

29 June 2022

Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul

The Pre-Synod Synthesis Document of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg

On this feast of the Apostle Peter, our first pope and shepherd of the Church, and the Apostle Paul, the peerless evangelist of the early Church, the Archdiocese of Johannesburg presents to the clergy and faithful the summary of our synodal process, begun in October of the year 2021.

The document is the final report of the pre-Synodal process in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg. It has been guided by the instructions of the *Vademecum*, an extract of which is quoted below (pg. 57).

The diocesan synthesis should reflect the diversity of views and opinions expressed, and pay particular attention to the lived experiences of participants, both positive and negative. The synthesis should be faithful to the people's voices and to whatever emerged from their discernment and dialogue, rather than a series of generalized or doctrinally correct statements. Points of view that are contrary to one another need not be omitted but can be acknowledged and stated as such. Views should not be excluded simply because they were expressed by a small minority of participants. Indeed, sometimes the perspective of what we could call the "minority report" can be a prophetic witness to what God wants to say to the Church.

The first two pages (pgs. 3-4) are a summary of the process, sketching out the history of Synodality in the Archdiocese and how our previous experiences shaped this process. The spiritual fruits of the process are highlighted in this first section. The following six pages (pgs. 5-10) are a summary and synthesis of what parishes sent from their own listening circles, the presentations at the pre-Synod event and the outcomes of the discussion groups held after each presentation. The final three pages (pgs. 11-13) speak to the desire which emerged amongst participants to create within the Church a culture of welcome, listening, ongoing formation, and accountability.

The desires identified by the synodal process are rooted in the concluding question each listening circle was asked: where do you feel the Spirit of God is calling us to as the Church of Johannesburg?

Recommendations have been made which may be useful in helping the local Church create that culture. It remains now for the Bishop of the Archdiocese to review the recommendations and decide which ones to implement, and how they will be implemented.

This report will now be sent to the SACBC Secretariat, where it will be synthesised with the reports of the other dioceses in the Conference before being sent to the next level of integration.

Pre-Synod Synthesis Document of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg

1. Introduction: Rereading the synodal experience

The synodal experience for the archdiocese began, in a certain sense, in 2009, when the archdiocese held its first diocesan synod. Ten years later, using a methodology like that of the listening circles recommended for the synod on Synodality, the Archdiocese held its second synod. The 2019 “Acts of the Synod” gave voice to a collective discernment that took place over the course of a year, and the fundamental question it sought to address was, “What kind of Church do you want to belong to, what are the obstacles that stand in our way of achieving that vision, and how can we overcome them?”

At the conclusion of that Synod the Archbishop established the Synod Preparatory Committee as the Synod Implementation and Monitoring Committee. Several successes followed, but most important for the life of the archdiocese was the establishment of the Safeguarding Committee, and the reestablishment of the Department of Marriage and Family Life. Despite these and other successes, much has been left undone, due in large part to the intrusion of the global COVID 19 pandemic.

When the synodal process was formally launched in October of 2021 the archdiocese chose to revisit the themes of the 2019 Synod, as a way of reviewing and reviving them. This accorded well with the thematic questions contained in the *Vademecum*. Eventually the synod committee divided 14 themes into three broad categories, those focused on parish ministry, those focused on marginalised groups, and the three special questions that emerged later in the process.

While there was a determination on the side of the Archbishop and Synod Committee to make the process as inclusive as possible, fear of retribution and stigmatisation prevented some people from participating in the listening circles being established across the archdiocese. A woman who wanted to participate in a listening circle asked if her parish priest would find out that she had participated. She was afraid that if she said anything that he disapproved of she would face some form of retribution. A subcommittee established to spearhead listening circles for LGBTQ Catholics reported that every single person that they approached to help with its work refused. Yet again people were afraid of being stigmatised.

It became obvious that the Church many parishioners encountered was steeped in prejudice and patriarchy, the very opposite of the Church envisioned by the people of the Archdiocese in the 2019 synod. There was a certain discomfort and concomitant resistance to listening to people on the margins of the Church

Despite these challenges there was significant interest from people in other dioceses in the country and indeed from around the world, in the work that the archdiocese was doing on the synod, particularly regarding listening circles for women and the LGBTQ

community. It became evident that for many people this opportunity to simply be listened to by others within the Church was liberating and even revolutionary. An almost constant refrain by participants in parish listening circles and at the pre-Synod event was the desire for this listening methodology to become part of how we “do” Church.

A month after the initial booklet was released the Archbishop decided that the archdiocese should make use of this opportunity to also pay attention to three other topics, namely patriarchy; sexual abuse; and the relationship between our faith and Traditional African Religious practices. The topic on women was then refocused using the lens of patriarchy. This left sexual abuse and Christianity and Traditional African Religious practices as special questions, together with the topic of Integral Ecology which had been proposed by the extended Synod Preparatory Committee.

45 parishes and 6 other groups participated in listening circles and sent in the results of those to the Synod Preparatory committee. According to the numbers of people reported to have participated in the listening circles, 3852 conversations took place over the build-up to the pre-Synod gathering. These results were given to three sub-committees that produced summaries and analysis that were presented at the gathering in three sessions spread over two days. Approximately 120 people represented the parishes of the archdiocese at the gathering and participated in yet more listening circles at the end of each session.

There were differences in tone and substance between what parish based listening circles said about topics within the marginalisation category and the feedback received from the listening groups that followed the presentation. This was in large part because the parish-based groups were more likely to attract people who felt strongly about a particular issue or had been personally affected by it, while the listening groups held at the pre-Synod event were more varied and included clergy.

The greatest fruit of the Synod was the experience of being recognised and heard. People who had experienced sexual abuse within the Church reported that they felt that their suffering had been recognised by the Church simply through her listening, and that the listening circles had provided an experience of God’s presence and healing of their deep wounds.

Whatever else may happen with the outcomes of our pre-Synodal process, we can say that for the people of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg it has already been a success.

2. Discernment of the collected contributions

a. Parish Based Topics: Youth, Marriage and Family Life, Missionary Discipleship, Liturgy, Life-long Formation, Welcoming Communities.

The topics of this theme have as their nexus the parish community as welcoming home, place of formation, place of nourishment, place of sending and returning. It is therefore unsurprising that the ideas found in the themes of marginalisation and special questions are also echoed here. The parish is the locus of our identity, our sense of belonging and our mission. It is for these reasons that above we have an obligation to do parish ministry well.

Leadership, formation, liturgy, and welcome were all singled out as the things that we need to get right in order to achieve excellence in our parish communities.

Leadership refers to both clergy and laity within the parish, as well as at an archdiocesan level. All too often the people of God encounter poorly trained, uncreative, and rigid leaders within the Church who present a distorted image of Christ and the Church to those within the parish. Some leaders stand as obstacles to the graces that Christ the Good Shepherd intends for the flock. The leadership model which clergy is formed in is that of servant leaders, but often the pressures of pastoral ministry cause ministers to forget those lessons. It is also not enough for our clergy to be guided by a servant leadership model if those who support him in his ministry of leadership have not similarly been formed. Better formation is needed if we want our parishes to be more than well disciplined, financially stable, sacramental dispensers.

Formation is something that all members of the parish community need and is a life-long and holistic process. According to the Acts of the 2019 Synod, the department of catechetics was tasked with drawing up a program of ongoing formation for the archdiocese, beyond that of sacramental preparation. Three years later the people of the archdiocese affirm the importance of this mandate and continue asking for its implementation. Formation will help our parents be better parents to the youth of our parishes, it will help our youth to understand our common faith, it will equip people with the knowledge and tools for a life of ministry, it will give people the tools to study and understand scripture beyond the superficial and fundamentalist levels currently quite common in the Church, and it will help people deepen their spirituality which in turn can lead to a transformative encounter with Christ.

To achieve excellence in our parishes a vigorous and ongoing evaluation of the implementation of the 2019 synod outcomes and resolutions, and consequence management for those who do not perform is needed.

PPC's and Parish Priests need to be held accountable. A competent, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic promoter of all things synodal should be appointed in the parishes. We need to strengthen the concept of personal ownership of synod implementation.

Liturgy needs to be done well for it to truly be the “source and summit” of our faith and communal life. People need to be formed for ministry, which again points to the importance of ongoing formation, both for clergy and laity. Priests and deacons are encouraged to improve their homiletics not only by explaining the text but also by making it relevant to their congregation. Some homilists, regardless of the text or feast, will inevitably use the homily to promote a particular position or condemn another. This is a liturgical abuse of the people of God. Lay ministers need to be suitable for their ministry, and properly prepared for it. Ongoing support in terms of training and retreats should be provided.

The importance of creating communities of welcome cannot be emphasised enough. The scriptures speak eloquently of our obligation to welcome the stranger, the widow and orphan. An oft neglected group in each parish is the migrant and refugee. Their vulnerability renders them invisible.

When our parish communities are experienced as harsh and judgemental, no-one except the pure and sinless feel comfortable and at home. This is especially true of the youth of our parishes. We as Church need to learn how to journey with people, starting from where they are, and not where we think they should be. Parishes need to find ways of helping people connect to the community beyond that of the Sunday liturgy. In some places it may be through Small Christian Communities, or sodalities, or prayer groups or ministry groups. People may connect through common formation events, or acts of service, or social events. If liturgical celebration is the skeleton of the parish, then our common life is the flesh which brings life to dead bones.

A thread which weaves its way through the topics of this section is listening. A respectful listening to one another should be evident in our leadership, in the formation given and received, in the liturgies we celebrate and in the welcome we extend. Many participants of the parish listening circles and in the archdiocesan pre-Synod event asked that this experience of Synodal listening be continued in parishes and in the archdiocese. This process of coming together with others from the archdiocese simply to listen to each other was experienced as valuable, especially as the Archbishop and other leaders of the archdiocese were present.

b. The Voices of the Marginalised

This category included the topics of women, LGBTQ, the disabled, the poor and homeless, and migrants and refugees. The interpretative lens used for these topics was recognition. Common to all five topics was the desire for recognition of ongoing fidelity; equality; charisma and conscience.

Fidelity – people who are marginalised for whatever reason display great faithfulness to the Church. They continue to show up, to participate and contribute. This generosity of spirit should be recognised and acknowledged.

Equality – marginalised people seek recognition that they, just as much as any priest or bishop, enjoy a basic equality as human persons made in the image of God. Tellingly, the report points out that all the marginalised are lay persons, not clerics.

Charism – the Holy Spirit gives charisms to each of the baptised for the service of the Church and its mission. A failure to recognise and use the charisms of the marginalised denies the church a rich source of ministry and witness.

Conscience: The tradition of the Church has long held that God speaks directly to individuals in their conscience. While it is acknowledged that people have an obligation to inform their conscience, the church and her ministers are not immune from that obligation either. This again points to the importance of being able to journey with people in the struggles of their lives, especially when the individual's conscience may lead them to conclusions at odds with current church teachings or practice.

The submissions made by the various groups of marginalised uniformly expressed gratitude for the opportunity that the listening circles presented to voice their concerns, and most hoped that some sharing of reflections such as they experienced in the pre-synodal phase would be able to continue. This was echoed in the listening groups of the pre-synod event itself, where people expressed a desire to give more opportunities to those who are marginalised to tell their stories. The Church would benefit by having this kind of discerning consultation continue.

There was also significant negativity towards the marginalised expressed by a small proportion of groups in the listening circles. Migrants and refugees were portrayed as criminals involved in drug and human trafficking, the LGBTQ community as unnatural deviants and women who sincerely feel called by God to some form of ordained ministry as disobedient and disloyal members of the Church. While these voices were in the minority, it is easy to see why some look at the Church and see xenophobia, homophobia, and patriarchy.

Most people who look part in the pre-synod event find themselves living in tension between treating marginalised people with love and compassion, while also trying to remain true to the current tradition of the Church. Generally, there is no lack of good will but a genuine confusion about what being loving and compassionate may mean in the concrete circumstances described by the many participants in the listening circles.

The responses of people indicate a real need for better scriptural formation, to avoid the many and manifest errors of biblical literalism and fundamentalism. We need to understand and accept that our knowledge of what it means to be fully human has evolved over time, and that good theology needs to be informed by science. There is also a need for a deeper theological formation which addresses nuances in the teaching of the church, rather than settle for conclusions looking for a justification.

Each of the marginalised groups addressed areas particular to them which needed recognition. Women spoke of the need to have their place in the church recognised. They also pointed out that the moral teachings of the church weigh disproportionately on women, with unwed mothers and divorced women facing stigma from the church, including being denied reception of the Eucharist or being removed from ministries. Many women said that they have experienced psychological, spiritual, and sexual abuse by clerics, as well as a more generalised abuse of power. How does the Church address the issue of incompetent, drunk or abusive priests when channels to address this do not seem adequate to the task? There is a desire to have a call to orders in the Church discerned and recognised.

The LGBTQ+ community wanted the church to recognise how destructive and harmful judgement and stigmatisation was to them, and to all members of the Church community. The lived reality of LGBTQ+ persons should be engaged with and not avoided; their pastoral needs attended to with humility. Our theology and pastoral practice must be informed by better biblical and scientific scholarship.

The Disabled or Differently Abled want their membership of and presence in parish communities recognised and their pastoral needs addressed. They are also liable to experience some form of abuse and stigmatisation. Existing programs to help with integrating the dis-abled into the life of the community should be encouraged and supported. Many submissions recognised the work which SPRED does in the Archdiocese.

The Poor and Homeless wanted both the multifaceted needs of their community recognised, as well as the work done by many of the assisting organisations. Caritas as an umbrella body for social outreach in parishes needs to be supported. It was hoped

that ways to access help would be made easier for those in need. Migrants and refugees as a group understandably overlapped with the poor and homeless. There is a recognition of a need for introductions into the parish community, and for inclusion in parish social events. Diversity training may help to reduce xenophobia and prejudice.

c. Special Questions: Sexual Abuse; Ancestors and the practice of our Christian Faith; and Integral Ecology

These important topics did not have much engagement from parishes, showing that these are not issues that parishes are dealing with or want to deal with. However, that does not invalidate their importance. The overall rankings of the 14 topics are consistent with the themes and topics that came out of our own Archdiocesan Synod of 2019, which both validates and reaffirms the importance of those outcomes. The three special questions were ranked 14th, 9th, and 13th respectively.

Each of the three topics stressed the importance of education and formation. This is consistent with the outcomes of the 2019 Synod, where the department of catechetics was mandated to set up a program of life-long, holistic education.

A second common theme is the importance of listening. This fits in with the synodal theme of journeying with one another, as well as the 2019 Synod mandate to listen to various groups of people. The people of Johannesburg said this three years ago and it seems as though they are saying it again in 2022.

Sexual Abuse

There was an acknowledgement of how much has been done by the archdiocese already in setting up safeguarding structures in the archdiocese and parishes. Some concerns were expressed on how allegations of abuse are dealt with. It was impossible to know whether the concerns were regarding historic cases or more recent cases. While the Archbishop made it clear that each of the cases referred to him had been appropriately dealt with by the Professional Conduct Committee, perception does matter. It points to the importance of being as transparent as possible regarding complaints and processes, while respecting the right to privacy of both accuser and accused.

Ancestors and the practice of our Christian Faith

The submissions from parish based listening groups and the pre-synod event showed that people are not always clear about the distinctions between cultural practices and religious practices.

Several submissions asked for more information on the teaching of the Church on the matter of Ancestors and Christian faith. There was a high degree of consensus that

ancestors as religious, cultural, and traditional phenomena need to be explored, understood better, and then the teaching of the Church needs to be clearly taught to the people of the Church. In addition to the formation of laity, it was thought that clergy needed specific formation so that they can help parishioners mediate the tension between culture, cultural practices, and religious practices.

It was also clear that those taking part in the listening circles were deeply attached to certain cultural practices and needed the Church to guide them in understanding potential congruences and incongruences. Equally clear is that parishioners wanted action taken against priests who practice as traditional healers and thereby bring confusion to people.

Integral Ecology

Most parishes have done very little regarding environmental education or taken steps to mitigate their impact on the environment. Listening circles point to passivity on the part of the Church in this area and point out that the church has almost nothing to say about the economy, and how political and economic systems impact the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Most respondents to this topic have pointed to a need for ongoing education and formation in parishes and have suggested that the Justice and Peace department take a more active role in addressing these issues. Formation needs to be done in homilies, in catechesis and through archdiocesan policy. The archdiocese should also have clear environmental justice directives so that living the value of integral ecology becomes entrenched in our parish cultures and is not reliant on any individual in a parish.

3. Conclusion: Next steps

a. Creating a culture of listening

The reports from the different topics all stress the importance and desirability of having regular listening circles as part of parish and archdiocesan life. The experience of being listened to has been revolutionary for many people, especially those on the margins of the Church. The listening circle methodology has provided a safe space for people to speak and has made people who were feeling alienated from the Church feel part of the community once again. What would be helpful in creating a culture of listening is the following:

1. Departments within the chancery should be mandated to integrate listening circles into the training and work which they do within the parishes. This is particularly true for Marriage and Family Life; Evangelisation; Youth; Catechetics; Liturgy; SPRED; Justice and Peace; Migrants and Refugees.
2. Establish a desk or working group with the Archdiocese for Women, to continue the journey of listening with and alongside them.

b. Creating a culture of accountability

Nothing will change, nothing will get better, unless amongst other things, the leadership of parishes are held accountable for their actions, or lack of actions. Leadership in a parish consists not only of the parish priest but also deacons and laity. Episcopal Vicars and Heads of Departments working in the Chancery also need to be accountable for their performance, as do Deans.

We are making great strides in accountability for sexual abuse, but there are other ways of abusing one's power. We also need accountability for financial mismanagement, maladministration, poor or abusive homilies, and not following Archdiocesan guidelines. What might be helpful in creating a culture of accountability is the following:

1. Establish ways of doing performance appraisals for Archdiocesan departments, Vicars, Deans, clergy and PPC's. Criteria of evaluation should be clear, as well as the mechanism of evaluation. The Church should be mission driven and professional in her appointments and practice.
2. Homily evaluations could be done regularly, using a standardised form, and the results fed back to the parish priest or deacon in question. This process could be overseen by the PPC Executive.
3. All parishes within the archdiocese should undertake a review of steps taken to implement the 2019 Archdiocesan Synod Resolutions, as stipulated in the Acts of the Synod.
4. Deans of Deaneries should be mandated to do annual visits of the parishes in their Deanery, with reports submitted to the Archbishop.

c. Creating a culture of ongoing formation

A thread running through every topic was the need for formation of one kind or another. The Archdiocese needs a vision of lifelong, holistic formation, of which sacramental preparation is but one part. The formation needs identified began with the clergy, but did not end there. There was a need expressed for the formation of leaders in a culture of servant leadership. Many of the reports indicated a lack of knowledge of Church teachings, and an underdeveloped understanding of scripture and tradition. It is therefore recommended that:

1. The Acts of the 2019 Synod mandated the Department of Catechetics to produce an outline of the processes and resources for a program of holistic formation. This important work has not yet been done. It should be done as soon as possible, possibly with the departments of the Chancery supporting them through a forum such as the HOD's meeting.
2. Related to the point above, more attention should be given to the empowerment of laity through ongoing formation in areas such as scripture, liturgy and theology. Parishes and chancery departments should be encouraged to have regular formation events on documents from Roman dicastery's and Papal encyclicals.
3. The Synod Monitoring and Implementation Committee should review the work done in this pre-Synod phase to identify all of the areas identified as needing formation and make recommendations to the Archbishop and all relevant departments on how such formation needs could be met.

d. Creating a culture of welcome

Creating a culture of welcome within our parishes is crucial if we hope to form a Church of Missionary Disciples, where our youth and the marginalised feel at home, enriching us with their creativity and vitality. A culture of welcome ensures that we are sensitive to those of different races, cultures, and nationalities. This will help us create parish communities free of racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination.

Part of forming welcoming communities is to ensure that parishes live in harmony with all of creation, ensuring a just and sustainable use of the world's resources. The following may be helpful for us to achieve those goals:

1. Parishes need to formulate ways of recognising and using the gifts of the Youth and integrating them into parish groups and ministries.
2. Those who belong to marginalised groups should not only be allowed to exercise ministry in the Church, but actively encouraged to do so.
3. The Acts of the 2019 Synod called for diversity training in our parishes, so that clergy and parishioners are more careful and respectful in what they

say, and how they say it, to people belonging to vulnerable and marginalised groups. This should be the joint responsibility of the departments of Marriage and Family Life, Youth and Evangelisation.

4. The Archdiocese should be encouraged to appoint a vicar for environmental justice, who after consultation will produce environmental guidelines for parishes.