

Findings of the Synod Process In the Archdiocese of Halifax- Yarmouth

JULY 14, 2022

PREPARED BY THE DIOCESAN SYNOD TEAM



Archdiocese of | Archidiocèse d'
Halifax-Yarmouth



Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am extremely grateful to so many of you who participated in our Synodal Process in the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth, especially the Parish Synod Teams who took up the task of engagement despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your work is very much appreciated.

Our report has been submitted to the Atlantic Episcopal Assembly and, combined with similar reports from the Atlantic Canadian dioceses, a report from Atlantic Canada has been submitted to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. The bishops of Canada will review the findings from across the country at their plenary meeting in September. From there a report from the Canadian Bishops goes to a Continental Gathering in early 2023 before reaching the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023.

However, the universal process was not the only reason for this Synodal Process. We plan to use this report to help us to act locally. I have heard your many hopes and concerns and wish to act on whatever is within our diocesan purview. Therefore, this Synodal Synthesis will form the basis of a new pastoral plan for the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth. This plan has been informed by deep listening and reflection on our four pastoral priorities of homelessness, evangelization, catechesis, and parish identity.

My goal is to provide a plan with opportunity for feedback and consultation from any who wish to be heard using both the formal structures of consultation — such as the Diocesan Finance Council, Mi'kmaq Pastoral Council, Council of Priests, Parish Pastoral and Finance Councils, and Parish leadership Teams — and informal means such as small groups, surveys, webinars, and whatever other tools we can employ to ensure the faithful are heard and contribute to the next steps for our diocese.

We have experienced much difficulty and confusion as the pandemic followed quickly on our own amalgamation process. It is time to come together again with one heart, and one mind and set our sights on the building up kingdom of God in our midst.

Sincerely in Christ,



Most Reverend Brian Joseph Dunn
Archbishop of Halifax-Yarmouth



FINDINGS OF THE SYNOD PROCESS IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF HALIFAX-YARMOUTH

ARCHDIOCESE OF HALIFAX-YARMOUTH
JULY 14, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A SYNOD?

The word “synod” refers to an assembly of the synod of bishops together in Rome, but the word also describes the Church’s posture of journeying together – to being a community that is united in purpose and mission, moving together in the same direction in this earthly pilgrimage. In everything we do, the Church is meant to be a “synodal” Church: though the Church is not a democracy, the voice of each person is valuable and their personal contribution is indispensable.

Every three years, bishops from around the world gather in Rome for a synod on a particular topic. In 2023 bishops from around the world will gather in Rome at a synod on the topic of synodality itself. In preparation for this, Pope Francis has asked all bishops to consult and pray with their own dioceses to help determine how synodality is being lived out in our midst and how we need to grow in our experience of journeying together.

The purpose of this process is twofold: to *pray* and to *listen*. We gathered communities in the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth in order to *pray* together and to *listen* to the unique contributions of each person. Everything that is shared and recorded in these conversations will not only be communicated with the global Church, but will also help shape the pastoral direction of the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth.

In everything we do, the Church is meant to be a “synodal” Church: though the Church is not a democracy, the voice of each person is valuable and their personal contribution is indispensable.

OUR PROCESS IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF HALIFAX-YARMOUTH

Our synod process opened in October of 2021 with an Assembly of the People of God presided over by Archbishop Dunn. We explored the core themes of synodality, and gathered teams from all parishes across the diocese to train them to have synod conversations at the parish level. The parish teams began gathering listening groups consisting of general parishioners, parish councils, finance councils, leadership teams, social justice ministries, prayer groups, youth, and families. Individual contributions were also submitted to the Archbishop or Diocesan Synod Team directly by mail or email.

The end result was 145 gatherings happening in every one of our parishes bringing together 821 people for reflection on the scriptures, spiritual conversation, and dialogue on six key questions distilled from the synod themes. The fruits of these conversations were recorded and submitted to the diocesan synod team.

The synod team added a follow-up survey for an additional 117 parishioners who were unable to attend in-person or virtual listening sessions. Additional encounters, such as those for religious sisters and university students, were planned and postponed numerous times due to shifting COVID-19 restrictions. In the end the follow-up survey was used to try and gather input from these groups as well.

In March 2022 the diocesan synod team launched an external survey to help give voice to those not normally considered. The faithful were encouraged to invite their friends, neighbours, and relatives who were no longer connected to the church to offer their feedback. These invitations were supported by social media ads encouraging participation. This survey garnered 513 responses, more than half of whom identified that they attend church rarely or never.

Overall, the synodal journey was fruitful but challenging. Attempting to gather people in the midst of a global pandemic and skepticism for the synod process acted as a drag on the proceedings. Despite these challenges the resulting contributions provide much insight and opportunity.

THEMES WHICH EMERGED FROM SYNODAL CONSULTATION

Parish sessions followed a process of scriptural reflection and spiritual conversation considering six thematic questions:

1. What struck you from this depiction of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles?
2. Where is the Church today? What are we doing? What are our strengths and weaknesses?
3. Where and what would you like our Church to be?
4. Can you think of an example of when you felt that you were “journeying together” with a group or community in your local Church?
 - a. If so, how did that make you feel? Were there specific processes, people, or circumstances that helped you to feel united and valued in the group?
 - b. If not, why do you think that is? What would have to happen for you, personally, to feel part of a community that is genuinely united in mission and purpose? What would make you feel that you, your voice, and your contributions were welcomed and valued?
5. Call to mind a time when a major decision was made at your parish.
 - a. How were these decisions communicated? How did you personally learn of it?
 - b. Did you feel that your voice was heard and acknowledged in that decision/discernment process?
 - c. Which voices were most influential in that process? Which voices tend to go unheard?

- Bearing in mind these experiences and reflections, where do you think God is calling our Church right now to grow and progress?

OVERALL THEMES

Below we will discuss themes that emerged within our parish spiritual conversations, as well as how these relate to the results of the external consultation surveying those typically on the margins of the faith.

CENTRALITY OF CHRIST & POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Parish groups were extremely clear of the need to allow the Holy Spirit to work and for the person of Jesus Christ to be central to their lives and to the work of the Church. This theme extended into all questions where there was a call for more focus on Christ, both personally through prayer and teaching, and sacramentally through the Eucharistic celebration and devotions. In some cases, there was a slight edge to this, suggesting that the institutional Church was a block to what the Lord and Spirit want for the world.

External respondents had an overwhelming positive, 75%, opinion of Jesus, despite a much more negative view of the Church itself. Digging deeper into those opinions we see that 50% of those opinions focused on Jesus as a good teacher or role model with another 22% saying he is God.

Figure 1: If you had to give your opinion of Jesus in a few sentences, what would you say? (external survey)

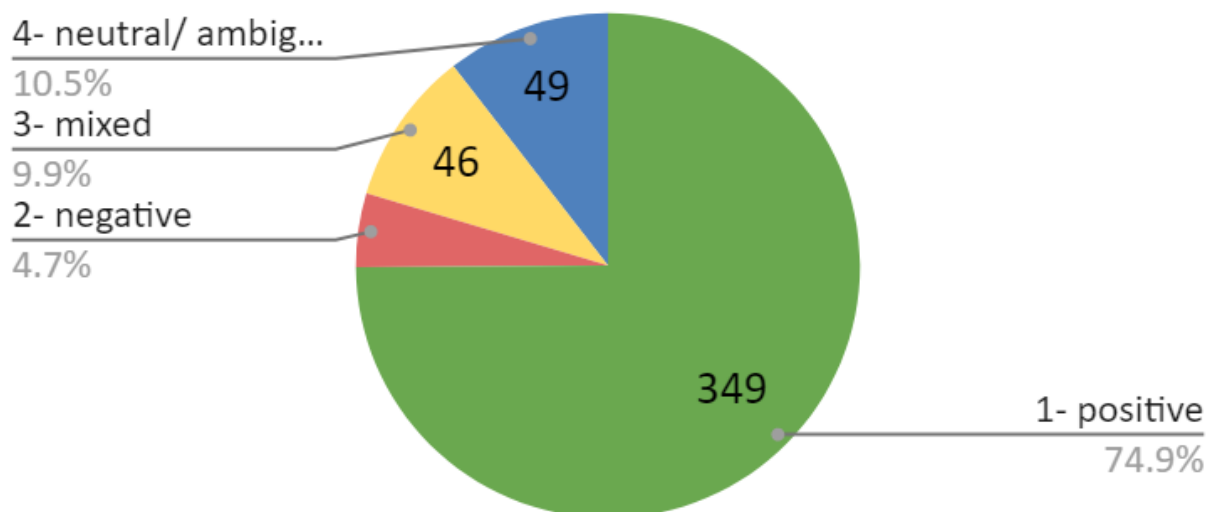
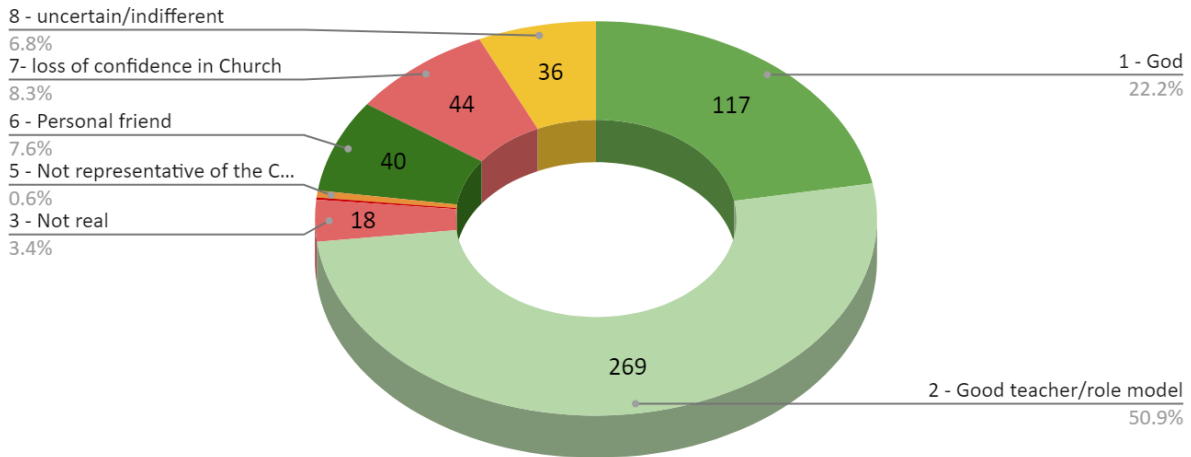


Figure 2: From external survey.

If you had to give your opinion of Jesus in a few sentences, what would you say?



Overall, there was great personal faith demonstrated by parish respondents and an overlapping interest in Jesus from external respondents. However, we also see the beginning of an emergent trend where there is a perceived distinction between the “institutional Church”, the commands of Christ, and the people of God. This is further evidenced in the themes of inclusivity and leadership outlined below.

INCLUSIVITY & WELCOME

The theme of inclusivity was pervasive in all reflection questions. Many groups expressed their amazement at how inclusive the first church was. Specifically, many noted that the Holy Spirit was an agent of inclusion by allowing others to hear the message in their own language and that Jews and Gentiles welcomed one another. Many parallels were drawn between the Apostles in the Upper Room and the church today: small, afraid, and in need of the Spirit of boldness.

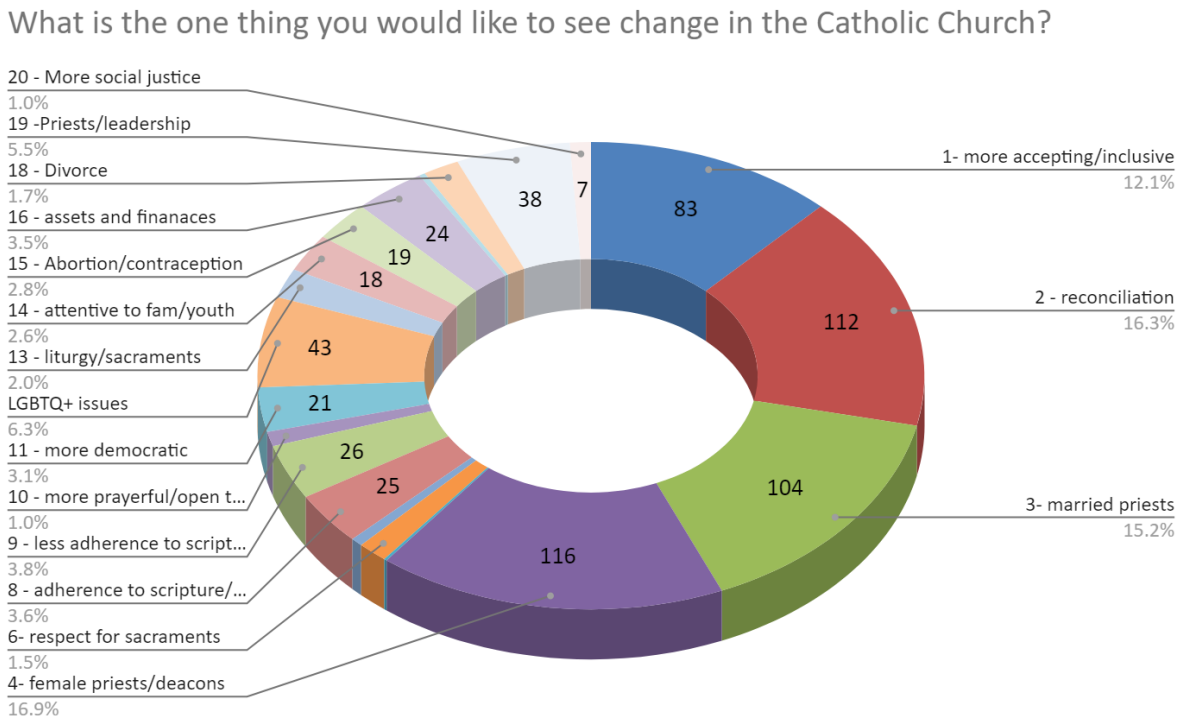
DOCTRINES & DISCIPLINES

Further responses revealed that inclusivity and welcome were not as simple as having more greeters at the door of the church — although local hospitality was deemed very important. Instead, many felt there were institutional and systemic issues that were exclusionary. In particular, many people named doctrines and disciplines such as married priests, divorce and remarriage, ordination and the role of women, and stances toward LGBTQIA2S+ people as

exclusionary and unwelcoming. Some groups that raised these issues expressed deep skepticism that their voices would be heard and passed on.

We also saw this sentiment expressed by our external survey participants. When asked what is one they could change about the Catholic Church these similar issues of doctrine and discipline were raised.

Figure 3: From external survey.

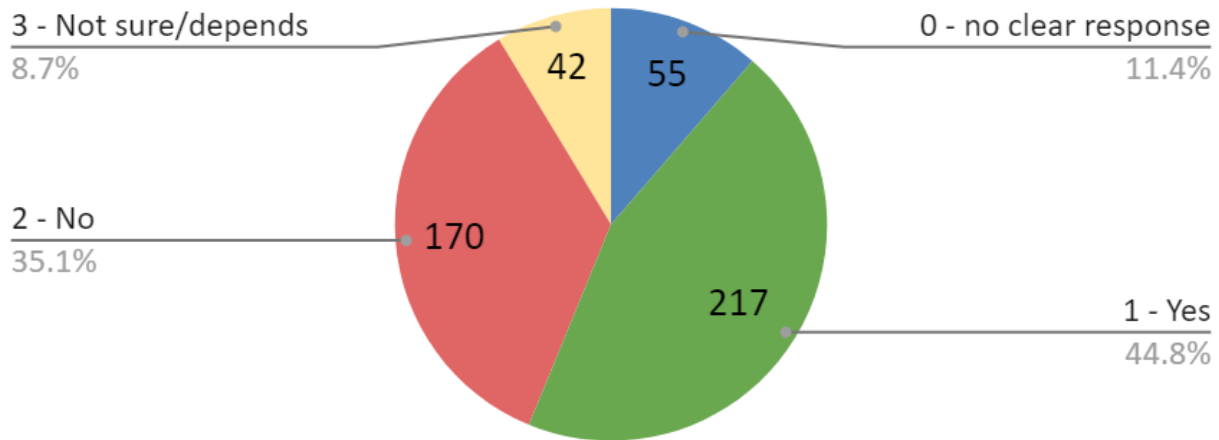


COMMUNION & COMMUNITY

Parish groups identified the importance of community as part of inclusivity and welcome. When asked of an example of journeying together and overwhelming number of parish responses identified a small group or ministry (Faith Study, prayer group, service groups, etc.) as a key experience. For many people smaller group experiences helped to generate real connections and relationships that fostered a sense of being part of something and offered opportunities to grow and serve. Generally speaking, negative experiences in these smaller settings were also a source of not feeling welcome or included. Occasionally, a sense of exclusion was felt by a decision from another source such as “leaders”, “the diocese”, or “the Church”, but it appears primary experiences of welcome or inclusion occur in smaller settings. In both circumstances the frustration of “not being heard, whether new ideas or an alternate view point”, was paramount.

Approximately 45% of external respondents noted they would feel comfortable attending an event at a parish that interested them. Inside of those responses people felt they would be generally welcome if they chose to attend.

Figure 4: If you were interested in attending a service or event hosted by a Catholic parish tomorrow, would you feel comfortable or welcome to do so? (external survey)



There was also a great desire for unity and diversity. Many people identified theological or liturgical divisions as problematic in the Church and raised division as a key concern. Division was also experienced locally in the divide between communities, particularly in light of recent parish amalgamation within the Archdiocese. The desire for diversity mainly manifested in allowing for many different devotions, gathering types, and liturgical expressions including space for contemporary and Latin celebrations. The main idea was to make room for many expressions stemming from a desire to include as many people as possible while maintaining a unifying Catholic identity. There were, of course, advocates for a singular form of expression as being primary or ideal over others although this sentiment seems to be vocal but less prevalent.

LEADERSHIP & ACCOUNTABILITY

A great number of parish and external responses centered on leadership. In fact, per Figure 3, among external responses issues of accountability and reconciliation were as large of a factor as any doctrine or discipline of the Church. These sentiments were widely shared by parish responses as well. Parish responses in particular identified these issues as barriers to outreach and evangelization as they colour the entire external reaction to the Church and discourage members from inviting others to join.

The two primary issues of accountability were clergy sex abuse and residential schools. Of those who raised them many external respondents cited them as reasons they would never be interested in the Catholic Church. Parish responses raised taking “real” responsibility for these issues was important. The shape this would take was unclear but the sentiment was strong.

Stemming from these issues was a strong sense among parish responses of division between the average person and the “institutional Church”. Institutional church seems to mean a small caste of leaders, generally clergy or central organizations such as the diocese or Rome, who make decisions with outsized effect on the people impacted. Examples of this ranged from local decisions about financial resources to the sex abuse scandals.

This sense of division lead to strong calls for increased participation in decision making. There was not a strong trend for a democratic approach but rather more emphasis on listening, consulting, and truly “being heard” in decision making processes.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to the general themes identified above there were some specific considerations worthy of additional review.

AMALGAMATION

Leading up to January 1, 2020 our diocese began a process of amalgamation of parishes. This process affected all of our parish respondents in some way. Overall, while there was recognition for the necessity of such a move “the way it was done” was either a matter of concern or an example of good participative leadership. Those with negative experiences spoke about being “blindsided”, “not being heard”, or “that everything was a foregone conclusion”. Some had positive experiences, particularly around the parish naming process, where by many voices were heard, communication was clear, and opportunities for dialog existed.

Many people realized the work of truly coming together in these new realities was greatly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. As a result, much of the work remains undone. However, the new larger parishes with multiple locations left many feeling with a sense of disconnection from their community and decisions of leadership. Additionally, some of those affected by church closures did not have a sense of inclusion/sense of welcoming in their new church.

YOUTH & FAMILIES

There was a very strong desire from all parishes to reconnect with youth and families. This was seen as both a current weakness and an important factor in growing together. Part of this concern focused insufficient follow-up with youth after catechesis.

Among external survey respondents, 34 were from those aged 18-34. Their impressions largely mirrored the themes already identified, particularly regarding inclusivity and accountability.

Our parish sessions included five youth gatherings encompassing 42 people (including other family members in some cases), two young adult groups totaling 14 people. These groups identified the importance of faith for them but also highlighted the difficulty of being a Catholic in today's world where there are many different voices and values. The value of being inclusive and welcoming identified above were also very important and many identified they felt very welcome and included in their youth groups. There was also a theme of not being heard: that young people have no voice in decisions at the local and universal level. It was expressed that many felt a group of older people made all the decisions and input from young people was unwanted and unappreciated.

RURAL EXPERIENCE

In order to capture the important voice of rural communities we separated out feedback from rural parishes to look at any emergent themes that separate the rural experience from the overall contributions. There was little difference in opinion from external respondents who reported being from rural areas. The general issues facing the Church externally appear to overshadow locality. While parish responses also shared the sentiments identified above two particular issues presented themselves.

Firstly, our rural communities more intensely experience the limited number of priests where Mass may be celebrated on a limited schedule. As a result, liturgy of the word and communion services are more common. Secondly, the physical geography often makes having a unified parish identity more difficult. In terms of leadership and decision-making some felt that these realities are not sufficiently understood or considered when making decisions in "Halifax" or in "Rome".

ACADIAN EXPERIENCE

To help understand the unique needs of the Acadian and French speaking communities in our diocese we isolated parish responses from our Acadian regions. Overall many of their experiences and concerns fit into the themes outlined above. However, many people also remarked that the Acadians had strong ties to the Catholic tradition in their everyday lives. As the wider culture has changed this also lessened the connection between Acadian culture and Catholic tradition impacting the role of the Church in people's lives. The feedback also highlighted importance of small faith groups centered on the Word of God in sustaining and growing in faith and for homilies that relate to everyday life.

MI'KMAQ INPUT

Before finalizing this report, the themes identified were given to our Mi'kmaq Pastoral Council for additional insights. The council was asked to consider the themes from their experience and advise if any additional issues should be brought forward. Given the importance of their feedback, this report will be studied as part of the Council's future meetings.

CONCLUSIONS

Reviewing the overall themes provides some areas of further consideration for the local and universal church.

CENTRALITY OF CHRIST AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

“There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom, and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.”

(Evangelization in the Modern World, #22)

Given the importance that parish responses placed on the person of Christ it seems necessary to find new and more ways to offer opportunities of encounter with Jesus. Further training and formation are needed to equip the faithful to share these experiences with others in a positive fashion and for clergy to have tools necessary to preach the basic Gospel message. These needs have implications for our diocesan priority of evangelization as we consider how to best support parishes in their evangelizing efforts. Any training in evangelization requires a deeper appreciation, through prayer and intercession, of the power and role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the baptized. Unlocking the gifts and graces required for evangelization needs to form a central part of formative initiatives.

The good news is that despite negative perceptions of the Church there seems to be a general openness to the teachings of Jesus among those who do not participate in the life of the Church. While it is easy for insiders to dismiss the “Good Teacher” perception of Jesus as incomplete and not a full recognition of who he is as Son of God and Redeemer of all humanity we need to look at ways to shift our thinking from correcting these assumptions to building on them through dialogue and accompaniment.

INCLUSIVITY AND WELCOME

There is much work to do when considering the issue of inclusivity related to doctrines. Synod discussions determined that there is a strong desire from the faithful to see welcome and acceptance extended to communities that are on the margins of the Catholic community (especially related to Church teaching on LGBTQIA2S+). The consensus in the culture on issues

related to gender and sexuality may be in conflict with the long-standing tradition of Church teaching, and this causes a great amount of difficulty for those within and outside the Church with regards their personal beliefs, and their relationships with others. Many of the Church's teachings in this area are matters of doctrine which are unchangeable and rooted in God's law and natural law; however this process reveals that we need to find ways to journey together with compassion and understanding with those who feel disaffected, marginalized, or rejected by the Church because of their philosophy of gender and sexuality.

So then, how to deal with these questions becomes a matter finding new ways to express them and recognizing that greater assent to truth occurs as we increase in conformity to Christ not by convincing arguments alone. On disciplines, perhaps these could be examined to find which are fundamental and universal practice and which need purification and renewal. This is a question for the universal Church to consider. In the diocese, understanding this need for inclusivity can inform our evangelization and training efforts as described above.

COMMUNION AND COMMUNITY

Interestingly, an overwhelming majority of parish respondents felt most engaged and welcomed in a small group or ministry context such as prayer group, Bible study, or service organization. This points to a reality that inclusivity and welcome can be experienced locally through encounter and relationships between persons. Thus, as we consider priorities around evangelization, catechesis, and parish identity providing more opportunities for people to connect in smaller settings appears to be a more fruitful, and possible, approach to take locally. These smaller settings can create spaces of inclusion, welcome, formation and evangelization, outside the context of the liturgy, which requires an appropriate disposition for full participation.

“The grace that is given by Christ in the liturgy calls for vital involvement; ‘The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church’ (SC, #9), in fact ‘it must be preceded by evangelization, faith and conversion. It can then produce its fruits in the life of the faithful.’ ” (CCC, 1072

Smaller groups and opportunities to connect can also open up new spaces to work with specific groups. Respondents highlighted the need for increased effort with families and youth. Groups that gather and support families and young people can be the nucleus of this reaching out rather than solely fixating on the fact they are “not at Mass”. For those many families and youth who do participate in the liturgy such groups could also be a place of support in dealing with their felt needs of being Catholic in an increasingly difficult environment.

Likewise, the positive experiences reported by participations, demonstrate that smaller groups can offset many of the concerns raised in rural realities. The Acadian parishes in particular responded how important their small scripture groups were in providing connection and community. As we wrestle particularly with the geography and infrequency of the Eucharistic liturgy, perhaps the focus needs to shift to groups that nourish and sustain each other, who then gather for the Eucharist when available rather than focusing on communion services.

LEADERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

On the matter of residential schools, it is clear from our responses that the church in Canada must honour the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Holy Father's Visit to Canada and the National Reconciliation Fund are good starts. They must be built on locally through work with our Mi'kmaq communities. The establishment of a Mi'kmaq Pastoral Council for the diocese is a positive local step. Clergy formation and religious education should include more focus on the local church's 400-year relationship with the Mi'kmaq people, including truth about the residential school in our diocese to help foster new awareness. More can be done to celebrate this relationship during our annual treaty day Mass and around the Feast of Saint Anne.

Sexual abuse scandals also dominates the public consciousness. Continuing our work toward safe environments and responsible ministry and commitment to action are key here. Perhaps more can be done on our diocesan website to highlight current policies and make reporting and follow up as clear and transparent as possible. Locally, the ongoing class action suit facing our diocese marks a moment for expressing sorrow, offering apology, and making restitution. Clear and consistent communication about this process can help demonstrate commitment to a new way of dealing with these issues.

“Besides this apostolate which certainly pertains to all Christians, the laity can also be called in various ways to a more direct form of cooperation in the apostolate of the Hierarchy. This was the way certain men and women assisted Paul the Apostle in the Gospel, laboring much in the Lord. Further, they have the capacity to assume from the Hierarchy certain ecclesiastical functions, which are to be performed for a spiritual purpose” (Lumen Gentium, #33).

The desire for greater participation in leadership by all the baptized is something we are working on locally. Establishing leadership teams to assist pastors in decision making and forming new guidelines for pastoral and finance councils are all help. However, ultimately it appears people are not asking for a democracy but instead for their voices to be heard and respected. Developing processes that engage people in small groups and as individuals will need to form part of consultation and decision in the future. Providing clear, timely, and

transparent communication can also help people to understand the situation in their community and why certain actions are necessary.

The topics of married priesthood, and desire for ordination of women both to the priesthood and diaconate were discussed often. Locally, women in ordained positions of leadership are common in our neighboring protestant denominations and many parishioners have trouble understanding why the situation is different in the Catholic Church. This distinction can appear misogynistic or as an issue of equality. These topics should be examined at the level of the global church. In our diocese, we can foster areas of lay leadership apart from ordination that emphasize the gifts and charisms given to all individuals, and involve all people in consultations and leadership roles, both pastoral and administrative.

Other means of participation in leadership could be developed through further study by the universal Church on the concepts of *co-responsibility* and *delegation*. A deeper exploration of how the laity can, and should, cooperate in the temporal and spiritual aspects of the Church and a parish or diocese can open up new pathways for participation. Deepening understanding of the importance of *all the baptized* in the mission of the Church are also necessary.

NEXT STEPS

The themes raised by our synod process are worthy of further consideration locally. We will be reviewing them with our clergy, leadership teams, pastoral and finance councils for more reflections and possibilities for action under our four pastoral priorities: evangelization, catechesis, parish identity, and homelessness. Using the fruits of these inputs, we can develop a clear pastoral plan for the diocese that allows us to journey together on the path of renewal.