



Synodality: A Submission from AMRI Lay Mission Committee May 2022

1. The Journey

The Lay Mission Committee is an official committee of the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI) whose aim is to recognize and promote the role and voice of lay people within the Irish missionary sector and within the Irish Church. Its members consist of men and women, lay and some religious active in lay mission and advocacy at home and abroad.

Following discernment in early 2021 around the future direction of the committee, the group focused on the need for a conversational space for Catholics in Ireland in relation to the forthcoming Synod and agreed to develop a series of webinars:

- a) to explore a national voice for lay people and how laypeople can contribute to a more inclusive and flourishing Church in Ireland;
- b) to explore the difference the synodal process might make to the role of lay people in Ireland;
- c) to look at how the role and voice of women can inspire the decision making and re-imagining of the Church in Ireland.

These webinars, attended by over 300 people in total, provided a space in which people of faith could share their thoughts, ideas and hopes for a different kind of Church in Ireland and to dare to dream, following the example of Pope Francis in his book 'Let us Dream – A path to a better future'. Each webinar began with prayer to the Holy Spirit, to invoke a sense of listening to each other and to God. Then in response to input from invited speakers, all participants were given the opportunity to join in small group conversations and reflect on what was heard and what they understood to be the key issues. These discussions occurred in a spirit of deep listening with moderators and facilitators in place to ensure as far as possible that all

voices could be heard within each group. What was interesting was the intent with which facilitators tried to really listen to each of the group's conversations and to record the key points being made. The positive energy in the group and the level of engagement showed that there is a hunger among laypeople for the renewal of the Church.

Some of recurring themes in the small group discussion were:

- The desire for a more inclusive Church where all members feel equally valued
- The desire for real listening and discernment
- The importance of gospel values and opportunities for faith and life sharing
- Present Church structure needs changing
- The need to reach out to those who don't feel welcome
- The marginalisation of women within Church structures
- The importance of laypeople claiming their place in the Church.

What follows is a taste of the feedback from the small group conversations which occurred during three webinars.

2. Areas of commonality

Webinar 1- Single input followed by discussion - A national Voice for Laity - Creating a more inclusive and flourishing Church

- Structure is important, without proper structure, decisions made by the few can have a disproportionate affect the lives of the many. "Nothing about us without us" is a call for greater inclusion, listening to the experience of laypeople, and a better understanding of the lived lives of all the baptised.
- The early Christian communities were anchored in the message of the Gospel. The Synod provides us with a great opportunity to reflect and listen to each other about our hopes and dreams for a different kind of Church for now and the future, based on Gospel values. God speaks to us, all the time, right down through the ages and today through the people of God and especially through prophetic voices which are often ignored.

- The voice of laity is heard but so often not valued or acted upon. Lay people feel side-lined and ignored, often resulting in disengagement and apathy, a scourge of our Irish Church. We are all called to be missionaries and for many of us, we resist this calling, either because we feel excluded in our Church, or we do not feel confident, or we feel suffocated in our faith community, or we pass this calling to someone else! How the Church is structured does not support or facilitate laypeople to recognize or answer this call to mission. We become conditioned to passivity with no real invitation or opportunity for sharing our faith and learning from and supporting each other.
- Imagine having a more inclusive Church in Ireland where we are all equal. We may believe that all are welcome at the table, but not all can sit at the table. The cumbersome structure of our Church weighs heavily, and it is very difficult for the laity to get a voice at the table especially in a patriarchal structure. Secular models exist where decision making is inclusive, why not in our Church? Therefore, we believe that a lot of work needs to be done at grassroots level by all, to create truly listening spaces immersed in Gospel values where people can feel at home and where Catholics can truly contribute to a flourishing Church. This will require a major shift of attitude by all of us: laity, religious, priests and the hierarchy.
- There is some truth in the fact that the Church in Ireland has been shaped by the institution rather than the gospel. While we deeply acknowledge that clergy do provide leadership and spiritual support to people every day; clericalism often becomes a major barrier which prevents Catholics from being heard, respected, and taken seriously.
- The future of the Church in Ireland might be centred on small groups coming together rooted in the Gospel, outside the walls of Church buildings. This will require a re-imagining of the Church where all the baptised take more ownership of their faith communities and where priests and religious can play key roles in facilitating this process working alongside lay Catholics in real partnership, sharing their gifts for the good of all.
- Overworking the clergy is not a sustainable way to maintain the Church in Ireland. There is need for greater sharing of the responsibilities of ministry. We can look outside the Church in Ireland to other parts of the world, to

Africa, Asia and South America and learn from their experiences where evangelisation is largely done by catechists and lay people. Perhaps a capacity building programme for laypeople which has already begun in a small number of dioceses in Ireland but has not been broadly accepted or understood by many Catholics, is required?

- Upskilling in better communication strategies is key for dioceses and parishes and this will require using technology in a smart way. Conveying important information in a timely manner is essential to allowing Catholics have access to information about events, programmes and is critical for the growth a truly inclusive Church. Catholic social teaching is one of the greatest secrets in the Church and most people are unaware of it in Ireland.
- The absence of a national voice that is truly representative of all Catholics in Ireland is a barrier to creating an inclusive and flourishing Church. We recognise that the voices of those on the margins of society are not truly heard in the Catholic Church in Ireland although this is slowly changing. The Gospel continues to challenge us to reach out to those who are perceived as 'other'. Jesus himself continually pushed the boundaries and went against the prevailing religious culture and societal norms of his time, in engaging with people on the margins.

Webinar 2 – Panel of 4 - laywoman, layman, religious sister, and a bishop chaired by a laywoman, try to answer the question - What difference the synod process might make to the role of lay people in the Church?

- The synod process can potentially help us to create a spirit of real listening and where true discernment can take place. This will only happen when all voices are heard and listened to in a non-judgmental way. Efforts need to be made in a strategic manner to make space for groups of people who feel left out as well as for people whose voices are not yet heard; people who feel disconnected from the Church and people who feel excluded by the language of the Church.
- It is very clear that a collective approach by all is necessary to enable this to happen and to start from where people are at. By practicing synodality and

tuning to where people are at right now, could be transformative and create opportunities for a more inclusive Church to emerge and different ways of living out our faith. It is important to have a plurality of approaches with regards to participation.

- Living out the gospel in a caring and compassionate way can be as simple as asking someone 'What is life like for you today?'
- We must widen the entry point into the language of faith and speak the same language as 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. There is a loss of the language of faith in our society – could we engage in a new language to encourage greater participation?
- It is 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 so that parishioners experience it locally and learn by doing. To empower people, Church leaders must have a clear vision for people to encourage them to articulate their unique calling and common identity through baptism.
- There has been a steady decline in life changing faith formation within our education system and within our parish communities. The tradition of passing on the faith is diminishing, and Sunday Mass observance alone is unable to sustain it. Faith formation is necessary for true participation in Church and small faith groups have a key role to play. With trained lay leaders in parishes, hopefully people will experience a closer Church which is connected with their everyday lives.
- There is clear evidence to show that the Irish Church has been shaped by the institution and not the Gospel. So how can we move beyond the institution to creating faith communities centred around the message of the Gospel while still maintaining the rich traditions of the Church?

Webinar 3 – A panel of three lay women and one religious sister explore - How can the role and voice of women inspire the decision making and re-imagining of the Church in Ireland?

- The global synod gives us all the opportunity in a focused way to speak to the changes which are necessary to create a more inclusive Church for all and especially for women's participation in the Church.
- Many women are claiming this space despite experiences of exclusion in a Church largely controlled by men. It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus always included everyone, women and men and reached out to break the restricting boundaries of his religious and societal culture over 2000 years ago.
- Women generally, and in Ireland in particular, have had quite a raw deal over the years in terms of provision of healthcare, equal access opportunities, pay parity, gender discrimination etc. The Church - priests and laity - need to engage with this inequality as part of a process of ongoing inclusion and reform.
- Women and men by virtue of baptism, all share in the priesthood of Christ. The male-dominated hierarchical structure of the Church is an inherent form of exclusion for women in the Church.
- Women are not being given positions in the Church which they feel called to and deserve based on merit. This is discrimination and would not be tolerated in any other organization in the modern world. Decision making structures need to include women at the highest level. There has been no serious culture of debate, dialogue or listening in the Catholic Church on the issue of women's full participation in the Catholic Church. We welcome the recent dialogue between women religious and bishops in Ireland.
- The Church is present and experienced in a profound way in the community of the faithful and how we treat each other. The structures of the Church could reflect this by creating a spirit and culture of inclusivity for all.

All the speakers talked about how important the family was to their faith development growing up, and the role that women play within the family cannot be over emphasised.

3. Prophetic voices – out of tune voices

- The idea of the Church in service to the society of our time that is not inwardly focusing on itself and its structures, but outwardly discerning the movement and ongoing revelation of the Holy Spirit and reading the signs of the times, promoting what is in keeping with the word of God and critiquing that which is not.

4. Conclusion

The hosting of the three webinars by the AMRI Lay Mission Committee was an exercise in synodality. This experience of meeting online and sharing together about important matters of our faith and the future of our Church was energizing and challenging for all involved. They were privileged Spirit inspired moments. However, the lay mission committee are conscious that not all members of the Church have been able or are willing to avail of such opportunities. Synodality can be a pathway to a better future, to be a Church as an inclusive community where the love of God can be experienced in people's lives. Synodality is above all about hopes and dreams, that once expressed need to be nourished and treated with tender care so that through honest dialogue they can flourish and become a reality.