

THE REPORT OF THE ASC IN NOVEMBER 2023

120 people gathered on Saturday 25th November for the 1st meeting of the Archdiocesan Synodal Council (ASC). We gathered a month after the end of the first part of the Vatican Synod. Its method of working – small groups around tables, listening, discerning and significant periods of silence influenced our way of gathering. This was part of what enabled the very first ASC to have a special character and to develop the valuable lessons we had learnt on our own Diocesan Synodal journey.

Bishop Bev Mason, Anglican Bishop of Warrington, set a positive tone for the day in her opening reflection encouraging and affirming us. She said: *It's upon your firm foundations of enduring Presence, hospitality, faithful witness and service, of generosity — and of keeping the nerve when everyone around you may be losing theirs, that you're now seeking to build upon ... and be more of a visible and proactive presence in the name of Christ. This is so very exciting ... it's our Lord's own ministry that you're seeking to intensify, And you couldn't be doing this at a more crucial time! Don't be afraid! You know, the biggest blockage to mission and outreach, is us and our own self-consciousness and confidence. Remember who it is who calls you. And remember He is with you!*

The main task of the ASC was to hear what had happened to implement the Pastoral Plan since its publication in November 2021 and under the 6 Pastoral Plan Areas to suggest priorities for the Diocese for the next 12 months. This report gives the priorities that have, after discernment, emerged, and a flavour of what was said in each of the Areas.

The suggested priorities are shown in bullet points below.)

Becoming a church that honours the vocation of all the baptised

- Establish a continually developing plan to empower/enable all the baptised to develop confidence in living out and sharing their baptismal vocation.
- Bring together models across the Diocese of good catechesis and create ways in which good practice can be shared across the parishes.
- Draw up a plan and a strategy to begin the implementation of the employment of lay pastoral workers.

The responses suggested in this part of the Pastoral Plan hold firm the tension of doing things in the Church and of living out our baptismal calling in the day-to-day living of our lives. The way we hold that tension forms the struggle of trying to suggest priorities. Do not limit ministry to things we do in the Church or for the Church. The vast majority of Church members are lay people! If we had a thorough audit of skills we would be encouraged. The need for evangelisation and formation were stated many times, as was the need to be committed to paid pastoral staff on the ground. An invitation to a personal relationship with Christ must be at the heart of our understanding of responding to our baptismal calling.

Becoming a church that accompanies people through life

- Clarify what is meant (and not meant) by accompaniment and how this relates to synodality and communicate this to all parishes, plus a structure and plan to implement accompaniment across the archdiocese.
- Develop programmes to identify the different accompaniment needs of various specific groups (e.g. parents with young children, marriage preparation, the elderly, those in mixed faith marriages, those freshly graduated, catechists, social

action groups, sick, disabled, divorced & separated, LGBTQ+, bereaved, single parents, those struggling with cost of living, prisoners and their families, families with children or adults with special needs, supporting Catholic children in special schools or in non-Catholic schools, teachers, etc)

Many of the comments in this Area put at the heart of accompaniment a renewed encounter with Christ and a need to be formed in different areas of spirituality (spirituality network etc.). The importance of formation looms large, especially for those entrusted with ministries – catechists being just one example. The lack of a director in the Pastoral Department was felt to be a serious weakness. A comment raised a question for reflection: Why would anyone want to be accompanied by us?

Becoming a church where synodality is embedded

- Commit to looking at governance structures across the archdiocese ensuring transparency at all levels.
- Ensure and develop support for effective working of the DSCs.
- Develop a strategy to better communicate the path the archdiocese is following in implementing the Pastoral Plan.

How do we ensure that all parishes and all archdiocesan structures are embracing our Pastoral Plan commitment to synodality? It was clear from the responses made that some are worried about places where there is no engagement for varied reasons. There was a realisation that we had not clearly communicated the path on which we are walking.

If we are going to set up new structures, we must support those who give of their time and energy to enable these to work effectively. We must not be afraid of giving the time needed – but we must also not be afraid to move on!

Becoming a church that renews its organisational structures and administers its property to serve its mission

- Equip all in the Families of Parishes to capture and share the vision involved in their development, particularly in relation to our use of resources and our environmental responsibilities.
- Review how we are operating synodally in every level of archdiocesan life and work.

It is clear that many people felt that we are trying to talk the talk, but not walking the walk! We are not being as bold and creative as we have been encouraged to be. Formation is called for to enable this. Are buildings more important than people and mission? There is a commitment to making Families of Parishes work – but many questions about the support needed to make this happen. What is our mission? What is the reason we do all we are doing? We are being called to make this clear for everyone.

Becoming a church where young people and young adults flourish

- The Youth Synodal Council must be established as an urgent priority
- Support schools pastorally in developing chaplaincy with particular reference to the Catholic life of the school and links with its local parishes and communities.

We must not leave the future to chance. What is the place of the parish in ministry to and with young people? An easy answer is Catholic Youth Workers – but in what way? The work of Animate is seen as important but there needs to be a re-focusing on the links with parishes and young people and young adults.

Becoming a church that cares for its priests

- Develop a system of mentoring and pastoral accompaniment for all the priests of the archdiocese, taking special note of the way this is communicated.
- Find new ways of providing support for priests in administration, finance, building management and maintenance in order to free them for their specifically priestly ministry.

“It’s a team game” and “don’t play your striker in goal.” There is both a realistic and unrealistic expectation of the ministry of priests. Well-being for ‘staff’ is key in all business, no less so for priests. There was concern shown for priests who are getting older with no reduction in workload and pastoral demands. Again, as in the Synod, it was made clear that there is a great affection for and concern for the priests of the archdiocese whose work is valued and appreciated.

A supplementary document will be made available on the archdiocesan website. This document will ensure that we have a record of all the points that were made in the submissions that were received.

The next ASC gathering is on Saturday 9th November 2024.