



# **Kilmore Diocesan Synodal Pathway Report 2022**

This report is structured as follows:

## **A. The journey undertaken so far**

- A.1 The process used in Kilmore diocese
- A.2 Our **experience of the journey** at parish level and as a steering committee.

## **B. What we heard on the journey.**

- B.1 Listening in parishes
- B.2 Listening to youth
- B.3 Gathering of Parish Pastoral Council members to review report on listening

## **C. Next steps**

## **D. Appendices**

### **A.1 Synodal Process utilised in Kilmore Diocese.**

1. In the summer of 2021 Bishop Martin Hayes established a steering committee. This committee developed an initial approach to engaging with the people of the diocese, considering the Covid circumstances. A video featuring the bishop inviting participation was placed on the diocesan website.

2. Meetings were held in late September and early October 2021 to hear the views of the priests on the proposed process.
3. Four Zoom meetings were held in mid-October for parish volunteers inviting them to engage in a listening exercise. 28 parishes (80%) were represented at these. The volunteers were invited to do two tasks:
  - a. Hold a conversation with their Pastoral Council on its sense of the future of faith and church. (Appendix 1)
  - b. Hold a similar conversation with one social group. Here the emphasis was on non-church groups, especially people who are distant from church. (Appendix 1) A list of the various social groups that make up the population of the diocese was offered, and the volunteers chose from that list. (Appendix 2)
4. In parallel with this, a listening process for young people was led by the Diocesan Director of Youth & Young Adult Ministry (Appendix 3)
5. The Covid situation meant that it was difficult for the volunteers to proceed quickly with these conversations. 27 summaries on conversations were submitted between November and January 2022. Members of the steering committee and the Diocesan Pastoral Council were invited to view all the summaries.
6. In late March the steering committee held a reflection evening to identify the main points emerging from the summaries. This was set in the context of prayer and quiet time. (Appendix 4) A report was then prepared in the light of that for presentation to a diocesan assembly. That report forms the next section of this document.
7. That assembly occurred on Tuesday 3 May 2022 in Ballyconnell, involving some 130 members of parish pastoral councils. The focus of that meeting was to see if the members recognised the voice of their communities in the report, and if there was something further, they wanted to add. (Appendix 5) A report on that meeting is also in the next section.
8. The steering committee met in mid-May to finalise the Synodal report, identifying follow-up steps and charting their own experience of the journey.

## **A.2 Experience of the Journey**

### **At parish level**

On the parish reporting template one of the questions asked was on how people experienced the listening meetings. The process of being listened to came across as a very positive experience for the groups:

- *It was a good meeting. We were open with each other, and everyone had an opportunity to speak and be heard.*
- *It is a long time since we met – it was open, honest and welcoming.*
- *Everyone was very open and shared their most personal feelings and experiences. It was a very moving experience and brought us closer together*
- *I like that our community was consulted.*

There was also a concern noted in many of the responses about what would happen after all this listening was done.

- *The young people appreciated having their opinions heard and listened to. They would appreciate action on these now.*
- *One concern, shared by a number of members, was the degree to which our thoughts, opinions and suggestions at parish level would be accepted and included in the final report to be sent to Rome' If the synodal process genuinely seeks to empower people to bring about positive change in our church then it is vital these responses , however critical or radical, are presented in full to the very members of our church with the true power to initiate the positive changes we feel are necessary to secure the future of our Church*

### **Steering Committee**

The Steering Committee consisted initially of eight members, including Bishop Martin Hayes. As part of the reporting process, the members were asked to give their reflections on the journey they had taken from the first meeting right up to the submission of the report, the highlights, and low points. There was a general feeling of being very happy to be part of the steering committee. The level of commitment, openness, and honesty was evident as all meetings were attended, and there was a great willingness to help with whatever task was at hand. It was also felt that the diverse range of life experiences, skills, and faith experiences added value and depth to the committee's deliberations and

process. There was a consensus that it was a positive and enriching experience for all concerned despite the committee's challenges, especially with the covid pandemic.

1. For most of us the low points were around the early months during Covid lockdowns – seeking to launch the process, seeking to support groups to engage in listening on the ground. All the launch meetings with the parishes had to be done by zoom, and the parish volunteers struggled to gather people for their conversations.
2. At the same time one of the pleasant surprises was the utility of zoom, and social media generally. We were able to communicate to the diocese through the on-line video with Bishop Martin. The October zoom sessions with parish volunteers were lively and engaged. Even during restrictions in November and December there was a sense of a shared struggle to get the listening tasks done.
3. Two high points were mentioned. The May Assembly was the only diocesan in-person gathering during the process. There was a great sense of people being delighted to meet again. We invited them to come an hour early for something to eat ahead of the meeting. They enjoyed that so much it was hard to move them into the meeting! As second high point was the reflection evening for the steering committee, to pull together a report on the listening at parish level for the May assembly. Half of this was given over to prayer and reflection on the material gathered, and half to identifying the patterns. Here people had a strong sense of the Spirit guiding.
4. We recognised several strong pastoral challenges arising from the exercise. The challenge to action was one of these. There was a definite sense of wanting significant change, and a sense that this has been articulated before at previous diocesan assemblies. How to manage expectations and deliver change in a reasonable timeframe will be difficult.
5. The priests are caught in the centre of these expectations, between on the one hand a pattern familiar to them that is in steep decline, and on the other a new set of expectations that will challenge their capacity.
6. Among all the issues raised there was scarcely a mention of the environment.
7. Throughout the process there was a shared sense of wanting church and faith to connect with the wider society. However, as noted in the report on the May assembly there were two voices on how this might be approached – the voice of invitation, and the voice of obligation.

Holding these two voices in the search for an agreed way forward will be a challenge.

## **B.1 What was heard in the parishes**

### **1. Faith is still good news**

The Synod preparatory documents from Rome depict the mission scene as comprised of three players – Jesus, the crowd, and the apostles. While Jesus' mission to the apostles was broadly the forming of disciples, his mission to the crowd was sharing the good news. And the feedback from the listening suggests the message of Jesus is still experienced as good news. One of the questions in the consultation was on whether it would make any difference to people if there was no faith in the world. There was a very strong positive answer to that question. Despite all the cultural changes in both rural and urban Ireland, and despite the great reduction in the status of the church, the experience of the Christian faith for many people continues to be a positive one. While we might have expected this feedback from people involved in church groups, we also got that strongly from a wide range of social groups who have no formal connection with church. Christian faith was described as 'an anchor' for people when facing difficulties. It gives a sense of meaning and purpose to life.

- *Faith offers us a language to express the mystery at the heart of life.*
- *Faith provides guidance and direction in daily life.*
- *If there was no faith in the world, I feel I would be a totally different person. Faith keeps me grounded. It shapes my sense of right and wrong.*

The listening did, of course, also pick up something of a post-faith culture as well.

- *Faith is important to people I love, so I respect that. It gives them meaning in life.*

### **2. Desire for a church that is close to the life concerns of people**

The word "connection" came across strongly when people were reflecting on church. There is a desire for a church that speaks the language of the people and reflects their lives in its liturgies.

- *Some of the readings at Mass are very complicated and hard to understand. It is hard to relate them to today's world.*
- *We need to be seen as a welcoming parish community actively inviting others in.*

- *The church needs to become more understanding of and compassionate towards the needs of young people. We want them to feel connected to a church that is modern in its outlook and relevant to them in their daily lives.*

There is a strong sense that today's apostles are not in touch with the reality of life for today's 'crowd' and that an all-male, celibate clergy is not fit for purpose.

- *The laity have spoken and requested married priests and male and female deacons to be admitted as leaders/apostles within the Catholic church. Has the laity been heard?*

There was also a very strong call throughout all the groups for the church to address real-world issues like poverty, homelessness, bullying, domestic violence, drug addiction, mental health (suicide), racism, and sexism in our local communities in conjunction with the professional agencies.

- *The church needs to be more proactive in the community and help the community deal with its social problems*
- *We need to build a 'bridge of kindness' to people who do not go to mass but are wonderful kind people who live good lives.*
- *The church should want to understand and share in the lives, troubles, joys, and passions of the community*

### **3. Desire for greater participation**

This, of course, raises the question of who is this church that is connecting with the world and its challenges. There are two perspectives coming through here – one sees the church as being largely the responsibility of *them*, meaning the clergy. The language of *they* is used more often than the language of *we*.

- *Ensure the parish priest is actively engaged and seen in the community.*

The other looks for a more synodal church. It sees the need for greater participation of lay people in the life of the church.

- *I would like to see a system similar to the reformed churches, where the laity takes a bigger part in the church. A part that is recognised, valued and supported by the clergy.*
- *Create new structures within the church organisation which will allow peripheral voices to be heard.*
- *We strongly recommend that this consultation process of sharing ideas, raising problems and suggesting solutions becomes the norm in our church. This will require the upper echelons of the church to listen with a genuine desire for positive change to secure the future of our church.*

- *I understand the church is an old institution and has its strong beliefs. But the world has changed so much, and people will walk away from Catholicism if they don't feel listened to.*

#### **4. Desire for a more inclusive church**

While the message of Jesus is experienced positively, there are strong reservations about church culture and practice as led by today's apostles. This comes across in the social groups, very strongly in the youth consultation, and is also echoed in the feedback from PPCs. The modern sensibility about justice and inclusion is offended by the church's treatment of women and minority groups, especially LGBTQ+.

There is a call for the Church to face up to and embrace change.

- *at a minimum, allow women to take the lead in prayer services and other non-eucharistic celebrations such as baptism*
- *the church needs to present a genuine welcome and equality of opportunity to women so that they feel empowered to come forward and be of service to their faith community*
- *the ordination of women will give more credibility to the church*
- *Accept the LGBTQ+ community. Stop shunning and shaming people for who they love*
- *The church needs to be more compassionate towards those who in the past were ostracised because of life choices or mistakes.*

Overall, the majority view in the consultations call for the church to change. They are looking for a church that communicates the good news in a manner that relates to people's lives, is more synodal and more just in how it treats women and minorities. However, there is also a voice that calls on the church to hold firm. The sense here is that it is for the wider society to change, not the church.

- *We should only give the sacraments if there is evidence that the parents and child are prepared. The children should attend a weekly Sunday school, and the parents should attend Mass*
- *The church would be better if it embraced more traditional forms of ceremony, such as the Latin mass and the orthodox teaching*
- *One person was 'lamenting the many changes in the Church, especially the dismantling of the altar rails and movement away from reception of Holy Communion on the tongue.'*

## B.2 Voice of Youth

Some 140 young people were engaged in conversations with class groups. (Appendix 3) There is a strong sense that young people across the Diocese are calling for change within the Church. There is a greater demand for church leaders to become more linked in with issues that are important to our young people. Topics like mental health, environment, and leadership roles for women in the church are seen as most important.

For many young people emerging from isolation has given them time to reflect and explore faith, life and meaning in their own lives.

- *'Faith helped me cope and get through the last year. It helped me cope with being lonely during lockdown last year.'*

For many young people their faith is based around morality. There is a strong voice that is seeking a more inclusive church for the future and to let go of the past and rebuild.

- *'I believe in equality for women, which is something the Church does not stand for. The catholic church does not hold women in the same respect as men, so Catholicism ends up angering me instead of helping me.'*
- *'Be kind and respectful to minorities or marginalised groups, i.e., people of colour, LGBTQ+ people. Treat them with equal respect.'*

A lot of hurt and anger is still with young people and when asked about their own faith, church scandals and abuse is stopping them from exploring their own relationship with God.

- *The church needs to understand its hypocrisy and how they have allowed itself to become bigoted and small-minded.'*
- *'The Church needs to either get with the times or expect less and less young people taking part in a church that has previously condemned them, for example – being gay and giving half-hearted apologies*

There is a calling for the church to acknowledge their sins and become a more tolerant and understanding place where young people feel like they are valued, accepted and most importantly safe.

There is a strong voice for parish priests to become pillars of the community and to be more active in community events. The strongest request coming from youth is for more services to be provided in support for young people and their wellbeing. There are serious issues preventing our young people from reaching their potential such as mental health issues, family problems, depression and suicide especially with young men.

The request is for the church to not only recognise these issues but become part of the solution. Young people are looking for long term plans to be put in place and for Church leaders to change the culture and build a more trusting, accepting and inclusive youth ministry going forward.

- *Conscious that God is with us. Faith keeps one on the right path. When one is lonely or sad faith sustains us.*

In summary, young people are a particular group that need to be included in parish life by way of liturgies and pastoral initiatives via John Paul 11 Awards. Young people (some value their faith while others reject the Church) would like a space / place where they can be listened to. Young people emphasised inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community and care for the environment.

### **B.3 Gathering of Parish Pastoral Council Members to review Report on Listening**

130 Pastoral Council members representing 31 of the 34 parishes in the diocese were present for an evening of reflection and conversation about the results of the listening exercise. The evening focussed on two questions: *Do we recognise in this report the voice of the people? What are our own views on the report?* There was prayer time, small group discussion, and open forum for each of the questions.

On the first question 15 of the 20 tables were unanimous that the report accurately reflects the voice of the people in their communities. Doubts were expressed at the other tables. The main doubt was regarding the positive experience of faith expressed by the social groups. *Did we really listen to people on the margins of church?* There are many people out there for whom faith means little or nothing. We don't seem to have heard from them. A second concern raised here was whether the voice of people very committed to church was heard and expressed. This was a response to what was perceived as a strongly critical tone in the report.

The second question was to provide an opportunity for the pastoral council members to offer their own views on issues raised in the report. Several points were made here.

- Some priests spoke about the absence of their voice in the report, and the very difficult and at times demoralising challenges that lie ahead for them. There was a strong expression of empathy from the gathering for the situation of the priests. There was a sense that their situation needs to be considered in pastoral planning. It is not reasonable to expect them to be carrying greater responsibility as they get older and fewer.

Consideration also needs to be shown to the younger cohort, who face into decades of ministry in very changing circumstances.

- There were differences in how people saw the challenge of the church engaging with the wider society. There were two languages underpinning these differences. Some people used the language of invitation, others the language of obligation. For the former, the church needs to change to effectively connect with the people who have moved away. This group was largely in sympathy with the criticisms of the church in the report. But for the latter it is the people who have moved away who must change. The church needs to hold firm in its beliefs and teachings, and challenge people to live up to the demands of faith. There was a sense of grieving here for the lost position of church in society. A desire that church should teach, and people learn. A desire for parents to take responsibility for the faith of their children. A desire that organisations like the GAA should not be putting on events that clash with Mass times.
- There was a concern that the Synodal process in the diocese has been rushed. One round of short meetings in difficult Covid circumstances does not represent deep listening.
- There was a strong sense in keeping with the report that action needs to happen. This is something that can't be left to clergy on their own – we all must take a role. The 'we and they' must become 'one'.

## **C Next Steps – Steering Committee**

1. We are conscious of the fact that this exercise was completed over a short period during the restrictive Covid period. So, it is very much a scoping exercise, a start that must be built on.
2. We look forward to the national report on the synodal pathway outcomes and will utilise it as a resource for our local follow-through.
3. Our synodal process has included a listening to a victim/survivor of clerical sexual abuse which we will continue alongside the engagement of the National Synodal Task Group with survivors and victims of clerical sexual abuse at national level through "Towards Healing" and "Towards Peace".
4. Our focus this year will be on designing and delivering training to the newly elected Parish Pastoral Council members on pastoral leadership considering the issues raised in the listening.

5. One of the elements of this training will be to offer methods to the Parish Pastoral Councils for reaching out to a wider energy and commitment in the parish for mission.
6. At the same time, we will be exploring the scope for the employment of pastoral and administrative workers in the diocese. We recognise we will need to identify sustainable funding models for this.

## **D. Appendices**

1. Listening Process at Parish Level
2. Groups listened to
3. Listening Process with Youth
4. Steering Committee Discernment Meeting
5. May 2022 Diocesan Assembly

## Appendix 1 – Listening Process at Parish Level – Summary of Task

### 1. Hold one conversation with your Parish Pastoral Council for one hour

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|---|
| <i>How has faith helped you in your life?</i>   |
| <i>How can the church support and encourage more active participation?</i>  |
| <i>How can the laity be listened to and be heard? Especially women and young people?</i>                                      |
| <i>How as a faith community can we address issues that trouble our society?<br/>What is the Holy Spirit asking of us now?</i> |

### 2. Talk to four people from a social group of your choice. Use the same questions as above or adjust them to the group – e.g:

|   |
|---|
| <i>If there was no faith at all in our world would it make any difference to you?</i>                               |
| <i>What would make it attractive for you to be more part of the church?</i>   |
| <i>How can the church listen better to you and other<br/>(women...migrants...etc)?</i>                              |
| <i>If there was one good thing the church could do that would make the world a better place what would that be?</i> |

### 3. How would we do this?

- a) Decide which way of meeting people is feasible and safe considering Covid
  - *small group meeting*
  - *one to one in-person conversations*
  - *one-to-one conversations by phone or Zoom*
- b) Decide which social group you will focus on
- c) Give people the questions in advance
- d) Give them an explanatory page on the purpose of this (which would be supplied)
- e) Two roles - one person leading the conversation, one person taking notes
- f) Summarise the notes into a summary sheet that will be provided
- g) Have the conversations during November

## **Appendix 2 – Social Groups listened to**

- Local walking groups
- Isolated rural men
- Indian Community
- Inward migrants, both Irish and International
- Isolated rural people
- Healthcare workers
- Ladies football team
- Parents Association
- Young parents
- Families caring for a family member at home
- Travelling community
- Local GAA clubs
- Active age group
- Parents/guardians of communion class
- Newcomers to the parish
- Foreign nationals
- Pope John Paul 11 Award Participants
- Lapsed Catholics
- Parents of teenagers
- A victim/survivor of clerical sexual abuse
- Local development group
- National schoolteachers
- Asylum seekers:
- Isolated rural people
- Transition year students

## **Appendix 3 – Lesson Plan for Listening to Young People in Classrooms**

To view the lesson plan, please click on the link below:

 [Lesson plan on synodality to be used in schools.pptx](#)

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## **Appendix 4 - Synod Listening Exercise with Steering Committee – First Discernment of results – 28 March 2022**

The purpose of this meeting was to agree a summary of what was said on the ground from the various groups that took part in the listening. It was not a summary of our preferred points. It was an objective account of what the people of the diocese said, recognising majority and minority views.

We identified summary headings and points for elaboration, with a view to producing a 5-page report for a diocesan assembly on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2022. That Assembly would assess the report with a view to finalising the diocesan document to feed into the national and global Synod processes.

The meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022 was structured as a discernment – a prayerful paying attention to the voice of the people of the diocese. Its form was as follows:

- 5.30pm      *Gathering for meal*
- 6.00pm      *Presentation and clarifications on Martina Gilmartin's (Diocesan Director of Pastoral Development and Faith Formation) summary (circulated ahead)*
- 6.20pm      *Prayer and quiet time on the question – What did the people say? (Savina Donohoe)*
- 7.00pm      *Were we happy with the headings? Once the headings were agreed, we divided the time to attend to each one in turn. We recorded on a flip chart what the main point was, and what elaborations we wanted to make. These elaborations would include majority and minority opinions from the reports. (There was an option to also Zoom record the meeting as a further record).*
- 8.30pm      *Next step – who would be involved in writing the 5-page report for the May Assembly?*

## **Appendix 5 - Diocesan Assembly to Review Report on Synod Listening Process - May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2022 in Ballyconnell**

**Purpose:** To explore two questions with the parish representatives.

- The first was to do with whether they recognised the voice of the people in the report. This was not about their own views.
- The second was about their own views: what was it in the report they affirmed, what they challenged, what they wanted to add.

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| 6.00pm | <i>Registration followed by tea and sandwiches</i>  |
| 7.00pm | <i>Welcome, housekeeping, and small group introductions</i>   |
| 7.10pm | <i>Introduction to Session from Bishop Martin</i>   |
| 7.15pm | <i>Summary presentation of key points from the report</i>   |
| 7.20pm | <i>Prayer and quiet time with first question: Do we recognise in this report the voice of the people?</i>             |
| 7.25pm | <i>Small circle discussion (facilitated)</i>  |
| 7.45pm | <i>Open forum</i>   |
| 8.15pm | <i>Stretch break</i>  |
| 8.25pm | <i>Prayer and quiet time with second question: What are our own views: What do we affirm, challenge, want to add?</i> |
| 8.30pm | <i>Small group discussion (facilitated)</i>   |
| 8.50pm | <i>Open forum</i>   |
| 9.20pm | <i>Closing words from Bishop Martin</i>   |