcoming environment in their parish and in the Church at large. Several groups stated that their own parish was very welcoming. College students overwhelmingly reported feeling welcomed and supported by the Church and their local campus ministry. Parishes gave a great many examples, from coffee and donut Sundays to welcome retreats, of the ways that they try to welcome new people and build a spirit of community among parishioners. As one report noted, hospitality is foundational.

Respondents also discussed many challenges regarding inclusivity and community. Though they felt that their own parish was welcoming, some said they do not feel welcome in other parishes. Others don't feel comfortable even in their own parish. One newly merged parish reported: “Parishioners have an experience of ‘Even though I'm a part of this parish, I'm not really part of it,’ but somehow they're still willing to give it a shot, to be in that place and try to work it out.” Parishes wondered how to nourish people with conflicting spiritual needs, for example, praying the Rosary versus maintaining silence before Mass. Some participants shared stories of being pushed away because they didn't have the right family situation or they weren't listed as a registered parishioner. Young people described the tendency of youth groups to become cliques, and being judged by long-term parishioners for not receiving the sacraments as expected or even for moving to a new parish. People expressed concern that we are not only lacking in welcome, but at times exclusionary.

There is also a perception among many groups that the Church as an institutional hierarchy is unwelcoming. Several people mentioned their impression that Pope Francis is trying to be more inclusive, but the bishops and others are resisting him. They feel there is a lot of judgment and hypocrisy, and that the attention is much more on the Church as an institution rather than on the transforming power of Jesus. One parish mentioned that in order to expand our efforts, especially ecumenically, Canon Law and theology may need to be revisited. Another parish pointed out that the Church should focus on love of God and neighbor and help people know what to do rather than what not to do.

Participants very much want to create opportunities for everyone to feel welcome. They mentioned different groups that deserve particular attention, such as Black Catholics, those who are divorced, those who identify as LGBTQ, and youth. Yet there was no consensus on how exactly to go about welcoming them. One parish mentioned that they welcomed a gay couple when they started attending Mass, but then



the pastor had to have a very difficult conversation with them when the couple decided to get married. Many people want to reach out and relate to youth but expressed that they don't know how. Some also felt that the rules around the reception of the Eucharist are a barrier to welcome and inclusion.

They mentioned experiences of people no longer attending church because of the rules around Communion. One person summed up a common opinion: "I don't think it's right of the Church to deny anyone Eucharist."

Mission and Outreach

There is a strong sense that the Church in general and parishes in particular have to be more intentional about evangelization, both within and outside of the Church. People are concerned about the decreasing numbers of priests and parishioners. As with the topic of welcoming, participants noted many specific categories of people who need support in their particular time and place in life, from children and families to the elderly who struggle with daily tasks. One group advised that we can learn a lot from popular Protestant churches who reach out to families and ask what they need, offering vibrant worship and Scripture study that creates enthusiasm. Gannon University students set up a prayer table once a week, inviting people to pray and discuss God. They were the only group consulted to specifically mention prayer. The college students recommended being unapologetically Catholic, living the faith so obviously that it makes people ask questions.

Participants asked for guidance in their own spiritual lives and help in evangelizing others. Developing a personal relationship with Christ is key for every person, but how? How can the Church help us bring our adult children back to the faith? Several people asked for small groups, set up for every age group or situation. College students in particular wanted opportunities to foster personal relationships with one another and with their parish priests. Parishioners and college students were interested in spiritual direction, though many didn't know how to find a director. College students asked for more Confession times, particularly opportunities outside of the normal Saturday timeslot. There is also a perceived disconnect between the diocesan-level faith formation and the local



Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops start a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 18, 2023. Five U.S. priests will travel to Rome April 28-May 2, 2024, to share their experiences of parish life with the ongoing Synod of Bishops on synodality. The five were selected by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as part of a 300-member worldwide delegation. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

parish impact. While the diocese recently rolled out new relationally-based faith formation models for middle and high school, parishes reported that the religious education materials for younger children are not at their age level, that faith formation isn't engaging, that the recognized need for adult education is not being met. College students mentioned that both Catholic schools and faith formation programs need better catechesis. Religious sisters were concerned about the theological formation of seminarians, and that they need to be taught how to build relationships with parishioners and priests. Everyone is looking for ways to promote spiritual growth.

A few groups also brought up material outreach to the poor and those suffering injustices. Many parishes have food and clothing pantries, and some invite the wider community to things like parish dinners. However, we don't always engage with those we are serving, treating them as people from whom we can learn. True listening can help us break out of our parochial mindset and see the wider Church.

Leadership

One point of clear consensus from every group is the need for lay co-responsibility in the Church. Priests recognize that the Church needs lay leadership. The laity are asking for more responsibility, both as a response to their baptismal call and as a practical assistance to their pastors. There is a genuine concern for the well-being of the clergy. People noted that priests are often isolated and overworked, and it isn't sustainable to keep putting everything on them. There were a few comments recommending the Amazing Parish model. Lay ministry is particularly able to uncover the needs, sufferings and joys in the parish. Without eliminating hierarchical, pastor-led structures, many people pointed out the need for a team approach where the laity also have the ability to minister to each other. They also are consistently asking for leaders who are both vibrant and compassionate.

This is an area where people have just as many questions as statements. How can the laity assume more responsibility in and for the Church? Is the pastor the only one with authority in the parish? How should a leadership body be configured? Can deacons help more because of the priest shortage? Are the people involved at all in decision making? What would an organizational chart of the parish look like? What is a successful parish infrastructure? Can the diocese help? Where is the line between the diocese advising and the diocese telling parishes what to do?

There is also a certain amount of frustration with the current parish model. Parish pastoral councils are a common

means of including the laity in running the parish, but they are not well understood. Some asked if pastoral council is an advisory or a leadership body. Others pointed out that pastoral councils should be hearing the voice of all to discern what God wants for the parish. Yet parishioners reported that they don't know who is on pastoral council, when they meet or what they talk about.

The frustration also extends to how much parish life and vitality depends on the person of the pastor. "In the parochial model, the pastor still sets the tone in a big way for the life of the parish. This can be discouraging for people who do not connect with their pastor's vision – or when it seems the pastor does not have vision. But when the pastor does have vision, having his support can help things move forward in beautiful ways." People wondered if there is a better way of evaluating priests' job performance, and if the assignments are tailored to maximize priests' talents and energize the faithful. They want an authority structure that is community-centered, that includes more women and parents. Still, the laity very much look up to and value their pastor. His personal involvement and care, and especially personal connections and invitations, make a big difference.

Several groups brought up the image of a family as an apt analogy. They want to see more relationships between the generations, between laity and clergy, and also have priests support priests and laity support laity. Family relationships can be messy and difficult, but also very fruitful. "Being family is not a nice sentiment, but a goal and vision at every level that can and should be measured and nourished," one report stated.

In the Diocese of Erie, the second round of Synod conversations took place in the context of pastoral planning and parish restructuring. The eastern vicariate experienced major restructuring in December. The northern vicariate is currently in the midst of planning, with the final plan set to be announced in April. This process has been difficult, even painful, for parishioners, clergy and parish life. Many parishes have been doing only the bare minimum while waiting to find out if they will be partnered or merged. Parishioners are hurt by losing their parishes, and that hurt is deep and hard to heal. Priests have to face the resistance and hurt feelings every day. People aren't seeing a long-term vision for pastoral planning. What is the structure of the diocese in ten years? Are we preparing clergy and lay ministers to help with that vision? Are we training priests to be missionary sacramentalists or pastors? Priests who have been through the process report that healing does come. They note that experiencing the Church as a home and school for communion is hard when your parish is restructuring. But eventually, most parishioners acknowledge the need to go where Jesus is in the Eucharist, even if it isn't in their preferred church.

Communication

The comments on communication were linked to many of the other topics already discussed. People want a listening Church, particularly where those in authority hear those who are not, but they describe the current systems as "transactional." The diocese asks people to give feedback by completing a form, and then generates a report from those. This has been a common experience for pastoral planning, even if it has not been the only method of consultation. Parishioners want to share in the responsibility and decision-making and not just offer feedback. As noted under the leadership section, they want to feel like a family.



Pope Francis joins leaders of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops for prayer before a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 20, 2023. Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, a president delegate of the assembly, is seen in the far right of the photo. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

Overall, the consensus is that we need better mutual communication between the diocese, pastors, and parishioners. People asked for more transparency from the Church. Communication within the parish is limited, and many people were not even aware of the methods that the diocese uses to communicate. They recommended that materials be distributed in print, online and in social media, and the information should be clear and honest. Although parishioners have been receiving bi-monthly magazines from the diocese mailed to their homes since 2005, one person mentioned that information from the church doesn't come to you, you have to seek it out. Several commented on the changing and challenging landscape of social media and want the Church to take better advantage of technology. On a positive note, people extolled the merits of personal communication and the importance of living the faith as a means of evangelization. Communication is key in every area: hospitality and building good relationships, enabling co-responsibility, and outreach and evangelization.

Conclusion

The listening sessions provided a rich tapestry of perspectives, revealing both the strengths and weaknesses within the diocesan community. The desire for a more inclusive, communicative and collaborative Church was palpable. Moving forward, addressing concerns related to leadership, communication and outreach will be pivotal for fostering a vibrant and engaged faith community. The synod process has laid the foundation for dialogue and improvement, underscoring the collective responsibility of the Church to evolve and meet the diverse needs of its members. The

practice and awareness of synodality is growing, and people are invested in a church not about agendas but journeying together.

Despite manifold concerns, overall, there is a sense of hope. Hope that we can find a way to welcome all, even those with whom we disagree. Hope that, with a little guidance and coordination, we can evangelize people within and outside of the Church, from every walk and stage of life. Hope that the laity will be able to step into the gaps left by the shortage of priests and take responsibility for their own communities and the wider mission of the Church. Hope that a little more effort will allow us to have better discussions and enable a true understanding of the practical and spiritual aspects of life in the Church.

The conversations in the Diocese of Erie unearthed a significant array of feelings, insights, challenges and hopes. That in itself has been valuable. The need to address all of these with concrete plans and steps is no small task. Although pastoral planning has played a considerable role in the life of the church in Northwest Pennsylvania for the past several years, parishioners can rely on the prayer they have been praying, “for the vision to see new paths of possibility, “a spirit of mission to invigorate our every effort,” and “the strength to be unafraid of what is new.”

For those who already are active in the Church, she has been there in their times of need. They want to be that same presence for others. As one group put it, “The Church has been good to us, and we want to be good to her.”