

Synodal Pathway in Killala Diocese

Placing Hope in Faith



DIOCESE OF
KILLALA

When Jesus had finished teaching, he said to Simon Peter, push out into deep water and let your nets out for a catch. Luke: 5:4



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Photo: Bishop John Fleming launching the Synodal Pathway.

Introduction

The Synodal process in Killala diocese has followed a different trajectory to other dioceses in that a process of dialogue with the laity and religious had already been completed prior to the announcement of the national and worldwide process.

When the Synodal Process was initiated by Pope Francis, it was decided that it was unnecessary for this Diocese to revisit a stage already recently completed.

In February 2017, the priests of Killala Diocese, though not all were supportive, decided that (i) they would ask the people what they wanted; (ii) they would work with them in making it happen; and, (iii) they would reassure them that the priests would support them. The process was called Placing Hope in Faith, in deference to the centrality of both faith and hope in its provenance.

A credible start

In order to get things started a steering group was established in February, 2017.

Each Deanery was represented by two women, one layman and a priest and co-opted were Bishop John Fleming and a priest coordinator – in all, 18 members – eight lay-women, four lay-men, five priests and Bishop John Fleming. Almost immediately a problem arose. Was the agenda open? Was everything up for discussion? What about hot button issues like the ordination of women, mandatory clerical celibacy and LGBTQ+ teaching?

A distinction was drawn between what changes a diocese could implement and what were the prerogative of the universal Church. While this distinction was accepted by the committee, the dilemma was that if the agenda was not open when approaching the general public then the process would have little credibility. The problem was resolved when Bishop Fleming gave a commitment that whatever was decided that was within the authority of the diocese to implement would become Diocesan policy and that what was beyond the authority of the diocese to change, he would bring to the Irish bishops and would send to the Papal Nuncio to forward to Pope Francis.

In September 2017, the committee having accepted the undertakings given by the Bishop, undertook an analysis of Priest numbers in a Mass attendance survey. The first indicated that within less than two decades there would be 7 or so Priests for the 22 parishes of the diocese – with the vast majority in their late 60s or 70s. The second, based on a head count on three successive weekends, concluded that religious practice – in the sense of attendance at weekend Masses – was around 29%.



Bishop Fleming welcoming 300 parish delegates to the Diocesan Assembly in the Twin Trees Hotel, Ballina on July 1, 2018

Survey

In November, the committee decided that a survey should be undertaken in every parish to elicit the opinion of the people and that its results should be voted on in a Diocesan gathering or Assembly.

It was agreed that the survey would have to be anonymous and confidential. By December, the committee had agreed on the survey's seven open-ended questions. They were:

- 1. Where, in your everyday life, do you experience love, truth, goodness, hope and joy?**
- 2. What is it that encourages you to participate in the life of your local church/parish?**
- 3. What is it you find difficult about participating in the life of your local church/parish?**
- 4. As a Church, what are the biggest questions we face?**
- 5. What do we need to do now?**
- 6. What do we need to stop doing now?**
- 7. What topics would you recommend for the upcoming Diocesan Assembly?**



Newman Institute, Ballina, training workshop for Parish Pastoral Councils.

In January 2018, the Placing Hope in Faith survey was launched by Bishop Fleming who strongly encouraged participation from each parish. In February, to publicise the survey, the committee held meetings in every parish with Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs) and their priests and from then until April survey sheets were distributed in every parish.

For the survey to reach the gold standard of credibility – that it would be 'real, respectful and transparent' – it was clear that it would have to be anonymous and confidential in order to elicit as truthful a picture as possible and that it should be open to everyone in every parish (apart from young children). Surveys and their accompanying envelopes, in which on completion, the surveys were individually sealed, were distributed widely in every parish through PPCs, where they existed, or where they did not exist, through other agencies. The survey was widely published and was also made available for completion online. A total of 1,457 completed questionnaires were returned – adult surveys comprising 1,101 and young people 356.

As the surveys were anonymously completed it was impossible to have a profile of those who completed them in terms of assessing whether they reflected the opinions of regular church goers, members of religious congregations, groups who may have felt marginalised or indeed those who are estranged." Equally there is no data on those who didn't avail of the opportunity to express their opinion although some have subsequently said it was because they felt it was only going to be "more of the same" and that they feared nothing would change.

In May, in order to underline the importance of accurately surfacing the data that emerged from the survey and ensuring that its processing and analysis was undertaken by a reputable, independent and professional agency, the GESERA Institute for Action Research from Lisselton, Co. Kerry (GIAR) was employed.



In June, the report produced by GIAR was sifted into 129 proposals under 14 areas of interest – in no particular order:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. General | 6. Management of parishes | 11. Prayer |
| 2. Family | 7. Child Safeguarding | 12. Liturgy |
| 3. Youth | 8. Education in the Faith | 13. Deacons |
| 4. Women in the Church | 9. Pastoral Care & Priests | 14. Inclusion |
| 5. Lay Participation | 10. Vocations | |

Whilst these were the general overall areas of interest to emerge, an insight into the priorities of respondents can be gained by considering the breakdown of the answers to question 5, “What do we need to do now?” and Q.6, “What do we need to stop doing now?”. The top ten answers in each case are listed below broken into adult and youth responses. The prevalence of the aforementioned “hot button” issues is particularly noteworthy.

Question 5 - What do we need to do now?

Ten Most Frequent Responses

Among Adults		
Response	Frequency	Percent
Youth, Appeal to / Encourage/ Include	285	26%
Women, increase roles	234	21%
Celibacy, abolish	216	20%
Participation, enable / encourage	103	9%
Education - faith formation (for all)	90	8%
Prayer	72	7%
Children's Masses	55	5%
Listen more	53	5%
Religion in School	50	5%
Parish Councils, strengthen	46	4%

Among Youth		
Response	Frequency	Percent
Youth, Appeal to / Encourage / Attract	60	17%
Modernise / Change	45	13%
Celibacy, abolish	42	12%
Mass, improve / make more interesting	41	12%
Women, increase role	41	12%
Accept Everyone	23	6%
Relate more to people	21	6%
Listening, Discussion, Dialogue, Openness	19	5%
Vocations - increase	18	5%
Embrace Gay People	16	4%

Question 6 - What do we need to stop doing now?

Ten Most Frequent Responses

Among Adults		
Response (stop /cease ...)	Frequency	Percent
Ignoring Women	54	4.9%
Old-Fashioned Mentality	54	4.9%
Being Judgemental	51	4.6%
Negativity / Complaining	46	4.2%
Dictatorship	44	4.0%
Hiding Past Atrocities	40	3.6%
Celibacy (for priests)	31	2.8%
Boring Homilies	27	2.5%
Excluding Gay People	27	2.5%
Money - talking about / asking for / announcing collections	27	2.5%

Among Youth		
Response (stop/ cease...)	Freq.	Percent
Judging People	24	6.7%
Mass being boring	24	6.7%
Anti-LGBT practices	14	3.9%
Old-Fashioned /Closed-Minds	14	3.9%
Celibacy	12	3.4%
Discrimination / Exclusion	12	3.4%
Making-Up People's Minds	12	3.4%
Being against abortion	11	3.1%
Hiding past atrocities	11	3.1%
Forcing People to Believe	9	2.5%

Question 7 - What topics would you recommend for the upcoming Diocesan Assembly?

The answers to question 7, asking those surveyed to recommend topics for the diocesan assembly, were summarised into the top ten issues of all respondents as represented in the table below.

	Response	Frequency	Percent
1.	Women	476	32.7%
2.	Youth- Attendance/ Engagement	348	23.9%
3.	Celibacy / Married Clergy	344	23.6%
4.	Priesthood (community, role, overseas) and Deacons	157	10.8%
5.	Inclusion (in general)	143	9.8%
6.	Participation	136	9.3%
7.	Vocations	132	9.1%
8.	Abortion / Protect Life	82	5.6%
9.	Mass	75	5.1%
10.	Education on / in Faith (for all ages)	60	4.1%

Diocesan Assembly

After the survey results were processed we had a list of 129 proposals which represented the views of the people on what needed to happen in 14 different categories.

We now needed a process by which the 129 proposals could be voted on to establish how in each category the proposals could be prioritised – in other words, in what order they might be implemented. To establish a credible decision-making process to achieve that aim, 300 delegates from the 22 parishes were chosen by their PPCs and, together with the priests of the diocese as well as representatives of other church groupings, they gathered in Ballina on July 1, 2018 for the first Diocesan Assembly.

Bishop Fleming welcomed the delegates and outlined the work of the day:

"The Diocesan Assembly today will decide on the blueprint for a Diocesan Pastoral Plan for the coming years. It will mean that Bishop, priests and people working together will adopt a strategy for how the portion of the People of God who live in this diocese will face the future. A number of issues have arisen which we are unable to put into practice. These will be forwarded to the Vatican and the Irish Bishops Conference for their attention. The remainder of the issues, which have emerged from the consultation process are outlined in the document and will be voted on today at the Assembly. The issues which win the approval of the Assembly will then become part of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan."

In advance of further considering the 129 proposals a series of agreed general principles and attitudes underpinning the process were outlined as follows:

- 1 That, with the decline in the number of Priests, and in preparation for Parishes without a resident Priest, a process of shared leadership between Priests and Parish Pastoral Councils be pursued as a matter of urgency;
- 2 That, after the Assembly has reported on its conclusions, Focus Groups be established with interested and skilled personnel to help implement the decisions of this Assembly;
- 3 That, after the Assembly has reported on its conclusions, 'Moderators' be appointed to each Focus Group to 'drive' its operation by gathering a group of people interested in particular subject areas and by taking responsibility for meetings, discussions, liaising with members, Parishes and Diocese;

- 4 That a Diocesan team be appointed to oversee the operation of the Focus Groups, to evaluate progress in implementing the decisions of the Assembly and to encourage all involved in this process;
- 5 That a Listening ethos be given an on-going, permanent and structured status in the diocese allowing a respectful platform to the voice of the people;
- 6 That, Transparency, Inclusivity and Consensus should be accepted as foundation stones in Diocesan and Parish policies and concerns;
- 7 That LGBT (Lesbian • Gay • Bisexual • Transgender) parishioners be made to feel welcome and accepted in our Parishes and Diocese;
- 8 That, because it is a source of anger and frustration for many Catholics and because it is bringing the Church into disrepute, we call on Church authorities to deal with the issue of Priests who have been 'silenced' because they expressed opinions in accordance with their conscience, opinions being expressed by this assembly;
- 9 That the Role of the Church in bringing the community together be respected through community-building activities organised by Parish Pastoral Councils;
- 10 That, in the future management of Parishes and Diocese, a committee be established to examine the financial and other implications and report on the following:
 - a. Support for Parish administration in the absence of Priests;
 - b. Increased demands from three key areas:
 - Child safeguarding
 - Data protection
 - Charities legislation;
 - c. Religious education in Primary and Secondary schools;
 - d. Communications strategy of the Diocese;
 - e. Adult Faith Formation;
 - f. Youth programmes;
 - g. The disposal of Parish Property no longer needed;
 - h. The alienation of Parish Property to local interest groups.



Fr Aidan O'Boyle, PP, Ballina,
responding to the launch of the Synodal Pathway.

The Vocations section and the Inclusion section were divided into two:

Vocations (I)	Vocations (II)
Inclusion (I)	Inclusion (II)

Proposals in regard to Vocations and Inclusion which were not within the authority of Bishop or People to implement, were placed in Vocations (I) or Inclusion (I). Examples of issues falling into this category which attracted huge support were: that Priests should be allowed to marry, married Priests be allowed to return to ministry and that Women be ordained. In response to question 7 (What are the topics you would like to see on the agenda of the Diocesan Assembly?) decoupling Priesthood from the requirement of Celibacy was the proposal most mentioned and the ordination of Women came second.

In addition, under the heading of inclusion was the call for the Church's teaching on Homosexuality and those excluded from the Church to be changed to reflect the inclusion of all people regardless of Sexual orientation, Marital status or Family status

Proposals that could be implemented by Bishop and People were then placed in Vocations (II) or Inclusion (II).



Easkey Community Centre, training workshop for Parish Pastoral Councils.

Surprising issues that emerged

The delegates' response to some of the issues beyond the Diocese's capacity to implement on which they registered their opinions:

- That Priests be allowed to marry: Agree 85%, Disagree: 1%;
- That Priests who have married return to active ministry: Agree 81%, Disagree: 19%;
- That the Church's teaching on Homosexuality and those excluded from the Church be changed to reflect the Inclusion of all people regardless of Sexual orientation, Marital status or Family status: Agree: 86%, Disagree: 14%.
- That women be ordained to the Priesthood: Agree 69%, Disagree: 31%;

The second highest finding in the survey prior to the assembly was: 'That the Mandatory ban on the Ordination of Women be lifted'. Indeed, running through the survey results in the answers to different questions were comments repeated over and over again on the need to ensure that women are given due respect by the Catholic Church.

While women often take the brunt of responsibility for the life of the Church at Parish level, the survey indicated deep-seated unease that a Church not open to the gifts of all the Baptised was losing the hearts and minds of Catholic women.

There was a sense too that many women had already drifted away from the Church and that unless progress is made in respecting the equal rights of women that the drift will continue. Concerns were expressed too of a perceived ethos of Misogyny and its negative legacy over the years.

The Role of Women in our Church was central to the findings of our survey and regarded as an issue that needed to be dealt with, now.

- That Women be ordained to the diaconate: Agree 80%, Disagree: 20%;

That the Ministry of the Diaconate should only be considered if women are allowed to be candidates as well as men as a male-only Diaconate has the potential to add another layer of male clericalism and alienate women further was a significant finding from the survey outlined earlier and reflected again in the subsequent assembly.

The volume of responses in favour of the above issues was significant given the profile of the attendees who could mainly be said to be of a traditional mould. The manner in which they represented the voice of people on the margins demonstrated a very strong awareness of the issues which concern many who have walked away, no longer practice or felt there was no point engaging with the process.

A Unique Occasion

The Diocesan Assembly was a unique occasion, an historic day for the Diocese with, for the first time in history, a gathering of People, Priests and Bishop together setting the agenda and marking out the ground for a way forward and in Faith and in Hope determined to create and sustain the momentum needed to move the Diocese and the Parishes on a Synodal pathway into the future.

It was also a clear statement that the sacrament of Baptism was, as the Second Vatican Council stated, an equalising and determining factor between Parishioners and Priests and, in terms of Parish management, trumped the earlier priority of Ordination. Just as 'the priesthood of all the baptised' in Vatican Two-speak means that it's not just the Priest who celebrates the Eucharist but all the Baptised who celebrate with him, the gathering for the Diocesan Assembly was a public statement representing our belief that every baptised person has both a right and a responsibility to exercise a joint leadership in our Church.

To continue the emphasis on confidentiality and to ensure that the process was completely private, an independent firm was contracted to supply a system of electronic voting when, on assembly day, the delegates were asked to prioritise five or six proposals to be implemented in order of preference in each category. Each delegate keyed in his or her preference and in seconds the results appeared on a screen. Thus the voting was both private and confidential and experienced as private and confidential with parishioners seated beside parish priests, each voting privately and independently of one another.

Among the general principles voted on by the assembly were:	For	Against
That a Listening Ethos be given an on-going and structured status in the diocese allowing for a respectful platform to the voice of the people.	89%	11%
That Transparency, Inclusivity and Consensus be accepted as foundation stones in Diocesan and Parish policies and concerns.	91%	9%
That the role of the Church in bringing the community together be respected through community-building initiatives organised by PPCs	91%	9%

The ‘How?’ question

With the Diocesan Assembly, we had determined what the people of the Diocese wanted to see happen under ten different headings as well as the order in which they wanted their proposals to be implemented. The next question was to determine how that implementation would take place.

Ten Focus Groups were established involving a total of 120 people who addressed how the implementation was going to take place. It was the task of the Focus Groups to focus on the areas and issues identified in the Diocesan Assembly and to prepare them for implementation as part of a pastoral plan.

This involved (i) taking the priorities voted by delegates at the assembly as the effective agenda for the diocese (ii) teasing out the priorities with a view to establishing how they might be implemented (iii) placing a focus on what can practically be done (iv) establishing goals and focusing on action not on further discussion.

Among the questions addressed by the Focus Groups were: (i) Is this proposal achievable? (ii) What can be done? (iii) How can we go about doing it? (iv) What has it going for it? (v) What (and who) are the obstacles to making it happen? (vi) Is there any background preparation we need to make? (vii) Do we need to get any more information? (viii) Are there aspects we need to examine in more detail?



Easkey Community Centre, training workshop for Parish Pastoral Councils.

The Focus Groups held several meetings and when they had presented their reports, we knew the answer, not just to the 'What?' but to the 'How?' question'.

Under the Focus Groups, the original 129 proposals under 14 headings were refined down to 72 under ten headings. Moderators (or leaders) and secretaries were appointed to each Focus Group with their roles specified with an emphasis on driving forward the operation of the groups.

In January 2020, an Implementation Committee was appointed to encourage, supervise, co-ordinate and resource the implementation of the 72 proposals and the committee elected three laypeople as Leaders – Anne Sweeney, Patricia Melvin and Peter McLoughlin – to lead, on behalf of the group, the implementation of the 72 proposals.

The Implementation agenda got underway in January 2020 when two proposals to be presented to the four Deaneries were ambushed by the arrival of COVID which side-lined the process for the following two years. The two proposals were (i) The contemporaneous election of new PPCs in every parish with training workshops to be provided to enhance their effectiveness and (ii) That a Family/Children's Mass be introduced in every Parish (or number of parishes) as a matter of priority.

The decision to start with electing new PPCs was based on the conviction that a key part of the parish scaffolding to support the Synodal pathway was effective PPCs, and the belief that if a Synodal pathway was going to prosper the PPC was the key platform, sponsoring reform and creating (and maintaining) momentum at local level. The Children's Mass, already effective in some parishes, was unanimously regarded as an essential strategy in the pastoral care of children and young parents.



Next Steps

The election of new PPCs has now been completed in all Parishes throughout the Diocese simultaneously. A schedule of training workshops in each Deanery has been completed and the members of the 22 PPCs were commissioned by Bishop Fleming at the Chrism Mass during Holy Week 2022. Each PPC has been asked to nominate a link person to liaise with the Synodal team moving forward and this request was met with enthusiasm.

It is envisaged that the next step will involve a return to Implementation committee in order to decide together on which proposals from the Assembly to focus on prioritising first, with the emphasis on tasks which are doable and effective. The feedback received from the training workshops will also form an integral part of the decision-making process. It is also hoped that some of the link persons from the PPCs may become part of the Implementation committee so that strong links to parishes are built and maintained.

Finally, we are on our way. One significant stage of the journey has been completed and we move forward continuing to Place our Hope in Faith.



Education in the Faith Study Group.

Fruits/Spirit at work

As we prepare for the next stages of the Synodal journey the following are some of the considerable fruits of the process to date.

- Rekindling and re-owning the vision of the second Vatican Council.
- Re-establishing hope for the future of the Church.
- Sense of the Spirit inspiring the process: early dilemmas resolved, openness to change, confidential survey and voting.
- Confidence in our ability as a Diocese to follow a Synodal pathway.
- Confidence in Parishes through PPC elections and training and energy generated for the future however problematic and challenging that might appear to be.
- Confidence in the Diocese in working through creative and even prophetic ways in resolving problems.
- Hundreds engaged with the process (committees, groups, Individuals).

- Energy and momentum It brought.
- Increased level of engagement between Laity and Clergy. Link established between Synodal team and Priest's council.
- Learning to walk together.
- Quality and commitment of lay leadership that emerged having been voted in by peers.
- Sense of reality as real issues named and faced.
- Underlining the 'key' problem issues: Women, Clericalism, Patriarchy, Misogyny, Homophobia, undue deference to the past, trust in the Baptised and not just the Ordained.

A final thought from the survey findings and an important pointer for future trajectories:

'Inclusion' has become an important word and is a key reality in today's world. It must be central to the ethos of the Diocese of Killala and its Parishes. Every effort will be made to ensure the participation of non-churchgoers, the marginalised and the estranged.

Journeying together



Team Leaders



Anne Sweeney

Anne Sweeney, originally from Skreen & Dromard parish, now living in Ballina, is married to Downey and has five adult children. She works full time in the Banking sector, has served on Kilmoremy Parish Council and mentored the parish youth group as well as enjoying ministries in St Patrick's Church. She has studied Pastoral Theology (NUIG) and Spirituality (Maynooth) and has been part of the Placing Hope in Faith team since 2017. She is an ardent supporter of the Synodal pathway.



Patricia Melvin

Patricia is a native of Crossmolina where she currently resides with her husband Joe, who hails originally from Ballina. She is mother to three adult children and a retired teacher of French, German and Religious Education. Her final years in Gortnor Abbey Secondary School were spent as Deputy Principal and subsequently as Principal. Patricia has become involved with the Synodal Process in the hope that it will be a vehicle for much needed change in the Church, particularly for women and those who feel marginalised.



Peter McLoughlin

Peter McLoughlin, a native of Westport is a retired Secondary school teacher and has served as Chairperson of Kilmoremy Parish Council. He is keenly interested in Genealogy and has written three books on families in Mayo. He is married to Helena Syron and they have four adult children and four grandchildren. Peter is a firm believer in the Synodal process and is totally committed to People and Priests working together for the Church.



Brendan Hoban

Brendan Hoban is a retired priest of Killala diocese and resource person for the Synodal Pathway. A native of Ballycastle, he was ordained in 1973 and since then has served in seven parishes of the diocese. In recent years, as diocesan historian, he has researched and written a number of books on the history of Killala diocese. He believes, passionately, that the reforms of Pope Francis, if accepted and implemented, will save the Catholic Church.

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*Synodality is a style, it is a walk together,
and it is what the Lord expects from the Church
of the third millennium. Pope Francis*

Synodal Pathway in Killala Diocese Placing Hope in Faith



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