

Since the first stage of consultation for the Synod in 2021-2022, synodality has begun to take root in the Archdiocese of Seattle. This local Church is in the midst of a major restructuring process, *Partners in the Gospel*, which groups two, three, or more parishes under a single pastor. Each parish family will re-envision what it means to be a faith community in today's world, with the ultimate goal of carrying out the Church's mission more effectively. As this process has unfolded, the synodal model of listening, especially the practice of Conversation in the Spirit, has been invaluable. Listening led to changes in attitude as well as concrete changes in the makeup of the parish groupings. We are more aware than ever that the ultimate success of the Partners in the Gospel initiative will depend on our continued commitment to being a synodal church.

Because of the intensity of this ongoing process, we emphasized that participation in this Interim Stage of the Synod was entirely optional. About twenty parishes took part, offering dozens of listening sessions during Lent. In addition, a special effort was made to hear from those whose voices were largely unheard during the last consultation, especially parish priests and youth. Special sessions were also held with Chancery and parish lay staff and women in ministry.

Many of the same themes emerged in this consultation as in the listening that was done in 2021-2022: The need to reach youth, young adults, and young families; the role of women in the Church; questions around who can preach and who can be ordained as deacon or priest; and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals and other marginalized groups in the life of the Church.

What fosters and encourages our mission as Church?

THE EUCHARIST is central to our Catholic faith and practice. "Eucharist is the reason I am Catholic." (Parish) "I can't overstate the importance of communion. When someone receives Eucharist, we are all equal." (Parish) "When I take communion to the homebound, that person is waiting for Jesus to come to them. I cannot express how much joy it brings to the person receiving communion." (Parish) "I have witnessed inclusion from the Church during Communion, seeing people from all walks of life coming together as one." (Youth)

People treasure the Church's **UNIVERSALITY, RITUAL, AND TRADITION**. "I love the pomp and circumstance. The tradition. It's the same everywhere." (Parish) "I really like going to Mass because it makes me reflect on what there is to be grateful for and living in the moment and appreciating everything about life." (Youth) "Beauty of Catholicism and structures is that we are in communion with other times.... We are guided by the unchanging Holy Spirit." (Priest) "For being a very 'old tradition' - young adults respond to those traditions" (Chancery staff) "It's easy for us all to get behind the Gospel and I'm optimistic about that." (Parish)

Many participants cited **COMMUNITY** as a key aspect of mission. "The Church does a good job of forming a community." (Youth) "There's a core connection that I think gives the Church a kind of strength and courage that the Holy Spirit can do things with." (Parish) "I love the friendships that are formed through schools, volunteer roles, fundraising events, faith group sessions, sacramental prep classes." (Parish) The "Spanish-speaking group feels welcome when people take time to talk to them in their language." (Youth) "The Church is at its best when it's warm, welcoming, and focuses on community building and doing more for other people."

(Youth) "It is the miracle of the Holy Spirit to unite all through awareness, acceptance, and action." (Parish) "It was so lovely to see how welcoming everyone was... Everyone was so open and caring and it was a genuinely positive space." (Youth) "'Welcome home!' For me, those two words are Church." (Parish)

The **DIVERSITY** of the Church is a gift. "We love that our church gives us a space to be connected to all types of people – people who look different from us, live different lives than us, people who have a lot and those who have very little.... Diversity is important." (Youth) "Diversity is the richness of God's creative genius." (Chancery staff)

There is a deep sense of pride in the Church's **SERVICE AND ADVOCACY**. "How proud we are of what the Church does to help others who are not fortunate. That's the walk and the talk." (Parish) The "social action of the church is inspiring." (Parish) "The Church has done a great job with service and helping the immigrants at the border." (Youth)

PRIESTS play a key role. "Good pastors create an alive environment making one feel welcome and part of the Church." (Parish) "The good happens when the priest and laity are open and willing to work together." (Parish)

LAY STAFF also have a major impact in carrying out the Church's mission. "Good staff makes things easy. Same with having good Pastoral and Finance Council." (Priests) Lay ecclesial ministers have a sense of call: "It's a vocation, the uniqueness of lay ministers brings variety to the Church." (Chancery staff) "It is not just a job, it is tied into the greater mission of the Holy Spirit." (Chancery staff)

There is a strong desire on the part of the faithful to **FOSTER GROWTH** in the Church. Personal invitation came up frequently: "As much as you put it in all media channels, the best thing is still word of mouth by someone who finds value in it. You want people to feel 'I want to be part of this because I feel welcome and needed here.'" (Parish) "You have to start with the invitation." (Chancery staff) "It takes invitation for us to flourish, to understand our capabilities." (Women in ministry) "Personal invitation is crucial. Sometimes you just need a smile and an invitation. It is important to be present. Being willing to be foolish and let them know you love them and want to know about them." (Parish) "Being invited makes people feel welcome." (Youth) "How do we make our parish church be as welcoming as we can so people who are seeking out Christ can find a home here?" (Parish)

What blocks or hinders our shared mission as Church?

Across all the consultations, the **LACK OF UNITY** came up most frequently as a block or hindrance to the Church's mission. "Priests disagreeing with the Pope from the pulpit is very harmful." (Parish) "Disunity is limiting what we can do as Church." (Priests) "The Church needs to see with both eyes or breathe with both lungs across the ideological divide." (Priests) "We need more unity in the Church. We could get so much more done if we focused more on creating an inclusive Church." (Youth) "Get rid of politics in the church. It causes fracturing." (Parish) "It would be good if the pastor could preach, vote your hopes and not your fears." (Parish)

RED TAPE emerged as a challenge in all the consultations. This came up both in the context of parish/chancery structures and in terms of Church teaching or practice in some areas. "The red tape that people have to go through to become Catholic.... It feels like it's become such a bureaucracy." (Parish) "We are mummified in our own procedures." (Priests) "Bureaucracy is making it hard for some kinds of ministry and evangelization." (Priests) "The mission of the parish seems to be hindered by office structures and bureaucracy." (Parish)

“Canonical structures have hindered us, especially in RCIA because early we have to ask regarding marital status. Any issues must be resolved before people can fully enter the process. It leads to lots of frustration.” (Parish ministry) “Rigidity to rules that are not even doctrine, not gospel-based.” (Retreat ministry) “The Catholic Church has a lot of rules.” (Youth)

The **PUBLIC PERCEPTION** of the Church also emerged as a problem. “The image of the Church in mainstream media is harmful.” (Laotian/Khmu community) “A culture of fear and bad PR and complaining parishioners prevents us from taking bold action. Fear of litigation keeps us mired in policies.” (Priests) “What gets in the way of mission is fear of trying new things, fear of looking bad... The fear of looking stupid is enough to keep things from happening.” (Women in ministry)

The **CULTURE** in which we live also makes it difficult to gather the community. “The busyness of our culture” is a barrier to Church life. (Chancery staff) “American life is very busy and priorities are not with Church.” (Laotian/Khmu community) “Many of my peers are not interested in attending Mass because they see it as something boring that is interrupting their weekend.” (Youth) “The busyness of life gets in the way; school, kids, hobbies, everyone wanting a piece of your time. How do we make sure we can make Christ our focus and bring it back? it’s easy to get swept away by life. Easy to get caught up in the world.” (Parish)

For **LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS**, there are particular challenges. “I struggle when working in spirituality to remain spiritual.” (Chancery staff) “How do I go out and take the space for quiet when there is so much to accomplish? How do we find the time to find inner peace?” (Chancery staff) “The structure of caring for priests and deacons is wonderful. Unfortunately, that has not been the case for lay ministers, especially for women. I hope that a lay minister could be able to work a lifetime career.” (Parish staff) “My job is very vulnerable.” (Parish staff) “In a conversation with a deacon, he said his vocation was given to him by Jesus Christ, mine was not.” (Parish staff)

Community was one of the positives in this consultation; the **DIFFICULTY OF BUILDING COMMUNITY** was also an important theme. “There’s a thirst for community and to connect spiritually.” (Parish) “It is hard to find intimacy in a large organization like ours. A sense of belonging.” (Parish) “People should be more welcoming.” (Youth) “Once here, we welcome, but outside, we need to do better outreach and need to educate others outside the church.” (Young Adults) “The Church is not as welcoming until you know it better.” (Young Adults) “We should talk more to each other – to be more connected as a community.” (Youth)

Related to welcome and community is the desire for greater **INCLUSIVITY**. “I just wish the Church would acknowledge more cultures, especially during Mass.” (Youth) Young people shared their experiences of exclusion: “I feel a subtle exclusion at church because of my ethnicity”; “people praying in their native language receive odd looks”; “going to English Mass and having the sense that people looked at us weirdly” “I felt alienated from the Church when I became part of the LGBTQ+ community”; “I felt looked down upon while wearing a chapel veil”; “people with tattoos or dyed hair can feel unwelcome.” (Youth) “It’s one thing to be welcoming but we are wanting inclusion.” (Parish) “We are not that welcoming Church that we profess to be.” (Parish)

PREACHING was a frequent topic. “People are tired of hearing messages from the pulpit that don’t speak to them.” (Parish) “Poor preaching is an obstacle.” (Parish) People commented on what is spoken about, what is *not* spoken about, and who is permitted to speak: “No one talks about climate change at church. We would love to see more priests speak from the pulpit on climate change and what steps the church can take to get involved in climate change advocacy.” (Youth) “If you hear condemnation, especially from the pulpit, you’re not coming

back.” (Parish) “A problem is having to listen to the same person preach, week after week. We would be enriched by listening to different voices, including women.” (Parish) “Open the pulpit so there’s more than just the priest to talk.” (Parish) “There is so much the church misses out on by not having the perspective of women, such as offering reflections or being deacons.” (Women in ministry)

The issue of **ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE** came up regularly as an obstacle to mission. “There should be Mass for young people but like more understandable.” (Youth) “We don’t always use words that are understandable. The words don’t move people to action.” (Parish) “I think that at times when we start with our Church world and language it’s a turn off. At times makes us look elitist like we’re in the special Church world and they just don’t know.” (Chancery staff) “The language itself hinders. Catholic words are complicated. Is there a simpler way to discuss things? The word ‘synod’ is strange. Words get in the way.” (Parish) “Sexist language is used. How do we all share in the mission if we aren’t recognized in the language?” (Parish)

PRIESTLY FORMATION is another area of concern. “Too many priests are not well-screened for their capacity, talent, and vision to be good pastors, good shepherds” (Parish). The “paternalistic structure of seminary formation; suppression of personal opinion” gets in the way of mission. (Priests) “The greatest failure as far as church structures is the formation of priests. Priests are taught that they are the ultimate authority in their parishes, they behave like they are special, holier, etc... and in turn, the laity responds to this by looking at priests as being more than a human being. It is very dangerous and can become an occasion of sin. When we have that authority and we factor in our humanness, it is extremely hard not to be tainted by that power.” (Parish)

There is a concern that priests and bishops lack **ACCOUNTABILITY**. “The lack of accountability that we see in the church would seem to indicate that there is no job description to use to perform an evaluation OR the evaluation is irrelevant OR they don’t believe they need to be accountable.” (Parish) “Many in the bishops and priests... are defensive. Their attitude is, ‘I have all the answers; I have all this training.’ They neglect the fact that they have a particular *function* in the body.” (Parish) “Church authority is closely tied to clericalism, makes people believe priests are above the fold, they seem to have automatic immunity.” (Parish) “Some of the people who are pastors are thrown into the situation with no experience and no accountability. If it were me – I’d be fired.” (Chancery staff) “Bishops and pastors are free to decide how much they want to listen. That’s a bad thing. Parish and diocesan pastoral councils should be *meaningfully* advisory.” (Parish)

Many participants suggested that the Church reconsider who can be priests. “We need to revisit the model of priesthood we are working under, including married priests, women priests. There was a time I could be fired for such a statement.” (Parish staff)

Finally, the clergy **SEXUAL ABUSE CRISIS** continues to come up regularly as an obstacle to mission. There remains a sense that the “Church has not apologized for sexual scandals caused by clerics.” (Parish) “My children are not practicing their faith now. The problem of priest abuse is a factor.” (Parish) “I am deeply concerned about the Church going forward. The church hasn’t changed enough to ensure sexual abuse does not happen in the future.” (Parish)

Voices of priests and youth

In addition to the general themes outlined above, this round of consultation brought forth particular concerns of groups who were not heard as fully in earlier listening.

PRIESTS shared a desire to overcome polarization and a confidence that it can be done: “Being dedicated to the same truth allows us to overcome differences in aesthetics. Chanted prayer and guitars can coexist under the umbrella of the wisdom of the ages.” They have a strong desire for connection with their bishop, their people, and with each other. “The diocese is so big that everything is policy. Shrink dioceses so that bishops can administer personally.” They desire greater balance in their ministry: “Half of my week is administration.” “Many things push us away from the main things. We need to keep the main things the main things.”

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS find great meaning in their faith. “I struggle, but in my everyday life I feel I’m better because of God.” At the same time, young people sometimes struggle to understand the Bible and to connect with the liturgy: “Scripture is hard to understand.” They express concern about the public disunity of Church leaders and by the negative views of the Church in the media. “The general consensus is that the Catholic Church is NOT winning the PR game.” Inclusion is very important to young people. “The Church should be a safe haven for excluded populations.”

There is a sense among young people that there is too much emphasis on the negative: “The Catholic church has the reputation of things you cannot do rather than what you can do.” “What made me question going to church is the negativity that comes along with a lot of the masses at a church near me.”

LGBTQIA+ youth shared their experiences. “My teachers never talked about LGBTQ in the Church so I didn’t feel included and questioned myself.” “I was scared that if anyone knew I was queer I would be harassed and expelled.” “During confirmation class I had a friend who came out and the priest started arguing with her.” “Kids being bullied because they’re queer has been too normalized.” “Jesus was very progressive for his time, he pushed against societal standards at the time and advocated for everyone. Why can’t the Church do the same now?”

Hope in the Synod

Some concerns were expressed about the synodal process as “overly inclusive... process becomes more important than the end goal” (Priests). There are also fears and concerns about where this process is going: “Where’s the action?... we’re tired of just talking about it.” (Parish) “What happens to this effort of synodality if Pope Francis passes away from the scene before the process is finished and changes can be effected?” (Parish)

Overall, participants expressed great hope in synodality. “This process is helping us come together to listen to each other rather than fight each other.” (Priests) “The synodal process is life-giving.” (Priests) “I am surprised and happy about the synodal process. I am finding it beautiful.” (Chancery staff) “There is hope in the church with the synod.” (Youth) “I feel that these synod discussions have fostered our shared mission. This is a LIVING church.” (Parish) “It’s a big testament to how far the Church has come.” (Youth) “This level of listening is difficult, but it can yield such powerful fruits.” (Chancery staff) In synodal listening, “we sense the value or weight of each person’s experience. It’s not just words, it’s an experience, it’s a life.” (Parish)

Virtually all participants agreed that we need to do more listening. “We need to talk more amongst ourselves and listen more carefully.” (Priests) “Adults, listen to kids more.” (Youth) “We need to have more sessions like this to listen to all kinds of people, so we can know everyone’s side of the story.” (Youth) “The Holy Spirit is talking to us, we need to listen.” (Parish)