

++FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION and MISSION



Report of the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey

Planning and Process

Shortly after the announcement by His Holiness, Pope Francis on May 21, 2021 establishing the theme for the Ordinary Synod of Bishops in 2023 and inviting “all the baptized” to participate in the preparation for the Synod, Bishop Dennis Sullivan asked his leadership team to plan and implement the Synod process in the Diocese of Camden and appointed Mrs. Donna Ottaviano-Britt, Secretary for Pastoral Outreach and Director of the Office of Leadership and Discipleship, as our liaison to the Synod Office of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Mrs. Ottaviano-Britt was excited to take up this work because we hoped that this would revive the experience of our four-day diocesan convocation, *The Joy of the Gospel in South Jersey* which had been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the Summer of 2021, our leadership team developed the general outline that parishes, schools and other institutions would follow for consultation. In September, after the release of the Synod tools, the team prepared the list of questions that would be circulated to the parishes and added a series of questions about the Eucharist in order to begin remote preparations for the American Bishops’ initiative on the Eucharist (2022 – 2024).

Central to this plan was celebrating the Opening Mass of the Synod on Sunday, October 17, 2021 at Our Lady of Hope Parish in Blackwood, New Jersey. Delegates from all 62 parishes of the diocese, along with their pastors, were invited to an orientation program prior to the Mass. This orientation helped delegates understand what a synod is; why parishioners were invited to participate; and how the process would be conducted. In addition, the synod leadership team demonstrated for the delegates what a parish listening session might look like and provided strategies delegates could use to facilitate difficult topics and personalities.

After the orientation, Bishop Sullivan celebrated Mass opening the Synod in the Diocese of Camden and then recognized dozens of the faithful for their outstanding service to the Church by presenting the Bishop’s Medal. Afterwards, all were invited to the parish hall for refreshments.

Attention then turned to the delegates and parishes. In the days following the Opening Mass, delegates met with their pastors and parish staffs to set dates and times for listening sessions. Many parishes targeted particular groups within the parish: youth; married persons; senior

citizens; regular communicants; those who practice less often. They also tried to find ways of reaching out to those who are registered but not participating; those who have left the Church; the poor; disenfranchised; and those who practice in other Christian and even non-Christian communities. In-person listening sessions were conducted for these later groups in some parishes. Other parishes conducted virtual meetings, prepared online surveys or distributed paper surveys in order to reach as many people as possible.

The original deadline for concluding listening sessions was expected to be December 8th, our national and diocesan feast day. However, many parishes asked for an extension so that they could conduct listening sessions over the Christmas and New Year's holidays when more people might be available and college students would be home. Since the Holy See pushed back that dates for submitting our findings, we moved the reporting date for each parish to January 15, 2022.

The elementary schools and religious education programs of the diocese were invited to conduct their own "synods". Teaching materials about the concept of synod were provided to the schools as was a simplified series of synod questions, including questions on the Mass and the Eucharist.

The Bishop's Delegate for Hispanic Ministry also conducted a series of "encuentro" styled meetings at parishes where Hispanic Ministries are located. Similar sessions were provided for Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean and Deaf Catholics in the diocese.

Zoom sessions were conducted every Wednesday evening for the parish delegates. On those Zoom calls, delegates could ask questions, share best practices and to engage with delegates in nearby parishes to clarify and coordinate the work of facilitating Synod listening sessions. Every Friday a summary of the Wednesday Zoom discussion was sent to all delegates in case they were unable to participate in the weekly call. Overwhelmingly, the delegates appreciated the support they received from the diocesan leadership team.

A few parishes were prepared to submit their findings by the original December 8th deadline. In advance, materials mimicking the online tool for data collection were provided to all delegates. A training session on how to synthesize what was heard and to enter that into the online tool was conducted. This was repeated again in January for parishes submitting their data on January 15th.

Once the online tool was populated, the 11 areas of Synod discussion were divided among the diocesan leadership team to further synthesize what was submitted. While weight was given to the number of times particular themes were mentioned, all information reported was captured in first version of this report. The first, or draft, report was then sent to the 5 Vicars Forane, all the priests and the parish delegates. All were asked to read the document and note areas that they agree were "heard" in their listening sessions. They were also asked to mark those areas "not heard" and to suggest material be added that they believed was missing in the draft. All were then invited to a meeting facilitated by their dean. After those meetings, each dean was asked to submit suggested revisions or additions.

The diocesan leadership team reviewed the suggestions and altered the draft document as necessary. The revised report was then sent to all priests and delegates and was made available on the diocesan website for all the faithful to read.

Companions on the Journey

Few parishes opted to include this question in their parish listening sessions. Though mergers have been complete for many years, those sharing said there is still significant difficulty. The “us vs. them” mentality continues to hinder their ability to bring new families and different people to the parish who they felt belonged there.

The listening session gave voice to the communities of different ethnic backgrounds, including their search for other parishes that serve their needs yet outside of their local community.

Some shared the desire to respect parish boundaries yet it can prohibit the growth of a parish and/or prevents the parish from reflecting its civil community. The Hispanic and Asian influence is growing rapidly in our diocese yet parishes are ill-equipped for outreach. Some identified there are efforts at outreach to the wider community, yet say the parish itself could do a better job.

The LGBTQ+ community was discussed widely and there is desire for inclusivity and accompaniment – yet there is a general consensus from the laity of being ill-equipped to do so. The subject of women in church leadership roles appears to be a gap for the church, particularly because women hold these positions in the secular world.

Many also shared the diversity of the local community is not reflected in the parish with commentary that more could be done to rectify this.

Nearly every parish identified the absence of both young families and their children, along with young adults. Observations regarding root cause fell in several categories: school aged children are not involved in parish life, are not brought to Mass and overall most are (parents and children) are poorly catechized. Many families are committed to many activities/sports and the parish, including Mass, is no longer the priority. **Note: The Latin Mass mission parish, is experiencing growth in its young families.

Those participating suggested proactively inviting youth and young adults to participate in different ministries in the parish and not limited to only altar servers. The common message is Church does not relate to its young people. Suggestions include the parish could improve its engagement resources and create activities helping young people and families feel welcomed and understood.

Others suggested parishes lack quality catechetical programs resulting in poor formation of young people. Sacraments and being part of the community feels like ritual to youth/young adults. Many shared the belief this is why so many leave after Confirmation.

A large number of parishes expressed the LGBTQ+ and divorced communities are excluded. The common recommendation is creating specific ministries where members can enjoy the richness of parish life. There appears to be a perception the LGBTQ+ and divorced (without differentiating the divorced and remarried) cannot receive communion and participate in liturgy.

Based on experiences, two specific groups are unhappy and do not return because of church rules and teaching. Many expressed a need for improving the teaching on these subjects.

Parishioners believe that formation, as well as learning how to engage in dialog would be very beneficial to support initiatives with youth, young adults, LGBTQ+ and the divorced. Ministries specifically for these groups would help to keep them in our parishes with activities for them.

It seems that in both questions the answers were somewhat similar and the resolution to the issue is also the same.

Called to Listen

Several of the participants said that God speaks to us through all people who are created in His image and likeness, and all are equally worthy of our kindness, care, respect, and love. We are called to recognize the love of Christ in all voices. Some of the voices we ignore are those of the young people, children, women, homeless, sick, persons with special needs, non-Catholics, those who have stepped away from the Church, those we encounter in the volunteer and ministry settings, those who are going through difficulties such as physical, emotional and spiritual needs, those who are alone and single, and those suffering from addiction.

Some of the answers mentioned that the ways God speaks to us are through the generosity of the poorest of the poor; through people of different races, ethnicities, or socioeconomic statuses; through a homeless person who goes unnoticed through the fast-paced life that we have; through the open and honest example of small children; through bereavement ministry. Seeing God in everyone through humble and caring interactions is a way to embrace God's voice. God speaks to us through all on their own journey.

Other answers were not related to the voices we ignore; however, they mentioned that God speaks to us through priests, religious, deacons, nature, prayer, Mass, homilies, Holy Communion, Scripture, traditions of faith, Catechism, and signs of the time. Some parishes mentioned that the question was difficult to answer and others that they do not know which ones are the voice we ignore.

The majority of the answers stated that the parishes do not listen to the voice of the laity, women, and young people. Some said it depends on who is the pastor and how he sets up the structure and culture of the parish.

Those who felt that listening was lacking, mentioned the following reasons: limited access to the pastor, opportunities to voice opinions regarding Church law and governance, as well as parishes have a very involved group of people and only those voices are heard. Some shared the Church's actions are often misinterpreted. The Church is welcoming in Christ's name but cannot change Doctrine to suit each person's ideology. It also seems people express there are things missing in the church/parish/youth group, etc. when ministries clearly do exist. Maybe there is there a Public Relations problem?

People complain that the Church decides without ever asking questions of parishioners and their needs. Some topics seem to be silenced in the Church – everything should be discussed with openness. Church seems to listen to those who agree with their political or ideological views only. The Church leadership from the top down seem to avoid Church doctrine and listen to the political voices more than orthodox parishioners.

Parish councils provide a voice of the pastor to the people, yet not an opportunity for the voices of the parishioners to be heard. Parishioners are not necessarily comfortable speaking out, nor asked for their input – parishes don't have forums for parishioners to voice concerns or provide suggestions.

Most common answers of why parishes do not listen to women state that the Church mutes women's voices by excluding them from global/hierarchical leadership roles, priesthood, and diaconate. Women do the bulk of the work and are taken for granted, and the Church does not listen to the young or to women as much as they listen to men. Women are not seen as equal, yet have many ideas and are capable of holding leadership roles.

Regarding young people, the common opinion is the Church is not successfully engaging them, and outreach is poor, especially after Confirmation. The Church also lacks an ability to provide community to the 30- and 40-year old community members as well. The Church has adapted technology yet fails to utilize it for young people and modern issues they face in these times. More young adults should be in leadership roles and highlighted. Older parishioners just ignore young people. There could be a children's liturgy to help families.

Several answers stated that the Church does not listen to the LGBTQ+ community and fails to recognize their needs and identity. Few are in leadership roles. Other groups that the Church does not listen to are the poor, those on the peripheries, and those who felt that they do not or cannot belong.

Those who stated that the Church listen to the voices describes the following ways as to how parishes do it: youth ministry, religious education programs, Bible study groups, prayer groups, sacraments, activities outreaching to the poor and homeless, personal phone calls by staff to all active and inactive members, reaching out to those who are not Catholics or who have "fallen away" from the Church, visitation door to door by the Legion of Mary, parish council, altar servers, readers at youth Masses, activities and fundraisers for teens, finance council, Catholic Daughters and Knights of Columbus.

There were also several suggestions of how the Church could listen to the voice of the laity. The following are recommendations: more informational postings in the bulletin, forums (listening sessions) to check in with the laity and give updates, implement a clearer process to speak up, phone calls to people who stop coming to the church, parishioners like this Synod process and would like to see the process continue, suggestion boxes, involve those inactive and have their opinions. A significant number of responses concluded that the parishes listen to the voices of the parishioners, but feel that the parishes' leadership does not act on their concerns or ideas.

Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission

The majority of responses to the concept of a baptized Catholic's personal mission centered on the need for Catholics to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. From that foundation, respondents understood that they must live out this relationship in their daily lives by word and example. They also understood that their personal relationship with Jesus Christ requires that they have a prayer life; that they read and study the Sacred Scriptures; that they participate in the Eucharist and Sacraments; that they must perform works of charity in the community; be of service to the parish; and financially support the Church.

The community of baptized Catholics, according to most respondents, must be a “light to the world” which evangelizes by sharing our individual stories of faith and inviting others to become disciples – “go and make disciples.” (Mt. 28:19) A call for training in the work of evangelization was expressed by a few and many added that the evangelization is two-fold: to fallen away Catholics and to the wider community. Some respondents also noted the sad divisions that exist among the Christian Community and called for common prayer and discussions that might lead to unification.

One parish made a noteworthy comment: “The Church is not felt in our community today. Church leaders cannot do it alone. This problem must be brought to the attention of the faithful and addressed even if it takes holding [more] discussion sessions.”

Most respondents to these questions believed that their parish was a place of welcome that provides ministries and programming to a wide variety of people and their needs. They did not believe that their parish “ignores” any specific group of people, at least with intention.

When pushed to provide answers, they acknowledged that there are those who feel alienated from the Church and their parish communities, especially: the divorced; divorced and remarried; LGBTQ+ community; youth and young adults; young married couples and families; the homebound; the incarcerated; and the addicted.

Some noted that in parishes with Hispanic parishioners there is lack of understanding of the varied needs of this community – they are a diverse population coming from the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America where cultural differences are many. The Hispanic community also has layered needs – the undocumented; the newly arrived; first generation; and those who have been established in Southern New Jersey for some time. Recognizing and addressing these different needs is key to preventing many Hispanics from drifting away from the Church into evangelical Protestant communities.

Some respondents noted the need for leadership among pastors, priests and deacons. They also want more educational and social opportunities; inclusion of Charismatic Catholics; and an emphasis on Pro-Life which sees beyond abortion only to the poor, migrants, gun control and the death penalty. Others offered that Catholics need education on the marriage teachings of the church and those pursuing annulments should be assigned a mentor, someone to accompany them in this journey.

Simply put respondents understood that they are invited by their parishes to share their “time, talent and treasure” and so live out their service to society. Service opportunities abound in most parishes through Knights of Columbus; Parish Nursing; Saint Vincent de Paul Societies; Stephen Ministry; Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist to the Homebound; grief ministries; senior ministries; youth groups; food pantries; prison ministries; English as a second language programs; the House of Charity/Bishop’s Annual Appeal; and works that meet the needs of communities outside of the United States.

Most did not see themselves as “missionaries.” One parish described its “Light the Fire” program which invites parishioners to go out into their city to encounter others and invite them to join them for a prayer in church. At that time the Sacrament of Penance is available. Another suggested that emphasis should be placed on the dismissal from Mass which invites us to be missionaries.

Dialogue in the Church and Society

Responses to all questions regarding diversity showcased the very wide disparity between parishes when it came to engaging with diverse peoples.

Parishes with apparent Anglo homogeneity, but without an active social justice ministry saw little need for interaction with diverse peoples. Remarkably in several responses that because we are a universal church that there was no need to tailor our faith or ministries to engage with diverse populations.

Parishes with apparent Anglo homogeneity, but with an active social justice ministry, saw great need for increased representation of diverse peoples and creating active ministries to invite people of diverse backgrounds to the parish, but also to bring parishioners to populations not represented in the parish.

Parishes with apparent diverse populations, but without an active social justice ministry felt that their parish, though one, operated like two. One ministry for the English-speaking population and one for the, usually Spanish-speaking, population. Some respondents felt there was little imperative to bring the populations together.

Parishes with apparent diverse populations, but with an active social justice ministry or hospitality ministry, saw more cohesiveness in their communities. This was often helped by having a non-White priest in the parish and diverse representation in lay leadership.

In general, the form of listening to the voices of those out of the mainstream fell to Catholic lay ministers and ministry participants who developed small working groups to bring the marginalized to the church, typically in a small discussion group format. If a minority person themselves or an advocate for social justice, the pastor and/or parochial vicar might also have a role in the work.

Parish social service ministries, if a parish had one or more, were also credited with doing most of the communications with marginalized peoples. However, very few parishes responded with efforts beyond ministries to the poor or Hispanics. One parish noted their work with the LGBT+ populations and one parish wished that parish would use the resources of Courage International.

All parishes who responded to this question, many did not, appeared to have a fairly active ministry to the sick, to varying degrees. Similarly, parishes had some form of poor ministry, ranging from Saint Vincent de Paul Society's to food pantries, to active ministries to help bring people in need to various shelters Catholic Charities offices. In terms of work with minority populations, activity there depended on if the parish itself was diverse or had an active social justice ministry, if it does not have one of the two, then there was little interaction with diverse populations. In terms of those excluded from society, but not listed above, that was the smallest segment of parishes, usually only the few with substantial social justice ministries and specific desire to reach out to the margins.

Speaking Out

Answers here seem to be dependent on two factors 1) is the pastor open to dialogue and 2) is the nature of the dialogue acceptable or not?

With regard to #1, parishes reported that if the pastor was a natural two-way communicator, then parishioners felt comfortable with discussing matters of concern with him and his parish staff. If the pastor was not comfortable talking with parishioners, instead either

forwarding their concerns to parish staff or lay leaders, or not welcoming dialogue at all, then respondents reported a lack of open communication. Some felt ostracized for voicing an opinion considered counter to the pastor's opinion.

With regard to #2, this too often fell to the preferences of the pastor. Pastors who were comfortable discussing any concern - fiduciary transparency, concerns with the Mass, changes from the Vatican, diversity, etc. – then parishioners felt empowered to open dialogue. In parishes where the pastor is considered myopic to his own preferences, the parishioners did not feel they could voice concerns.

Most parishes did not answer this question. Of those that did, they were located in larger, urban/suburban communities or resort towns and noted that the parish did interact with local media, at least pre-pandemic, and would invite them to events or community initiatives. Many parishes credited the use of the diocesan newspaper, The Catholic Star Herald, with disseminating parish news to a wider audience.

Most parishes now eschew the use of traditional media, instead focusing on the use of social media to interact with their community in a public forum. There was some concern that traditional media is inherently hostile to the Church.

Most parishes reported that the pastor is the sole spokesperson for the community, though some noted the use of pastoral associates or deacons occasionally. Parish respondents reported utilizing pastoral councils to varying degree. Some lay leaders and business administrators are well-known in some parishes and will speak with limited authority, but in most cases, parish respondents reported that they do not know if they have a pastoral council or finance council, who is on it, or what they do.

Celebration

Less than half of parishes responded to this question. Adoration, Parish Missions, Family Prayer, Family Traditions, Daily Mass, Devotion to Saints, and various annual special events, masses, and devotions were listed as experiences that strengthen the faith, prayer life, and sense of mission within the community. The importance of and the connection between both personal prayer and communal prayer and action was evident in responses.

There is strong desire for connections to be made both with God and with others. Parishes indicating where there is well-planned, beautiful, transformational, excellent liturgy have named relevant homilies, joyful music, a spirit of reverence, a respect for the Eucharist, and an understanding of what it means to love God and neighbor as the sources of inspiration, nourishment, and enthusiasm.

Nearly half of parishes responded to this question and the most common response the following as the common needs: improved faith formation regarding the liturgy, especially within Hispanic communities, creating a welcoming environment which includes greeters, personal invitations to attend and into ministries, relevant homilies, and the visibility of women in leadership roles.

Music is also mentioned frequently, as responses indicated that choices in music that allow for ease of participation, in a variety of styles, with worship aids of some kind will promote active participation. Clear signage of mass times, good use of technology and social media, and better communication can also promote participation. Finally, an attitude of inclusion rather than

exclusion, and the observance of diversity in age, cultures, lifestyles, marital status, and family status within the community is viewed as important.

Over 80 percent of parishes responded to this question. COVID is certainly a factor. Both the imposition of too many protocols and the ignorance of protocols are given as reasons why the faithful are not participating. The ease of watching mass on television or online is seen to have deterred the faithful from participating in-person. However, the most common response to why the most not participate weekly is that the faithful have become lazy, while other priorities have risen above Sunday liturgy as more important.

Poor liturgy planning, poor quality and irrelevance of homilies and music, too much asking for money, along with poor sound systems foster boring and disengaging liturgy. The sexual abuse scandals have caused many to stop attending Mass. Feelings of exclusion (women, children, LGBTQ+ mentioned specifically) keep people away from participating at Mass. Inconvenient mass times, the lack of opportunity for confession, the lack of transportation, and the lack of a sense of connection and/or community are also listed as reasons keeping people away.

Nearly 80 percent of parishes responded and the lists of suggestions were extensive. Recommendations include the following topics: education, public policy, climate change, human trafficking, child abuse, domestic violence, mental health, basic human rights and the poor. Others suggestions related to equal rights for all people - regardless of race, color, age, gender or sexual identity.

A number of parishes also responded there should be more attention paid to other societal concerns such as education, gun violence, addiction, sexual abuse, anxiety in youth, more frequent and transparent communication from church leadership, outreach to youth and families, divorce, the annulment process, and comprehensive work in pro-life ministries (conception to death).

Several parishes recommended focusing lack of clergy, need for women priests and deacons, helping parents raise children (navigating social media, living within an increasingly secular world, and cost of Catholic school education), and the need for unity and community within the Church. A few parishes felt the Church should pay more attention to adult catechesis, and assistance in responding to anti-Catholic issues in the media.

Ecumenism - The Church's Relationship with Other Christian Communities

Only a few parishes included this in listening sessions. A common observation from those who responded is they may not have line of sight to what the parish does with the other Christian communities in the area. Others shared the most visible interaction was more seasonal (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter), or event driven versus a sustained ministry. The most common point of intersection with the other communities are in ecumenical food pantries and some prolife efforts. Many in the listening session voiced the opinion that much more can and should be done.

A few parishes shared specific feedback stating they are routinely engaged with other Christian communities tending to multiple needs ranging from food insecurity, addiction, senior gatherings, interfaith young adults, racial justice, as well as intentional invitations into their Small Christian Communities the parish and the pastor supports and encourages. There were several mentioned regarding the limited opportunities during COVID, with hopes these will return. Those

involved and aware of this work reference the commitment and passion for their calling to this work.

The participants consistently shared the fruit of working together is alignment to the mission of sharing the Gospel. The collaboration demonstrates to the local community what it means to follow Christ's example serving others. Others referenced the opportunities to make friends, to learn and share the faith. There was emphasis on the collective ability to evangelize the culture locally, and much more could be done for the kingdom as there is "power in numbers."

Lack of any organizational structure, poor communication and some distrust of Catholics made it difficult for outreach and/or collaboration with other Christian communities. Some felt there would be great benefit if there were clarity of beliefs/understanding to break down the doctrinal barriers. Several also mentioned there is a need for Catholics to recognize they are not holier than others because this is an impediment.

Others mentioned that the parish needs a point person for this work, as the pastor is stretched too thin for this to become a vibrant ministry. Also, the lack of a roadmap for how this works and what it can look like can also inhibit people from stepping forward to lead.

Authority and Participation

This question was difficult for many parishes to answer and so it was left blank. Among those that responded, most believed that the pastor alone has authority and makes decisions. They acknowledged that often they did not know why particular decisions were made and would like more transparency. Many responses noted that the parish has a Pastoral Council and a Finance Council but often they did not know who represented them or for what term of office or how the process actual worked.

Of the parishes that responded, the majority were unaware that their parish had a pastoral plan with goals and strategies. The few parishes which reported having pastoral plans shared the hard they undertake to implement the strategies, attain goals, and make sure that they communicate to the parish through the bulletin, Mass announcements and other forms of communication.

The common response to this question was that most people, especially if they are regularly practicing Catholics, understand that they are co-responsible for the wellbeing of the parish, especially for its financial wellbeing. However, there was also general agreement that when the "rubber needs to meet the road" that few step forward to volunteer or participate in parish sponsored events. This is even more true among younger parishioners. Among the Hispanic community there seemed to be a better understanding that they are co-responsible for the pastoral outreach of the parish.

Most responses acknowledged that the lay faithful are invited to share their talents by participating in the many ministries that are sponsored by their parish. The need for participants or volunteers is most often made through the parish bulletin, website or social media platform. On occasion the need is part of the announcements made at Mass. Overwhelmingly respondents noted that a personal invitation from their pastor or a ministry leader was most effective in growing a particular ministry. Ministry fairs or ministry Sundays wherein ministry leaders are available to discuss what is done and expected was also seen as effective in recruiting new members.

Overall, respondents were disappointed that more people don't come forward – it seems that the same 10% to 15% do most of the ministerial work.

Discerning and Deciding

Several parishes reported participants are unaware of how decisions are made in their parish. Others stated that the pastor made the decisions. Most respondents were aware that their parish had both a pastoral council and a finance council. Some respondents suggested making clear what purpose these councils serve. The respondents suggested communication with the people, seeking their input. The respondents thought transparency was necessary to improve the practice: who are the members of the councils, when do they meet, what is being discussed, what is the process for making the decision.

The respondents suggested the process for making decisions, along with who are involved in such decision making, needs to be clearly communicated to the parish. Many reported the parish finance statement, usually printed in the bulletin or presented by the parish finance council was given yearly. However, this is often done in a general way; none of the particulars were explained. Many respondents reported that the weekly contributions are printed in the weekly bulletin but not how those contributions are used. The common tools for delivering information was the weekly bulletin and announcements from the pastor. Some suggested using current social media for dissemination of information. There were no particular tools mentioned for accountability.

Many respondents reported the principle means of forming the people is through prayers and devotions. It was further stated that faith formation programs also contribute to forming the people, along with retreats, community service and various ministries. Some noted that too often people do not know who is sitting next to them in church. Respondents suggested the importance of pastors in building community and the need for personal invitation for getting people involved. Other respondents suggested the need for the various groups in the parish to get together for the purpose of sharing and uniting in mission.

Forming Ourselves in Synodality

Several parishes did not answer this question, and others reported it was decided not to ask process of synodality does not exist in their community.

Regarding how synodality is practiced at parish pastoral councils, participants stated that pastoral and finance councils are guided by procedures and protocols established by Canon Law and the statutes of the Diocese of Camden. However, parishioners are not aware of how the members of these bodies are chosen or if other advisory bodies are operating within parishes. Staff and pastoral council members are the ones offering opinions. Pastors are aware of the need to involve everyone and be open to suggestions. However, some committee chairs are territorial and refuse to listen to others both formally and informally.

Some other bodies in which parishioners stated synodality is practiced are ministry leadership sessions, faith formation committee gatherings, feedback from ministries leaders, census, dialoguing with the larger community without imposing ideas, "town hall" sessions, volunteers' feedback, parish community events, parish bulletins, asking opinion from the pulpit, receiving opinions from parishioners after Mass, Catholic Daughters and Knights of Columbus.

A significant number of parishioners stated synodality is not practiced in their parishes due to the following reasons: little is done to change Church ways after listening to parishioners, pastors along with pastoral and finance councils make the decisions. Consulting the community occurs rarely, if at all. Some complained about the short time frame allowed for the listening and feedback sessions. Hispanic participants mentioned they are not involved in decisions and are not aware of how decisions are made. They express a need for more Latinos to be involved in leadership positions in the parish.

The most common groups of suggestions for fostering a more synodal approach are related to parishioners having more opportunities to find out about various councils and their responsibilities. This would provide transparency and encourage more people to become involved in the parish. Provide a "job description" of the duties these council members perform. Involvement of the parish council with the whole community. Parish Council whose members are diverse and whose terms are limited to encourage a rotation of leadership from among the community. Information about who is on the pastoral council and finance council.

Gathering of the minorities making them all feel welcome. Actively listen to and implement suggestions from a more diverse set of people to make parishes appeal to everyone. Create more unity within the groups. Gatherings between the diverse groups present in the parish. Parishes should plan more activities such as multicultural fairs, encourage Catholic devotions, and meet once a month for fellowship. Listen more to the need of the Hispanic community at the parish level.

Hold ministry fairs to expand membership and start new ministries. Have people from different ministries speak at Mass. Extending a personal invitation to people to join the councils and ministries. Establish coordinators in parishes who listen and oversee the ministries to determine what ministries might be needed and to make sure each ministry has a defined mission assisting each of them in enlisting new and maintaining current members.

Conduct surveys and provide opportunities for parishioners to come together in a synod-like process every few years to find out what the needs are at that particular time in the life of parishes. This would open the opportunity to begin new ministries and to invigorate present ones to meet the needs of the parishioners on a current basis. Conduct an annual Parish Survey along with consultations. Ask parishioners what is needed to grow their faith and develop specific plans. Reach out to people on the peripheries.

Establish ministries of parishioners dedicated to fostering synodality (listening and consulting) with more involvement of youth and young adults. Conduct follow-up speak-out sessions. Voting by the community on decisions made in the parish, such as Mass times. Form subcommittees on specific topics. Consider inviting non-active parishioners to be involved in small ways.

Clergy need to have a more visible presence to those outside the Mass. Priests should know where to get help for parishioners and be aware of community resources. More meetings with pastors. More flexible office hours in which parishioners could talk with the staff and pastor. More dialogue between the laity and the leadership.

Have town halls on a regular basis for pastors, convocation team, and parish council to keep parishioners more informed of plans and what is happening in the parish. Meeting by age groups: teens, singles in their 20's and 30's, those with grown families, and senior citizens. People in a group of their peers will feel more comfortable speaking out or getting involved.

Display suggestion boxes in churches and have a section in the bulletin with updates every month. A ministry booklet on different ministries should be available for all parishioners. Better communication, electronically and physically.

Host listening sessions at least once a year. Encourage everyone to speak up and call to action. Rollout of the feedback from our local, deanery, and diocesan-wide listening sessions. More meetings by ZOOM. Small discussion groups with ministry leaders, parish leadership council, and pastor to discuss ideas and opinions. Leadership should have more accountability.

Community events for parishioners and visitors such as coffee after Mass, bake sales, couples' retreats, dinners, guest speakers, summer children's camps, and Bible camps. Small groups opportunities such as Bible study, book study, video study, and prayer group.

Understanding the Eucharist

The majority of respondents responded affirmatively; they do believe the Eucharist to be the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The common reasons for this faith included the Bible, catechesis, Eucharistic miracles, the teaching of the Church, which is ancient and consistent, and Jesus himself. Some respondents credited their families for their faith in the Real Presence; others stated the lack of faith stemmed from their families. Some respondents expressed that the Eucharistic was a representation or a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, but not actually Jesus. The doctrine of Jesus' true presence in the Eucharist is just too unbelievable. At least one delegate expressed concern that today more people are spiritual based, emphasizing Jesus' spiritual presence as being more important than His substantial presence.

Some respondents stated they come to Mass due to a sense of obligation; they were raised to attend Mass. Some reported going for a sense of peace and a love for Jesus. Some responded they go to worship God and center their lives. Some respondents attend Mass for the proclamation of the Word, while others go for the Eucharist. Many stated they did not attend Mass because of the current sexual abuse crisis or because of the Church's teaching regarding the LGBTQ+. Some responded that they did not attend Mass because they have a personal relation with God or that the ritual is irrelevant. There was a common consensus that many people do not judge Mass to be a priority in their lives, therefore they do not attend. Also in young families, sports events are prioritized.

Most respondents suggested better, more relevant homilies; better music; greater reverence, some suggested communion rails and communion in the hand. Some suggested personnel sharing of faith or an open discussion of the Scriptures and the homily. There were some respondents who expressed that the ritual was always the same, and the need for an explanation as to why. Many expressed a desire for a livelier ritual. A number of respondents suggested a greater involvement of women, particularly preaching, and perhaps as deacons and even priests. Many respondents commented more about what they would like to change in their parish: when announcements are made or having more fellowship after Mass or were ministers should be seated.

Many respondents stated that Holy Communion was nourishment; food for the soul. Reception of Holy Communion gives the recipient joy, peace, grace and strength to live a good life and face new challenges. Holy Communion gives a sense of connection with God. Holy Communion confirms that Jesus was with the recipient.

Most respondents stated that special occasions were the opportune time for them to invite others, usually family, to join them for Mass. Some expressed that they invite non-practicing Catholics.

Several respondents stated they had never invited another person to join them at Mass. A concern was expressed that an invitee would not be able to receive communion causing them not to feel welcomed. Some cited a fear of rejection. Others mentioned that such an invitation needs to be part of a personal sharing of faith; why this is important to me. One delegate mentioned they often talk about their parish with others. A few parishes mentioned the need for evangelization training.