

1. Continuing the Synodal Process

Three online meetings (OM1-OM3) took place in February and March 2024 in response to the Synod Office's invitation to reflect further on the Synod Synthesis (October 2023)¹. An explicit invitation was extended to parish priests; synod delegates and other clergy were provided with the opportunity to join. A further short survey is planned to ascertain the reasons people give for engagement or non-engagement in the Synod Process at the parish and diocesan phases.

The online meetings, hosted by the Archbishop, commenced with a period of lectio divina (Phil 2:1-11) and invocatory prayer. Following a series of introductory comments and a reflection on the synod experience, small groups were created featuring a mix of priests, deacons and lay people (synod delegates). Each participant had received a pack prior to the meeting inviting reflection on *Evangelii Gaudium* (27), the documents from the diocesan, continental and universal phases and five questions stemming from the key question of focus: 'How can we be a synodal Church in mission?' These questions focused on what hinders mission in terms of parish life; what encourages mission in leadership and parish life; the structures and formation required for living a baptismal vocation; and the sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Since the diocesan phase (October 2021 to March 2022), there appears to have been a shift in language and emphasis in the discussions. The extent to which this is generally true of the diocese, whether the responses were directed at the questions posed, or a result of the Synod Process is unclear. The number of people involved was relatively few.

2.1 Recurring themes

Cultural currents and shifts also have a profound impact on our parish communities. The 'joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this

age [are those of] the followers of Christ'² This is also appears to be true of a blurring of distinctions between contemporary morays and political imperatives and the way the Church sees itself as a political and social actor. In the online meetings and individual submissions at this stage of the process, concern was expressed about conforming to the world, and communicating the vitality of faith to a culture that sees things in a very different way to times past.

The practical situations of families often seem to restrict opportunities for active involvement. The extent to which our parish structures and arrangements can change to accommodate expectations on and from families is a concern.

2.2 Shared Belief and Experience

The multicultural nature of the Archdiocese of Southwark remains a source of joy and a challenge. The wealth of experience of other ecclesial realities (migrants from Latin America, Africa and the Far East, as well as many from other European nations and North America) offers a dynamism to the diocese and a sign of what is possible in terms of, particularly, lay involvement in the life of the local Church (i.e. first- and second-generation migrants). The complacency often felt in our parishes, experienced as a loss of energy and drive owing to being well-looked after in the Church was challenged.

Participants in the meetings reflected on the need to strengthen 'interconnection' (communion) in three ways: a focus on the Eucharist; common endeavor, not just in charitable activity but also in evangelisation; and shared faith. The lack of unity of faith present in the Church – in terms of different conceptions of the Church, its purpose and tone – was raised. Without a clear sense of what unites it is hard to find the consensus called for by the Synod Process.

The call to holiness was repeatedly mentioned and more than in the initial sessions, liturgy was offered as a key to self-understanding, personal and communal

¹ <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/11/vatican-synthesis-report-eng-oct23.pdf>

² *Gaudium et spes*, 1

growth and the source of all that is good in the life of the Church. People will devote themselves to a mystery, one participant offered, 'not to a question mark' – highlighting the need for confidence and a sense of the holy.

2.3 Structures for mission

Fundamental to mission, it was stated across all three meetings are structures that require a focus on: recognising the gifts of all; proclaiming the kerygma; helping all to see their personal vocation; responding to the baptismal call and bearing the presence and witness of Christ into the broader community. This evangelistic tone was a marked development from the earlier Synod meetings in 2021-22.

Several examples from current activity in the diocese were mentioned as examples of both mission and Synodality. Notably, the *Some Definite Service* approach was frequently mentioned in each session as encouraging spiritual conversations, co-responsible parish planning between priests and people, missional language and emphasis and intentional accompaniment.³ The layered and multi-faceted nature of this approach was said to allow for a continued flow of ideas, wisdom and activity, rooted in prayer.

The space and time set aside to talk through the process was seen as a 'real synodal fruit'. Structures developed, or at least regular opportunities to set aside time, to contemplate mission and pressing issues as a Church, was encouraged by participants at the listening sessions. The quality and thoughtfulness of observation at these sessions showed the value of mature disciples, lay and ordained, reflecting on the witness of the Church to the world.

2.4 Clericalisation

There was some mention of the role women play in the Church's decision-making and the wider notion of lay involvement in decision-taking. The reality of clericalism, or at least what is understood by it, was challenged. Some articulated clericalism as the deliberate method of keeping people unformed and an unwillingness to 'share the fruit of theology'. Others suggested that this was more personality or even culturally driven than a direct result of clerical structures.

2.5 Formation

The desire for formation, a call clearly articulated and heard in the Southwark Synod Process, provides a strong mandate for lay formation and, wherever possible, lay and clergy formation together. Shared responsibility depends on mutual respect and requires both time and a space apart from the routine.

3. Drawing on the diocesan process

The diocesan synthesis document (April 2022)⁴ highlighted ten 'next steps' in terms of activity related to mission and Synodality in the diocese. These steps drew on the desires and encouragement found in the parish and individual submissions to the diocesan listening team. Since the creation of the synthesis, marked progress has been made in a number of areas from the adoption of new models of youth ministry (§§60-62) to the recalibration of ongoing clergy formation - diaconate and priestly (§63); from the introduction of a diocesan Caritas (§§71-72) to the further exploration of synod submissions to discern formation needs (compiled in a fresh document entitled *Formation as Transformation*, which was published in December 2023)⁵.

⁴ https://aec.rcaos.org.uk/s/SouthwarkSynthesis_Final.pdf

⁵ *Formation as Transformation: A Synod Document* (December 2023), <https://aec.rcaos.org.uk/synod>

³ <https://aec.rcaos.org.uk/sds>