



Synthesis of the Synod on Synodality in the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky

The experience of the Synod on Synodality in the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky has been prayerful, Spirit-led, and an overall healthy experience for the life of our diocesan Church. At the beginning of the process, we encountered some hesitancy on the part of some to participate, citing their belief that they would not truly be heard and that nothing would change as a result of the listening process. At the conclusion of the listening, participants universally expressed their appreciation for the effort to include them in the conversation and they expressed their hope that the listening and participation would continue.

Our desire would certainly be for more people to have participated in the process. However, we were very pleased that approximately 1,000 people participated in person in some form in the listening sessions conducted in the Diocese. Another 406 individuals participated by submitting their input online. Many voices were heard reflecting a myriad of experiences, hurts, joys, concerns, and dreams for our Church. Throughout all of the listening, it was clear that people

love their Church, love their God, and are passionate in their dreams for how we can grow together.

HISTORY OF SYNODALITY IN THE DIOCESE OF OWENSBORO

The process of being a listening diocesan church does not begin and end with the Synod on Synodality. We have a strong history of listening to the People of God over the years.

- In 1991, the third bishop of Owensboro, Bishop John McRaith, convened a diocesan synod. The dialogue and listening that happened became the core information to set forth planning for the diocese.
- In preparation for the second Synod on the Family in 2014-15, the diocese held open regional listening sessions. Over 600 people participated in these sessions. The first Synod on the Family had generated both affirming and sensational media attention. There were voices speaking concerns that the Church may be contemplating changing church teaching in areas such as the permanence of marriage and same-sex attraction. Overwhelmingly though, participants were concerned that the Church listen to the lived experiences of contemporary men and women striving to live out vocations as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and single adults. The average participants were at midlife and older. They were concerned that their children and grandchildren were too often distanced from the Church. Special concern was expressed that people who had experienced divorce and remarriage felt unwelcome in the Church and most notably would not attend Mass if they were to be denied Holy Communion. The same concern was expressed for people in the LGBT community who felt unwelcomed by the Church.
- Listening sessions were also sponsored in preparation for the 2018 Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment. These sessions were focused toward youth and young adults. There was concern heard about the peer pressure that leads young people to see and experience the Church as irrelevant. There was an affirmation of the often-heard maxim that young people are “spiritual but not religious.” Clearly, the institutional Church was falling short of expectations to many of these generations.
- In 2018, when the Church was rocked by the scandal that unfolded in the wake of revelations about former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the diocese sponsored regional listening sessions with Bishop Medley in attendance. People rightfully expressed outrage at the mishandling of this decades-long scandal by U.S. bishops and Vatican officials and multiple contemporary popes. While painful to hear, these sessions were largely therapeutic for participants. No one left feeling the inadequacies of the hierarchy were excused, but they genuinely felt they had been heard.
- The Hispanic community in the Diocese of Owensboro has participated in four synod processes. Each of them involved a period of study, reflection and consultation in the parishes with Hispanic Ministry, followed by a diocesan gathering of delegates to discern the next steps together. The first was in preparation for the first National Encounter of

Hispanic Youth & Young Adult Ministry (2004-2006). The second was to discern priorities for the diocese's first pastoral plan for Hispanic Ministry which was promulgated in 2007. The third was leading up to the V National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry (2017-2020) and then to study the conclusions and discern priorities for the current diocesan pastoral plan for Hispanic Ministry (2021-2026).

The conclusion of the diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality leads us to the next phase in the Diocese of Owensboro – reflecting on what we have heard, discerning where the Holy Spirit is taking us as a diocesan church, and creating plans of action. We are committed to continuing the process of growing as a synodal church – a church that acknowledges the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in all baptized people and seeks to listen and to discern.

SYNOD ON SYNODALITY IN THE DIOCESE OF OWENSBORO

I. OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

Eleven women and men were appointed to serve as members of the Diocesan Synod Team reflecting a diversity of ages, ethnicities and cultures. The role of the Synod Team members included the development of the listening processes and resources for use in parishes and other groups. The Synod Team was also asked to attend as many listening sessions as possible in order to hear firsthand from the people of the Diocese. The most important role of the Synod Team has been their participation in the discernment of the movement of the Holy Spirit based upon all that was heard as well as what we expected to hear but did not.

The Diocese contracted with Ministry Training Source to assist with Synod efforts. The work of Ministry Training Source included the following:

- conducting a retreat with the Diocesan Synod Team on the topic of discernment
- coding and assisting with the interpretation of data
- providing a two-day discernment retreat for the Diocesan Synod Team at the conclusion of all listening and in preparation for the writing of this synthesis

There were two phases of listening in the Diocese of Owensboro. We began with listening in parishes and other Catholic organizations and groups during the months of January and February. Then seven regional listening sessions were held in various locations across the Diocese during the month of March with the Bishop and members of the Diocesan Synod Team present at each.

II. PHASE I: PARISH (LOCAL) LISTENING SESSIONS

During the months of January and February 2022, sixty-six of our seventy-eight parishes conducted two-part listening sessions. Pope Francis has rightly emphasized the importance of hearing the voices of those on the periphery. One of our struggles was the issue of trying to

reach those people – the individuals and groups who would not be coming to any of our parishes to have their voices heard. To assist in our efforts to reach into the periphery, individuals who participated in the first parish listening sessions were provided with a tool and were asked to use that tool to have a conversation with someone on the periphery and then return to the second listening session to be the voice of that person and the vehicle for sharing that individual's concerns, hurts, questions and even prayer requests. Not all participants engaged in the periphery conversation, but many of those who did reported that it was a powerful and rewarding experience. For several, they had to go no further than their own family to speak with someone on the periphery.

Attendance at the parish listening sessions was typically light and the demographics were generally Caucasian individuals between the ages of 56-74. We were keenly aware of the lack of participation by younger people and by people of color.

Each pastor was strongly encouraged to involve his parish in the Synod process. The Diocese provided bulletin inserts, pulpit announcements, and social media blurbs. We also provided homily helps, Prayers of the Faithful and user-friendly resources for the listening sessions. Materials were made available for use with the young people of our parishes in youth groups or other settings. An online portal was provided for any individuals, including youth, who could not attend or did not want to attend a parish listening session. Four hundred six people chose to participate in this way.

In addition to listening in parishes, listening groups were also held in other places across the diocese to include religious communities, school children, youth, diocesan staff and priests.

III. PHASE II: REGIONAL LISTENING SESSIONS

Seven regional listening sessions were held across the diocese during the month of March 2022. Five of these were conducted in English, one in Spanish and one in Burmese. Bishop Medley along with members of the Diocesan Synod Team attended each session strictly for the purpose of being present to listen firsthand.

Three hundred twenty-one people attended the regional sessions. Once again the demographic was very much the same as what we saw on the parish or local level. Fifty percent of those who attended were between the ages of 56 and 74. Sixty percent were female and sixty-eight percent were Caucasian. Eighty percent of those who attended the regional listening sessions were active Catholics since birth who attend Mass regularly.

Given the exodus of younger people from our Church in general, it was certainly troubling to see them so grossly underrepresented in this synod process. The same is true for people of color as well as people who find themselves on the margins of the church for a variety of reasons.

Our efforts to reach deeper into the periphery were frustrated when an outbreak of powerful tornadoes in December 2021 affected our diocese, and our energies and attention were rightly devoted to responding to the devastation and the immediate needs of individuals. It is an ongoing question for us, however, of how to reach those whose voices are not being heard. The Synod on Synodality is a multiple year event encompassing local churches, national bishops' conferences, and finally the formal Synod of Bishops in 2023. We have come to realize that synodality is not an event but an integral part of being Church and hearing the Spirit-filled voices of all the People of God. Only with this conversation of heart will the Church remain attentive to all people, especially those on the margins of society and the Church. Our work in this area is inadequate. How do we reach our separated sisters and brothers, the poor, youth, racial/ethnic minorities, those in the LGBT community, divorced and remarried, inactive Catholics? This is a question that will guide our continuing efforts at being a synodal Church in the Diocese of Owensboro.

The general spirit of those who participated in the regional listening sessions was one of engagement and enthusiasm. Much of the work was done in small groups with reports made to the larger group. People were animated in their conversation. They were passionate, but respectful of one another, in voicing opinions and ideas. The opinions were wide-ranging and included those who long for a return to the traditional Latin Mass as well as those who would like to see women ordained to the priesthood. Despite being challenged by the varied opinions, there was no discernible negative tension among the participants at the regional listening sessions. The sessions were powerful experiences of listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through all the baptized.

The three questions that seemed to generate the most conversation at both the parish and regional listening sessions were:

- What do you treasure most about your faith?
- What breaks your heart?
- What are your dreams for the Church?

These three questions elicited some passionate responses.

IV. WHAT WE HEARD

We received 319 pages of input from the parish-level listening, another 91 pages from the seven regional-level listening sessions, and 813 pages of online input via our diocesan website. The topics covered were wide-ranging and the opinions expressed were varied. The following are some of the more commonly-heard sentiments, ideas, and opinions.

- It was a common occurrence to hear people express their heartbreak and dismay over the polarization and division felt in our society, our families, our communities, and in our Church. They expressed their longing for unity.
- In responding to the question, “What do you treasure most about your faith?” people would respond that the Eucharist and the sacramental life of the Church are its greatest treasures. Many responded that they value the universality of the liturgy. The rituals are comforting.
- At each regional listening session, people cited a lack of knowledge about their faith as the greatest stumbling block to sharing their faith with others. They followed this observation with a request for more adult faith formation. People seemed to be operating according to varying definitions of catechesis. Some saw it as information-based only with a focus on apologetics, and others spoke of opportunities for growth in a personal relationship with Christ and more familiarity with Scripture. Of course, both aspects are vital to the life of a missionary disciple.
- Participants expressed their desire for the Church to be hospitable and welcoming to all, while at the same time stating firmly that we should not water down or dilute the faith. This sentiment was primarily expressed with regard to individuals in the LGBT community. There is an uncomfortable dilemma for many who desire to honor and uphold Church teaching but, upon hearing the experiences of people, ask if there is something more the Church must understand in the 21st century in order to respond pastorally and with love.
- Some parents with children in the LGBT community made a plea that the Church instruct them in how to have a conversation with their child about their sexuality and gender identity and what the Church teaches.
- The annulment process was identified repeatedly as an obstacle for people preventing them from participating fully in the life of the Church. The annulment process was described as long, intrusive, and painful. Notably, many of those describing the annulment process were not necessarily people with first-hand experience of it. This speaks of a periphery we did not reach but must continue to seek out.
- In addressing the Church’s mission, it was often spoken of as those ministries that are exercised within the walls of their parish church. While these ministries are vital to the life of the Church, there were not many thoughts expressed about the mission of the Church in the world and about how each of us can live out that mission in our daily lives.
- People in general expressed a thirst for community, for belonging. Some participants expressed feeling on the outside of their Church community and expressed their desire for more opportunities for community-building outside the celebration of Sunday Mass.
- Concern was expressed that women do not generally hold decision-making roles in the Church, although Church employees and volunteers are largely female.
- In some of our parishes that enjoy a richness of diversity of cultures, many parishioners felt that their parish does a very good job of being welcoming and inclusive. Some

reported misunderstandings, conflicts between ministries, as well as cultural and language barriers. Others expressed concern that it seems that two cultures are simply living side by side within the parish but not truly integrating with one another.

- We repeatedly heard the concern that young people are leaving the Church at alarming rates. There seems to be a lack of a sense of relevance of the Church, or perhaps even of God, in their lives. A desire was expressed for more opportunities to help young people grow closer in their relationship with Jesus and to have a greater sense of belonging in their parish communities.
- Frustration was expressed about the lengthy RCIA process for someone desiring to join the Catholic Church. At the same time, people acknowledged the value of the process and its powerful impact stating that “everyone should go through RCIA”. This seems to reflect a hunger from people in general to go deeper in their faith and to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Participants referenced the COVID-19 pandemic and the Church’s response to it as having harmed our parish communities. In particular, some cited the harm caused by closing down churches for a time and expressed their frustration that the Church succumbed to civil authorities in making the decision to suspend the celebration of Mass. Many commented that some people have still not returned to Sunday Mass. There is a sense that our parish communities have been wounded by the pandemic and are still trying to recover.
- It was stated that the sexual abuse crisis has also wounded our Church. Some feel that the Church has handled the crisis well and are grateful that the Church’s safe environment efforts have put much needed safeguards in place that protect children. Others feel that much more could be done. All agree that the crisis has undoubtedly damaged the credibility of the Church and that some have left the Church because of it.

V. DISCERNMENT OF THE MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

At the conclusion of the listening, the Diocesan Synod Team along with Bishop Medley convened for a two-day retreat. The Team had previously been provided with all of the input from the parish-level listening as well as the regional-level listening. They had also been provided with coded data from Ministry Training Source. The purpose of the retreat was to prayerfully discern the voice of the Holy Spirit in what had been heard as well as what we expected to hear but did not.

As a result of this period of prayerful discernment and based upon what we heard from the People of God, the following were identified as areas where the Holy Spirit is calling us to more in the Diocese of Owensboro, in no particular order:

- **Listening / following the synodal path**

- People are longing to be heard. They want their pastoral leaders, in particular their pastors and Bishop Medley, to provide more opportunities for listening to their concerns, their hurts, and their dreams for the Church.
 - Too many voices are missing from the conversation. We need to find better ways to reach people on the peripheries. How do we reach people who, for many reasons, are not willing or able to come into our churches? We need to be more effective at this and more committed to our efforts.
 - Decision-making needs to be a more collaborative and far-reaching endeavor, inviting the input of the faithful in order to make the best decisions possible. We must grow in our ability and our willingness to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit in order to discern both personally and communally where the Spirit is leading.
- **Families**
 - The stability of the family is integral to healthy communities and to a healthy Church. However, families are being bombarded with multiple challenges. The Church needs to meet families in their lived experience, to do more to accompany families of all kinds and to provide them with support and resources.
 - We need to more effectively integrate youth and young adults into the life of the parish community, not through programming, but through connections and relationships and through opportunities for encounters with Jesus Christ.
 - The Church needs to better equip the family for intentional conversations about sexuality and gender.
 - Families need the support of the Church and of their peers in living out the call to holiness, deepening their relationship with Christ, and forming their children as people of faith who desire to know, love and serve Jesus Christ.
- **Leadership**
 - Ongoing support and formation is needed for priests, parish staffs and other pastoral leaders. Some particular areas in which to focus formation efforts include: working to become better listeners, accompaniment of one another, providing a culture of encountering one another and Jesus Christ, and evangelization.
 - Transitioning from one pastor to the next can be a difficult process for both the pastor and the parish community. Help is needed to facilitate the transition and to provide for good communication before and during the process of transition.
 - The laity need to be personally invited, encouraged, empowered and formed to share their gifts in ministry positions within the Church and, more importantly, for their role in living out their faith in their communities and families on a daily basis.

- More women need to be included in leadership, decision-making positions on all levels of the Church. We are a Church primarily served by women but women are noticeably absent from positions of leadership within the Church structure.
- **Ministry to the Margins**
 - It is an ongoing challenge to minister to those on the margins of the Church for a multitude of reasons. As a Church, our model has typically been one of waiting for people to come to us. We must be a Church that is willing to go to the peripheries and to encounter people in the messiness of life, to be a missionary Church.
 - There are many people who are divorced and remarried without the benefit of an annulment. This was identified at every regional listening session as a real stumbling block and we heard support across the board from people asking that this obstacle be removed so that this group may return to the Table of the Lord. Our efforts need to focus on increasing people's understanding of the annulment process. Integral to this is calling forth advocates who can accompany people through the process so that it can be an experience that brings healing and not hardship.
 - Those in the LGBT community were identified time and again as a group that lives on the margins and is in great need of welcome and acceptance. It is vital that we increase our outreach and that we empower families to have the difficult conversations about gender issues and same-sex attractions, always expressing the love and mercy of God.
- **Adult Faith Formation**
 - We have heard people express their hunger for a greater understanding of their faith and a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Parishes have responded with programs and events, but have not had great success in getting people to participate. The Diocese will strive to provide parishes with the resources to offer creative opportunities for adult faith formation.
 - We have also heard people express their desire to go deeper, to live a life based in prayer and holiness. An important part of forming adults in their faith is to provide opportunities for them to encounter the holy, to learn to pray, and to help them to live out the call to holiness in their daily lives. All of these things must be a part of our adult faith formation efforts.
- **Encounter**
 - Since the ultimate goal of all faith formation is to help people grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ, we must increase our efforts at providing opportunities for people to encounter Christ. With the awareness that one model

will not work for all, we must be creative in our efforts and offer multiple and varied opportunities.

- **Diversity**
 - Diversity in our Catholic Church is one of our greatest treasures. We must continue to celebrate our diversity while maintaining the universality of the church. Instead of disregarding those who are different in some way, we need to acknowledge that our diversity provides us with an opportunity to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in those who can offer us a different perspective.

VI. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this process, we were reminded in the Preparatory Document that *“the purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.”*

It was clear that this entire synodal experience was meant to be an experience of synodality itself. Perhaps the greatest value is that those who chose to participate in the process have felt listened to and respected. Their opinions have been valued and they have been reminded once more that the Holy Spirit works through them, underscoring the importance of making their voice heard.

In a culture that has little tolerance for differences of opinion, this has been an experience of respectful listening based in prayer and an understanding that each of us is a valued member of the same Body of Christ.

We are grateful for this experience of synodality and for the opportunity to be present in person to hear so many voices. There was nothing surprising in what was heard and has been communicated in this synthesis. However, the value of the process cannot be overstated. Time and again we heard people express their support for Pope Francis and his movement away from a clerical institution and toward a church that listens and responds, toward a church that is missionary and that enables its members to live out their call to holiness. People expressed a longing for more of the same. They expressed a longing to be heard, a longing to go deeper in their faith and in their relationship with Jesus Christ, a longing to share their faith with others, and a longing for an increased sense of belonging to a community of believers.

In conjunction with the observance of the Eucharistic Revival in the United States, the Diocese will strive to continue the synodal process with listening sessions on the Eucharist – on the Real

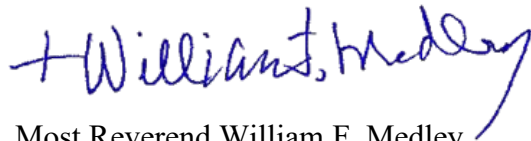
Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, on the question of why younger generations are not coming to Mass, on how our churches can be more welcoming and inclusive.

We are also committed to focusing more of our attention on reaching those on the periphery of the Church – including the divorced and remarried, those in the LGBT community and their families and friends, on women and their right to be treated with dignity and equality in the church, the poor, the immigrant, and those who experience discrimination because of race.

When Pope Francis opened the Synod in October of last year, he declared his surety that *“the Spirit would guide the Church and give us the grace to move forward together, to listen to one another and to embark on a discernment of the times in which we are living.”* In fact, he stated that *“if the Spirit is not present there will be no synod.”*

This has been our experience of synodality these past few months – an experience of being led by the Holy Spirit in a time of listening and discerning. It is this same Spirit that will give us the grace needed to respond to what we have heard and to become more and more a church that listens. It is the same Holy Spirit that will help us look at things with the eyes of Christ, to see what Christ sees, and to continue in our work to move forward the mission of the Church.

Respectfully Submitted on Behalf of the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky,



Most Reverend William F. Medley
Bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro