

**SYNOD 2023**  
**FEEDBACK FORM ABOUT THE GROUP DISCUSSION**

“What changes need to be made – in myself, in our parish, in the Diocese –  
to make the Church’s mission today more vibrant and effective?”

*(Please complete this form clearly)*

Name/Type of group (indicate parish)	<b>Woolhampton Parish</b>	
Date of meeting	December 2021 – February 2022	
Particular details that you wish to be noted (e.g. ecumenical, school, university etc)	We ran a series of open meetings in the four churches of our parish, at different times of day and different days of the week, in person and on Zoom, and also conducted two surveys, so as to maximise scope for participation within the time available to us. These included a meeting for parishioners in the 10-18 age range, and a survey of those who had left the Church. We had breakout groups with facilitators, and published minutes and other documents on a dedicated website.	
Number (indicate males/females)	The meetings and surveys in our small rural parish attracted over 200 attendances and responses in total. Some parishioners attended more than one meeting.	We did not collect data on the gender of participants.
Age range	10 – 90+ years of age	

**I. THE JOURNEYING COMPANIONS**

How can we be more welcoming as a Christian community?

Pope Francis is recognised and valued as a progressive leader and as the key stimulus to the synodal journey, encouraging all to support change and embrace inclusion. His vision is of a synodal church where everyone’s views are heard and respected. We are a long way from that vision at the moment.

A very strong message from our synodal process is how much both current and former members value Church as community, companions journeying together. An equally strong message, however, is how often our Church is not experienced as an inclusive community. Indeed, it can be actively exclusive at times, to everyone’s loss. Those who do not readily fit some model of the ideal Christian can feel themselves excluded, or actually be excluded, from full participation in Church life. Most obviously, the priesthood excludes women and those who are married (unless they happen to be former Anglicans). Yet St Peter discovered that the Church thrives on diversity (Acts Ch 10), and St. Paul tells us that “...you are all one in Christ” (Galatians 3:28). One former parishioner commented: ‘If we are all God’s children, why do we exclude anyone who is not like us?’

At all levels from the universal Church to the parish, we must therefore be more welcoming and inclusive, learning to see Christ in others. We each have to resist any temptation to be judgemental of people with views different from our own. This is the essence of synodality.

People come to church for different reasons, each hoping to find something that fits their needs at the time. They should be confident of finding a welcoming and sustaining community. Sadly, the

predominant view is that their experience can fall short of this expectation. Efforts should be made to be more accepting of difference, to be welcoming, and to include those seen as on the margins – the homeless, ex-prisoners, infrequent attenders, asylum-seekers, newcomers and others. Everyone who knocks on the door should feel sure of a welcome.

Many of those who have left or are on the verge of leaving comment that the Church generally does not express itself in ways accessible to modern culture. Some liturgies appear remote. The importance of joy and uplift seems far outweighed by fear and condemnation. If people do not feel welcome then they will not come, congregations will shrink further, more churches will close, and we will all be losers. Those who leave do so in a spirit of frustration, anger and, above all, great sadness. This issue concerns every level of the Church, from the local to the universal.

## **2. LISTENING**

How can we be good listeners to those close to us and those outside the Church? To whom do we listen?

What became apparent very quickly in our process was the large segment of the Church to whom we do not listen. Many parishioners were deeply concerned about the current unequal position of women in the universal Church. They felt that the priesthood and diaconate should be open to women, and that women should be allowed full participation at all levels of Church life. At the moment, many women feel that the roles they fulfil are minor and often menial, and that their needs are not addressed.

We appreciate that, in a world-wide Church embracing a great variety of cultures, the roles of women, and indeed of other groups, will be seen in a variety of ways. However, if the goal of treating women equally with men in all things in the Church is simply ignored, or shrugged off as too difficult or inconsistent with current Canon Law, the Church will have a greatly impoverished future.

Young people are key to today's Church, and are not merely tomorrow's Church-in-waiting. But many parishioners expressed concern that the Church is not in touch with its younger members. Young people – especially teenagers – find their needs ignored. Church liturgies can be experienced as boring, with little relevance to modern life. There is a lack of joy. The view that Christian teaching is outdated and that young people would not embrace it was quite strongly expressed, along with the view that the Church's position on marriage and other moral issues needed to move with the times, so that more people could feel included. The young people asked that the faith be translated to them in a way that they can follow.

Teenagers also commented that there are a lot of activities for younger children in our parish, but that activities and events for older children and adults were also important and more could be done. There was a feeling from parishioners of all ages that the Church has been slow to respond to a changing world, a world that is more open than ever. It is felt that having and making friends in the faith community, especially for young people, provides mutual support for personal faith and its growth. A social component is important for like-minded people of faith.

## **3. SPEAKING OUT**

*How can we be more honest in our dealings with each other?*

The synodal process presents a rare opportunity to improve communication between clergy and laity, and between parish and diocese. We need effective mechanisms for open, honest and

respectful dialogue, and for more collaborative leadership, at all levels. At both diocesan and parish level, these are seen to have deteriorated recently or to be lacking entirely, leading to some parishioners joining other parishes or leaving the Church altogether.

Our synodal process has also highlighted, again, the importance of being open and inclusive. Joint decision-making and shared responsibility are empowering, and usually lead to wiser outcomes. There are many who have much to offer and who would welcome more involvement. The old patterns of top-down decision-making – clergy dictating to laity without any consultation – can simply lead to resentment and alienation.

The Bishop's recent visit to the parish was seen by some as a missed opportunity to promote inclusivity, reconciliation and the synodal process itself. Instead, some felt it had too much stage management and too little chance for spontaneous interaction. It did not feel synodal.

#### **4. CELEBRATING**

##### *How might we celebrate better the Liturgy in our parish?*

Liturgy lies at the centre of Christian life. The sharing of values and rituals underpins Catholicism, creating a sense of identity and promoting inclusivity. Parishioners take strength from worshipping together, and appreciate having monks from Douai serving the parish. With the general shortage of priests and lack of vocations we consider ourselves lucky to have them.

Liturgy is a prime example of where decisions should be made as locally as possible, and in full consultation with all concerned, rather than being imposed top-down. Petty changes to wording, or arbitrary and rigid rules about who is allowed to do what, strike at the heart of the joy and inclusiveness that should characterise liturgical activity, and are the opposite of synodal. They drive people away. We have to be able to adapt liturgy to local circumstances in order to give real expression to its full richness.

We would all be enriched by greater variety in our liturgy: more experiment, services designed for particular groups (young, etc), wider involvement in planning and delivering. More discussion and teaching about the liturgy would help open up the possibilities, making our rich traditions flourish under the actual circumstances of our times. Liturgy in less formal settings – house Masses, taking communion to the sick, etc – is an important element of this and likely to become more so in future.

Within our parish, teenagers reported sometimes finding homilies boring and aimed at the adults rather than them. They feel overlooked. Perhaps homilies might be focused on their perspectives from time to time. We should also be more imaginative in finding roles for teenagers within the Mass – like serving, reading, bidding prayers, music etc – and encourage active participation.

Music is an important part of much liturgy. Here, too, we need to explore different approaches for different circumstances. Diversity is key.

#### **5. CO-RESPONSIBLE IN THE MISSION**

##### *How well do we work together as clergy and laity for the mission of the Church?*

Parish life is at the very centre of how we practise our faith. It is how most people experience church, and is hugely valued. Encouraging and supporting the development of an involved, active and compassionate community is seen as vital. This sense of community should be nurtured by

members of the congregation and by a compassionate and sensitive clergy welcoming everyone, including all age groups, those divorced or feeling alienated from the church, infrequent attenders, non-Catholics, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

In the course of our synodal process, we have identified a series of areas where we as a parish can work together, laity and clergy, to build a more synodal way of being, to journey together and promote the Church's mission. In the coming months we will be looking at how best to prioritise and take this forward.

We should be aware of and reach out to those who are elderly, infirm and isolated in the community. Taking communion to the housebound, lonely and vulnerable is seen as a vital ministry and needs to be maintained within our parish, with a fresh cohort of lay ministers needing to be recruited and prepared. House Masses are another opportunity for shared initiative.

Participation in Church activities and ministries is seen as a way to draw people of all ages into Church life, giving them a sense of purpose and inclusion. It should not be left to the usual suspects but shared among all the parishioners, especially the young. At the same time we should be aware that people have many other commitments within work and family life and should not feel pressurised into participating.

## **6. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

*How can our group, parish, diocese and the Church be more outward-facing?*

The Catholic Church at both national and local level is often seen as inward-looking (self, soul) rather than outward. Within the UK, Pope Francis has a high public profile and is greatly valued. He is seen as the Church's most effective ambassador, doing all he can to reflect Christ's teachings. His public comments about major global issues, such as climate change, and during international crises, are pointed and incisive, and set a moral tone that influences millions. Apart from him, however, the Church in the UK these days does not voice its views prominently enough: it often seems to be missing from public debates on issues like poverty, refugees, injustice, exploitation – the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching. The Catholic Church currently appears in the news rather more often for child abuse than for defending the needy and vulnerable.

Of course, the Catholic Church does also have many examples of proactive, compassionate and saintly people within the laity and the clergy, who bring the gospel, and Christ, to life in people's lives. Individuals in local congregations reach out in support of the vulnerable in many different ways. The sense of community around the parishes is clearly important and beneficial to its parishioners. People identified the witness of modern martyrs in serving the poor and the oppressed and in giving their lives in standing up for them. But our reputation, nationally and globally, has been tarnished by the mishandling of the child abuse scandal. It will take many years and much atonement before our Church regains the respect of wider society. Even now, substantial segments of the worldwide Church have not really started to address this most appalling scandal in their midst.

## **7. WITH THE OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS**

*In what ways might we improve our dialogue and relationship with other Christians?*

At the local level, many people see the Catholic Church as lagging behind other Christian groups in terms of involvement in the community. A greater commitment to mission, and to whole-hearted

collaboration with others, would make the Church more visible and more accessible. We need to link in better with 'All Churches Together' and similar local groups. This is felt to be a high priority.

Within our parish, we have experience of fundraising for local and for global causes and of working directly with these causes. The same is true for the diocese as a whole, eg with its initiatives in Bamenda. We are also trying to raise our awareness of environmental and similar issues. Such activities are best carried out in collaboration with other local groups that share the same objectives. Both parish and diocese should continue to develop networks to strengthen this work.

## **8. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION**

*How can we make the Church more participatory and increase co-responsibility?*

Reform of the priesthood is a matter of urgency. Many parishioners believe that diocesan priests should be allowed to marry if they wish, that there is no compelling theological reason for compulsory celibacy, and that under current rules it is hypocritical to welcome former Anglican married priests into the Church and allow them to officiate. It is considered that, because of their very different lifestyle, priests cannot easily relate to those married, with families, who have to contend with all the resultant pressures and responsibilities in their lives. Some priests are felt to be uncaring, critical and exclusive, with out-dated views that should have been addressed in the seminary. However, parishioners also comment on encountering wonderful priests, who dedicate their lives to humbly leading their people to God.

Alongside these vital structural changes, parishioners recognise that the job of a parish priest puts huge demands on the individual. More time, care and imagination need to be invested in formation before someone is appointed to the role, and appropriate support must be available after appointment. The secular world has much to offer in this context.

In the context of divorce and remarriage, many expressed a strong desire for change in Canon Law and the culture surrounding it. An overwhelmingly recurring theme from our discernment process is that the present regulations concerning divorce and remarriage are inappropriate and a major factor in driving people of good will away from the Church. The divorced and remarried too often find themselves unwelcome in the Church because of Canon Law. There should be acceptance that people make mistakes and that lifelong blame should not be heaped on the divorced, who are looking for a sense of belonging and need to be part of a loving community. This does not have to involve a rejection of traditional Church teaching. See:

<https://www.thepastoralreview.org/issues/257-past-issues/2019/january-february-2019/1652-pope-francis-and-the-internal-forum-solution> for an up-to-date analysis of how Canon Law can be applied humanely.

The complexity and remoteness of the annulment process are experienced as humiliating, punitive and degrading. Some recent annulment cases have highlighted the fact that the Church can be seen as being hypocritical in this matter. The very public scandal of Boris Johnson being allowed to remarry in church, within the strict letter of Canon Law, when so many others are prevented from doing so, simply underlines the absurdity of current practice. The letter of the law crushes its spirit and brings the Church into disrepute, questioning Canon Law's consideration of the term 'scandal'.

More generally, Canon Law needs to be overhauled to allow the right climate for flexibility in day to day practices at individual and parish level. The Church hierarchy needs to acknowledge that informed and spiritually prepared laity are capable of discerning some decisions for themselves. The

Holy Spirit is not constrained by regulations, and the Church should not be imprisoned by its own overly prescriptive rules. The Holy Spirit speaks to us all.

The words of Pope Benedict XV, when reviewing Canon Law in 1917, are still relevant: “...*adapting others [ie other laws] to the necessities of the times and enacting new ones in conformity with the present needs.*”

## 9. DISCERNING AND DECIDING

*In a synodal style Church, what new processes of decision-making and decision-taking are needed? How transparent and accountable are the decisions made?*

In a synodal-style Church, it is obvious that decision-making must involve those affected by the decision, and not be reserved for some closed process involving a subset of the clergy only (as, for example, with the recent distracting revision of the English translation of the liturgy). The current synodal exercise acknowledges explicitly that the Spirit ‘blows where it wills’. The Spirit may speak to anyone, and therefore all concerned must be engaged if the Church is to discern collectively how the Spirit is seeking to move us. This reinforces the importance of subsidiarity in a synodal Church: decisions must be made as locally as possible, and not centralised more than absolutely necessary.

Our parish has many parishioners who are spiritually mature, well informed, thoughtful, energetic, prayerful individuals, generous with their time and experience. Our synodal process was strongly supported, evoking many striking contributions. We are keen to work together, sharing responsibility and decision-making. We expect to be synodally involved in decisions that affect us, at parish or diocesan level.

The clerical sexual abuse scandals have shown once again that the current Church is neither transparent nor accountable. This subject repeatedly surfaced in all inputs to our synodal process. The universal Church, with its authoritarianism, priestly celibacy and a remote hierarchy seemingly immune to challenge, is a setting ripe for such abuse. It has been occurring for a long time, and in the eyes of the world appears to have been systematically covered up by the Church, which has seemed to give higher priority to defending its reputation and hindering justice than to looking after those who have been gravely damaged by some of its clergy. The Church has now taken some important steps to combat abuse, but it must look much more deeply and more urgently at the underlying roots of the problem and face up to the need to make some fundamental structural and cultural changes, including within the seminaries.

The abuse and subsequent cover-up have completely undermined the Church’s authority, making it seem hypocritical. The Catholic laity feels tainted by association, and this has been one powerful reason for many baptised Catholics leaving the Church. One parishioner commented that “ ‘Mother Church’ has been protected at the enormous expense of the humiliation, degradation and life-long suffering of young lives failed by the very Church which should have protected them.” This is the opposite of companions journeying together.

On a different matter, parishioners have been concerned at what has felt like a lack of enthusiasm from our diocese for the current synodal process, with relatively little information or encouragement from diocesan leaders, and little evidence of openness to real change. So we were pleased to see, in the latest diocesan e-News (no 354, 22 February), a public commitment by the diocese to publish ‘across the diocesan communication channels’ its report on the submissions it receives through this synodal process. This is a constructive step towards improving its transparency and accountability, and hence its credibility.

## 10. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY

*How do we form people to make them more capable of “journeying together”?*

Sacramental preparation is one area where the scope for lay ministries is recognised and needs to be expanded, especially in view of diminishing vocations. Those who are actively involved in catechism are a strength of the church, but there is too much dependency on just a few people. Opportunities to contribute, including amongst the younger parishioners, should be encouraged. Don Bosco summer camps and Christian Life Movement groups for young people have been greatly valued in the past in this and other dioceses.

With fewer young people being educated in Catholic schools, an increasing burden falls on parents and guardians to educate their children in the faith generally. Over time, sacramental courses help to ensure that families get good support when they remain in a parish. It was noted that much joy is experienced by those who had been actively involved as catechists or in related roles.

There is a strong desire for ongoing, lifelong formation in the spiritual life, over and above sacramental preparation. The Mass itself is, of course, a primary source of formation, but there is also hunger for opportunities to study and share knowledge and experience with each other. For those with online access, significant spiritual resources are now available. However, there is also a real need for a wide variety of continuing and complementary approaches to young adult and adult catechesis, based on people working together at the level of individual parishes, groups of parishes and the diocese as a whole. Study groups and similar initiatives could be enriched by working with other Christians in the area and nationally, and indeed with other faith traditions. On a practical level, there is a desire for teaching on prayer, which is identified by some as the source of all meaningful activity of the church.

Formation for both laity and clergy should – in future – cover not only the rich spiritual traditions of the Church’s heritage but also the major issues facing the modern world.

25 February 2022