Irish Synodal Pathway – Working Group Submission

Working Group Priority Area: [Family]

Date of Submission: [30th May 2026]

1. Group Overview

Members: Muirne Lawlor, Paul Keogh, Stephen Cummins, Maura Murphy, Cora O'Farrell, Mark O'Leary, Anne O'Leary,

Convener: Deirdre O'Rawe

National Synodal Team Representative: Bishop Martin Hayes

2. Statement of Discernment and Vision

We envision families in vibrant, parish/pastoral communities of faith being nourished, welcomed, and enabled to live their baptismal promises co-responsibly.

Mindful of the wealth of initiatives and resources that already exist, we present an invitational, non-prescriptive roadmap that can be implemented and adapted to diverse contexts, from small parishes to larger pastoral communities.

Our vision invites families in parish communities to engage confidently with a coherent, resource-rich, and adaptable plan that honours existing good work, strengthens sacramental and catechetical life, and enables the laity to live out their baptismal promises in shared mission.

The group met on four occasions and reflected on the recommended texts. Both *Baptised and Sent* and *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) see the parish as essential to marriage and family life, with *Baptised and Sent* acknowledging the parish as the primary mission-driven community and *Amoris Laetitia* providing a deeper theological rationale and a wider, more inclusive pastoral approach. The foundational building block of the parish community is the family and the parish itself is a *family of families*. Both documents advocate ongoing formation, marriage preparation and enrichment, family catechesis, liturgical involvement of couples and families, hospitality, and networks of lay leaders within parish life.

Each meeting began with the Synod Prayer *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*. We then reviewed notes and work completed since the previous meeting including research and consultations. Using *Conversations in the Spirit*, and in an atmosphere of trust and welcome, with open and receptive hearts, each member spoke intentionally, expressing experiences, thoughts and feelings and without imposition. While focussing on the person speaking, the other members

listened respectfully, actively, intently and without judgement. After each person spoke, there was a time of silence and reflection. In round two of the *Conversations in the Spirit*, there was a shared discernment when each member spoke about what struck them and in what ways.

Through prayer and intentional listening, members were able to 'hold' different approaches and emphases. This enabled a 'widening of the tent' to encompass the range of ministries represented and an enlarged frame within which to discern the needs of couples in each season of marriage and at different stages of family life, and potential responses.

The group shared the following insights and drew together the most pressing needs:

- To embrace the family as the primary context for faith formation (Domestic Church) and move from one-day events to ongoing formation.
- To build an ecosystem of home–school–parish collaboration (the "three links") with school as the current strongest bridge.
- To reframe "Faith Transmission" to "Faith Nurturing/Sharing" with emphasis on reciprocity and mutuality.
- To strengthen hospitality and inclusion, with specific scaffolding for vulnerable families (disabilities, addiction, dementia, poverty, new arrivals).
- To strengthen marriage preparation and post-preparation support.
- To ensure national coordination with local flexibility.

The submitted proposals offer a pastoral, cohesive, and practical, approach by making families the primary agents of formation, sustaining parish life through ongoing accompaniment and the involvement of Marriage and Family movements so as to connect faith to everyday living in inclusive, generative ways.

The proposals:

- Place the family at the centre of faith formation, strengthen parish accompaniment, foster durable faith across generations, and translate faith into everyday life through practical supports and inclusive practices.
- Reaffirm the centrality of the sacramental life, with a practical emphasis on marriage accompaniment, catechumenate, and the renewal of home, parish, and school partnerships.
- Enable sustained formation and belonging by reducing isolation; integrating sacraments and ongoing formation into daily life.

- Leverage the wisdom and resources of older generations so as to support holistic faith formation across life stages.
- Demonstrate the Church's relevance to daily life; support resilient families; signal the Church as a practical partner.
- Create spaces of physical and digital encounter and dialogical formation where families and parish communities can more fully understand the Gospel and grow in mission.

Our aim has been to propose a workable timeframe and pathways for implementation which focus on the parish, parish clusters, the diocese and at national level. This will depend on the effectiveness of parish/pastoral communities in providing a structure which enables the development and strengthening of relationships. Working alongside Marriage and Family movements, practical programmes will enrich couples, families and parishes. As Pope Francis stated in 2016, "*The main contribution to the pastoral care of families is offered by the parish, which is the family of families, where small communities, ecclesial movements and associations live in harmony*" (A.L. para 202). Effective training and the development of resources will require national support.

Based on the Family Working Group Individual Submission Proposals, the guiding documents *Baptised and Sent* plus the *National Synthesis,* the following four streamlined proposals have been developed. These integrate the individual suggestions into cohesive, actionable strategies that align with the Synodal priority of supporting the family as the "Domestic Church".

Proposal 1

Title: Nurturing the Domestic Church: Home-Based Faith Tools

Description: An invitation to families to accompany their children in faith at home, as the "Domestic Church", through the use of simple digital and physical toolkits (prayers, rituals and conversation starters); also recognising grandparents and elders as a key existing support system.

Rationale: Focuses on the "Domestic Church" and starts small by empowering parents without making them feel overwhelmed.

Intended Impact: To move from a "passive laity" to families who feel confident in their baptismal promises to nurture faith in the home.

Implementation Pathway (Next Steps):

- **Basic Application:** Design of a central digital hub which signposts to resources and activities specifically designed for domestic use. The CMF website www.marriageandfamily.ie could be developed as the digital platform for this signposting. Local parishes could also utilise these resources at key moments in family life.

- **Enhanced Application 1:** The development of a training programme for older parishioners to act as formal faith mentors to young families. This would fall under the remit of the Council for Evangelisation, Catechetics and Pastoral Renewal.

- **Enhanced Application 2:** Establish a simple, welcoming programme of follow-on gatherings for families in the period after the baptism of their child, offering a series of gentle, invitational touchpoints where families can reconnect with the parish and their peers in a relaxed and supportive environment. The programme would begin shortly after baptism and offer simple, regular gatherings (e.g. seasonal blessings, toddler prayer sessions, parent gatherings, treasure hunt, arts and crafts activities such as Advent wreath creation) during the early years of a child's life, creating a bridge between baptism and later sacramental preparation.

- **Resources:**

  Diocesan / National Level:

  - Provide simple frameworks and resources for baptism follow-up
  - Offer training in hospitality, accompaniment, and family ministry

Proposal 2

Title: The Vocation of Marriage

Description: A pathway of accompaniment for couples – moving beyond only offering pre-marriage courses to also providing couple-to-couple support during the early years of marriage.

Rationale: Acknowledges existing structures and frames mentorship programmes which respect the need for support for couples in their marriage relationships.

Intended Impact: To provide a sustained sense of belonging for both husbands and wives as newly married couples, reducing isolation and strengthening the vocation to married life.

Implementation Pathway (Next Steps):

- **Basic Application:**
  - Parishes or parish clusters hosting an annual blessing of couples who are (and maybe couples who are planning to be) married in the Church – perhaps also marking significant wedding anniversaries. Maybe this blessing could take place near the feast day of Saints Louis and Zelie Martin and invite couples attending to light a candle at one of the church's shrines and say a prayer together there.
  - These parish / cluster celebrations could be advertised locally during the previous weeks, e.g. through parish newsletters and parish websites.
  - Where possible, the celebration might be followed by light refreshments offered by the parish / cluster hospitality team.
- **Enhanced Application:**

- In addition to the basic application above, parishes / clusters could implement a voluntary mentorship programme where experienced Catholic couples are trained to walk with newly married couples, during the first few years of marriage, in their local parish / cluster.
- Those couples intending to marry could be offered (voluntary) involvement in the programme when they give notice to the parish of their intention to marry.
- The 'mentor couples' could be identified locally from couples who are actively involved in parish life, or through Accord, or through some of the marriage support movements (which can be identified from the Council for Marriage and the Family's website [www.marriageandfamily.ie]).
- Programmes which might be offered include: FOCCUS[1]; REFOCCUS[2]; or Tandem[3] (see footnotes for a brief explanation of these programmes). Another option might be to run the Alpha Marriage Course – a very worthwhile course, for couples at all stages of marriage, which could be facilitated at parish / cluster level, in person or online.
- After involvement in one of these programmes, and impressing on couples the need to continue to nurture their marriage relationship, it might be suggested to them to consider joining one of the marriage support movements, such as Marriage Encounter or Teams of Our Lady for ongoing support offered by involvement in these lay movements. Following the successful adoption by parishes of some of the above programmes, perhaps consideration could then be given to adopting the "Witness to

[1] FOCCUS helps couples see their relationship as a sacred vocation, a reflection of God's own love. Rooted in Catholic teaching, the process invites couples to bring their faith into their everyday communication, building trust and unity through God's design for marriage.
FOCCUS stands for Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study. It is a personalised consultation using a research-based questionnaire and gives couples a good snapshot of how their relationship works. It was developed by FOCCUS Inc., an apostolate of the Archdiocese of Omaha, and is suitable for couples planning to marry in the Catholic Church. It's not a test to pass or fail, as every relationship is unique. The programme includes a number of one-hour sessions after completion of the questionnaire. In the follow-up sessions, the couple will discuss the results and issues identified from the questionnaire with each other and with trained facilitators.
There are already people within Accord who have been trained in this programme and who could train others.

[2] Linked to FOCCUS is the REFOCCUS Marriage Enrichment Inventory – helping couples to pause, reflect, and reconnect. It offers renewal and enrichment, even for the best of marriages, whether a couple has been married for two years or twenty years. Through seven guided questionnaires, REFOCCUS invites couples to rediscover each other's hopes, needs, and faith. It's used in homes, retreats, and small parish groups to spark meaningful conversations that rekindle joy, intimacy, and understanding. The areas of focus for the programme include: marriage as a process, intimacy, compatibility, communication, commitment and empty nesters.
As with FOCCUS, there are people within Accord trained in this programme who could train others.

[3] The Tandem Programme was developed by Teams of Our Lady ('Teams') and is offered by that Movement as an outreach to engaged and recently married couples.
A Tandem group includes up to 6 couples, together with a lead couple, and, when available, a chaplain. The programme consists of 12-14 monthly meetings, ideally over a simple meal. The meeting structure follows the Teams pedagogy: sharing about the members' life during the previous month (as a way of deepening relationships within the group); a period of prayer (which can be varied, depending on the level of faith of those attending); discussion of that particular meeting's study topic (circulated beforehand, with questions for reflection, prior to the meeting, as individuals and then as a couple, followed by a decision on what might be appropriate to share with the group).
The monthly topics, some practical and some more spiritual, include: Listening and Dialogue; Time to Live – A Common Project; Work and Us; God and Us; Love, Tenderness and Intimacy; Digital World; Suffering; Conflict and Crises; Forgiveness and the Couple.
There are couples within Teams who have already led the programme and who would be available to train other lead couples (and accompany them for whatever time might be needed).

Love" programme – a catechumenate model for marriage preparation and renewal, started by Ryan and Mary-Rose Verret, Consultants to the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

Proposal 3

Title: Sacramental Belonging: Strengthening the Parish-Home-School Partnership

Description: A transition towards parish-based, home-supported sacramental preparation. This emphasises the central role of the sacramental (Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist & Confirmation) while inviting parents into a closer relationship with the Sunday worshipping community which is actively involved in mentoring.

Rationale: Recognises that this transition is starting to happen and seeks to point to models that work in close co-operation with the schools of the parish(es).

Intended Impact: To shift the focus from a 'school event' to a 'faith community encounter', building long-term parish belonging.

Implementation Pathway (Next Steps):

- **Basic Application:** Moving enrolment ceremonies into Sunday Mass, inviting families to a simple hospitality event afterwards.
- **Enhanced Application 1:** Building 'parish-family community'[4] through preparation for the sacraments:

1) Appoint a small "Family & Sacraments Team" (6–10 people)

  - Priest + coordinator + school liaison + 2–3 catechists + 1 safeguarding rep + 1 hospitality person
  - Meet once a month (60 mins) during school term

  Outputs: calendar, parent communications, volunteer rota, feedback loop.

2) Three touchpoints per sacrament (minimum standard)

For each of Baptism / First Penance & Communion / Confirmation:

  - Welcome / enrolment at Sunday Mass (10 mins within Mass)
  - Parent + child session (60–75 mins)
  - Celebration / ritual (Penance Service / thanksgiving Mass / Confirmation reflection)

3) Year Plan per season:

[4] This model is based on good practice in sacramental preparation initiatives which are going on in parishes and blending various ministries into a year-long programme, reflective of the seasons of the Church and involving the whole parish community. There are three broad elements and a monthly 'Family Mass and Hospitality' is the 'belonging' building block where roles are assigned to families: readings, offertory procession, welcome, and choir, followed by 20 minutes of tea/coffee afterwards.

September – ‘Family Faith Kick off’; October-November – (First Penance / First Communion Partnership); Advent – ‘Faith at Home’ push; January-February – Confirmation; Lent – Reconciliation; May-June – First Communion; Summer – family pilgrimage / walk.

- **Enhanced Application 2:** Establish a sacramental preparation model which would be a blend of face-to-face and digital interaction where parents lead small-group faith sharing for other parents during the preparation year using the *Walking with Families*[5] material developed by the Dublin Archdiocese.

- **Enhanced Application 3:** Train lay volunteers and clergy in *Godly Play*[6] and *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*[7] to help children and parents encounter Scripture and liturgy through reflective Montessori-inspired methods.

Resources:

- Personnel
  - Training of **Lay Pastoral Ministers** as already in progress in the Dioceses of Killaloe, Limerick, Cashel & Emly, Kerry, Ferns, Kildare & Leighlin and Kilmore
  - Training of specific **Parish Ministry Teams** to be initiated in accord with the proposal of the Lay Ministry Synodal Working Group
- Materials
  - A Family Resources hub

Proposal 4

Title: A parish, or pastoral area, Family Ministry Team (possibly 8-10 people) to support families in faith, social interaction and communal Christian living

Description: The formation of a single Family Ministry Team to serve a cluster of parishes. This team focuses on Radical Hospitality (explanation provided), on pastoral accompaniment of families and organises liturgical and social events suited to families, providing support for Human Need (wellbeing, mental health, belonging, parenting). Support can include a safe digital space of

[5] *Walking with Families Resources for First Holy Communion and Confirmation*
The First Holy Communion Preparation is a resource for parishes to accompany families on *Zoom* with the aid of a *PowerPoint* meditation. There are also suggested family activities which can be used as part of the journey towards First Holy Communion. The Confirmation Preparation consists of three *Zoom* sessions, each lasting thirty minutes. The sessions are based on three short videos with the following themes:

- Strength for the Journey
- Gifted by the Spirit
- Called by Name

The videos are intended to stimulate faith conversation at home between parents / guardians and daughters / sons for Confirmation.

[6] *Godly Play* – a Montessori-based method of spiritual formation for children. It uses engaging storytelling, tactile materials, and ‘wondering’ questions to help children explore Bible stories, liturgical traditions, and their own relationship with God.

[7] *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* – for children from three to twelve years of age, is grounded in Sacred Scripture and the Liturgy of the Church. Using concrete materials (such as 3D figures) the children are introduced to a biblical text or a liturgical moment and they are helped to approach and experience the presence of God.

encounter but should always lead to a real sense of belonging, of welcome and engagement with the parish. The purpose of this proposal is to provide an opportunity for the parish to support and nurture both spiritual and human development.

Rationale: Many families struggle with isolation, with care of the very young and elderly, with raising children in a hedonistic and material world, with issues of childcare, addiction, unemployment, disability and poverty. They often feel the church has little to offer them by way of practical help and support. This proposal avoids duplication by using one team for a cluster and focuses on building relationships as a point of entry to engagement with the parish. It recognises that faith today is often mediated through community and encounter rather than formal structures.

Intended Impact: To re-establish the parish as a relevant, supportive "hub" for the practical and spiritual challenges of modern family life. An understanding of the church as a “field hospital” that offers help and healing to all, regardless of engagement or ability.

Implementation Pathway (Next Steps):

- Training and formation needed for all members of Family Ministry Teams to ensure clear role definition and boundaries
- **Basic Application:** A cluster identifies suitable volunteers to form a "Welcome Team" that provides hospitality and information at all major family-centered liturgies.
- **Enhanced Application 1:** The team organises liturgies and social events (picnics, day-trips, children’s parties) suited to families and to parish facilities.
- **Enhanced Application 2:** The cluster hosts a series of professional Human Need presentations (e.g., cyberbullying, budgeting, mental health, parenting) shared across all parishes in the area. The Family Ministry Team will discern the individual needs of the parishes for these presentations.
- **Enhanced Application 3:** A national database to be drawn up of Church approved experts and professional bodies in different fields relevant to the presentation options.

Radical Hospitality is the practice of welcoming others with an extraordinary, transformative generosity that completely exceeds expectations. It goes beyond basic politeness or standard customer service to ensure that strangers, guests, and marginalised individuals feel entirely seen, heard and safe.