

A Synod for the World

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*A session for the Diocese of Middlesbrough's Synod Day at St Mary's Cathedral, 21st May 2022.
A special gathering of clergy, laity and religious, to mark the completion of this Diocese's first
step in becoming a "synodal" church, fulfilling its contribution to the listening process
underway in the worldwide Catholic Church.*

Part 1: What (See)

1. Introduction
2. Synodality, the Church and the Holy Spirit
3. You: Middlesborough diocese
4. My story, T4CG
5. Changing church
6. Flooded church dream

Chat break: *what does the dream say to you?*

Part 2: Why (Judge)

1. New era: what's going on, how Catholic social teaching can help us
2. The inversion of God vs Self; the realms
3. The importance of place; resist the powers
4. Becoming a relational church; restoring relationship with people and place

Chat break: *how will you become a relational church?*

Part 3: How (Act)

1. Practical next steps; subsidiarity
2. Inward-facing - how the parish forms its own people
3. Outward-facing - becoming a relational church
4. Prayer

PART 1: WHAT (See)

What's happening?

1. Introduction

It really is an honour for me to be here with you on this special day - an important milestone in your journey of faith together. Let me tell you briefly what we're going to cover in the next hour or so:

- We'll look at your journey in the wider context of deep change across the Church
- We'll explore, against the backdrop of cultural and political change, why synodality is happening now and what it's for
- We'll explore how God is calling you, both as individuals and together as groups and as parishes in particular places, to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world - and how your journey forward together might begin to shape up
- Along the way we'll explore what it means to listen to the holy spirit, the effects of secular ideas on the Church, how Catholic social teaching can help us understand what's going on, and we'll get a wider sense of what vocation and sharing responsibility means, the importance of place and of becoming a relational church, the benefits of group discipleship, and much more
- We've got just under an hour, it will be in three parts, I'll be stopping a couple of times for you to chat with each other. Does that sound ok?

2. Synodality, the Church and the Holy Spirit

- Can I just say that I think it is vital that we understand what the Synod is about and what it is not about. The Synod is not only about saving the Church. It is about saving the world. Pope Francis said the Synod involves *"discernment of the times, in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity"* in order to deliver the Church's mission in a de-sacralised world, which is *"to proclaim and establish among all peoples, the Kingdom of God."* (*Lumen Gentium*).
- At the heart of the Church's mission is building a common good between Him and the whole of humanity - that is all of our neighbours, to heal the fragmentation caused by the modern world. As the prophet Isaiah says, we are called to be *"the Repairer of the Breach, the restorer of streets to live in."* (*Isaiah 58:12*).
- Some Catholics have responded to synodality more in fear than in hope: fear of change, or fear of no change. some dismiss it as a waste of time. But this diocese is one of those who have taken it to heart.
- I think you - who have really engaged with the process - will know that synodality is much more than an ecclesial exercise or a battleground where issues are contested. being synodal is not about political issues - progressive or conservative. It is about developing a posture of listening to the Holy Spirit together.

- It's about bringing us closer to the mission of Jesus - a way of being - and *that* is to bring us closer to the ways of the early Church. By "church" we can think of the body of Christ, the whole People of God.
- Important as they may be, we must resist the habit of reducing the meaning of "church" to the management of buildings or ecclesiastical structures. More accurate to think of "church" as groups of faithful people with a covenantal commitment to place, traveling together in relationship with God.
- If we fail to see the purpose of synodality, which is to conform us to God's priorities rather than our own, then its potential will be lost, and it will fail at a time when our country needs us most.
- When Jesus meets Nicodemus, he says that to leave behind past habits, we need the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He says to Nicodemus, a high priest, you can't understand what the Kingdom of God is, unless you are born of the Spirit.

Jesus says "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:12)

- The in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit in us must come before outward structural change. It is a feature of the modern world that we so frequently think that professionalism matters more than inner transformation by the spirit. If we do that, we get stuck on worldly kingdoms and won't see the Kingdom of God.

3. You - the Diocese of Middlesborough

- It's been a real privilege to have some insight into your journey.
- We heard about the key findings from the listening phase of your synodal journey, from you individually, your parishes, religious orders, young people and special interest groups. It's vital that these precious findings are grasped and play a part in who you are becoming as "church" as you move forward.
- I am struck by your passion, commitment and desire, your appetite to build on the parish conversations, and quickly. You want to *"liven up, lighten up, simplify."*
- You want lay people to have better training in practical and administrative roles - you want better formation in scripture, prayer, catechesis, Catholic social teaching - among you there is a hunger to deepen your faith.
- You want to see lay people growing in confidence to take on more responsibility, you want all the baptised to share ownership of "Church" - you want lay people to be enabled to 'grow up' and play full part in Body of Christ.
- And you want to invest time in the relationship between clergy and laity to recognise each other's gifts, to journey together, heal divides.
- You want to evolve new structures of oversight and adjust who takes responsibility - and enable lay people to share that, so that priests can focus on what they were trained for. You want to see more women taking responsibility.
- You are determined to engage with young people and with people "on the margins".

- You are open to exploring new forms of worship, prayer and pathways that might help you grow your congregations.
- There is a sense in your synthesis document that 'time is short' and you want to get on with it. I found it moving to read. It's exciting and daunting in equal measure. This is your synodal journey - it's a journey of becoming; it's your discipleship; your calling, here in this place.

4. My story and Together for the Common Good

- Can I tell you just a little about myself. I have been a Catholic for over half my life, but I grew up an Anglican, daughter of David Sheppard, who was Bishop of Liverpool during the 1970s 80s and 90s. He and Archbishop Derek Worlock the Catholic archbishop overlapped for twenty years. They forged a friendship and public partnership at a time when the city was troubled by sectarianism, high unemployment and unstable local politics.
- I was a bit of a rebel and did not enjoy being a bishop's daughter. I became estranged from the Church from my teens until I was 26: I had a conversion experience and became a Catholic. I worked in graphic design and charity work, raised a family, lived a quiet life.
- Then about 11 years ago, I experienced a prompting of the Spirit. It wasn't clear at first, but I prayed and asked God to show me what I should do. A group gathered around me and *Together for the Common Good* started and it has evolved organically. We are a small team but work with many organisations and partners. We are Spirit-led, and I can only say that the scale of what we manage to do is like loaves and fishes.
- We draw on Catholic Social Teaching and engage across the Christian traditions to encourage them to build common good and play their part in spiritual and civic renewal especially in the forgotten places. We work with churches and schools, hold public conversations, accompany church leaders and build relationships. We help churches rediscover what we call their "civic vocation" and urge them to restore the covenantal relationship of church with people and place.
- I've had no leadership training, learned on the job. I trust in God's guidance. I often feel out of my depth but have found that asking questions from a position of vulnerability paradoxically has become a strength - it opens up new ground, builds relationships. I am fully aware of the Catholic understanding of vocation, but I have no other word to describe my calling.
- My work draws me into listening and learning across the churches. This listening and learning does not dilute the Catholic tradition. On the contrary, it reveals a clearer sense of the distinctive calling of the Catholic Church, and the opportunities that the Synod presents.

5. Changing Church

- The Catholic Church in the West is in decline. This is painful, but being open to the Spirit enables us to deal with the truth.
- We are familiar with the tensions that characterise this decline. Tensions between the liberal and traditional wings. Between some clergy and laity. But also, the mutual estrangement between the "social activist" and "evangelism" wings of the Church too. These tensions, mutual suspicions and hostilities make Jesus weep. All of this leads to mission drift. The Church is a vast institution containing within it the full spectrum of human thought and behaviour. It's human and flawed. We must forgive each other and stop blaming each other - become more holy - cherish each other - listening is incredibly precious. Realise the deep value of the process. Don't allow "issues" to undermine it - recognise the wealth of our shared passion for our faith and the Church.
- But it's not only the Catholic Church that is in decline. All the traditional denominations (Catholic, C of E, Methodist, etc) are seeing decline - they are all seeing falling attendances and ordinations, financial crisis and so on. Priests, pastors and vicars feel they have failed. We are in a new era for which their training has not equipped them.
- Alongside this, though there are signs of new energy and growth, something beautiful is happening. The kinds of churches which are growing are those which are not characterised by the "consumerist" model - that is, where we go to church, get something and go home again. All too often, Christian life lacks the fellowship of mutual love and support.
- But those churches which are growing are characterised by relational opportunities that offer companionship and a real encounter with the Holy Spirit - the form that takes differs, but it always centres on a cell group, where people journey together in group discipleship.
- God is at work. What is He doing? At times like these, we need the wisdom to be undertaker as well as midwife. The whole body of Christ is undergoing profound change.
- Did you know that the fastest growing churches in the world are the underground churches in China, Afghanistan and Iran? These Pentecostal "churches" have no money and no building. They are centred on the Eucharist, and small groups of faithful people engaging with Scripture together, and a direct form of discipleship.
- There are examples closer to home too, for example a church I know had a tiny congregation of 30, but the pastor invited ordinary local people to share a meal and introduced them to the Beatitudes in a low key way. This initial group of six grew to 150 in six months, people came to faith and there were baptisms. Another example, a young couple I know feel called to a new sort of ministry in the community and their bishop is assigning them to a parish to live alongside the priest. Another - a vicar whose church was not growing has found a new energy after introducing Alpha and new approaches to his community.
- There are innumerable stories of change, birth, death, we only have to look. In our own parish, within our own communities, we should be asking God to show us what He is doing and where we can join in.

- The energy comes in unglamorous ways, in patient listening, watching to see what God is doing. Spending time together and with God, asking Him to show you where to look, who to work with. The emerging church is taking the form of groups of faithful people listening to the Holy Spirit.
- Don't be put off by the vulnerability of your parishes - God is doing something across the whole Church. your weakness can be a strength - when you are weak, you have greater need for God - that's what He wants to teach us - and you have greater need for other people. He wants us to connect with the people in our neighbourhood, to love each other, to travel together.
- As a Catholic archbishop said recently, *"We are not going to be able to return to business as usual and we should put our trust in what God is doing. The only thing we know about the future is that it won't be the same as it is now ... if we walk with each other in the name of the Lord then he is walking with us too: there may be a strange warming of our hearts as that happens. I really think these are exciting times – I'd go as far as to say that this is the most important day in the life of the Church this millennium. We need to become the Church that God is calling us to be."* (Archbishop Malcolm McMahon)

6. A prophetic dream: Church flooded with the Holy Spirit

So now we're going to pause for a minute. I'm going to read you an account of a dream reported by a church leader seven years ago, about *"how the Church of our past will be FLOODED by God's Spirit and what "once was" will be no more."* I'd invite you to close your eyes, and allow any thoughts to come forward in your mind:

I saw the water level rising so fast in the basement of the church that I had to grab others to get out. It came pouring in from the bottom floor, a wall of water that was rising up from the earth, moving at a speed that was unnatural. It came up the steps and we had to quickly leave the building before going under. I had been in the LIBRARY studying my journals and books and had to leave them behind.

As soon as I got outside, I saw all the people from the Church gathered together to the side of the building. They were standing on a small hill to my left on a huge ROCK. The entire hillside was one big rock that they were standing on – looking up. Something had caught their attention and they were looking together at what was taking place. Something was coming, something was shifting, and they were watching and waiting.

As I look back to the church behind me, I hear something. Then I see the large brick building starting to shift. As the water now begins to pour out from beneath, one entire section to the right of the building collapses (where the Library was). As soon as it collapsed, the middle section next to it also caved in from the crumbling foundation. Then, the third and final section to the left of the tall brick building fell as the earth gave way. In a matter of seconds, the entire structure was now gone. Those on the rock were secure together and looked on. (Wanda Alger)

A short break for a couple of minutes to chat to your neighbour.

what does the dream say to you?

PART 2: WHY (Judge)

Why Synodality Now? What's it For?

1. New era: what's going on, how Catholic social teaching can help us

- So we've explored some of the big change going on in the Church. But why is it changing now? and why is synodality happening now?
- This is a time of crisis but also of opportunity. There is great dissatisfaction across the churches, But I'm not sure whether God is wanting "the church" to become more 'modern' or 'relevant'. In any case, before taking a view, we ought to be sure we understand what's going on. We need context.
- By reading the political and cultural signs of the times we will understand more fully the purpose of this Synod. Seven years ago Pope Francis [said](#), "*We are living not through an era of change, but a change of era.*" He was not alone in seeing this.
- We need to understand the nature of the new era.
- Catholic social teaching (CST) is sometimes called the theology of the Holy Spirit in practice. CST can help us recognise when social and cultural systems are dehumanising. It can help us to be politically literate about what is going on in a way that is aligned with our faith, avoid the risk of mission drift and the corrosive influence of secular ideologies.
- All the way from *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 to *Centesimus Annus* in 1991, and right up to *Evangelii Gaudium* in 2013 or *Fratelli Tutti* last year, the social teaching of the Church guides us to uphold human freedom in its Christian sense - that is to uphold the human spirit in the face of "the principalities and powers".
- It teaches that neither human beings nor nature should be commodified, and that capital has a tendency to do exactly that: to turn people and everything in the created world into commodities.
- But Catholic social thought is not an anti-capitalist ideology. Rather, it transcends left and right. Capital can be creative, and that creativity should be encouraged. But it can easily become anti-human, so that capacity must be constrained.
- Neither is Catholic social teaching pro- or anti-state. It calls out state systems when they dehumanise too. Power should be devolved and distributed through local institutions and the family. CST is against the overcentralising tendencies of the administrative state.
- CST helps us identify three kinds of power: the earthly powers of money and state, and relational power, of human beings in relationship, which has a transcendent aspect.
- So let's use CST to examine what's been going on to read the signs of the times.
- The [pandemic](#) brought our troubles into sharp focus, but they are not new. We are in the middle of a very deep spiritual malaise, driven by forces corroding our civic life for over forty years, with deeper roots going back at least two centuries.

- These forces were unleashed by an individualistic, hyper-liberal philosophy that views human beings as isolated individuals rather than social beings, a false anthropology. It has had catastrophic effects on our institutional and social relationships and our sense of belonging. The family, community and place have all been undermined. The most devastating impact has been on the economy, leading to the degradation of parts of our country, the abandonment of whole communities.
- The era of individualism - active on both the left and the right - has been hostile to human beings and now it's unravelling. The unravelling happening now is marked by breakdowns in trust, political polarisation between post modernism and conservatism, social fragmentation, inequality and symptoms of distress, rises in loneliness, addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism. Even if it isn't visible in some peaceful communities, this is what is happening.
- The churches have been vulnerable to this assault too and have not known how to resist.
- Most of these signs accelerated in the pandemic but were not caused by it: they are part of a decades-long trend. A radical individualism and hyper-liberalism, on the left and the right, has driven the commodification of human beings and an over-reliance on technocratic solutions to human problems.
- Whether it is globalisation or human trafficking or zero hours contracts, the medicalisation of sadness or dating apps, the preferment of academic qualifications over manual work or of "social mobility" over community – the combination of big money with the technocratic impersonal state has catastrophic effects.
- Other aspects of the unravelling can be seen in the geopolitical instability manifested in the impact of the Ukraine-Russia war and its impact on the global economy. Meanwhile our domestic politics are in a protracted period of realignment, no longer a matter of the old left and right: both parties are incoherent and failing to resonate with the majority of the population who are a long way from Twitter, Westminster and political activism. All of this impacts communities and real life.
- All the more reason for us, the Church to get our act together.

2. The inversion of God vs Self; the realms

- This individualism has deep roots, beginning with the Enlightenment, which despite its many benefits, resulted in a turning away from God and a turn to the Self. It led to a loss of the sense of the transcendent nature of the human person.
- We need to get things the right way up again. Everything seems stacked against us in a world completely dominated by this cult of Self, framed by an aggressive secular humanism.
- But the truth is this is God's world. If we really believe that God is real, then God is the primary agent, not me, not you.
- We need to be clear about who we are as human beings - our identity. My identity is not to be reduced to a category, like "straight, white woman" - no! my identity and yours is as a transcendent human being in God. This is who we are - before we were born and after we die, and while we live our mortal life.

- But we are living in an inversion - a false reality - we have been groomed - and are actively being groomed on a daily basis, to think that God is a fantasy, who only exists in our imagination, or in our private spaces - our homes, or our churches, like some kind of private club or lifestyle choice. A society based on this false approach is inhospitable to the human being, it becomes a machine, it leaves people abandoned. It is also unsustainable, which is why it is unravelling.
- The reality, from a Christian and Catholic point of view, is that there are two realms, the heavenly and the earthly. We need to know which worldview we are operating from. The machine atomises. God builds relationships. Sometimes we in the Church forget who we are. We end up operating from within an earthly paradigm, using managerial, technocratic approaches, thinking we can sort it all out on our own. We can't.
- As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "*I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?*" If we ask Him into our lives, then through the indwelling of the Spirit, we will begin to be able discern between the realms of heaven and earth. We are called to live in the world but not to be of the world.
- This era of individualism has been more harmful than we might think - it has subordinated the human spirit and desecralised the world. This hyper-liberalism goes against the grain of what it means to be human.
- Our Catholic and Christian worldview by contrast, holds to the sanctity of human beings made in the image of God, made for relationship with Him and with each other in the places where we live.
- This is the backdrop to synodality and this is why it's happening now. This is what Pope Francis saw seven years ago when he talked about a change of era. Synodality is happening now because the world needs the Church to resist those dehumanising powers and to build the Kingdom of God in the places where we live.

3. The importance of place; resist the powers

- Place is important because this is where people live: this is the battleground. The local church (that's us) needs to be involved in upholding the human space, generating relational power. It needs to be part of the resistance against the dehumanising tendencies of money power and state power.
- This is what CST consistently tells us, and this is why in his most recent letter, *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis talks about the importance of love, fraternity and civic friendship.
- In other words, our Catholic tradition calls us to a counter cultural insurgency against individualism. This sounds like a political campaign. But it isn't - it is gentle. It's about loving people and building relationships. It is about accompanying people. We could say it is about restoring trust, building a common good between people who have been divided. Common Good is the antidote to individualism.
- However the Church is not well prepared. Many Catholics still don't know the reality of the Holy Spirit in their lives. But the synodal culture is a way to correct this. Some of you here will have experienced the unmistakable gentleness of the Spirit and you will know what I mean.

4. Becoming a relational church; restoring relationship with people and place

- A big part of this "walking together" is about becoming a relational church. This requires reframing our conception of 'church' as more than a place of worship, more than a privatised Catholic club.
- Rather, it is to conceive of church as a group of faithful people committed to a place. A humble church, where, through companionship and real relationship, people in the neighbourhood feel welcome and encounter the Holy Spirit, find a real sense of family and accompaniment in the struggles of their lives.
- A woman told me she had been struggling with terrible debt for two years. She had gone to mass every week but hadn't told a soul about her suffering. Why don't our churches have a culture where people are known, where we can be real, in all our brokenness, where we can be loved and supported?
- We need to become "communities of place", outward facing, multigenerational, living in loving friendship with our neighbours and neighbouring institutions, especially in places that have been abandoned, both economically and spiritually.
- And so when we are thinking about the kind of formation we need, we need to realise that [relationship with place](#) is central.
- But the truth of church decline is that it has fallen out of relationship with large parts of the population. It is no longer the object of affection that it once was.
- In particular, too much of the church now suffers from middle-class dominance. The class issue in the church reflects similar issues in our politics.
- Unfortunately, some forms of "social action" can fall into this trap.
- Christians are called to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world. The covenantal promise of a local church and its leadership requires accompanying people and staying for the long term. It means not doing things *to* people or *for* people, but walking *with* our neighbours in friendship and mutuality, in shared vulnerability and in solidarity with the struggle of everyday life. It is about being relational in all that we do.
- This reciprocity - with our neighbours in the places where we live - the building of local [covenantal relationships](#) is what the prophet Jeremiah meant when he says we should *"Seek the peace of the city -- and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its peace, you will have peace."* (Jer 29.7)

A short break for a couple of minutes to chat to your neighbour.

how will you become a relational church?

PART 3: HOW (Act)

How is God Calling Us, Here and Now?

1. Practical next steps; subsidiarity

- So in the final few minutes I just want to offer you something to think about over lunch.
- You have reached a critical moment in the synod. But what happens between May 2022 and September 2023? What will you do?
- Today is an important stepping stone. The next official milestone is the national stage coming up in the autumn. However, regardless of what happens at that level, the most important focus is in fact your journey, here in this diocese, and in your parish.
- It's clear that God is working among you and that change is more likely to come from the grassroots, more bottom up than top down. I believe the national synodal team expect that to be the case too.
- I'd like to propose to you the principle of subsidiarity, which is intended to uphold the integrity of the human person:

"Decisions should always be taken closest to those they affect, and a central authority should not do things that can be done at a local level."

This is a key principle in Catholic social teaching, and should be balanced with solidarity. But it is often overlooked, ironically also in the structure of the Church. It requires distributed leadership. I suggest it is relevant for you now at this stage in the synodal journey. It requires careful discernment about what decisions need to be taken at what level. The Catholic Church is a unique institution with a particular understanding of authority and so some decisions must be taken centrally, but many can and should be devolved to more appropriate levels.

- You can wait and see what Cardinal Vincent says in the autumn, but if you do, you risk losing the momentum, the spark of energy you have now - so I would say in keeping with subsidiarity, you should get on with implementing the ideas you have been discussing, and start now.
- If you are finding the synodal way is bearing fruit in your parish, keep it going.
- It's important to **be practical**. Perhaps the question to ask is:

"where do we have room for manoeuvre?"

I suggest there are two ways of approaching the next stage:

1. inward facing - focusing on your own formation as "church"
2. outward-facing - to the neighbourhood, and each other

Both require a listening posture. The listening posture is to ensure we always remember that God is primary agent, not us.

We need to keep things the right way up.

2. Inward-facing - how the parish forms its own people

What will your inward-facing synodal approach look like?

How is God calling lay people in your church?

John 15:16 feels relevant here:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

How will you as a people become more proactive and less passive?

Your approach could involve:

- **A continual culture of listening:** you may want to build on the foundations of the Parish Consultations by continuing synodal conversations (I noted that the synthesis document said the timetable was rather short and last minute) those who were involved really valued the experience, the appetite is still there; and some parishes didn't engage as deeply as others - some didn't even realise what the synod was about - so there is a good reason to keep the process running in some form, so more people can benefit and contribute.
- **Discernment:** there are two areas in terms of discernment I'd like to highlight:
 - **Lay ministries: the idea of vocation needs to be understood more widely** there is a need to create a space for us as lay people to begin discerning our particular calling, and to do this together prayerfully: what are our gifts and skills, how do we feel called, what's that little nagging from the Spirit saying? How can we help to distribute responsibility? This needs to happen *before* training is put in place. Training, as needed, can be shaped to the needs that arise. But remember training in administrative tasks *will be a waste of time* if you are not also becoming a Spirit-led, welcoming, relational community.
 - **What is of God and not of God:** particularly in this time we are living in. This kind of discernment means listening and not running ahead of God but rather watching what He's doing. It means being able to discern what is coming from God and what is just noise from the countless voices around us. Even Jesus said *"the Son can do only what he sees his Father doing"* (John 5:19)
 - It's about listening carefully for an invitation to join in with what He is doing rather than steaming ahead with our own ideas. In our prayer conversations and listenings to God, we can ask Him to show us what He's doing and then notice. Ask Him for clarification: "Are you teaching me? Is it about what you're doing over there, or over there?"
 - This is also a helpful way to navigate a culture awash with hostile political ideologies dressed up as benign ideas: we should always be asking "what is of God and what is not of God?"

- **Formation:** group discipleship and encounter with the Holy Spirit is the fundamental building block for renewal. So it needs to be the first step in your formation strategy.
 - I think it's not unfair to say that many Catholics have got stuck on a formulaic, rote-learned, atrophied form of prayer - which is less likely to open up a relationship with the Holy Spirit. It is sometimes consumerist: go to mass, get something and go home again. It is often individualistic, solitary and passive.
 - This is so different from small self-run groups of Christians which provide opportunity for encounter with the Spirit, and with each other, like the early church. Churches with cell groups fared better during the pandemic than those stuck in the consumerist model. We need not only the Mass and the Eucharist, but also the small discipleship group. It is about both/and, not either/or.
 - Everyone, including young people, should be offered an easy way to join a discipleship group. Alpha is an excellent place to start for example.
 - For those who are already in a group, perhaps ask where they would like to go next to refresh their discipleship journey.
 - Ask your groups about their discipleship experience, would they like support? do they discern together, is there mutual respect, is the group characterised by trust, does it enable sharing and vulnerability?
 - How familiar with Scripture is your group? Maybe you could make a commitment to regularly get into *Lectio*?
 - Could you bring together all the active prayer groups from time to time, perhaps for a special mass and shared meal?
 - Perhaps you could offer tasters of a range of different prayer approaches - *Lectio*, *Taizé*, Examen, spontaneous, contemplative, music-based, pilgrimage.
- **Governance:**
 - when it comes to thinking about this, of course revitalising the Parish Council is a fantastic idea. But this will be good not only internally for the church, but also externally - for the community: it would be excellent to have a strong church institution in the area.
- **Getting a good mix in the leadership of the parish:**
 - when you are starting to discern the new pattern for leadership in your parish, please consider how you will get beyond the usual suspects in parish life and build a broad mix.
 - This can be achieved by intentional personal invitation and discernment. You have to be really determined about this. In particular think about people who are under-represented, for example women, young people and people from working class backgrounds in communities which have been left behind. Make an effort to build a genuinely diverse group - think about true diversity, not just age, gender and race - think also about educational background and class. And diversity of opinion. Try to build a genuinely diverse group.

3. Outward-facing - becoming a relational church

What will your outward-facing synodal approach look like?

Remember that despite our vulnerabilities, the church needs friends, and we can offer friendship in return - accompanying people. So building relationships is essential, both personal and institutional.

This is a kind of reweaving, a reweaving of the civic space that we are part of. In this, our vulnerability becomes a strength.

We are called to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world. It is about loving and cherishing people. Love and righteousness come before justice. Out of that we get called into the right way of doing justice.

Becoming relational: I think we all realise that the synodality process, properly understood, is pointing us towards becoming a more relational church. This is an area that *Together for the Common Good* can help with. We work with churches and [we can help you](#) do this.

Some of the questions we can ask ourselves at parish level is

- Who are we, as a people, **in this place**? what is God calling us to do, here in this place?
- How are we called to help **build** the Kingdom of God, to bring about the common good?
- Who among our **neighbours** are we called to be in relationship with? What can we do together?
- It might help to **draw a map** - just a simple map - of your area and mark all the local institutions - businesses, other churches, places of worship, charities, clubs, shops. How well are you connected?
- Who do we know? Where are our blind spots? How will we **connect** with our neighbours? For example could we pray for local business owners or invite them for a regular breakfast? There are lots of ideas you will come up with.
- What will our engagement with **young people** look like?
 - first is to recognise that we have a treasure in our young people
 - ask them what they would recommend; cherish what they have to say; meet them where they are; offer ways for them to lead.
 - can you provide a space, a physical place for them to meet, to offer that feeling of belonging, that they are not alone. Loneliness is statistically higher among young people, 18-24 year olds, than older people, despite or perhaps because of, their engagement in social media.
 - how can we build a working relationship with our local schools, FE colleges, and church and church groups? Always look for opportunities of partnership.
 - ask God to guide you to people who have a gift in this area - you may feel you don't have the ability, but you'll be surprised, God will bring you someone.

- How could our **worship** become more relational?
 - if it is a ceremony without community, without interaction, without belonging, then it's impoverished.
 - can we experiment with more relational formats so that it is less of a barrier to people who are not used to church?
- There is a great sense that you want to engage with people who are "**marginalised**?"
 - The first thing is to be honest about who you are and are not in relationship with. If you need to do "outreach" it means you don't have connections with certain parts of the community: that tells you something. Perhaps you can consider whether the church itself has become marginalised. You could ask yourself who you know, who has those connections - and take it from there.
 - Are we cherishing our neighbours who are poor? You could find out what is the experience of people who are poor if they are invited in to your church? do they feel welcome and at home or do they feel uncomfortable and want to leave? is there a class or cultural barrier?
 - What are we offering that is like a sense of family?
 - How can we give a "hand up" rather than a "hand out"?
 - How can our approach become more reciprocal and be more like a friend, a living alonsider, rather than getting stuck in the service provider mentality?
 - How well equipped are we to handle these relationships? Let's be honest, a lot of churches are afraid of getting involved with people or families who are dysfunctional. Which local statutory agencies or neighbouring churches or charities would help us and build our confidence?
 - We really need to think about our solidarity with poor people. We discussed how the political and cultural context - globalisation - has caused this very dramatic change in the economy. In some areas people are finding themselves in difficult circumstances due to no fault of their own. Manufacturing has moved abroad and the jobs situation is so terrible. But solidarity won't be achieved by "church as service provider". People in poor or working class communities have much to teach the church - in fact Pope Francis says they should be the treasure of the Church - and the one-way dynamic of "service-client" is often perceived as a separation between 'us' from 'them'. What is needed is mutuality, respect and genuine loving friendship. Justice flows from love, not the other way round.
- **What about our assets**, our buildings?
 - How is God calling us to use our assets?
 - Are we sharing what we have?
 - What conversations can we have with our neighbours to see how God might be calling us to offer what we have?

- **Vulnerability is a strength**
 - The church does not have it all sown up - it is vulnerable. In fact, the church itself is marginalised. It needs friends, so this a good reason to reach out.
 - You could start by asking the neighbourhood what they would most value? One church I know asked the neighbours and they most wanted a playground. So this was that church's first step. Over time this church became the hub of that community.
- **Keeping it simple**
 - The best approaches are simple. They don't necessarily need funding or strategy.
 - Just be relational.
 - You do not have to be ordained to run a place of welcome: all you need is a room and some warm, relational, sensitive, prayerful people to host and invite people to come, and do simple things together. It's about being close to people, accompanying each other.
- **Remember what God at work looks like:**
 - You'll notice that people feel valued, they grow, they care for each other, they empower each other, there is love and friendship. The Holy Spirit is unmistakably gentle, and always inspires us.

4. Prayer

I just want to thank you Lord for bringing us together, for bringing all these wonderful people into this place together. Ask you to bless every one of them and all their families and the people they engage with. Bless the synodal process in this diocese. Thank you for their generosity of spirit. Thank you for all their gifts and skills, for the relationship between them, for the trust growing between them. Bless them now as they go forward, and we trust Lord that you have this in your hands, that the fruit that will come from this is all for You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you for listening. I'm really touched that you trusted me. I could have said all kinds of things, couldn't I? But I have really put myself in God's hands the last few days trying to discern what He wanted you to hear through me today. I really hope this has helped you in some way.

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Click [HERE](#) to find out about **Common Good Journey** for your parish and how to get involved

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