



On 16th November 2021 over 175 people met on zoom to take part in a Webinar organised by the AMRI Lay Mission Committee entitled:

We Need to Talk 2!

Introduction – from the AMRI Lay Mission Committee

This webinar was the second in a series of webinars from the AMRI Lay Mission Committee to explore the synodal process and what difference it might make to the role of lay people in the Church. Our aim was to explore understandings and experiences of synodality and to identify key issues as stepping stones along the synodal path.

At the webinar, the opening panel discussion tried to be representative of a range of views in the Irish Church – male and female, reform and traditional, Irish and global, lay and hierarchical. It could not encompass the rich tapestry of views of all the baptised but provided some balance that will be important to hold going forward in what the AMRI Lay Mission Committee hope will be an inclusive process. We are grateful to the panellists and chair for providing the springboard for the discussions that ensued.

We hope the feedback adequately reflects the discussion in the small groups. Your feedback inspires hope and raises concerns. It surfaces some of the key issues that will need to be addressed in the synodal pathways (both the Irish Synod and the global Synod on synodality): the nature of deep listening; being inclusive of all the baptised and acknowledging diversity; the need to more fully understand what a synod is; the importance of the language we use; the role of women in the Church; the evolving role of leadership locally and nationally; not being afraid of the difficult issues and challenges; the need for faith formation and recognising synodality as a way of being and doing mission. And much more! We are grateful to the facilitators in the small groups for capturing the insights and for the overall facilitator on the night who so ably kept us all on course.

This document attempts to collate and summarise these small group conversations. It tries to provide a snapshot capturing the many diverse views and opinions expressed by a large group in one Zoom meeting. What is captured below is taken from the facilitators feedback notes. 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. Real Listening & Discernment
2. Groups being left out – voices not heard
3. Comments about the Synod
4. Inclusivity & Diversity
5. Caring and compassionate Church
6. Use of Language & Communication
7. Leadership
8. Addressing Challenges
9. Positive engagement & hope
10. Small Christian Communities of faith & importance of small groups
11. Faith Formation
12. Mission & Cultural Awareness in spreading the gospel

Real listening & Discernment

We need to listen more to our inner voice and not just say that we always did it that way, we need to be open to new things and be surprised. We also need to listen to each other, trusting each other and allow for each of us to be participate where there is a communion of relationships where everyone has a voice, openness, talk, listening and hearing from each other. This kind of listening could be translated as “realizing that there is more than, just, our own story”

‘Your own story isn’t the only story’

Perhaps I need to listen more attentively to the voices of more traditional Catholics around me – they may see things differently. Continue to listen to each other’s stories. The path of a renewed Church would best be found through listening to and discerning the will of the Holy Spirit for the Church. Reference was made to an article in The Furrow by Brian Grogan, S.J. titled “Give the Spirit the mic” which is an excellent, accessible and humorous resource on synodality and also the Association of Catholics and WAC are holding zoom sessions on the subject of synodality – refer to their respective websites.

There is a question as to whether or not we really know how to listen and that we need some exposure to the “mechanics” of listening. Unless we learn to really listen to each other, there is a danger of the Church becoming as divided as much of society. We need to learn to listen in a Christian way. What is important is what unifies people in parishes today on their journey. For some people today, they are attracted to social justice and environmental issues on their journey. All voices need to be heard and listened to in a non-judgmental manner. All contributions passed on – unedited. Learning by doing and listening to the monologues, dialogues, challenging and accordant voices. Listening to the Spirit by all is key as well as asking where does Jesus fit into all of this?

Groups being left out – voices not being heard

Some groups are being left out or are not being heard including our younger generation, LGBT groups and people who feel disconnected from the Church. Many are made to feel inadequate and excluded and some have not heard about the synodal process in their parish.

Women religious have been ignored and groups not invited and a greater effort is needed to include those at the margins. The culture of clericalism must go in respect of the need for a 50/50 gender representation in the Church. Some are looking for a different church where women (including religious women) would be listened to as they were the ones doing the work. For young people (under 35) the Church is just not relevant.

‘the Church is just not relevant’

Local parish engagement needs to be accessible for all - not just chosen few, the regulars and the PPC. Feedback in groups is controlled by the PP and sent to the diocese and the bishop decides what goes forward.

Comments about the Synod

What is a Synod? What is the Synodal pathway? What is the difference? Will this Synod really make a difference to people in how they practice their faith? Is everything on the table for discussion? Will it be completely open? I realise that I have a personal responsibility, but I need clarity of what is being asked. Many feel that “we heard all this before—a few times” and some are feeling a little cynical about it – like here we go again. It appears that people give views and not much, if anything changes. Voice of lay people are generally at a low level in Ireland.

Some would like to think that that lay people can be really part of the synodal process. This is already the Synod – a diverse gathering here tonight – but united and desiring to be church. Change is possible. Covid has shown that. Would we be meeting like this on Zoom were it not so?

‘Will it be completely open?’

There is a fear for some of breaking apart and losing some good traditions and continuity with the past is important. There is need for good administration and structure at parish level as not having everything depending upon the priest in the parish. Allowing smaller groups in parishes /communities to gather and make their contribution - not just the ones gathered by the PP is important.

There needs to be a defined person/persons employed at the Bishops’ Conference and/or AMRI (may be even jointly working together!) to receive feedback, offer formation to diocesan/group leads, to be the face of the synodal pathway, we need to invest time,

resources, energy, personnel into this to give the process the best chance to engage the majority of people both within and outside the formal Church structures

The proposed Synod is a great opportunity to revive the Irish Church and enable it to serve the community of the Faithful, but it is in grave danger of being squandered unless there is an authentic dialogue process put in place which involves communal/private prayer, understanding that dialogue is a contemplative/meditative practice and a learned capacity, that meetings should include time for that silent communion in the Spirit of Christ, which is the hallmark of true contemplation, includes active fellowship and faith sharing, reflective listening with respect, that the Spirit of Christ waits between the words and participant's should be willing to learn the principles of authentic dialogue.

Inclusivity & Diversity

It is important to have a plurality of approaches with regards to participation - nobody is limited to just one way of participating. We can learn from the experiences of lay involvement in the Church in Nigeria. The Church needed to revisit the Synod prayer especially where it uses the terms ignorance and sinners in connection with ordinary people.

'nobody is limited to just one way of participating'

The sense of inclusivity means balancing topics which may cause unease/discomfort. We need to explore the participation by many in a decision-making process that allows the relevant person/group to make an informed decision.

Caring and compassionate Church

It's important to enable people to articulate what they believe in and say what they think. Some have a feeling of being marginalized even though, outwardly, people might assume that they are very involved in the Church. Some do not experience care from the Church community at a difficult time during their life.

"What is life like for you?"

While people do express empathy, we need to get to the core of the Christian message ie that we should care for each other. Such caring might be as simple as people asking someone in difficulty "What is life like for you?"

Use of Language

Plain language should be used about the Synod that is easily understood by all as the word "synodality" has little meaning for most people. The experience of those preparing children for sacraments find that there is a gap between "Church" language and that of the young people. Faith language must relate to people's experience – process, encounter, listening,

self-determination; warm relationships where the language of salvation makes sense. The language of a personal faith journey is important.

‘We have to widen the entry point into the language of faith’

We have to widen the entry point into the language of faith and speak the same language as people. The Church needs to simplify her language especially for the sake of the younger people. There is a loss of language of faith in our society – we need to engage in new language to encourage participation by all people. The experience of watching online masses and the online world has opened up a whole new world now and shows that there is a need for a new language for the next generation as well as faith formation. The Church to communicate better with people through the media and other means. As things stand, there appears to be a need to know basis culture. Perhaps lay people, using a business term, need to be the Church’s marketing medium.

Leadership

Where is the Holy Spirit leading the Church? Look at the Acts of the Apostles for the model of early Church. The Holy Spirit speaks to all of us – important that lay people claim their space in the Church and assert what we are – let us live it as if that is the case. A new Church is emerging – let all of us take on a leadership role. Have not heard anything from the pulpit on the Synod - or on the pope! There needs to be leadership on the ground from clergy as well.

‘important that lay people claim their space in the Church and assert what we are – let us live it as if that is the case’

We need parish leadership to begin to speak of synodality and we need to begin to experience it locally in order to learn by doing. In order to empower people, there must be a clear vision for its people who can articulate their unique calling and common identity through baptism. Out of this there needs to be a raising up of lay-Christian leaders that can help facilitate the establishment of house-gatherings such as described in The Acts of the Apostles. We can learn from the Church of Ireland – perhaps engage them as our facilitators. They have vast experience of the Synod way.

Addressing Challenges

Getting people to want to help is difficult – many feel that they have been down this road before. How do we move this (discussion about synod) down to people and get their opinions? Bishops have to try to be on the same level as us. People are so disengaged, a legacy of the past, what comes first engagement and then faith or faith then engagement? We need for people to experience the spiritual - to be transformed as only then will we get motivated eager and enthusiastic engagement. So, empowerment by the Holy Spirit is a key

element of this process. The Irish church has been shaped by institution - not the gospel – we need society to acknowledge that.

‘The Irish church has been shaped by institution - not the gospel’....

The future of the Church could become a more interfaith Church. It’s time to call out the archaic mystical approach of the Church in liturgy and the clericalisation of some of the sacraments such as marriage. Living the Gospel and in doing it in our daily lives.

Positive engagement & hope

Get people to articulate what they believe in and say what they think is important. People involved in exciting projects in communities can be asked to engage. Listen to people without conditions and no agenda. Its positive that more bishops are attending these webinars around discussing synod. How I experience Church is important and see Christ in all of this? Some were struck by the passion that exists in this gathering for Christianity. The webinar has broadened my understanding of what the Synod is – not just something to be done a parish level. Dioceses needs to get people involved and encourage engagement. PPC will probably be the starting point, being much more involved in the liturgy would be a great starting point. Guidelines need to be produced for engagement. The role of the Spirit, the openness of the conversation and the positive atmosphere of the panel discussion.

‘Dare to feel excited about the Synod’

Let us not forget that there are so many ‘shades’ (ie levels of connection/involvement) of church members out there. There is desire to keep tonight’s momentum going (referring to the webinar). Some felt a sense of excitement and hope – becoming more mature and coming to discern for ourselves: an inversion of the traditional hierarchical model. Dare to feel excited about the Synod.

Small Christian Communities of faith & importance of Small Groups

There is a desire out there to join some likeminded groups that might involve study and prayer and if there is no such group in the area that we could/should attempt to form one. Small communities are the way to go but the organisation in the Church structures is the problem. Future is ‘bottom up’ approach via basic Christian communities.

‘Future is ‘bottom up’”

Faith in Christ is all changing and invites complete conversion, small groups meeting and sharing like in the early church, one heart one soul in communion in the here and now, not

having to wait for any Synod to start. I believe these small groups, which were already mentioned in the initial AMRI meeting, will be the places where the Holy Spirit will move to convict, refresh and reinvigorate the laity and the wider Church.

Faith Formation

Sometimes we feel that the Lord is looking down on us as we run around in circles with the next 'new' thing when in fact Jesus spoke the same truths all those years ago on the road to Emmaus – a personal relationship with the Lord puts things in perspective. Affirmation of the importance of prayer and what would take me forward in this process- Relationship of the Trinity, need to re-examine the rules and ask are they fit for purpose. Catechism and it's importance in involving lay people. Some had concerns with a lack of tools for our schools and sacramental preparation. We have to be honest and transparent about the inability of schools to form faith - without role of families being advanced in Catholic schools. In regard to synodality we need faith formation for parishioners that begins with accessible and familiar language and that opens up an entry route that can be built upon.

'we need faith formation for parishioners'

We need faith formation for all to enable full participation – what is a Synod? Need to understand the difference between the call and invitation to Synod from Pope Francis and the call from the Irish Bishops? There is a tension within the church itself which inhibits faith formation.

Mission & Cultural awareness in spreading the gospel

"Bringing Church close to the people". The greatest resource the Church still has are the people in it however many feel abandoned, especially women, who are not 'yet' seeing their contributions acknowledged as active and equal members of the Church in decisions that affect their lives. To move forward and bring the Church closer to the people, the Church must help to establish and facilitate centres of training throughout each diocese for women and men. This should lead to a greater flourishing of leadership such as in catechesis, sacramental preparation and youth ministry.

'bring the Church closer to the people'

A real genuine invitation, extending beyond the practicing, to reach all people, this is the starting point. How do persecuted Christians express their faith? The question "What is the target and focus" of the meeting. Given, the fact that many of the people present had worked in other cultures, surprise was expressed that there was not more of a focus on how people spread the message of the gospel when working in other cultures

Conclusion – Next Steps

The AMRI Lay Mission Committee is very grateful to all of the participants for sharing your views. This document will help inform the drafting of a submission to the Irish synodal committee and we hope to the Synod on Synodality (We are figuring out the procedure for this one!). We will gladly share a draft with you in advance of submitting it. We plan to hold another webinar based on the feedback and your views on the themes would be welcome. Meanwhile, we continue on the path to a synodal Church.