

## **Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin**

### **Towards October 2024 Synthesis**

#### **Preface**

What follows is a report from the diocese that was requested by the National Synod Office of all dioceses as part of its preparations for the second assembly of the universal synod to be held in Rome in October 2024. The Diocesan Synod Team were asked to carry out this listening at a regional meeting held in late January, for return by 25 March. Due to the particular time constraints, the narrow focus of the question being asked, and following advice, it was agreed by the diocesan team to undertake a focused listening on this occasion rather than the wider listening that marked the Listening Lent of 2022 ahead of the first assembly.

#### **Introduction**

Members of the diocesan synod team prepared and facilitated a listening session using the methodology of conversations in the Spirit. The synod team consists of seven people - four women, a lay man and two priests. The team decided to identify individuals from the diocese to invite to the listening session as a target group, rather than opening it up to any who wished to attend. The people invited to the listening session represented a cross section from the diocese. They included a prison chaplain and deacon, two parish youth ministers, a young person involved in his parish, an RE teacher and Meitheal leader (youth peer ministry), a PP of an urban parish, a PP of a rural parish, two PPC members, a religious sister working with children with disabilities, a parish secretary, a young mother, a middle-aged father, a young priest, and a retired religious sister. The invitation to the listening session was very much welcomed by all, including a number of others who were unable to attend. Two people who regretted in particular not being able to attend were a priest ministering in the diocese with many years of missionary experience and a young person whose family are originally from Zimbabwe and who could not be with us due to college commitments.

The evening began with hospitality. Tea/coffee and refreshments were available for 30 minutes before the session officially started. Bishop Denis joined participants for this section of the evening which was very much appreciated by them. The session itself followed the template offered by the national synod office with some local amendments.

It is useful to note that, as part of the preparations ahead of the listening session, the synod team reviewed once again the submissions received in our Listening Lent and our diocesan synod synthesis through the lens of the proposed question. We are satisfied that what follows reflects what was contained therein also.

## **Findings: How can we imagine the life of the Church in Ireland where people are co-responsible for the Church's mission in different ways?**

Even though many in the room did not know one another, the preparatory work done in the session itself meant that people were quite ready and willing to speak in their small groups. This underscores the importance of taking time for prayer and for making connections with people before entering into conversations. The question itself allowed participants to approach imagining the future life of the Church in a positive manner while being aware of the challenges faced.

The various rounds of conversations prompted an inclusive vision for the Church community, grounded in the gospel and the desire that all aspects of the life of each member of the Church community be infused with a living faith.

The gospel attitudes of welcome for all, inclusivity, respect, and care echoed throughout the sharing and discussions. Importantly, this inclusive vision went beyond acceptance of the 'other' to also include and seek the active sharing of the gifts and uniqueness of the 'other' for the life of the community. Within the conversations there was strong convergence in an assumed and essential starting point of recognising that not only are all welcome in the Church but also that each person has something to offer. Participants were able to recognise the richness that diversity offers to the Church and her members – a diversity which can only be truly fruitful when the variety of gifts within that diversity are unleashed for the common mission of the Church in a unity of purpose.

The recognition of this diversity of members and gifts within the Church is perhaps a preliminary and helpful step in coming to understand what is intended in the call for differentiated co-responsibility.

An important viewpoint that emerged in the conversations was that lay people may not recognise themselves as subjects of the call to co-responsibility while clergy, because of their understanding and interpretation of canon law, may feel that this call is somewhat disingenuous in a reality where they are ultimately held responsible for the life of a parish. If not addressed, both of these elements, but particularly the latter, could be major roadblocks in progressing the vision of a co-responsible Church community.

Alongside this, there is often a lack of clarity in what we mean by the terms mission and now, differentiated co-responsibility. We cannot begin to ask lay people and clergy to imagine how they might share co-responsibly in the mission of the Church if we cannot give a clear articulation of what that means – in both aspirational and concrete, 'seeable', language. We need to find ways of exploring these concepts with people so that they are not paralysed from the first instance of being asked the question because of a lack of clarity about what exactly is being asked or explored. As was said in one group, teaching and learning are needed and a moment of awakening for people to realise they are Church.

We are talking about change. And change, working towards an inclusive and co-responsible vision of Church, cannot happen without leadership. The recognition of the need for leadership by participants in this listening session points to a recognition of the need for order within the Church. But people's lived experience of a hierarchical Church in the past and the needs of the Church in the culture and times of our age, call us to envisage this order, this hierarchy, in new ways. It was clear through our conversations that the pyramidal vision of hierarchy where power, decision making and leadership flows from the top-down needs to change and be shaped by a deeper understanding and working out of both the vision of Vatican II and the processes of synodality.

Participants spoke of fearless, open leadership, a leadership in which lay people and clergy work together, creating structures to encourage and nourish the local faith community to be places centred on service and giving witness to the gospel. Among the hallmarks named regarding this leadership was the ability to let go of the past and be guided by God, to be committed to welcoming and including others, to actively seek to work with others and to be able to help people to identify their skills and talents and, in turn, to actively and continually invite people to bring those skills and talents to the life of the parish. Good leadership also has the humility to seek out and uses available expertise in discerning and realising ways forward with others.

There are certainly challenges ahead. Change of mindsets, change of hearts, and changes in the way we go about things in the life of parishes, lie before us. The need for openness to change, courage, tolerance of and patience with one another, and trust in the work of the Holy Spirit is required. What happens when locally we meet resistance or stubborn refusal to be open to this way of being Church? How will lay people and clergy support one another in times of criticism or ridicule? Even more fundamentally, what are we now putting in place to ensure the sacramental and pastoral life of our parishes continue in accord with the principle of differentiated co-responsibility? The need to form and train people for lay led liturgies, including possibly into the future baptisms, funerals, and weddings, was noted in a number of the conversations. We have a long and slow road ahead of us. We are called, not to panic, but to trust in the accompaniment of God with us.

Through the question posed and the conversations had, there has emerged a clear sense that key stepping stones in the way forward include attentiveness to the gospel; enabling each person to see that they are a valued and necessary part of the local faith community; finding ways of recognising and harnessing the variety and diversity of talents and gifts of individual members to help build a vibrant local community; forming and teaching all Church members – lay and ordained – in the ways of a synodal Church by 'doing' 'being' and 'preaching'; and forming and teaching all Church members what the mission of the Church and differentiated co-responsibility tangibly look like in the places we inhabit together.

It is accepted that the pace and nature of change will happen differently, in different places because of a number of varying factors. There may be despair along the way, as well as

frustration. We should be ready for this and ready to turn to the Holy Spirit for courage and inspiration in these times.

Finally, as we move further into our synodal journey together, there was a clear call through these conversations in the Spirit to provide training for lay people and clergy together, in facilitative leadership in order to empower and encourage maximum participation in and commitment to building and growing our faith communities.