



Archdiocese of Cashel & Emly

Synodal Synthesis – May 29th 2022

Introduction

This ‘journeying together’ took on a particular focus in 2015 in the Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly with the establishment of an interim Diocesan Pastoral Council comprising laity, priests and the Archbishop. This DPC developed a vision statement for the Archdiocese and set up working groups which identified the need to listen to the views and ideas of people across the diocese. Thus, a Listening Process with parishioners from all 46 parishes took place from 2017-2018. The Listening Process did include contributions from young adults under 18 years and people from the Travelling and LGBT Communities albeit in small numbers. The views and experiences of the priests of the diocese were also attended to in 2018. A five- year Pastoral Plan Seeds of Hope is the fruit of both listening processes and was drawn up in 2019. The five Seeds of Hope discerned from the consultation process are Faith and Spirituality, Youth and Family, Community Engagement, Participation in Liturgy and Leadership and Co-responsibility.

The overriding positive element from all people is the honesty of the conversations and feedback.

Challenges

The Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly then lived with the Covid 19 pandemic which postponed the launch of the plan until September 2021. This was not the only difficulty the Archdiocese encountered. The global Faith Community now faces the issue of many people not returning to their parish communities in person as social media enables us to participate in liturgical services online.

There is also the challenge of an aging faith community in churches and an aging priestly community with low Mass attendance within the middle aged to younger generations and no younger priests to encourage and support the older generation.

Current situation

In December 2021 the Pastoral Development office was invited by Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly to meet with focus groups to explore the concept of 'synodality' in greater depth. The five seed groups within the Diocesan Pastoral Council were chosen in addition to people on the periphery of the Faith Community and those whose voices may not have been heard in the Listening Process: young adults, young parents, Men's Shed, people from the LGBT+ community and people with additional needs.

Themes from the Synodal process

Having listened to and reflected on the experiences of all the groups the themes which emerged are Outreach, Community, Acceptance, Incarnational Spirituality, Connecting Faith Celebrations with Life Experience and Leadership and Co-responsibility. Four of these six themes are similar to four of the five Seeds of Hope in the Diocesan Pastoral Plan.

Surprises

People on the periphery were very open and willing to be part of a conversation about the meaning of community and faith/spirituality for them. This illustrates that each person desires these two elements within their life despite an obvious move away from formal church practices.

Obstacles

There is a chasm between the language of the Synodal documents and the language of the woman or man on the street. This language is a challenge for the practising faith community never mind people who feel excluded from or consider the Church irrelevant. Therefore, when we reach out to those on the margins, we need to use language that speaks to their reality.

Christ in the Gospels uses the language of the people to invite them to recognise God in their midst. When the Church uses theological or religious language which people do not understand it excludes them even further. We must acknowledge the importance of using the language of the people so that when we invite them to reflect on God and faith in their lives they can connect

with their own lived experience. People sense the presence of God in the quiet and in nature and the language of the Faith community tries to communicate this goodness. Thus, we need a balance, using ordinary language to enable people to understand while explaining the value of traditions passed to each generation.

Understanding

It is important to recognise it takes time to reach out to people on the periphery and it may not happen within the time assigned to the synodal process within each diocese. We are requesting to be invited into people's spaces and asking them to be open to conversing with us and allowing us the privilege of listening to their experiences. It may take time to set up meetings and one must accept people's hesitancy and acknowledge that our process may not be their priority. In recognition of this we sent out an online questionnaire to support networks so that people had the freedom to engage or not. We received one online response.

As this synodal process is a calling to the Universal Church to reclaim its way of being, of journeying together then we acknowledge that the going out, the meeting and the listening are ongoing events that do not end in 2023 but that must continue if we are to build up the Kingdom of God.

Milestone

The discussion within the Diocesan Pastoral Council echoed many aspects of the conversations with those on the periphery; 'In our experience, God is speaking to us through people whose voices have been ignored by the fact that they have walked away. They have not felt included. They have shown disinterest and apathy because we didn't listen'. DPC

Body of the Synthesis:

Emerging themes

Outreach

We cannot demand or expect to bring people back into our churches to observe the traditional practices of the past. Christ calls us to 'Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News to everyone'. Each group expressed gratitude at being contacted and invited to be part of a process where their experiences were listened to. We must reach out with humility to those who feel they have been excluded and judged and who have not experienced the love of Christ

for them within the Faith Community. When we have the courage to reach out and ask if we may meet people in their spaces, we are acknowledging that their spaces are as important as our church buildings and that we want them to be comfortable rather than wanting to be comfortable ourselves.

Young adults speak openly and freely of feeling connected to other young adults with similar interests but do not feel a sense of community within the parish. They are happy to meet with us on a number of occasions in a relaxed atmosphere to reflect on what is important for them but acknowledge they do not feel at ease at Mass or at formal church services.

One of the Seeds of Hope identified in the pastoral plan is that of Youth and Family. Parishioners are concerned for young adults, young people and families. They want to have initiatives which attract young people. Young adults and parents are searching for ways to connect yet these ways need to be in their spaces where they gather, have fun and converse.

A group of young adults who are committed to their faith said they cannot see a way of involving young people in Sunday Eucharist other than the choir. Their peers see the Faith Community as irrelevant. Yet they believe in the value of outreach and listening to young adults perhaps in the form of a questionnaire or survey that young adults can access on social media and complete anonymously.

Members of the Men's Shed, the LGBT + community and people with additional needs also appreciate being reached out to and affirmed where they are rather than where we want them to be.

The priests are ministering to people on the margins and the DPC speaks of being 'called to grow together by reaching out to individuals or as part of a community/parish effort to engage with people on the margins.'

Community

Each one of us as a human being is called into relationship and every person has a desire for community. One of the Seeds of Hope named by the parishioners in the diocese is Community Engagement. The priests of Cashel and Emly have identified good friends and family as a support to them in their ministry. One of the questions which made sense to all the focus groups was 'where do you feel a sense of community?'

The word Community for many means a sense of welcome, identity, familiarity, connection. Young adults with additional needs experience a sense of community in the hubs where they engage in activities with others as these hubs contain smaller numbers and people get to know each other better.

The challenge for us as a Faith Community is that those on the periphery and those who may only come to liturgical services occasionally do not experience a sense of community within the parish or the Church in general.

Young adults and people within the LGBT+ community say they do not feel welcomed in the Faith Community and their identity is not valued. We are called as a people of faith to look deep within and see if our judgements are those which Christ warned against.

‘Teenagers are not actively participating in Church. Some elderly people whose way of life has been greatly affected by Covid restrictions now seem further apart. Also younger parents, adolescents, refugees, people with mental health issues, travellers, people with low self-esteem, people who might be termed as ‘working class’, the LGBT community all seem further apart. Some women are disillusioned. Also men often times don’t involve themselves as Eucharistic Ministers. People who have decided they don’t need it anymore are also further apart.’ DPC

A welcoming open community helps all of us to live with the feelings of loneliness which gnaw deep in the human soul. Loneliness is part of every person’s life and is named as a challenge by the laity and priests of the diocese and by groups on the periphery. Surely this is why Christ asks us ‘to love one another so that all peoples may know you are my disciples’. Jn 13:35

Acceptance

People on the margins feel they are not accepted as they are. They feel excluded by the Faith Community’s words, attitudes and behaviour. Young adults say ‘Older people don’t listen to us young people so much. Older people are judging us.’

‘I think the local church and church in general would support me in my personal life more if they were more open minded and with the times. I am an unmarried mother. I think the church needs to stop frowning on this and open arms to anyone who wants to practice their faith. I find it hard at times to have faith when so much bad is in our world. I think if this was discussed more at Mass it would help me more with my personal faith.’ (Young woman 26+ years who took part in the Diocesan Listening Process 2017-2018).

It is worth noting that parishioners who are involved in their faith community feel judged by others for this. So many people may experience being looked upon in a negative way depending on their perspective.

‘Some young families think that young children are not welcome in our Church. We need to make sure that we welcome all, young and old with open arms. If people are made to feel welcome, they begin to feel involved and get a sense that the Church belongs to them. This way faith will be passed on from generation to generation.’ (Parishioner 56+ years)

Those within the LGBT+ community who have a strong personal faith are finding ways of connecting with each other and worshipping in a safe space. They believe that Christ invites each person, whom the Father has created, to be who they are. This process of journeying together has also included meeting people from other Christian churches who experience similar barriers of exclusion and intolerance.

‘Us travellers are never asked to do anything at Mass and sometimes at the sign of peace we’re ignored by others. They don’t want to shake our hand.’ (Young Travelling woman Under 18).

‘Where people are respected for who and what they are, they can speak their truth freely without fear of ridicule or judgement.’ (DPC)

Young adults with additional needs speak of ‘being loved as they are’ in their family home or house share situation and as a result feel very relaxed there. Both the focus groups and those who took part in the Listening Process said that being listened to helped them to feel accepted. When we give time to another person to express their feelings, challenges, joys and sorrows we are saying to them ‘I see you as a sister or brother’. Surely when Christ ate and drank with people on the margins he too was saying ‘You are my sister and my brother’.

Incarnational spirituality

Each group who engaged in a listening process acknowledged a deeper purpose to their existence whether that was a deep faith in a loving God who cares for each one of us or being at peace with oneself, nature and the world. A theme which threaded through faith and spirituality was the need for it to connect with each person’s life experience, an incarnational spirituality.

‘It needs to be a broader spirituality which is not focused on the sacraments. There is a place for the sacraments but if they do not connect to people’s daily life they become irrelevant’.
(Men’s Shed)

The Men’s Shed spoke of people with mental health concerns and addictions who may see sacramental spirituality as not connecting with their lives.

People desire a quiet way of praying, being in nature and near historical monuments. (Young adults) Young people of Confirmation age speak of their parents, grandparents, teachers and friends introducing them to faith and helping them to know God. Younger and older teenagers said the Covid pandemic encouraged them to find new ways of praying in their families such as using a prayer book, walking in nature and finding other prayer spaces outside. Prayer and relationship with God are seen as a help in difficult times and a support to one’s mental health. Lighting a candle in a quiet church is an action that many young adults will carry out particularly at exam time. They see it as a light in darkness, a sign of hope and comfort. It is interesting that young adults also recognise the limitations of social media, that much of it is noise and it is difficult to discern the truth. They see faith/spirituality as a call to the quiet, to the mystery within themselves and in the universe. This type of spirituality is linked in many respects to the natural world where nature offers the chance to experience peace and harmony as opposed to the hectic pace of life and the burden of everyday living for many.

The Faith Community is called to reflect again on the wonder of the incarnation, the wonder of the God of the Universe becoming a human being and identifying with every aspect of human existence.

Connecting Faith Celebrations with Life experience

Our faith celebrations need to speak to where people are at. We need to invite rather than demand obligation, we need to involve rather than exclude. ‘When liturgical celebrations are meaningful and connect with people in their everyday concerns, they are inspirational. Language must be in keeping with people’s ability to connect and empathise.’ DPC. Even the term Liturgy is off-putting for some. It is not a word used in the everyday and when religious language is solely observed in ritual it becomes irrelevant.

Yet young people of Confirmation age speak of being happy if the Mass focuses on their stage in life and they can be involved in organising it and have a booklet with songs they sing. 'It needs to be made real for my generation.' (Young man under 18 years)

A focus group of young mothers want to feel "uncomfortable" at liturgical celebrations. They want their faith to challenge them and to be radical. They speak of their need for Catechesis or teaching in the faith to satisfy a deep hunger. Only then can they be catechists to their own daughters and sons. Alongside this feedback the priests speak of 'a sustained belief in the value of the priesthood and the sacraments.'

Young mothers wish for the Faith Community to reach out and engage with them at the level of the home environment where parents try to pass on the faith. They search for an anchor in the midst of an ever-changing world and if the Faith Community no longer provides that anchor parents search for something else to hold onto. They voice the opinion that Catechesis is lacking both in the educational sphere and in the parish sphere. It is not enough for them to see people at Sunday Mass. They want to be known at a concrete level.

This same focus group of young mothers who meet and pray together are 'nourished after their conversations and feel that other people are supporting them, and they are not on their own'.

Leadership and Co-responsibility

The parishioners and priests across the diocese and the DPC speak of all of us being called from our baptism to be followers of Christ and to serve our sisters and brothers, by using the gifts God has given us. The call now is to journey, together with those in ordained ministry, to build up the faith community in our time and to reach out to those who need to believe in our loving God.

'I think you have to work at your personal faith and expecting your Church to support you without your effort yields nothing. I think the Church has to be relevant to today's faith-based communities and encourage discussion and openness.' (Parishioner 66-75 years)

There is also a recognition of the limitations of institutions across all of Irish society and the Church itself is no exception. Many of the focus groups on the periphery see the institution as a barrier to their being their full selves. The LGBT+ community, young adults and the Men's Shed see the institution as irrelevant and by extension the Faith Community, the People of God have also become so. The focus groups engaged in dialogue with us speak of the leadership

roles that women and people of diversity hold in wider society. The institutional church with only one group of people holding leadership roles is out of tune with the world we live in and is not a positive sign of a loving God who embraces all people. ‘Involve women and those people who are currently side-lined – People with disabilities, divorced, single mums. Represent us at Mass.’ (Young woman 26-35 years)

Young adults themselves have taken the lead across the world on climate justice. They see caring for the earth as part of their spirituality. Spirituality is also about how they treat others and honour those who have passed away. They see social media as a way of maintaining connection with people and being called into action on various social justice issues. Each person whether part of a faith community or not is gifted by God to serve God’s purpose for the world. Many people on the margins experience an inability to exercise their gifts within the Faith Community. Surely as we look at the first disciples whom Jesus called we see that ‘God chose those the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose those who are weak to shame the strong’. 1 Cor 1:27

All people who have been listened to as part of this synodal journey have expressed an appreciation to have their voices heard, to be seen as people of value who have something to say. They want this engagement to continue and to build relationship. This is the call to our Faith Community at this time, to walk with those on the margins and to be enriched by them. Surely when we do this, we need have no fear about the future of our Faith Community as Christ walks with us and we serve all people of every nationality. As a Faith Community we no longer look in upon ourselves and worry about the loss of many traditions and practices but rather journey together in hope with God and all our sisters and brothers throughout the world.

Conclusions

‘Structures which reflect the synodal nature of our Church include Pastoral Leadership teams, Pastoral planning - enabling vibrant active faith communities, training in leadership, dialogue and discernment, programmes of catechesis and religious education, use of inclusive language, protocols for transparency and accountability at all levels, a culture of walking together as a pilgrim people in the spirit of the gospel, welcome and inclusion in the Church life and its decision- making process for all members without discrimination’. (DPC)

This vision as outlined by the DPC in its conversations offers next steps as a response to the emerging themes. The Diocesan plan, ‘Seeds of Hope’ suggests pastoral initiatives on a phased

basis. These initiatives invite us to look outwards rather than inwards, to building up the community everywhere and not just focus on trying to create community within a church building or at a particular liturgical celebration.

As a Faith Community we are called to see all outreach to those on the margins as being part of the ministry of laity and priests. Our ministry is not limited to functions within church buildings but is engaging with the entire community, indeed the global community. Our ministry is to be concerned with the joys and sufferings of all people of every creed and none. We are not concerned then with numbers or lack of numbers or the age of both our laity and priests inside the churches. Christ calls us to be a people who are looking outwards, who are concerned for the vulnerable of our society rather than the vulnerability of our institution. Are we called to reflect on those beliefs which serve as a barrier to welcoming people into the Faith Community? Do these beliefs create obstacles to our being followers of Christ? Surely for many people today the Church is seen as not honouring them for who they are and the lives they are living. Are we then as a Faith Community preventing people from experiencing the love of God for them? Many of the voices on the periphery speak of feeling excluded due to beliefs which the Church holds.

The wish of young parents to engage in Catechesis so that they can pass on the faith to their children is a call to the Faith Community to encourage lay pastoral leaders in this work. This voice is one which invites us to hear another story. A group of young mothers invite the Faith Community to explore our beliefs at a deeper level and to share their richness with courage.

We have begun to listen to people and we must as a Faith Community continue to listen to all people and every generation. This leads to a more humble, inclusive and welcoming community. Our language too needs to be inclusive and the language of the everyday. We need to support people to experience the presence of God in their lives and speak in words that they understand. If we retain religious language which is specific only to liturgy, then it too becomes a method of exclusion. Is the Holy Spirit calling us to ‘journey together’ with those of our own faith tradition and with all peoples in humility, openness and love? A synodal Church ‘is open to wisdom emerging from dialogue across difference. It is open to the contribution of young people from their particular perspectives.’ (DPC)

The co-responsibility of laity and priests for the faith development of parish communities is a response to the new vision of leadership within the Church. It is a shared responsibility, a

recognition of the priesthood of all believers. Concrete steps need to include the setting up of Parish Teams and inviting diverse people from across the parish community to share their gifts on this team. Ongoing faith and skills development need to be provided for lay pastoral leaders to work alongside the priests of the parishes and indeed to reach out to those on the periphery.

Dialogue and listening between laity and priests have taken place within the Diocesan Listening Process (2017-18) and within various leadership groups in the diocese, in particular the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Listening enables us to understand each other's perspective. Trust has been built as a result and it must be the way we journey together as a diocese into the future. This synodal process has been one which has enriched all participants. It is challenging each of us to treat our fellow human beings with the love and respect that is their God given right. We hope that this work of building relationship will be ongoing and bear fruit in greater love and understanding.

