



On 24th May 2021 over 100 people met on Zoom to take part in a webinar organised by the AMRI Lay Mission Committee entitled:

We Need to Talk!

A discussion around a national voice for laity within the Irish Church

As part of this webinar, participants had the opportunity to reflect and discuss their experiences and views in facilitated break out groups. This document collates and summarises these small group conversations. It provides a snapshot capturing the many diverse views and opinions expressed by a large group in one Zoom meeting.

What is captured below is taken directly from the facilitators feedback. The comments have been grouped into headings for ease of reading and to see common threads.

The areas of discussion can be grouped under the following headings:

1. General Reflections
2. The need for an inclusive Church
3. Access
4. Frustrations
5. Reimagining the Church
6. Capacity building
7. Communication/Dialogue/Sharing Information
8. Embracing Change
9. The Synod and a national voice for laity
10. Networking and working together

GENERAL REFLECTIONS

The preparation for an Irish Synod is a chance to start anew, a fire! Let it take off. We should be optimistic, hopeful, positive. The Synod is like a breath of the Spirit drawing inspiration from Pope Francis. The Pope reminds us that synodality is a process, a journey and requires trust. As laypeople we want to engage in this process. It is wonderful that lay people are interested enough to hold an online event such as this.

“Jesus is alive in lives of the people.

May we always remain committed to the Gospel.”

The opening presentation by Shane Halpin explained clearly why structure is important in beginning this process. The cumbersome structure of our church weighs heavily, and it is very difficult for the laity to get a voice at the table. Before we can talk about renewal, we need to reform the structure. Current structure where laity are on the margins is feudal, like vassals outside the castle walls with no guarantee of being heard. Nowhere was/is there a voice for the people, unless we are part of some working group.

Shane’s image of the ‘inverted pyramid’ is so important, however the non-churchgoing laity are the biggest cohort – doesn’t that tell us something about the lack of being heard? While it is tempting to talk about big issues or the universal church, we need to talk about Ireland; about our wounds, apathy, stories. There is a lot of hurt, pain and suffering in our Church. Structure matters but we also need to get beyond the layers. We need to remove and heal the hearts of stone. The Church is clericalized. All challenges are compounded by the problem of clericalism. Culture flows from structure.

“...the Holy Spirit can do more than we realise.”

Let us not rush to healing without looking at justice - don’t let us duck the hard questions. The only way to make the ‘inverted pyramid’ real is to place the emphasis on Jesus. His vision was more like the inverted pyramid model for society.

THE NEED FOR AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH

The greatest need is for an inclusive Church where we are all equal. We believe that all are welcome at the table, but not all can sit at the table. Equality and inclusivity are the key.

The faith is there in the people of God, but there is no public forum. There needs to be a local forum, just like in the early Christian communities. Inclusive decision-making always requires listening. We need to offer hospitality, and a listening ear. When we talk about the laity, most of those involved in Church are female, yet the structure is patriarchal. As a woman, where do I fit in? Women want the inclusion and equality that was given to them through baptism. We need to facilitate more inclusive structures as currently the Church is perceived as exclusive, and male dominated. There is a need for gender balance. We need a remodelling of the church - we want to be church together where all are equal.

“If we are to understand ourselves as equal,
then we must have an equal voice. We need a strategy together.
Without strategy we cannot move forward.”

ACCESS

Access is huge. People do not feel heard, respected and they want to be taken seriously. Clerical grace and favour can give a lay person the sense that they are being taken seriously, but when a priest moves, the invitation goes too.

“Ultimately all authority is clerical and that’s not ok.”

Not acknowledging that all authority is clerical damages any process of consultation. We need to move the barriers to inclusion – it is difficult to get access past the gatekeepers. We need to acknowledge gatekeeping, that information is getting stuck and not shared. Since when is it the responsibility of the excluded to remove the barriers themselves?

A weakness to change and access within the church ‘structure’ is the Curia. Bishops need to let go of control totally. The structure has so much control and keeps going around in circles – how can we go forward with this current structure? “The root rot needs to be cut out”. The structure needs to change.

FRUSTRATIONS

It is essential that priests be willing to stand back. Many laypeople are willing and capable but are simply not allowed to get involved. However, we must remember that it is also a two-way street – often bishops and priests ask for input and are ignored by the laity. People self-exclude too. By Baptism, we share in the priestly, kingly and prophetic ministry of Christ. In Confirmation our gifts are enabled by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Then we are simply ignored! There is a total dismissal of the voice of the laity. Assumption that asking some lay people (PPCs) means consultation isn't true. The institution does not take its own sacraments seriously. The hierarchy only knows how to condemn, it has no understanding of pastoral care. What we profess and what we believe is not behaviourally acted out by the institutional structures. There is nobody under 30 on this Zoom;

“we are an aging, tired and stagnant laity.”

The laity are educated in theology and liturgy. Priests and clergy are meant to ‘serve the people’ not the people serve the clergy. We always mention ‘the excluded’ but what do we mean and do we really accept the excluded person? Are we truly receptive of the whole People of God?

“The game is up in relation to clerical vocations, so we need to explore whether this is the Holy Spirit at work? Are we being called to something different?”

We are a people of faith and hope so should not be negative. We had hope for Vatican II, but 60 years later it feels like nothing has happened. Where are the young people? Many are totally preoccupied with one issue: how are they going to be able to buy a house. The church seldom speaks into this debate, or on other issues that concern young people.

RE-IMAGINING THE CHURCH

What is the purpose of the church? Is it just about the sacraments? We need to get rid of dogma and create a new theology – care of the earth spirituality. I don't know where we go with the *Vision*. In today's Ireland, how do you actually get people together? If we are going to train lay people for ministry, we must first ask what the vision for their future role is. Then we can train them for a specific role. But there is no vision! What will the future look like?

“It is not a question of women/doctrine/structural change....

It is about who we want to *be* in 10/15 years' time.”

The future has to be about people gathering. For example, I brought my children to see the Pope [in Dublin]. They loved it. Church has to become more about what happens outside the building, beyond just the blessing of the graves! It has to be about people, people of joy. There is no fun in 'church' anymore! There's no craic!

We talked about the re-empowering of the existing diocesan structures, but the seeds of growth often spring from outside the more formal structures. What sort of an 'ice-breaker' would bring people together to start off this process? It could happen with clustered parishes, or with Life in the Spirit Seminars - but you need to call them something different.

I have an image of the early Celtic church – building a literal City of God – building it locally and then networking locally about what they were doing. People felt on-board, they had ownership, because there was no hierarchy among them. They were communities based on equality and brimming with joy.

We can focus on environmental issues – people expect to hear more from the church on *Laudato Si'* etc. Young people are speaking on it, and it is a religious experience to witness their passion. “Thou shall renew the face of the earth” is so well expressed when you see them campaigning. Rooted in scripture and prayer, the growth of small Christian communities that focus on who we serve and what we do. Small groups coming together for listening and discernment, with respect, and no judgement. Be open to letting go of control of the outcome– let the Holy Spirit do its work (discernment approach may be a helpful and inclusive approach given the quite polarised

views of the very right-wing conservative element and the more liberal groupings). Something may emerge from this – one person described it as ‘the message emerging’. Small groups tap into ‘lived experience’ more easily as trust is perhaps built faster than in big ‘assembly’ type groupings where the loudest voices are often the ones with the microphone. Generally the idea of a national assembly or something similar wasn’t favoured. Use the new media like zoom and MS Teams to connect people all over – people may find it a ‘safer space’ than meeting up in person with strangers. We have spent too much time as church in the Church building, so we need to go out into the community - into school, marginalised groups, development etc.

“We need the religious to be more visible as they model the values that are needed in today’s world – don’t hide away, though we understand how difficult it must be for sisters and brothers in today’s climate.”

CAPACITY BUILDING:

We should look outside the church in Ireland: we need to reach out to other parts of the world to know and learn from their experiences. The Irish church has not modernised: need for capacity building and updating of skills for clergy and laity - shocked at how overworked the clergy are in Ireland.

“How sad is it that change will only begin when there is nobody left among clergy to do the job?”

Lay people are qualified through our baptism. There is a big question around resources for lay people, around how it can be done? There is no vision for it. People have to be trained to prepare them for ministry. There is a need to support the laity in catechetics: need to update the ways that sacraments of confirmation/communion are taught - children are often not ready; parents often are not involved and volunteers are left alone with no support from the Church.

COMMUNICATION/DIALOGUE/SHARING INFORMATION

People are really annoyed at how hard it is to find out what's happening in parish and in the national scene - the church is secretive, and communication is poor. From parish newsletters to bishops' requests for input (ending at Pentecost), people are not hearing, not feeling included or taken seriously. Currently working as 2 separate groups – the laity and the clergy – there should be just one group. ACI (association of Catholics in Ireland) have a good process - Inform (talks about synod), engage up (responded to bishops invite re synod) and engage out (diocesan, PPC requests - also challenging when only PPC is consulted, not laity)

EMBRACE CHANGE:

“We have to embrace the importance of letting go; the process of letting go can give us energy. Only then can we get excited about something new.”

As a group we need to accept that change needs to happen and that all laity within the church know this and must also change. Zoom is a great way of reaching out to all laity within Ireland and overseas, provides an opportunity for regular meetings with people more widely and with other parishes and dioceses in Ireland and overseas. The laity could play a role in the appointment of bishops and would vote for a pastoral bishop, not doctors of canon law.

THE SYNOD AND A NATIONAL VOICE FOR LAITY

A national voice for laity is an excellent idea. It is important to get representation of all laity. If it is left to the Bishops, only 20% will be included. Involve different interest groups e.g. divorced/separated Catholic; LGBT Catholics, etc. Use Citizen's Assembly process but for an assembly of the People of God. Be sure to pick up on the large percentage of the population who claim to be Catholics but don't feel included. A market survey was suggested for selection process. All groups and sectors who want to be included should have a voice. Move from language of Synod to Assembly. German example of a Full Assembly of people. How will people know about this opportunity to have a voice? It needs to be advertised in the media. We need to activate a life-giving church – with small groups sharing faith and taking care of each other.

There needs to be a listening exercise with the marginalised in our society. We need many different channels /forums to allow for the many voices. Those who are in the church, those who are catholic in name only, the homeless, the migrant, the travellers, the youth. Whatever forum/vehicle/process is engaged in - it must be representative and inclusive from the start. Its membership must stretch across age, gender, socio-economic realities etc. Every parish needs open parish assemblies that begin conversations now. Religious are also lay and have much experience of the synodality process.

“The Synod is the church’s best kept secret – surprised at the lack of awareness among the laity.”

The parish is where this needs to begin and parishes are not talking to their parishioners about this. Bishops must make parishes accountable for this. If we leave it [Synod] to the bishops’ are we opting out of something that we should be doing. We should take matters into our own hands and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us. If we have to ask permission then we can do nothing.

NETWORKING AND WORKING TOGETHER

A working group could be formed by the laity in June, made from volunteers. We need to network with the voices that are already out there. There are so many groups, many already meeting weekly to share the Word. It works as a model because each participant has an equal voice. For real renewal to take place, groups should be meeting and working together.

I have this image of the first Apostles gathered in a room, terrified, until the Holy Spirit descends upon them. Local empowerment happens at local level. We must recognize the value of coming together locally to pray together, then networking out of that local faith group experience.