

## St Austin Synod Report: Diocesan Listening Sessions

St Austin's held 8 listening sessions during January as part of the Diocesan listening phase. There were two town hall type sessions – one in-person, one via Zoom. Six listening sessions were held via zoom with sub-groups within the parish: Pastoral Council, Liturgy Comm, Finance Comm, social justice ministers, Graduate and Professional Young Adults, representatives from the school community. Each session lasted approximately two hours.

St Austin's also provided two online surveys: one with just the Fundamental Questions and a longer one with those plus the Digging Deeper (Core) Questions. 12 people answered the short survey and another 12 people answered the long survey.

The diocese asked for the report response to be brief, saying bullet points are ideal. While not all responses were able to be included, its hoped that this report captures the most important trends. All input was rendered anonymous in both the notes from the listening sessions and the survey responses.

*Demographics:* \*\*since we did not know that we needed to make note of the demographics, these are estimates based on memory

Total number of all parish participants: Over 100

Age Range (by percentage):

18-30 yrs old: 20%

31-40 yrs old: 20%

41-64 yrs old: 40%

Over 65: 20%

Gender:

Female: 80%

Male: 20%

Ethnicity:

Caucasion: 80%

Black/African American: 0%

Hispanic: 20%

Asian: 0%

Other: 0%

## *Fundamental Questions*

### Images of Journeying

- Moving our facilities due to the construction. Many spoke of the sense of community and journey that they experienced in helping move the school to its temporary campus at San Jose, as well as helping move the offices and priests to their new locations. There were expressions of hope and excitement over the possibilities that our new facilities will offer once construction is completed.
- There is a strong sense of community that was brought up, specifically in terms of relationships that have developed through various parish groups – St Vincent de Paul, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Christ Renews His Parish, Small Christian Communities, Graduate and Young Professionals Group.
- Liturgical images were cited. Attendance at Mass, reflection booklets provided during Advent and Lent, the quality of the liturgy. Parishioners come from all over and pointed to that as an image of journey – the coming together for Mass and then being sent out in all directions to live the Gospel.
- There is an awareness of there being people of all generations who come to St Austin's and also of many families who have been part of St Austin's across multiple generations.
- A large number of people spoke of how St Austin's has adapted to COVID. While two individuals objected to ongoing protocols of encouraging mask wearing and seating in every other pew, all others who brought up COVID expressed thanksgiving for the continued caution on the part of the parish.

### What are the joys of parish life?

- Relationships. Many people spoke of the relationships that they have formed as a result of involvement with parish life. They cited the ability to form and be in communities.
- The ability to participate has actually been enhanced for many groups during COVID and the shift to online meetings. There are a greater number of people able to attend meetings online than were previously able to attend in person.
- Welcoming. There were many expressions of how welcoming the parish is. This was particularly mentioned by a number of people who said that they did not feel welcome in other parishes due to their opinions on women's roles in the Church, LGBTQ rights, reproductive issues.
- Liturgy. Parishioners expressed an appreciation for the homilies – “excellent preaching that we get week in and week out.”. The quality of the music at our Masses was also cited as a joy, including the choice of music that allows the people to join in the singing. Some noted the joy of seeing multiple generations of a family attending Mass.
- The Paulists. Every listening session found parishioners speaking to their love of the Paulists and the Paulist charism of evangelization, reconciliation, and ecumenism/interfaith dialogue that is part of our parish life. The Paulists are viewed as being very welcoming and willing to listen to people. Some expressed how open the

Paulists are to ideas from parishioners and being willing to help parishioners implement those ideas such as a commemoration of Kristallnacht. Our young adult group expressed appreciation for the fact that the Paulist really care about them and show their support by being present at their meetings.

- Diversity in our parish. An openness to diverse groups of people, the variety of ages, students and non-students, and the fact that parishioners come from a large number of different zip codes was seen as a positive for the parish. (It is noted that we are not as diverse when looking at racial diversity within the parish.)
- CHRP. While the Christ Renews His Parish program is no longer active in the parish, many of the women who participated voiced how much it had enriched their faith lives.
- Social justice. There was near universal appreciation for the level of social justice ministry that happens at St Austin's: St Vincent de Paul, Thursday Outreach, Just Faith, Micah 6, Courageous Conversations.

What are the joys that you have experienced in the larger Church?

- Mass in other locations. Several people spoke of how much they valued attending Mass in other places even if it was in a language that they did not understand – they still knew what was going on due to the structure of the liturgy.
- Experience of the universal Church. Some have been able to be part of larger world wide gatherings that have given them an experience of the world wide Church family.
- There is a strong sense of connection to the Church that goes both forward and backward in time. The richness of the Catholic tradition.
- Pope Francis

What are the difficulties and obstacles you have encountered to active parish life?

- The obstacle mentioned most often is that we are a "commuter parish" since most parishioners live at some physical distance from our facilities. This makes it difficult to attend in person events/meetings particularly on week nights. Traffic and parking make it difficult to get to our church.
- There seems to be a small core group that does all the ministries.
- People don't know about various parish groups/ministries nor how to join them. There's a lack of public invitation to become involved.
- It is difficult for people with disabilities to get to St Austin's and around the property.
- As a downtown parish, we encounter homeless people and those with mental illness on our doorsteps (and sometimes within our buildings/church). Its hard to know how to deal with them and more guidance from the parish for handling those interactions would be welcome.
- There are different levels on knowledge about the church and a need to provide faith formation for all levels from basic knowledge to those with an already full understanding of our faith. We need a more expansive adult faith formation program.

What are the difficulties and obstacles that you have encountered in the larger Church?

- What the bishops say and do often makes people feel disconnected...or that the bishops are disconnected.
- How can we have respect for an institution that has done things that are disingenuous and that covers up major issues? If you want to see a youthful growing church, you need to address their concerns towards the institutional church. The priest sexual abuse scandal is a problem.
- There is an unwillingness to change with the times.
- Frustrating as a woman to see how many very capable voices are not being heard and that only men can minister. We are missing out on the talents of many who are able and willing to minister. Young people see this and are walking away because of it. They are going to where all voices are included.
- Eucharist has been politicized by some members of the hierarchy.
- Hard for parents to trust the Church in regards to the safety of their children.
- Pro-life stance has become politicized and combative, rather than compassionate. It seems like the Church thinks the only issue anyone needs to focus on is abortion.
- The Church doesn't understand people with disabilities.
- The Church has no place for LGBTQ Catholics. They are left out. The Church should not be in the business of deciding which sins (whether publicly identifiable or not) preclude a person's ability to continue living out and witness Gods love to their parish community and the wider world. We are ALL sinners.
- The Church highlights sexual morality but the sex abuse scandals contradict that. There is a lack of integrity between what the church teaches about sexual morality and what it does.
- It often feels like St Austin's is marginalized within the Diocese. We are viewed as different and are not understood by the Diocese.

What are your dreams for St Austin's?

- That the Paulists continue to staff St Austin's for many years. A significant number of parishioners expressed fear that the Paulists would be removed from St Austin's the way they were removed from the Univ Catholic Center. There is wide support for the Paulists among the parishioners of St Austin's and universal agreement that the parish wishes to continue being served by the Paulists. Parishioners value the Paulists and have found themselves strongly influenced by their charism of evangelization, reconciliation and ecumenism/interfaith dialogue. These aspects of the Paulist charism have clearly been embraced by the parish.
- More adult formation classes, book clubs, Bible study. Our new buildings will offer opportunities to expand what is available.
- That our reputation as an inclusive, welcoming parish is even more widely known. St Austin's can be a home for anyone.

- We are already known for our social justice ministries and several people spoke of wanting to expand upon these ministries.
- Expanded ecumenism. Have a stronger relationship with the Micah 6 churches. Expand opportunities to connect with and participate in shared outreach ministries with the other churches located near West Campus, including our non-Christian neighbors.
- Since we are located on the edge of the Univ of Texas, is there a way to reach out to the faculty and students? Have we tapped into the resources that might be available across the street?
- We need to grow in diversity. How do we bring in African American students? Latinos? Is it time to consider having a Spanish Mass? Ethnic, racial, sexual orientation diversity enrich our parish and enable us to see the Body of Christ as it really is.
- Increase small group opportunities such as the Small Christian Communities, CRRP, and such where people can get to know one another better.
- Everybody in our orbit would find a place where they feel welcomed. Increase hospitality, not just greetings at the door but meals together, someone reaching out if you don't show up, creating relationships with the people that we are helping.
- We need greater opportunities for youth to be involved. There's a recognition that this is difficult given that most live some distance from the parish but it was a need that several expressed.
- Just about everyone mentioned how much they are looking forward to our new buildings and what opportunities the new space will provide.

What are your dreams for the larger Church?

- Liturgical prayers that are intelligible. A few people noted the sometimes awkward wording of prayers which render them as not making sense.
- Be more inclusive and treat all with dignity. Stop pitting one group against another, favoring one group over another, causing division.
- In the US, that we grow past being a one issue church.
- More places for women to be visible leaders
- Mercy and forgiveness should be the focus
- I wish the Church would encourage more encountering, especially with people who are different from us, who have different dreams, and with whom we can become an open and sharing community.
- More lay saints
- Pope Francis' idea of a poor church resonates, a church directed to the margins of society, directed toward helping people.

## *Digging Deeper (Core) Questions:*

### **Listening:**

How is God speaking to us through the voices that are in our midst?

- This question was answered mostly in the negative. Many saw the church as historically identifying itself with the hierarchy and not being open to those on the peripheries, especially those who might want change in the Church. Its not easy for the Church to listen.
- God is speaking, but it often feels that the church leadership is not listening.

How is God speaking to us through voices we sometimes ignore, including those on the peripheries?

- There is a loud set of people with fundamentalist views that drown out voices that disagree
- We tell kids that they can do anything but then the Church is an obstacle to equality.

What space is there to listen to the voices on the peripheries, especially cultural groups, women, the disabled, those who experience poverty, marginalization, or social exclusion?

- Hard to listen unless there is a connection. These days, if you don't have access to a computer and internet, how do you participate?
- LGBTQ people, folks with addictions or mental illness are often hidden in plain site
- Diocese and larger church has done a terrible job at training priests and pastoral ministers in talking about sexuality. Its not about simply parroting Church teaching, but how to respond with compassion.
- Some mentioned experiences in other parishes where if you do or don't do something, you will go to hell. Either you are in or out.

### **Speaking Out:**

What enables or hinders your parish community from speaking up courageously, candidly, and responsibly in the parish and society?

- Hindered by fear of being persecuted by those who believe differently
- Actions by the diocese that seem to have no understanding of what is best for the people but rather seem based in personal egos or self-interest

- Fear that speaking out might get the pastor or the Paulists in trouble

What space is there in your parish for the voice of people, including active and inactive members of our faith?

- St Austin staff will listen, have a conversation and give a pastoral response. They are willing to engage with parishioners.
- In groups at St Austin's, I've found people willing to be with me, to listen to what I have to say.

### **Sharing Responsibility, Authority and Participation:**

How are the baptized members of your parish able to participate in the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel?

- There are an abundance of ministries in which people can participate.
- An important reminder was brought up that the laity are asked to take the Church out into their families, their work places, their neighborhoods. We should not worry so much about how much we are able to do "at Church" but look at the ways in which we are living out the Gospel outside of the building.

What hinders people from being active in your parish?

- The distance that many parishioners live from the parish.
- The universal Church does not offer the same opportunities to women as to men.
- The stories that we hear/read of LGBTQ who are no longer allowed to participate in various Church ministries.
- EIM training – while necessary, its become burdensome and off putting to many
- We have many former parishioners who now attend churches of other denominations (and even some non-Christian congregations) because they no longer feel like they belong within the Catholic Church
- Seems like it's the same group of people who do everything. It can be intimidating for new people to get involved when they don't feel part of that group.

How is authority or governance exercised in your local parish?

- The parish staff listens and is open to suggestions
- There have been many sessions about the construction project gathering feedback and keeping the parish informed from the early planning stages through obtaining various permissions, signing with a developer, etc. The construction project came up several times with people feeling like they have been involved in the process. A lot of

excitement has been expressed for the opportunities that the new buildings will provide to the parish.

How are teamwork and co-responsibility put into practice in your local parish?

- In the past, the Pastoral Council was elected at large and also had representatives from different ministries. That seems to have fallen to the wayside. People feel they need to go to a priest to share their ideas or concerns because they don't know who else to go to about parish life. Who is on the pastoral council?
- We could do a better job of helping people know who the staff is and what they do.
- The re-constituted Liturgy Committee opens up an additional way in which parishioners share in the co-responsibility of the parish.

### **Discerning and Deciding**

How does your parish use the methods of listening and speaking (consultation) to make decisions?

- The primary example that was brought up in this regards were the sessions that were held around the new construction project

How does your parish promote participation in decision-making within the hierarchical structures of the Church?

- While the Pastoral Council, Finance Council, Liturgy Comm provide ways in which parishioners are involved in decision making, some questions were raised: how many know these groups exist, who serves on them, how is membership selected, where does one get information about their meetings (don't see minutes).

Does the decision-making methods of your parish help you to listen to all members of the community, including those who are on the peripheries of parish life?

- This was already addressed in the two questions above.



## Celebration

How does prayer and liturgical celebrations, especially Sunday Mass, inspire and guide your parish?

- There was pretty wide agreement that parishioners feel liturgy is done very well at St Austin's: "What makes St Austin's is the quality of worship. People do participate at Mass. We need to hold onto this and make it even better."
- Great preaching by the Paulists was frequently brought up.
- It was noted that people do fully participate, including by joining in the singing.

How did the parish community respond to: How does their prayer life and celebration of the Mass inspire and inform their personal decisions and decisions in the parish community?

- "Without St Austin's, I might be an even more going-through-the-motions cradle Catholic. Mass and the Eucharist are meaningful rituals to me."
- "The homilies by all our priests are inspiring, well-constructed and relevant."
- A number of people mentioned how grateful they are for the opportunity to participate in daily Mass via streaming. In the past, schedules and distance made it hard to attend daily Mass but with streaming, many are now attending each day online and welcome that opportunity.

How does the parish invite all baptized Catholics, including our ethnic communities, youth, families and persons with disabilities and their families, into the active life of the parish, especially Sunday Mass?

- Some have noticed that the property is not inviting to people with disabilities. Conversely, some noted how much they welcome seeing a family with two blind parents who sit at the front of the Church during the 8:45 Mass.
- Its also hard for disabled and elderly folks to simply get to St Austin's. "We need an office of ministry to elders, like we have an office to Hispanics, blacks and disabilities at the diocesan level."

## *Final Question:*

How did your parish community respond to: From your small group sharing, name one insight where you heard the voice of the Holy Spirit today.

- This question was not brought up in our sessions. But as the person who facilitated all the sessions and read all the survey responses, my personal answer based on what I

heard/read would be: As a “commuter parish”, St Austin’s is made up of people who strongly desire to be there due to finding a community in which they feel they belong and where they can grow in their faith.

*Submitted by Elizabeth M Korves to Diocese of Austin on Sun, Feb 6, 2022*