DEANERY SYNOD REPORT

1. Companions on the journey – what do we excel at and who do we leave behind?

There is an acknowledgement in South deanery that we celebrate liturgy as well as we can across most of our parishes. We have many good 'pilgrims' who make effort to live a life centred on Christ. There's plenty of good will among people who are engaged in ministry, of particular note at this time was the mention made of stewards who have working hard over the past few years to keep people safe and feel welcome!
Journeying with people preparing for Sacraments was noted by a few parishes, even where such preparation has been missed over the past few years due to the Pandemic, but a desire to see these opportunities return.
A couple of parishes noted people's response to emergency appeals (eg. Through SCIAF) and through Mission Appeals which heighten that broader sense of Church.

However, we are conscious of all those we leave behind, who are not involved in the life of the Parish, who are marginalised or alienated. There are those who feel excluded because of their life style situation – the divorced, single parents, members of the LGBT community. They feel judged and condemned by the Church and we have lost touch with those who feel angry, abused, abandoned and hurt by the Church. There are those on the margins of society who feel the Church has nothing to say to them as they struggle with addictions. So many of our young people are missing. Many women are frustrated at the lack of trust and opportunity to take part fully in the life of our community of faith: second class companions on our journey of faith.
We are diminished as the People of God by the loss of so many.
In the scriptures we read of the many times Jesus walked beside people in the hardest of situations, loving them and healing them. There is a strong desire for us to learn how to follow His example.

Across each of the categories, there is also a common thread of a desire for better training: in catechesis and ministry in order that people are not left behind.

2. Listening – do we exclude the voices we don't want to hear?

According to one parish response, "synodality" needs to be imbedded in Church life for the future to ensure a dynamic process, not just a one off event!"

In some Parish communities, there are many who are not heard. We listen to the priest, to the pronouncements of the bishops and the Pope. We listen to one another.

However, we are not listening to the voices of people who are missing from the Church, who feel they are not invited or welcomed by the Church. Their non-involvement, walking away, allows us to exclude voices that might be uncomfortable for us to listen to – for example to the hurt and abandonment of divorced people, of those in same sex unions. It allows us not to acknowledge the wrong done to the victims of abuse. We must listen to the voices of the wounded. One parish noted that God is often speaking to us through those we ignore or forget.

Nor are we listening to those who feel they are voiceless, who are not given the opportunity to speak out, whose voices, they feel, are not valued so they stay silent. Women in the Church often feel dismissed in this way.

We remember that Pope Francis has said that if you say something I don't like, we must have to listen even more. because everyone has the right to speak.

One parish questioned: "If the Church is so good at listening, why do we need a synod?" and noted that we all need to listen better. But often we only hear what we want to hear.

3. Speaking out – do we speak out courageously, who does the world consider speaks for Catholicism?

There is a consensus here that fear of being marginalised when we do speak out hinders the process. Fear of rejection is a well known phenomenon!

The "official voice" of the Church is the Hierarchy and their pronouncements are regarded as the viewpoint/beliefs of the Church. People struggle to see a role for the laity in this. The Hierarchy speaks and we listen.

Many feel that, we, the laity, are rendered voiceless within the church. There appear to be few opportunities for the laity to speak out, debate, share their views and especially to influence Church thinking.

People doubt that their views as lay people are as valued and respected as those of the clergy. This “Clericalism” robs the Church of valuable insights, dictating as it does how we should live our lives rather than dealing with the reality of lived situations. Lives that don’t conform to the rules can be judged and dismissed as wrong. Accusations of hypocrisy and double standards are easy to make.

Out with Church circles we live our lives in a secular world within which it requires a great deal of courage to put forward a Christian point of view. The media are disinterested in Christian points of view. Many lay people do speak out, bringing the Gospel message into their workplaces and society. Organisations like Justice and Peace can provide opportunities and support for this. However, there is a need to better training and Catechesis to take place in our parish/diocesan communities to aid us to speak out clearly.

4. Celebrating our Faith – are our celebrations engaging, nourishing, satisfying?

There is a general acknowledgement across the deanery that our parishes seek to warmly welcome all who come to our Faith celebrations, although some feel it could be improved. There are good numbers of people engaged in ministry, particularly in the liturgy. The provision in some parishes of a variety of prayer and liturgical opportunities was appreciated which two parishes commented on as keeping the wider community connected, especially those who had been housebound for some time. There is a strong sense in a couple of responses that people recognise the great efforts made in celebrating the liturgy, but those responsible for preparing liturgical texts seem to be removed from this. Language has become in barrier in the revised liturgical texts.

A pressing need is for us to reach out to the many who rarely or never come to celebrate faith and who do not feel themselves to be part of our Parish community.

Parental involvement with children’s preparation for reception of the Sacraments can be a way of reaching out if parents are given a more central role in the process.

There is a broad sense of delight to see people returning to the practice of their faith following the experiences of lockdowns and restrictions which is very positive, although there’s an acknowledgement that time is needed to return to where we were. One parish questioned the relevance of the Sacrament of Penance in the lives of the faithful and a desire to return to Penitential Services with General Absolution would be beneficial.

5. Responsibility for our common mission – what hinders the involvement of all the Baptised?

This common mission can be regarded too easily as the responsibility of the clergy and maybe a select few, and not as something we are all involved in because of our Baptism. The hierarchical structure of the Church acts as a hindrance on the full involvement of all the Baptised since it allows some voices to be valued above others, some to be sought out to carry this responsibility and others never given the opportunity. Those who feel undervalued and voiceless will not feel able to take on the full responsibility their baptism confers on them. We need to seek out the weakest members.

Many of the Baptised have turned away from the Church and its mission because they feel excluded from it. Because of their lifestyle situations they feel condemned for by the rules of the church, their lived experience is at variance with the teachings of the Church. Some feel passive or inactive because they feel neglected by the Church as Mother.

Others feel the Church has nothing to say to them and would not value their contribution anyway: a huge obstacle to their involvement.

Women often feel their full involvement in parish life and the wider life of the Church is not valued and not sought so that they do not have the confidence to fulfil their baptismal role.

Through baptism, we share in the 'priesthood of Christ', therefore the responsibility to engage ourselves in social and political issues as well as education and charity (eg Foodbanks).

Abuse scandals have also hindered the faithful's involvement in the Church's mission. One parish suggests that seminary formators should be equipped to give future priests the best training needed for leadership.

6. Dialogue – do we speak to other Christian Communities, civil society, other faith communities?

By and large, ecumenism is accepted as a good thing, although some seem to find joint worship as a challenge.

The Church speaks to these groups through formal, set channels at both the local and universal level

Although not every parish seems to be involved with other local churches, the G52 Churches Together group is the representative group whose primary aim is to bring most of the various local Christian groups together through planned events, such as the recent Good Friday Walk of Witness.

Formally the Church speaks out on various aspects of civic society…for example Pope Francis condemning the slaughter of the war in Ukraine, the ecological disaster we are creating through climate change and global warming.

However, neither of these are examples of dialogue, a word which implies a two way process. Rather they are the start of a journey, an opening of the door towards respectful and open dialogue. Much more progress needs to be made along this road, to see others as our companions on the journey.

Through our day to day life people have informal contact with other Christians, with civic society and with other faith communities. They value and welcome this contact and would support efforts from the Church to reach out and enter into true dialogue with society, the marginalised and local communities of faith and of no faith.

There is a strong call for the development of Justice and Peace groups as a structure which can support this journey towards dialogue.

7. Through our common Baptism, other Christian communities have a special place in our lives – how does this manifest itself?

There is some mixed experience in our deanery with some areas highlighting good relationships and others seeking to have a relationship with other Christian groups. Within the G52 area, the Churches Together group, comprised of Roman Catholic members, Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopal Church and the Baptist Union speak to one another and plan joint events, for example the recent Good Friday Walk of Witness, World Day of Prayer, Octave for Christian Unity.

This provides an opportunity for respectful conversations and the beginning of an appreciation of each other's Christianity. It is an attempt at working to begin healing between the different communities and to combat bigotry. However, this contact is limited to a set number of meetings a year and only limited awareness among the congregations. This contact is seen by some as a polite adjunct rather than of central importance to our common mission.

Much more progress needs to happen so that we can move forward on our faith journey with our neighbours and friends. Clearer and more open invitations to existing opportunities for dialogue can be the basis of progress. A recognition of the richness of the gifts we can share with one another will impel us forward.

8. Authority and Participation in our Church – how do we open this to all church members?

There is certainly a common thread from parish responses that the current ecclesiastical structure doesn't allow for dialogue, therefore, for most people, the structure of the Church is irrelevant.

A strong feeling, for the laity in particular, of being voiceless and unvalued pervades the discussion of this topic, of a two tier church, a hierarchical structure top heavy with a male, celibate priesthood. Opening up the structure means fully involving the laity as equal, mature companions on the Church's journey of faith, women as well as men.

Moreover this radical reform has to be planned and carried out at every level of Church life. In every Parish, strong efforts have to be put in place to reach out on a regular basis to every home and every Church member, not just to those who attend Mass. We have to act in the knowledge that the Parish Community is wider, much wider, than those who come to the church building and that our aim is the participation of all. Our journey of faith has to include different people, opinions, attitudes -welcoming all without condemnation, following Christ 's example.

Building up community, welcoming people, encouraging people to share their gifts, valuing their contributions will all be part of this new planned reform.

The greater contribution from the laity means recognising much that does not need to be done by Father can in fact be done by lay women and men.

The skills and talents of the members of our communities can be put to use for the good of the parish. The lack of priests might very well in part be offset by greater lay involvement. There is recognition that lay ministry is well established in the liturgy, but needs to be better developed in all areas of church life.

Time and again in discussions, participants have spoken out strongly in favour of allowing priests to marry if they wish and also strongly in favour of women being allowed to be Deacons and Priests.

The place of women in the Church is viewed by many as unjust and unacceptable and call for greater involvement of women at every level.

9. Discerning and deciding – how do we ensure this is inspired by the Holy Spirit and takes into consideration the fruits of the discernment of all the Baptised?

The synodal way will certainly challenge us in our listening to one another. We need more transparency and accountability, which a few parishes see as a benefit of Parish Pastoral Councils. Some parishes mentioned how they would like to see better consultation on decision making and appreciate when they are consulted!

Jesus Christ came for all and sent his Apostles out, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, to carry the Good News "to the ends of the earth".

Through open and honest discussion we have come to realise that many in our parish community are not receiving that Good News, that the Church speaks to fewer and fewer people.

Through prayerful meditation on Scripture and with the knowledge of our lived experience we have discerned a way forward and turn to Jesus Christ in prayer that the Holy Spirit will strengthen us too on the journey ahead.

10. How do we continue to walk together, listening and discerning the way forward?

Firstly, we must be open to change and growth! Building a welcoming Community is the first essential step - reaching out to everyone in the Parish, getting in touch with all, mass-goers or not. Work at opportunities to reach people where they are and especially being aware of certain groups such as young people and those felt excluded from the Church. Invitations may need to be repeated but should always focus on being open to all, especially the missing and the voiceless.

Communication, therefore, will be so important within the Parish but also between Parishes and with other faith communities. In this context social media and electronic communication was suggested as the way in which so much communication takes place. This is especially true for the young but not only for them. On-line worship, so essential during covid restrictions, continues to be invaluable to the housebound and the sick, involving them in Parish services and Mass.

Participation by the laity at all levels of parish life, including at decision -making, needs to be thought through and planned for with invitations to both men and women to share their gifts and talents with the Parish.

People have expressed their strong desire to see the Church moving forward on the basis of this synodal experience. Constructive dialogue is without doubt agreed as the way ahead.