

# Research for the Development of a Facilitative Leadership Training Programme

Prepared for the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland



Prepared by  
Dave Thompson, October 2023



The Synodal Pathway  
of the Catholic Church in Ireland

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# Preface

In October 2021 Pope Francis opened a universal synodal process leading to the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of Bishops in October 2023. It was clear to all observers that this Synod would be like no other before: the entire People of God was being invited to take part in a synodal process that would lead to a Synod on how the Church could be more synodal in its mission. Suddenly, words such as “synodal” and “synodality” entered the daily lexicon of the Church, as Church leaders across the world began to lead their communities in the process.

In Ireland, where the Episcopal Conference had announced a national synodal pathway in March 2021, the announcement of a universal synodal process towards a synod on synodality was both welcome and challenging. The *National Steering Committee for the Synodal Pathway in Ireland and Task Group*, appointed by the Irish Episcopal Conference to make recommendations for a national synodal process that would consider the question “What is God asking of the Church in Ireland at this time?”, undertook to integrate the universal process into the preparations and planning for a national synodal pathway.

Across the entire country, a network of people – lay, religious, and clergy – was convened to plan synodal meetings at local level to consider the theme of the universal synod: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*. These diocesan delegates, together with delegates from movements, associations, and religious orders, received formation coordinated by the members of the *Task Group*. Despite the challenges of time, training, and resources, the delegates succeeded in preparing and hosting synodal conversations across the island of Ireland in Winter 2021 and Spring 2022. The members of the National Steering Committee and Task Group are deeply appreciative of the work of the delegates in organising the meetings, as well as their efforts to communicate the message of synodality as widely as possible. In addition, the unseen work of the delegates in compiling the syntheses that contributed to the National Synthesis is deeply appreciated.

The anecdotal evidence from the synodal meetings, as well as the evidence gleaned from the syntheses that were submitted, indicated a very positive welcome among participants for this kind of process. Equally, however, the evidence also clearly pointed to challenges that would need to be addressed as part of the preparations for a national synodal pathway: local leaders would need to be trained and resourced; communication with those on the margins of the life of the Church in Ireland would need greater attention; those who have been wounded in the Church would need to be assured of the sincerity and meaningfulness of the process; local clergy would need to be resourced and empowered; and even those who joyfully participate in the life of the Church would need formation in synodality.



Accordingly, the National Steering Committee, together with the Task Group, decided to commission a research project to gather the experience of those who had been involved in the process as delegates/leaders with a view to designing a training programme for local leaders. The experience of those who led the synodal conversations in Spring 2022 would be invaluable in identifying the areas where local leaders would require training and resourcing so that the synodal conversations that would be essential for a national synodal pathway would be meaningful and fruitful.

We are deeply grateful to Mr. Dave Thompson of *Confluence Facilitation* who was commissioned to carry out the research. The online survey designed by Mr. Thompson, together with the regional meetings for local leaders and clergy which he facilitated, have provided rich insights into the experience of the synodal process so far. We owe a debt of gratitude to all who took part in the survey, but especially to those who gave generously of their time to travel to the regional meetings.

The results of the survey which are presented in the following pages not only offer clear and helpful signposts for the formation required for a meaningful and sustainable synodal process in Ireland, but also provide insights into the journey that synodality offers the Church in Ireland. What emerges is the potential for a form of exodus that can lead to a new sense of identity for the People of God in Ireland. We find here the hope that by embracing a synodal style, the Church can discern what God is asking of us at this time.



There is the confidence that by speaking the truth in love – in love for God, for the Church, and for one another – and by allowing ourselves to be guided by the Word of God, we can discern the voice of the Spirit, guiding us to a new springtime for the Church in Ireland. We can begin to see a Church which calls people into a communion that is transformative, which offers its members the possibility of fulfilling their baptismal vocation through co-responsible participation in the life of the Church, and which empowers its members to embrace the mission of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others.

It is our sincere hope that the findings published in the pages that follow will serve as a helpful tool for all who are charged with guiding the Church in Ireland on its first steps along the synodal pathway.

**Dr. Nicola Brady and Rev. Declan Hurley**

Co-Chairs

National Steering Committee for the Synodal Pathway in Ireland



# 1.

# Executive Summary

## 1.1 Background and methodology

The National Steering Committee of the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland commissioned facilitator and researcher Dave Thompson to carry out a needs analysis with lay, religious and ordained local church leaders. This research, using focus groups and an online survey, was aimed at those with prior experience of the synodal process with a view to supporting local leadership, increasing and improving engagement, and strengthening the sustainability of the process.

## 1.2 Findings from the focus groups

### **What have been the strengths of the synodal process so far?**

People who attended the listening sessions were grateful for the opportunity to speak and be heard. The listening sessions also allowed for a wide range of perspectives to be heard, reflecting the diversity of opinion in the Church. The listening sessions encouraged the development of the art of listening and were widely considered to have been characterised by sustained, respectful listening, without judgement. Some participants considered the listening sessions to be sacred experiences. There were frequent references to a sense of the Holy Spirit being present.

### **What have been the challenges relating to the synodal process?**

A wide range of perspectives were heard in the listening sessions, but there was still only a fraction of Catholic people involved. Hearing from people who were not regular church attenders was sometimes considered difficult, and young people were harder to engage with. There was some perception that synodal activity has been challenged by limited or lukewarm engagement from some clergy. Some participants commented that, if a local priest was not engaged in the process, its importance was lessened. Clergy within the focus groups largely considered that when local priests limited their involvement in synodal activity, it was because they were busy, but also because they did not fully understand it.





There was extensive comment on the process of the Universal Synod, specifically uncertainty about its timeframes, end point and its impact on the Church at parish or diocesan level. There was also concern about managing the expectations, and in some cases simply not being able to meet the expectations, of some of the people who had attended listening sessions.

The synodal process has made some clergy very aware of the challenges of a synodal approach to parish life and there was a perceived challenge for priests as they are being asked to reconsider their traditional roles and change their approach.

### **What are the opportunities that are developing for the Church to be more synodal in its activity?**

Synodality was seen as an opportunity for greater lay involvement. The most consistent opportunities identified for synodal activity were in current structures, such as Parish Pastoral Councils or Diocesan Pastoral Councils, though synodality was also considered as a means to provide greater contact between people in the parish.

### **What are the challenges to these ideas/possibilities?**

A synodal approach and the development of more collective leadership in the Church were perceived to require a culture change. There was perception that a lack of structures, and lack of experience and stability in some current structures, are challenges to developing opportunities for synodality. There is also a challenge not only to develop contact with people in synodal ways, but to find the time and energy to maintain that contact.



Priests are often struggling to come to terms with recent changes, both inside and outside the Church. Synodality was perceived to require priests to radically change practice in leadership, as well as adding new responsibilities to an already busy schedule.

### **What is needed to make synodality in the Church a sustainable process?**

Greater clarity about synodal processes and activity was considered necessary, and understanding of a synodal approach could be increased by modelling. It was also thought sustainability could be improved by the development and understanding of Church structures at various levels.

Spirituality was considered to be necessary at the centre of any synodal process; prayer and reflection were often considered to be key. A need was also perceived for synodality to be seen to be creating change from a recognised starting point, with realism about what could be achieved. There was expression that priests' engagement with synodality could be more positive if there was more support around their changing role.

### **What skills are required for a synodal approach to become a key part of Church life?**

The three key skills most considered were: facilitating discussion (creating the right atmosphere for people to talk and connect); listening skills (including understanding what someone was meaning, not just being attentive to what was said); and understanding of the spirituality of synodality, particularly discernment. Clergy asked for training on working and discerning collaboratively.

## **1.3 Findings from the online survey**

### **Background details from respondents**

There were 145 valid responses to the online survey. Most respondents were lay people, and there was an even gender response. The majority of respondents were over 55 years old (69%). The smallest age bracket of respondents was 25-34 years (3%). The majority of respondents (69%) said they were representing a diocese, with every diocese in Ireland represented. A broad range of organisations, movements or associations were represented in the survey. Thirty-one respondents said they were primarily representing an organisation, movement or association. In all, 21 separate organisations were represented.



## Engagement with the Universal Synod

Respondents had engaged with the process by reading documentation for the Universal Synod and participating in parish or diocesan synodal events (all of which received positive responses of over 80%). Over two thirds (68%) of respondents had organised or facilitated in-person synodal events. Almost all respondents found the synodal process to be important. Ninety-eight percent of respondents placed some degree of importance on the process, with almost two thirds saying it was 'very important'.

Respondents most valued the opportunity to talk about their Church and its future (87%), and to hear from others (79%). 83% of respondents said that the time commitment was either manageable, easy to manage or very easy to manage.

Most respondents (95) made further comment on the synodal process, ranging from a short sentence to quite lengthy responses. Approximately a third of comments were overtly positive, grateful and hopeful, often stating joy, trust in or enthusiasm for the synodal process. More commonly, comments were a mixture of positive comment and concerns, as well as some constructive criticism. There were concerns regarding the breadth of engagement of the synodal process; approximately twenty responses referenced concerns or difficulties in engaging people. Some comments referred to a desire for change in the Church, and expressed concerns about what might inhibit that change. At least ten comments directly referred to how the role of the laity should be increased.

## Capabilities and training needs

To inform the development of a training programme to equip local leaders, respondents were asked to indicate their confidence level for a range of tasks. The tasks where most confidence was indicated were explaining synodality, explaining discernment and leading a scriptural reflection. Slightly less confidence was indicated in presenting synodal theology, facilitating a listening session, facilitating a conversation with opposing views and leading Spiritual Conversations. Indications of less confidence were for designing a listening session and listening to people who might be disengaged from the Church.

Almost half (70) of the respondents made further comment about training. Almost a third of the comments asked for training in communication, particularly in relation to engaging with and encouraging people to participate in synodal activity. Understanding of theology or development of spirituality, facilitation, and the current stage of the Synod and/or requests for information on synodality in simple language, also received widespread comment in reference to training. Listening skills, discerning skills and facilitation skills were most commonly listed by respondents as skills they thought a synodal leader should have.





# 2.

# Methodology

## 2.1 Project initiation

The National Steering Committee of the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland commissioned facilitator and researcher Dave Thompson to carry out a needs analysis with lay and ordained local church leaders. This research focussed on those with prior experience of the synodal process to support local leadership, increase and improve engagement, and strengthen the sustainability of the process.

## 2.2 Design and dissemination of questionnaires

The development of the online survey went through several iterations before the link was released on Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023. The survey link was sent via email to bishops, delegates and representatives in the synodal process at diocesan level. Email recipients were expressly asked to only pass on the survey link to local leaders who were involved in organising or facilitating listening sessions in a diocese / movement / association and to those who were involved in the writing of a synthesis during the Diocesan Stage of the Universal Synod.

The survey was composed of short, mostly closed, questions covering:

- role in the Church
- gender
- age range
- whether the respondent was representing a diocese or a movement / association / organisation
- participation in the Universal Synod
- aspects of the synodal process of most value so far
- the manageability of synodal activity so far
- confidence relating to a range of leadership skills
- aspects of training respondents considered would be helpful to them



- skills respondents thought a synodal leader should have
- the main topics respondents thought should be covered in training of local leaders

The survey closed at midnight on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April with 145 valid responses.

## 2.3 Development and facilitation of focus groups

A simple facilitation plan for the six focus groups was developed that allowed for four main aspects to be covered in two-hour sessions:

- Welcome, presentation of aims, consent, introductions, contracting, and an opening reflection.
- Discussion on the strengths of the synodal process so far as well as the challenges arising.
- Discussion of the opportunities developing for the Church to be more synodal in its activity and the challenges to these ideas/possibilities.
- Discussion about what would make synodality a more sustainable process and what skills would be required to do this.

The focus groups took place in the following locations, with the following groups:

Date	Venue	No. of participants	Composition of group
13.3.23	Maynooth	14	Clergy/laity/religious
14.3.23	Mallow	4	Clergy only
14.3.23	Mallow	14	Clergy/laity/religious
15.3.23	Knock	9	Clergy/laity/religious
22.3.23	Ballygawley	6	Clergy only
22.3.23	Ballygawley	10	Clergy/laity/religious
	<b>Total:</b>	<b>57</b>	



## 2.4 Analysis and reporting

Data analysis and report writing began after the last focus group ended, throughout the end of March and April 2023. This took place in three phases.

Firstly, the analysis and reporting on the findings from the focus groups. With participants' permission, the focus groups were recorded so that the verbatim could be replayed and analysed using a framework approach. Focus group participants were assured that any quotes used would be anonymous and would speak to wider themes, not specific instances. This qualitative data was added to a matrix (in this case, an Excel spreadsheet), displaying participant groups as rows and key research questions as columns. The cells were then populated with verbatim or summarised data from the discussions. The completed framework was then used as the raw material for interpretative thematic analysis that worked logically through the raw data, creating a coherent set of findings and insights. The focus group findings are set out, section by section, with a summary sentence at the top of each finding, followed by supporting text, with any relevant quotes from the focus group participants.



It is not uncommon for reports of this nature to comment on the most important themes first, before working through more minor themes. To allow for a better 'flow' in reading this report, however, this approach has not always been taken. Sometimes a major theme has had related sub-themes. These have often been gathered together and so the findings do not always read in order of importance. The titles of key findings, however, have been underlined. These key findings form the basis for the Executive Summary.

Secondly, analysis of the online survey. The raw data was exported from SurveyMonkey to an Excel spreadsheet. Responses that had been marked as a test or were substantially incomplete (in most cases responses stopping after the first handful of questions) were removed, leaving 145 valid responses. Graphs and tables were created where visual representation of the data was most helpful. Open responses to questions were divided up into main themes. The findings from each survey question were reported on with the insertion of key graphs, tables and quotes where they were most helpful.

The final section of the reporting was to draw conclusions and reflections, taking into account both the survey and the focus group findings.

An Executive Summary was added once the body of the report was complete.



# 3.

## Findings from the Focus Groups

### 3.1 What have been the strengths of the synodal process so far?

Across the six focus groups there were several similar themes where all groups, laity, religious and clergy, were in agreement.

#### People who attended the synodal listening sessions were grateful for the opportunity to speak and be heard

There was widespread agreement in the focus groups that the listening sessions were well received as they provided an opportunity for people to meet and share perspectives. A recurring phrase was about how people were 'delighted to be asked' and that in many cases, this was for the first time. There was also general agreement that people appreciated the opportunity to speak openly and that everyone present was listened to.

The impact of the listening sessions was very often that people felt welcomed and included, and part of a genuine listening process with the opportunity to speak openly and honestly about aspects of life and faith. The various synthesis documents received little direct comment, but their reflection of perspectives was occasionally cited as evidence that genuine listening had occurred.

*'[There was] genuine delight to be asked for the first time.'*

*'The very fact that people were asked to participate for the very first time, and asked to give their opinions on their faith, their experience and their wishes for the future, and they were genuinely listened to, for the first time, a lot of them, both church goers and non-church goers, they were grateful for that.'*

*'[The listening sessions] made a big impact on people, it was the first time they had been given the opportunity to express their opinion... In the hope that it was actually going to lead to change.'*

*'I had to lead [the listening session] and I was absolutely petrified because I was asking people questions and I was terrified about what they were going to throw back at me... but it didn't happen... It was open.'*

*'There was a lot of gratitude for what the Church was doing.'*



## **The listening sessions allowed for a wide range of perspectives to be heard**

A second consistent theme, regarding the strengths of the synodal process, was that there was evidence of breadth in the groups who were included, and in the perspectives shared. There was opportunity for regular church attenders or lay people involved in parish activity to speak, with recognition that while practice of faith, in terms of sacraments, might have uniformity, there is enormous diversity in opinion beyond this. Some participants noted how the process gave them a greater sense of connection across the Church, both nationally and internationally, and a sense of being part of what is happening overall.

Specific perspectives included much comment on the role of women in the Church and how the listening sessions gave a voice to a desire for greater participation in ministry and governance. There was evidence of the inclusion of people who may be experiencing marginalisation such as survivors of abuse, or LGBT+ people (or advocates for these groups). There was also some expression of the synodal process being used to connect with groups of people who had disengaged from the church, or who might have been seen as being on the periphery of parish activity.

*‘[The listening sessions brought out] the diversity of Catholicism beneath the appearance of uniformity.’*

*‘Speaking for the survivor group, that the submission wasn’t subsumed into the big report, but that it went as an appendix to Rome, I thought that was very powerful.’*

*‘It is bringing a voice to some people who have been excluded.’*

*‘One group spoke to the Men’s Shed, and they said those men were so engaging... they weren’t going to Church, but they were people of faith.’*

## **The listening sessions encouraged the development of the art of listening**

The listening sessions were widely considered to have been characterised by sustained, respectful listening. In the main, people didn’t just have the opportunity to meet and talk, but what they shared was well received, without judgement.

*‘There was the opportunity for anybody... to stand on the rooftop and shout whatever they wanted, and they were listened to, across the spectrum.’*

*‘Everybody was highly engaged, highly involved and were concerned about the people on the margins, and their views, and the future of the Church.’*

*‘People are listening to each other ... [they] don’t seem as fearful about expressing an opinion at parish level than in the past.’*





**The listening sessions were often considered to be sacred experiences. There were frequent references to a sense of the Holy Spirit being present**

Listening to others speak openly about their life and faith was often described in spiritual terms such as ‘prayerful listening,’ or a ‘sacred experience.’ Many participants commented on how they perceived the Holy Spirit to be present in the act of listening fully to someone, especially listening in a community. There was some articulation of how this was one way of listening to the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit lives in community with the Father and Son.

Some participants were able to perceive a change in themselves, or in the wider group. On occasion, there was reference to how the listening process was a means of discernment in other processes in the life of the Church.

*‘I found it a really sacred journey... I was part of something... we’re at a key moment in the Church and to be involved in the conversation around that, it was very special.’*

*‘The process of listening, and using the tool effectively to listen and then to really listen... [and] you were also able to synthesize... what the group was saying and take on board other people’s perspectives... The Holy Spirit is in everyone, a spirit of unity, love, freedom, and power, holiness, so [the process] is reflecting what the Holy Spirit is doing in us. As we listen, we are being transformed.’*

*‘[Everyone] really bought into the aspect of the Holy Spirit to the gathering, and the prayer element... the Spirit definitely entered the process.’*

*‘There was trust that the Synod was gathering with the Holy Spirit, and a respectful listening and a quality in the speaking... and time to discern what was being said.’*

*‘Discernment is a new word for laity... Sometimes a Pastoral Council wants a decision now... this process seems to be saying ‘hold on, we’ll see.’*



### **There was sometimes a desire from participants to talk further and for connections with people to be developed**

Because of the positive nature of the listening sessions, there was, on occasion, a desire from participants to continue talking, as it was felt there was more to be said. It was also perceived that connections were developing, both from people within the parish community who were beginning to explore their faith and each other's perspectives, and sometimes from people on the edges of, or outside of the parish community, who had disengaged or had very little previous connection to the local church.

*'They couldn't believe that they were being asked... they went away feeling that they wanted to be involved and it didn't finish.'*

*'I would say people ...wanted more of this structured kind of talk... And the issues came up which were recorded.'*

*'I think Covid was a reboot... in the reboot there's a different kind of understanding of where we're going, some people can adapt to that, and some people can't, some people have disconnected with church... but there's another group who have found an interest in getting involved with church again.'*

### **The synodal process was often recognised as something new and different, which allowed for the possibility of change and hope for the Church in the future**

The 'positive energy' or 'buzz' some participants commented on might be better described as a recognition that something new and different was happening in the life of the Church. For many participants (though certainly not all), this was the first time they had taken part in this kind of listening, discerning and synthesizing. While there was certainly evidence of caution in the focus groups, there was also varying degrees of hope and a sense that change was possible – or that at very least this was a helpful approach to the difficult issues facing the Church.

The possibility of and challenges to change are described in much greater detail later in this report, but for now, considering the strengths of the synodal process, it is worth briefly noting the main sources for participants' sense of hope. A cautious, but more positive outlook for the future was often based on recognition that change could no longer be avoided (with particular reference to the need for co-responsibility in leadership) and the honesty of the synodal process.

*'There was hope that [the process] was going somewhere... there was a new way of doing things.'*





*'If you say what you are thinking, even if nobody else agrees with it, nevertheless, you are going to be respected for what you say... maybe something new will emerge, it mightn't be the thing you wanted... but you might begin to see some possibilities, even people are given a method of discerning.'*

*'I am absolutely convinced that if people believe that this is serious and that the bottom isn't going to be pulled out of it at the last minute... [there is going to be change] there are huge possibilities.'*

*'The movement is not towards conserving the way it was before... but there's a strong movement towards getting something new, trying something fresh, [there's a] longing for more.'*

*'There was a new sense of hope because people could speak and be heard and what they said was captured and it found its way into the synthesis.'*

## **3.2 What have been the challenges relating to the synodal process?**

While there were many strengths and positive aspects to the synodal process so far, there was much comment on the challenges of what was, for most participants, something new and unfamiliar. These challenges have been considered in two groups: challenges *relating to* synodal activity itself (for example, re-engaging with people who had disengaged from the Church) and challenges *emerging from* the synodal process (for example, understanding the wider process and its development, or managing expectations going forward).

### **3.2.1 What were the challenges relating to the synodal activity itself?**

#### **A wide range of perspectives were heard, but overall, there was still only a fraction of Catholic people involved**

It was consistently pointed out that while efforts were made to invite and welcome people (and there was a large number of people involved in the listening sessions), when looking at the numbers of Mass-going Catholics overall, the level of engagement in the Synod was still relatively small. There was expression in the focus groups that creating widespread involvement, at parish level particularly, was not always easy. People who did not attend Church as regularly, and younger people were often considered hard to attract, and there was recognition that sometimes the perspectives present at the listening sessions could have been wider.

Some focus group participants expressed the view that many people were simply apathetic, with the impression that the Church was no longer seen



as relevant offered as a reason for this apathy. If people didn't care about the Church any longer, how could re-engagement take place? Belonging was a related theme here; why would someone come to an event to talk about something they no longer, or never, felt part of? Aside from people who had disengaged from the Church, young people were also mentioned as sometimes difficult to engage.

*'We did our best to encourage people to the table... but there are thousands more that we haven't heard from.'*

*'There was a challenge in getting new people involved, the challenge of getting people who had walked away to come back. Younger generations, how do you talk about synodality when they're not in front of you?'*

*'We were very, very thin on youth input into the process, to get the young people engaged in this was nearly impossible. They'd come to the meeting just to please you, but to really engage them...'*

### **There was consistent comment that the timeframes for the Universal Synod caused the process to be rushed**

There was specific comment about the timelines for the creation of documents and responses to documents at different stages of the Synod. There was recognition that, in order to keep the whole synodal process moving across the Irish Church, deadlines needed to be set. There was also recognition that the documents beyond local synthesis were helpful for gauging wider concerns.<sup>1</sup>

*'What was happening at the European stage of the process, that helped me to see a bigger picture... sometimes we can get bogged down in our own issues, but it is helpful to see how our European countries have a process.'*

However, the timeframes for reporting and responding was a consistent theme in the 'post-it' responses to the challenges relating to synodal activity.

As a result of the deadlines, some focus group participants felt the process, at times, came with a certain amount of pressure, and some felt they couldn't meaningfully respond within the timeframe. There was also limited comment on how the synodal process of listening, reflection and discernment was to some degree being undermined because the Universal Synod was 'being given as a task.'

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this would be ecumenical contact with other denominations and faiths, which received few references in the submissions from dioceses and other groups to the National Synthesis and was therefore considered a notable issue not strongly present from the consultation. Another example would be climate change, which did not receive any mention in the National Synthesis, but which was included in the Continental Stage of the Synod.



*'The timeframe for the summary of the three documents was really tight, it was a huge challenge.'*

*'We did the diocesan synthesis and the national one and we were due to go on to the third stage to do with our own diocese and parishes, and the next thing we were asked to look at the Universal... We were discommoded there, big time, possibly the National Steering Group were caught unawares as well... We're only now getting back to, where do we go from here? But I think the momentum was lost a bit.'*

*'There's a structural challenge, the process as we experienced it imposed deadlines, for the Church to put deadlines in the weeks before Christmas, what planet are they on? That's a busy time.'*

*'We ignored the Continental thing, don't get me wrong, we did read it, but in terms of assessing, we were not at a place where we could respond in any real way. We could have done something quickly... but it wasn't going to benefit us in any way as a group... We have realised we need to take this at a pace that suits us, otherwise it's just a tick box.'*

*'The Church wanted to do something to bring a conversion or a change of how we are... but they presented it as a task to be done... you have to pull people out from that. If you were a teacher teaching French or Science you're teaching information, but you're hoping ... it becomes part of their heart. I think the methodology has got us stuck a bit.'*

**There was some expression that the overall synodal process was negatively affected because it varied in quality place to place**

This aspect was probably demonstrated by inference more than direct comment. Many focus group participants felt that the energy and engagement (or lack of) from the parish priest was a critical factor in productive synodal activity (an aspect considered in greater detail below). Some participants directly recognised how the listening experience varied not only parish to parish, but across dioceses, due to the emphasis placed on the process, who was present to speak and how the events were facilitated.

This variation caused some to reflect on the consistency of the activity, not to the extent of questioning its validity, but simply accepting that there were variations. Further comment included reflection on the nature of the process, and if it favours those who are articulate, particularly if it is not well facilitated.

*'The process itself is not very scientific, it's not consistent across dioceses, even across parishes. A facilitator can be wonderful, but everyone hears everything through their own lens [sic].'*



*‘The process favours articulacy, middle class people can express themselves and have a bigger voice, perhaps, than less well-educated people who don’t speak up in meetings.’*

### **Synodal activity has been challenged by limited or lukewarm engagement from some clergy**

The changing role of priests in terms of changes in society and culture, falling vocational numbers, and the Church potentially moving towards a more synodal structure, is considered in much greater detail in the section looking at challenges to the opportunities to more widely use synodal processes. In this section, it is enough to consider how lack of engagement, or lukewarm engagement, of local clergy presented a challenge to synodal activity.

In each of the four ‘mixed’ focus groups there was at least one priest present. Comments from focus group participants outside the clergy tended to be direct but restrained. Comment was mostly about how, if a local priest was not engaged in the process, it was undermined, or its importance was lessened. Priests themselves, however, both in the two clergy-only focus groups, and in the other four ‘mixed’ focus groups were very open, and at times blunt, in their assessment of the clergy’s role in synodal activity.



While there was recognition that some clergy 'stood back' from the process because they wanted to leave space for others to talk openly, the clergy within the focus groups largely considered that when local priests limited their involvement in synodal activity, it was for two main reasons. Firstly, priests are busy; their work has always been widespread, and has expanded in recent years. Many priests are ageing, and this can negatively impact their capacity to cover the workload. Synodality has added one more layer of activity. In addition, the last two decades have been traumatic for the Irish Church, coming to terms with the harm caused to so many by the abuse crisis.

Secondly, and connected to the first reason, some local clergy were perceived to be indifferent to the synodal process either through cynicism about it, or through not fully understanding it – a point returned to later. There was also some discussion as to whether priests were sufficiently informed and equipped for the synodal process from the very start. As a result, there was much discussion about how some priests were fearful about embracing change and felt ill-equipped for it.

*'Some of our priests decided that they weren't getting involved. They weren't against it, but they weren't getting involved, they were there to open the hall ... They picked up an erroneous interpretation that this is about lay people. Others ... to put it quite bluntly, [thought] 'where is the dividend in this for the local padre?' Some are that bit older, they're taking on extra parishes, and GDPR and charity law.'*

*'The priest has to be interested in the synodal process, a number of priests never bothered giving out the surveys in our diocese and some never mention the Synod.'*

*'Looking at the clergy, did they get an appropriate engagement from the start, to facilitate their involvement?'*

*'The biggest resistance... is some of our colleagues, who just don't want to engage... there is an uncertainty, because if you've been doing something for forty years and suddenly it's 'we're going to expect you to do it in a different way'... these are major concerns.'*

*'[There is a sense of] this will see me out... it'll get me to retirement. Do I need to deconstruct everything I've constructed over the last fifteen or twenty years? It's not worth that investment.'*

*'Priests are not sure about all of this... there's a feeling that we're at a low ebb within ourselves at times. It's a different life to what it was a number of years ago and lads are struggling a bit with that - and I include myself in that.'*



### 3.2.2 What challenges emerged from the synodal process?

This second question in this section moves on from looking at challenging aspects of synodal activity, to challenges emerging directly from that activity. There is some overlap between this section and the later section considering the barriers to opportunities for synodality. The intention in this section is primarily to look at challenges *immediately arising* from the activity of the Universal Synod, as opposed to more general use of synodal approaches in church life, in the future.

#### **There was extensive comment on the process of the Universal Synod, specifically uncertainty about its end point and its impact on the Church at parish or diocesan level.**

Arguably, the overarching key challenge emerging from the synodal process is uncertainty about the overall aim, as well as what, if any, impact it has on the local Church. Building trust in the process, managing people's expectations, maintaining momentum, and reassessing the life and activity of a parish, all, to varying degrees, rely on clarity around this issue.

Every focus group had varying levels of comprehension, and the emergence of uncertainty was, at times, surprising. On occasion, participants who had previously been very clear and articulate about their involvement in the synodal process, at the introduction of a new question, could suddenly become very uncertain about what they were being asked to comment on, or unable to think of an answer.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, there was some uncertainty about the various stages of the Universal Synod. While many in the room felt they did have a clear understanding, others were less certain about what stage came next.<sup>3</sup> More common was uncertainty about where the Synod would end, as well as expression about the connection between the various levels of reporting and their effects 'on the ground' at parish and diocesan level. For example, one participant noted how the Synod was happening simultaneously with the development of Parish Pastoral Councils, but admitted that they were struggling to see the connection.

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<sup>2</sup> Possible lack of clarity about the nature of the question and context of the discussion should also be taken into consideration.

<sup>3</sup> See reference in the previous section relating to how some found the emergence of a 'new' stage to be a surprise.



While there was general recognition that there would be no or little immediate change on certain topics (the ordination of women, for example, or Church teaching about same sex relationships), there was, on occasion, some discussion about whether or not synodality was actually about change at all. Some focus group participants were looking for short term action stemming from synodal processes, others felt that action would come in time, but it was a long way off yet, and that synodality was primarily about listening.<sup>4</sup>

Some focus group participants went further to conclude that the effect of so many questions about the process, threatened its relevance. In effect, that people will only get behind something when they can understand it and see something beneficial emerging from it. One priest asked bluntly if, through lack of clarity, *'will people get fed up and disengage?'* or write the process off as *'another brainwave of the Pope, or the bishops, or cardinals.'*

*'I probably talked to seven or eight different priests [before coming to the focus group] ...and none of them could really give me an understanding of the pathway... 'we had a listening, we filled in, we sent a report back, that was it.' No one can, with any clarity say what this process is.'*

*'[Synodality] is ancient in the Church, but it's still new... I would say a lot of priests don't understand it, maybe some bishops don't understand it.'*

*'It's not a very settled process, it's not an easy process, it's a journey that the Church is on. Maybe not everybody is sure where it's going to lead.'*

*'Has the thing taken a life of its own that is completely divorced from those of us who are basically working on the ground, both clergy and laity?'*

*'The continental stage was nearly a killer for the whole thing... it kind of suggested we're going to a different level now and who is going to be interested in the group in [a small town] talking?'*

*'I don't know what the process is... I'm in favour of it, but does the lay director of the diocese have a strong voice, is it bigger than my voice? It's just not clear to me... [in other processes] we know exactly how they work and they have evolved to create balance and fairness. This, I'm not so sure... Maybe it's too experimental and new and it'll find its own course.'*

*'[The PPC] are tuned into synodality, but [this question] keeps coming up all the time, 'exactly what do we mean by synodality?' We use the phrase, but also the question, 'do we all understand what this is about?'*

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<sup>4</sup> These differing perspectives tended to surface during more abstract discussion about the nature of synodality and were less common in the context of a specific topic.





**There is a challenge to keep up the momentum created by the positive aspects of the process so far**

One of the strengths of the synodal process was considered to be the energy found in bringing people together, which resulted in the connections being made and, for many, a sense of the Holy Spirit being present in some way. A challenge for the synodal process is maintaining the momentum from this. The word ‘momentum’ was rarely used in the focus groups, however, for those who were most keen to see change come quickly to the Church, there was some expression of frustration at the speed of the process, and much expression of a desire to ‘move forward’ or ‘get to what comes next’ – with the expectation being that, beyond the documents, there will be action. There was limited comment that the various reports and syntheses made the process academic in nature; arguably, most saw this as simply a means by which to record each stage of the Synod.

*‘The pace is slow, it feels like we’ve been waiting for the bus, and now we’re on the bus, but the bus is going at ten mile an hour.’*

*‘The difficult bit was that it became very academic I think, when the international summary came back in October... we’re then told to consider that again... with your national synthesis and diocesan synthesis. So you have three documents and you’re doing compare and contrast... Lots of people were like ‘hold on’, the best bit was people speaking out.’*





*'I think the bishops should have the freedom from Rome to engage in a staged examination of ... implementation or examination of change... Ultimately you will have your final synodal conference document... and then it has to filter all the way back down again. In that timeframe, what's happened to vocations? What's happened to the age profile of the shepherds of the Church? And what is the motivation of the laity? There has to be a shorter timeframe in terms of measured response to certain core elements that maybe the bishops and lay representatives would engage with.'*

**There is evidence of trust in the synodal process so far, and this will either develop or diminish depending on what happens next**

As noted previously, there was gratitude from many people for the opportunity to speak openly about what was important to them. However, there was also specific expression from focus group participants that trust had been placed in the process, which would, in time, either increase or decrease, according to what happens next. There was limited, but nonetheless consistent expression, of the Church being 'on notice'. There was trust, but it would only stretch so far.

Some comments alluded to previous engagement with the Church that were perceived to have been negative experiences.<sup>5</sup> Only one speaker felt that trust had been damaged in the process so far, which related to a specific issue not being included in the National Synthesis.

*'Some said, "we'll do this once, but if it turns out like before, we won't be back."*

*'We want to trust the process, but the history so far is that things get edited out, trusting the process was an ask for some people.'*

*'People were convinced that maybe this time it would work, so we're on notice in a sense. If it's not going to work, or we're doing to them what we did to them before.'*

*'If we could all trust, and I think clergy are the most cynical... the first reaction is negative... but if there was trust that this is real and it is a genuine process, there would be huge buy in.'*

**There was concern about managing the expectations, and in some cases simply not being able to meet the expectations, of some of the people who had attended listening sessions**

In connection to the point above recognising how trust needs to be developed, one of the repeated phrases in the focus groups was 'managing expectations'. While it was positive that people had been welcomed and

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the constraints of time, and given the objectives of the focus groups, follow up questions were not asked about these.



listened to at a listening session, some focus group participants were concerned that, having been listened to, there were now expectations of change in the Church in response. There was some expression of concern, even anxiety, that the synodal process was placing the Church in a difficult position, trying to address expectations that in many cases it would fail to meet.

There was a variety of perspectives on this, some participants perceived that some of the groups the Church had engaged possibly had very low expectations. One participant commented on how just speaking out can act as a release for expectations, even if there is a sense that change is not going to come quickly. To varying degrees, however, there were consistent concerns that the process of synodality (the *'house rules'*, as one participant put it) had not been explained clearly enough, and so the Church was in danger of *'leading people up a mountain, only to bring them back down again.'* Some comment went further and recognised that, while it might be a synodal process, the power to make major changes would still lie with the hierarchy; the new approach still existed in old structures.

In addition, there was recognition of a broad range of expectations. One post-it note summed it up best, saying, *'So many issues'*.

*'When people bring up what might be an angst in their lives... I think there could be expectations from people that things are going to change... that the thing that I shared... is somehow going to be addressed.'*

*'When you give people the liberty to voice whatever they want to voice, and they have a pent-up thing they haven't had the chance to say before, then how do you allow them to do that in a way that is realistic? Because not everything that might come up in the synodal process might be changeable... At one level you're giving people free reign, but there's a 'but' when you hear what they have to say.'*

*'What was made clear is that the syntheses are not roadmaps and they're not policy, that was made clear, but that will pose a challenge as we move ahead.'*

*'People are looking for concrete evidence of change... People I'm talking to are looking for change, and there won't be a quick fix... It's not going to change.'*

*'The first meetings are fine, it's the second meetings that are the problem. We came and we talked to you, but what did you do about it?'*

*'In South America, the discernment is done by the people who do the listening. Here, the discernment is being done some place else. A diocese can decide something for itself, but the critical discernment will be decided some place else, back to the hierarchy... I'm not sure how clear we have been about the house rules with the people in the engagement.'*



*'In most listening processes you engage people in full... we have put the small print very small, in that we have taken what you have to say, but you won't be involved in the final discernment. In any other listening process, you wouldn't do that, you'd engage people right to the end.'*

*'For some of the groups on the margins I think ... because the Church hasn't really engaged with them prior to this, maybe their expectations are quite low anyway.'*

*'If people can even just speak and say what their expectations are, that in itself is a release for them... the fact that they can talk, say it, and be listened to, who knows what happens down the road.'*

### **The synodal process has made some clergy very aware of the challenges of a synodal approach to parish life**

As previously noted, there has not always been clarity about what synodality is and what is going to happen next, but for many of the clergy who attended the focus groups, there was a very clear awareness of a need for change in the leadership of the local Church, and enormous challenges. Within the two clergy-only focus groups in particular, there was much discussion about how the culture of the Church in general, and the parish in particular, needed to change. Some of these themes are picked up again later in the section on challenges to opportunities for synodal activity. In this section, four aspects have been reported on as challenges priests perceived to be *directly emerging* from the current synodal process.



**(i) There is a challenge for priests as they are being asked to reconsider their role and change their approach**

Some focus group participants perceived their (priest's) role to have been always been about making decisions and trying to bring others along. There was perception in the clergy-only focus groups, that that has now changed to creating a space where others are facilitated to be involved and there is group discussion and decision. This approach was considered to be relatively new and its facilitation wasn't something that was ever taught at seminary. It also brings with it a fear of more and longer church meetings.

*'Most of the time we try to get people to agree to whatever we've decided in our head... We don't say that, but deep down, if we're against something, it won't happen in the parish... We still are very powerful in the parish setting... It's a complete shift of action, to genuinely listen to people, hear what they have to say and to put our own agenda [to the side] ... but it's a very difficult move... because it's much easier... [to do what you want].'*

*'We're used to the other way around, we come up with a place we want to get to, and we work back ... We're not good at starting blank and hoping we'll arrive at a destination. Fellas don't feel they have the time for that wandering.'*

*'Was there training for it? No... It's never part of how we are or how we be as a priest... how to be a priest in a radically different way.'*

*'They always said in seminary priesthood was about being rather than doing, and we always thought it was an excuse for laziness, because you could be a priest and not do anything! Now, we're being told that it's about being church... [the training] was right, but they didn't explain what they meant by it.'*

**(ii) Priests work in a hierarchical system that has not modelled the kind of participation synodality is perceived to be promoting**

There was perception in the focus groups that, while there was broad agreement with the development of synodal processes, priests had not been prepared for it. Neither discussion nor consultation had sufficiently occurred, and there was no training and development, or even advice on how to create the extra time needed to spend more time with others in order to help them make decisions.

*'We come from a very powerful Church, and to dismantle that is a problem.'*

*'The institutional Church is having its cake and eating it. No other institution would have such a radical change and not clear the decks before they start.'*

*'That's the fear, the more you engage with this, it's going to take more time, take more energy. It's the right thing to do and you're trying to involve more people in decision making, but it doesn't disengage you from the process and it involves more meetings... Sometimes, you're thinking, 'I've had enough of that.'"*



**(iii) There was some recognition that the laity might be asked to do more, but they do not always respond**

Priests noted that, while there was scope for the laity to take on a greater role within the Church, because this is a new development, or perhaps because the laity are unused to carving out space for parish activity, they do not always respond. Participants were very aware that any new activity takes time, patience and commitment to develop, and the human resources of the Church are most often middle-aged and older. In addition, not everyone in this demographic wants change, some are very conservative and want things left as they are.

*‘In Pastoral Council meetings, we need this, we need that... But there’s few enough saying ‘I will...’*

*‘There’s no tradition of people pushing themselves forward... Reality is dawning on people that they will have to do it themselves.’*

*‘Had this happened twenty years ago, maybe it would be different, but we have such an older, ageing clergy, but we have also lost so many of the younger generation. A lot of the people we are engaging with are middle to senior age group who are traditional in their own way.’*

*‘Inevitably not everyone wants change. The challenge is trying to cope with one end of the spectrum and the other, so as to avoid a split... The majority view was that there was a need for change... A small minority were worried that things they had all their lives [would change].’*

**(iv) For both clergy and laity, synodality offers a change that is not just about participation, it is also about discernment**

Priests noted that, while wider participation is a change in itself, synodality is also a new way of working that is faith-led. Some priests noted how so much of their time was taken up with buildings and building maintenance, or with services, and less with considering how the Holy Spirit might be leading the parish community.

*‘This might sound heretical, but a lot of the stuff we have been doing hasn’t been faith driven, or faith inspired... We needed a new hall, so we built a new hall. Did we pray about it? No, it was obvious. But this is turning the whole thing upside down... It’s a huge change, it’s not just bricks and mortar and not just pews and seats, it is the Spirit of God directing, in any way, where this parish is going. That’s a very different prism to be looking through than previously.’*

*‘Faith in Ireland is involved with buildings, what’s around them... rather than people’s faith.’*

*‘The process is it; that’s the outcome. We’re used to having outcomes... often a physical outcome. This is more the process of deciding the next step.’*



### 3.3 What are the opportunities developing for the Church to be more synodal in its activity?

#### **Synodality is a process in development and so this question landed in different ways**

This question was met with a wide spread of responses. In general, some focus groups answered it more easily than others, but within each group there were sub-groups regarding how people responded. There were a handful of people across the focus groups who did not know much about synodality and hadn't thought much about it, beyond some awareness of the Universal Synod. Others were more familiar with the Universal Synod, but hadn't given much thought to how talking, listening and discerning might be applied beyond it.

Other focus group participants, however, were starting to think about wider opportunities for synodality. This group was often identifiable through the questions they asked about the process: 'What if...?', or 'Could we...?' Some were very clear about how synodality might be used more widely, others were doing so already. Included in this group were people who had taken part in listening exercises before or were part of religious organisations or movements that were already involved in a listening process before the Universal Synod began.

*'I would have said initially that I thought of the synodal process as in local, national, Prague and so on, but actually I think it's moving away from that now as we're looking to try and add it as a process at parish level with our different bodies, at diocesan level as well.'*

*'I'm not coming with my parish hat on, so I'm thinking about how we include everybody, to be more synodal in all our activities.'*

*'People have to experience synodal processes to know what it is... and it will spread.'*

#### **Synodality was seen as an opportunity for greater lay involvement generally**

Throughout the focus groups, there was widespread recognition that the steady decline in numbers, and the current age of the clergy, was forcing change upon the Church. However, while this was accepted as a driver for change, there was also very clear desire for a change in Church leadership with greater balance between clergy and laity, and the laity being more active and taking greater responsibility. There was agreement, and at times even excitement, that there was now an opportunity for the Church to become radically different. Synodal activity was perceived to be a means through which people could not only be listened to, but be invited to become more engaged.



On occasion, some focus group participants were able to apply a level of theology to their thinking, referencing, for example, that involvement was much in keeping with the practice of the early Christian Church, or that a proper understanding of baptism and belonging would help change how people thought about their engagement with a local parish. For the most part, however, there was simply agreement that local churches could be places of empowerment and creativity, where people's gifts and talents were used more widely.

*'Sometimes we say it's all about Rome and all about the bishops, but it's actually all about us, priest and people together, we are co-responsible... How are we going to change the Church where we are? The idea of using this tool, of listening to each other and deciding together, obviously we have to resource all of that... it's a different way of thinking.'*

*'The fact that there is such a scarcity of ordained clergy now in our diocese is creating ...an opportunity for synodality in terms of more participation of the laity... An opportunity is emerging through a lack of something, shining new light on capabilities.'*

*'I think there is an opportunity to get people feeling that the Church is their Church, and they are responsible for it.'*

*'A floodgate has been opened for people to see they are part of the parish rather than just being passive spectators.'*

*'We're all baptised and responsible for each other. It's not the laity without the clergy, it's not the clergy without the laity. The difficulty for me is a lack of formation, unless one can understand what it means to be baptised, then it becomes impossible to engage at that level.'*

### **The most consistent opportunities identified for synodal activity were in current structures, such as Parish Pastoral Councils or Diocesan Pastoral Councils**

In all focus groups, there was consideration of how synodal activity would be helpful for pastoral councils, at both parish and diocesan level, as well as other structures already in place, such as school boards or multi-parish groups. While there was acceptance that pastoral councils were at various stages of development (some are forming; others are long-established and considered fruitful in their processes), there was recognition that these were key groups to be developed, and a synodal process needed to be at their core.

For focus group participants who had experience of well-developed Parish Pastoral Councils or Diocesan Pastoral Councils, there was some expression that these meetings could be about discernment, and were considered to be spiritual in their nature, rather than solely 'business' focussed.





Co-responsibility received much discussion here as focus group participants talked about how leadership would develop between priests and lay people, with widespread comment about how, in various ways, there was a desire for the laity to ‘step up’ and assume more responsibility such as bringing communion to people who were housebound, parish visitation, liturgies and funeral ministries. All of which would be co-ordinated through the synodal approach of the Parish Pastoral Council.

There was also some outspoken comment here to the effect that the Church must deal with the reality that the number of clergy is going to be greatly reduced in the future, rather than planning for, or hoping for, a reversal of that trend. Parish Pastoral Councils were seen as key in addressing the lessening number of clergy. Some recognised that synodality would allow for parish or diocesan leadership to evolve over time.

There was very limited expression that reforms in the Church could happen quickly, and that new structures of both laity and clergy could be developed at national level.

*‘The Parish Pastoral Council is key... the people who will be running the parish in ten or twenty years’ time will be the parish council, so we need to train parish councils... so that they will be able to function. They may have a priest coming in, but they may not, we don’t know... [Some say] we should be praying for more vocations... somebody said [to me] recently that God has been telling us that he’s not giving us anymore [priests] and what part of ‘no’ do people not understand?... It’s God’s way of forcing us to have a people’s Church... it’s beginning to happen now by default.’*





*'The responsibility is for both to work together... Laity want to be involved at the decision making within the Church.'*

*'There's this phrase now, co-responsibility, it isn't that we're responsible, or that they're responsible, we're in it together. Learning to walk together, priest and people is a learning process for both people and priests.'*

*'Our gatherings as a Diocesan Pastoral Council are so spiritually fruitful because we start with prayer, and we actively engage in that and listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Council. Coming from that, what we are discussing is a totally different conversation.'*

*'We use a synodal way in our meetings, listening to what somebody is saying and not reacting to it. If you give it a chance, people are really beginning to like that.'*

*'One thing that is the elephant in the room, is that there are less priests... that's a huge challenge for the parish and a huge challenge for the priest... There has to be some diocesan structure of engagement with all parishes and all priests to come up with some workable solution to the way forward, bringing in the synodal process, I have no doubt that that is the way to go.'*

### **Synodality can provide a means of contact between people in the parish**

Beyond the current structures in the Church, synodal activity was seen to create more contact between people who were already engaged in the parish. There was recognition that while the listening sessions for the Universal Synod had brought people together, they had by no means connected with everybody. Perhaps, now that there was greater understanding of the process and familiarity with it, more people might want to engage. Some focus group participants recognised a need for people to simply connect with each other and be able to share something of their lives and their faith. The perception was that very often this wasn't offered through more formal activity (such as a Mass), or even in informal spaces, where there is conversation, but perhaps less intention about how people connect with each other.

There was limited discussion about how synodal activity might be used for the engagement of specific groups in the parish, who might not otherwise meet. Similarly, there was limited comment about how synodality might be used as a means of consultation and a mechanism for feedback on a particular change or initiative.

*'I think that as a result of the Synod, awareness has been raised, and an awful lot of people who weren't involved, now want to be involved.'*

*'Telling a story of something that happened to you in your life is something that anyone can do... opportunities to tell those stories around faith and meaning and purpose... between people who have lived and people who are looking at the big questions.'*



*'I physically bring young adults into the convent to talk with elderly sisters... I'm involved in an evangelisation cafe... run by young people. I invite the sisters to go into the cafe... Over a cup of tea, suddenly they're talking. It's gone on too long now that we have the elderly, the middle-aged, the families - they're all siloed off. A synodal process would be having intergenerational conversations and providing safe spaces... for these things to happen.'*

### **There was some expression about how synodal activity might help develop faith**

While not a key point of discussion, there was, in most focus groups, some discussion of the place of synodality in catechesis and faith formation. At its simplest level, synodality has the possibility to allow for conversations about faith and could help people develop language to talk about it. A few participants went further to consider that the very act of talking about your own faith caused thinking about what you personally contributed to the community of faith. In this way, synodality has, in the words of one participant, the potential to be a 'grow up' moment for the Church, because it forces people to describe their own faith in their own way, rather than by statements given to them.

This discussion was very often set in the context of a wider perception that faith formation had traditionally been weak in the Church – talking about, or explaining your faith, was not generally something people were expected to do. One participant noted how previous efforts to deepen faith often involved inviting people to a course, with the end result, in their assessment, of having the same people attend, who usually attend everything. More optimistically this participant concluded that synodality might offer something different: *'If you've any chance of [deepening faith], it's with the momentum caused by the Synod.'* Scattered across the focus groups, was some expression relating to how many people had a desire for greater depth in their faith, and greater understanding. A need for 'nourishment' was expressed on occasion, though not always clearly defined.

The clergy particularly noted how certain old practices were changing, recognising that where, previously, the success of activity was frequently measured by numbers in attendance, now there was increasingly more discussion about what faith was developing because of that activity.

*'Faith becomes a more normal thing to talk about.'*

*'I think Catholics outsource religion very often, the priest does it, the mother does it, the school does it and that worked in a very integrated society... I think that doesn't work anymore, it has imploded, in Ireland anyway. I think [synodality] is forcing people to have conversations where they are invested, and uncomfortable... this is encouraging people to realise, tentatively, "this is my faith."*



*'If everyone could see, everyone involved, this is our baptismal call... this is a journey together.'*

*'People don't always understand what and why they believe.'*

*'Faith formation... has been absent for too long in the Church and that's probably why we are where we are.'*

*'Faith is showing itself in new ways now, it was very simple in the past... you'd plan something and you'd hope for a great crowd to turn out. A novena and the Church would be packed for three or four days. But you'd just wonder about the level of faith and the level of searching, and we're tapping into that, and it's scary, to know how to do that... to tap into people's new ways of having a relationship with God. It's very airy fairy and how do you make that real?'*

*'There's an opportunity for us to become a faith-led Church and to allow the Spirit to lead us, it is turning us on that one.'*

**There is an opportunity for contact with a wider group of people, who don't usually engage with the local parish**

Another sub-point in response to this question, was comment around using synodal activity to engage with people from beyond the local parish's usual sphere of contact. This very often came from participants who had already used the synodal process for wider engagement. These participants saw a need for the local parish to *'go where people are'*, to local schools, for example, or the local GAA club. Sometimes this desire to engage was in reference to groups that had previously been engaged with, and a previous connection could be built upon. At other times this was in reference to specific groups participants felt the Church should be engaging with, such as people from the LGBT+ community, travellers or refugees.



*'I feel it's not just about going through the wider process and whether rules are going to change or not. It's so important to reach out in your own local parishes so as you're communicating that you're opening up to people, asking about faith, asking their opinion.'*



*'There's a pent-up energy for people to re-engage socially. People were locked up long enough over Covid they want to get out and they want to talk... Can we tap into that energy now?'*

*'There's an opportunity to go out to the peripheries and try and involve people that wouldn't have been involved before.'*

*'Sometimes when people are asked once, they give an answer, but when they reflect on it a little bit later, they give a different answer.'*

*'We talked about young adults coming back to the Church, but that's not realistic so we talked about the Church moving out to the spaces where young adults are, and then other community groups, we mentioned the GAA, and groups we need to be connecting with.'*

### **For some, synodality presented ongoing possibilities**

While most of the responses to this question focussed on concrete ways where synodal processes could be used, there were a handful of occasions where comment simply recognised an openness in synodality. The practice of talking, listening and discerning might then present new opportunities.

*'It's scary that there is no end, but it's also a positive, it's ever new. It's growing and developing.'*

*'But there's an opportunity now to do things in a slightly different way... If we know we are discerning... having a little bit more open ended [approach] and to act in a synodal way... It will seep into our ways of thinking.'*

## **3.4 What are the challenges to these ideas/possibilities?**

This section, looking at challenges to the implementation of synodal practice in the future, has some overlap with the challenges listed in response to the synodal process so far (Section 4.2). Repetition has been reduced where possible, but two separate sections have remained, so as responses to two different questions can be clearly seen.

### **A synodal approach and the development of more collective leadership in the Church requires a culture change**

While there was enthusiasm for greater lay involvement in parish leadership, and parish life generally, there was also acknowledgement that the move away from old structures would be slow. There was widespread recognition that the parish priest had been the key decision maker, at almost every level. One priest summed this up effectively (and humorously) by saying, how, earlier in the week, he, *'had a phone call to say that the lightbulb was out in the toilet.'* Another priest commented that, *'I sometimes think the best gift I could give to a parish is to get sick at some point,'* so as parishioners would then have to take on more responsibility.



Fear was recognised to be a challenge to more collective leadership, but more commonly focus group participants noted how they, and others in the parish, were *uncertain*. For some participants, it was not clear what type of governance they were aiming for, because they had not seen ‘co-responsibility’ at work. There was also some expression of frustration about the timelines of the process, and a desire for change to happen more quickly. It proved difficult to pin down exactly what was being waited for, but it seemed there was uncertainty about the current stage of the synodal process and what change was possible.

A further challenge is that whatever change or development is desired, it is most often taking place in the context of not everyone agreeing that change is needed.

*‘We’re used to saying, ‘they need to make changes’... it has to become a ‘we’. That’s the change in our own mindset, even at local, parish level, we can’t be expecting someone to tell us what to do, we have to be part of the somebody.’*

*‘The challenge to all of [these ideas] is fear, we have this fear of the unknown. [For example] having an intergenerational conversation, the older generation saying ‘I wouldn’t know what to say to a young person’, and vice versa. Fear stops us from taking those opportunities.’*

*‘It applies to everyone... Maybe some who don’t want any change or are happy with how things are... in terms of how we include people and walk together in a synodal way, maybe being more accountable, that would require a change of mindset also.’*

*‘For many people, Synod is done and dusted and there can be a perception that Synod has happened, so the challenge will be how do we continue?’*

### **The Church is changing while it is still coming to terms with its new place in society**

A general point, made in reference to many different questions and topics in the focus groups, was that the Catholic Church in Ireland, once at the very centre of the community, now has a different role. It was noted many times how the local GAA often has much greater activity and participation. Trauma from the legacy of abuse was commented on (though much more openly in the two focus groups with clergy only) as was the general trend of people drifting away from the Church, that some perceived to have been accelerated by the pandemic. Some participants commented on how they perceived Church culture, and notably Church language, to be very different to the rest of society. In their perception, the language of the Mass doesn’t always connect. The challenge of managing change inside the Church is therefore increased by uncertainty and a re-evaluation of the Church’s role in wider society.

*‘We’re small. We’re not as important... In our mind, we need to accept that.’*



**The lack of structures, or the lack of experience and stability in structures, is a challenge to developing opportunities for synodality**

As previously stated, participants indicated that a culture change is required in the Church to transition away from a priest-centric model of leadership. While there are places where structures for a more collective leadership are developing, and others where they are 'bedded in' and experienced, in other places, and arguably the majority of parishes, these structures are not yet developed, or are very much in their infancy. The following sub-points have been outlined briefly below, because these aspects were returned to in greater detail when focus group participants were asked about how synodality might become more sustainable.

Firstly, the evidence from the focus groups would suggest that Parish Pastoral Councils, considered previously as a key vehicle for synodality, are in various stages of development. Some parishes have had an effective Council running for many years; others have had an established Council, but its efficacy has been variable. In many cases a Parish Pastoral Council is either in the process of development, or only recently developed and there is going to be a period for members to get a sense of the Council's remit and its faith-based nature.



In the focus groups, there was some expression about the need for a framework and some direction about how decisions were made in the Church and how all the various levels of authority and governance fitted together. This was sometimes accompanied by a desire not to have everything set in stone. As one participant put it, that there would be, *'direction, but not over direction'*. Some form of modelling of both the work of a Parish Pastoral Council and synodality in that space was also referred to.

Another challenge for Parish Pastoral Councils was considered to be getting a wider spread of people involved, beyond the same group who help out with everything. The intention was not to exclude this group, but simply to recognise that there was a need for new voices to be heard, and not to add another layer of activity to people who were already committed.

Brief comment was made about communication and the need for better connection to what was happening in other places, particularly across the diocese. Comments about communication also referred to better communication to the people in the pews, particularly regarding how 'being church' might change.

*'The structures, at the moment are very limited. The number of parishes that do not have a parish council, is amazing. The number of parishes that have councils that don't meet or do nothing... box ticking for the PP... We have been required to have structures for the laity to participate, but we don't always have them.'*

*'There are parishes where nobody knows except the parish priest what money there is in the parish... Financial councils are just names on paper.'*

*'Historically in the Catholic Church we have gone for retired teachers, we've co-opted retired teachers onto different groups, because there's a perception... that these are the people, but we need people with other skills... technology skills... advertising and marketing skills... strong communicators.'*

*'The Parish Pastoral Councils are faith-based, and a lot of people couldn't get their heads around that for quite a while. My first official 'meet the Parish Pastoral Council'... we had a good sit down and chat and we said 'this is what we think it's going to look like'... Three of them came up to me afterwards and said, 'now we can understand what this is about'... I'm not saying I want to impose exactly what I want out of a Parish Pastoral Council but at the same time there has to be guidance.'*

*'There's a challenge to get non-traditional people onto parish councils and to administer the Eucharist... The wider group, they might be in second unions, but they've been in a second union for twenty years and its as solid as you could get.'*

*'We found that there was a massive communication breakdown not just in terms of synodal processes, but generally in parishes at a macro level, I suppose [developing connections] was a positive in the process.'*



**There is a challenge not only to develop contact with people in synodal ways, but to find the time and energy to maintain that contact**

As noted earlier, there was much positive comment about the connections made with a variety of people through listening sessions or other synodal activity. However, while there is an opportunity to keep dialogue going, there are a number of challenges. Firstly, time and energy are needed to involve people in a new process, at a time when some parish activity has not fully returned since the pandemic.

Focus group participants often recognised that many committed people, both laity and clergy, were time poor, and with less people volunteering post-pandemic, parish resources were often stretched already. There was also comment about how there was sometimes apathy about the parish, perhaps because the Church had not reached out previously, and this sometimes made it difficult to find new people to take on responsibility.

There was limited expression of concern that, having made the effort to connect with people, there was an onus on the Church to maintain and meaningfully develop that relationship, and not treat it as a means of gathering information.

*‘In terms of laity as well [as priests] you’re going back to the same people to get involved... We haven’t managed to renew a lot of ministries ... even simple things like readers or eucharistic ministers, it’s harder to get those people now... post-Covid is part of it.’*

*‘People are time poor... you find it harder and harder to get people to volunteer.’*

*‘There was a time when you had resources because you had enough people practising... but now as the practising community decreases, so your resources decrease, and you can’t find the people... with the talents you need.’*

*‘People being engaged in faith, there’s apathy around that... the apathy from the Church in the past maybe not reaching out ... to young adults. We say they should be coming into Church, but in fact there’s been thirty or forty years there where the Church didn’t... reach out to where people were.’*

*‘When you go back to people, how do you create a space that doesn’t feel like I have left you? I haven’t come and gone... [so that no one feels] I used you, I needed information, I went to you, I got it, I ran. How do I create a process where the door is always open, both ways?’*







### **The development of synodality is linked to broader consideration of the purpose of the Church**

The focus of this research was to gain understanding into people's experience of synodal processes and what they thought the next steps might be. While this was the overwhelming focus of the conversation in the focus groups, every so often, other, more theological questions were asked, or comments were made. These statements stemmed from discussion about the place of synodality in relation to the purpose and practice of the Church, particularly the place of the Eucharist. In short, how much emphasis should be placed on access to the Eucharist?

*'What does being a eucharistic community mean?'*

*'Does everybody have to run after the one priest in an enormous Church, or can people come together in small groups to have a service of the Word together?'*

*'We need to look at the way we view our sacramental life because that is where we are blocked, because the priests provide the sacraments, whereas our faith began with the Gospel, and I think we are afraid to give up those sacramental expressions ... and try to go back and put the Gospel into practice in our daily lives.'*

*'Without shepherds, the flock can't be led. If you're trying to engage the laity and you don't have the shepherds... You want to engage the laity and use them as a resource that takes the burden from the clergy, but there's obviously a huge issue for the Church... in terms of vocations... There is no Church without the Eucharist, there is no Eucharist without the priesthood. For people not to realise that, is scary.'*



## **Specific responses from the clergy**

Many responses from the two clergy-only focus groups have been included in the previous aspects in this section, however the priests in these groups also responded to this question of challenges to synodal opportunities in specific ways. Responses might be broadly considered to be about how opportunities to develop synodality depend on priests' ability to adapt their role in leadership.

### **Priests are often struggling to come to terms with recent changes, both inside and outside the Church**

In the focus groups, there was much reflection on the effects of recent, or relatively recent events on the clergy, including the trauma from the abuse scandals, the effects of the pandemic (particularly lockdown) and in general the decline of the Church in terms of engagement with people and its place in society. Coming to terms with these aspects was considered, for many priests, to be the widest context in which synodality is happening.

*'[During lockdown] you had to deal with a lot of stuff that you hadn't been thinking about. I thought one thing we failed to do was to check in with each and every one of us as a collective. How did we survive all this? What changed in us after the experience [of lockdown]? Some fellas have been left behind because some of us have moved on.'*

*'It's very hard to be a priest in a declining church ... you want to have the young people, they're gone. Get over it. That's very hard... Meeting people outside the Church... it's very difficult for priests to know how they would do that.'*

### **Synodality was perceived to require priests to radically change practice in leadership**

Various comments were made about how training in seminary and practice was geared towards keeping competing interests at bay and making individual decisions. Synodality, by contrast, requires a priest to allow differences of opinion to be aired, but still be managed, as well as the development of teamwork.

With some humour it was recognised how conflict could have been more easily avoided previously, whereas synodality promotes *'having to work with people you don't like.'* Agreement with the laity can also be a stretch, because even getting priests to agree with each other is difficult! More seriously, however, letting go of authority and *'sitting back as a leader'* was not considered something that came easily to most priests.

*'We were trained to be tough, individual leaders who can deal with tough people. We hold the line very often, we keep the place as a neutral space very often... [because] parishes can be competing places of strong personalities, so it's very difficult... to know how to work in teams. The young lads coming up must be trained in teamwork.'*



## **The transition towards collective leadership relies on the parish priest**

The movement away from a priest-centric model of parish leadership to a more inclusive, collective model based on synodal activity was considered to be a slow process. Priests acknowledged that inviting others into leadership takes time and development, and a gradual approach of drawing people in, as well as stepping back.

*‘[As priests] we’re part of the problem, but we’re part of the solution... We need clarity.’*

*‘There is a danger to think that we’re not important... but we have a very important role to play, but we need to identify that now... What’s our role? ...What’s my relevance?’*

## **New responsibilities for priests add to an already busy schedule**

One of the key aspects discussed in the focus groups was how priests are to manage the demands in their time, especially with a declining number of priests. More is being asked of fewer and fewer clergy. Drawing others into leadership and helping a group (of whatever kind) come to a collective decision, rather than imposing a decision on them, will take *more* time for priests who are often already time poor. Synodality was perceived to require more time in the short term, to make possible what might be a sharing of responsibilities in the medium to longer term.

*‘The clergy are getting fewer and fewer and getting busier and busier.’*

*‘Everything in the Catholic Church involves the sacraments, depends on the sacraments, sacraments depend on priests, the Eucharist depends on priests... We’re just being crushed by the weight of responsibility and expected to have enthusiasm.’*

*‘Everybody expects the priest at their funeral.’*

*‘“They won’t say no to you, Father,” which means you have to go out and do all the asking.’*

## **Changes will not happen without at least some resistance**

In addition to comment on the redefinition of a priest’s role, and greater pressure on a priests’ time, there was also expression that whatever changes were made to parish life, would be met by varying degrees of resistance, because some parishioners don’t want change. Some priests saw this as a desire to return to the way the Church was in previous decades, or to go back to a ‘*steady Church*’. Most saw this resistance as inevitable as there will always be people who will not accept change. One priest commented that some people will only act when all the priests are gone.

*‘There is a tension between, in our parishes, those who want no change, and those who want something new. And the ones who want no change are very strong.’*



### 3.5 What is needed to make synodality in the Church a sustainable process?

There was much discussion in the focus groups about what aspects participants thought would make synodality a more sustainable process. Many of these elements overlap. For example, better communication is a part of better developed structures. The first four findings below should be seen as interlocking.

#### **Clarity about synodal processes and activity**

A recurring theme across the focus groups was uncertainty around aspects of synodality including the stages of the Universal Synod; using synodal processes beyond the Universal Synod; and when action can be taken. Greater clarity around these separate, but connected, processes was perceived to be important to sustaining synodal activity.

*‘A defining and a clear explanation would encourage engagement and lead to sustainability.’*

*‘Is it sustainable? Even the word synodal, we’ve had discussion about that tonight again, so current model, no... There has to be a change.’*



### **Understanding of and use of a synodal approach could be increased by modelling**

Linked to the uncertainty about synodality, the forms it might take, and how it might lead to action, there was some expression in the focus groups that more modelling of synodality would lead to better understanding of it, and thereby increase its sustainability. It should be remembered that the focus groups had a mix of people – most very familiar with the listening sessions, recording and synthesising of the discussion and the various stages of the Synod. For many others, however, there was less clarity. There was therefore some desire to see more examples of synodality in action. If others could see how this worked, its use might then be more quickly adopted.

A minor, but related aspect, is that when people did see synodal processes at work, most commonly through a listening session, or, in some instances in reference to the Pre-Synodal Assembly Day in Athlone, they responded positively to what they experienced and were energised by it.

*‘Modelling is very important... we’re talking about [synodality], but we’re not doing it. Most processes in most parishes are not synodal.’*

*‘People need to see this working if they’re going to buy into it. If the people on top are not modelling it, then it’s not going anywhere. The first training needs to be for the Episcopal Conference.’*

*‘The meeting in Athlone, personally, I found that a really good experience and because of that it made me very interested in promoting it.’*

### **Clear communication about synodal activity at various levels**

Connected to a better understanding of synodal processes and activity were comments relating to communication on different levels. This includes comments reported earlier about hurried timelines as part of the Universal Synod, but also about general dissemination of information at diocesan and parish level. Late invites to the focus groups were also mentioned with many comments about only knowing about the focus group a day or two in advance. The rushed invite creating a certain level of bemusement, and sometimes an impression that the process is haphazard. There was limited comment that, by extension, such a seemingly erratic process will struggle to get commitment from people. Other aspects of improved communication focussed on improved structures in the Church (see the following point) and allowing space for continued review.



*“[There needs to be] a core team at diocesan level of people who are engaged and committed who will move this process forward. They are not there by chance -someone asked me yesterday to come here today - but are really involved and enthusiastic about it, and will see the process through.”*

*‘There has to be continued space for people to continue to talk, where are we? What’s good? What’s bad? What can we improve?’*

### **Sustainability will be improved by the development and understanding of Church structures at various levels**

There was much expression in the focus groups about the need for parishes to be given a clear ‘operating model’ outlining what was expected of them. While this was not fleshed out in detail, and comments differed group to group, in general there were requests for each parish (specifically the Parish Pastoral Council) to know what they were responsible for, and to have support from the diocese. Specifically, it was suggested that this would be a group of committed people at diocesan level to which parishes could ask questions. As one participant put it, *‘making people aware of different things that can be done’*. Dioceses in turn would have support and direction from a national pastoral body, so as there was unity in direction across the Irish Church.

A number of focus group participants felt strongly that until this perceived gap in Church structures was closed, a sustainable process would be difficult. There were some assertions that helpful models were being used in other countries.

Within the requests for more structures, there were also requests for flexibility, as noted earlier, *‘direction, but not over direction’*. A need for unity, not uniformity was requested, recognising that parishes and Parish Pastoral Councils are at very different stages of development and there shouldn’t be one road map everyone is following in lockstep.

There was also some discussion around clarity that the Parish Pastoral Council stays pastoral and ‘faith-based’ in nature. Other aspects, such as finances and building maintenance, are managed elsewhere.

There was limited discussion about employed roles for the laity in the co-ordination of parish life (or in more than one parish) to take some of the pressure off the priest. Although this is not a directly relevant topic here, it might be considered that the role of people employed in a parish would be in keeping with the broader direction set by diocesan and national structures.

*‘We need an operating model in the diocese. What’s the support? How are people going to get educated and trained?’*



*‘There’s no national committee for lay people and such a committee could be representative of the dioceses.’*

*‘If we’re talking about [lay] participation... I still think there’s a big weakness, there’s no canonical structure for that... Even when there’s a rule that says every parish is to have a Finance Committee, I know parishes that don’t... There’s no use in talking about Parish Pastoral Councils unless you have a Diocesan Pastoral Council and maybe a national one... The three levels you have in safeguarding.’*

*‘There [should be] a diocesan structure that engages with everybody... from the diocesan office, that one person out in a parish doesn’t feel they are being targeted, isolated, whatever.’*

*‘In the US I remember seeing that a lot of parishes had what was called a ‘Parish Life Coordinator’... Their whole function was to take the stress off the priest and take the daily running of the parish, be a point of contact for all the lay ministers... It just seemed to be a very logical type of role that would be of benefit.’*

### **Spirituality must be at the centre of any synodal process**

In the context of wider discussion about synodality’s sustainability, at each focus group, at various times, comments were made that synodality was only sustainable if spirituality was at the core. Put more simply, if there wasn’t a spiritual core, it wasn’t synodality. Prayer and reflection were often considered to be key expressions of this spirituality, no matter what other structures or processes were put in place.

There was also limited expression about how being synodal connects to the mission of the Church, and not just a means for making decisions internally.

*‘The reason we are all here is that we have some sort of relationship with Jesus... There is no point setting up structures or moving forward if that isn’t at the core of what we are about. If we are trying to sustain this, then there has to be some sort of understanding that prayer is at the core.’*

*‘At the heart of synodality ...prayer and spirituality is key, if it isn’t practiced, it’s not synod, it’s something else.’*

*‘It’s not really our project.’*

*‘Synodality for the sake of synodality doesn’t make any sense unless it’s in the context of mission. That’s what Francis is saying... ‘How can we be more effective carriers of the Gospel, witnesses of the Gospel? ... Part of that answer is that if we are more synodal, we will be a more effective church.’*

*‘There’s a lot of people looking for alternatives, and they’re searching in different avenues, different ways... [we] still have a role there to play.’*



### **Synodality needs to be seen to be creating change**

There was comment that, in very general terms, synodality must have an output. While there were some concrete suggestions about what might be achieved, most focus group participants avoided giving a specific example, perhaps recognising how differently people saw the process, ranging from connecting people to each other, and through this better connection with God; faith formation; better running of the parish; or better connection with others on the periphery or outside of the Church. Others spoke more about reflection and less about action. There was broad agreement however, that there had to be a clear sense that *something* was being achieved, for synodality to be sustainable.

More negatively, there was limited comment comparing synodality to previous initiatives that were no longer under consideration. One example cited was the 'Share the Good News' project. One participant noted the time, effort and resources that had been put into the project, but concluded, *'in our diocese it died a death'*.

*'For synodality to be a success, you need to see something... I want to see results coming from that. Change.'*

*'I'm happy to go with an open-ended process, I don't want it locked down too soon... but when I think about 'Share the Good News' I wonder if there's a possibility that the whole thing might be shut down.'*

### **There needs to be recognition of the starting point, realism about what can be achieved and acceptance that culture change takes a long time**

A point made generally, but strongly in the clergy-only focus group, was that there had to be recognition of the current context for the Irish Catholic Church. This aspect has been noted before, but in this context key elements, such as the effect of the abuse scandals, or the decline in numbers of people attending, should be remembered so as realistic activity is put in place. In summary, synodality has not stepped on to a level playing field.

Recognising the Church's long-standing problems, there was some expression that whatever plans are put in place should be clearly understood, manageable and achievable. There should also be recognition, as has been reported previously, that synodality is a huge cultural change for the Church, and will take a long time to bed in. Sustainability might be enhanced by celebrating the small wins as they happen.

*'I think we are all emerging... from the trauma of abuse and the revelation that priests we loved, family members, this hidden secret was a miasma, everywhere. I think all the energy in the Catholic Church in Ireland has gone into trying to fix that...It's only now we're kind of gasping for air.'*







*'If you want to have sustainability, you have to have things that are measurable... There's no point in coming out with something so great but we'd never be able to do it.'*

*'There needs to be patience in the process... I don't know what that means in reality, but maybe just be easy on ourselves. We can only do what we can do, being rather than doing.'*

*'The Church that we have known, over the past whatever, it is finished, it's over. Our way of being church is going to be different... Now people will discuss [a decision] and the priest will have the vote like everyone else, it's a different model. In terms of sustainability, this has to be embedded over centuries, probably.'*

*'You [often] want to see mass change, but sometimes it's a little thing, one person has re-engaged, and you need to celebrate that. These small wins, small changes that come about, we need to celebrate them.'*

### **Training was considered an important element of sustainability**

Training was mentioned as an aspect that would enhance sustainability. Given that the final question in the focus groups related to training and skill development, however, for the purposes of time, further discussion was not encouraged at this point! There was limited expression about how training



might focus on co-responsibility and be offered to both priests and laity together so they could both hear the same thing. There was other brief comment about who training might be offered to and the kind of form training might take.'

*'We spoke about training not being the usual suspects, but that training is offered synodally.'*

*'Any training needs to be a modelling, not just passing on information.'*

### **Priests' engagement with synodality could be more positive if there was more support around their changing role**

While there was general acceptance that priests' time was in demand and that more support should be on offer, in the clergy-only group this discussion was more specific. There was agreement that there were very few support mechanisms. There was some comment that priests were not trained with or used to having the language to be able to talk about their personal needs. While there was spiritual direction, this was felt to be more about spiritual life, rather than taking in activity or work.

Two priests spoke specifically about supervision (the opportunity to discuss approaches to work and its effects) which both found to be very helpful as it provided an outlet to talk openly about themselves, as well as discuss the context they were working in. There was general agreement that this type of approach would be beneficial, although there was also recognition that for many priests it would be new and uncomfortable. There was, however, appreciation for the space and freedom to talk openly in the small focus group, share commonality and at times vulnerability, as well as recognition that the opportunity to do so didn't occur very often.

*'We're first responders to the faithful and therefore you can be engaged in very difficult realities.'*

*'We don't have the language to ask for that help.'*

*'There's very little care for the clergy, or support... it doesn't exist within the diocesan framework, [though] it might be in the paperwork somewhere.'*

*'There's something about supervision, maybe that's not the right word... I would need mentoring, coaching... If we are doing this process, I can sit down with you and you can hear my story and say 'How come you haven't thought of?' or 'Did you think of...?' or 'Would this be helpful?''*

*'What's very interesting is our gathering here. You come thinking, what is this thing? ...But it's good, away from the Synod, to just sit down here and chat... It's a little bit like supervision... you're thinking about things differently. It's group support, I don't know how you'd phrase that.'*



### 3.6 What skills are required for a synodal approach to become a key part of Church life?

Focus group participants were asked this question along with the question about the sustainability of synodality, so there is some degree of overlap between the previous section and this one. There was, however, some uncertainty in the responses. While those who were originally uncertain about the questions (or why they had been asked to come) very often increased in confidence during the focus group, this question was met with some confusion. In each of the four 'mixed' focus groups, whenever skills or training was mentioned, there was always the question, 'skills or training for what?' The answer was always, 'for the types of activity you saw opportunity to continue or begin' discussed in previous questions.

#### Understanding of the place of synodality

A point already made at length, is that many participants in the focus group were uncertain about where the practice of synodality best fits in the overall activity and structures of the Church. This question produced further discussion about the nature of synodality, as clarity about what someone is being asked to do, directly relates to what skills they need to be equipped with.

There was some expression about wanting to understand simple synodal processes that could be grasped by people and groups. With that as a foundation, it was considered that development of ideas, skills, and even risk-taking, could then happen, with less chance of a return to old ways of doing things.

*'One of the skills and training areas is to encourage the spirit of risk-taking and to encourage parishes and communities to pilot certain initiatives. There are fifteen areas identified in the synthesis document and maybe if a number of parishes were encouraged to focus on [these] maybe with young people or outreach to the LGBTQ community, or the role of women, there might be some clustering of those parishes... some collaborative way to do this, that would move it on.... It's to encourage that mentality of 'can we pilot something here?' Or, 'can we pilot something new?'*

*'[Something new] is hard to sustain, because you will always fall back to your usual position when you're under pressure.'*

#### Facilitating discussion

The issue of clarity aside, the three main requests for skill development focussed on facilitation, listening and spirituality (particularly discernment). There was widespread agreement that skills such as creating the right atmosphere for people to talk and connect, the inclusion of everyone and the management of different, sometimes conflicting views, required understanding, practice and development.



*‘Facilitators who can engage with people and help bring them towards change, as well as different lay led ministries that might be needed going forward... This is what’s happening, how can we facilitate the change taking place in the Church?’*

*‘In every parish there are groups of people... who have a commitment... any training we could give them to give them more confidence and the skills they need... At the synodal gatherings, when I asked people to facilitate, there was a gasp and ‘I wouldn’t want to’ and that’s understandable... if you’ve never had to do that. So we had a little training session for a couple of weeks about managing a group and making sure everyone gets an opportunity to talk, and dealing with someone taking over the group. So, basic training in facilitation and confidence building.’*

*‘There will be people who will ask difficult questions, and how do you deal with that?’*

*‘I think it’s easy for us to look at synodality and think it’s very easy to do, but it’s actually very, very difficult, you have to unlearn everything we’ve done. It’s not a practice in our culture, it’s completely counter cultural really.’*

### **Listening skills**

There was much discussion about listening skills as a critical element of synodality. There was agreement that listening skills went beyond being attentive to what someone was saying, and included understanding what someone was meaning. Some comment went further to say that understanding, empathy, and hospitality of time, all contribute to accompaniment – journeying with other people.

Managing conflict within a group, perhaps surprisingly, was a skill that was hardly addressed during discussion of this question, although there was some limited discussion about the ability to listen to and, in the words of one participant, ‘*absorb anger*’ in relation to listening.

*‘Listening is more than just simply hearing. Someone could be saying something, but you’re also hearing another voice behind it.’*

*‘We actually don’t listen to each other... look at political conversations... this unlearning is across the whole of society.’*

*‘[We need] to unpack the art of accompaniment, what does it mean to journey with people... based on their need? We need to look at accompaniment in terms of those who feel outside of the Church... It is part of discernment... meeting people where they are at.’*

*‘Being able to listen to, absorb and process anger... there’s a lot of frozen anger that has ended up in a depressed Church, and has depressed morale.’*



## **Understanding of the spirituality of synodality, particularly discernment**

Each focus group clearly understood that, embedded in facilitation skills and listening skills, was spirituality. Prayer was mentioned as an aspect of synodality, and a possible aspect of training, but there was more frequent and explicit comment about understanding discernment and learning how to discern. Focus group participants recognised that the process of listening and discerning how God might be leading was very new – some even spoke of the need to ‘unlearn’ what had happened in the past.

*‘We’re not just listening to the content of the conversation, we’re trying to also discern where is the Spirit in this? It’s a different skill set... Facilitating conversation plus.’*

*‘Listening skills are important, but spiritual listening is something different... If this is about anything, it’s about discerning. We need training on what does it mean to discern? ... What is the voice of the Spirit?’*

*‘The synodal approach is that a spiritual conversation allows people to speak... You listen, then you feedback what you have heard ...The objective is to hear the voice of the Spirit, which doesn’t mean there is a majority... it’s not everyone speaks and then we make a decision; what have we heard in what was spoken?’*

*‘Discernment. We talk about discernment, it is a personal, spiritual thing, but there are also steps of discernment that the Church teaches and I don’t think we have ever discussed them at any meeting I have ever been at.... Discerning the Lord’s will is not the same as decision-making.’*

## **Training needs to be accessible and practical**

There was limited, but nonetheless consistent, expression in the focus groups that whatever training was on offer would be accessible, in that it would be easily understandable, in straightforward language. It would also be transferable, in that it would explain theory but apply it to everyday situations. One suggestion was that there would be a toolkit to take away. Others expressed that they wanted training that left them (or others) feeling empowered, encouraged and inspired – the national Pre-Synodal Assembly at Athlone was referenced as an example.

There was limited expression about training for laity to take on specific roles within the parish; most comment in response to this question focussed on more general aspects.

*‘[I’d want to leave with] a toolkit of resources. When I go out of that room, there’s all the information that I can share.’*

*‘There has to be training put in place really quickly where lay people can assist the priests, at things like funerals, anything that can be done to take the weight off the clergy.’*





### **Specific responses from the clergy**

While many of the comments from priests have been included in previous aspects in this section, there were specific training needs mentioned by the clergy. Some of these comments have been gathered here.

#### **Training on working and discerning collaboratively**

Priests again returned to the perceived change in their role. Much comment focussed on collaboration, unpicking the habit of being an individual leader and beginning to work as part of a team – both with other priests and with laity. Within a parish, there was recognition that the role of the priest was changing radically, from sole leader, to leading through accompaniment. This was considered to require significant retraining to assist the transition to developing and employing a different skill set.



Comments on making decisions through discernment tended to be very similar to the comments made by participants generally, however, there was also recognition from clergy that authentic discernment entailed a significant change from past practice where their role was more directive. There was also some expression that it requires a change from simply completing the next task, to discerning what the important tasks are, in the many activities they are part of.

*‘Getting into the business of training to be a leader, training to work in a team.’*

*‘There will be a skill set needed where priests are helped to change their identity ... if you were going from “I am a priest and I lead the parish” to “I am the priest and I accompany this faith community where the Spirit is leading us” then your whole identity structure [changes].’*

*‘Discernment, so that we arrive at a decision, not a decision being handed down.’*

*‘Another skill, how do you minister in a discerning way? ... That’s a particular skill that synodality requires of us... Fellas can minister when they see what’s before them and they’ll do it, now... Synodality is to see what’s before you and discern from the myriad of things where the Spirit wants me to invest myself? That’s a big one.’*

### **Reaching out beyond the structures of the local Church**

Mission was discussed to a lesser degree, but there was recognition that the old model was that the Church was at the heart of the community and maintenance of the flock was also maintenance of the local community. Now, however, there was a perceived need for the Church to ‘go out’ and engage beyond its structures. An awareness of these changes, and an awareness of the new skills needed, was also considered to be necessary.

*‘We had to maintain a community, for the most part, now we’re being asked to be missionary, to go out. We need training on that, because it is a huge different skill set... We were comfortable in maintenance.’*

*‘A skill we need to have is an awareness that we need skills... If you’re not aware, it’ll mean nothing to you.’*



# 4.

## Findings from the Online Survey

There were 145 valid responses to the survey.

### 4.1 Background details from respondents

#### 4.1.1 Most respondents to the survey were lay people

The largest group of respondents were lay people who volunteered in the Church (41%). When this group is combined with lay people employed by the Church (20%), and those who chose 'Other' but described themselves as lay people (8%), it can be seen that around two thirds of survey respondents were laity.

#### 4.1.2 Just over half of the respondents were female

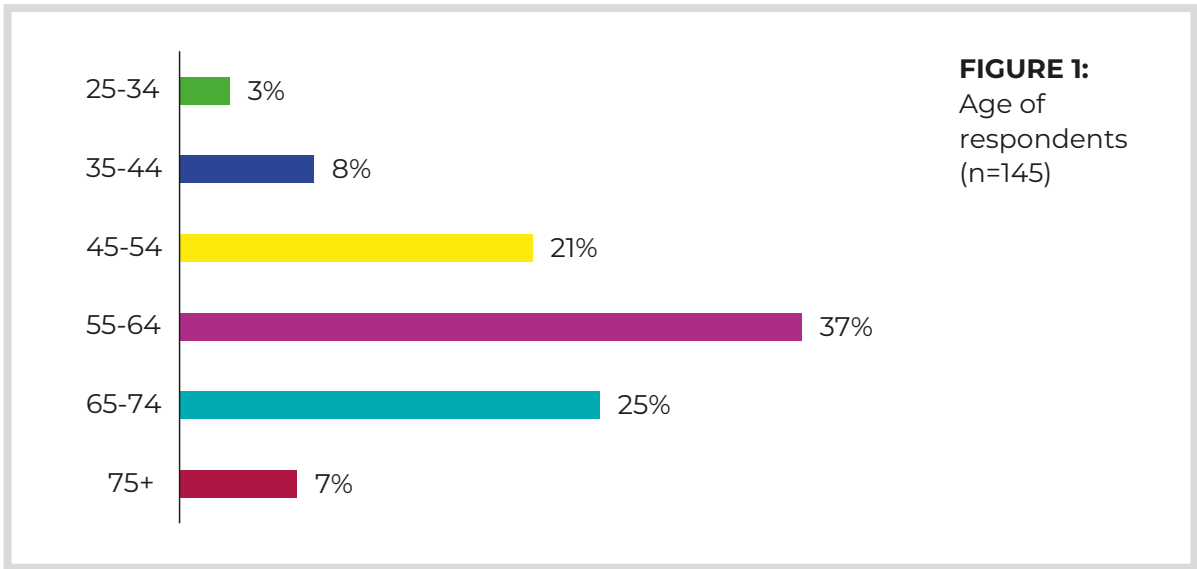
There was an almost even gender response to the survey with 51% of respondents selecting female, 48% selecting male and 1% preferring not to say.

#### 4.1.3 The majority of respondents were over 55 years old

Over two thirds of respondents (69%) were over 55 years old, with just over half of this group in the age 55-64 age bracket. The smallest age bracket of respondents was in the 25-34 age bracket; 4 respondents (3%) in total.





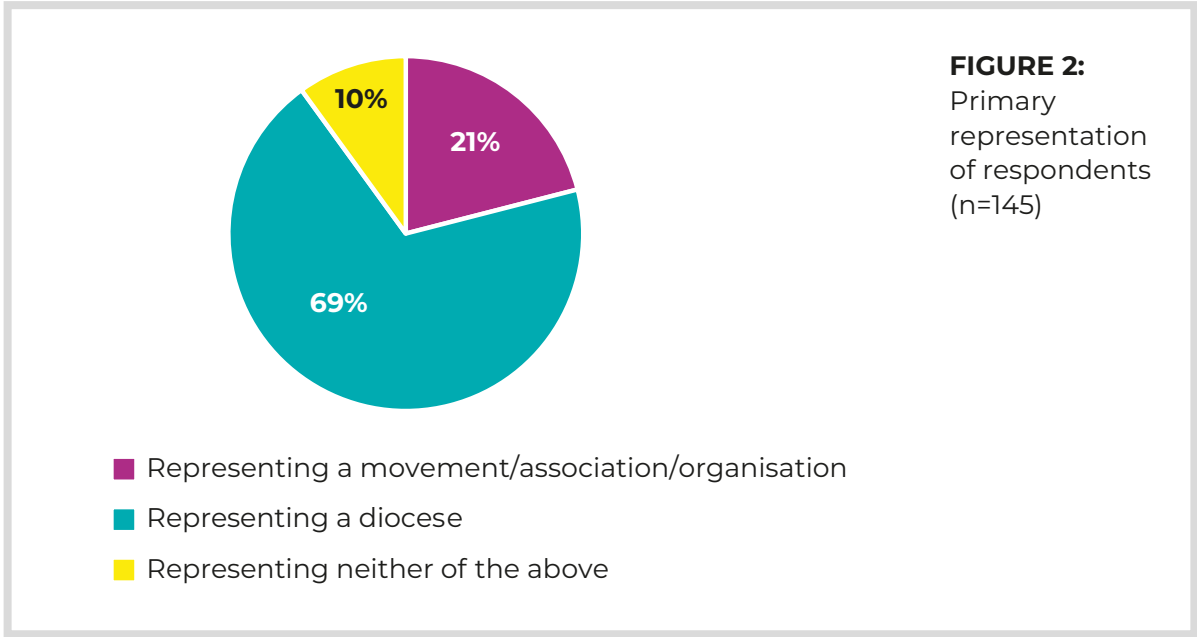


**4.1.4 The majority of respondents said they were representing a diocese**

When asked if they were primarily representing a diocese, a movement / association / organisation, or neither of these, 100 respondents (69%) said they were representing a diocese.

**4.1.5 Every diocese was represented**

Most dioceses had 1-4 (inclusive) responses, however three dioceses (Elphin, Kildare and Leighlin, and Meath) account for 29% of the total responses.



#### 4.1.6 A broad range of organisations, movements or associations were represented in the survey

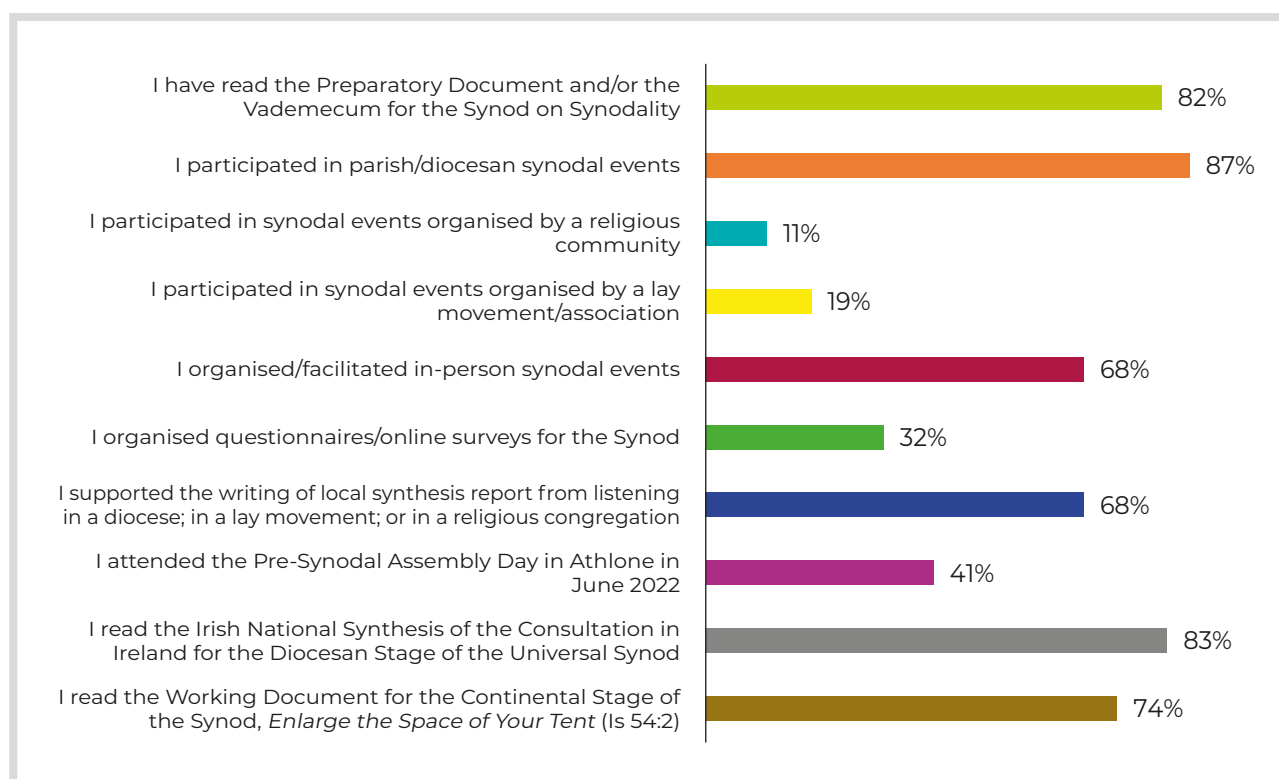
31 respondents said they were primarily representing an organisation, movement or association. In all, 21 separate organisations were represented, most with a single respondent.

### 4.2 Engagement with the Universal Synod

#### 4.2.1 Respondents most commonly read documentation for the Universal Synod, including the National Synthesis, and participated in parish or diocesan synodal events

Respondents were asked to state if they had been engaged in certain elements relating to the Universal Synod. The three most common aspects of engagement were reading preparatory documents for the Synod, participating in parish or diocesan synodal events, and reading the National Synthesis, all of which received positive responses of over 80%.

It is worth noting that over two thirds (68%) of respondents had organised or facilitated in-person synodal events, proving that the majority of survey respondents assumed a level of responsibility for this process.



**FIGURE 3:** Respondents' involvement in the synodal process (n=145)



The aspects with the lowest positive responses were perhaps unsurprising, given that they were all activities that a minority of people would be likely to be part of (participating in a synodal event organised by a religious community, movement or association; organising a survey; and attending the Pre-Synodal Assembly Day in Athlone).

#### 4.2.2 Almost all respondents found the synodal process to be important

Respondents were asked to assess how important they thought the synodal process was. 98% of respondents placed some degree of importance on the process, with almost two thirds choosing that it was 'very important'. Only 1% of respondents (one respondent) chose to say it was 'not at all important'. Two respondents said they did not know.

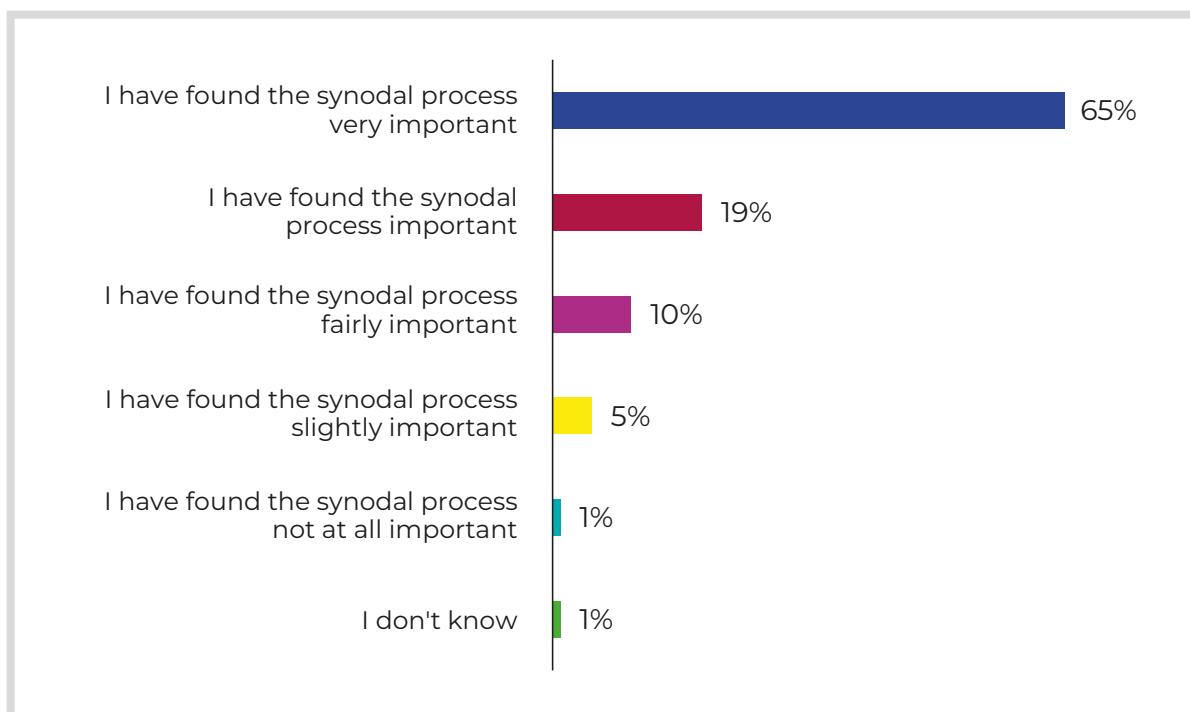
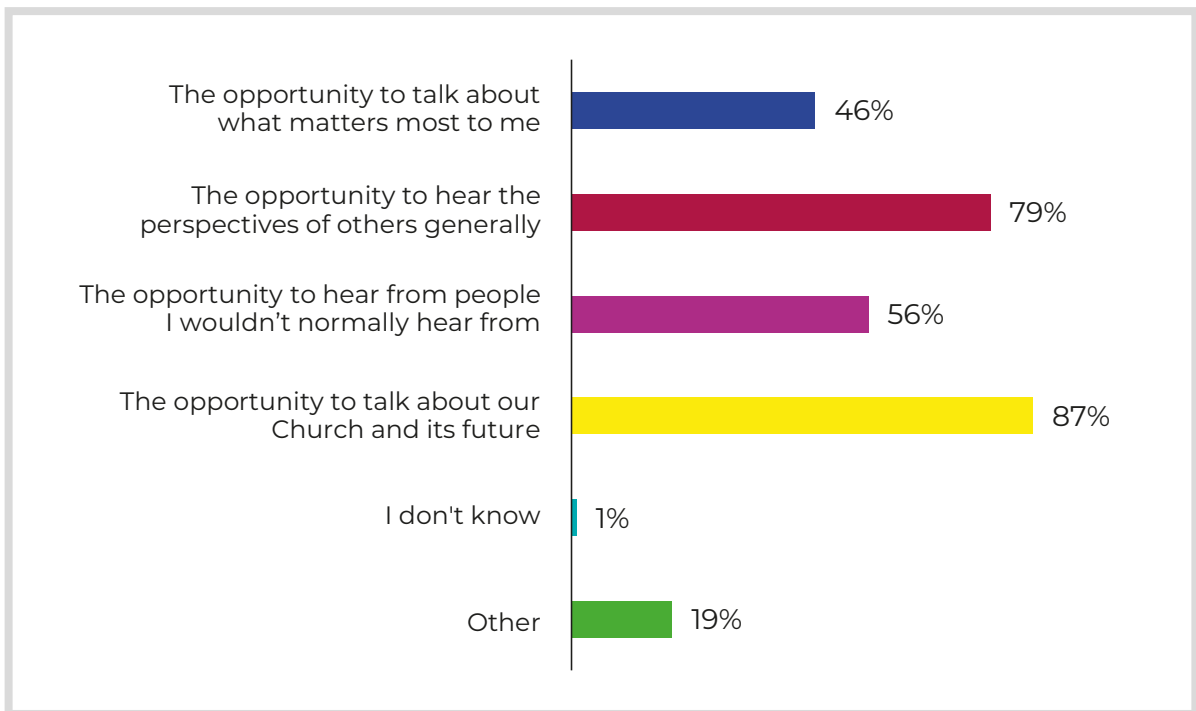


FIGURE 4: Importance of the synodal process (n=145)

#### 4.2.3 Respondents most valued the opportunity to talk about their Church and its future, and to hear from others

Respondents were asked to choose what was of most value to them, from a small range of opportunities provided by the synodal process. Respondents could choose more than one option, and there was opportunity to express another reason. 87% of respondents valued the opportunity to talk about their Church and its future. 79% of respondents valued the opportunity to hear the perspectives of others.





**FIGURE 5:** The value of the synodal process

#### **4.2.4 The selection of 'Other', in response to the question about the value of the synodal process, provided further comment on listening to others.**

There were 27 comments from respondents who chose 'Other'. Ten of these broadly related to the opportunity to listen to others and hear a wide range of perspectives. For example:

*'The fact that people have been asked to gather and share their views and ideas in an unrestricted environment.'*

*'Having the opportunity to link with others who are representatives of various movements and parishes.'*

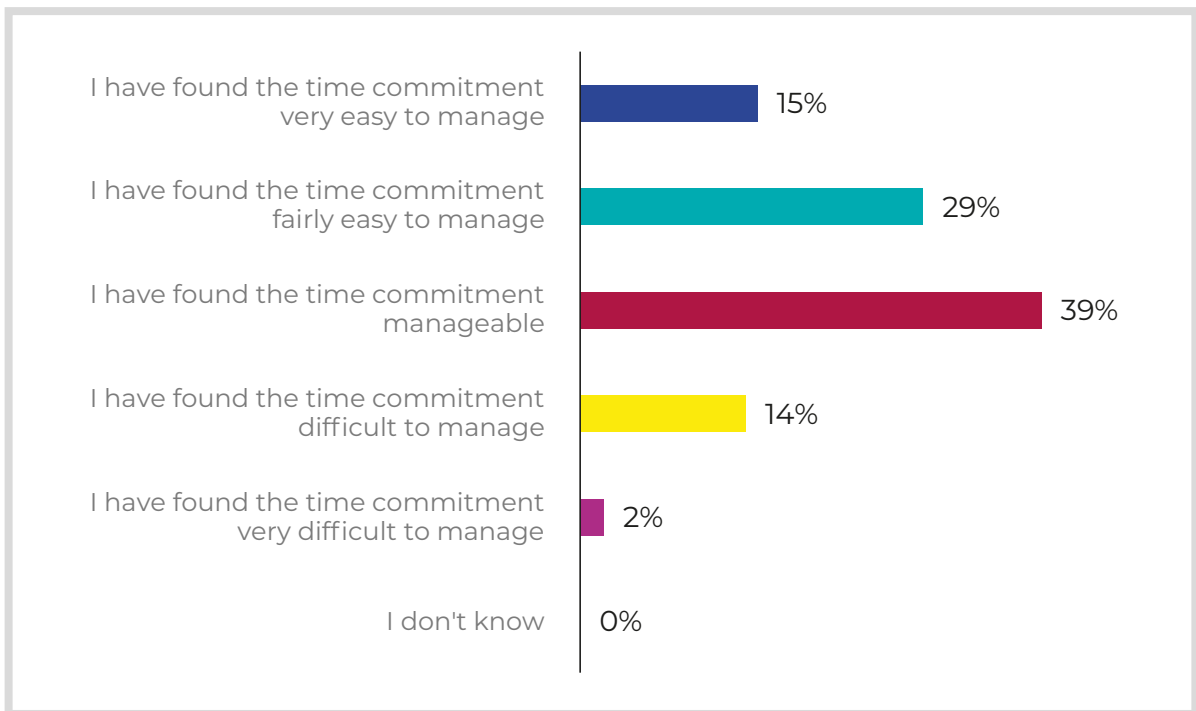
*'Give people a sense that they are being consulted, listened to and have something valuable to contribute.'*

*'The inclusion of people who are not usually consulted in Church discussions e.g. LGBT people.'*

*'The opportunity for perspectives to emerge that we are often biased towards or blind to.'*







**FIGURE 6:** Assessment of the time commitment needed for the synodal process (n=145)

#### 4.2.6 Most respondents made further comment on the synodal process

Ninety-five people left further comments, most wrote a short sentence or two on one aspect. Some, however, wrote quite lengthy responses. Many comments had both positive and critical aspects. In terms of subject matter, many comments could reasonably be added to two or more of the sub-sections that follow. Some longer responses, addressing more than one theme were split into two or more quotes and added to different sections.

These responses have been broken down into three broad groups with the main themes outlined below: overtly positive comments (approximately a third of responses); critical comments, which should not be seen as unfavourable, as it often asked for something, suggested an improvement or articulated a particular need (approximately two thirds of responses); and negative responses where the respondent made an assessment that there was something wrong with the process (several responses).



### **Approximately a third of comments were positive, grateful and hopeful**

Approximately ten comments were positive and non-specific, often simply stating joy, trust in or enthusiasm for the synodal process. Several other comments gave a reason for the hope expressed. Another small group of comments simply expressed a positive spiritual impact from the process, this was expressed in many other responses too, but in most cases the respondent went on to talk about other issues important to them.

*‘It’s a great process and definitely the way forward for the Church.’*

*‘I found the process to be trustworthy, and it has my confidence.’*

*‘The sessions have been energising and hopeful.’*

*‘I enjoyed participating and found it renewed my faith.’*

### **There was positive comment about how synodality allowed for meaningful engagement with others**

Several comments specifically addressed how synodality and the listening sessions had been very important means of engaging with others and hearing different perspectives.

*‘Gathering with people who have never had the opportunity to talk about Church and how it relates to them has proved very insightful and is a process that should be continued.’*

*‘Synodal process has been a valuable platform for the people in the Church and those in the margins to find their place to listen and their voice to be heard with the desire to seek the truth of God’s love in our Church.’*

### **There was positive comment about the organisation, communication and support for the synodal process**

Several comments referenced the organisation and communication of the synodal process, acknowledging the support of the National Steering Committee.

*‘The Irish Synod Team have been very informative with great structure. At a Diocesan level we weren’t on our own. Listening and sharing with people across Dioceses has been so informative and definitely one of the greatest benefits of virtual platforms. It allowed people to be engaged without tremendous travelling.’*

*‘Encouraged by the work of the SP Committee to make the process effective and to ensure the longevity of the process.’*





### **There was expressed desire to continue with the process, and for further support**

At least eight respondents commented directly on their desire to see synodality continue and on the need for further support, particularly in terms of resources and creative ideas.

*'We are all still learning what it means to be 'synodal'. This needs to be understood and supported with appropriate resources.'*

*'It is important to provide training in synodal methods, in particular, that of spiritual conversations.'*

*'We need to keep people engaged or they may forget it ever happened.'*

### **There were concerns regarding the breadth of engagement of the synodal process**

Approximately twenty responses referenced concerns or difficulties in engaging people. Approximately half of these responses commented on how difficult it was to get people to come to a listening session, both regular Mass-goers and those who do not attend. Around one third of the comments in this group addressed concern at the lack of engagement or enthusiasm from priests.

*'Need to find new ways to hear the voices of so many, including those who come to Church liturgies and events regularly and those who participate rarely or not at all.'*





*'The process needs greater involvement from non-cChurch goers and young families - which is very difficult to obtain.'*

*'I am not convinced that the clergy are particularly enthused by the whole process. They are ageing, tired and have had a few efforts at reform in their lifetimes that didn't go very far, so another effort is not engendering much passion.'*

*'It appears to date there is very mixed levels of interest from local clergy and it would possibly benefit the process to have an insight into the levels of interest, support, apathy or resistance to change from the clergy in light of their current role.'*

### **There was concern that the synodal process differed place to place**

Linking to the previous point regarding communication (and comments about how there was, at times, *no* communication getting to the pews) several respondents commented on how some dioceses seemed to have very little happening when compared to others. There was also comparison of approaches between dioceses.

*'There does not appear to be much momentum for the synodal process in this Diocese to date.'*

*'Questions in [my] Diocese not easy to understand. [A neighbouring diocese's] questions, for example, were better in this regard and prompted questions about lay involvement in Church decision-making'*

### **There was limited criticism regarding communication of the process**

A small number of respondents highlighted concerns about how information about the process is communicated to parishioners.

*'I don't believe the ongoing information is trickling down to parishioners. There needs to be a more structured process of ongoing and regular information-channelling and communication at many levels and in many ways so that people are not reliant on what they are informed by the priest at Mass.'*

*'More information on process should have been given in parishes not just to pastoral councils.'*

### **There was some expression about the challenges of the timeframes**

Eight respondents made further comment about how the timelines for submissions have, at times, been challenging and/or rushed. This was, however, sometimes connected to comment about the worthwhile nature of the process.

*'The time frame in getting responses back from parishes etc was too restrictive.'*

*'The reason with regard to the difficulty for time commitment relates to the different timeframes to get documents/submissions over the deadline date - very little time given for the submission pre the Prague Continental process.'*



### **There was concern over two synodal processes**

Three respondents specifically commented that clarity about the synodal process was not helped by having two processes run side by side.

*‘Having the international and national synodal agendas running more or less concurrently is a bit confusing. I think that the national one is that which will garner greater interest.’*

### **Some comments referred to a desire for change in the Church, and expressed concerns about what might inhibit that change**

At least ten comments directly referred to a desire for change in the Church, most considering that the role of the laity should be increased. There was general concern that hope brought about by synodality might not come to anything, and some specific concern that desire for change in the Irish Church will be lost at international stages of the Synod.

*‘Concern about where it will take us and if anything will really change.’*

*‘While so far well managed, there will need to be a significant culture change in the Irish Church to even to get to the point of holding a Synod/Assembly or being a synodal Church.’*

*‘Great to have clergy and laity working together! But worried that the Synods in Rome will revert to the old model dominated by bishops.’*

### **There were some concerns that the traditional teaching of the Church might change**

Two respondents, while recognising the value of the process, outlined concerns about the impact of the synodal process on Church teaching.

*‘I think that if there is not enough prayer invoked, calling down the Holy Spirit onto the synodal process the core teachings of the Magisterium will be jeopardized.’*

### **The most consistent concern was that faith was not enough of a part of synodal practice and that the teaching of the Church would be challenged**

Several respondents expressed concern that the approach taken was primarily secular in nature, not faith-based and that the product of such an approach would undermine Church teaching.

*‘The synodal process would benefit from avoiding the use of contemporary secular language such as inclusive, listening, universal etc. The synodal process must be open to the Holy Spirit. The Church is not a corporate entity seeking a share of a consumer market.’*

*‘There is a danger that we just apply a spiritual veneer to a primarily secular mentality and call it Catholic. Our process has to be different than that of a secular body tasked with restructuring or improving a civil organisation?’*



*'I was disappointed with the emphasis placed on ideological campaigns which advocate what the Church cannot change. These emphases were found both implicit in the questions we were asked, in the responses given and in the representations from the Church in Ireland. I worry that it is destabilising to the already tenuous faith of many... There is a problem with the very notion of discernment at the heart of this process. Those facilitating it seem to think that good will is a sufficient criterion for heeding the input of someone. But the criterion has to be compatible with the Gospel as articulated in the Creed, the Scriptures and the Magisterium.'*

## **4.3 Capabilities and training needs**

### **4.3.1 Confidence levels were generally high regarding the nine tasks listed (relating to synodality). Least confidence was indicated against designing listening sessions**

To inform the development of a training programme to equip local leaders, respondents were asked to indicate their confidence level for a range of tasks (where 0 was 'not confident' and 10 was 'very confident').



The full data table can be seen on the following page, however, for simplicity, if it can be taken that the bottom four markers (0-3) signify lack of confidence, the middle three markers (4-6) signify some degree of confidence, and the top four markers (7-10) signify good to high levels of confidence, then the data can be simplified to the table immediately below.

Task	0-3	4-6	7-10
Explaining what synodality is to others	7%	26%	69%
Explaining what discernment is to others	8%	25%	68%
Presenting a basic theology of synodality to others	16%	28%	57%
Designing a synodal listening session for local parishioners	13%	37%	49%
Identifying ways to listen to people who might be disengaged from Church	23%	42%	35%
Facilitating a synodal listening session for local parishioners	11%	26%	62%
Facilitating a conversation when people express opposing views	13%	29%	58%
Leading people in a scriptural reflection	12%	22%	66%
Leading Spiritual Conversations	13%	27%	59%

**TABLE 1:** Confidence levels of respondents regarding key tasks relating to synodality (n=140; 5 people skipped this question)  
 (Note: As percentages are rounded up, the total for each task is not always 100%)

The tasks where most confidence was indicated (highlighted in green) were explaining synodality, explaining discernment and leading a scriptural reflection. In each case markers 7-10 were over 60%, and markers 4-10 totalled over 90%.

Slightly less confidence was indicated (highlighted in orange) in presenting synodal theology, facilitating a listening session, facilitating a conversation with opposing views and leading Spiritual Conversations. However, in each case the 7-10 markers were still well above 50%, and the 4-10 markers totalled over 80%.

Most notable for indications of less confidence (highlighted in red) were designing a listening session and listening to people who might be disengaged from the Church. In each case the 7-10 markers were below 50% and the 0-6 markers were at 60% or above.



### **4.3.2 Almost half of the respondents made further comment about training**

Respondents were asked if there were *any other aspects of training they would like*, that would help develop the synodal pathway in their context. Seventy respondents commented, with a small number of these being 'no further comment'. Comments were wide-ranging, many listing two or three different topics. The main themes have been included here.

#### **Almost a third of the overall comments asked for training in communication, particularly in relation to engaging with and encouraging people to participate in synodal activity**

This group can again be broken down into thirds. Approximately two thirds of the comments in this sub-group were in relation to finding ways to engage with people and to encourage them to come to events, to listen to others and share their opinions. Some of these comments specifically related to engaging with people who were outside the Church or were perceived to be difficult to reach.

*'How to deal with those who are showing no engagement.'*

*'Creative ways of engaging people. Connecting with people on the margins.'*

*'For me, it's how do we get engagement from those that didn't participate the first time round. So, I think it's communication skills in terms of the message [and] how we message.'*

The other third of comments in this sub-group related to training in more general communication skills including event planning, PR and marketing, and using social media.

*'General communications and listening skills PR and marketing skills to promote the synod and its message. Social media skills.'*

*'Communicating well through social media.'*

#### **Understanding of theology or development of spirituality received widespread comment**

Ten comments made specific reference to leaders in the local Church having a sufficient understanding of theology. Beyond these specific comments, references were made to other aspects of spirituality in relation to synodality, most commonly about how the synodal process wasn't just about listening, but also discernment and spiritual engagement.

*'Leaders would need to be knowledgeable in basic teachings of the Catholic Church and be able to explain them appropriately.'*



*‘Training in leadership, basic theology and Christology, training in catechesis, history of the early Church, how the Church might move forward as a loving, caring, humble, poor, simple, ‘powerless’ community.’*

*‘There is a great need for scriptural understanding, and daily practice of Lectio Divina in order to discern the Pathway. It is a skill that is needed for this work.’*

### **Facilitation, or aspects relating to facilitation received significant comment**

Approximately ten comments either directly referenced facilitation (often with no explanation) or aspects of training that might be considered as facilitation skills, such as chairing skills, objectives for participants or analysis of conversations.

*‘Practical facilitation skills. Facilitation of deep listening. Analysis of outcomes of conversations. Creating shared actions. Maintaining ongoing listening. Letting the Holy Spirit lead.’*

*‘To facilitate the diversity of views, and some very strongly held it is important to have a professional and competent facilitator.’*

*‘Some guidance on the content that we are looking for from the participants? Are the questions to be similar to those we used last year?’*

### **There was significant comment on the current stage of the Synod and requests for information on synodality in simple language**

While these might be considered as two separate topics, there is a degree of overlap in this sub-group. Approximately ten comments referred to training being able to explain aspects of the Synod or the synodal process. A few comments asked for clarity on the current stage of the Synod. Other comments asked for clarity on what action synodal processes could and couldn't achieve. Other comments asked for simple explanations of synodal themes that would make it easy for people to understand. It is unclear whether these explanations were intended for the benefit of the respondent, or for the benefit of others who were not as familiar with synodality.

*‘Further clarity on the proposed steps of the Irish Synod, in order to get people engaged in a long process.’*

*‘Clarification of what the Synod can and cannot achieve... in terms of calls for doctrinal change. How to balance listening to pain and disappointment while also holding the hope of healing and renewal. Answering the calls for change in relation to moral questions.’*

*‘Give plain English versions of discernment, synodality, allowing ordinary people grasp the themes, the terms are obscure and self-defeating of their meaning and objective, is theoretical rather than pastoral.’*

*‘A FAQ document that explains in language easy to understand what the synodal process is all about and what are the next stages.’*





### **There was a small number of comments relating to handling conflict**

Three comments specifically addressed handling conflict, or opposing perspectives; brief reference was also made to this theme in other comments.

*‘Ensuring I am confident if there is conflict at a gathering’*

### **A small number of comments referenced the type of approach training should take**

These few comments noted two elements. Firstly, that training would be practical and active. There were also requests for training to be for both clergy and laity together.

*‘My skills would improve with more experience through watching and taking part.’*

*‘Not so much a skill as an approach ... all training should be provided to clergy and laity together. Much training in late 2021 / early 2022 was focused on the laity and many clergy were unsure of their role in Stage 1. We need to be trained together for the journey together rather than implying that there is any significant distinction between the needs / roles of different folk in the Synodal Pathway.’*

### **4.3.3 Listening skills, discerning skills and facilitation skills were most commonly listed by respondents as skills they thought a synodal leader should have**

Respondents were asked *what skills they thought a leader in a synodal Church should have*, with space to list up to five skills. Three skills (listening skills, discerning skills, and questioning skills) were given as examples. There was an extremely broad range of responses, some of which might, with more understanding, have been included in these main themes. Skills that were recorded more than 20 times are included here.



Listening skills had over one hundred responses, sometimes described as ‘active listening’ or ‘respectful listening’.

Discerning skills had over 60 responses, often with descriptions about being able to listen, reflect and report, or respond authentically and respectfully.

Facilitation skills had nearly 60 responses. A wide variety of descriptions were included here, including: group work; making sure everyone has their voice heard; identifying points of agreement; redirecting conversation if a group goes off topic; creating space for freedom to think and then speak; and keeping to time.

Questioning skills might also be considered as facilitation skills, but there were over 20 separate mentions of questioning skills, including aspects such as helping participation and finding greater depth.

Knowledge of theology, or at least a clear understanding of the Gospel, had over 20 responses including: *‘a good understanding/overview of faith and faith community’*; *‘confidence in their spirituality’*; *‘confidence engaging with Sacred Scripture & Church Teaching’*; and *‘Education (learning about synod, discernment and faith)’*.

Prayer also received over 20 responses, including: prayerfulness; leading others in prayer; and *‘catechetical skills in group and prayer’*.

#### **4.3.4 Better understanding of synodality and a better understanding of faith were respondents’ two most common suggestions for topics for a training programme**

Respondents were asked *what topics they wanted to see in a training programme* (provided by the Irish Synodal Pathway) for clergy and lay leaders in the Church, with space to list up to three topics. No examples were provided. There was an extremely broad range of responses, with notable overlap between the responses concerning skills in the previous question. Topics that were recorded 20 times or more are included here.

Synodality had approximately 40 direct references, mostly in relation to what it means for the Church in practice. Responses included: *‘Synodality - what it would mean in practice’*; *‘What the Church is and what synodality is’*; *‘Opportunities to engage in synodality’*; and *‘Clarity around the distinction between what the Synod has as its aims and ... the process of changing the doctrine of the Church’*.

‘Faith development’ is a very broad heading, and arguably many of the responses could be included in this theme. Most of the approximately 40 comments placed in this category related to the acquisition of theological knowledge or development of understanding of Church teaching.





Responses were similar to the responses in the skills question and included: *'Basic tenets of faith'*; *'How the Church gets its beliefs and how they are handed on'*; *'Individual faith formation'*; and *'Development of belief and enrichment of personal faith'*.

Listening, and particularly spiritual conversation and listening, had approximately 30 responses. As with the previous question, 'active' and 'respectful' listening was mentioned, but so was listening to the Holy Spirit and there were some links to discernment. (Discernment as a topic itself was recorded approximately 20 times.) Responses included: *'How to train others in good listening and synodal skills'*; *'How to listen to the Spirit together'*; and *'How to facilitate spiritual conversations'*.

'The future of the Church and its development', is, again, a very broad theme, as many comments here related to the future of the Church. However, approximately 30 comments related directly to the *relevance* of the Church in contemporary society and what change is required to promote re-engagement with people generally. A sub-section of this group is comments relating to the place of women in the Church, which accounted for around ten comments. Responses included: *'Relevance of Church in the modern world'*; *'Envisioning future expressions of Church'*; and *'Alternative decision-making in the Church'*. Responses specifically relating to the role of women in the Church included: *'Promoting women as preachers'*; *'Role of women religious in the Church'*; *'Equality for women in the Church'*; and *'Women – expanding their role'*.

Comments that made specific comment about how clergy and laity would work together had approximately 30 responses. Most comments focussed on laity taking on greater responsibility in the Church. Responses included: *'How clergy and lay people can move forward together in a mutually respectful way'*; *'Lay people in active not passive involvement'*; *'Empowering lay people to take ownership of their baptismal calling'*; *'parish structures to facilitate lay participation'*; and *'A spirituality for participation and co-responsibility in Church life'*.

Facilitation skills, directly or indirectly, had approximately 30 comments, all of which were very similar to the facilitation skills outlined in the previous question.

Comments about inclusion, welcome and engaging with people received approximately 25 comments. These were similar to the comments made about the same topic in the open response section after the indication of confidence questions. Responses included: *'How to engage those who feel excluded from the Church'*; *'How to reach out beyond the walls of the Church'*; *'Going outside the tent. Reaching out/openness to outsiders'*; *'What is mission?'*; and *'Engagement methods'*.



# 5.

## Conclusions

This research was intended as a needs analysis with lay and ordained local Church leaders, focussed on those with prior experience of the synodal process so as to support local leadership, increase and improve engagement, and strengthen the sustainability of the process. The following conclusions are offered, based on the findings of both the focus groups and the online survey.

### **The responses to the online survey and the contributions in the focus groups demonstrate a high level of investment in the wellbeing and future development of the Church**

There were 145 valid responses to the online survey, with widespread engagement at relatively short notice. This should be seen as a positive indicator of engagement. While the online survey was relatively short, the high level of open responses demonstrated that people wanted to share their perspectives. If the responses had been short, or open responses had been skipped, this could have been seen as indicating a lack of engagement. However, lengthy comments were common in the online survey.



The comments made were also overwhelmingly positive. There were many critical comments, but these should, in the main, be read as constructive criticism, borne out of a desire to see development in the Church. This is supported by almost total agreement that the synodal process was important, with 87% of respondents agreeing that talking about the future of the Church was one of the strengths of the listening sessions.

Similarly, while many of the participants in the focus groups had been asked to attend at short notice with various levels of engagement and understanding, the tone of the meetings was also overwhelmingly positive. Discussion was at times focussed and intense, with difficult issues being addressed, however, the focus groups were synodal in nature, and characterised less by pessimism at the difficulties and obstacles, and more by a sense of hope and what was possible.

### **There is a desire for change in the Church**

The evidence from the focus groups and online survey shows there is a desire to see different elements of Church life change. The responses to the online survey in particular show how varied these expressions of change are. In the main, the findings point to a desire to see co-responsibility in leadership between priest and laity, which will in turn develop greater connection between people who already regularly attend Mass. This will also, to varying degrees, promote the development of ways to connect or reconnect with others with less engagement, or no engagement to the Church.

### **The desire for change is driven by a desire for a deeper experience of faith**

While there was much discussion in the research about the declining number of priests, and the impact of this on the celebration of the Eucharist and parish life generally, there was evidence of a desire for greater exploration and development of faith. This was not always an explicit theme in the focus groups, however, it could be argued it was often an implicit element, being the underlying reason why people often wanted to see change. Exploration and development of faith was also referenced in over 40 specific comments in the final question in the online survey which asked what people want to see covered in training.

While the declining numbers of priests is hastening change in the Catholic Church in Ireland, in this research at least, the desire to find meaningful ways to develop and express faith emerged as the stronger driver for change. The evidence gathered in this report supports the idea that, should the numbers of priests suddenly increase in subsequent years, a strong desire for co-responsible leadership and a more connected approach to Church life would remain.



### **There is a desire for synodality to succeed, but it is not yet fully accepted as the mechanism for change**

The desire for change, means there is a desire for a mechanism for change. This research indicates a desire amongst participants for synodality to be that mechanism. Further research would be required to explore the extent to which the varying levels of uncertainty, and at times lack of understanding of the place for synodality in Church life, are a barrier to people adopting a *firm* belief that synodality is the means for the change that is needed.

### **The listening sessions positively impacted participants and propelled the process**

Participants considered the listening sessions to be overwhelmingly positive. There were certainly differences place to place, but on the whole, people who attended appreciated the opportunity to be open and honest, to connect with others, and consider the future of the Church. Feedback on the listening sessions, notwithstanding certain criticisms about who did/didn't engage, or concerns about the means of decision making or the open-ended aspect of the process, was overwhelmingly positive.

There was no consistent concern in either the focus groups or the online survey about having to deal with conflict. More common was concern about managing expectations after engagement and sometimes resistance to change in the Church. The energy and vitality of the listening sessions, not least the sense of a sacred experience, prompted not only hope, but some sense of belonging, which might, in time, lead to a wider sense of responsibility.

### **There is a lack of understanding around various elements of synodality, and this is hindering development**

The evidence of the focus groups was clear that there is very broad range of ways people understand synodality. At one end of the scale there was awareness of the Universal Synod, the listening sessions and maybe the syntheses, but little understanding of the broader impact synodality could have. At the other end of the scale were people who thoroughly understood the process and could see its benefits at parish and diocesan level. In some cases, they were already putting this into practice. Most people were somewhere between these two points – having found the process of synodality to be helpful, but only beginning to think about wider opportunities for its use. The focus groups helped develop their thinking.

It was a surprise then, to see the survey result concerning explaining synodality. When asked if people could explain synodality to others, 69% rated this as seven or above, out of a possible mark of ten. The more open comments in the online survey, however, raised many more questions about understanding and so this result might be best viewed as an assertion of



'I can explain what synodality is' rather than 'I can explain how synodality could be a key part in the life of the Church.' Both the focus groups, and particularly the survey, showed evidence of uncertainty around the timelines and processes of the Universal Synod and the Irish Synodal Pathway, and how synodality itself could be developed in a parish setting in connection with, but independent to, these larger processes. There were also requests in both focus groups and the online survey for clarity and simple ways to understand what is happening.<sup>6</sup>

These findings suggest that for synodality to be effectively developed, there is a need for greater clarity, particularly concerning the relationship between the wider universal and national processes, and synodality at diocesan and parish level. This lack of clarity is creating drag, as conversations too often drifted into discussion of what was and wasn't synodal, and what people across the Church were and weren't being asked or allowed to do.

### **The concept of synodality as a way of being, has perhaps become confused by the synodal processes**

The research points to the possibility that some of the uncertainty around synodality also relates to confusion over synodality as process (gathering, listening, discerning) and the larger synodal processes taking place. While few research participants said it directly (and there were more comments in the online survey than in the focus groups) the research suggests that the production of content and reports has confused understanding. The content produced by synodal processes certainly has value, but if synodality itself is a move towards a more reflective, faith-led approach to decision-making and development, have the phases and timelines focussed attention on specific process and distracted from the overall method?

### **The opportunities for synodality in the Church have not been widely explored because the approach has not been extensively experienced**

Many research participants asserted that faith-led, consultative, inclusive approaches to decision-making will entail a culture change for the Church. Synodality, therefore, is going to take a long time to bed in. On the basis of the discussion in the focus groups, when looking back at the nature of the Church in the last several decades, it appears there has been little change and that it is difficult for people to envisage possibilities. It can be concluded that some of the questions and uncertainties around synodality are present because it is a process many people have not experienced at length, and so they can struggle to see the possibilities of being part of a synodal Church.

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<sup>6</sup> Though in the online survey responses, these requests might be interpreted as the desire for a simple explanation for the purposes of developing *other people's* understanding.



### **Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils are key structures for opportunities of further expression of synodality**

In the focus groups, participants from religious organisations and communities often had experience of synodal listening sessions outside of the recent parish or diocesan listening sessions. Beyond this, the findings suggest that when focus group participants were asked about further opportunities to use synodal processes, most participants were already thinking, or at least beginning to think about pastoral councils.

From this it can be concluded that the pastoral councils are likely to be the key structures where decisions about other aspects of the Church’s life (for example further listening sessions) will be made. It is also the pastoral councils that will ensure development is well-managed and sustainable. This is not substantially evidenced in the online survey results, where responses focus on skills that could be used in a wide range of settings.

### **The clergy have not received enough support to understand synodality and its impact on their role**

There was much discussion in the two clergy-only focus groups about the current issues of age, increased responsibilities and decreasing numbers of priests, as well as the wider effects of cases of abuse in the Church and the effects of the pandemic. In addition, there was wide ranging discussion about the perceived changes in role for parish priests with respect to synodality. These have been outlined in the table below.

**TABLE 3:** Key aspects of the priests’ perceived change in role

<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Individual, sometimes isolated leadership	Collaborative, consultative leadership
Working to an agenda and prompt decision-making	More reflective decision-making, with wider input
Decision making on the best information available	A faith-based approach to decision making, seeking to discern
Holding competing voices at bay by maintaining neutrality	Encouraging a wide range of voices and an increasing diversity of opinion
Church was at the centre of the community and parish activity and mission overlapped	Mission of the Church now requires more engagement with the local community





While there was limited discussion about wider mechanisms and support for priests in general, this was not the focus for qualitative research. More attention was paid to the lack of support given to changes in approach. It might be concluded that insufficient support has been provided for priests specifically, in relation to developing an understanding of how synodality is asking something different from them, and how they might work through these changes, particularly in relation to their current workload. While a clergy-centric model of Church is problematic, priests are part of the solution because they are a critical component of the decision-making and governance mechanisms and have a key role in the transition to a new model.

In the context of the priests' expression of how much they enjoyed the space of the focus group to reflect on the pressures associated with their work and the place of synodality, it can be concluded that similar points of connection and discussion in the future would be beneficial for clergy.

**Skills of facilitation, listening and discernment, in the context of better understanding of the place of synodality, and some exploration of designing and promoting a listening session, should be key elements of the proposed training**

Discussion in the focus groups centred on skills of understanding of synodality<sup>7</sup>, facilitation, listening and discernment. The online survey results repeated these aspects. (Listening, discerning and facilitation skills were most listed by respondents as skills they thought a synodal leader should have.)

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<sup>7</sup> Which might reasonably *not* be considered a skill!



The findings point to facilitation, listening and discerning as key areas for the proposed training, extending from a starting point of better understanding of the place of synodality and its faith basis. Without greater clarity about synodality, there will be a 'verbal drag' as training time is lost to wider discussion. There will also likely be a 'mental drag' as participants focus not just on skill development but are distracted by the uncertainty of what they are being asked to apply their skills to.

Facilitation and listening skills are very broad topics, but the research points to designing a listening session (for people both engaged with and disengaged from the Church) as the area where respondents to the online survey felt least confident. Training should also consider how these sessions are explained and communicated since approximately a third of the comments in one question in the online survey asked for training in communication to encourage people to participate in synodal activity.

While online survey respondents also suggested a better understanding of faith as a topic for training, this is too large and undefined an aspect, and separate to *skills* training. However, it is important to note in terms of the wider context for synodal leadership training.





# 6.

# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Questions from the online survey

### Introduction

In October 2021 Pope Francis launched the Synod on Synodality for the Universal Church. The first stages of the Universal Synod provided insight into the perspectives of the people of God and much learning about synodality. Alongside the Universal Synod, the Catholic Church in Ireland has been exploring a national Synodal Pathway. The Steering Committee for the Irish Synodal Pathway was created by the Irish bishops to ensure that, as this pathway develops, local Church leaders are equipped with skills and resources. The aim of this survey is to provide the Committee with information on the training needs of local clergy and laity to help build a synodal church focused on communion, participation and mission.

Thank you for taking part.

There are 3 sections to this survey:

- Information about yourself
- Your participation in the Universal Synod
- Your training needs

### Section 1: Information about yourself

Could you tell us a little information about yourself by answering the following questions:

1. Please select your role in the Church:  
Lay person – volunteer in the Church  
Lay person – employed by the Church  
Religious  
Deacon  
Priest  
Bishop  
Other (please specify)



2. Please indicate your gender.

Female

Male

Prefer not to say

3. Please indicate your age.

Under 18

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65-74

75+

4. Respondents are most likely representing a diocese or responding as a member of a movement/association/organisation.

Please indicate who/what you are primarily representing?

I am responding as someone representing a diocese

I am responding as someone representing a movement/association/organisation

I am representing neither of the above

5. Please indicate which diocese you represent

Archdiocese of Armagh

Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly

Archdiocese of Dublin

Archdiocese of Tuam

Diocese of Achonry

Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois

Diocese of Clogher

Diocese of Clonfert

Diocese of Cloyne

Diocese of Cork and Ross

Diocese of Derry

Diocese of Down and Connor

Diocese of Dromore

Diocese of Elphin



Diocese of Ferns  
Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora  
Diocese of Kerry  
Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin  
Diocese of Killala  
Diocese of Killaloe  
Diocese of Kilmore  
Diocese of Limerick  
Diocese of Meath  
Diocese of Ossory  
Diocese of Raphoe  
Diocese of Waterford and Lismore  
The Synodal Pathway Survey

6. Please indicate which movement, association or organisation you are representing.

## **Section 2: Participation in the Universal Synod**

7. Please select the options that apply to you (tick all that apply)

I have read the Preparatory Document and/or the Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality

I participated in parish/diocesan synodal events

I participated in synodal events organised by a religious community

I participated in synodal events organised by a lay movement/association

I organised/facilitated in-person synodal events

I organised questionnaires/online surveys for the Synod

I supported the writing of local synthesis report from listening in a diocese; in a lay movement; or in a religious congregation

I attended the Pre-Synodal Assembly Day in Athlone in June 2022

I read the Irish National Synthesis of the Consultation in Ireland for the Diocesan Stage of the Universal Synod

I read the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod, Enlarge the Space of Your Tent (Is 54:2)

None of the above



8. How important have you found the synodal process to date?

I have found the synodal process very important

I have found the synodal process fairly important

I have found the synodal process important

I have found the synodal process slightly important

I have found the synodal process not at all important

I don't know

9. What aspects of the synodal process have been of most value to you so far? (Tick all that apply)

The opportunity to talk about what matters most to me

The opportunity to hear the perspectives of others generally

The opportunity to hear from people I wouldn't normally hear from

The opportunity to talk about our church and its future

I don't know

Another reason (please specify)

10. How manageable have you found the synodal activity to be?

I have found the time commitment very easy to manage

I have found the time commitment fairly easy to manage

I have found the time commitment manageable

I have found the time commitment difficult to manage

I have found the time commitment very difficult to manage

I don't know

11. Is there any other comment you would like to make about the synodal process to date?

(Please write 'no comment' if you have nothing further to say)

### **Section 3: Your training needs**

12. In developing a training programme to equip local leaders, the Steering Committee for the Irish Synodal Pathway are seeking to build confidence in a range of skills.

Please indicate your confidence level on the following tasks where 0 is 'not confident' and 10 is 'very confident.'



Explaining what synodality is to others  
Explaining what discernment is to others  
Presenting a basic theology of synodality to others  
Designing a synodal listening session for local parishioners  
Identifying ways to listen to people who might be disengaged from Church  
Facilitating a synodal listening session for local parishioners  
Facilitating a conversation when people express opposing views  
Leading people in a scriptural reflection  
Leading Spiritual Conversations

13. Aside from the skills and tasks already mentioned, are there any other aspects of training you would like, that would help develop the synodal pathway in your context? (Please write 'no comment' if you have nothing further to say)
14. What skills do you think a leader in a synodal church should have? For example, listening skills, discerning skills, or questioning skills. (You can list up to 5 skills.)
15. What are the main topics you'd like to see in a training programme (being provided by the Irish Synodal Pathway) for clergy and lay leaders in the Catholic Church in Ireland? (You can list up to 3 topics.)

Thank you for your participation. Your feedback will play an important part in the next stage of the synodal journey.







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