

Our Journey Together in the Diocese of Brentwood

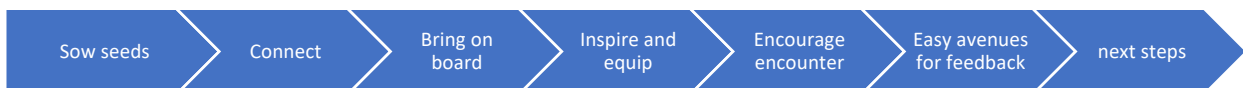
How does our 'journeying together' allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the Mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take, in order to grow as a synodal Church?

'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.'

Ruth 1:16

The Diocese of Brentwood serves those who live, work, and pray in East London and Essex and Our Journey Together was the name given to our Synodal Pathway as we invited people of all walks of life and different relationships with the Catholic Church to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit speaking through their lives. This has not been a novel experience for our diocese as there have been at least two similar initiatives in living memory that sought to hear God's call through a time of listening, reflection, and discernment within the Diocese. The most recent, called The Stewards of the Gospel, was about to enter its last phase just before the pandemic changed all our lives forever. It is my hope that as we progress, the Stewards of the Gospel and Our Journey Together will dovetail into one another and that we, like Ruth, will show a deep faith and resilience in these demanding times, even when the way ahead seems unclear and beyond our control.

Our Journey Together has been a process of developing a basic framework that remains faithful to the central question, whilst being adaptable to different circumstances and modelling synodality each step of the way. The general roadmap of engagement was as follows:



Our mode of engagement was to attract involvement rather than to insist on participation in the hope that those who did engage would become champions for others to do the same. We provided podcasts, surgery sessions and listening exercises to enable people to join Our Journey Together. We invited them to pilot and give feedback on the listening exercises provided and invited them into the process of sifting through the responses received at our Synod Day. Some parishes decided that they would like to develop their own questions and methods of engagement so we requested a basic format and easy avenues of submission so we could include their findings in the responses we received from around the Diocese.

We received responses from 30 parishes (34%), 6 secondary schools and 3 primary schools. Despite our best and considerable efforts, many people and priests were not moved to engage. Nevertheless, we did receive responses from some marginalised groups, for example, a group representing the voices of travellers. One religious order specifically reached out to single mothers; and individuals submitted responses on matters relating to black and ethnic minority communities, the celebration of the Extra-Ordinary Form of Mass and the poor and homeless.

Over 200 people engaged with us through our online listening exercises. A few of these include the parishes and schools mentioned above, but many were small groups within a community, groups of friends or individual responses. Through our schools and a few tenacious champions, we heard the voices of some Muslims, people who no longer practice their faith and those of other Christians. Much of our engagement was conducted online because of the restrictions in place but downloadable resources were also developed so those not online could also participate.

The responses were sorted under five themes: Sign of the Times, Communion, Participation, Mission and Towards a Synodal Church; and key words identified within each of these themes. The synod

team then formulated five statements or questions for each theme, based on the responses and the key words.

The Synod Day was a further listening exercise but of a different nature. Bishop Alan and about 90 people came together from across the Diocese for a prayerful, interactive and discursive assembly. The five themes became focal points around a hall; the statements were on the wall with the individual responses on tables underneath. Participants were encouraged to spend time at each of the five areas, to read the responses, reflect and discuss the statements with those around them, and respond by placing stickers on those responses or statements that they wished to highlight. If they felt that the statements didn't faithfully synthesise the responses, they were encouraged to re-write or edit them. There was also the opportunity to record a message to camera.

The feedback from the Synod Day was then integrated into the synthesis below. The themes contain the statements or questions (*in blue italics*) and a flavour of the responses that gave rise to them. Some responses are *quoted in italics*, but this doesn't necessarily mean that there were more voices expressing that opinion. The synthesis is a collage of quotes so that individuals reading it might hear that their voice has been heard. The comments which have been underlined are those which Bishop Alan felt resonated with his own experience of the Diocese.

1. Sign of the Times

Where does the Church in Brentwood find herself today?

The Church gives blessings; it is a family, helping us in our hopes, struggles and disappointments. She heals and meets our basic needs; and is there for us in times of bereavement and grief. She cares and gives us time to care.

Many people reflected on the blessings which they have received from God through the Church: a space to share hopes and fears; the strength of togetherness; a place where we "*match our desire to help with others' preparedness to receive help*"; the beauty of the liturgy; and the strength that one gains from one's faith. "*We are so lucky to have our faith.*" "*God is good!*"

Many responses could be categorised under "life issues", a question for God or something with which they struggle: the stress which leads some women to abortion; whether the Church should revise her teaching on artificial birth control; the perceived acceptance or inconsistent treatment of divorcees; the need to value motherhood and fertility; "*homosexuality should be accepted*"; the Church should be more inclusive to the LGBT community; the concern to help prostitutes off the streets; those suffering with addictions or mental health problems; fuel and food poverty; the depressed and suicidal; consumerism, selfishness and indifference; suffering and war; the paralysing fear of the young to go out on the street; the brokenness of families and the concern for our planet. "*People have become tribal in their own bubbles,*" said one person. Yet we are called not to judge others for not wearing masks, for not being vaccinated, ... and for all the above.

As the Church reflects on herself and that "God is in control", we recognise the tension between the "desire to maintain the status quo" but also the need to listen, adapt and witness by our lives.

Many expressed their faith that God is in control. He is watching over us, meeting our basic needs. He will help, guide and protect us. Despite, even through, the pandemic, He is with us; and, like blind Bartimaeus, we need to recognise our dependence on Jesus for sight.

Some of the listening exercise responses could be categorised into how the Church is perceived by others. Negatively, some thought those outside would perceive the Church as having outdated, discriminatory views, "*looking back with rose-tinted spectacles*" while another said, "*the Church has an image problem, discarded by many because popular, superficial thought dictates that it is antiquated and has no place in modern society*". The issue of child abuse among some of the clergy

was mentioned, and that the Church can be perceived as being hypocritical, for example, to the gay community. Others commented, for example, *“How can we bring in married Church of England priests, when we don’t allow our own priests to be married?”* or explaining things as “a mystery” when a doctrine is difficult to teach or understand. One person thought others perceived the church, *“politely as being rather odd!”* *“A dogmatic tribal group who worships the Virgin Mary and is obsessed with sex”*, that *“shackles people rather than allowing them to be free”*, that, in the words of a Baptist minister, *“never moved off Good Friday ... [but] needs to be looking at the resurrection.”*

Positively, many said that the Church is known for being caring and has a wonderful example in Pope Francis. We need all priests and Church leaders to be such witnesses. The Church offers the world “a strong moral and ethical compass” and is leading the messaging on climate change, and support for refugees, the poor and marginalised. *“The Church in the US has been compromised by politics”* but high-profile clergy shouldn’t be afraid to speak out on important issues. She does amazing work through Caritas, CAFOD, food banks and her charitable organisations and initiatives such as “Calais Light”.

Others felt that we were losing young people to other Christian communities which had more engaging liturgies or were more evangelising; we need more priests; homilies are too long; there is clericalism among the younger clergy; Catholics are now in a minority in many Catholic schools, and those who are Catholic do not attend church; those who do come to church don’t want to get involved. Perhaps the Church has *“prioritised catechesis at the expense of evangelisation.”*

What have we learned about the Church during the pandemic?

There was a great sadness that the Churches were closed, those places where we find peace or rejoice in singing together but all were grateful for online services. The liturgy adapted. It was creative, *“eminently more prayerful, reflective and honouring to both God and our neighbour.”* *“We realised how much we rely on the sacraments”* but, as if by way of a consolation during the time of lockdown, there was a greater quiet and peacefulness. People became more spiritually aware. *“The word that came to me is about slowing down.”* There were new ways to be close to God and others; though we couldn’t see others, we found new ways to connect. Mass “attendance” increased. We prayed more. We had more time in our day. We saw a lot of sharing and much good. One person commented that post-pandemic, *“we talk more to each other at work and people of all faiths now pray together.”*

How can we use technology to build up the Body of Christ?

The majority expressed positive comments about technology, whether as a tool for evangelisation or simply a means of connectivity between individuals and groups. There was universal praise for the way in which liturgies were broadcast online during the pandemic and a desire not to lose what has been learned, whilst recognising the need to return to Church in person.

How does the Church engage with a world where some experience violence and injustice?

Many felt that still not enough is done to tackle racial injustice. Someone quoted that, *“92% of all teachers in the UK are white”* and that the Church *“should acknowledge that racism exists within its organisation.”*

Those who attended the Synod Day highly emphasised the comment that *“the youth who are involved [in the church] stay practicing far longer; and the priest should talk to them, so they feel wanted and included.”* Another remarked that we need to find ways to connect the young and old. *“Things like climate change, Black Lives Matter and the Me-too movement that are high on the agenda of young people are not mentioned in homilies or prayers.”*

Another commented that *“we need to be more visible when we have the chance. “Red Wednesday” was a missed opportunity in our parish when we could have lit the Church red.”*

2. Communion

Prayer and receiving the Sacraments improve our relationship with God; communion with him and one another.

During the listening exercises, when asked how we are in communion with God and one another, many answers spoke of the Eucharist and prayer. We are *“energised, nourished and consoled”* when we receive Holy Communion. Many spoke of the joy of coming back to Church for the first time after the pandemic. People commented upon the beauty of the liturgy and the sacred space of the Church; the need for greater reverence and more silence, tolerance of noisy children, children’s liturgies and greater participation of children in Church; the desire to have Mass available in Latin (or not); to celebrate more profoundly the liturgical year with greater emphasis on the seasons and the Marian month of May; and to continue with live streaming of Mass for those unable to attend in person.

The preparation for receiving the Sacraments was mentioned, especially how this might be directed to keep those children and adults practising their faith. Alpha, Cell Groups, Bible Study groups, Living Stones, Sycamore and Symbolon were all championed as examples of *“evangelising catechesis”* bringing people into communion with the Church.

Some of those who attend Mass daily spoke of the communion they have with other regular worshippers.

The Synod Day highlighted that the Church needs to be Christ centred. To acknowledge that He is in our midst. *“What would he have done?”* one person asked. Perhaps we are too concerned about rules and regulations without realising we could be putting people off or turning them away. There was a very strong endorsement to do more to engage young people in the Church, to create a Church for the young where the young are encouraged to be part an active of the community. There was acclaim for the work of CYMFED. The comment, *“children don’t get joy from coming to Church”* someone said during the Synod Day. *“Perhaps we need to help them better understand the Mass,”* said another. There were requests for the liturgy to be *“modern”* and *“lively and forward thinking”*; and for old and young to come together to listen to one another.

Prayer groups and *“Cell Groups”* were highly spoken of (and liked by those who attended the Synod Day) as a way to strengthen bonds between people – a place where worries and needs can be shared, and where the group talks, listens and prays with and for one another.

Other means of enhancing communion which were mentioned include Exposition before the Blessed Sacrament, rosary groups, and the Stations of the Cross... and celebrating good news together e.g., birthdays and (priestly) anniversaries.

We express our communion with one another by being a welcoming and inclusive community.

As people prayed the scriptures, the words *“welcoming”, “acceptance”, “inclusive”* and *“belonging”* were ubiquitous in the responses under every category and in reply to diverse questions. We clearly want a Church where all are welcome regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, class or language. There were examples of schools and parishes where this is championed and where responders felt a strong sense of belonging; and calls for us all to be less judgemental. Many felt that we were already a welcoming, inclusive Church but others recognised that we could be better. Groups mentioned specifically included the LGBT+ community and divorcees; and the noisy, fidgety children. Families and babies need to feel welcomed, especially the single parent with child. Are we doing enough to

support young Catholic families? The Church could be more inclusive, too, especially regarding lay female leadership. Responses included a call for female priests and married clergy.

There was a plethora of suggestions by which we could be more welcoming: a ministry of welcome; newcomers to be introduced to the community and a “welcome to the parish” letter; church cleaning groups; mother & toddler groups; refreshments after Mass; potluck suppers; gardening groups; and social events, just to name the most common replies.

The role of the priest was recognised as pivotal in a welcoming community. *“The clergy were found to be understanding, and have a good level of pastoral care, treating the parishioners as part of “God’s family” trying to know them all by name.”* The response that we need to have priests who are approachable and supportive was strongly endorsed at the Synod Day.

The need for formation (in doctrine) is key to greater and better communion.

Those who attended the Synod Day highlighted the responses that the Church should offer and support faith development and that sacramental teaching and understanding is very poor. They underlined the following comment: *“The example of Pope Francis in the way he lives his life, his teaching on climate change, refugees, the poor and marginalised, his ecumenism and inclusiveness etc. is so inspirational... . However, these wonderful teachings are sadly undermined by the hypocrisy, behaviour and unsustainable teachings of the Church in many ways. People have been leaving the Church in droves far outweighing newcomers.”*

There were requests for more retreats and parish missions; some felt that the fall in Church attendance was due to a lack of education. Many spoke of wanting more formation and training.

There were those who felt the Church stresses our sinfulness over and above God’s love and *“how gloriously we are made in the image and likeness of God”* whereas others believe we should be starting with our sinfulness and *“the need to confess and repent to be worthy of the Eucharist.”* A few individuals submitted lengthy responses, some arguing for a more generous inclusivity in admittance to receiving Holy Communion.

“If I am honest, I am confused as to what the current rules of the Church are on issues like...” and the various issues were mentioned. There were many responses asking for better and more catechesis, *“truth and clarity.”*

How do we express the communion we have with other (local) Christian communities?

Responders mentioned churches coming together for shared liturgies throughout the Diocese: Good Friday Walks of Witness, joint Stations of the Cross, and multi-faith remembrance services in November. Some said that they express their communion with non-Catholics when they bring their non-Catholic partners to Mass or watch services together online.

Common tasks also bring people together from different churches. Examples quoted include the charitable work of Citizens UK, the Malachi Project for the homeless and Churches Together (specifically mentioned in Basildon and Stansted).

3. Participation

How can we be more welcoming and inclusive as a Church in our local community?

Under a key-word heading of “Gathering People”, there were many suggestions as to how we might improve participation in the Church and the need to get people together other than for Mass. Tea and coffee mornings, socials, dances, quiz nights, films during lent, Lenten lunches for those in need; theatre trips, walks from Church, Justice and Peace groups, gardening groups, cooking classes, a

men's group, workshops, board game afternoons, Facebook groups and drama groups were all mentioned.

When people come to Church, it was suggested that we be more welcoming at the entrance. A ministry of welcome is a pastoral opportunity, just as it is for the clergy when they greet people after Mass.

Obstacles to participation were also mentioned: "*Gatekeepers*" who feel you do not fit in so efforts to get involved are blocked. Other obstacles to participation were more tangible – the facilities: closed churches, hard seats (the need for comfortable back supports for the disabled) or no singing. Geography, too; some churches on the fringes of the Diocese or smaller than the bigger ones said they felt isolated and needed more support from Brentwood.

A recurring theme was "*Clergy influence*" and the degree to which they determine whether the Church is welcoming and inclusive. The role of the Parish Priest is pivotal in creating a participative community. One priest holds a surgery, encouraging all to see him for help; others produce short Youtube videos, interviewing parishioners about their faith journey. One person thought that the role of deacons needs to be reviewed.

Lay involvement as Catechists, Readers, Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist taking Holy Communion out to the sick, leading Morning Prayer and devotions were all cited as examples of participation.

"Invitation" was a key word. "*A personal invitation goes much further than general announcements.*" "*A good leader delegates.*" Which leads us to the next statement:

We increase participation in the Church by asking others to volunteer.

Many people shared stories of how they came to be involved in the Church stemming from a personal invitation from one person, asking them to help with one task. There can be a reluctance, however, to ask for help and some people are better at asking than others. Is it that we leave the priest to do all the asking? We all need to talk more to one another in order to discover their skills and gifts, and encourage others to get involved. "*A lot of people are too shy or think that they are not capable.*" Perhaps we should be asking those who have lapsed, "*What will help you come back to the parish?*" "*We all need to befriend new members and encourage them to join the activities of the parish.*"

Good communication increases participation. In what ways might we achieve this?

Regarding the liturgy, more engaging homilies was mentioned more than once; and they should explain the readings, be "*more down to earth and less abstract*", and shorter. We should be putting more resources into better worship and aids to worship such as our choirs. Many people expressed their joy in participation by singing. Opinion was divided as to the type of music however, some preferring traditional hymns, others more "*lively, re-vitalising music.*"

Most parishes have newsletters and more now have websites (including praise for the diocesan www.whatgoodnews.org site). Can we find new ways to communicate with people? Email, WhatsApp groups... and with more people accessing social media, are we utilising it to the best of our ability by having, for example, online content on platforms such as YouTube? "*We need to become better at advertising ourselves*" said one person who gave the example of a connection between parish and school giving rise to 200 charitable donated items and some of the students volunteering... "*hopefully this will result in them coming back to Church eventually.*"

Other suggestions included a parish directory, photos of those leading church groups, and a suggestions' box... and a virtual one for those online! Most people wanted live streaming of Masses to continue for the housebound and those unable to participate in person.

Parish Councils, catechetical and liturgical groups, and other organisations all improve participation in community life.

It was felt that we share more of ourselves in smaller groups. Whether it be *"the PPC as a platform for parishioners to express their opinions"*, the SVP, CWL or parenting groups, for example, all these church organisations give us the opportunity to meet in smaller groups, bring us together, increase our participation in the life of the Church and provide space to share and listen to others. Some commented, however, that many groups do not cater for working people.

How do distinctions between male/female, old/young, clerical/lay, culture and language affect participation in our Church? E.g., Including the youth in the liturgy might increase participation.

Someone commented that there is increasingly less lay involvement in the Church over the past 20 years but this was balanced by another saying, *"the Diocese is still light years away from understanding the pressures of everyday life."* Others spoke of the demands of feeding and clothing a family and work-life balance. Perhaps the increased busy-ness of our lives is a barrier. What are the other barriers to greater participation?

The call for women priests and deacons was mentioned by many; and the comment, *"It is extraordinary that no woman gets to vote in who leads our Church"* received several endorsements at the Synod Day. The role of women in the governance of the Church at all levels was mentioned and how a greater involvement might increase participation of all and not just those women concerned.

Some felt that racial equality was not reflected in the roles of the laity.

"Running a large organisation such as the Church is an administrative challenge but the real challenge is supporting those in need." The answer, of course, to the above question is that none of these distinctions should affect our participation but we should focus rather on another much-emphasised word, *"co-responsibility"*. We must *"share the burden between priest and laity."*

There was overwhelming concern for the pressures placed upon the clergy and for their wellbeing. Some thought they would be better equipped for ministry through the support of a wife or by living in community, as was the case in the past when there were several priests in one presbytery. Perhaps the administration could be delegated to lay professionals, freeing up the priests' time for sacramental ministry or to spend more time in schools *"because many of them are inspirational."* *"Does everything need to go through the priest?"* Might we increase vocations to the priesthood in other ways? *"Do we need just two models of clergy? Could we not have some non-stipendiary clergy?"*

If we want to increase participation in the Church, we need to do more to encourage the youth. This was much discussed at the Synod Day. Often mentioned were calls to make the Church *"more child friendly"* and to have more youth activities and youth representatives on the parish council. *"I feel the youth should have a voice"* and *"give them something to do. Make them feel important."* Also suggested was that they should be more participative in the liturgy by having younger readers... and singers: *"A vibrant choir will pull the youth to church"* with *"hymns that they can understand and relate to that are not 19th Century language."* Many highlighted the work of our youth ministry which needs more support.

The comment, *"I think every parish should have an outreach worker"* links participation to the next theme of mission.

4. Mission

We are missionary by our charitable works when in social action, showing everyday kindness, listening to others and gathering people together for socials and community projects where all are invited.

Many expressed the belief that mission springs from the Word of God, prayer, and guidance of the Holy Spirit; and then this leads on to how we live that out.

"I pray for the Diocese to urge parishes to actually create spaces to listen and to engage in outreach." Some of the outreach and charitable works have been mentioned above. Others talked of include Project 58.7, supplying food to those in need and the "Daily Bread" Café.

People spoke of being more inclusive and reaching out to the marginalised, treating everyone as brothers and sisters, supporting those most in need in their area: visiting the sick and housebound, making arrangements to bring those to church who don't have transport, and helping the poor and homeless. *"Are we hearing the voice of Blind Bartimaeus on our own doorstep?"*

We are missionary, too, however, in the small acts of kindness: to those behind us in the shopping queue and to all whom we meet daily.

Again, the youth were mentioned and it was expressed that we need to show a good example to the young while they are still in their formative years.

Teaching and catechesis give rise to evangelism.*

"In order to be sent out on a mission, we first need to renew our commitment to Christ and to His teaching." Many people said that we need to get to know Christ better in order to be Christ for others and we do that through better and more catechesis. Talking about the lives of the saints, too, those who were close to Jesus, and how their relationship with him inspired them to good works will also make us more missionary. * But *"evangelisation also needs to be supported by teaching and catechesis."*

Others felt that the Church was out of touch with the secular world. Are we being Christ to all people? *"One (gay) person said that she had a breakdown trying to reconcile her faith with her sexuality."*

How shall we communicate the Good News? Social media? Personal testimony?

Evidence in the feedback suggests we need to experience the Good News before we can communicate it to others; and many spoke of how they have encountered it through Cell Groups, for example, or being welcomed.

There was concern that young people are searching for answers and the Church is not present in all online forums. *"The Church needs to find an engaging online platform for the youth."*

"Livestreaming is good. They might visit the Church because they have seen us online." All manner and means of communication were mentioned from the internet to invitations via leafletting or letters or just ensuring *"there's always someone on the end of the phone."* We need to share and listen to one another's stories.

"To be a synodal church, we need to be an example to the young by how we live." "Witness" was a key, underlined, word. *"Others see Jesus in you through our actions-caring for one another."* The youth in our schools spoke of the need to share more and to stop bullying, and *"to treat Jesus like*

our best friend and tell him what is going on in our lives”; and “for young people to discern their path in life and to have a sense of purpose.”

“A lot of what the Church does is not spoken about in the secular news” said one person. We need spokespeople who will communicate all the good that the Church is doing to counter the bad publicity she gets.

Finally, under this heading of communicating the faith, there was the recognition that many feel uncomfortable talking about their faith and just need more confidence.

Keeping churches open and providing a spiritual place of prayer where all (from the marginalised to the lonely and the lapsed) are welcome is mission itself.

One person felt that we should *“keep churches open, rather than selling off churches in the face of falling vocations”* and many people’s dream for the future was for full and bigger places of worship. Others expressed in many different ways that it is individuals who are the living stones making up the Church.

Are we too comfortable? Missionary enough?! What is Jesus asking you personally to do?

Some said that they thought the Church was *“on the right track”* and that in a world of change, there is the right *“balance between what has been with a flexibility to bring in the new.”* One individual said, *“This is God’s mission.”* The clarity of this statement is a healthy reminder that mission begins and ends with God.

Finally, one 10 year-old server when asked what his dream was for the future of the Church replied, *“Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster!”* The response, *“My dream is: a serving Church”* was liked by many at the Synod Day.

5. Towards a more Synodal Church

Do we have faith that God is guiding this synodal process?

Participation in this process was by way of invitation and, for those who took part, there was a consensus that the Holy Spirit is at work as we journey on this synodal pathway. A few, and predominantly those who were once part of the Anglican communion, had reservations, and some of those did not engage in the process.

“Sometimes we don’t emphasise what the Holy Spirit does” remarked one person. The Catholic faith is a wonderful treasure and we need to hold on to the fact that Christ is at the centre of the Church. *“We need to trust in the Spirit.”*

A “Listening Church” manifests itself in its governance, structures of leadership and teaching.

Some felt that the energy experienced in the Church post Vatican II had diminished and even that the Church was going in a different direction. Someone remarked that *“synodality must never weaken the papacy.”*

The *“critical”* role of the priest has been mentioned above. *“He has the power to strengthen or ruin a community.” “There is the priest, for example, who comes in and stops people fulfilling their roles and tries to do everything himself.”* Would this still happen if the laity had more of a voice in the governance of the parish? *“Are we ordaining the right kind of men?” “What are the criteria for suitability for ordination?”* Many called for priests to be freed of the burden of administration.

There was criticism as to how some ordinariate priests were appointed to parishes without beforehand explaining the Ordinariate to the people and how that might affect the parish and the liturgy.

The role of women in the church, and not necessarily women priests or deacons, was frequently raised.

[A Synodal Church is an inclusive Church.](#)

Many felt that the Church was inclusive and welcoming but the LGBT+ community were the people thought most excluded.

[Among the responses, the youth of Newham listed, in their opinion, what did, and didn't, need to change in the Church: The faith, doctrine, sacraments, liturgy and sacramentals \(buildings and statues\) don't need to change but the Church's engagement with "the world" does. What, therefore, is the world saying to the Church?](#)

We are losing young people to evangelical churches. Why? *"They are being evangelised in these churches."*

Conclusion

Our own Stewards of the Gospel process and this synodal journey have many parallels and synergies, not least a desire for maximum consultation regarding the future and mission of the Church. Our diocesan synodal process was paused when the pandemic affected the life of the local churches. We had begun to look at partnerships of parishes as a collaborative way forward.

Since the bishop is encouraged "to integrate the Synodal Process into the life of the local Church in creative ways that promote deeper communion, fuller participation, and a more fruitful mission." [para. 3.2, Vademecum], Bishop Alan will meet for a day of prayer with the diocesan synod team after Easter to discern how the fruit of this synodal pathway might be fed back to the partnerships so that the journey may continue.

It may be, for example, that the matter of freeing priests from the burden of administration, mentioned above, might be explored by each partnership to find a local solution and/or local missionary outreach projects are discussed at partnership level to discern the needs of one's immediate neighbours.

["More time please" ... What happens next? Where?](#)

Many asked this final question. There has been the feeling that processes and programmes, all begun in the past, have not led to change; and the synodal pathway could become the latest in this line of initiatives to come to nothing. The diocesan programme of renewal, "Vision 2000", leading up to the millennium, came to nothing and now there is the danger that the time lost to the pandemic has caused the "Stewards of the Gospel" programme to lose its impetus. It is important, therefore, that the vision document, "Shaping our Future", which was the fruit of this last process, is integrated with the responses of this synodal pathway to become the first step in the next stage on our diocesan journey.

The last word goes to someone in our diocese who said, *"My dream is for a more joyful Church."*

Appendix 2 – Methods of Engagement and Resources

Synod Surgery Sessions

Target Group: Those who will coordinate listening sessions in their local communities.

Purpose: To provide a safe space for mutual support and encouragement of those who will enable people in their local community to engage with Our Journey Together. This also became a place for people to give us feedback on resources and make practical requests.

Description: The Diocesan Contact persons offered an hour twice a week for the first 3 months of Our Journey Together, to meet online with people on our database who would enable local listening sessions to take place.

We made it clear that this is part of Our Journey Together and that everyone in the Zoom room had something to contribute and would be heard with respect and fraternal love. We also made it clear that nothing personal mentioned in this meeting would be noted. The only notes made were practical action points that were mentioned at the end of the meeting, for confirmation. Most of these meetings were open to any expression of Catholic Community in the Diocese and we often had a mixture of those from parishes, schools, charitable organisations or interest groups.

Insights: People came from all over the Diocese to a zoom meeting and did find them to be a supportive and encouraging experience. The online nature of these meetings meant that people who would not have otherwise had the opportunity, were able to share their experiences, questions, and wisdom with one another. Specific issues were raised, and where a practical response was needed, we were able to follow up after the meeting. However, this also became a place for emotional support for those dealing with resistance. On at least one occasion, a participant came back to tell us that our prayers for her situation had been answered. When something was raised that should have been part of our response to the central question, we asked the person involved to email or in some way send us their comment, so that we did not break the confidence arranged at the beginning of the meeting.

Generally, we had 8 – 12 people in attendance for a surgery session. This was an ideal number for this type of meeting and enabled healthy conversation.

It would have been even better if we had some surgery sessions specifically for schools or on specific issues. People who attended these meetings went on to organise local listening exercises in their community. If they did not, it was often because they experienced significant resistance from their parish priest. This was incredibly disheartening to the person involved. To build for success, we would have needed more facilitators to keep the conversation in small groups. If organising something similar in the future, I would recommend building in time to train and prepare other to facilitate sessions like this.

Printed and Printable Resources

At the launch of Our Journey Together we produced a few small resources to engage with people in parishes, schools and connected to religious orders. To lower the environmental impact of these resources, they were kept to a minimum and kept small. Through our surgery sessions and from email feedback, we were also asked to produce downloadable and printable versions of our online listening sessions. These were also made available to facilitators.

Prayer cards

Target Group: Our praying population who are connected to parishes, schools, and religious orders.

Purpose: To enable the first step in Our Journey Together to be one of prayer and to provide a gateway to our online resources through a simple QR code.

Description: An A7 printed card with an inspirational quote, the Synod Prayer and a QR code directing people to Our Journey Together pages on the diocesan website.

Outcomes: The feedback received was positive and we were asked to make more available, so set up an ordering system that enabled a discount for those within the Diocese to order more prayer cards for their local community.

www.cpo.org.uk/product.aspx?prod=DOB100A7PC

Thankyou cards

Target Group: People who attended in person listening sessions.

Purpose: To honour those who took the time to attend a listening session and provide them with an avenue to share a personal reflection with us.

Description: An A5 Thankyou card that could be given out at the end of an in-person listening session.

By far, most listening sessions happened online, so there was not the opportunity to give these cards to people though we did get multiple requests for a link to the personal reflection survey.

Printable Listening Sessions

In response to the request for resources to engage people not comfortable with anything online, we formatted our online listening sessions for printing locally. In addition, we provided a leader's guide and a note taker download to equip those leading and recording comments to do so easily. They reflected the online surveys so that anything written or typed could be inserted and sent through our online forms.

Online Resources

Our Journey Together Podcasts

Target Group: People who had heard of Our Journey Together and wanted to know more.

Purpose: To provide an easy-to-access source of information that would help people understand the main concepts of Our Journey Together.

Description: This was a first series so provided a light touch on the main themes and used story, clear and easy to understand language with a warm and friendly manner to convey our messages. We wanted to provide a resource for people who were unlikely to read the documents on For a Synodal Church. At the time of writing this report there were over 700 listeners to the four episodes. We used the following platforms:

[Soundcloud](#)

[Spotify](#)

[YouTube](#) (short, subtitled clips)

Listening Exercises

Target Group: Those with some connection to the Catholic Church who wanted to participate in Our Journey Together.

Purpose: To listen prayerfully to Scripture and one another as we shared our responses to the questions posed.

Description: Four different listening exercises were provided. They were based on the following:

1. The Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary
2. The Road to Emmaus
3. Peter and Cornelius
4. The Healing of Bartimaeus

Survey Monkey was the tool used to provide the prayers, readings, and method of sending responses directly to the Synod Team. The Synod Team ran a pilot of each of these resources and adapted them according to the feedback received. Many of those who experienced these listening exercises went on to lead sessions with people from their community, either online or in person.

<https://www.dioceseofbrentwood.net/synod-2021-2023/our-journey-together-resources/>

Conversation Starters

Target Group: People who are connected to someone who is connected to the Church.

Purpose: To reach beyond the regular Church going population and into Cafes, mealtimes and informal conversations and invite people to join Our Journey Together.

Description: Using a survey that resembles a text conversation we created four 'spark a conversations' for people to use with friends and loved ones who would not otherwise engage in Our Journey Together. Some of the faithful were concerned at the lack of interest by their Parish Priest and were anxious to hear from those who no longer go to Church or who are not Catholic. These resources were offered as a tool to help them to do this wherever they were able to strike up a conversation.

People who used this resource were generally positive about them, however if doing something similar again, it would be essential to make them more accessible, so they can be found and used at a moment's notice.

www.dioceseofbrentwood.net/synod-2021-2023/our-journey-together-resources/ Please scroll down to the relevant section

Personal Reflection

Target Group: Those with something personal to say who might feel inhibited in a group setting.

Purpose: To hear even the most delicate or difficult responses to Our Journey Together.

Description: A simple survey on the main themes was created to capture personal responses. This was connected to the Thankyou cards through a QR code, and the link was sent to all our contacts. We also had some email requests for this type of form.

www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/PersonalReflectionBrentwoodSynodQR

Share your Thoughts

Description: The Archdiocese of Westminster shared their Synodal Pathway resources with other dioceses. This is an online version of a preparatory reflection produced for those who would attend a listening session.

www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ShareyourthoughtsBrentwood

Methodology in preparing the synthesis

All the responses were printed and cut into separate strips of paper. The synod team met on two days to read and arrange these by theme and to identify "key words" (Appendix 3). Five statements or questions were formulated from the key words for each of the five themes (above, within the synthesis). The transparency and validity of this "filtering" was then critiqued at the Synod Day.

Synod Day – 5th March

Target Group: Anyone who had participated in Our Journey Together or who would like to do so.

Purpose: To review the responses, listen to what was said and respond.

Description: Bishop Alan and approximately 90 people attended our Synod Day. After a time of prayer, encouragement and contextualising Our Journey Together, everyone present was given time to review the responses received. They had the opportunity to add their own comments, prioritise, using stickers or send us a WhatsApp message or voice note. Most importantly, conversation was encouraged during the 1 hour 30 minutes available for them to wonder around the room.

For the first 30 minutes there was silence as people read comments and explored the different themes, then there was a gentle hum as conversations started. At this point a video room was set up and anyone approaching the facilitator was invited to share their thoughts on video.

These methods of communication were used to further contribute to the diocesan synthesis and identify areas of interest. There was an incredible energy in the room, and everyone left with a positive attitude, especially after hearing about some of the next steps available to them.

A draft synthesis was shown to Bishop Alan; and the synod team met to review and comment on the draft. They examined again the source responses and suggested some final editorial amendments.