

Summary of Synodal Pathway responses received from St Bartholomew's Church – 24 March 2022

Introduction

106 people took part in the Synodal Pathway listening process, about a quarter of our parishioners, both parish groups and individuals, on Zoom or face to face. Many found the language in the documentation hard to understand, and felt the process was too rushed. Some replies were received from lapsed Catholics and other Christians. Most respondents were pleased to be asked for their views. A summary of the parish responses received follows, arranged by the Synodal Pathway questions.

What experiences of journeying during the pandemic were shared?

- Live-streaming of Mass from other parishes was a great compensation.
- Email communication with parishioners was much appreciated.
- Some parishioners felt isolated: we could have provided a support network for people.
- Opening the church as lockdown eased was handled well – social distancing, mask wearing etc.
- Church as community – It is more than just the building.

What has brought joy?

- The church's sense of security and certainty. It is consistent, and not in a rush to change due to societal pressures.
- It offers a range of spiritual and practical activities of care for others and answering real needs.

What has caused pain or sadness?

- Abuse and the attitude of the clerical leadership to this issue. The abuse and cover-ups have undermined trust in the church. Transparency is needed.
- Sexuality and relationships – there were opposing views on family planning. The church should be more sympathetic and understanding towards divorced and separated Catholics.
- Married priests – celibacy should be optional. Ex-Anglican priests are already allowed.

Who did people feel were missing from the Church community?

- Youth. They are the future of the Church. Many suggestions were made on engaging with youth – a youth club, different styles of music in the Mass, encouraging continued involvement after Confirmation. Social media is the best way to get responses from young people.
- Women. The vital need to enhance the role of women, particularly women deacons and priests, was brought up by many. This issue needs discussing officially and openly. The challenges of such a change were acknowledged, but unless active steps are taken many see a bleak future for the Church in retaining its strength and authority.
- Other missing people. The housebound, excluded and hard-to-reach Catholics, people who have been hurt by the attitudes of the clergy and congregations, the lapsed/not-very-active Catholics, single adults, divorced people, single parents.

Did participants share anything about the Church's experience of journeying with and including others beyond the visible Church community?

- Participants praised the ecumenical community at St Albans Cathedral, but suggestions were made for connecting with other churches, raising the profile of Christians working together.

Was anything shared about how the parish works together or how co-responsibility is put into practice?

- Community. Our parish has great leadership in the priest and deacons. It is a lovely, welcoming, caring community. Fr Francis is so committed and people are very willing to participate and volunteer. The new Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) works closely with Fr Francis and the deacons, and people can raise points directly with PPC members. Social events, which were not happening before Covid, have started again and are important for getting people back into church. Community is at the heart of recovery.
- Inclusiveness. We should understand other Christians' views. The Church needs to welcome Catholics who don't tick all the boxes, eg not always at Mass, lapsed, LGBT+, non-white.
- Services. Mass is our main form of worship, but we could have other services and events. Communal prayers during Mass should include explicit references to the crises of the moment. Our services should reflect the multicultural society in which we live.
- Music. Different styles could be included, eg folk, band, children's choir, but leaders are needed.
- Parish groups. Seen as important, supportive and responsible for a wide range of service in the parish.

What did people wish to celebrate about how your parish lives its mission?

- Spirituality, sacraments and the Mass. Most comments related to the focus on the Mass, celebrating the liturgy and recognising the church seasons.
- Parish organisation. The Priest's key role was noted, and the need for priest and congregation to work together. Our new Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) has a mission statement and five areas of growth – spirituality, ecumenism, building community, youth and social justice.
- We have a good range of parish groups and activities, but information should be shared about them, perhaps talks after Mass about their work, and lists of the groups in *St Barts Together*.
- Activities and opportunities to volunteer that had lapsed were mentioned (lunch club, Fair Trade stall, lifts to Mass) but parishioners need encouraging to get involved and share their skills and enthusiasms.
- Many attend the same Mass each week and do not know people who come to a different one.
- We would like to see greater engagement of our young adults and hear their voices more.

What areas of mission did people say were being neglected within the Church?

The organisation and operation of the Catholic Church

- Nearly 40 wide-ranging, strongly expressed critical observations were made about the organisation and operation of the Church. Key points related to: the separation between the Church hierarchy and laity; openness and clarity about finances; broadening the experience of the priesthood; a compassionate approach to human frailty and the challenges of most people's lives, perhaps guided focussing on Jesus' teachings instead of condemnation and rules.

In what ways did they see partnerships with people beyond the Church developing?

- Charity and mission work. Supporting the third world through hospitals, schools, water. We are journeying together but must support the less fortunate to show our love for one another.
- The Church offers a range of charitable activities such as Caritas, Church in Need, Cafod; locally charity work is provided by the Society of St Vincent de Paul, Knights of St Columba and Justice & Peace groups.
- The most pressing social issues are poverty, lack of community and loneliness so we should support local food banks. We could approach our ecumenical friends, and the council, to help foster community

What did you notice about how people participated? What attitudes or feelings stood out?

- Most people were willing to take part, once we had persuaded them to come to a meeting.
- The 'listening piece' was good for encouraging all to take part and listen carefully.

Which stories or real-life experiences were especially moving, and why?

- Organising a funeral during the pandemic, including limits on the number of people attending.
- The joy when the church was open again.
- Receiving Communion again – we were then participants, not observers.

Which experiences seemed to have strong resonance? Which experiences were mentioned less but are significant?

Live-streaming of Masses from other parishes showed how others organise the Mass. Usually, parishioners stay with one church, for better or worse, and do not try other churches.

What dreams, desires and aspirations for the Church were expressed by participants?

- It should listen to the faithful and make sure that suggestions from them carry weight.
- It should move forward more swiftly and respond to change (compared to the Vatican Council).

Were there any particular issues that the people felt the Spirit was inviting the Church to pay more attention to?

- Abuse victims; education of priests; allow celibacy to be optional and allow priests to marry; divorcees and those who feel excluded; youth.

Conclusion

Thank you to all who took part in this listening process. All your views are important. Our parish response was sent to Westminster in January and points were incorporated in the Diocesan summary document. A formal submission to the Bishop's conference is next, followed by national and international stages of the process. The dioceses will put forward their suggestions to Rome. The Vatican will release a working document in September 2022, and a second draft in June 2023. After a month-long gathering of bishops in the Vatican in October 2023, the Pope will write an apostolic exhortation, giving his views and decisions.