

## **Introduction**

In May 2021, we received the news of the Pope's plans to carry out a multi-year, global process for a 2023 Synod on synodality.

Jeff Henderson, Director of Pastoral Planning and Leadership Development, was chosen to lead the process locally, aided by clergy, Chancery staff, and parish ministers.

With the short notice, the still-active COVID restrictions, and needing to proceed though not sure how, we decided to do an on-line consultation, mostly by means of a survey.

The Vatican sent questions for consultation, but also allowed us to come up with our own topic. We decided on parish vitality and viability.

The purpose was to identify markers of parish vitality, raise awareness to them, and in their regard, to challenge parishioners to up their game to make their parish viable.

In January 2022, the survey was put online, and mailed to all 75K households, clergy, and religious in the archdiocese, asking for responses by the end of February 2022.

We also hosted focused, in-person meetings with 11 groups, such as youth and young adults, retirees, people from closed parishes, and immigrants.

There were 16K surveys returned, with 46K responses to open-ended questions, which were all read and summarized by volunteers, for a notable 21% participation rate!

The focus on parish vitality and viability led to discussion about the future of parishes, and the role of clergy and laity in Church leadership.

The Synod process highlighted the importance and the challenge of open, honest, and consistent communication through an accessible medium.

In that regard, most participants in the process reported that the parish bulletin is the most effective communication tool to Church members.

## **General Comments from the Survey**

Our working definition of synodality was listening to God in prayer, listening respectfully to each other, and together deciding in the light of faith on the best way to go forward.

Some thought this would be a cumbersome decision-making process. Nevertheless, for the sake of vitality all need to participate, take ownership, and share responsibility.

At the same time, it's not realistic to hope that the end-results of a multi-year, global synodal process will truly represent voices on the parish and archdiocesan levels.

Just consider: Catholics in New Albin, Iowa, fill out the archdiocesan survey, and their comments are synthesized along with 16K others in this report.

Then, the reports from the 15 dioceses in USCCB Region 9 (Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska) will be synthesized into one regional report, and sent to the USCCB office.

There, the reports from all of the 14 USCCB Regions (representing 196 dioceses) will be synthesized into one report, which is sent to the Vatican Synod department.

That office will then synthesize the reports from the 60+ episcopal conferences in the world (representing almost 3K dioceses) into the document used at the 2023 Synod.

Once the Synod is over, the Pope will write a document based on what was heard in the month-long discussion among the 300-some Synod participants (mostly bishops).

Each time, what was said by parishioners in New Albin is filtered through the interpretive lens of someone else's mind and heart, faith and politics.

So, as a decision-making process, if synodality is employed beyond the parish or archdiocesan level, it carries the unwanted risk of making people cynical, even angry.

Speaking of anger, some parishioners used the survey to make their feelings known about past parish or school closures, and negative experiences with Church leaders.

That said, many were grateful for taking time to ask and listen before making decisions that could affect parishes.

## Specific Comments from the Survey

Some Catholics feel estranged from the Church, thinking it's too conservative:

1. Women and most married men being denied Holy Orders
2. People who are LGBTQ, or divorced and remarried feeling unwelcome
3. Bishops worrying more about the institution than stopping clergy sex abuse
4. Clergy appearing to be all about rituals, rules, and saying "no"
5. Too little attention given to the environment, racism, immigration, and the poor

Still others feel disgruntled with the Church, saying it's too liberal:

1. Too much attention given to the environment, racism, immigration, and the poor
2. Bishops unwilling to punish certain Catholic politicians
3. Bishops co-operating with government during COVID, like closing churches
4. Clergy treating abortion as only one issue among many, making it less important
5. The Pope restricting the celebration of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass

Both ends of the spectrum believe that youth and young adults will be lost to the Church unless changes are made in keeping with their respective points of view.

People agreed, however, that Mass every weekend, in each parish, with a good (and brief) homily is important for the vitality of parishioners and viability of a parish.

The priest shortage was acknowledged, making Mass every weekend, in every parish impossible, unless who can celebrate Mass is changed (women, married men).

Some survey respondents suggested that, instead of closing an otherwise vital parish, a parish can offer a Sunday celebration led by someone other than a priest.

Priests play a significant role for good or for ill in the vitality and viability of a parish. For the most part, the priests are appreciated.

Deacons, religious and laity might relieve the burden on the too-few priests by volunteering for duties that don't require ordination, if priests would be open to that.

Speaking of volunteers, respondents said that things like parish cliques, or entrenched leaders frustrated the desire and ability to volunteer, especially among young people.

## **Markers of Parish Vitality Identified by the Survey**

There was enough agreement on the most important markers of parish vitality, by the survey respondents from among laity, religious and clergy, to call it a win.

The top markers of parish vitality were identified as having Mass in the parish every weekend, a sense of belonging, and faith formation programming.

Other markers that received strong support are good preaching, financial stability, service of others, and the practice of stewardship.

The survey results line up with our 4 archdiocesan ministry priorities: enhance Sunday Mass, strengthen faith formation, teach stewardship, and promote vocation.

They also endorse what the Vatican says are the 3 essential activities of a parish: serve the poor, learn and teach the Gospel, prayer and worship.

As there is strong agreement about those markers, indicating that the Catholic faithful are of one mind about parish vitality, and so we can/should own the survey results.

And as a consequence of that, we know where we need to up our game as individual parishioners, and as parish communities.

There's also a need to do pastoral planning at both the local and archdiocesan level to ensure the best pastoral care for Catholics in the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

Pastoral planning may (or may not) include closing some parishes or churches. If there are closings, it would be done in dialogue with parish leadership.

It mightn't necessarily or only be geography, numbers, financial health, condition of buildings, or even the regular availability of a priest that decides a parish's future.

That said, a parish needs enough money to pay the bills, and enough active people for an appropriate sense of community, and to carry out ministry roles.

A key determinant of a parish's viability will be its vitality, whether or not there's anything going on in a parish and its church between Sundays.

## **What's Next?**

This report of the synodal exercise on parish vitality doesn't mention every comment or opinion, but is an attempt to summarize general thought trends.

There is an expectation for greater transparency moving forward, and that this exercise will be translated into action on the local level. What follows are proposed action steps:

1. Develop an instrument with markers for parishes to measure their vitality, in order to make individuals and communities aware of where they need to up their game. This should include a review of whether there is enough money to pay the bills, and enough active people to constitute a community and to carry out ministry roles.
2. Following-up on the local use of the above-mentioned instrument, work to develop a plan to address the distribution of priests serving how many parishes. Also, work to enhance the markers for parish vitality to ensure their future viability.
3. Perhaps as an alternative to closing parishes, work with clergy and laity to re-vision parishes so they can operate without a residential and/or regular priest presence, where deacons, religious, and laity can help take care of parish administration, serving the poor, faith formation programming, gathering in church on weekdays for prayer and on Sundays for Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest (SCAP), if it's a Sunday when a priest can't be there.
4. Continue to promote the 4 archdiocesan ministry priorities: enhance the experience of the Sunday assembly for Holy Mass; strengthen faith formation programming; teach stewardship as a way of life; promote vocations in general and priesthood in particular.
5. Continue to stress the 3 essential activities of a vital parish community: help the poor; learn and teach the Gospel; gather for daily prayer and Sunday worship.