



2021 Synod 2023  
For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission

## St. Matthew's West Norwood, Diocese of Southwark

### Feedback from parish listening sessions

#### Our process

During December 2021 we held three listening events in the parish, two in-person events and one on-line. We held two of these events on a weekday evening and the third after the 11am Sunday Mass, in the hope that as many people as possible would be able to participate. In total approximately 50 people took part. The age of participants ranged from 7 to well over 77.

In order to ensure that those who took part had the opportunity to speak freely about whatever they felt the Church hierarchy needed to hear, we did not give them a set of prescribed questions, rather we suggested that they simply discussed whatever they wished in response to three broad themes:

- What does the Church does well
- What are the key issues facing the Church today
- What should the Church do differently

#### Our feedback

Our conversations were lively and wide-ranging. A breadth of opinions were voiced, at points conflicting and we have not attempted in this document to present a consensus view. All the points made during the discussions are recorded in summary here. Where similar views were expressed in different discussions they are recorded separately to show the strength of feeling on that particular point. The feedback is organised thematically as far as possible, notwithstanding that there is considerable overlap between some of the themes.

#### Overarching message

Although this document does not seek to offer editorial comment on the views expressed, it is perhaps worth highlighting that one overarching message consistently came through in all three sessions, that did not neatly fit into any one theme. This was that the Church should not be judgmental or as one participant put it *"Catholics are no better and no worse than anyone else! Stop being judgmental"*.

## **I. Key Issues/challenges**

### Church hierarchy

Clergy hold a lot of power. Priest's attitudes, improving participation.

Church should be about ways of thinking not rules

Sometimes feels that decisions are imposed on the laity, e.e.g changes to the Mass rite without consultation. This can be very hurtful.

There is a question of consistency/good practice between parishes. Currently parishioners are very much at the mercy of whoever the Bishop sends as parish priest. In some parishes (not ours) there is a power vacuum.

Lack of accountability/supervision for those with ministries

Out of touch with the reality of people's lives

There needs to be more recognition of parishioners views by the hierarchy of the church.

For decades there has been a shortage of priests.

Concern about lack of support for priests.

Need to provide assistance for older priests

Why does the hierarchy not comment about the use of the Holy Name as an expletive in drama and literature

### Being an inclusive and welcoming church

People are moving away from regular practice of faith or going to other churches. Need to listen to these people, respect and value them independently from their opinions/lifestyle or whether or not they come to church. We should be open and welcoming to people of all faiths and none, starting by building relationships.

Need more welcoming attitudes towards marginalised groups e.g. LGBTQIA+ community, women and people of colour.

Many people do not currently feel fully included. For example,

- LGB people, who do not take communion because they are in a relationship
- Divorced and remarried people who are not allowed to take communion.

Denial of communion should not be used as a punishment.

These rules can feel hypocritical and are often shrouded in an air of secrecy that has a negative impact on families, including children.

Allow divorced partners to receive sacraments.

The church's views on gender identity are not clear and not communicated.

Globally the Church is not loud enough about the issue of gender. People get stigmatised for wanting to call themselves 'female' as opposed to 'biologically female'. I understand some want different genders, but saying biological differences do not matter creates problems.

We should recognise our similarities rather than focus on the differences. Look to the positives rather than a church that focuses on sin & guilt

We should be more reflective and promote and concentrate on Jesus and what Jesus would do.

God is love, not God is love except divorcees, separated individuals, gay people etc.

Outdated beliefs towards most groups beside cisgender, straight men is an issue.

The church does not accept real life situations and people as they are.

Get more men to come to church

Secularisation of the modern world is a challenge for the Church

Need to get more people coming to church.

More involvement of women and younger people. NB the people in the pews are no longer medieval peasants! You must value us more.

Global acceptance towards other groups, starting from the Pope, e.g. his inclusivity of queer folk.

At a national and global level, the Church must reflect the society in which it lives and serves. It must change if it is to continue to serve. In particular issues about married and women priests should be seen as an opportunity and not a threat or sources of ossification.

Beliefs are outdated. Need to accept Gay people and priests should be allowed to marry.

### Impact of sexual abuse within the church

How to relate to people who have been abused? How to bring healing? How to be present to victims of abuse?

Hypocrisy of sexual abuse and lack of honesty from hierarchy - great need for honesty to rebuild trust.

### Role of women

Male-only hierarchy leads to a lack of diversity, Need for more women in the Church's voice.

The Church is too male dominated

Structures need changing; equality of opportunity

Historical decisions made by the church hierarchy have led to the exclusion of women

Women priests should be allowed.

Women priests please.

As a young girl in the Church, I would like to see female and married priests

Women's full participation in the ministry of the church is needed, including full training for priesthood.

Need to communicate more clearly Bible teaching on the role of women - explaining apparent contradictions and misconceptions. Explain that evil didn't come to the world through the woman - Genesis is poetry and imagery. Address a number of anti-female passages in the Bible.

Alongside consideration of the role of women we should also discuss the role of lay men. Important to have positive role models for boys and young men (not only priests). Women want to share power with men, not take it away.

There is a fear of women from men in power - that women will take over.

There is a need for a greater role for women if the church is to survive, especially thinking world-wide. Many parishes are being closed where there is no priest.

The whole concept of ministry needs a shake-up. Need to be able to bring the Eucharist to people, and allow for people to take more active roles in this.

Impact on life choices affecting women, e.g. abortion and marriage

The majority of church goers are women; there should be more involvement of women at all levels of church organisation.

Need for inclusivity of female roles at all levels

### Married priests

Celibacy as a way of life is something you can admire but it shouldn't be put on a pedestal. In some cases, the parish can take on too much importance in a priest's life and lead to an authoritarian style of leadership

Open to wider interpretation of what a priest is. e.g. women/married

The nature of humanity means that we can be more than one entity. It is possible to combine having a family with running a parish.

Fear that allowing priests to marry would be divisive.

Wouldn't like it if priests were married, it would be different/a change.

Married priests please, who understand sexual issues.

The Church should allow priests to marry. Having a family may also help them; having first hand experiences. It may also encourage more entering the priesthood.

### Sex, relationships and contraception

The Church's attitudes to and teaching about sex and contraception do not match the reality of people's lives. This is a very significant issue for young people.

In relation to IVF "extra" babies or "donated" babies, people need to understand that a child is a gift not a right.

The Church should allow contraception to allow happiness within families and harmonious family experiences. Contraception prohibition leads to a lot of frustration or over population.

Should allow gay people to recognise and celebrate their life-long relationships. At the same time emphasis should be on monogamous, exclusive relationships (for all types of sexuality), not on lustful ones.

Church should remain a strong voice against abortion and also against donating embryos or making spare embryos via IVF.

### Ethnic diversity/racism

The church in the UK is ethnically diverse. But there is a problem in appealing to younger people. Younger people tend to prefer the Pentecostal church, the evangelical churches, where there is a more vibrant youth culture, with younger music.

### Role of young people

Younger people need to be empowered to express their ideas and take decisions within the church

Getting and keeping younger people involved is an issue

Need to do more to engage young people

### Technology

Tech is making the world smaller, bringing us together in new ways bad and good. Online masses both offer an opportunity to participate more easily but the risk is not ever meeting anyone in person.

Online Mass raises theological questions about whether you can really participate in the Mass if you are not physically present and if so, how should we understand what non-physical presence (online) is about? It was striking how differently different people reacted to not being able to attend Mass during the pandemic. For some, we missed Mass, others didn't. Some celebrated mass online while having a host in front of them, another person celebrated Mass in their own home.

While online Mass was very reassuring in Lockdown, we need to ask whether spiritual communion was enough?

## Holy Communion

It is wonderful to be able to go from country to country and participate in one and the same Mass.

The Eucharist needs to be more widely available, it is very unsatisfactory that some people should be denied communion. It should be our starting point

## Ecumenism

The Church is right to pursue dialogue with other churches and other faiths. But it will be an extremely long journey. We can learn a lot from other faiths.

Should we view ourselves as Christian first rather than Catholic first? We should embrace the Christian side of our faith.

Negative attitudes towards other religions is a problem

The RC national church should join the National Council of Churches like all other denominations.

Need more inclusive beliefs towards other religions

## Climate change

The Church needs a stronger, clearer voice on climate change. What it is doing and saying needs to be better communicated.

## Impact of the pandemic

People are angry about what has happened in lockdown. The impact, especially on children from BME communities has been severe. The Catholic church is renowned for education but was absent from many of these children's lives when they needed it most.

The pandemic was a test of faith, family, neighbours. Lots of people have been lost to the church during the pandemic.

We need to take care of each other and be more immediate about that. The church is very rich, people shouldn't be suffering in our community.

## Social Justice

Need for more debate about the Church's role as a champion of social justice. How does the church use its wealth for good?

On issues such as the refugee crisis, the church should be more active/vocal. Some felt that the church was doing important work in this area but is perhaps not well known about/understood.

The Church is not always vocal on these issues when it needs to be. Need to reach out more proactively to offer help within the community. For example, the church is not taking a visible stance on cuts to welfare benefits. If the church is silent it is complicit in damage done to young people, the impact on people's mental health etc.

We must attend to what Christ stood for

Need for more statements at a high level on important global issues such as poverty and climate change, for example.

Need for more visibility of Christianity in public places

Addressing poverty, refugees, climate change and loneliness are main issues facing the church today. Not the importance of family.

More time spent thinking about how we make the Gospel real in our lives

More putting faith into practice

Churches open to people who are homeless

## Approach to change

Evolution not revolution, small steps rather than big changes. But ultimately priests to be able to marry and female priests

We should be embracing the teachings of Pope Francis and talking more widely about these.

Bishops need to be brave.

There is a difference/distance between the concerns of bishops and the laity - a gulf between the concerns of the hierarchy and ordinary people in their day to day lives. For example:

- a new translation of the Bible - this would not be a priority for most people.

- No idea how the laity feel about the child abuse

Need for flexibility

There is too much division in the Church

I think the main issue facing the Church today is a culture of indifference as we have become so self-serving and worldly and the Church is viewed as out of step with modern thinking.

Parishes could set up meditation groups. "The future of the church will be mystical" said Karl Rayner. So the future of the church will be more spiritual. Not just DOING but BEING.

Need to succeed in an inclusive transition.

Don't be afraid of change. Organisations that stand still tend to fail/disappear. However, don't lose sight of what is the essence of Catholicism and its values.

"The Church of the future needs to be contemplative or it will die" F. Lawrence Freeman OSB

We could do with being intentional disciples/followers of Christ. We need more heart, not head, parish, national and global level. Humility, simplicity, self-control - permitting the Holy Spirit to work in and through us.

We need more opportunities to share how the Gospel speaks to people.

Without prayer we can be disconnected from God, we need to have an individual relationship with Him but we also need to be part of a community to live out our faith.

We need to look in and look out

## **II. Examples of things done well**

Locally:

- Working with organisations such as London Citizens
- In our parish things have improved: improved collaboration, encouraging diversity, involving people who may have felt less welcome in the past, e.g. L'Arche community, LGBT people

- Ecumenism, inviting people from other faiths and Christian denominations, scripture groups. Presence in local care homes, mass online.
- Welcoming people back to the church after lockdown has been a positive experience.
- Our parish is very welcoming to children
- Lots of effort is put into making sure our services are beautiful and it is appreciated.
- Lots of people are taking part
- Church supports the community and schools
- Supporting local and national causes
- Good to have a place to pray outside the church building
- Fr Cassidy is a great preacher and so good with the children
- We have a great priest and a great children's liturgy. This really helps growing the community.

Globally:

- The Pope seems more open to change and wants equality
- Moving away from proselytism, promoting the fascination of understanding as a start
- With the introduction of Pope Francis, the Church has shown increasing acceptance towards, for example the role of women in the Bible.
- Perpetuation of Values
- Keeping Catholicism alive in challenging times
- I think the Catholic Church offers sound teaching on the Gospel values and has the courage to stand firm in this regard as it is inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- The Church voice on the protection of life is the only voice these days
- The Church voice on poverty and justice since Pope Francis came to the papacy.

- The message of grace
- The church protection of refugees
- It is good the Church is asking these questions
- Great the Church is willing to listen to different views.
- Helping the poor and people in need
- Liturgy