



RESPONSE TO THE WORKING DOCUMENT OF THE CONTINENTAL STAGE

Prepared by the Diocesan Synod Team – Archdiocese of Cardiff



Response to Question 1 on the Working Document of the Continental Stage [WDSC]

“After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?”

For many parishes in the Archdiocese of Cardiff the Synod process has been and is “a journey of discovery and an opportunity to reflect on its own strengths and areas for improvement...to journey together with the Church during the process, be given a voice and be listened to” (*Merthyr*). The broad majority of parishes agreed that “most of the issues identified in our Parish report were reflected in the diocesan report” (*Llantrisant*). People felt that it had been particularly important to have been “able to discuss and discern controversial or difficult questions” (*Belmont*). “Views were often expressed with deep emotion, some passion and, one felt, a relish at the opportunity to open our hearts in front of others... this was accompanied by some disagreement and some measure of acrimony by those who felt unable to listen to and accept the other’s point of view” (*Ross-on-Wye*).

It is clear from all parish reports that many people recognise the fundamental importance of the parish community in building the Body of Christ and fostering a sense of Communion (*Bridgend*). There was wide-spread support for the Synodal programme and, in some reports, a hope that synodality would replace a perceived current Catholic Church culture that is experienced as ‘patriarchal’, ‘hierarchical’ and ‘authoritarian’ (*Bridgend*). The responsibility for the synodal life of the Church must be shared by all (*Whitchurch, Cardiff*). Several reports expressed a concern that the process may not lead to any tangible change.’

There was appreciation for the title of the DCS document’s title ‘Widening the spaces of the tent’ with its emphasis on “going out to those who feel excluded and walking with them, recognising their feelings and listening to them” (*Belmont*). “The image of the Church as a tent really resonated with the group” (*Tonypandy*)

Many parishioners “wish to accept the responsibility to live out their baptism promises, to embrace shared responsibility for the mission of the Church, but equally acknowledge the need for formation for this” (*Merthyr*). Communities are encouraging a sense of ownership, involvement and listening to the Holy Spirit using their gifts or charisms in service to the Church. “To assist in this endeavour, it is recognised that gift discernment must take place in the parish and more training opportunities made available” (*Merthyr*).

Parishes wondered “how to engage with those to whom the Church has become irrelevant” (*Grangetown, Cardiff*). While parishes have identified the need to be more welcoming of people both inside and outside their Churches, there is the important observation that this is the responsibility of all. It was questioned by some “whether effort to engage with groups feeling isolated, e.g. gay community, was being carried out by those with sufficient understanding of the problems needing to be addressed” (*Abergavenny*).

Some parishes noted that their church communities were “in good health”, referencing aspects such as generosity in outreach to the missions, developing countries, and food banks (*Newport*). Nevertheless, through the process some communities had come to realise gaps in their parish life and were seeking to develop areas such as health and safety, liturgy, welcomers and the social life of the parish, further accepting that training and formation is necessary for ministries and volunteers. It was noted that “people want to be involved and taught the faith so they can speak out confidently” (*Newport*). Reference was made in several reports that all Catholic groups should be open to both men and women. The role of women was mentioned in several reports. Being aware that women have proved themselves as capable as men in most areas of human employment, e.g. Law, Medicine, Art, Science, [it was felt that] it is difficult to accept that they are never fully recognised as contributors to religion and worship, but are allotted often minor roles (*Newport*).

Echoing the DCS, it is clear from a number of reports and conversations that the decreasing number of the clergy, and the lack of clear structural alternatives for parish leadership, is having a detrimental impact on community life. “Concern in the DCS about the relationships within the Church and the balance of responsibility and leadership between clergy and laity resonated strongly...The suggestion of a flexible model of leadership and training and development to support this echoed the St Helen’s message very clearly” (*Barry*). Some concern is expressed about priests’ well-being: spiritual, emotional and mental.

As in the DSC, there were many references to a sense of loss experienced by people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many reports recorded people’s gratitude for the way in which clergy and parish communities strove to maintain some sort of Communion during this period, though there was also a sense that many were longing for a return of the many aspects of parish life suspended during the pandemic.

There is a great awareness of the importance of good communication both within the parish and with the wider community, especially to promote evangelisation. A need is felt for greater transparency within parishes, especially in areas such as financial information and regarding sex abuse scandals.

Parishes emphasised the celebration of the Mass as a central and crucial part of parish life to strengthen their relationship with the Lord and with one another. Many note the need to seek an increase in attendance and participation at Mass, and more specifically, the presence of children, young people and families in general. Some accepted the need to be more supportive towards families affected by situations such as suicide, mental health, abuse and bereavement. Some look for improvements in areas of the liturgy such as music and preaching. The live-streaming of Mass had been a great help for many and along with social media in general has great potential for evangelisation.

Particular points of interest and/or concern raised included:

- The DCS talks about synodality as being “‘the way of being Church,’ but given the relatively low involvement of the Church members [in the parish part of the process], it is hard to see this way of being as a reality” (*Barry*).
- Fears were expressed that the voice of women may not be listened to, despite best intentions.
- There is a need to give attention to the perceived isolation and loneliness of priests.
- The importance of the role played by religious was too fleetingly addressed in the DCS and merited greater attention.
- The reference in the DCS to the Oriental Churches’ experiences of working in a synodal way suggested that the Latin Church should learn from this understanding and experience.
- Advocacy for the environment raised in the DCS does not seem to have figured significantly in parish dialogue.
- There is a “need to hold mercy/welcome and teaching/tradition together, so that one is not emphasised at the expense of the other... [to] get the balance right, and go too fast and far for traditionalists while leaving progressives dissatisfied and frustrated” (*Belmont*). Similarly, a fear was expressed by some that in emphasising “inclusivity” there is danger that challenge to doctrinal teaching might be overlooked (*Abergavenny*).



Response to Question 2 on the Working Document of the Continental Stage [WDSC]

“After having read and prayed with the DCS, what possible tensions do you think are particularly important? What are the questions or issues that should therefore be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?”

The first point to make is that the responses to this stage of the synodal process, like the first diocesan stage, reflect a profound concern for the well-being of the Church. The laity, and it is principally laity, speak of their aspiration for a Church reflective of the teachings of Christ. There is a sense that things need to be done differently to address the issues and tensions articulated in the Working Document of the Continental Stage. At the same time there is a sense of ownership as the synodal process takes shape.” “the joy of being included is for me the single greatest fruit and seed of the synodal process” [Caerphilly]. Parishes were learning about synodality by practising it in their discussion groups.

The reports from the parishes of the diocese that were submitted reflect on several key tensions and mirror some of the key messages from the Working Document itself. One of these can be summarised as a dichotomy between those who responded and those who the Church fails to reach. “In many cases their voice has been absent from the synod process, and they appear in reports only because others speak about them, lamenting their exclusion.” [*Working Document of the Continental Stage*]

This was reflected in some submissions from parishes which spoke of the Synod increasing an awareness of a responsibility to those beyond the walls of the Church “However, the Parish came to the realisation that each member has a part to play to be more inviting, accepting of diversity within our communities and respectful.” [Merthyr] while there was a similar expectation in the south east part of the diocese “(it) should lead to a more loving, open Church” [Chepstow & Caldicot]. The existence of a level of poverty in rural communities that needed to be addressed was recognised by some others who saw it as presenting a challenge to Christian communities [Ross-on- Wye]

The metaphor of the tent was well-understood and the community in Hereford expressed the wish of many “the aim of ‘widening the spaces of the tent’ rather than ‘fixing the scaffolding’, going out to those who feel excluded and walking with them, recognising their feelings and listening to them [Belmont Abbey]. The report from St Helen’s Caerphilly reflected, as did others on the difficulties of Vatican documents and the need for them to be made more accessible [Caerphilly]. Parishes reflected on the need to improve the welcome that parishes offer [Newport]

In a reflection by one of the Deacons in the Archdiocese, there was an emphasis on the expectations of young people for a Church that placed greater emphasis on diversity: “The importance of inclusion was a key theme in the Archdiocesan Schools’ Summary Report and many parish reports indicated a desire for a radical review of these areas of Church life.”

The issue of inclusion as the precursor to being a missional church was identified in different reports. “We at Saint Helen’s certainly talked about the Church becoming more inclusive of marginalised minorities under the sub heading of Mission.” [Barry]

There are many ways of defining minorities but the Working Document reserves a special place for young people, recognising that their absence is a significant issue. Special efforts need to be made to involve them at every level in the synodal process. Recognising their unique contribution to the future working of the Church is of fundamental importance: “There is universal concern regarding the meagre presence of the voice of young people in the synod process, as well as increasingly in the life of the Church”. [*Working Document of the Continental Stage*]

Parish responses reflected on the absence of the voice of the young and the need to involve them more actively in the synodal process. One parish spoke for many “... we must find ways to support young people with compassion in regards to ‘where they are’ and help to accompany them to a relationship with Jesus.” [*Maesteg*]. One of the Recommendations of the Synod Report from the Archdiocese of Cardiff called for a Youth Forum – and the resources to support it- in order to amplify the voice of the young.

There is only a single reference to the elderly as a discrete group in the Working Document. However, several parishes and/or groups referred to this section of the faithful as ones requiring particular attention. The pandemic, the amalgamation of parishes and increased reliance on technology are all areas that have a significant impact on the elderly. The Sisters of St Joseph of Annecy spoke of the special charisms of the elderly and their giftedness for contemplation and prayer: “Many of these mature, elderly people would like the church to let go of dogmatic certainties and offer society the values of contemplation and listening.” [*Sisters of St Joseph of Annecy*]. “Incorporating the wisdom and experience of the elderly in decision making on parish matters.” [*Tonypandy*].

The Continental Stage in Europe, in particular, may need to reflect on how it supports the elderly as an essential element of the tent-dwellers and a resource for supporting the Church in its transition.

The scandal of clerical sexual abuse was referred to in many reports from around the world “Many local Churches express concern about the impact of a lack of trust and credibility resulting from the abuse crises” [*Working Document of the Continental Stage*]. This lack of trust and confidence in the Church’s capacity to address the issue was evident in several responses from parishes in the Archdiocese of Cardiff. It represents a serious test for the Continental Stage precisely because it undermines and challenges the sense of unity and mutual trust on which the very synodal process is built.

Another form of tension in the area of inclusion is the Catholic Church’s relationship with other faith groups. The process of extending the tent must recognise the work undertaken by those who share in the Abrahamic roots of our Church. “There was a call expressed for more integration with other churches, a call to a more purposeful approach towards other faiths and cultures. This approach begins by reaching out in a meaningful way towards other faiths so that we can walk together with others as is central to a truly synodal church.” [*Whitchurch, Cardiff*]. In rural parishes within the diocese the recognition of the importance of an ecumenical approach was clear. “Faith-sharing and working on common projects with other Christians (and other groups) in our area.” [*Llanarth*]

There were a number of specific references in the submitted reports to the need for a review of the liturgical practices of the Church. There was a need for improved formation, for using homilies to improve understanding of the tenets of faith, and a recognition of the part that good liturgy can play in supporting the synodal process. “Prayer and liturgy are reported in the DCS as the means of binding the members in communion with each other. In both the DCS report and that of our parish, there is a loud cry for ongoing formation in synodality”. [*Whitchurch, Cardiff*]

The spiritual nature of the synodal process was explored by one contribution which reflected on the powerful use of lectio divina as an appropriate practice in support of synodal discussion “The key thing, as with the Synod, is that participants make space for the Holy Spirit to move freely.” [*Llanarth parishioner*]

A number of parishes spoke of the need to address the issue of the role of women in the Church: “Issues such as unlocking the potential for lay participation and particularly of the role of women in the Church...” [*Ross-on-Wye*]. In all other parts of society women have demonstrated their capacity to lead and contribute in ways equal to men. “One pro-forma commented that ‘women are an underdeveloped resource. This is a waste.’” [*Caerphilly*]

The failure of the Church to recognise more fully the contribution to be made by them undermines its moral authority in calling for a just society. Parishes recognised that the issue of equality of access to positions either of leadership and ministry were beyond the scope of parish submissions. There was an expectation in several reports, however, that the Church needed to address the matter – and this should start with the Continental Stage of the synodal process.

It was clear from the parish reports that fed into the Diocesan Report that many were becoming increasingly conscious of their responsibilities to those at the margins and wished to be part of a Church that “goes forth”. Sadly, but equally true, was the absence of the authentic voice of those beyond the tent. As the WDCS reflected, most reports spoke about those who were on the margins rather than hearing their specific voice. Reaching out, including and celebrating the diversity of the People of God is the central mission of the Church and the synodal process has raised awareness of the issue, at least. The national syntheses have identified the “why” and the “who” of inclusion. They have been unanimous in speaking about the poor, the ethnic minorities, the disabled and women. The Continental Stage will need to articulate these concerns with a focus on “how”. In what ways can the Church demonstrate a commitment to inclusion, a recognition of diversity and an acceptance of difference?

The changing role of the laity in terms of accepting and executing specific functions is another area where further work is required at the Continental Stage. It is referred to in the Working Document “Attention is needed to their specificities, and also to safeguarding the harmony within each local Church. When it enters into the concrete life of the Church, the theme of ministeriality inevitably meets with the question of its institutionalization. This raises the question of the structures through which the life of the Christian community unfolds.” [*Working Document of the Continental Stage*].

The development of lay ministers and the development of a co-responsible laity have to be addressed within the context of priestly ministry. This was recognised by many parishes, some of which recommended the development of resources to assist lay-led liturgies. [*Grangetown, Cardiff*] This was a matter for a diocesan lead “Having a mandate for the laity is very important and the feeling was this should be at a diocesan level so that it would not be impacted by changes of clergy.” [*Barry*] Some elements of such ministry might be better undertaken by the laity: “Other key lay led roles are also being developed with the leadership team working to draft ministry descriptions and assisting with recruitment.” [*Newport*]. A view echoed in another submission, “Need for formation in co-responsibility for mission, and greater and better collaboration between priests and laity.” [*Belmont*]. The issue of some lay leadership of parish communities was recognised as requiring further support “It is important to see more lay leadership in the Church organisation.” [*Llantrisant*]

The issue of the limits of the various ministerial roles, the development of new forms of training and development -for clergy, religious and laity- will require further work both in identifying these emergent boundaries and shaping the mission to these new parameters.

Analysis of responses by Root & Branch of the reports that made up the national synthesis for England and Wales referred to the need for increased and improved models of subsidiarity - with decisions taken at the level where they were likely to have greatest impact. At heart there is a creative tension between the models of Church bequeathed to those of an older age and the renewed emphasis on missional parishes with its emphasis on the New Evangelisation. Work on co-responsibility and on issues of subsidiarity both speak to this wider tension and will be one of the significant issues to be addressed in the Continental Stage.

In summary, the Continental Stage has to engage with the issue of inclusion in its different guises. The fact that most national syntheses spoke with one voice on the issue of the Church needing to be more a champion of the marginalised is clear. The laity have been asked to consider how the Church acts out its role in the world in the years ahead and they have spoken with passion and Christian conviction in supporting the preferential option for the poor. **How** it reaches out meaningfully to those who are not in the tent or who have chosen to leave is a key issue. It is at the heart of the synodal process that the Church is listening to the voices that often have not been heard. The Continental Stage will need to consider the practical ways in which the Church responds to the challenge of the Beatitudes. The sexual abuse scandals, the subjugation of the voice of women, the failure to address adequately the challenges of economic and social poverty in some societies are spaces for radical action.

The synodal process called for inclusion and diversity in two separate but connected developments. The first was to be open to those on the margins and invite them to the tent. The second element of inclusion will be to make the management of the tent space more equitable.

The Church will need, in the Continental Stage, to set out how it will manage the multiple ministries so as to reflect the culture of co-responsibility – to associate itself with the palpable urge for an inclusive and shared mission of ministry. For the Church to be more open to the poor and the disadvantaged, it needs to engage with the vast majority of the laity who are not actively involved in their parish. Models of parish, based on a purely clerical model have failed and will continue to fail. The call of the synodal reports from all parts of the world was for a more inclusive Church- including in the way that it managed itself and its engagement with the wider world. Increased involvement of lay and religious in the parish and the diocese will provide increased opportunities to be at the service of society and make the Church more representative of its membership. Increasing the missional drive of the parish calls for a more diverse pattern of appeal and challenge, while increased focus on the needs of wider society will render it closer to the model of Church at the service of the world.



Response to Question 3 on the Working Document of the Continental Stage

“Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?”

Most responses to this question identified the significance of the **synodal process** itself. There was a clear recognition that this was a major departure in the development of the Church and, with it a sense of privilege and responsibility to be part of the process. Equally clear was the sense that this was a process- ongoing and continuous- which called for a commitment from all the baptised. “As the WDSC recognised, the key priority is to safeguard and promote the fundamental principle that synodality could be the key to ensuring the People of God are able to hold in tension, the ‘peg-ropes of the tent’ – that differing ways of living and, in terms of evangelisation, witnessing to faith in Jesus Christ can be accepted.” *[A Deacon of the Archdiocese]*

There were several caveats- principally recognising the lack of preparation over a sustained period of time for such a process and a concern for the language of the Vatican documents that had the effect of excluding those whose views needed to be heard. “We felt that the language of the original document was above the level of ordinary people and 44 pages would not encourage anyone to read it.” *[Maesteg]*.

There was near unanimity across the parish submissions regarding what were considered to be the priorities and recurrent themes. The desire for a **more inclusive and welcoming Church** which was more closely aligned to the Gospel values of Jesus was clearly articulated. The call of Pope Francis for the Church to be more like a field hospital resonated through most reports. The metaphor of the tent – expanding to accommodate others- powerfully shaped many responses. There is an appetite, a hunger for reshaping the Church to be more responsive to the needs of the wider society and the Continental Stage needs to capitalise on these movements.

This openness to change called for **new forms of ministry**, recognising the talents and skills of all the People of God and both as a response to declining numbers of priestly vocations and as a means of representing the fullness of humanity- men and women, young and old, married and single. Developments in **liturgy** and improvements in homilies and general preaching were felt to be critically important.

Reflections on the nature of the Catholic Church did not mean that people were unaware of the need for a greater spirit of **ecumenism** and several reports assessed the need for greater efforts at cooperation. The Continental Stage will provide an opportunity to assess options for greater collaboration with those of other faiths. “Engagement with other denominations and other faith groups should be pursued to facilitate greater understanding and cooperation.” *[Abergavenny]*.

There were very few submissions that did not refer to the declining numbers of **young people** being visible in the activities of the Church. Most parishes that responded saw this as an area of critical importance, with a need for sustained efforts by diocese and parish. In the Merthyr parishes there was a wish to increase the opportunities to hear the voice of young people. Working with other agencies that engage with young people was seen as an important way forward for some. “It is also actively exploring a youth project with a City Housing Association.” *[Newport]*

All of these changes demand further investment in the **formation and development** of all the People of God. The synodal process itself has demonstrated a need for greater attention to the deep conversations that need to be a recurrent element in the life of the parish. From different parts of the diocese there have been calls for the laity to have improved opportunities to learn about the Faith in order that they can be the evangelisers that their baptism calls them to be.

The Continental Stage provides an opportunity for aligning similar issues expressed from many different Local Churches. The singularity of the call and the unanimity of the voice calling for common changes, appear to represent the Spirit working through the synodal process.

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