

Synthesis Report on Diocesan Listening Sessions Spring 2024
Report for the Diocese of Grand Island
Presented by Bishop Joseph G. Hanefeldt

Overview

The Diocese of Grand Island is a large geographic territory. Some parishes are a 5-hour drive from the Cathedral in Grand Island. We are also limited in diocesan resources to take on special projects like this. As bishop, I must rely heavily on the pastors of our parishes to communicate to their people the concept of synodality and engage them in this process. Response to this has been limited. Therefore, I took it upon myself to schedule and facilitate two listening sessions for the faithful to attend, one in the far western side of our diocese and one here in Grand Island, the far eastern side of our diocese. Additionally, I held a third session with the Diocesan Pastoral Council, whose members represent each of the four deaneries of our diocese.

The first listening session was held on January 30, 2024, at Christ the King Church in Gering, Nebraska at which there were 29 people in attendance, including 4 priests and 1 permanent deacon. The second listening session was held on February 6, 2024, at Resurrection Church here in Grand Island, at which there were 32 people in attendance, including 2 priests and 3 permanent deacons. The listening session with the Diocesan Pastoral Council was held on March 2, 2024, at which 14 of the 20 Council members were present, of whom 3 were permanent deacons.

A Summary of Responses to the First Guiding Question

Where have I seen or experienced successes – and distresses – within the Church’s structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?

- 1) There was some consternation about parish pastoral leadership.
 - “How are parishes supposed to work when there is a change of pastors?”
 - “The way the parish works is often guided by the flavor of the priest.”
 - What is currently taking place with pastoral leadership is felt to be a hindrance to the Church’s mission.
 - It was stated that there is no input from parishioners in this process of assigning pastors to parishes.
 - Furthermore, as pastoral leadership varies from priest to priest the people were asking if pastors could be trained to follow diocesan “rubrics” when they move from parish to parish.
 - Could there be a resource that explains the roles and responsibilities of church structure and leadership? Clergy need to allow the laity to do more so that they can do less administration and attend to the pastoral care of souls.
 - People are afraid to step forward in leadership, for various reasons; fewer people are participating in the life of our parishes.

- We need to eliminate wishy-washy leadership; we need to be firm and consistent in our teaching.
- 2) Some people voiced their appreciation for hierarchical leadership – that “the closeness of layers – people, priests, bishop, pope is a strength of our Church.”
- One person said that structure equates with control, which can cause misunderstanding.
 - There was agreement around the statement that “the stability of the Church we take for granted.”
 - It was said, and others agreed, that our Catholic School System in this country has contributed to continuing the mission of the Church.
 - Gratitude was expressed for Pope Francis and his openness with the Synod; yet family members in other dioceses have never heard of the Synod.
 - “There are too many “yes” responses protecting the institution; This happens in other denominations as well.”
 - It was asserted that the Church does not talk much about the Holy Spirit. Discernment of the Holy Spirit in the Church is needed for the lack of men’s vocations and diaconate program open to men and women.
 - We could be more inclusive with both married priests and women priests.
- 3) “The structure of family life is struggling.”
- Family catechesis is needed because parents have not received the formation they need in order to form their own children.
 - Families are thirsting for the faith.
 - More than one person mentioned the need to re-evaluate and rethink the process of faith formation, more along the line of family catechesis.
 - Clergy and laity must stay strong in Church teaching and in teaching the gospel.
- 4) Communication was mentioned:
- “We need good leaders that communicate with us and guide us.”
 - “The older generation wasn’t taught to think or communicate. They were taught not to question things.”
 - “The Church is transparent, and we have immediate access to documents or information.” Others agreed there is a lack of transparency in church structure. Why is it the way it is?
- 5) Several things were noted that I would group under the “life of the Church” in this question.
- People appreciate the liturgical uniformity of the Church – wherever you go throughout the world, the Mass is the Mass.
 - Abortion is a topic that is splitting the Church.
 - Someone said they feel like “a new energy is being breathed into the diocese.”
 - We need to be more welcoming; not being welcoming is a hinderance to the mission.
 - We need to use technology better and resources in the best possible way.

A Summary of Responses to the Second Guiding Question

How can the structure and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

- 1) The Structure of the Church needs to foster the culture of caring for each other.
 - Outreach in the care of others needs to be fostered and developed.
 - Church needs to evaluate where the needs are and how to address them.
 - We need to tell our story – to show people the amazing things the Church is doing in the care of others.
- 2) The organization of the Church has so many ministries, committees; not being efficient. Too busy with reports, not with what is important.
 - “Church structure needs a template so people can understand how the church is organized, so they know who to turn to in need or with questions.”
 - “There are some elements of the Church that people want to change that shouldn’t be changed, as well as a “soft-sell” on some important elements that should not be softened.”
 - Church rules; some can change but some cannot.
 - We need to learn about charisms. People don’t know or realize their gifts.
 - We need to do better at fellowship and hospitality.
 - Small groups are a gift in the Church; Faith is nourished organically, by others.
 - We need clarity. What is the mission? How do we work towards the mission.
- 3) How to build up the Church?
 - We must foster the wise and practical use of social media.
 - We must preach our baptismal call and teach it!
 - We should approach parish life from a family perspective, small communities of the faithful gathered.
 - We should prayerfully discern what is to be done and then do it.

Comments about this experience

The overall sentiment is that people are grateful for the opportunity to discuss these matters in the life of the Church. Understanding synodality is going to take some time. It seems that even among those who participated in these listening sessions, it will take some time for them to grasp the breadth and significance of synodality. At the same time, among all who participated there is a yearning for greater vitality in the church at all levels. Some hope that it may come about because we are all talking about our lived experience of the Church by means of these synodal listening sessions. How we learn synodality will best take place from engaging people in the synodal method.