

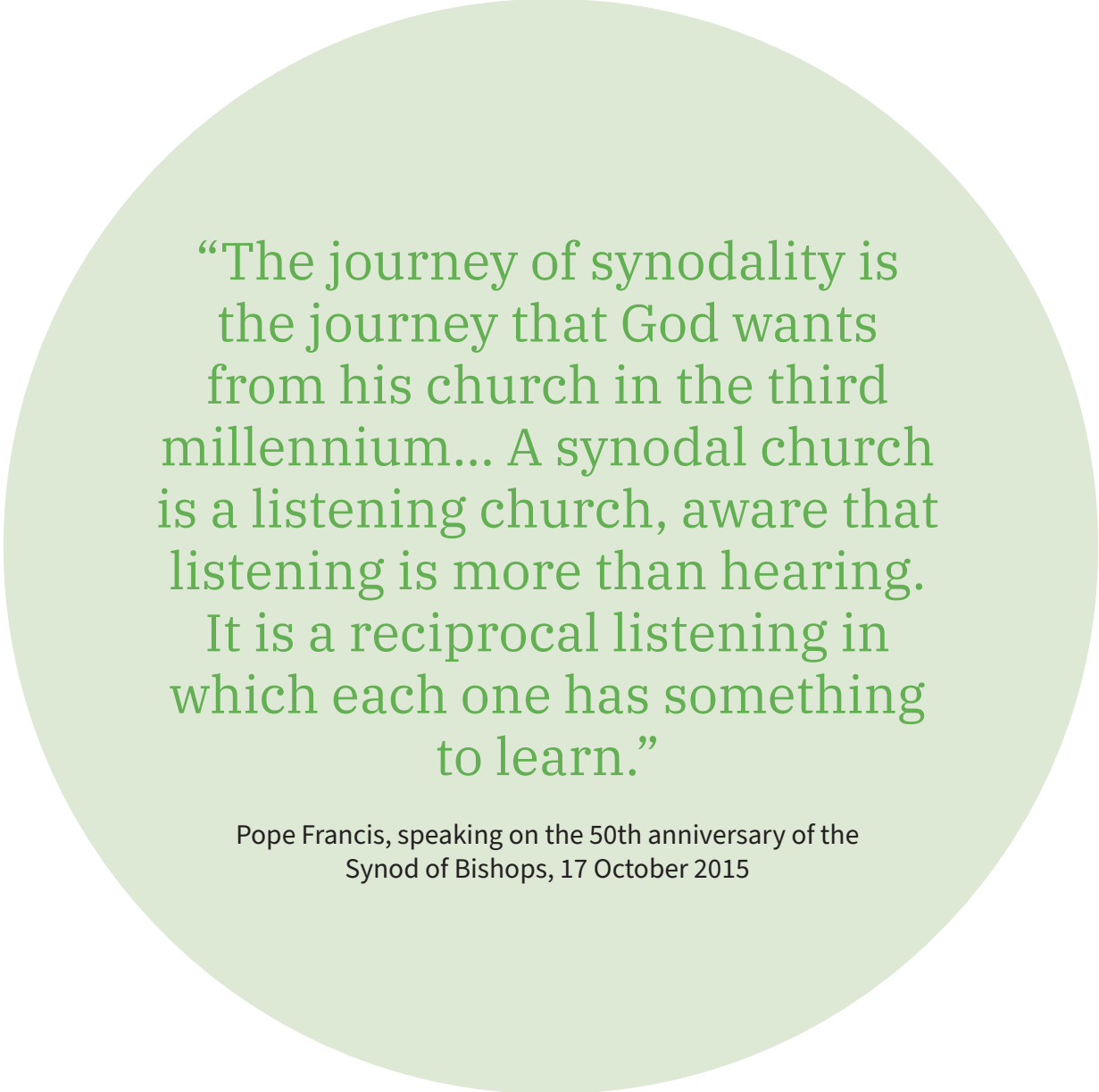
# What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?



*Report from the Steering Committee  
for the Synodal Pathway of the  
Catholic Church in Ireland*



The Synodal Pathway  
of the Catholic Church in Ireland



“The journey of synodality is the journey that God wants from his church in the third millennium... A synodal church is a listening church, aware that listening is more than hearing. It is a reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn.”

Pope Francis, speaking on the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015

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# Foreword

Responding to the call from Pope Francis to be a more synodal Church, in Ireland and around the world, people of faith have been coming together in prayerful discernment about what it means to be a community of Christian disciples in today's world. We have been reflecting on our calling — as individuals and as communities of faith — to live out Christ's commandment to love of God and love of neighbour in spaces of encounter with those whose views and experiences may be very different to our own. We have been challenged to identify our failings and consider how these might be addressed. We have been encouraged to share our joys and hopes and to think about how we might build on these to make our contribution to the evangelising mission of the Church. This work is already beginning to bear fruit in the positive experiences of those who have felt heard in a way they had not previously experienced in the Church, and in a renewed interest and energy for meaningful conversations about faith and the role of the Church in society.

The Church in Ireland is committed to a national synodal pathway with a timeline that extends beyond the anticipated conclusion of the current Universal Synod on synodality, scheduled to finish in 2024. The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference had made this commitment before the detail of the Universal Synod was announced by the Vatican, with a five-year timeline (2021-2026). The guiding question for Ireland's national synodal pathway is: What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time? A Steering Committee was appointed to lead a two-year preparatory phase of dialogue and discernment to explore what a national synodal process could offer the Church in Ireland, and how best to structure and organise such a process so that it supports and strengthens the local church, engaging as many people as possible in responding to the question of what God wants from the Church.

This report attempts to capture some of the learning from this two-year experience, offering initial recommendations for the work ahead. It is intended as an invitation to dialogue with an awareness that any national process will need to connect deeply and authentically to the experience of the local church. The Steering Committee has worked closely with the members of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and with those in local leadership in dioceses, movements and associations, to shape the process and capture the learning at every stage in the journey. We are deeply grateful for the commitment of all those in local leadership who have invested time and effort to offer people the experience of a listening Church.

To make the most of the opportunity afforded by the global experience of the Universal Synod, and mindful of the demands on the time and energy of local leaders, we have integrated the work for the Universal Synod with the preparations for Ireland's national synodal pathway. There is a complexity to this synodal work with multiple inter-connected strands. This report endeavours to set out clearly the process that has been followed to date, together with what is known at this stage about the future plans for the work, bearing in mind that there is an openness to the process at both the universal and national levels to allow for learning to be integrated as we proceed, with listening leading to improved pastoral responses and more effective outreach.



From the perspective of the Steering Committee there have been two significant phases to this work. In the first year the priority was to support local leaders to achieve the greatest breadth and depth possible in their listening outreach for the Universal Synod, and to design a process at national level to gather and communicate the fruits of that listening. In the second year, the priority was to engage with those who had led this local listening, and to learn from their insights and experiences so that the design of the national process to follow could build on best practice and address, as far as possible, any shortcomings or challenges identified in the first phase.

As we prepare to publish this report, we are grateful for the leadership of Pope Francis and for the commitment of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, which has made possible a deeply enriching experience of sharing stories of faith, both painful and hopeful, and new opportunities for a coming together of the people of God. It has been both a privilege and a great responsibility to be entrusted with these stories and experiences. We are especially grateful to those who have been hurt by the Church and yet were willing to trust in this process. Their generosity of spirit and their hope for healing and reconciliation through truth and justice has been a powerful prophetic witness.

The ongoing commitment of so many local leaders who continue to give so generously of their time has been one of the good news stories from our journey so far. Research undertaken with this group in March 2023 demonstrates clearly that for those in local leadership the spirituality of the process is central. Their experience of leadership and facilitation of synodal processes has been a faith-filled and hope-filled experience that has motivated them to seek new faith development opportunities, for themselves and for others. There is a diversity of views among them about what the future of the Church will look like, but a shared sense that the experience of synodality is helping to shape our thinking and planning for that future in a positive way. They are also clear that there is much more work to be done, with many more people still to be reached, and important lessons to be learned from the experience so far about how to engage people and prepare them to lead and participate in the synodal pathway.

We hope that this report will help people understand and engage with the work done so far and offer a foundation to build upon in the next stage of our synodal journey. Despite the many challenges before us, the engagement with the process to date affirms that for many people in Ireland today faith and the experience of being part of a worshipping community are important and much-valued parts of their lives. The Church has an important role to play in society, engaging with humility in a diverse and rapidly changing context. The learning from our synodal journey offers us the opportunity to model the kind of respectful listening and relational approaches that could contribute to healing of relationships in the wider society. We can take encouragement from the response of the people who have taken part in this listening process so far, and as a Committee we reiterate our appreciation for all those who have given so generously of their time to make this possible. We also offer our thanks to the members of the Irish Episcopal Conference who entrusted us with this task and who have been supportive and encouraging throughout the process.



**Dr Nicola Brady**  
Co-Chair  
Synodal Pathway Steering Committee



**Fr Declan Hurley**  
Co-Chair  
Synodal Pathway Steering Committee



# 1. Executive Summary

1. This report has been prepared by the Steering Committee of the national synodal pathway for the Catholic Church in Ireland in fulfilment of its remit to guide a two-year process of synodal listening and discernment for the Catholic Church in Ireland, documenting the learning and offering recommendations to help shape and inform the next phase of this work.
2. The relationship between the national synodal pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland (2021-2026) and the Synod on synodality of the Universal Church, organised by the Vatican (2021-2024) is explained. The report outlines how the work of these two synodal processes have been integrated to date and how the different areas of focus complement each other, while noting also the challenges for those in leadership positions resulting from the additional complexity and time pressures that have arisen in this context.
3. An overview of the work carried out by the Steering Committee, with the support of the Task Group and, later, General Secretary (a new role created in autumn 2022) to develop a process to support engagement at local, national and international level, is provided, together with an explanation of the key milestones on the journey so far.
4. The understanding of synodality that has shaped this work is summarised. Pope Francis has called the global Catholic community to a rediscovery or reimagining of the ancient practice of synodality that traces its roots back to the early Church. Synodality was at the heart of the hopeful vision of the Second Vatican Council and the work of reform and renewal inspired by the Council in the local church. The potential for a national synodal pathway to build on this work and strengthen the evangelising mission of the Church through the healing of relationships and the engagement of all the baptised is discussed.
5. Key features of the context in which the Catholic Church in Ireland is undertaking this synodal journey are highlighted. The devastating impact of the abuse crisis and the need for continued reflection on its causes and consequences are emphasised. Other challenges noted include the impact of COVID-19 on the early stages of this work, the low levels of experience and formation in synodality and the impact of a rapid secularisation of Irish society as part of a wider experience of rapid social change. The opportunity for the Church in Ireland to provide a prophetic and hopeful witness through honest and humble engagement with these challenges, drawing on the insights and encounters provided by the synodal process, is discussed.
6. Examples of synodal dialogue and outreach are shared to illustrate the variety, creativity and significance of the work that has taken place to date. This offers an insight for those who have not yet had an opportunity for personal experience of the synodal process and provides ideas for those who wish to try new approaches in their particular context.





7. Some key themes in the learning from this initial two-year phase are explored, including the response to the listening that has been offered and practised through the synodal process, the centrality of the spirituality of synodality, the work of outreach and communications, reporting and documenting, the role and contribution of clergy to the process, needs in the area of formation and the way in which the synodal process seeks to support the work of mission.
8. The report sets out the recommendations of the Steering Committee for the next stage of the synodal pathway. It is recommended that, rather than a single National Synod, there would be a commitment to a series of national synodal assemblies to better develop and embed synodal practice, and allow space to address the wide variety of issues raised to date, as well as integrating new learning. This work would continue beyond the timeframe initially envisaged for the synodal pathway (2021-2026). Consequently, the recommendations offered are limited to the initial steps that might be taken. Further consultation with local leaders before the structure, process and focus of the national synodal pathway are finalised is recommended, given the critical impact of their role for the success of this work.

## 1.1 Recommendations

1. The research undertaken with local leaders was highly informative for the Steering Committee and, from the perspective of local leaders, offered a welcome opportunity for consultation which acknowledged the importance of their contribution thus far. It is recommended that this would be repeated during the next phase of the synodal pathway, helping to embed good practice in learning from people's experience of leadership in a Church context, both positive and negative, on an ongoing basis.
2. The pilot training programme should be promoted at local level to current and emerging local leaders. Following evaluation of this pilot programme, a suitable institutional partner should be sought to provide access to accreditation, annual training and continuous professional development.
3. The research has highlighted the need for some clergy-specific elements to the training, in addition to those to be undertaken by clergy and lay people together, acknowledging the significant changes that are being asked of priests and providing space for them to reflect on the future of priestly ministry in the synodal context.
4. The synodal pathway should include an intentional focus on the welfare of priests, drawing on the work that has already been done in this area.
5. Building on the growing appetite for faith development opportunities that has been emerging from the synodal process, other church organisations should be encouraged to explore what they might have to offer in terms of training and skills development.
6. The work of the Steering Committee affirms the original idea set out by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference that some form of national synodal assembly should form an integral part of the national synodal pathway for the Church in Ireland and goes further to suggest that there should be a series of national assemblies extending beyond the initial 2021-2026 timeframe of the synodal pathway.
7. National synodal assemblies would form an important element of a wider synodal pathway, which would include other ways to support people to connect to the work, through prayer and through less formal, creative spaces that might include engagement with the arts or storytelling, for example. These would not be formally constituted synods, but rather assemblies that follow the methodologies and approaches that have been used in the engagement with the Universal Synod. The plan for the national synodal pathway would be open to the possibility of a formally constituted synod at national level in response to possible developments arising from the Universal Synod and/or further learning and insights from the national process.
8. It is recommended that there would be a further national-level engagement with local leaders prior to deciding the specific question/questions that would shape the first national synodal assembly. An emphasis on the general theme of co-responsible leadership is recommended in light of what has emerged from the listening undertaken to date.





9. A proposed process for the next three years is outlined: (i) further engagement with local leaders leading to agreement of the question/questions for the first national synodal assembly; (ii) local preparations for listening including catechesis; (iii) local listening and reporting to national level; (iv) preparations at national level including historical, sociological, and theological reflection on the issues/questions identified in the local listening; (v) national synodal assembly; (vi) local action, response and feedback for evaluation.
10. It is recommended that the process would continue to be predominantly volunteer-led at national level with the expansion of the current Steering Committee model to include working groups with delegated authority in the following areas: national assembly planning; theology and sociology; spirituality and formation; communications and outreach; youth; the universal synod and other international engagement. In addition, it is recommended that the governing body would include individuals with responsibility to provide a point of contact and support for dioceses (on a regional basis) as well as congregations/movements/associations and the Councils and Agencies of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.
11. A change of title is also recommended moving from a "Steering Committee", which suggests direction and a top-down approach, to a "National Animation Team for the Synodal Pathway" which better reflects the fact that the role of the national body is to work collaboratively with the local church, taking forward those aspects of the work that require national-level planning and coordination.
12. Local church structures, such as parish and diocesan pastoral councils, constitute a critical element of the foundations for the work of synodality. Further investment and guidance, to continue the work already underway to realise the full potential for these to serve as authentic instruments of synodality, is recommended. It is suggested that this may be best be achieved through the establishment or development of leadership teams at diocesan level. The role of this group is not to carry all the responsibility of the work to be done, or to give direction, but rather to support, communicate and encourage a wide range of people to take responsibility for elements of the synodal pathway at local level.

## 2. About this Report

At its summer general meeting in June 2021 the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference announced the formation of a Steering Committee to guide the first two years of a five-year process leading to a national synodal pathway for the Church in Ireland. The Steering Committee began its work the following September and was tasked with oversight of the initial preparatory phase of listening and reflection, producing a report at the end of its two-year term summarising key findings and recommendations for consideration by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. The Steering Committee was supported in this work by a Task Group with responsibility for assisting dioceses and other groups in the planning and management of listening processes, and contributing to the outreach work of the Steering Committee.

This report reflects the listening and outreach undertaken by the Steering Committee, with the support of the Task Group, from September 2021 to September 2023. It sets out some initial recommendations for the planning and implementation work to be undertaken during the subsequent three-year phase of the synodal pathway, conscious that the work of synodality in the Church is a long-term process of renewal which will not be complete by 2026. The recommendations also take account of the potential for learning and/or direction that may emerge from the ongoing process of the Universal Synod.



# 3. The journey so far

## 3.1 Understanding our responsibility and our context

The Steering Committee began its work in September 2021 by reflecting on its Terms of Reference and agreeing approaches for engagement with the different stakeholders to be consulted about what a national synodal process might offer the Church in Ireland, with reference to the guiding questions: What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time? This work was informed by learning from experiences of synodal processes and listening initiatives that had taken place previously in a diocesan context in Ireland. The group engaged in prayerful reflection on the signs of the times to identify key features of the current context, in Ireland and more widely, that would likely impact the response to, and planning for, the synodal pathway.

## 3.2 Integration with the Universal Synod

From a very early stage in this process it was clear that the planning for Ireland’s national synodal pathway would need to be integrated with the work dioceses and other groups would be undertaking for the Universal Synod. The Synod on Synodality (2021-2024) with the theme ‘Communion, Participation and Mission’ brought many innovations to the normal process of the synod of bishops. Foremost amongst these innovations was the introduction of a diocesan phase whereby local listening and discernment would form an integral part of the Universal Synod. It was decided that the Steering Committee and Task Group would work with dioceses and other groups to maximise the outreach and engagement from this work and that, in turn, the learning and information gathered would inform the development of the national synodal pathway.



This integration of the two processes has been, on balance, a positive addition to Ireland’s national synodal pathway, providing resources, methodology and guidance issued by the Vatican Synod Office, as well as the opportunity to share learning and experiences across different national contexts. The timeline created significant pressures, particularly for clergy and local leaders whose formation in synodality was limited. The focus of the Universal Synod on how we are journeying together as a synodal Church has been helpful in preparing the Irish Church to respond to the question of what God wants for the Church in Ireland at this time. At the same time, feedback from local leaders indicates that there has been confusion about the relationship between the two processes, and the different questions guiding each one, which has had a negative impact on their confidence in communicating locally about the synodal pathway.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Feedback from local leaders was gathered through research undertaken in March 2023. The detailed findings have been published separately as *Research for the Development of a Facilitative Leadership Training Programme* (hereafter ‘Research Report’). Further information on this research can be found on page 14 of this report. The term ‘local leaders’ encompasses the range of people, clergy and lay, employed and volunteers, who were involved in organising and/or facilitating synodal processes in a local church context.



### 3.3 Communications Strategy

The Steering Committee developed a communications strategy aimed at empowering a diverse range of voices to engage in the national conversation about the synodal process, as well as engaging internationally to share experiences from Ireland.

Committee members contributed interviews and articles to different media outlets, as well as accepting invitations from a wide range of groups to make presentations and contribute to training on synodality. The questions, feedback and learning from these engagements were collated at each monthly meeting of the Committee to inform decisions on the content and resourcing of the communications strategy.

The Task Group developed a website for sharing updates and resources ([synod.ie](https://synod.ie)), including Irish language translation of the core content, as well as facilitating collaboration with other groups and institutions offering resources and training on synodality.

The Steering Committee is grateful to the Catholic Communications Office for its contribution to the resourcing of this strategy, and the facilitation of engagement with Diocesan Communications Officers over the course of this work. Local communications networks are a vital component of this communications strategy, because it is engagement at this level that will ground this process of transformation in local realities, and because locally-based outreach offers the potential to reach the greatest number of people, forming lasting connections.

The strategy has been informed by the resources for the Universal Synod and the decision was taken to adapt the universal logo for use in the Irish context to support the integration of the processes.

At the heart of this approach is the desire to share faith through the building of relationships, the sharing of stories and the development of resources to help make the invitation to engage in the synodal process accessible to all. The principles that underpin the social media policy for the synodal pathway are reflective of the wider spirit of the communications strategy, namely:

- that what is shared is truthful;
- that our sharing is charitable;
- that we speak from the heart and our own experience;
- that the contribution of all is valued.

### 3.4 Public Consultation

In April and May 2021 the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference undertook a public consultation centred on the following question: What would be your preferred option for engagement in a conversation process about the Synod? Although this initiative pre-dated the establishment of the Steering Committee, the findings were provided to the Steering Committee for analysis. The responses gave helpful insights into the challenges and opportunities for the national synodal pathway in Ireland.



Several hundred people shared valuable perspectives and experiences to illustrate the possible approaches and methodologies that might be adopted to engage people in the synodal process. We are grateful to all those who took the time to submit a response.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.5 Supporting Ireland's national response to the Universal Synod

The Task Group worked with local leaders to adapt the material provided by the Vatican Synod Office for use in the Irish context, and to develop networks that enabled local leaders to support each other and share questions and ideas. With the support of the Steering Committee they developed a process for gathering the material collected at local level through this work of listening and discernment, receiving these ideas and experiences prayerfully as the Irish Church, and communicating clearly about the process to ensure that it was transparent and accessible.

A national Pre-Synodal Assembly was organised to take place in the Sheraton Hotel in Athlone on 18<sup>th</sup> June, with a closing liturgy in Clonmacnoise, the ancient monastic site founded by St Ciarán in 544. In the weeks prior to the Assembly over forty synthesis documents were received from dioceses and other groups. A writers group formed from the Steering Committee and Task Group worked with this material over several days of prayerful discernment, identifying the main themes and noting issues that were not present in syntheses. The reflections from this group were presented to delegates at the national Pre-Synodal Assembly for discussion and further discernment and would form the core of the National Synthesis — the contribution from the Irish Church to the Universal Synod — following further discernment and writing to reflect the Assembly experience.



<sup>2</sup> A summary of the ideas submitted was later published on the website: “Public Consultation on Irish Synodal Pathway”, 23 March 2022, <https://synod.ie/?s=public+consultation>

Prayer resources were published in the week leading up to the Pre-Synodal Assembly with a request that people across Ireland might support this work in prayer. The 160 delegates to the Assembly were representative of the listening and engagement processes that had taken place. In addition to the Steering Committee and Task Group, participants included bishops, those responsible for diocesan engagement with the synodal process and representatives of groups and organisations that had organised listening processes as a contribution to the Universal Synod. Delegates reflected on the findings and messages emerging from the diocesan listening phase of the Universal Synod, using the methodology of spiritual conversations, with scriptural reflection, small group discussion, silent reflection and plenary dialogue. The closing prayer in Clonmacnoise on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2022 took the form of a simple liturgy that looked back to reflect on Ireland’s monastic past and looked to the future in its expression of hope for the synodal process. It offered a hope-filled moment of thanksgiving for the work completed thus far, and a shared moment of prayer for healing and renewal in the Church. These events helped to demonstrate synodality in practice, both for those in attendance and those reached through the media coverage. The interest of a great variety of media outlets and journalists in what was taking place was a source of encouragement and support to the process.

Following the Assembly, the Steering Committee and Task Group completed the writing of the National Synthesis in consultation with the members of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference. The document (in both English and Irish language versions) was launched in Knock, Ireland’s national Marian and Eucharistic Shrine, on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2022, during the annual novena which had taken for its theme that year ‘A Journey in Hope’. The publication of the National Synthesis



sparked further media interest in the process and generated debate as people sought to understand the implications of what had been shared and what it meant for the Church. One local synodal leader described its impact as follows: “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” (Research Report p. 16). The presentation of the National Synthesis by the Steering Committee underlined that this is not a survey, or an academic report, but rather a reflection of a deeply spiritual process of listening and discernment. It is offered not as the final word, but rather as an invitation to further and deeper dialogue, and as a tool for reflection and pastoral action.

### 3.6 Resourcing the work of the synodal pathway

As the engagement with the work and the requests for support and training grew the Steering Committee, with the approval of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, made changes to the leadership of the process to increase the level of support available from autumn 2022. A General Secretary was appointed and the chairing of the Steering Committee moved to a co-chair model, with two co-chairs and two deputy chairs, to increase the level of support available to staff and volunteers, and to better reflect the collaborative nature of the process.



### 3.7 The Continental Stage of the Universal Synod

A further innovation of the Synod on synodality was the introduction of a continental stage to facilitate the sharing of experiences and the development of relationships across national boundaries.

The central resource for this phase of the work was a document entitled *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage* (hereafter Document for the Continental Stage) published in October 2022. This was produced by an international writers group working with the 112 synthesis documents received by the Vatican Synod Office from Bishops' Conferences around the world, as well as others (e.g. religious congregations) for the diocesan phase of the Universal Synod. The General Secretary and Task Group provided support and resources for local leaders in engaging with the Document for the Continental Stage of the Universal Synod alongside the national and relevant local syntheses. They were invited to facilitate reflection at local level, exploring what resonated from the global perspectives brought together in the document, as well as what challenges might be emerging for the Church in Ireland. The Document for the Continental Stage was affirming of the process experienced to date in Ireland, echoing the concerns raised in the Irish context. It was also challenging, highlighting areas that have perhaps not received sufficient attention in our context. As part of this process it was emphasised that local leaders could now begin to identify pastoral actions arising from the listening, responding to the question: "What might we be called to do in response to what we have heard?"

Further submissions were received from local leaders in January 2023 and these were read and explored through spiritual conversation by the fourteen person delegation representing the Irish Church at the European Synodal Assembly in Prague in February 2023 (with four in-person and ten online delegates). The Assembly brought together 200 in-person and 390 online delegates for prayer, worship, dialogue, discernment and fellowship. The approach demonstrated the



commitment of the Universal Church to the practice of synodality, helping to promote unity in diversity, notwithstanding the significant tensions that were evident. Through this process, the Assembly could acknowledge with humility the woundedness of the Church in Europe today with the historic failings and contemporary blind-spots that can impede its mission of evangelisation and reconciliation. The desire to be a more pastorally-sensitive Church, was clearly articulated with particular attention to those who experience marginalisation, including women, youth, the LGBT+ community, migrants and refugees. The deep and raw wounds of the abuse crisis were at the heart of the discernment, while delegates repeatedly recalled the challenge of hearing the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. The contribution of the Irish delegation, which placed particular emphasis on the wounding of the Church through abuse, and the hope for healing and reconciliation through

the work of justice, love and truth, was published.<sup>3</sup> At the conclusion of the Assembly the Steering Committee noted the need for further work to help people at local level in Ireland connect to this wider global context. Reports from the Continental Synodal Assemblies were published by the Vatican Synod Office during March and April 2023 and these formed the basis for the *Instrumentum Laboris* or working document for the Synod to take place in Rome the following October.

### 3.8 Learning from Local Leaders

A major priority of the Steering Committee during its second year of work was to learn from the experience of those in local leadership who had guided and facilitated the work undertaken thus far. It was recognised that, without their considerable efforts, none of the opportunities extended to people to experience and participate in the synodal process would have been possible. It was also recognised that many people had not been reached in this initial phase of listening, and that some people had concerns about the process. The insights of those in local leadership are essential to better understand the context and the needs to be addressed.

It is also good practice, in keeping with the spirit and methodology of the synodal process, to ensure that those who worked to create the spaces for others to be heard are afforded that same space for reflection and listening. As the synodal pathway is envisaged as a long-term process two important areas for attention in this listening were support and sustainability. The Steering Committee engaged an independent researcher to conduct an online survey and a series of focus groups during March 2023. The report arising from this research (published separately) provides valuable insights into the experiences, motivations and concerns of local leaders. It reflects a group that is diverse in terms of experiences and opinions, but united in their concern for the present and future mission of the Church, and in the conviction that the synodal process is an important development in the life of the Church. The findings from the research informed the recommendations from the Steering Committee regarding the next stages of the work. From this consultation a pilot training programme for local leaders is being developed to be made available from autumn 2023. Members of the Steering Committee, Task Group and the General Secretary have also been responding to invitations from dioceses to offer information and training on the synodal process to clergy groups.

In parallel with the independent research, the General Secretary and Task Group engaged with local leaders to facilitate the sharing of ideas about pastoral actions that could now be taken in response to the issues and questions raised during the listening undertaken to date.

### 3.9 International Engagement

Steering Committee members, individually and collectively, engaged in processes of learning exchange with colleagues from other national and continental contexts, learning from the models and methodologies of synodality that had been implemented in other places, and exploring what might be relevant to the Irish context from this learning.

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<sup>3</sup> “Speaking notes from the Irish delegation attending the Continental Assembly of the Synod in Prague,” 7 February 2023, <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2023/02/07/speaking-notes-from-the-irish-delegation-attending-the-continental-assembly-of-the-synod-in-prague/>





### 3.10 Preparations for the Universal Phase of the Synod on Synodality

As the Synod on Synodality moves to the universal phase this work on the international level continues to provide inspiration and encouragement for the national synodal pathway in Ireland. The decisions taken by Pope Francis to extend the timeline for the work, adding a further global gathering in 2024, and to widen the participation beyond bishops, demonstrate a listening Church responsive to the learning from the synodal process.

On Wednesday 31st May 2023, the Feast of the Visitation and the last day of the Marian month of May, the Catholic Church in Ireland united with the Church around the world to pray for the work of the upcoming Universal Synod, placing it under the protection of Our Lady, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, marking the occasion at Knock, Ireland's national Marian and Eucharistic shrine. Prayer resources were distributed to parishes and schools and shared through the website and social media.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* published in August 2023 as the working document for the gathering for the universal phase in October continues to reflect the breadth and diversity of the issues raised and experiences shared from the diocesan through to the continental phase. This is helping to build trust in the process. The General Secretary and Task Group have provided further support to local leaders in engaging with this phase of the work.

The announcement of an ecumenical prayer vigil to open the synod on synodality is helping to model the spirituality and practice of synodality for the local church, as well as the wider world.



### 3.11 Final Report

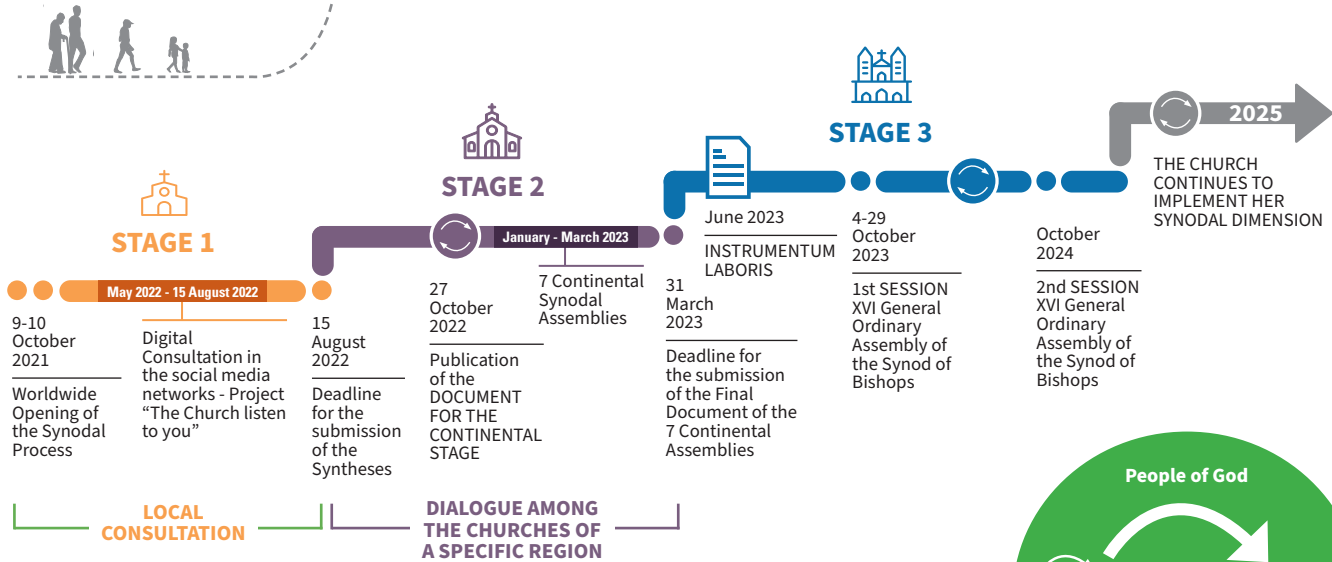
In preparation for the publication of this report the Steering Committee has been reflecting on the journey so far through the lens of Scripture, keeping Christ at the centre of our vision for the work. We have engaged in further dialogue and discernment with the members of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in preparation for further work on the support and development of local leaders, reflecting with them on what we have heard so far and endeavouring to respond together to the question: "What might we be called to do now in response to what we have heard?"



# The Synodal Process

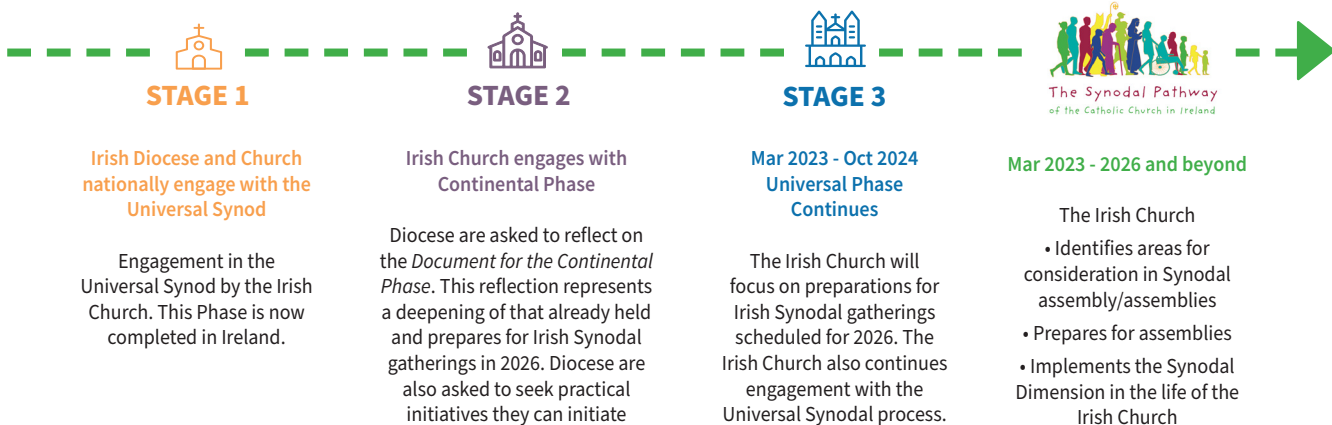
## 2021 - 2024

PROCESS OF LISTENING,  
ENCOUNTERING, DIALOGUING,  
DISCERNING



# Irish Synodal Pathway

## 2021 - 2026



*"Enlarge the space of your tent"*

(Is 54:2)



# 4. A vision for a synodal Church in Ireland

## 4.1 Understanding synodality

“A synodal Church is a Church where all the baptised feel engaged.”  
(Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, Interview with *Intercom* February 2023).

*The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your country, your kindred and your father’s house for a country which I shall show you” (Gen 12:1)*

As we have listened to the voice of the Spirit in preparation for the Universal Synod, and as we discern the path ahead for the Church in Ireland, there is an emerging sense that we are beginning a journey. When we move beyond the idea of the synodal pathway as “something we have to do”, we realise that this is not something of our own initiative. It is God who is calling us to make this journey. It is his initiative.

It is a departure from what is familiar. We are being called to leave something that has been familiar for a long time, a place that has been our home.

The destination of our journey is not something that we will construct for ourselves. It is not of our making. Rather, we are being led by God. He will show us where he is leading us, and it will be his gift to us so that we can be his people.

On this journey, we are being called to come to know ourselves as God’s people and to discern the mission he is entrusting to us.

It does not seem prudent to leave from a place that is familiar for an unknown destination. It might even be considered foolish to set off towards a destination that is beyond our control. And even if we accept that it is indeed God who is calling us to depart and who is leading us, why is he asking us to do this? What is his purpose?

How can we discern the voice of God as he leads us on this journey? How is it possible to make this journey together? How can we encourage one another to trust that this is indeed what God is asking of us at this time?

At the beginning of this process in 2021, synodality was an unfamiliar term to many people in the Catholic Church. Two years on the level of awareness and understanding is growing steadily as more people have the opportunity to experience synodal listening in their local parish or other contexts, but much more work remains to be done if the spirituality and practice of synodality are to be embedded across all levels of the life of the Church in a meaningful and lasting way.





While we may have the impression that synodality is a new development it is actually an ancient concept at the heart of the life of the Church. The word synod derives from the Greek for ‘together on the way’ and the foundations of this practice in the life of the Church can be traced back to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Synodality found particular expression in the hopeful vision of the Second Vatican Council and in the work of renewal and participation inspired by the Council in the local church.<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict stated that: “The synodal dimension is constitutive of the Church; it consists of a coming together of every people and culture in order that they become one in Christ and walk together, following him, who said: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14: 6)” (Angelus, 5 October 2008).

Pope Francis is calling us to a rediscovery or reimagining of this practice for the Church of today, bringing with it a deeper understanding of our baptismal calling and its significance in the life of the community of Christian disciples to which we belong. The foundation for this work of renewal is the practice of deep and respectful listening, inviting all the people of God to contribute to the discernment that shapes and guides the mission of the Church, with a reassurance that everyone’s contribution is welcome and valued.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Michael A. Conway, ‘No turning back: synodality and the future of ecclesial life’, *The Furrow* July/August 2023, pp. 387-398.



An important element of this process is the outreach to, and engagement with, those who do not feel that sense of belonging in the Church. Where people have walked away from the Church or experienced hurt, alienation and rejection, we need to understand why this has happened and what can be done to better support people to experience an encounter with Christ through the Church. The synodal process offers a critical opportunity for the healing of relationships and the work of reconciliation. It seeks to engender a culture of truth-telling in which we listen not only to each other, but listen together for the voice of the Holy Spirit guiding us to be a less defensive, more courageous and outward-looking Church. Acknowledging our wounds and our brokenness in this way does not weaken our witness, but rather strengthens our faith as we engage with the wider society from a place of humility, conscious that we are all sinners in need of God's mercy and grace.

At the same time there is an important invitation to people to share what is precious to them about their faith, what nourishes, supports and sustains them, so as to build confidence in the sharing of faith in an increasingly secular and diverse society, and strengthen the work of mission and evangelisation in the Church.

The synodal process, whether at local, national or international level, brings together people of different experiences, viewpoints and with different – perhaps conflicting – aspirations for the future. The aim is not to avoid conflict but instead to acknowledge with honesty that conflict exists amongst us and, precisely because it is a normal feature of our human condition, Scripture offers us resources to navigate that conflict, avoiding the destructive, dehumanising manifestations that damage relationships. We are called to resist the temptation to label, to pre-judge or to reject people, holding instead the complexity that we can agree with people on some issues while disagreeing passionately on others. Christ's example points us to the practice of generosity and curiosity in our engagement with those we encounter on our journey.

The Church is challenged to model the unity in diversity that is at the heart of Christ's vision for the Church: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (*John 17:21*). The practice of deep listening, grounded in the Scripture that reminds us of our shared belonging in Christ and the trust in the Holy Spirit that defines our synodal practice, helps the Church to overcome polarisation, to choose a relationship over rupture and to live out our Gospel values, notably the love of neighbour and the respect for the worth and dignity of every person, made in the image and likeness of God. We are called to extend this model of relationship beyond the Church community in the spirit of the "social friendship" described by Pope Francis in the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*.

Synodality in the Church is therefore at once both an experience and a process. It is hoped that the experience of synodality will give rise to a renewal of the Church, prompting better and more informed conversations about faith and strengthening relationships within the Church community. It is also a process that will lead to changes in structures and practices to facilitate wider input in decision-making and greater sharing of responsibility in the life of the Church.

## 4.2 The Irish Church Context

An important aspect of the work of the Steering Committee has been to consider what a national synodal pathway might offer the Church in Ireland in the specific circumstances of today.

When the Irish bishops first announced their commitment to a national synodal pathway, they outlined some of the key themes that might be expected to arise in this work:<sup>5</sup>

- Solidarity, outreach to the peripheries and the promise of a New Pentecost, with an emphasis on the vision of social friendship.
- Listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church in an Ireland faced with rapid transformation and secularisation, acknowledging the major decline in practice of the faith and in the number of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life.
- Shocking revelations of institutional and clerical abuse, leaving a legacy of deep trauma and a need for healing.
- The need to promote peace-making to overcome deep-rooted divisions on the island of Ireland and to promote a culture of welcome for those who are arriving from other places.
- Listening to the cry for transparency, greater participation and accountability in the Church.
- Discovering the family as “domestic Church” and acknowledging the importance of the family context in people’s faith lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Connecting with young people in a way that enables them to use their energy and gifts to spread the Good News of the Gospel.
- Honouring the contribution of women, recognising the need to hear the deep concerns about barriers to women’s leadership in the Church.

Following on from this, in their reflections on the context for Ireland’s national synodal pathway, Steering Committee members were conscious, first and foremost, of the deep hurt that has been caused by the different forms of abuse perpetrated in the Church context and need for continued examination of its causes and effects. Trust in the Church and the credibility of its witness to Gospel values have been severely damaged as a result.

In spite of this very challenging context it was encouraging to note that there was considerable goodwill towards the synodal process evident in the acceptance of invitations to join conversations and get involved in the work of organising, even when people did not fully understand what the synodal process was about. There was a desire for something new with an emphasis on outreach and relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic made this work more difficult in many respects, including the restrictions on in-person gatherings, and the isolation and trauma that had been experienced by many people, with some people feeling particularly hurt and angry about the restrictions in the church context that had prevented in-person attendance at Mass. On the other hand, the experience

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<sup>5</sup>. Statement of the Spring 2021 General Meeting of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 10 March 2021, <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/03/10/statement-of-the-spring-2021-general-meeting-of-the-irish-catholic-bishops-conference/>



of the pandemic had prompted many people to place greater value on connection, community and coming together and in some local church contexts the synodal process provided an opportunity for pastoral listening about the impact of COVID-19 on individuals, families, the local church and the wider community that may not have happened otherwise.

This goodwill was a crucial factor in overcoming the challenge of the lack of formation and preparation among local leaders. Evidently, the practice of synodality was not well developed in the Irish Catholic Church. There had been a lack of attention to skills development in areas such as dealing with diversity and dissent in a Church context. This was compounded by low levels of investment in adult faith development, and low levels of interest in some cases where opportunities were offered, resulting in great disparities in terms of people's confidence in speaking about their faith. It was clear that the Church would have to develop new ways of negotiating relationships with honesty in order to build and re-build trust and gather people to reflect on, and contribute to, the missional outreach of the Church.

The starting point for this work was one in which the *sensus fidei*, the instinct of the faithful for the truth of the Gospel<sup>6</sup>, had been neglected with an emphasis on Church teaching rather than a listening Church. The synodal process calls us to a Scripture-inspired engagement with the lived experience of the faithful in the cultural context that shapes their daily lives, taking seriously their hopes and concerns about the teaching and practice of the Church. It reflects the vision of the Second Vatican Council, as articulated in *Lumen Gentium* with its emphasis on the common priesthood of all the faithful.<sup>7</sup> This engagement goes hand in hand with efforts to address manifestations of clericalism that are harmful to relationships, creating separation between priests or bishops and the rest of the people of God, disempowering lay people and alienating many, notably women and young people. The lack of trust engendered by this culture of clericalism had resulted in some cynicism about the synodal process, in the belief that the participation of lay people would not really count and/or that the outcomes had been pre-determined.

Related to this issue was a concern that the synodal process might operate out of a model of Church that is disconnected from current social and cultural realities. By contrast, it was hoped that if the Church could rise to the challenge of confronting realities that may be difficult, there could be an opportunity to be truly prophetic in an age of cultural revolutions – technological, philosophical, sociological – that are transforming our human reality. Synodality can help the Church prepare for and face this challenge in a spirit of shared responsibility among clergy and lay people that recognises the equal dignity of all the baptised, creating space for those who have felt marginalised or excluded from the work of the Church as a community of disciples.

A significant motivation for many Steering Committee members in becoming involved in this work was the call to go out to the margins, taking inspiration from Pope Francis' vision of the Church as a field-hospital. It was recognised that the degree to which the synodal pathway is successful in over-coming socio-cultural and socio-economic divides will have a defining impact on the process. It was recognized that there is a need for reflection on what it really means for the Church if the

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<sup>6</sup> International Theological Commission, "*Sensus Fidei* in the life of the Church" (2014) [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html)

<sup>7</sup> See for example: Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ, "The Church becoming synodal. Part 1: Lumen gentium and the inverted pyramid" in Thinking Faith, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021 <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/church-becoming-synodal-part-1-lumen-gentium-and-inverted-pyramid>



voices of those at the margins truly matter – not just as recipients of support and pastoral care, but as members of the Church community actively shaping its future through their involvement and participation.

The call to be a Church that goes out to the margins can be understood as implying that the Church is located at the centre, and yet for many people the Church is on the margins of their lives and experiences. It needs to be acknowledged, for example, that the vast majority of Catholic families have experienced rapid disengagement from the faith by their children. Church weddings are in decline. The result is fewer opportunities to connect people to Christ. Where people lose the opportunity to have a personal relationship with Christ they can also lose the opportunity to find Christ in others. The wider social context can make it difficult to have conversations about faith and values, even within families. Grandparents have been particularly vocal in raising these concerns. In this respect, the Church itself is experiencing a form of marginalisation. This can bring important insights to the Church and a significant leadership opportunity if we embrace it through synodality – following the example of Christ to be a sacrament of healing in our relationship with society.

Increasingly people are making a distinction between faith and Church, with many dismissing the Church as a remnant of the past. From a Church perspective it is important to acknowledge not only that mistakes have been made in the past, but that we will continue to make mistakes. Synodality could help us to navigate those challenges in a relational and Christ-centred way. The synodal process represents a sincere effort by the Church to reach out to people and help them feel genuinely part of the life of the Church and of the local church community, as well as helping them to feel that Christ is at the centre of their lives on a personal level. In order to be successful, this work requires commitment to a long-term process.

The potential contribution of the Irish experience to the wider Universal Synod was also considered. Ireland's experience of moving from a situation that was characterised as religious conflict, and marked by sectarianism, through a peace process that included particular emphasis on relationship building between Christian denominations, is an important story to share. The particularly rapid pace of secularisation which, in recent years, accompanied a rapid globalisation and diversification of Irish society through migration and economic development, has led to large-scale changes: in the economy, in politics, in the culture of the society. Recent referenda have been characterised by a public debate that presents disengagement from tradition as emancipation. How we engage with these realities in our context will have a defining impact on how the Church and the synodal process are received and understood by the wider society. The learning from this experience will be relevant to other contexts.

The synodal pathway presents a critical opportunity to look at who we are as Church. Empirical data has an important place in the process, but far more important is how we use that information to support the work of healing relationships and building trust. Communications and messaging will be of central importance here. There is a need to reflect critically on the language of the Church and consider where this may be detrimental to the work of reconciliation and healing. There can be a temptation to shut out the critical or cynical voices, but in a synodal process we are invited to consider what this challenge may be teaching us.





The practice of synodality calls us to expand our thinking on spaces and structures beyond the traditional structures of church life. These will have their place in the process and it is hoped that relationships at that level will be transformed by the Holy Spirit, but Pope Francis has been very clear that the Church needs to reach out beyond those structures and that reaching people is only the beginning of a process that aims to achieve lasting relationships.

Through the synodal pathway the Church in Ireland extends a humble invitation to people to come and experience hospitality, welcome and listening, seeking through these encounters to establish connections that will allow the Church to include more people in our journeying together as followers of Christ. The synodal process brings a degree of uncertainty, but Pope Francis reminds us that Christians are equipped to deal with uncertainty, and recognise that at times this can lead to enlightenment.



# 5. Synodality in practice

*This section draws on the experience of Steering Committee members in engaging with locally organised events; the experience of the Task Group and General Secretary in supporting local leaders; the reflections shared by local leaders in the Research Report and the experience of organising the national pre-synodal assembly and prayer walk as a synodal experience at national level.*

*“What are you doing here?” (1 Kings 19:9)*

The question that God asks Elijah resonates with us as we seek to walk the synodal pathway. Elijah has fled from those who seek to kill him. He comes to the mountain of Horeb and goes into a cave, perhaps to hide. The text evokes Elijah’s state of mind: the darkness of the cave, and the violence of the wind, earthquake, and fire, suggest destructive thoughts and emotions such as fear, anger, loneliness, together with a sense that his ministry has failed.

Our synodal pathway offers us the opportunity to answer the question, “what are you doing here?” It allows us to explore the historical and sociological changes that have impacted on the life of the Church in Ireland. But more importantly, it allows us to recognise and to speak about and to hear the feelings that weigh us down ... our disappointment ... our sense of failure ... our hurt ... our sense of betrayal ... our fear for the future of our parish communities and for the faith of our children and grandchildren ...

Perhaps it is only when we articulate these feelings that we will be able to hear the voice of the One who asks gently, silently “what are you doing here?” Perhaps then, it will be possible to discern the mission that God is entrusting to us, the future that he has in store for us.

## 5.1 Experiences

Synodality has to be experienced in order to be truly understood. The work can take many forms, but there are certain key characteristics that need to be present in order to constitute a truly synodal encounter. These include: an emphasis on prayer and scriptural reflection; an atmosphere of hospitality and welcome; the practice of deep and respectful listening; and a process to capture what has been shared in the listening so that it contributes to the wider work of synodality and pastoral planning in the Church.

Examples of the different ways in which parishes, dioceses and other groups have engaged with the process include:

- a) *Fish on Friday in the Diocese of Down and Connor (8<sup>th</sup> April 2022):*** An invitation to lunch and conversation, with inputs from the Synodal Pathway Steering Committee and from Trócaire to help stimulate dialogue and reflection on the relationship between synodality and mission in the Church today, with prayer, music and space for informal, as well as formally structured, conversation. Participants appreciated the hospitality and friendly atmosphere as well



as the opportunity to contribute to meaningful conversations. Members of other Christian denominations greatly valued the opportunity to share experiences from their church context and reflections on the common good.

- b) *Engagement with the local Men's Shed:*** This example was shared by a respondent to the Research Report (p. 13) as a way of bringing synodality to people in spaces beyond Church. This was a very positive encounter that illustrated how people may still be holding on to faith even if they are not in Church and open to conversations if the Church is willing to reach out.
- c) *Conversation cards:*** This approach, using cards with simple questions to invite people to have a conversation about their faith and what Church means to them was used in an inner-city parish and produced some very moving responses, notably from members of the Church community who were experiencing homelessness and/or addiction and reported finding in the Church a place of safety and welcome at a time in their lives when there were few such spaces available to them.
- d) *Establishing a new Parish Council:*** In the parish of Navan in the Diocese of Meath, during the autumn of 2022, a steering committee comprising members of the outgoing Parish Pastoral Council, together with the priests of the parish, used the method of spiritual conversation to reflect on the findings of the National Synthesis from the diocesan phase of the Universal Synod to determine pastoral priorities for a new Parish Pastoral Council. These were then presented at public meetings in Advent 2022 where parishioners, using the method of spiritual conversation, reflected further on these pastoral priorities, and discerned the qualities necessary in the members of the new Council, as well as determining the methodology for the selection of the new members. The process deepened a sense of co-responsibility in the parish. Parishioners began to view the new Council as people exercising their baptismal ministry rather than “the priests needing help”. There was also a sense that the mission of the parish was being Spirit-driven as opposed to a dependence on the pastoral initiatives and imagination of the clergy.

## 5.2 Learning

It is important to state at the outset that as a Church we are still processing the learning from the first two years of synodal engagement and outreach. What is offered here are some early reflections which are informed, to a significant degree, by the experience of the local leaders who contributed to the research commissioned in March 2023.

### 5.2.1 Appreciation for a listening Church

There has been a strong message of appreciation for the experience of a listening Church created by the synodal process thus far. The research report states: “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” (p. 12).



### **5.2.2 Spirituality of the discernment process**

We are still learning what discernment really means in the context of the synodal pathway and exploring its full potential. There is a tension between the need to understand synodality as a long-term process and the need to break it down into specific steps and tasks that can be implemented at local level. The methodology of spiritual conversations, while not the only method of discernment available, is one that has worked well in an Irish context. The Research Report states that: “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” (p. 14).

### **5.2.3 Reaching out to those who are not engaged**

The Steering Committee has also engaged with those who are resistant, or opposed to the synodal process, seeking to understand their perception that this is not about “enlarging the tent” as stated in the Document for the Continental Stage, but rather about moving the tent away from those who are faithful to the Magisterium of the Church. Some local leaders also expressed concern that the process was not sufficiently faith-based and risked undermining Church teaching (Research Report p.65).

There are many individuals and groups of people who have not yet been reached and there is further work to be done to identify and address barriers to engagement, as well as reaching out respectfully to those who are currently not interested in what the Church is doing. The Research Report states: “[i]t 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” (p. 16). Particular emphasis was placed on the challenge of engaging regular mass-goers, on the one hand, and, on the other those who did not engage with Church at all or see it as relevant.

The need to communicate widely and clearly the invitation to get involved in order to reach as many people as possible has been emphasized throughout this process. It is important to be willing to listen to people’s fears and concerns, reassuring those who may feel excluded that their contribution is valued, while taking care to protect the integrity of the synodal process as a commitment to journeying together, supported by a methodology centred on deep respectful listening and honest sharing.

### **5.2.4 Communications**

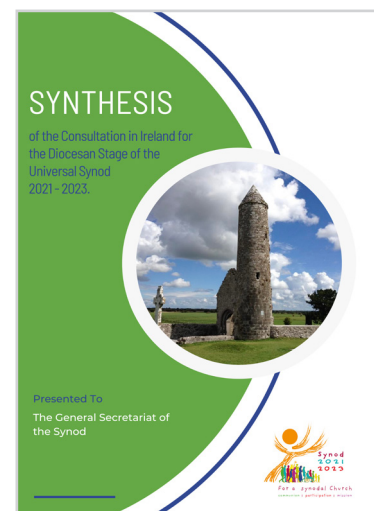
The work of communications is critical to the success of the synodal pathway in terms of promoting a greater understanding of synodality, reaching people with the opportunity to contribute and keeping people engaged through regular updates and accessible information. The process to date has highlighted significant challenges for the Church in the area of communications, both internal and external. The invitation to get involved in the synodal process did not reach all parishes and many people have felt left out or disconnected. There is a need to learn from those areas where local channels of communication have been particularly effective and seek to extend that good practice to other areas. The impact of externally-facing communications aimed at reaching those



who are not in Church was limited by a lack of confidence among local leaders in communicating about a process that was in the early stages of development. The open-ended nature of the synodal process, working towards long-term transformation rather than a single fixed end point, and the complexity of the relationship between the national and universal processes were barriers to communication for some local leaders (Research Report p.18). A somewhat related point is the uncertainty about the objectives of the synodal process, giving rise to widely shared concerns about managing expectations (Research Report p. 16). It is encouraging that many local leaders in the March 2023 research identified communications as an area where they would value additional support and training in preparation for the next phase of the work.

### 5.2.5 Documenting and reporting

The synodal process is generating a large volume of documents and reports. These provide a valuable record of what has been shared, and facilitate ever widening and deepening circles of engagement, allowing people to confirm that their views have been heard, engage with anything that may be missing, and invite more people to join the conversation without repeating what has already been covered. Returning to the synthesis of previous conversations can prompt new and perhaps in some cases better questions. These documents also serve as a useful tool for pastoral planning, helping us respond to the question: what might we be called to do in response to what we have heard?



### 5.2.6 The role of priests in the synodal church

Unsurprisingly, discussion of the role of priests has featured prominently and repeatedly throughout the synodal process to date. The National Synthesis (p. 7) contains a section on clergy which reflects deep appreciation for the work of priests, highlighting the need for attention to their welfare and workload. It was also emphasised that where there was a reluctance by priests to engage in the synodal process, or in work to promote co-responsible leadership, this significantly undermined confidence. Similar concerns were reflected at the global level in the Document for the Continental Stage (see paragraphs 19, 33, 34, 55 and 59).

The research with local leaders commissioned by the Steering Committee sought to delve deeper into some of these issues, including two clergy-only focus groups in addition to mixed clergy/lay groups. Among the concerns identified by priests were: the amount of change they have had to deal with in recent years including the pandemic experience, the significant impact of synodality on their leadership role and style, the already overwhelming demands on their time, and the complex challenges of parish leadership with the need to deal with competing views and aspirations (Research Report p. 27).

We are grateful to those priests who have shared very honest reflections on their experience so far and their thoughts on the future as part of this work. We recognise that many priests did not feel adequately supported to engage during the first phase of this work and that additional support, guidance and access to training should be made available in the next stages of the process.



### 5.2.7 Formation

The need for formation, faith development and training has been a clear and consistent priority in conversations about the synodal process (Research Report pp. 71-72). A focus on investment in this area can bring together people who have very different aspirations for the future of the Church, because all can see that weaknesses in this area are limiting and damaging.

In response to the training needs identified by local leaders in the research a pilot training programme has been designed, addressing the following areas:

- Understanding synodality
- Dialogue and discernment
- Facilitative leadership
- Dealing with conflict
- Outreach and communications

In addition, local leaders also identified opportunities for wider faith development — giving people a stronger foundation from which to engage in conversations about their faith (Research Report p. 72). This presents opportunities for a wide range of groups and organisations within the Church to offer formation and catechesis in their areas of experience and expertise and should be further explored.

### 5.2.8 Synodality supporting the work of mission

As the synodal process prompts local church communities to engage in critical reflection about their relationship to the wider society and to the current cultural context, there is an opportunity to develop our capacity to read the signs of the times, using the See, Judge, Act method of applying Catholic Social Teaching as modelled by Pope Francis (in *Laudato Si'* for example). Given the rapid and radical changes in our society that have produced the missionary context for the Irish Church, rigorous analysis and theological reflection are crucial to inform an effective discernment of pastoral strategies and priorities across the island, including necessary variations of emphasis to reflect local or regional conditions. They would, for example, inform reflection on what it means in a missionary context to be a Catholic institution, providing services to an increasingly diverse and pluralist population. Strategies for evangelisation, catechesis and faith formation will also need to take account of careful and sensitive engagement with such profound social change.



## 5.3 Recommendations

(these recommendations 1–5 are the same recommendations found in the Executive Summary on page 6)

1. The research undertaken with local leaders was highly informative for the Steering Committee and, from the perspective of local leaders, offered a welcome opportunity for consultation which acknowledged the importance of their contribution thus far. It is recommended that this would be repeated during the next phase of the synodal pathway, helping to embed good practice in learning from people's experience of leadership in a Church context, both positive and negative, on an ongoing basis.
2. The pilot training programme should be promoted at local level to current and emerging local leaders. Following evaluation of this pilot programme, a suitable institutional partner should be sought to provide access to accreditation, annual training and continuous professional development.
3. The research has highlighted the need for some clergy-specific elements to the training, in addition to those to be undertaken by clergy and lay people together, acknowledging the significant changes that are being asked of priests and providing space for them to reflect on the future of priestly ministry in the synodal context.
4. The synodal pathway should include an intentional focus on the welfare of priests, drawing on the work that has already been done in this area.
5. Building on the growing appetite for faith development opportunities that has been emerging from the synodal process, other church organisations should be encouraged to explore what they might have to offer in terms of training and skills development.



## 6. A national synodal pathway for Ireland

*“What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8 [NRSVCE])*

*The words of the prophet Micah are familiar but let us read them again in the light of the synodal journey that God is asking us to undertake together.*

*To “do justice” is a call to action. We are invited to recognise that there is woundedness in the Church, and as we walk together on the synodal pathway, we can hear the voices of those who have been wounded, and together seek ways to bring healing. Perhaps then, we can be an authentic voice for justice in our world that is wounded and broken.*

*The Hebrew term “hesed”, translated here as “kindness”, evokes a love that is unfailing, unconditional, and generous. It hints at the love that is at the very heart of God, which is why often the word “mercy” is preferred. As we walk the synodal pathway together, perhaps we are being called to accompany each other, and to listen to each other, with the love with which God loves us. Let us see in each other the object of God’s love, and let us speak to each other, and listen to each other, with kindness, and with the merciful love that is revealed in Christ.*

*To “walk humbly” with God resonates even more powerfully when we consider the meaning of the word synod: to walk together. In Christ, God humbled himself to walk the path of history with broken and suffering humanity. Let us too, following his example, humble ourselves to walk with each other, seeking humbly to hear his voice, and to discern what it is that he is asking of us.*

Ireland’s national synodal pathway seeks to respond to the question: What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time? The Steering Committee has been tasked with offering recommendations about the kinds of processes and initiatives that might best equip the Irish Church to respond to this question over the next three years, involving as many people as possible in the conversation. We have listened, prayerfully and with close reference to Scripture, to what people have been saying during these first two years of consultation. Local leaders are keen to see the national pathway begin to take shape, welcoming the opportunity to build on the significant learning that has taken place to date, continue the rich and energising conversations and deepen our discernment. They have been clear that they want to see a well-structured process with clearly communicated and manageable timelines that will be respectful of the work undertaken at local level and sustainable in the long-term. The Research Report notes: “There was consistent comment that the timeframes for the Universal Synod caused the process to be rushed” (p. 17). They want greater clarity about the objectives so as to have confidence that the listening will lead to action and that the outcomes will be relevant to the local Church context. The process will need to be open to what will emerge from the Universal Synod and help connect this global process to the local Church.





## 6.1 Timescale

In keeping with the Terms of Reference, this report offers recommendations for the next three years (from the end of 2023 to the end of 2026), conscious that at the end of this period the work will not be complete, and that new developments are likely to arise as a result of further learning.

These recommendations assume, and recommend, the continued integration of the national and universal processes. This does add an additional layer of complexity to the planning for the national pathway as there will need to be continued flexibility to support and encourage local church engagement with the Universal Synod. The challenges are far outweighed by the benefits of connecting our synodal journey to the wider global Church family, reminding ourselves what it means to be a Catholic Church in the increasingly fractured and fragmented world of today. The integration also ensures that our national pathway reflects best practice globally and is responsive to relevant developments at the level of the universal Church.

## 6.2 Pastoral Goals for the national synodal pathway

The national synodal pathway seeks to respond to the question: What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time? It is intended that this listening will lead to action at every stage of the process. The Task Group and General Secretary have consulted local leaders about the pastoral actions (for both local and national level) that have been identified in their context. An extensive list has been compiled, from which we can identify some recurring and over-arching priorities for further reflection and consideration. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and the flexibility to respond to regional diversity will be an essential element of the pastoral planning that accompanies the synodal pathway.

**Invitation:** Reaching more people with the invitation to take part in a synodal process that is Christ-centred, uniting people in prayer and contributing to renewal in the Church. This will require us to promote a better understanding of synodality, undertake further work to identify and address barriers to participation, share best practice in connecting with diverse groups of people, and improve our communication about the process — both within and beyond the Church.

**Outreach:** Telling better stories about our faith and our Church to enhance and re-energise the work of mission and evangelisation, connecting with people who value faith but are alienated from Church. Through the deep listening of synodality, becoming more pastorally sensitive and responsive in our accompaniment of people, as individuals, families and communities.

**Participation:** Creating the conditions that will facilitate wider involvement in decision-making. This is first and foremost about relationships, valuing everyone's contribution. It is also about structures — ensuring our existing structures serve as instruments of synodality, and creating new structures where necessary. Widening participation will require us to help people to understand and engage with decision-making processes in the Church through better communication and formation.

**Leadership:** Valuing diversity, identifying and addressing barriers to participation and belonging, recognising our shared identity in Christ, will help to achieve a model of leadership in the Church that is reflective of the membership of the community it seeks to serve. The area of women's leadership has been identified as a particular priority for action.



**Youth:** Achieving a more effective engagement with young people through respectful listening, better understanding of their concerns, hopes and expectations of Church. Developing new models of engagement and leadership where possible to facilitate youth participation rather than expecting young people to adapt to models that do not meet their needs.

**Commitment:** Developing cycles of engagement that will ensure that listening leads to action with effective evaluation and monitoring, helping to build confidence among people that their participation counts and that the synodal pathway is worth the investment of their time and effort.

### 6.3 From local listening to national assemblies

When the Irish bishops announced their commitment to the synodal pathway it was envisaged that this would lead to “the holding of a National Synodal Assembly within the next five years.”<sup>8</sup> The Steering Committee has followed this trajectory in its work, building on the experience of the national Pre-Synodal Assembly of June 2022. The 2022 Assembly, while it had a very specific focus on shaping Ireland’s contribution to the Universal Synod, affirms the value of this kind of experience to the Church in Ireland and provides valuable insights into the preparations that will be required for a National Synodal Assembly of the Church in Ireland.

The Steering Committee recommends that the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference makes a commitment to a series of national assemblies over the course of several years, extending well beyond the three-year timeline foreseen for the next phase of the synodal pathway. The rationale for this recommendation is two-fold. Firstly, it is vital to honour the listening that has taken place to date, represented in the National Synthesis. It would not be possible to address the breadth of issues included in the National Synthesis, and those raised subsequently, in a single assembly. Secondly, a commitment to a series of national assemblies with sufficient time in between for reflection and action will support the Church to develop and embed the spirituality, culture and practice of synodality.

In this vision, national synodal assemblies would form an important element of a wider synodal pathway, which would include other ways to support people to connect to the work, through prayer and through less formal, creative spaces that might include engagement with the arts or storytelling, for example, to help people to express what faith means to them and share their hopes and concerns for the future.

The national synodal assemblies would not be formally constituted synods, but rather assemblies that follow the methodologies and approaches that have been used in the engagement with the Universal Synod. The plan for the national synodal pathway would be open to the possibility of a formally constituted synod at national level in response to possible developments arising from the Universal Synod and/or further learning and insights from the national process.

The national assemblies would provide an occasion for gathering the experiential learning from the work that is being done on the ground at local level, deepening our theological reflection on issues

<sup>8</sup>. Statement of the Spring 2021 General Meeting of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 10 March 2021, <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/03/10/statement-of-the-spring-2021-general-meeting-of-the-irish-catholic-bishops-conference/>



or questions raised, and identifying the pastoral actions that can be taken at local or national level. The assemblies, and the process leading up to them, would contribute to the building and deepening of relationships across diocesan boundaries to support and strengthen the missional outreach of the Church. It is hoped that the learning from this experience would also result in better outreach and increased participation in other areas of church structures, such as the work of the Councils and Agencies of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, and the work of the Conference itself.

The process envisaged would be as follows:

- A further gathering of local synodal leaders with bishops to shape the questions for the first national synodal assembly, to take place two years later.
- The first year would have a focus on local listening. There would be a period of preparation for the local church — understanding the process and its objectives, reflecting on the historical, sociological, and theological context of the question, catechesis, making practical preparations and communicating the invitation. This would be followed by listening, outreach, prayer initiatives and other forms of engagement.
- The second year would have a particular focus on planning for the national assembly, gathering and publishing the reports from the local listening, producing theological papers and other resources, as well as the planning and organisation of the national assembly.
- In the final year of this three year phase the focus would be two-fold: (i) implementation and monitoring of actions, both local and national, arising from the synodal assembly and (ii) evaluation of the national synodal assembly experience to inform planning for the next in the series of national assemblies, adapting the process to integrate any learning as necessary.

## 6.4 Defining the focus of the national assemblies

The overarching focus for the national synodal pathway is reflected in the guiding question: What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time? It is envisaged that national synodal assemblies will support and equip the Church to explore particular aspects of the response to that question in depth, bringing together the experience of the local Church and the theological reflection on the relevant Church teaching with a view to identifying the actions we are called to take in different areas of Church life.

The Steering Committee in its recommendations has not sought to define the specific questions that might shape the agendas of national synodal assemblies, believing a further stage of consultation and discernment with local leaders to be necessary and helpful before decisions are taken in this regard, with a view to continued strengthening of the local church ownership of the national pathway. This report offers recommendations in relation to general principles that might frame and guide that further work of discernment and suggests a priority area for consideration as part of this focus.

The National Synthesis identifies fifteen themes as featuring prominently in the local listening, as well as pointing to areas where the lack of attention may warrant further consideration.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> The fifteen themes listed are: Abuse as part of the Story of the Church; Co-Responsible Leadership; Clergy; Lay Ministry; Sense of Belonging; The Role of Women in the Church; LGBTQI+; Sexuality and Relationships; Adult Faith Formation; Liturgy; Youth; Education and Catechesis; Family; Covid-19 Pandemic; and Culture.



documents arising from the Universal Synod, notably the Document for the Continental Stage, the report from the European Synodal Assembly and the *Instrumentum Laboris* have all been similarly broad. One local leader summarised the challenge with the words “so many issues” (Research Report p. 25).

There is an evident tension between the value of a broad perspective that considers the variety and diversity of concerns present in our local church communities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to have a strong focus that takes our engagement beyond a superficial acknowledgement of concerns and allows sufficient space for the challenging work of deep and detailed discernment leading to action.

With this in mind, it is suggested that the initial question(s) chosen for the national synodal assembly should be:

- Foundational – allowing us to develop the structures, processes and skills required for a synodal Church;
- Sufficiently open to allow us to continue to work with the breadth of what is captured in the National Synthesis, while not being restricted to what it contains;
- Responsive to the guiding question for the national synodal pathway: ‘What does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?’;
- Conducive to engagement with questions of culture, including the impact of the abuse crisis in the Church, and the relationship of the Church to the changing culture of society;
- Generous open questions that continue the work of outreach and listening that has already taken place, helping to deepen understanding and connection through exploring complexity and diversity rather than reducing that complexity to binary choices;
- Related to what is happening in the Universal Synod;
- Relevant to the needs of the local church in the diverse contexts across the island of Ireland.



## Co-responsible leadership

While not wishing to specify the particular questions for the agenda of a national assembly or series of assemblies, the Steering Committee wishes to highlight the broad theme of “co-responsible leadership” as a priority area for consideration. This theme has relevance across all the areas of focus that have arisen to date in the Irish context and relates closely to the focus of the Universal Synod. It was named as a priority concern in the National Synthesis and subsequently in the follow-up research with local leaders. Co-responsibility also featured strongly in the priority areas for pastoral action identified by local leaders. Work in this area would allow us to deepen our understanding of the current realities of the Church in Ireland, including barriers to belonging and participation. It would provide space to imagine new possibilities – developing a vision for an all-ministerial Church. One local leader described co-responsibility as “learning to walk together” as clergy and lay people (Research Report p. 32), reinforcing the idea that a focus on co-responsibility will help us to consider the implications of what has been shared during the listening and identify the resulting priority areas for action and attention. It would be an opportunity to share questions, concerns, ideas and examples of best practice at local level, and to deepen our understanding of co-responsibility in the specific context of the Church in Ireland, with all its regional diversity. An overarching objective would be to develop a plan for the Church in Ireland that would embed the practice of synodality through the promotion and development of co-responsible leadership, helping to enhance our capacity to engage synodally in the questions to follow in subsequent assemblies. A focus on co-responsibility would be reflective of the hopeful vision and desire for action that has been emerging from the process to date.

## 6.5 Preparation

The synodal pathway is intended as a significant long-term investment for the Church and it is hoped that this work will, in turn, encourage more people to take up leadership roles in the life of the Church. The vision for the synodal pathway should be ambitious enough to reflect the faith-filled and hope-filled nature of the encounters that have taken place to date. At the same time, there is a need to be realistic about the resourcing challenges, both human and financial, in a Church that is still counting the cost of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of participation and financial contributions. Local leaders have reported that people are time-poor, increasingly so post-pandemic. This is not seen only in the synodal process but across other areas of church life (Research Report p. 39).

There is a need for a compassionate approach towards those in leadership, mindful of the pressures impacting the Church at both local and national level, and the level of change to which leaders have had to adapt in recent years. Local leaders have highlighted the tension between the urgent need for the Church to become more pastorally sensitive and effective in its outreach through the synodal process, while at the same time needing to be realistic about the many challenges of the present context, and the fact that cultural change takes time (Research Report p. 47).

As has previously been stated, the local church will be a vital element of the national synodal pathway. It is through local engagement that the synodal process will have the potential to impact the greatest number of people, and in a lasting way through connection with the local church. The planning and coordination work to be undertaken at national level is envisaged as a support and encouragement to the local church, providing information, resources and opportunities for connection, networking and wider sharing.

The Church has a very valuable resource in all those who have made a commitment to this work — clergy and lay, staff and volunteers. Steering Committee members are very grateful for the support and collaboration experienced during this two year process. The fact that every diocese in Ireland has seen people come forward to volunteer time and expertise to help guide this process has been a great encouragement. Steering Committee members have also been working on a voluntary basis and we recommend that the process would continue to be predominantly volunteer-led into the next phase of the work. Support for volunteer leadership opportunities helps to model synodality in practice with its ethos of service and valuing of everyone’s contribution, enabling people of all backgrounds to contribute their diverse skills. The synodal process, particularly through the engagement with local leaders, is already drawing attention to Church practice in the areas of volunteer recruitment and retention. This will provide valuable learning at a time when not only faith communities, but the wider community and voluntary sector as a whole, are experiencing growing pressures in terms of volunteer availability.

It is anticipated that the work of the synodal pathway will continue to grow in the next phase. It is therefore recommended that the governance model would move beyond the committee structure employed for the initial phase to an expanded structure with a series of working groups with delegated authority in key areas, notably:

- Assembly planning
- Theology and Sociology
- Spirituality and Formation
- Communications and Outreach
- Youth
- The Universal Synod and International Engagement

In addition, it is recommended that the governing body would include individuals with responsibility to provide a point of contact and support for dioceses (on a regional basis) as well as congregations/movements/associations and the Councils and Agencies of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

A change of title is also recommended, moving from a “Steering Committee”, which suggests direction and a top-down approach, to a “National Animation Team for the Synodal Pathway” which better reflects the fact that the role of the national body is to work collaboratively with the local church, taking forward those aspects of the work that require national-level planning and coordination. The word ‘animation’ is suggested to convey support and encouragement rather than direction. It is not a commonly used word in church structures, but for this reason may help us to think outside existing models of engagement and imagine new possibilities for relationship-building and collaborative working.

Beyond this national level team it is not envisaged that the synodal pathway would involve the creation of new structures at national level. As the process progresses new structures may be developed in response to the learning to help facilitate wider input into decision-making. At present the focus is on existing structures, seeking to transform these into instruments of synodality, widening engagement and with an openness to change where needed. If the national synodal pathway is to have a meaningful impact, contributing to renewal across all levels of Church life, then it needs to be integrated into the existing structures of the Church, so that it is not speaking into a vacuum.



Local leaders have drawn particular attention to the role of parish and diocesan councils. The synodal process to date has been helping to identify some gaps and/or limitations in existing structures that could be addressed with intentional focus, for example by making these more prayerful spaces and having greater attention to the personal spiritual development and nourishment of staff/volunteers. As has been mentioned previously, local leaders connect this work of renewal to the promotion of co-responsibility and point to the potential for renewal of existing structures through synodality (Research Report p. 31). Investment in the synodal transformation of existing structures in the next phase of the work will help ensure sustainability by providing solid foundations for the synodal process and, in doing so, making it less dependent on individual leaders.

While taking all the above into account, it would be important to have the freedom and scope to think beyond existing structures, to widen engagement and think creatively about how best to reach a diverse range of people. A key question will be: what are the skills that are most needed by the local church and how can these best be provided?

### **Local church context**

The work of synodality builds on what has already happened in the local church in the development of parish and diocesan councils, and in efforts to encourage people to get involved in the life of the local church. We recommend that this work would be further strengthened in the next phase through the establishment of leadership teams at diocesan level. The connection between this work and that at national level might be reinforced by use of the language of animation/animators also at diocesan level. This would also underline that the role of this group is not to carry all the responsibility of the work to be done, or to give direction, but rather to support, communicate and encourage a wide range of people to take responsibility for elements of the synodal pathway at local level. It would be important to have diversity of roles and experience in this group — priests and lay people, from different geographical contexts and with different areas of professional expertise and experience. In keeping with the emphasis on embedding synodality in existing structures, it may be helpful for dioceses to draw membership for the synodal team from key bodies such as the Council of Priests or Diocesan Pastoral Council.

Core functions of this group would include:

- To work with the diocesan bishop to develop a strategy for synodal engagement in the diocese, working with local parishes, but also thinking beyond the parish context, particularly in relation to outreach to individuals and groups that were difficult to reach or engage during the 2022/2023 listening work.
- To participate in Irish Synodal Pathway gatherings, including regional meetings, and identify appropriate diocesan delegates.
- To develop a communications plan that will ensure that content to support the development of synodality, including communications from the national synodal team are disseminated to every parish, and more widely through diocesan communications, in a timely manner and providing a two-way exchange of information by relaying any questions, concerns or feedback from the local level to the national team.
- To ensure that updates on the synodal process – local, national and universal – are included regularly in diocesan meetings and events.

One local leader said of the Pre-Synodal Assembly: “The meeting in Athlone, personally, I found that a really good experience and because of that it made me very interested in promoting it” and similar sentiments were expressed by others (Research Report p.44). This suggests that when synodal events at national level are connected to the local context in a meaningful way, do not place an excessive burden on local leaders, and give due regard to the need to create and protect the space for their development and spiritual nourishment, they can make a powerful contribution to the hoped-for New Pentecost for the Church today, on the island of Ireland and beyond.

## 6.6 Recommendations

(these recommendations 6-12 are the same recommendations found in the Executive Summary on pages 6 and 7)

6. The work of the Steering Committee affirms the original idea set out by the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference that some form of national synodal assembly should form an integral part of the national synodal pathway for the Church in Ireland and goes further to suggest that there should be a series of national assemblies extending beyond the initial 2021-2026 timeframe of the synodal pathway.
7. National synodal assemblies would form an important element of a wider synodal pathway, which would include other ways to support people to connect to the work, through prayer and through less formal, creative spaces that might include engagement with the arts or story-telling, for example. These would not be formally constituted synods, but rather assemblies that follow the methodologies and approaches that have been used in the engagement with the Universal Synod. The plan for the national synodal pathway would be open to the possibility of a formally constituted synod at national level in response to possible developments arising from the Universal Synod and/or further learning and insights from the national process.
8. It is recommended that there would be a further national-level engagement with local leaders prior to deciding the specific question/questions that would shape the first national synodal assembly. An emphasis on the general theme of co-responsible leadership is recommended in light of what has emerged from the listening undertaken to date.
9. A proposed process for the next three years is outlined: (i) further engagement with local leaders leading to agreement of the question/questions for the first national synodal assembly; (ii) local preparations for listening including catechesis; (iii) local listening and reporting to national level; (iv) preparations at national level including theological reflection on the issues/questions identified in the local listening; (v) national synodal assembly; (vi) local action, response and feedback for evaluation.





10. It is recommended that the process would continue to be predominantly volunteer-led at national level with the expansion of the current Steering Committee model to include working groups with delegated authority in the following areas: national assembly planning; theology and sociology; spirituality and formation; communications and outreach; youth; the universal synod and other international engagement. In addition, it is recommended that the governing body would include individuals with responsibility to provide a point of contact and support for dioceses (on a regional basis) as well as congregations/movements/associations and the Councils and Agencies of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.
11. A change of title is also recommended, moving from a "Steering Committee", which suggests direction and a top-down approach, to a "National Animation Team for the Synodal Pathway" which better reflects the fact that the role of the national body is to work collaboratively with the local church, taking forward those aspects of the work that require national-level planning and coordination.
12. Local church structures, such as parish and diocesan pastoral councils, constitute a critical element of the foundations for the work of synodality. Further investment and guidance, to continue the work already underway to realise the full potential for these to serve as authentic instruments of synodality, is recommended. It is suggested that this may be best achieved through the establishment or development of leadership teams at diocesan level. The role of this group is not to carry all the responsibility of the work to be done, or to give direction, but rather to support, communicate and encourage a wide range of people to take responsibility for elements of the synodal pathway at local level.

# 7. The journey ahead

This report has endeavoured to capture, and build upon, the learning from the first stage of the synodal pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Synodality cannot be reduced to a series of events, but instead calls us to a long-term process of renewal in the Church, listening and learning at every stage. The Steering Committee seeks therefore to point the compass rather than plot the final destination, recognising that the recommendations will have to be flexible to adapt to ongoing learning, as well as developments in the Universal Church, and that the work required will extend far beyond the three years of the next phase of the synodal pathway.

The process to date has been less about finding answers and more about finding the right questions, holding the tension and not seeking to close down the difficult questions too quickly. We are learning how to create an environment in which we can have conversations that have real spiritual depth and engage with the issues that are impacting the daily lives of people in our local church and in the surrounding community.

We look forward to continuing this journey together, as local church communities and as the Church in Ireland, in dialogue and friendship with Christians of other denominations, with other faith communities and with the wider society.

The invitation to get involved remains open as the work moves into the next phase and we hope that more people will be encouraged to explore what they might contribute to the vision for a synodal Church in Ireland and be supported to offer that contribution. We place our hope and trust in Christ recalling his promise that “where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I among them” Mt 18:20.



# 8. Resources for further reading

## Material produced for the universal synod

- The website for the Universal Synod ([synod.va](https://synod.va)) provides explanatory material for each stage of that process, guides and resources for local leaders, reports (notably the reports from the continental assemblies) and the working documents for the continental and universal stages.
- The website for the national synodal pathway for the Church in Ireland ([synod.ie](https://synod.ie)) provides a range of resources, including the National Synthesis for Ireland.
- The local synthesis documents produced by dioceses and other movements and associations have been published separately on the individual websites.

## Books

Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy and Mary McDaid (eds), *The Synodal Pathway: When Rhetoric meets Reality* (Dubin: Columba Books, 2022).

Éamonn Fitzgibbon and Karen Kiely, *Limerick Diocesan Synod of 2016: A Camino of Hope in the Spirit of Truth* (Dublin: Veritas, 2023).

## Articles

Michael A. Conway, 'No turning back: synodality and the future of ecclesial life', *The Furrow* July/August 2023, pp. 387-398.

Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ, "The Church becoming synodal. Part 1: Lumen gentium and the inverted pyramid" in *Thinking Faith*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021 <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/church-becoming-synodal-part-1-lumen-gentium-and-inverted-pyramid>

Julieann Moran and Oisín Walsh, "Synodal Pathway: Communion, Participation, Mission: An interview with Cardinal Mario Grech", *Intercom*, February 2023 pp. 6-8.

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