



For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission

# Parish Synod Handbook

Diocese of Northampton





## Prayer for the Synod

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,  
as we gather together in Your name.

With You alone to guide us,  
make Yourself at home in our hearts;  
Teach us the way we must go  
and how we are to pursue it.

We are weak and sinful;  
do not let us promote disorder.  
Do not let ignorance  
lead us down the wrong path  
nor partiality influence our actions.

Let us find in You our unity  
so that we may journey together  
to eternal life and not stray  
from the way of truth and what is right.

All this we ask of You,  
who are at work in every place and time,  
in the communion of the Father and the Son,  
forever and ever.

Amen.

Our basic question is:

**What is the  
Holy Spirit  
saying to  
our Church  
today?**

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## Message from Bishop David

Synods are an ancient form of church gatherings, stretching back to the Acts of the Apostles. Now Pope Francis is asking us to gather in the same way. He has called a Synod in 2023 which will involve all of us. As Pope Francis said at the worldwide launch:

*“The Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of every Church, people and nation. And to listen to the world, to the challenges and changes that it sets before us... Let us listen to one another.”*

I am asking us all to get involved in our diocesan synod process. This is not a parliamentary system in which there are winners and losers. Instead, this is about graceful listening and graceful speaking, in which each person’s contribution is valued. Each one of us has the opportunity to speak and be listened to; but also to seek out those who do not usually speak, and those whose voices are not usually heard. The conversations we have together will inform the future direction of our diocese.

Pope Francis is very clear:

*“The purpose of this Synod is not to produce more documents. Rather, it is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be”*

Over the next few weeks there will be all kinds of groups and conversations springing up around the diocese. I ask as many of you as possible to take up these opportunities, both as participants and as local organisers. We will need your eyes and ears to reach those on the margins, a particular concern of Pope Francis. There will be resources and training to help make this happen.

The diocesan leads for the Synod process are Fr Francis Higgins and Avril Baigent. They are joined by Joan Barham, Sam Canning, Yoofi Clarke, Fr Andrew Coy, Fiona Inman, Rick Netherwood, Deacon Lanre Sanni and Fr John Udris to form the Diocesan Synod team.

Yours in Christ,

+David

“ **All must be invited to become involved. All should feel their voice is being listened to...** ”

*BISHOP DAVID OAKLEY*



# Synod Timescale

**28th October**  
Zoom meeting for priests and deacons

**1st November 7.30-8.30pm**  
Introduction to the Synod webinar

**6th November 1-4pm**  
*Becoming local listeners*  
St Mary's Woburn Sands

**Local group phase**  
from 8th November

Lay people and clergy bring together the results of their listening and reflect on their area in pastoral area meetings. Results of conversations are added to the submissions.

**Diocesan phase**  
March

The writing group reflect on the submissions and produce our report.



**Information and training phase**  
from 24th Oct

Opportunities for local listening to happen in parishes, schools, groups and individual conversations.

Further *Becoming local listeners* sessions:  
Online session 20th November, 1-4pm  
4th December 1-4pm Cathedral Centre  
TBC



**Pastoral Area Phase**  
February



Pre-synodal assembly to discern main themes for diocesan report.



**Discernment and writing phase**  
April





# Becoming a Synodal Church - our questions

Becoming a synodal church means exploring ideas of communion, participation and mission. The questions we have chosen encourage participants to express their experiences of church in these areas. At the same time, the very act of having shared conversations helps us to become a more synodal church.

**Communion:** conversations lead to a new experience of Church

Q.1 What does it mean to you to be Catholic?

**Participation:** the people of God talk and listen graciously to one another about questions that matter

Q.2 What are some of your experiences of the Church doing something well?

Q.3 What are some of your experiences of when things have not gone so well?

**Mission:** Our thoughts are turned to those outside the church walls

Q.4 What are our dreams for the Church?

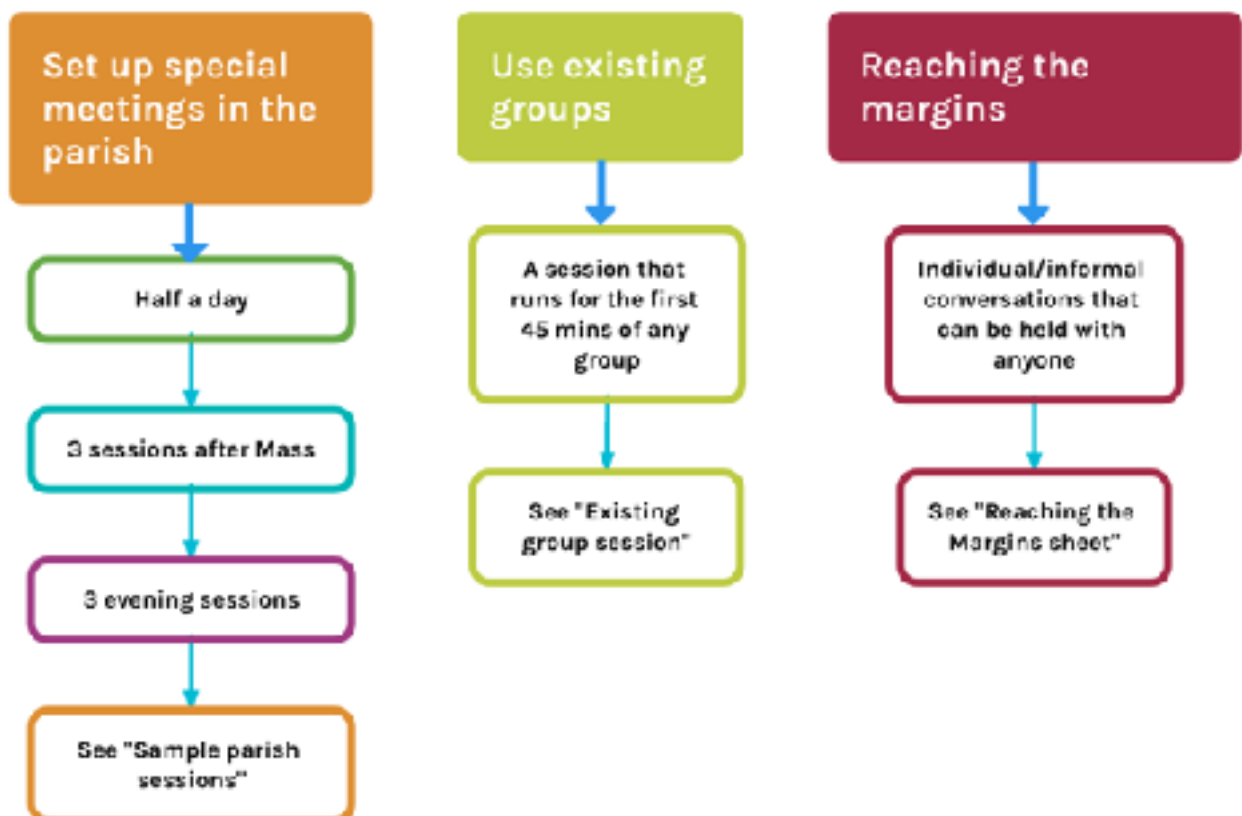
“ the purpose of the Synod is to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, and allow hope to flourish

*PREPARATORY DOCUMENT*

# The Synod Process in the Diocese of Northampton

The Synod documents make it clear that all the baptised are invited to the conversation, especially the marginalised and those whose voices are not often heard. To help this to happen, the diocesan Synod team have devised a number of different resources to be used. These will allow parishes, Catholic organisations, and individuals to take part in the Synod process. There will be separate resources for schools and young people. These resources can be found in this pack, and also in printable form on the diocesan website: <https://northamptondiocese.org/for-a-synodal-church/>.

## A range of ways to have good Synod conversations



Use the sample sessions and the planning help in Appendix 1 to discern the right approach for your community.

# Local Listener Role

Key to the success of our synod process are our local listeners. They are the hands, hearts and listening ears of the synod around the diocese. Many people have facilitation or small group skills as part of their life experience so this may be a good opportunity to bring new people on board. The role of the local listener is to create safe spaces for gracious conversations. They are prayerful and reflective, interested in other people, and will be ambassadors for the synod process.

As part of their role, they may:

- Work with their parish priest to run a **Parish Synod Process**
- Reach out through their networks to encourage groups to use the **Existing Group** materials
- Reach out to those on the margins in **individual conversations**

There are a variety of roles needed to run a Parish Synod Process :

- A coordinator to pull together the process
- A facilitator to MC the sessions (this may or may not be the same person as the coordinator)
- Group listeners to help the groups hold good conversations
- Note takers to jot down the results of the conversations

# Feeding Back

The Synod process involves a number of moments of discernment. They occur at these points:

- Group
- Parish
- Pastoral Area
- Diocesan
- National
- Continental
- Universal Church

At each point there is potential for the voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard. As part of this process each parish is asked to make a submission through the portal (<https://northamptondiocese.org/for-a-synodal-church/>) although any group or individual can also submit their responses separately. We suggest that parishes gather as many responses as possible (including existing groups and individual conversations) before writing their final submission. The process of writing up, and the final submission should be publicly available. From March-mid April next year the diocese will in turn write a submission which will be discussed at our Assembly and made publicly available.



# Pope Francis on listening

One of the key aims of the Synod process is to give us a new way of listening, to one another, and to the Holy Spirit. In his homily on 9th October, Pope Francis offers us Jesus' own example to show us how to listen:

*Jesus listened to that man's question and to the religious and existential concerns that lay behind it. He did not give a non-committal reply or offer a pre-packaged solution; he did not pretend to respond politely, simply as a way of dismissing him and continuing on his way. Jesus simply listens, for whatever amount of time it takes; he is not rushed. Most importantly, he is not afraid to listen to him with his heart and not just with his ears... This happens whenever we listen with the heart: people feel that they are being heard, not judged; they feel free to recount their own experiences and their spiritual journey.*

There are a series of bad habits around listening that Pope Francis identifies.

1. Giving a non-committal reply – hmm, yes, lovely
2. Offering a pre-packaged solution – well, if you only did x...
3. Pretending to respond politely, in order to get rid of someone quickly

Instead, Jesus:

1. Makes time – he listens for as long as it takes
2. Listens with his heart – with his whole person
3. Creates a safe space for honest conversation by not judging

Pope Francis encourages us to be open to the Holy Spirit, to be open to surprises. The real fruit of this process will come from true listening to one another, and to the Holy Spirit

## Exercise

In the light of Pope Francis' teaching, let's reflect on our own style of listening

1. Think of a time you have been listened to in a way that afterwards, you felt *understood*. Re-live the conversation, as much as you can remember.
  - a. What did that person do or not do that signified that they were listening and understanding?
  - b. What was it that made that experience so special? Can you identify anything of Jesus' style of listening in that experience?
2. Think about the way we talk to one another. What are your own bad habits around listening? How can we avoid these in our conversations?

***How will you take the Synod process forward?***

# Appendix 1

## Planning Steps

Once you're ready to think about the Synod in your local context, follow these planning notes. You can also download printable participants' notes, and feedback sheets from the diocesan website: <https://northamptondiocese.org/for-a-synodal-church/>. Each parish will receive packs from the Synod team which have a poster and prayer cards for you to use.

1. **Set up a little team** in your parish/school or organisation to plan and carry out the consultation process and gatherings on the local level. The team will consist of group listeners, note takers and hospitality/welcome. Think about how you can reach those who don't usually come to parish groups, eg
  - a) Hold meetings at different times and places (evenings, mornings, online)
  - b) Give the questions to existing groups, eg confirmation group, finance committee, SVP, music group, Legion of Mary (see separate "Existing group" handout)
  - c) People host meetings in their homes, with near-by parishioners, or families, friends or neighbours who are on the margins
  - d) Don't forget to include the sick and housebound
  - e) Reach out to your local Catholic school to encourage conversations with pupils, staff and parents
2. **Publicity:** participation can be encouraged through parish announcements, social media, personal invitation. Care should be taken to involve those who are excluded or whose voices are often not taken into account.
3. Hold a **training session** which should include a dry-run of the Synod process with the team. The diocesan Synod team can run training locally, especially if parishes buddy up or for a pastoral area. Having a well-prepared team who understand the principles of the Synod process is really important.
4. Participants should ideally include people from a **diversity of communities**, experiences, cultures, ages, and walks of life. About 2-3 weeks before the gathering, the **participant sheets** should be sent to all participants so that they have time to reflect on the questions.
5. Prayer is essential when running a group like this, where people may be vulnerable or hurting, may feel deep emotions, or may find deep- held views challenged. As part of your preparation, please pray for the individuals coming to the group, for all the practical

arrangements, and for the impact on your parish community.

6. Preparation of the space. Make sure your space is warm and welcoming, to encourage good conversation. Please also be aware of your local COVID situation, planning for good ventilation, social distancing and avoiding touch points.  
An alternative is to run the group in someone's home, eg sitting around a kitchen table (if possible). Placing a candle with a cross or Bible in the middle of the table can help to keep people focused over the session and encourage a prayerful atmosphere for the group.
7. At the gathering, communal prayer and liturgy will play a vital role. You may also want to include some singing or an extended prayer time.
8. Choosing the questions. In the Handbook for the Synod (Vademecum, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/document/common/vademecum/Vademecum-EN-A4.pdf>) there are a whole variety of questions. We offer four open-ended questions which we hope will encourage deep sharing, story-telling and encounter.
9. Use of silence. There is quite a lot of silent reflection and prayer time in this structure. Not everyone finds silence easy. As a facilitator you will be aware of people's level of comfort or discomfort. You may find, after an initial phase of foot shuffling and coughing, that people settle into the silence. Or if people struggle, you can end the time more quickly.
10. Once the group dialogue has taken place, **participants should review and share** about their experience of the process within their small group. How was their experience? What were the ups and downs? What new and refreshing insights might they have discovered? What have they learned about the synodal way of proceeding? How was God present and at work during their time together? Participants should then decide on the feedback they wish to communicate to the organising team.
11. After the gathering, the organising/facilitation team members can meet to review the whole experience and to **prepare the submission** based on the feedback submitted by all the small groups, and any other groups happening in the parish. All feedback should be submitted via the diocesan portal: <https://northhamptondiocese.org/for-a-synodal-church/>



## Appendix 2

### Embracing Difference and Responding to Conflict in Groups

Much conflict, whether in spiritual conversation groups or other contexts, occurs because of lack of clarity or mis-communication. Before any group embarks on a faith journey together it is wise to establish 'ways of working'. Working these out together as a group can be helpful as the group gels, begins to get to know one another and notices differences. Once these 'ways of working' have been agreed, it is the responsibility of all group members to hold one another to account in a gracious way.

### Our Synod ways of working are:

- Being fully present to the person speaking
- Respecting everyone's right to an opinion – even if you strongly disagree
- Choosing not to make judgements about others
- Not speaking for too long
- Speaking for ourselves and not others
- Keeping a sense of humour and perspective
- Respecting the confidentiality of the group
- Being prepared to apologise, if necessary, and to forgive often
- Being open to the Holy Spirit

### Intervening in the group

As facilitators, some interventions that we use will include the introductions and connecting sentences that will help the group to move easily from one stage to another. The facilitator as well as giving her own contribution to the conversation may wish to summarise what has been previously shared.

Where interventions are more common and, of necessity, more spontaneous, is when the sharing and discussion takes place. It is hoped that such interventions will become less and less necessary as the group develops but they may be required in some or all of the following situations:

- An individual wants to speak and is not being given the opportunity.
- Certain group members are losing interest.
- A monologue or dialogue develops which excludes other group members.
- The group becomes tense or embarrassed.

- Factions begin to emerge.
- Whispering takes place.
- The conversation stays entirely 'in the head'.
- Someone is openly criticised.
- The conversation drifts into argument.
- When relevant information is required and it isn't forthcoming.
- 'Red herrings' are introduced.
- People keep repeating themselves.
- The group appears confused.

## Should I intervene?

If you have time to weigh up the possibilities you may want to consider the following:

- What do I want to achieve?
- What will happen if I don't?
- What effect will my intervention have on group members?

The decision itself cannot be anticipated and there is always an element of risk when intervening particularly when responding to moments of conflict. Everyone makes mistakes and there is no substitute for having a go. Over a period of time people develop their own style of facilitation and this includes their ways of intervening. In general terms, however, I offer the following guidelines:


Interventions are best made in the form of questions or suggestions.

- A brief review of the developing situation is often helpful
- Naming your own feelings is often important as it invites others to do the same.
- An element of humour is sometimes helpful in diffusing tense situations.
- If you have to interrupt do so with due deference and an apology.
- You may need to remind the group of agreements you have previously negotiated.
- Q: Imagine the worst that could happen... how shall we respond?

Adapted from *Breathing Spaces*, Mark Davis







... We recall that the purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but “to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands ...

Preparatory Document