



THE CHURCH WE COULD BECOME - AN UNTORN NET *BEYOND SYNOD 2024*

May 2025

INTRODUCTION

People from across the three Dioceses of Brentwood, Southwark, and Westminster, coming from some 15 parishes and other religious communities, met over four Synodal gatherings, from 2022-2025 seeking to discern the way ahead for our local churches.

We offer our reflections and calls to action, not only to remind each other of all that we have shared together in the Spirit, but to encourage and challenge the wider Church in England and Wales, including its pastors, to renew itself as a holy People of God and the richly diverse Body of Christ. The seeds of the Second Vatican Council might now bear fruit in one, holy, catholic, apostolic, and synodal Church if only we nurture and allow these to flourish. We therefore share our discernment and our proposals for action with all who are committed to become a more Synodal Church, including the Vatican's Synod Secretariate, theologians and advisors who continue in this work.

We have been inspired by the documentation which has emerged from the Synodal process at both continental and Vatican Assembly levels, but have found our considerations much less reflected in the responses of the Catholic Bishops Conference of England & Wales. This risks breeding local frustrations when there appears to be little encouragement from all levels of clergy to make Synodality happen, not least because much of what we have discussed in the past three years mirrors many of the conclusions of the 1980 National Pastoral Congress process and event. The ability to implement many of these was sadly blocked by the Vatican at that time.

Considering where we go from here in the Synodal journey, in January 2025, we engaged in a Conversation-in-the-Spirit using “the untorn net” story found in St. John’s Gospel (21:2-3;5-6;8-11), questioning what this passage might mean for us, practically, in becoming more Synodal parishes and dioceses. Just as those gathered around Jesus were named, so everyone in the Church counts and should be named and recognised for who they are, particularly those who are marginalised at the edges of Church and society. The huge trawl suggests that Jesus call is for everyone, the totality and not just those pulling in the net. The core of what it means to be Church, to be the People of God, is found in baptism not ordination. The Spirit’s gifts which we receive in baptism and confirmation are the driving forces for our unity-in-diversity, for there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

The Synodal journey draws us to move from “the side of the boat” we have always used in trying to be a Church-in-Mission, and to risk casting out on another side, where we might well be surprised at the catch we find. Such a task requires patience and readiness on the part of all involved to pull in the net without it being torn. This involves an openness to the varied charisms which will be found in the People of God, whether lay-people, vowed-religious, deacons, priests or bishops. The exercise in creating communities of joy and hope which will discern “the signs of the times” must always be the result of shared participation and responsibility.

The Church of ‘the untorn net’ will not trap people into unhelpful, inward-looking dependencies, but see that through some holes in the net the more vulnerable might be falling through the holes and will thus need careful, informed support and nurturing. Moving from ‘one side of the boat’ to the other might involve facing up to challenges and even controversial areas. It might require a conversion from seeing some people in the Church as problems to be solved, managed, or tolerated, to welcoming the gifts they bring in building up the rich diversity of the Body of Christ.

FROM EXODUS TO EMMAUS

The second half of our January 2025 Discernment Gathering was explored in the context of the Exodus journey of God’s people from slavery and passivity to the Emmaus companions journey of recognition, freedom and energy. We valued the affirmation of the October 2024 Synod Assembly’s Final Document and Pope Francis’ Accompanying Note (24 November 2024) that much of what needs to be done to be seen as a more Synodal Church is already possible.

Furthermore, we welcomed the Pope’s practicality that ‘time is needed in order to arrive at decisions that involve the whole Church’, including the ten Synodal Study Groups’ topics. At the same time we are encouraged by his statement that ‘the Final Document is part of the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter’ and represents ‘the authentic teaching of the Bishop of Rome.’

We therefore urge those responsible for the continuing Synodal process, whether at Synod Secretariate or Bishops’ Conference levels, to remember the Pope’s indication that “Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it ... Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs.” (Amoris Laetitia, N.3)

In order for Synodality to be seen to be done, we call upon the Catholic Bishops of Conference in England & Wales to facilitate robust engagement with the Synod's Accompaniment Process of the Implementation Phase. We recognise that this might involve awaiting the publication of the Synod Secretariate's Support Document, which had been due in May 2025.

We now outline practical actions which could already follow in order to show that the Catholic Church in England & Wales is becoming a more Synodal community of communities:

- A Synodal preaching resource to support the Accompaniment & Implementation Phase, 2025-2028, should be prepared and offered to clergy and others to use, 2025-2026;
- Following the example of a number of dioceses already, other dioceses should take steps towards the holding of Diocesan Synods with equal representation from all sectors of the Church, including participation by our sister-Churches and ecclesial communities;
- The Dioceses of England & Wales should initiate or restore inclusive Diocesan Pastoral Councils and ensure that every Deanery and parish has a local Pastoral Council. The Chairperson of such Councils should be elected from their members and not necessarily be chaired by the Bishop, Dean, or Parish Priest/Parish Administrator;
- Pastoral Councils should ensure diversity in their membership, not least to include those whose voice is seldom heard: people of varied abilities, ethnic minorities, women, young people, and LGBT+ communities;
- Every diocese should have an Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Policy, reflecting the 2014 Bishops' Conference Equality Guidelines, including the principles and values underlying such documents;
- Relevant Formation Programmes, conducted in a Synodal and inclusive style should be developed to assist in achieving the above;
- Consultation Systems should be set in place across dioceses in England & Wales for the appointment of parish priests and bishops;
- The two seminaries (Oscott & Allen Hall) should include more women in academic roles, and be open to lay-students of philosophy, theology, and pastoral ministry;
- There should be specific input in the seminary curriculum on issues of sexuality and gender and the developing human and theological understandings of their related issues;
- Current parish structures need to be radically re-configured to reflect mobility and non-geographical realities with an emphasis on lay-led small communities of faith-sharing, prayer, and action-for-mission;
- We urge the Bishops' Conference to develop formation programmes for the introduction of official lay-ministries of Lector and Acolyte, and for the introduction of lay parish-administrators where there is no resident priest;

- We call for a more open approach to inter-communion in the contexts of inter-Church marriages and families, and where there are formal, local ecumenical partnerships;
- Women compose the majority of active participants in the Church. We therefore recommend that women religious, and other lay-people as appropriate, be more widely authorised to conduct Anointing of the Sick, Marriage Services, and Funerals. There should also be a wider authorisation for qualified lay-people to give the homily at Mass and conduct Liturgies of the Word and Holy Communion;
- We encourage the Bishops of England & Wales to urge the Vatican to release previous studies and reports on the ordination of women as deacons and presbyters;
- We encourage Dioceses to develop easily-accessible on-line Resources Sites where people can find their way to a variety of ministries, pastoral care and support networks, theological and catechetical resources;
- We ask that a priority be re-affirmed at Bishops' Conference, Diocesan and parish levels for young people and their active involvement in the Church, including their ministering to and with each other;
- We recommend that those dioceses which have no formal LGBT+ pastoral ministry should learn from the varied experiences of Clifton, Hexham & Newcastle, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Nottingham, Salford, and Westminster in developing such support for LGBT+ Catholics, parents and families;
- We recognise that many of our conclusions have financial implications and we urge the Church at all levels to continue to consider its use of empty properties, ill-used resources, and other means in order to begin to implement such recommendations.

CONCLUSION

We believe that the Spirit, which St. Pope John XXIII called upon to open the Church's windows and to blow in fresh air through the Second Vatican Council, continues to blow where she will in the people of God. Embodying that Spirit, in taking assertive action enables us to discern that God's will is being followed by the Church. The Synodal journey is, as Pope Francis emphasised, a continuing way of renewal and reform and does not end with an Assembly event. We do not know what the future holds, although we know who holds it. We therefore commit ourselves to be still and to know that God is, who is.