



**DIOCESE OF
DOWN AND CONNOR**



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

**DIOCESAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE
IRISH CHURCH SYNTHESIS**

www.downandconnor.org/synod

ADSUMUS, SANCTE SPIRITUS

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.



THE SYNODAL EXPERIENCE

The invitation from Pope Francis to take part in the Diocesan Phase of the synod: *For a synodal Church*, has given the Diocese of Down and Connor an opportunity to be attentive to the work of the Holy Spirit, to experience Synodality, and to reflect on the mission of our Church as it emerges from the pandemic and makes plans for the future.

The Diocesan phase of the synod was opened in St Peter's Cathedral on 16th October 2021 by Bishop Noel Treanor. A diocesan synodal team generated a range of ideas for synodal initiatives and developed the questions to be addressed, based on the themes of Communion, Participation and Mission. The initiatives, which we described as synodal moments, strived to reach people within our parish communities, those who may only attend Church on occasion, and those who could be described as being on the margins. While many ideas were generated the short timeframe and limitations of coming through a pandemic meant that we were unable to undertake all of the ideas. During Advent, each of our parishes was encouraged to pray the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* prayer and parish bulletins carried reflections on Synodality. This helped to raise awareness of the synod and pave the way for what we described as our 'Listening Lent'. This next section will describe the synodal moments and capture the experience of participants and facilitators.



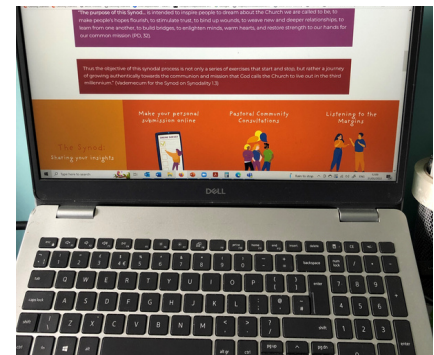
SYNODAL MOMENTS

MAKE YOUR MARK

People attending the Ash Wednesday Mass or another Mass chosen by the parish were given a postcard bearing the synodal questions to reflect on and submit. Parishes read the submissions and returned a summary of what they read. Some people found the questions that were used in the *'Make your Mark'* initiative off-putting, with language that was hard to understand and laden with Church jargon. Others found that the questions gave them great scope to share their insights and experiences of journeying in the Church.

ONLINE SUBMISSION

On Ash Wednesday we opened an online platform where people could respond to our Diocesan synodal questions. We received 93 submissions that people clearly put time and effort into. The submissions ranged from short one-sentence answers to 12-page submissions. People wrote that this was the first time when they felt genuinely consulted about their views on the Church. The reading of the online submissions was an emotive task as people shared their personal stories of hurt, goodness, sorrow, frustration and hope.



LISTENING CAREFULLY TO THE MARGINS

A core team was formed to connect with, and listen to, some of those at the margins of our Church. The team listened to: volunteers and clients of local food banks and local Saint Vincent de Paul conferences; LGBTQ+ advocacy groups and parents of children who identify as LGBTQ+; Adults with Learning Disabilities; Parents and Carers of People with Disabilities; the Deaf Community; and people who were divorced. Listening to the Margins was a deeply emotive experience; listening to the pain and hurt that was generously and honestly shared was a privileged moment for the listeners. The participants who shared their insights valued the opportunity, albeit that this was tempered by an uncertainty as to whether the Church would respond and effect the changes that they desired.

SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS IN OUR PASTORAL COMMUNITIES

Eleven events took place across the Diocese, and for many in the Pastoral Communities this was their first Church gathering since the beginning of the pandemic. Many were uncertain as to what to expect, and some were openly cynical about the synodal process and whether anything good would happen as a result of the synod. The gatherings were rooted in the Word of God by praying with the passage from St Luke's Gospel, The road to Emmaus. As a guiding principle, we encouraged those who engaged in the synodal moments to speak intentionally, to listen actively, and to seek understanding rather than agreement.



People were then guided to participate in a Spiritual Conversation that focused on the questions:

What has been your experience of journeying together in the Church?

and *What steps is the Holy Spirit calling us to take at this time?*

People reported that this was a new and encouraging way of engaging in dialogue in the Church and there was a call that we would have further opportunities to use the methodology of spiritual conversations as we discern a way forward together.

FISH ON FRIDAY



Seeking to engage with society and our brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions we held a listening event on Friday 8th April in the Stormont Hotel, Belfast, where 84 people gathered in small groups over food to share their experience of Church and hopes for the future of the Church and its contribution to our society. Nicola Brady, Chair of the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and Caoimhe de Barra, CEO of Trócaire provided stimulating inputs ahead of group conversations. Those who attended enjoyed the experience and the opportunity to grapple with important questions about the Church, society and our mission for the Common Good. There was a desire that the Church would move more confidently into the Public Square, and that the Church would make an intentional effort to speak up for the most vulnerable, animating Catholic Social Teaching initiatives.

The experience of the in-person events (Fish on Friday, Listening in the Pastoral Communities and Listening to the Margins) has much to teach us about how the Holy Spirit moves through encounters with others. Some people arrived at synodal sessions expressing uncertainty and cynicism. However through prayer, sharing on the Word of God, and Spiritual Conversations there was for many a conversion from cynicism to hope. Synodality was experienced positively in this journey with many learnings that we can take with us into the future.



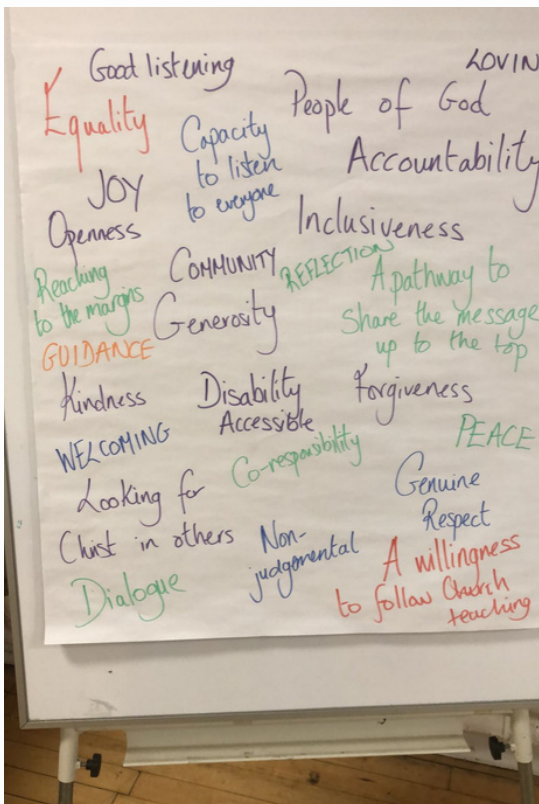
The next section of this report will reflect the contributions to the Diocesan phase of the synod in the Diocese of Down and Connor under the synodal themes of Communion, Participation and Mission. The views expressed, both in the in-person meetings and the remote submissions, were not uniform but they do reflect the diversity in our church, they give witness to the life experiences of our people and express the heartfelt love for the Church; a love that is expressed through challenge, compassion and care.



Communion

As people reflected on communion within the Church the issue of belonging resonated deeply and was spoken of and written about very often and very strongly. Many people find the Church to be a place of real belonging and a spiritual home where they have been cared for, nurtured and challenged to grow in faith. Throughout the synodal moments, people were conscious of those who were not in the room; it was with compassion that they recognised that the number of people from different ethnicities, younger people, and working families was low and that the synodal experience was poorer for this. There was a resounding desire to respond to the call of Pope Francis to be with people on the margins; the homeless, people suffering from addictions, the poor, and the lonely but uncertain of how to make those connections. Many recognised that the Church is for everyone as we are all sinners but that “there is an impression that the church is for the faithful, goodie-two-shoes”

Overwhelmingly, the people who contributed to the synodal process expressed a desire for the Church to be more welcoming of people in general, and people from the LGBTQ+ community and divorced and remarried people were mentioned often. At the same time, other people responded to the synod question on communion stating that Church teaching is clear and those who felt they did not belong to the Church were excluding themselves by their decisions about sex and relationships. This was a minority report, although stated strongly where it was stated.



Some people from the LGBTQ+ community said that they were still practicing their faith despite the Church’s position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. For them, their faith was fundamental to who they were and it came with a lot of hurt when they heard or read statements that they described as ‘othering’ them, making them not feel welcome or excluding them. Those who represented the LGBTQ+ community in advocacy organisations cited examples of people being excluded from participation in family funerals and baptisms due to their sexuality. For some people, the Church teaching on sexuality and gender and the language describing LGBTQ+ people as being intrinsically disordered has led to ‘internalised homophobia’, resulting in poor mental health, self-harm and suicidal ideation. Parents of children who identify as LGBTQ+ spoke of the Church not recognising their children as equal. One parent said that the Church should embrace its brokenness in welcoming all people without exclusion. Another described the pain of no longer coming to Church together as a family; “My son won’t go to mass as he is gay and feels unwelcome. My younger son and husband now won’t go, in solidarity with him. I am lonely because my family aren’t with me.”

There was mention of individual priests, 'on the ground', who were empathetic and supportive to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Those who mentioned this said they were appreciative of this support but were sorry that it had to be anonymous and private rather than explicit and public. Some of the suggestions for going forward were that the Universal Church revisit the teaching and language on sexual orientation and gender and that the Local Church would provide pastoral support e.g. groups like 'Beginning Experience' for parents of children who identify as LGBTQ+ and awareness training for parishes.

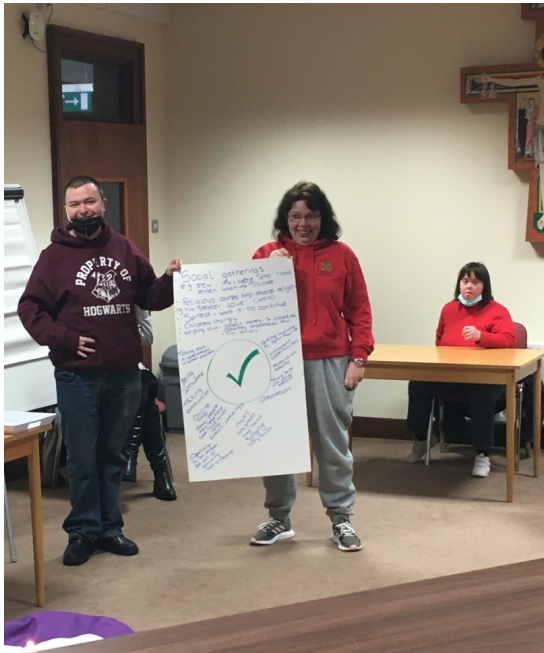
When it came to those who are divorced and remarried, we heard from some people in that situation that, while Church's rules and regulations might have an internal logic, they are experienced as draconian. Divorced people described the ambiguity that exists in relation to their role in the Church with some priests denying an active role in parish life. Some divorced and not remarried people expressed their belief that they cannot receive Holy Communion. It was reported that many priests avoid the strict implementation of the regulations regarding access to Holy Communion. This is experienced as helpful but it is 'turning a blind eye to the reality'. Few priests rigorously apply the rules, but, where they do people reported that they were left feeling like second class citizens, abandoned by Church and confused by mixed messaging. Honest and open engagement and accompaniment with those in second unions is called for. Naming the issue and dialoguing with it, rather than hoping people will not place a priest in an awkward position by presenting for Holy Communion or volunteering for ministry, was felt to be the best way forward along with quicker and less expensive annulment procedures.

Others who identified as feeling like they do not belong were single parents. There were moving life stories recounted telling us of people who were shunned and humiliated in their community because they were unmarried or divorced parents. This led to a sense of isolation and loneliness as well as internalised shame for some. All parents who wish to bring their children up in the Church should know welcome and support and the Church should seek to engage creativity in how it ministers to families.

The teaching of the Church on sexuality and relationships informed people's decision making in relation to Mass attendance and reception of the Eucharist, with many deciding not to go to Mass or receive the Eucharist. Some now look back and wonder why they did this when the current atmosphere is a lot more accepting of people in situations outside of Church teaching. This was brought up specifically in relation to contraception, with one woman telling us that, having taken the decision to use contraception for what she felt were unavoidable circumstances, she did not attend Church for years. Many seek a reconsideration of the Church's teaching on contraception that is more compassionate to women's health, well-being and raising their families in light of financial circumstances.



Belonging to the Church was not linked to sexual ethics and relationships only. We heard from many people that they felt that they were excluded from participating in their Church Community due to their perceived class. We heard numerous times that the Church caters more for middle-class people than working-class people, and in particular, any decision-making still lay in the hands of the middle classes in many communities.



We heard from the deaf community, adults with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities and here the issue of belonging came up again. People with learning disabilities and their families want to be included in the activities of the Church and to have opportunities to take on meaningful roles within the Church. Accessibility should not be simply a tick box exercise and should include things like easy read publications, support with transport, signing of hymns, and specially adapted services. Being part of groups like SPRED within the Church gave people with learning disabilities a sense of belonging and that was welcomed by all. Receiving Holy Communion and the Sacraments emerged as crucial for people with disabilities as it is in the reception of the sacraments that they feel close to God.

The majority of parents of children and young people with disabilities who were listened to did not feel that the church had accompanied them on their life's journey following the birth of their child. People with learning disabilities and their families often feel isolated and lonely. They want to be supported and to genuinely feel part of the Church community. This need is particularly strong for parents of newborn children. We heard that Welcome Ministry should be strong and consistent across parishes with people being intentional in their welcome to people with disabilities. There was a call for specific programmes on disability and deaf awareness.

The liturgies of the Church were places where people felt connected to the Church community. People spoke of the central role of the Sunday Mass and the pandemic brought into acute focus how important this was in their lives. People sought that the Sunday Mass would be an opportunity for joy-filled liturgy, with compelling preaching and an opportunity to express our reverence and gratitude for Christ truly present in the Eucharist.

As part of the synodal experience, we heard from people who feel that recently the Magisterium of the Church has been disrespected and that "Church teaching has been watered down" by conforming to worldly standards. In holding this stance of staying true to Church teaching some people found themselves alienated not only from society but also from their parish communities. The communion that many people desire requires a renewed commitment to accompanying people as they strive to be close to Christ on their journey of life, ensuring that the space for ongoing, respectful dialogue is opened up and maintained.

Participation

Through the synodal journey, there was a deep recognition that by virtue of our Baptism God calls all of us to service. The diversity of vocations in the Church was acknowledged, with people expressing their gratitude for vocations lived well. We heard gratitude for parents and family who had shared their love of God and the teachings of the Church. We also heard of Priests and Religious who had opened the Gospels, accompanied people in times of joy and sorrow, and encouraged the lay faithful into roles within their local parish community. The Permanent Diaconate was welcomed, with people feeling that deacons make a worthwhile contribution to parish life and we should raise awareness, understanding and uptake of this vocation alongside the priesthood. Many people expressed their joy in using their gifts by serving within the Church, participating as lectors, eucharistic ministers, in music ministry, running adult faith development programmes and helping in children's and youth groups. Participation in pilgrimage and retreats had been life-changing moments of encountering God's love for many.

People expressed a desire for priests to be cared for and to keep central their role as pastors of the community of faith. They called for priests to let go of some of the roles they currently carry out and to allow others to exercise their skills in pastoral work, administration, finance and management of properties. People noted that this may require the employment of staff at a local level. All vocations must be nurtured and cherished and there is a call for a committed approach to the care of clergy and the raising up of lay ministry within the Diocese.

In all of the synodal gatherings, the role of women in the Church was spoken of. It was recognised that women represent half of humanity and contribute so much to the life of the local church through the volunteering of their time and yet in the places of decision making in the church there are few female voices. Some sought that the Universal Church should review the decision on the ordination of women to the vocation of Priesthood and Permanent Diaconate. However, many felt that the local church could do more in relation to the role of women in leadership and needed to do so urgently in order to have any credibility, especially with younger generations; "I have daughters who I have encouraged to aspire to achieve what they want and to contest gender discrimination. But I am lost for words trying to defend my Church."

The language of the Church was also discussed as being a barrier, with many finding the masculine language off-putting and excluding women. For some, the translation of the Missal resulted in the use of complex words and cumbersome prayers that were hard to connect with. Others found that Church documents were written in a complex way that made them inaccessible making them the preserve of those with theological training and not the ordinary folk in the pews. There was also a critique of communication within the Church and that we fail to make full use of social media to convey the compelling message of the Gospel. "Loved ones, used to quite sophisticated and powerful social messaging, find Church ceremonies and messaging as very unconvincing and often irrelevant."



People whose faith was nurtured through prayer, scripture and teaching in Parish Cell Groups, Cursillo, Koinonia, Focolare Community and Religious orders communicated a desire that we would support one another in a similar way in our parish communities. Nurturing people on their faith journey should not be seen as the sole responsibility of the priest but of the whole community focused on evangelisation. People said that a more decided appreciation of, and investment in, the development of lay ministry is essential to the life of the Church going forward.

The value in having Safeguarding Committees, Parish Pastoral Councils and Finance Committees was expressed by people appreciating the opportunity to put their professional skills to use in the service of the Church. There was a desire for enhanced co-responsibility in our local parishes where priests and people together would make decisions, “Decision making should be a devolved matter”. It was recognised by some people that they missed the presence of functioning committees in their own parish when they could see the fruits that they bore in neighbouring parishes. Some people felt that they were completely removed from decision making in the life of the parish citing that if Father didn’t like an idea it simply wouldn’t happen and that the sentiments associated with a pre-Vatican II stance towards the laity (i.e. that they were merely to “Pray, Pay and Obey”) was still felt to be part of the culture in the Church today.

Abuse by priests and Religious in the Church has caused huge levels of hurt and scandal in an institution in which people had placed their trust. The impact of abuse has damaged credibility, with people expressing concerns over the Church’s handling of abuse and its loss of moral and teaching authority in light of its failings. There was recognition of the strides made in embedding a culture of safeguarding in the Diocese and the contribution of volunteers in instilling this new culture.

People expressed the need for transparency and accountability as being central to having a truly synodal church. In particular, they highlighted the need for transparency over financial matters by publishing both Parish and Diocesan accounts widely and explaining the purpose and impact of the various collections throughout the year.

People expressed their desire for greater dialogue to take place within the Church, especially with Church Leadership. People recognised that while the Bishop would visit Parishes, this was connected to the Sunday Mass and Confirmations, we need to create the opportunity for a more authentic dialogue on the pastoral needs of the Parish Community with the Bishop.

This synodal listening has demonstrated the life-giving energy that dialogue brings and a hope that continued dialogue will bring about the changes that people perceive as necessary to bring about greater participation in all aspects of the life and mission of the Church.



Mission

Among the various synodal contributions, it was on the theme of mission that we experienced the greatest level of consensus. There is a desire to belong to a Church that deepens our love of Christ, feeds our deep desire to know more about our faith, and readies us for mission in a more secular world.

Many people spoke of their love of the Church and the Church being truly present for them on their life's journey. The pastoral care provided by priests was spoken of by people, young and old, who said that they could always turn to a priest in times of difficulty. People spoke with great affection for the care that had been given during times of illness, death and bereavement. People spoke of their great hurt when during the COVID pandemic they were unable to access the pastoral care that they needed, especially those who were unable to have a Requiem Mass for their loved ones. There is a desire for continued connection with the Parish Community when people move into care settings. We should be a Church of mission and compassion, going to people when they are unable to come to Church.

People recognised that at this time in the life of our Church there is a massive task ahead of us in evangelising in a secular society. We heard that people feel ill-equipped to undertake the task of evangelisation. For some living in Northern Ireland has meant that there has been a long-standing tradition of saying nothing about your faith. In more recent times, as peace has grown, so too has secularism, a new stumbling block to speaking openly about faith. In order to grow in confidence and to be able to share their love of God people called for the Diocese to invest more heavily in adult faith development and to create safe and dynamic spaces to come together and talk deeply about faith. "Our spiritual growth is stunted. As adult members of the Church, we are not sufficiently grounded in our faith and do not have confidence in speaking about our love of God." People spoke of the loneliness that they felt in being part of a Church that their peers and family members have moved away from. There is a strong need to feel part of a community that supports and encourages those who wish to grow in their faith.

People spoke of the need to ensure that families, children and young people receive support for their journey of faith. Many recognised that much of the activity of the Church takes place at times that suit the older and retired members of the parish community with little creativity in organising events that recognise the demands and challenges of family life. A new approach to ministry was called for that would break away from sporadic sacramental moments whereby Confirmation is seen as a mass exodus of young people from the Church rather than them becoming full members of the Church. It was also felt that if the Church could demonstrate its ability to live out Catholic social teaching we would have more credibility and standing with young people.





The value of Catholic Schools, their ethos and their contribution to the education of our young people was spoken of as a great asset to society. Teachers spoke of how their work within Catholic Schools was an opportunity for them to live out their mission. However, many people queried the sacramental preparation taking place within schools led by teaching staff who were not fully committed to their faith and the teachings of the Church. There was a strong call for dialogue on how and where we prepare children to receive the sacraments and to live their lives to the full in the Church community.

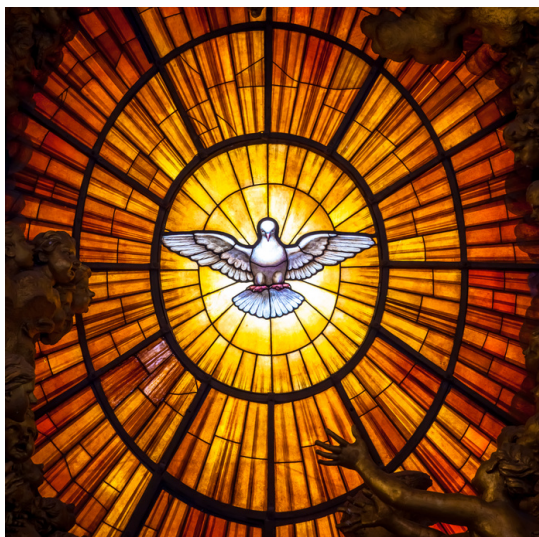
It was recognised that the Church has a life-giving vision for the world in its social teaching and that the Church has the potential to be a force for the common good in our society. Many spoke of the strength of organisations such as Saint Vincent de Paul and Trócaire while recognising the personal responsibility that we each have to enhance our own communities. “See a need – fill a need” ought to be the disposition that we have as a Church looking to the world around us.

The starkness of poverty within our Diocese was highlighted in listening to people in poverty and those who work to support them. We heard one story of a volunteer delivering a food parcel to a home and being met by a family member using a torch as they could not afford electricity. We found that there are increasing feelings of being ‘squeezed’ by the State and this is often accompanied by a perceived lack of real care by the official Church. ‘They have their big houses and big cars and live very comfortable lives, thank you’ ‘They haven’t got a notion.’ Some told us that God often appears distant in their lives as they struggle to provide for their families. One person told us, ‘My faith in God is severely tested. I wonder does He listen to me.’ We heard an appeal to listen to the difficult circumstances facing those in need and for these needs to be understood more in parish communities. We also heard a call for greater appreciation given to the work of so many voluntary organisations run by lay people.



The opportunity to learn from, and grow in relationship with, our sisters and brothers in other Christian traditions formed part of what we heard in our synodal listening. In particular, people reflected on the scriptural knowledge held in Protestant communities and how this would be good to share with our Catholic parish communities. They also highlighted the emphasis on welcome and how we might learn from our reformed sisters and brothers in this regard. More generally, in our Fish on Friday event, there was consolation in gathering with those from a variety of Christian traditions to discuss the role of the churches in working for the common good in society. More such gatherings were called for.

Next Steps



The synodal moments that have taken place across the Diocese have engaged many people in a way that is new. Although it was pointed out that listening experiences have taken place in the Diocese before it was felt that this process feeding into a Universal Church experience will allow issues that are beyond the scope of the local Diocesan church to be acknowledged. In reflecting on Communion, Participation and Mission there are five areas of priority for the Diocese to discern further and to make concrete proposals for adoption in the life of the Diocese.

The five areas identified are;

Encountering God's Love

As a diocese, the Holy Spirit is prompting us to find new and dynamic ways for everyone to encounter the love of God in the world in which we find ourselves today.

We will equip each person to deepen their spiritual lives, through vibrant liturgy, faith development programmes, and gathering for fellowship, prayer and worship.

Special care is required to ensure that programmes are created and taken up by families with young children, people with disabilities, socio-economic difficulties and different ethnicities.

God calls us to serve together

We commit to building a Diocese where all know that they have a vital part to play in the life of the Church. Everyone is gifted. Everyone is called.

We will work together to create structures and pathways that enable the building of vibrant and sustainable communities of faith where the vocations of all are recognised, supported and valued.

Decision making should be borne out of authentic discernment and we will grow as a synodal church exercising co-responsible leadership across the Diocese.

Action is required to ensure that the voice of women is integral in our decision making.

Being a Church where everyone can find belonging

As a diocese, we must commit to ensuring that our parishes extend Christ's loving embrace to everyone no matter where they find themselves on life's journey.

We will value and accompany people in parishes which are known for their warm welcome, hospitality and love.

The diocese will encourage respectful dialogue and pastoral accompaniment as each of us strives to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Being an authentic witness in the world

We commit to sharing the teachings of Christ so that with transformed hearts and guided by the living Word of God we make our choices to live in respectful relationship with people and the planet.

We will put our faith into action, working in partnership with other churches and faiths, in order to create a just, equitable and sustainable world for all.

Our Church as a loving family

We commit to journeying with people through all stages of their lives - times of joy and of difficulty- helping them to encounter Christ and to discern God's plan for their lives.

We will create safe spaces for people to encounter Christ, offering supportive, creative and appealing opportunities for everyone to engage with the Church.

CONCLUSION

This synodal journey has been one of learning, encounter and authentic dialogue. While the levels of participation in this diocesan phase of the Universal Synod, *For a synodal Church*, were good, there is a need to widen our engagement and harness the life-giving power that Synodality can bring to our Church experience.

Our encounters, both in person and in writing were marked by honest sharing. The dialogue that we have entered into has raised an expectation among many people that the Universal Synod will bring about action. In the interim, it is clear that as a Diocese there are many actions that we can undertake, guided by what we have heard from our people, in each one of whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

It is our sincere hope that people will find reflected in this document their own thoughts and insights as well as those of their sisters and brothers in Christ.



Thank You

We extend our gratitude to all the People of God who participated in this process.

Our thanks to the synodal committee who supported the Diocese in preparing the synodal questions and moments; Rev Tim Bartlett, Rev Joe Baxter, Siobhan Cox, Jim Deeds, Jackie Kerr, Stephen McAnee, Joseph McGowan, Rev Conor McGrath, Rev Kevin McGuckien, Paula McKeown, Rev Eugene O'Hagan, John Steen.

Our thanks to the clergy and parish staff who encouraged participation in the synodal process and to Parish Pastoral Councils and Clergy who reflected on their Parish submissions to the synod.

Our thanks to the facilitators of our Pastoral Community events; Gerry Clarke SJ, Caren Collins, Siobhan Cox, Jim Deeds, Catherine McCoy, Joseph McGowan, Paula McKeown, John Steen and to the Parishes who hosted events and provided hospitality.

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Our thanks to Nicola Brady and Caoimhe de Barra for their input at the Fish on Friday event.