OUR LADY and ST.GEORGE'S SYNOD MEETINGS 2022 - SYNTHESIS

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

In our church we have many good pilgrims who make an effort to live a life centred on love of Jesus, of the Eucharist , and of others. Our Parish welcome is for everyone and we try to promote community and involvement. There are a good number of people involved as Readers, Cantors, Musicians and -especially essential for the Covid regulations – as Stewards. Funeral Masses have good attendance and there is a real attempt to invite the whole Parish to celebrate with the children of the Parish on their sacramental journey. Invited to sign petitions to help secure asylum for particular families, the response was overwhelming. We also respond generously to various Parish appeals , for example SCIAF.
However we are conscious of all those we leave behind, who are not involved in the life of the Parish, who do not feel welcomed. There are those who feel excluded because of their life style situation – the divorced, single parents – or due to their sexual preference – 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 have already walked away …the Church does not speak to them. 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.

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

In our Parish community 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 marriages. It allows us not to acknowledge the wrong done to the victims of abuse.

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.

As a Church we now need to reach out to those who are at present voiceless and give them an opportunity to speak and be listened to with respect.

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.

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

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. Yet 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.

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

Our Parish extends a very real Welcome to all who come to our Faith celebrations, whether it is for a particular occasion such as " Life is Forever " Mass in November or regular Sunday or daily Masses. People show good engagement through singing and responses with hymn books and mass leaflets to help. There are good numbers of people who share their talents and gifts with the congregation in various Ministries as Readers, Cantors, Musicians, Stewards and Eucharistic Ministers. The Children's Liturgy group provide a high quality of engagement for children under 12 at Sunday Mass. On-line provision of Mass, begun under the Covid rules, continues to provide the sick and housebound with a sense of being part of the Parish Community.

However there is a need to continually encourage other people to become involved in the various ministries, especially younger people and those new to the parish.

Even more pressing is the need 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. We need to find a way to be in touch with everyone so that they may feel accepted and welcomed and encouraged to be part of the 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. At present they are sidelined to "dresses and kilts" but seen as essential companions on their children's faith journey, parents can work with school and parish and be encouraged to play a fuller part in the Parish.

Finally, a nourishing liturgy must use language that can be understood by the congregation. People are concerned that theologically correct terminology distances them from the Gospel message. A place for the lay voice to be heard?

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 our 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 valueless and voiceless will not feel able to take on the full responsibility their baptism confers on them.

Many of the Baptised have turned away from the Church and its mission because they feel excluded from it. Their lifestyle situation they feel condemned for by the rules of the church, their lived experience is at variance with the teachings of the Church. People who have been judged in this way walk away in anger and hurt, abandoned by the Church.

Others feel the Church has nothing to say to them and would not value their contribution anyway… a huge obstacle to their involvement. So the young, missing in droves from our parishes, are not interested in taking on this responsibility.

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.

It is a huge hindrance if we accept this situation so we must be open to making the journey together, clergy and laity as equal companions, ready to show love, respect and acceptance to one another on the way.

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

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

In our area the G52 Churches Together 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?

Within our area we have formal contact through G52 Churches Together, where representatives of most of the Christian Communities speak to one another and plan joint events, for example the recent Good Friday Walk of Witness, Women's Day of Prayer. 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, its agenda preset and little changed over the years, its discussions given little publicity and only limited awareness among the congregations. This contact is seen 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?

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.

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?

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?

The changes that we have described in previous answers need to be properly planned at Diocesan level so that every Parish has the opportunity to move forward and every member of our Catholic community is helped along their journey to maturity in faith.

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.