



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

27 April 2022

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The Diocese of Sioux City, at the request of our Holy Father Pope Francis, has completed its diocesan/local synodal process with a clear understanding that our work has not ended but only just begun. As was stated in the introduction of the Vademecum:

In creating the opportunity for listening and dialogue on the local level through this synod, Pope Francis is calling the church to rediscover its deeply synodal nature. This rediscovery of the synodal roots of the church will involve a process of humbly learning together how God is calling us to be as the church in the third millennium.

During our diocesan synodal process, I heard many of our faithful voice their concerns, their pain, and their frustrations. I was also profoundly touched by their deep devotion to and love for the Eucharist, their hope for the future of the church, and their desire to help and be part of its renewal.

The Diocese of Sioux City launched its journey on the path of the *Synod 2021-2023 For a Synodal Church* in October of 2021 on the weekend following the opening Mass in Rome. For the next couple of months, parish groupings engaged in over 40 parish-level meetings throughout the diocese (offering online communication options as well) and four deanery-wide listening sessions, at which I was present. The entire process culminated on April 1, 2022, with a final Mass and a briefing to pastors and the faithful.

This process was revealing, challenging, emotional, and in some cases painful, while at the same time, inspiring and refreshing. The entire process was communicated using multi-platform communications methods and all were invited to participate regardless of who they are, where they live and without regard to their faith practice.

DIocese of Sioux City

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I am humbled by the participation, the sharing and the willingness of our faithful to open their minds and hearts. I am proud of the openness of our presbyterate to this synodal process and I am enthusiastic about the future of our diocese and the church universal.

A 10-page summary report cannot cover all the issues and information that was gathered during this synodal process. For that reason, and with the guidance of my Presbyteral Council, I also instructed our synod team to compile a list of issues and thoughts that were presented during the synod process more than once but that didn't rise in priority to the level that made the final report. That list is attached as an addendum to this report and will be evaluated further for follow-up. Also attached as an addendum are a few photographs of our gatherings at the parish, deanery and diocesan levels.

Upon submitting this report, the Diocese of Sioux City will share it in its entirety across all our communication platforms and directly to our parishes to maintain transparency and stimulate appropriate levels of follow-up, learning and action at all levels.

'Synod' is an ancient and venerable word in the tradition of the church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of revelation [...] It indicates the path along which the people of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents himself as 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn 14,6), and to the fact that Christians, his followers, were originally called 'followers of the way' (cf. Acts 9,2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22).

With the submission of this report, I share my gratitude and that of all the faithful in the Diocese of Sioux City to our Holy Father for his guidance during this *Synod 2021-2023 For a Synodal Church*. I humbly stand with and for the people of the diocese as we learn all we can along this journey and work to support, sustain and renew the church in northwest Iowa. We walk this path together, followers of the way proclaiming our love through both words and actions.

Your brother in Christ,



Most Reverend R. Walker Nickless
Bishop of Sioux City





Diocese of Sioux City

Diocesan Report



Companions on the Journey

Responses regarding being companions on the journey and walking together in the church ranged from faithful who had a strong sense of belonging to concerns regarding those who may feel disconnected from the church.

The vast majority said those who walk together have a sense of belonging and connectedness to their parish choose to be active participants in parish life. The active offer their time, talent and treasure to the church. Parishioners also feel connected through participation in the Knights of Columbus, women's organizations and faith formation groups. Some respondents defined those who walk together as all who are baptized in Christ.

The participants defined those who do not walk together or are excluded by the church include the young, elderly, divorced, homebound, the LGBTQ community and single people. Those who are new to a community, fallen-away Catholics and the parishioners whose churches have been closed or transitioned to church building status also said they felt left out.

Some responses pointed out those on the periphery of the church as those who lack understanding of the church teachings, doctrine, dogma and rules.

Suggestions from the synod participants included a need for better listening in the church, reaching out to newcomers, being more welcoming, inviting and being inclusive to those on the periphery so that all will have a sense of belonging in the church. Personally inviting those who left the church was suggested in the synod responses as an effective way to reach out.

Other suggestions brought forth included praying for vocations and encouraging vocations.

Listening

Responses from the diocesan synod process suggests a disconnect between the church and those on the periphery and a need for better listening by church leadership.

The church tends to ignore and not help individuals who think differently and those in the LGBTQ community according to participants. The church often ignores women, the young and the “nones” (those who claim no religious affiliation).

Women provide a large percentage of the volunteer efforts to their parishes but may not be listened to or are not part of the decision-making process. The gifts of women need to be accepted as they are capable of advising, leading and representing women, children and creation. Young people also need to be listened to and given an invitation to be part of the church.

Many responses pointed to the impression that decisions are clergy-driven and the laity have no input. Addressing the needs of the people is not happening in parishes. Some participants said that money provides influence for the wealthy in parishes.

Some recommended promoting discussion groups to facilitate listening and prayer within the church.

There were suggestions to find ways to reach those on the periphery, have more one-on-one communications with the people and to ensure a welcoming atmosphere when those neglected segments come to the church. The church should include more individuals who represent those on the margins in leadership roles. Those who are participating and active in the parishes also need to listen to each other as all are part of the Catholic Church.

Speaking Out

Christ Jesus, people's faith and the gift of free will were cited as sources that enable people to speak out in the church. People speak for the church in the way they live out the faith. However, there is a lack of trust of the church by the faithful.

People are hindered from speaking up because they are afraid that they will not know enough about the church, and they fear being judged, isolated and ostracized. The parish should be transparent, provide people more opportunities to speak and validate those who do communicate. People find it hard to dialogue about differences and disagreements in the church.

Those who speak for the church tend to be the pope, the bishop, pastors and deacons. There is a need for input from laity and pastors need lay people to help the clergy as the Apostles helped Jesus. The faithful need occasions when their voices will be heard.

People are willing to lead in the church and their assistance should be supported and appreciated.

Some suggestions offered included educating the faithful on speaking for the church while speaking the truth with love and heart. There is a need to catechize every Catholic in the pew before they can confidently evangelize neighbors. There is a need to remind parents they are the primary catechists of their children.

Some do not see the rationale in closing churches, merging parishes or transforming parishes to church buildings. Some of the transitioned parishes have a young parishioner base, have money and have had religious vocations in the past. A few of the parishes that have been combined are struggling to work together as one parish. The feeling from some respondents is that bigger is not always better regarding churches.

Celebrations

Many respondents saw a need for better catechesis/faith formation for youth and adults on the real presence in the Eucharist and on other topics related to Mass in order to provide a foundation for a more meaningful experience at liturgies.

Feedback yielded diverse opinions/solutions on the desire for better liturgies – sometimes on opposite ends. Many commented on need for uplifting, contemporary music and inspiring homilies for a joyful experience and to draw youth. Others stressed need to maintain the traditional components of Mass and a call for more reverence. Some young adults asked for more availability of Latin Mass. Feedback also included desire for homilies to address tough moral issues with a clear and unified position. Some mentioned liturgies must be meaningful to be able to extend the mission of the church beyond the Mass itself.

Decreased Mass attendance, especially with younger generations, is a common reality which respondents believe is caused by various struggles ranging from breakdown of families, lack of quality catechesis, members drawn to other denominations, Mass offered in fewer locations and those not returning after COVID-19 shutdowns.

A lack of belonging and sense of community in the faithful compared to the past was a concern. Newcomers in general often do not feel welcome. Some say the teachings of the church make the divorced and those with alternate lifestyles feel unwelcome. The laity noted they could help extend personal invitations to attend Mass and to become involved in ministries and parish life. The laity could help create a welcoming environment, especially for new members. More events for fellowship and building community were suggested. Some noted the church could learn about successful welcoming from other denominations.

Shared responsibility

In regard to shared responsibility, many respondents saw the need for lay involvement as the number of active priests continues to decline. Often small numbers of the faithful provide a large percentage of parish work and the church should invite others to become involved. Respondents noted the need for education of the call for all baptized individuals to serve.

Many did not feel they had the knowledge to take on some parish roles. With that in mind, there was a strong call for adult education so parishioners could feel confident in sharing their faith with others. Several respondents mentioned a need for more education for parents to understand the primary role they need play in their children's catechesis. Others identified a need for better parish catechetical programs for youth.

A few responses surfaced noting that parishioners did not feel empowered by the priests to lead ministry and parish activities. Some respondents felt other parishioners were more important to the church so they really were not needed, wanted or encouraged to volunteer.

Knowing the laity has a strong role to play in the life of the church, several voiced a call to create small groups where people could work together, pray together and create a sense of belonging.

Small groups could also help with inclusion, which some find lacking in the church. Some specifically noticed the need for unity with parish minority groups including Hispanic Catholics. Respondents felt laity could help with inviting people back to church and could help lead activities that the priest cannot due to workload. Some saw a need to work together to offer more spiritual works and others saw a need to collaborate to serve the needy. Some suggested recognizing church volunteers would encourage more parishioners to serve their parishes.

Dialogue in church and society

Many respondents noted the church needs improvement regarding dialogue with other denominations, other Catholic parishes, people with varying perspectives or the general public.

Feedback included the need for greater efforts to invite and welcome others in order to listen to other viewpoints. Some said Catholics do not respect other religions. Others neglected in church ministry and dialogue include divorced parishioners and the LGBTQ community. Synod participants noted input should be sought from all including different age demographics.

Respondents noted priests and the bishop focus on their own agendas and sometimes they are not open to input of the faithful. There was a wide range of opinions regarding the messaging of the clergy. Some called for clear and consistent teaching by the pope, bishops and priests on moral issues and doctrine to avoid misunderstandings. Some suggested the church needed to speak out on more than just pro-life issues. Given today's divisive political climate, respondents were concerned some of this divisiveness was manifesting itself in the life of the church.

Some of the faithful said the clergy sex abuse scandal harmed the church and weakened the trust of the laity. There is a desire for the church to be transparent with parishioners. Some noted the church hierarchy is more concerned with the "institution" than the faithful.

To develop better dialogue, respondents suggested forming small groups where laity could help ensure people are welcomed by the church – especially immigrants and refugees. Some were concerned with the overall lack of effective communication in the church and the absence of parishes working together to try to solve tough problems.

Ecumenism

The feedback regarding ecumenism in the church varied from the successes in ecumenical relationships in several communities to a call to be more welcoming and to open up Communion to anyone who desires to participate, regardless of their denomination.

With the concern of fewer Catholics in the pews, there were questions by participants asking why the Catholic Church does not focus upon the similarities within the different denominations rather than the differences. Other responses suggested the church be more open to participation and open reception of Communion to all.

The faithful suggested the need to respect other faiths and strive for more communication with non-Catholics to avoid misunderstandings.

Some respondents were critical that the church does not include or recognize other faith traditions and backgrounds. Some were concerned that the theological differences were enough to keep the Catholic Church from connecting with other denominations.

At the same time, some responses indicated that the theological differences were not significant enough to preclude ecumenical cooperation between churches.

The diocesan faithful from smaller, rural communities had the sense that their parishes' cooperation and ecumenism was more successful than in larger communities and parishes. Current community outreach programs, including food pantries and social services were cited as good examples of ecumenism. Some responses called for a greater effort for different churches to work together for the common good. Some suggested that the Catholic Church should be more present in their communities to foster the sense of ecumenism.

Authority and participation

Participants expressed concerns regarding authority as it pertains to the scarcity of priests and increased involvement of the laity. Many responses included a concern for the future of the church with the ongoing decreased levels of participation.

It was often expressed that the laity need to step forward and assist their parish priests with administrative duties, especially in light of the shortage of priests. However, some felt that they could not move forward with any administrative or leadership activity without involvement or blessing from the priest, causing frustrations for both laity and clergy.

Many expressed their displeasure with the historical top-down structure within the church and little consultation with the laity.

The drop in Mass attendance and volunteerism by the laity is a great concern. The levels of participation continue to decline. Proposed solutions include reaching out to those who feel disenfranchised - encouraging youth to become involved in ministry, welcoming back fallen-away Catholics, reaching out to divorced Catholics, reaching out to minority Catholics, reaching out to the LGBTQ community and reaching out to single people.

Those who are involved in parish ministry and activities recognized they represent a small percentage in their churches, while others fear “lifetime appointments” if they volunteer. The faithful attending smaller, rural parishes felt that their participation levels were very good and superior to participation in larger communities and parishes.

Another suggested solution was adult catechesis. If Catholics were re-catechized, they would understand the value of the Eucharist and would desire regular participation in Mass and parish life.

Discerning and deciding

In many cases, the laity reported that they do not feel heard when decisions are made in the church and requested that their input should be seriously considered. Many respondents felt strongly that prayer and guidance of the Holy Spirit was needed by all in decision-making.

Parishioners were concerned that church leaders at all levels do not listen to the faithful in the pews, nor give any weight to the input and suggestions of the laity. Responses included displeasure with decisions of church leaders, a call for more consultation and feedback from parishioners before decisions are made. Some requested more transparency regarding decisions.

Concerns were voiced that many parish priests do not have good management skills which precludes successful decision-making. There is a desire for “holy and good leadership” in the church.

There is concern that the current structure of the church’s hierarchy does not allow for input from the people. Many felt that the church is not open to suggestions by the laity. Many responses included the concern that the diocese, bishop and Vatican do not care about the activity and future of small parishes or parishes in rural communities.

Varying generations and backgrounds of the faithful should be given opportunities to be heard and provide feedback to church leadership from their given perspectives.

When making decisions, the faithful suggest that all seek guidance from the Holy Spirit, Scripture and deep prayer. Many requested that church leaders look back to the traditions and values of the church when making decisions and moving forward. There is also a call for church leaders to visibly stand up and speak out for the traditional values of the church.

Forming ourselves in synodality

In order for the church to operate in synodality, the faithful called for a multi-faceted effort of outreach to the faithful in order to rebuild the church community. For the people to desire participation in a synodal church, many need re-catechizing to truly appreciate the importance of the Catholic faith in their lives.

Many responses called for the church to focus more on reaching out to the faithful, especially the youth, if there is to be a vibrant Catholic Church in the future. Outreach to any disenfranchised demographic in the church should include frequent and personal invitations.

In addition to inviting the people to participation in the Mass and parish life, there was a strong call for additional adult catechesis. The rationale is that if the faithful had a better understanding of the faith and the Eucharist, the natural step is to come back to Mass and parish life. Suggestions included building a passion for the church in the people. Currently, there is a strong lack of interest in the church by a large percentage of the faithful.

Many expressed concern that the modern culture is a barrier to growth in the church. Technology, busy schedules and sports were noted as distractions keeping the faithful from full participation in the Catholic Church and parish life.

Another barrier to synodality is the perception that members of church leadership are preaching conflicting values, causing confusion. The faithful desire consistency in messaging.

Participants suggested that church leadership should be more open-minded, more welcoming and consultative with the people in order to build mutual trust. A better partnership with leadership and laity will lead the church to a place where “walking together” is a reality.

ADDENDUM #1



**Other themes discussed and
presented during the
Synodal process.**

Synod themes of local concern not included in the main report:

- Work on solidarity in Sioux City between ethnic groups
- Some elderly members are not adept with technology and would benefit from hard copy communication
- Is division being created by offering English/Spanish Masses separately?
- Offer young parents daycare during Mass
- With the priest shortage, can deacons say Mass or can we have women priests?
- Merging dioceses might be a good idea
- In Hartley there were several abuse cases that the bishop covered up
- Lay people could pay for priests to attend speech coaches and retreats
- Provide options for religious education for children with disabilities – such as autism – and developing small groups for parents to support one another
- Some are still very angry that Masses were suspended when COVID-19 first turned into a pandemic
- Some feel disconnected since the Mass suspension and are not coming back
- Many are angry about pastoral planning and don't know why it is occurring
- Pastoral planning causes more problems in the church
- Many are angry about the clergy abuse mishandling and coverup
- Some are angry that President Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi support abortion and take Communion
- Some youth said they want and/or appreciate the traditional Latin Mass
- The synod questions posed by the Vatican were confusing and intimidating
- The bishop needs to be more visible, especially in small parishes and communities
- The diocese and the church do not address social justice issues
- Abortion shouldn't be the only issue of the church
- There are concerns that the synod will not be effective
- Desire for Vietnamese missals
- Some feel people who have questions or bring new ideas are not welcomed by the church leadership
- Narrowmindedness seems to be prevalent in church leadership
- Some do not feel like the bishop is backing or listening to his people
- The Lumen is not featuring all churches, just Catholic schools. There is not enough range of legitimate perspectives in The Lumen and diocesan communication
- Fallen-away Catholics have not been reached out to enough to return

ADDENDUM #2



**Photos from Parish and Diocese
Synodal gatherings**



