

Synod working Group – Reaching out to those who do not feel welcomed by, or part of the Catholic Church, and those who live on the peripheries and margins.

26th June 2023

The Preparatory Document introducing the Synod process spoke of “the important need to also include those who are now distant or disconnected from the faith, as well as minority groups, the poor and the marginalised”.

A diocesan working team was tasked with reaching out to those who do not feel welcomed by, or part of, the Catholic Church and those who live on the peripheries and margins.

This group of people is large and encompasses many for whom the church is not a welcoming or supportive place. This happens to people due to feelings of exclusion, lack of welcome, lack of understanding, those affected by abuse, those who feel excluded due to the teachings of the Church, the lukewarm and those who feel the church is no longer, or was never, relevant in their lives.

We wanted to avoid looking for very specific groups of people that we had *decided ourselves* may fall into an ‘excluded group.’ It was important that if we were truly listening in a synodal way, that we ensured that our listening covered anybody, who for any reason, feel unwelcome by the church.

To that end we set ourselves a task to try to reach out to those who no longer come to worship with us.

We worked with six parishes spread throughout the diocese and produced a leaflet that we gave to parishioners, asking them to pass it on to anyone they knew, in their circle of contacts who may feel in anyway excluded or unwelcome. We also distributed the leaflets to the staffs of three Catholic schools. Our leaflet asked people to send us their details, (using a pre-paid envelope) if they would like to talk to us. We would then arrange local listening sessions, or they could go to an online form where they could let us know what their experience was with the church and how this made them feel.

In a way there was an assumption on our end, that if we could explain to enough people that we were happy to listen to their experience, then many of them would be more than



willing to come and talk to us.

Around 300 to 400 leaflets were distributed throughout our parishes, and these were given specifically to those who said that they felt they knew someone relevant to pass them onto. We estimated that we were able to reach out to 1000+ individuals.

The response was minimal.



We soon learned that our assumption that 'if we listen, they will talk' was wrong.

We were unwilling to give up trying to reach out. On one particular weekend all the six parishes in the Slough Pastoral Area asked people at Mass to fill in a questionnaire asking people to speak on behalf of family members/friends who no longer attend Mass. Just under 1000 questionnaires were returned. It was in no way a very sophisticated gathering of information but perhaps gave some clues about how people are feeling.

From this small study the three largest groups seem to be:

- People are working longer and longer hours and often it is for shift work. They are tired and need to rest and have some family time.
- A large group no longer believe in God or find the Church irrelevant.
- Many are dominated at weekends by children's activities.

Other reasons that were given included frailty, worries about safety, dealing with bereavement, not feeling welcomed. The parishes involved are consuming the information.

From our leaflet responses, online form and survey we feel we can identify three different groups of people:

1. Those who attend Mass but for many (perhaps for those reasons already mentioned) do not always attend each week and even though they are present in church some may still feel "marginalised". (divorced/remarried, LGBTQ+ etc.)

2. There are people who feel excluded or unwelcome in some way from the church. They still have a connection with the church, and they do want to be listened to, and want the church to change, so they are still talking to the church.

"As a divorced Catholic and soon to be remarried in an Anglican Church I feel alienated from the Catholic Church yet welcome by all other Christian denominations. As a Catholic for 60 years, I do not feel that the church is leashing as Christ would do. Too much dogma and rules and not enough heart. Too black and white when the real world is grey. I thank the lord for Pope Francis who is trying to emulate the Lord, but others are not!"

"I feel that families are poorly served by the church. Children's Liturgy is great for the younger children but what happens then? Once children make their FHC they are expected to sit through a mass they can't follow. It's no surprise they stop coming. If the church can't make mass accessible for children/young people, then it will become irrelevant.

3. There are also many people who may, or may not, feel 'excluded' from the church that they know, but, they have now walked away and made their choice to leave. This may have been for any number of reasons. Perhaps it was by choice because they did not feel the church relevant to their lives, or because they may have been harmed in some way.

They had a connection to the Church previously, and something has changed. They do not want, or feel the need, to be heard and understood. We certainly need to reach out to listen, and try to understand this group, as it is important that the Church at all levels seeks to heal the wounds of abuse, lack of compassion, judgement, and alienation. They have a special need of the love of Jesus.

Is this one of the groups that Mission Northampton would like to engage with? If so, we feel that they will encounter the same difficulties as we have experienced. How do we reach out to them? It is difficult.

One of the people we listened to, sent this follow up afterwards:

"Thank you for listening and hearing – not always the same thing as you know. Thank you for your authenticity, empathy, and reassurance of God's love – it meant a lot to me, and I am sure... to others too."

Among other groups that we were hoping to be able to listen to, were members of the LGBTQ+ community as this group was mentioned in the diocese synod report. No one specifically came forward, but we were contacted by people who indicated their keenness for us to listen to one of their family members who were part of the LGBTQ+ community. We did encourage them to get their family member to contact us themselves but without success.

Another specific group that we were able to specifically listen to was the group who attend the monthly mass for the disabled and their families. They were content with the provision of a specific disabled friendly mass each month, but they asked why this is only happening in Luton.

It was also interesting to hear that the group think of themselves as belonging much more to that monthly Mass group, than to what may be considered their own physical parishes.

Where do we go from here?

The actual picture is indeed quite different from the one we started with. This is potentially a true sign that The Holy Spirit is at work and guiding the process.

It is important for the Church to understand that simply because it is prepared to listen, not everyone will want to talk.

We need to consider how we create an environment where the Catholic Church is seen as a place that our local communities want to engage with. A church that cares and wants to support everyone, regardless of their circumstances. This is an important missionary step. To achieve this, we need to be more outward looking and be seen as a part of our communities through social action and engagement. We have many examples of this in practice throughout Northampton Diocese that we can build on and learn from. Everyone benefits from these actions.

We would like to suggest three steps that we might like to undertake across the Diocese to reach out to all these three groups. But nothing is a “quick fix”.

1. Welcome

When people attend our parishes for Mass they need to be encouraged, heartened, inspired, and welcomed. Life for many is challenging and there are many calls on people’s energies and commitments. When Mass goers speak on behalf of family or friends who no longer attend Mass they speak of “a loss of faith, a loss of hope”. Fr. Ed Foley, the renowned Chicago liturgist, makes it very simple. “To continue to attract people to Mass three things must be in place: warm welcome, good music and a well prepared, substantial, encouraging homily where the Gospels meet the lived experiences of those listening.”

Somehow, we must take on that wonderful balance that we hear constantly from Pope Francis: true to the wisdom of the Church and yet a constant reminder that that the Gospel is a message of mercy. We suggest that a facility could be put in place across the Diocese where weekend parish liturgies could be reviewed externally under those categories of welcome, music and preaching. It would need to be undertaken in a positive and respectful manner and received with humility and mindful of the different groups we strive to serve.

Some questions that might immediately spring to mind:

- How would we make sure that it didn’t feel like an Ofsted inspection?
- Would priests and liturgy groups be open to such a suggestion?
- Who would do the reviewing?

- How do we make it a positive experience?

2. Inward or outward looking parishes?

We reviewed most of the newsletters that our 69 diocesan parishes published on the fourth Sunday of Easter. They made for interesting reading. There was strong evidence that parishes do provide strong spiritual support for those attending Mass in the form of weekday Masses, opportunities for adoration, and recitation of the rosary and more. Certain social events for parishioners were also advertised. However, there was much less evidence of what we might call “outreach”, of involvement in events or projects that reach out to those outside our Church, those who do not feel we are relevant in their lives. We could perhaps be accused of being a “closed shop”. However, we must make clear that some parishes spoke in the newsletters about such things as CAFOD, Foodbank, Bereavement Support open to all. And there is no doubt that individual Catholics are involved in good community activities and that some activities go on in parishes that are not necessarily in the newsletter each week. For the latter, we can give the examples of the Luton group supporting people with dementia, the London and Slough run supporting those who are homeless. However, if people are not to think of us a closed shop or irrelevant it is our suggestion that each parish be encouraged (or more than encouraged) to open its doors and host one, new community project in the first year after the Assembly to help those in need or engage in existing wider projects.

(Training and support for different outreach or community projects is currently being developed along with applications for funding and grants).

3. Sharing best practice and ideas

Regarding this suggestion, we acknowledge that people will need encouragement and support and sometimes training. We would like to propose a new stream of communication be set up in the Diocese. On this dedicated platform parishes could exchange information about what is already happening in this area of “outreach” or what they might be proposing. Experiences could be shared and advice about funding etc. The details of how this platform might look and how it might be constantly kept fresh would be something to be discussed.

Some good examples: a number of parishes did new, exciting and innovative things in their liturgies at Pentecost and on Fathers’ Day. We could use a platform to really encourage each other and share what works well.

