

Developing Women's Ministry Reflection Paper

1. Introduction

There is an established Women's Ministry Group in our Diocese from which diverse members were drawn for our journey as Pilgrims of Hope towards our Diocesan Assembly on 15 July. We reviewed:

- our Diocesan Synod Report [Diocese-synod-report](#) (D with page number),
- the National Synthesis National-Synthesis-England-Wales (N with page number)
- working document for the [European-Continental](#) stage (C with paragraph number)

and have drawn upon our own earlier Women's Gatherings and specific discernment. Areas that may well be considered more fully by other working groups are indicated OG.

2. What has been said?

Even before the section 'Women in the Church', our Diocesan Report noted:

- most of the listeners who came forward for training were women (D2) who made an enormous contribution to the process in our parishes, schools and other groups,
- a call for more recognition of the contribution of women religious to parish ministry (D3),
- people could contemplate radical changes, including women deacons and priests; and deacons and religious sisters being able to say Mass (D4), and
- we should explore possibilities for para-liturgies, allowing greater participation in leadership and prayer (D6).
- A very significant majority of our diocese's voices call for a radical reassessment of women's roles in the Church (D7) including requests:
 - to hear women preaching,
 - to address women's roles in decision-making in the church, i.e. women should have more authority and responsibility so that female voices are heard and respected,
 - for more exploration of Biblical women and saints and
 - to have ordination for women principally to the role of Deacon but also Priest.

A view from the pew

"I was asked as to how I would feel to share a reflection on the Feast of the Holy Family during Mass. Initially the request felt strange to me because I have only known the priest or deacon giving the homily at holy Mass. I had a feeling of unworthiness and incompetence. I was worried about how people would react seeing a woman sharing. The more I prayed the more confident I felt and the clearer I became on what the Lord wanted me to say. I spoke that day on what has helped me in my relationship with my husband for the last 36 years. It was deeply personal. I shared words on the power of God's grace, prayers, forgiveness, mutual respect and perseverance. After the reflection I received some very encouraging comments".

Our young people asked that:

- 'The Church needs to reform situations where it marginalises members because of their gender... It needs to speak out against injustices' (D5).

I can't understand

"The Catholic Church feels quite archaic and out of sync with the realities of the modern world. I can't understand why other Christian denominations are able to move forward and provide equal opportunity for both men and women in the church whilst the Catholic Church still clings on to its old structures which, in my experience, provide little encouragement or inspiration for a young woman."

We note that the National document:

- considers that clericalism (N11) isolates priests and infantilises the laity,
- 'women were not considered a marginalised minority so much as a silenced unrecognised majority whose gifts lie unwrapped and ignored in the parish' (N17)
- there were complaints about the use of 'male-exclusive language' and lack of consultation in revisions to the Missal and Lectionary (N18).

We also note that the European working document includes 'Rethinking women's participation' rooted in our common baptismal dignity to participate fully in the life of the Church (C60). It also highlights the issue of full and equal participation of women (C64).

3. Where are we now?

- Our diocese has a significant financial deficit and cannot supply a priest for each parish; this is expected to deteriorate further. Many of our parishes have declining Mass attendance, ageing parishioners, and 'burnt-out' clergy with a small loyal group maintaining existing Church structures and activities.
- Our society expects equality: the religious organisations' exception to equal opportunities legislation looks increasingly out of date.
- There is unconscious bias in relation to girls and women in the life of the Church.
- Our discipline of an all-male ordained ministry and mostly celibate priesthood is unhelpful (61% of our parish synod submissions call compulsory celibacy into question).
- Many of us have direct personal experience of graced ministry from female Catholics, female ministers of many non-Catholic Christian denominations, and married Catholic priests.
- Vocational discernment is a phrase little associated with women in our Church. There are pathways to follow for those feeling a call to religious life, but no formal route for women discerning a vocation to a different life of service in the Church. Vocations of value should not be limited to clergy and religious.



- Many of our female parishioners have professional experience as chaplains, teachers, leaders and counsellors but exercise little formally recognised leadership within our parishes.
- There is considerable diocesan expertise in the formation of catechists, readers and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist and in the preparation of those in formation for the diaconate for the current ministries of Lector and Acolyte. The CBCEW has not yet published our national guidelines for implementing the new roles of Catechist, Lector and Acolyte

Saying yes to God

“I had several conversations with the curate and one day he asked if I felt called to ordination. I laughed and brushed it off but afterwards it felt as if I couldn’t move or think properly. I said to God I couldn’t possibly do this; I am Catholic with an Italian Catholic husband and children. I couldn’t. Eventually after three days of wrestling and feeling confused I said yes to God, let it be to me according to your will. After that I felt a freedom and a deep sense of God’s presence within and around me. Eventually I was put forward for selection and was accepted for training. After training I served my curacy and now am a vicar in a parish with a high level of poverty and addiction. I am always Catholic, for that is my baptism and how I feel called. The Eucharist is central, and I believe in the Real presence of Christ in Communion. My deepest feeling is gratitude and humility to the God who loves us all into being and who can make all things new”.

4. How can God’s mission be served?

God’s mission can best be served by a vibrant, joyful Church which recognises the baptismal vocation and enables the flourishing of all its members, female and male. This would be attractive to everyone, especially those on the margins of our society, enabling every aspect of our church to grow. We need to move from a downward spiral of maintenance to an open, upward spiral of thriving communities of missionary disciples.

Although ‘vocation’ appears in the title of section D7 of our diocesan report, the word is not mentioned again. The section talks of the Church making use of the laity as a resource. Our Christian communities need to enable and encourage all the baptised to recognise and develop (i.e. discern) their individual gifts and exercise fully their priestly, prophetic and kingly charisms: a symphony of vocations as Pope Francis described for the [2023 World Day of Prayer for Vocations](#).

5. What are the major challenges?

- The culture of the Church in relation to women and their vocations.
- Young girls and women are not always encouraged to see themselves as able to make an important contribution to parish life.

- Some priests and people are set in their ways, unwilling to change, defensive and unaware of their unconscious bias (OG).
- Female examples of sainthood and heroism are rarely the subject of homilies.
- Unless there's a major paradigm shift, as with the pandemic, the perceived rate of change is slow and leads to impatience.
- There are rarely facilities (e.g. childcare) to support women who might want to volunteer.
- Talented women will use their talents elsewhere if their contributions are spurned. There are moments of opportunity in people's lives to seize which will not recur.
- Young practising Catholics and some from ethnic minorities feel isolated in their parish communities.

A young catholic mother speaks.

"There are no facilities for younger women and young mothers in my experience. Not even in the diocese. In the wider church at a national level there are facilities (Youth 2000 and Celebrate). There is an attraction to my husband's church because they have frequent family social events. Women and their children, fathers and their children, whole families. I want to be able to socialise with other families with young children so that my child can have catholic friends."

6. What questions do we need to address most urgently and what are our proposals for change?

There are many desirable changes in the life of our Church which could facilitate the flourishing of our women. This is what we suggest can be actioned now at a Parish and a Diocesan level.

Parish level

- To focus on listening to women's experiences and encourage women into positions of decision-making and leadership in parishes.
- To aim for at least 50% female representation on parish councils.
- To ensure that all our parishes allow both girls and adult women to be altar-servers.
- To increase and encourage the opportunities for lay leadership of Services of the Word.
- To invite women to share reflections during liturgies and after Mass.
- To encourage use of inclusive language (such as 'people', where appropriate) and to avoid the use of male pronouns for God whenever reasonably possible, and especially in informal liturgies and prayer.
- To discourage the use of the shorter forms of the Gospel readings when these exclude women (e.g. the Presentation in the Temple, the woman with a haemorrhage)
- To teach about Biblical women, women Doctors of the Church, and female saints (particularly influential British women such as Hilda of Whitby, Julian of Norwich, and Mary Ward).

Diocesan level

- To offer post ordination formation/ training for priests around unconscious bias in relation to women and girls in the Church.
- To promote a culture of accompaniment, ensuring that vocations of value should not be limited to clergy and religious.
- To offer formation to women and men for the ministries of Lector and Acolyte in our Diocese.
- To amend guidelines to encourage more Services of Word and Communion.
- To add our Diocese's voices to those calling for the extension of those permitted to give homilies.
- To add our Diocese's voices to those calling for the admission of women to ordination as Deacons.
- To educate all the Church to address unconscious bias in relation to women and their callings.
- To develop materials for seminarians, presiders, teachers, and catechists to enable them to hear and share stories of Biblical women with our people whenever opportunity presents.
- To ensure that 50% of forthcoming Diocesan Pastoral Council is female.
- To consider the provision of childcare facilities at large Diocesan events

7. Conclusion

As highlighted above there is much that our parishes and diocese can do to acknowledge, celebrate, and develop the many and varied roles of women (D7). As a diocese we have asked the Holy Spirit in our Assembly prayer to amaze us, to disturb us. Indeed, we have even been encouraged by Pope Francis to develop ministries such as Lector and Acolyte.

We can choose at this time to intentionally focus on how the women of our Church can flourish. In doing so we can encourage the growth of healthy catholic communities now and into the future in the Diocese of Northampton.

