

St Joseph's Parish Synodal meeting – 17th Feb 2022 report for St Joseph's Parish

1. Introduction

The report specific to St Joseph's Parish is a follow-up to the [report](#) from the St Joseph's Parish Synodal meeting on Tuesday 17th Feb 2022 submitted to Paisley Diocese. The majority of responses from the meeting related to structural issues within the Church that local parishes are unable to address. However threaded through these were responses and practical solutions specific to St Joseph's Parish. The response to the Diocese committed us to a separate report for our Parish. There was a sense of the need to "get our own house in order" to meet the needs of Parishioners and increase involvement of the laity. Several reasons for this were cited including the need for a more welcoming approach, the size of the Parish, the lack of information about volunteering opportunities and the requirement for better communication.

2. Summary of relevant recurring themes

2.1. Young people

Almost everyone present felt young people were marginalised and that the Church was not meeting their needs by not listening, not understanding the place of faith in the context of their lives today, or by failing to address their needs in a practical way.

The role of schools and the relationship between parents, schools and the Parish community was seen as crucial in bridging the gap between religion, Religious Education and involvement in the Parish. Some concerns were raised about the effectiveness of the current approach.

2.2. The role of language

In many responses the role of language and use of "jargon" was seen as a barrier to inclusion and involvement, noting that it may not be fully understood by members of the Church or the wider community.

2.3. The need for a Welcoming and non-judgemental Church

The theme of an unwelcoming Church was raised in all questions, specifically acknowledging those who do not meet the accepted definition of a "family", including single men and women, people who are gay and those who are divorced.

The need for a welcoming Church also related to recovery from Covid, bringing a sense of joy and hope back to the Church with greater opportunities for building our community back.

A welcoming environment was also noted both for "excluded" groups and for existing parishioners who saw no place for themselves in Church out-with attendance at Mass, whether through a lay ministry contribution or via social opportunities.

2.4. The need for a more proactive Church

There was a need for St Joseph's to be more proactive in clearly stating the requirement for greater lay involvement and identifying the areas where this is most desperately needed.

2.5. Learning from other Abrahamic religions

Joint worship was well supported; however it was observed that the current opportunities for joint activity and joint worship are poorly supported by St Joseph's parishioners.

2.6. Lack of a forum for dialogue

The lack of a forum beyond the current Synod for parishioners to engage in issues facing the Church was noted in several questions. This included the need for change and the form that change should take, how to achieve a more welcoming and inclusive church and the role of the laity. There is no local forum within St Joseph's for such discussions.

Individual question responses

Addressing inclusion

- There was broad agreement that the Church needs to be clearer about offering a welcome to, listening to and being less judgmental of those who feel marginalized, within our own Parish as well as in the wider Church.
- It was noted that no platform exists within our Parish for this type of conversation. One-to-one discussions as opposed to large groups were suggested as a way to help people explore challenges, along with offering a series of "question and answer" sessions. Within St Joseph's, a connection was made to revitalising the use of the Church Hall as a way to re-engage those who do not feel included, offering the opportunity for conversations related to specific areas of interest.
- The current focus on on-line communication may exacerbate marginalisation for particular groups including some older people, those with visual or cognitive impairment and those with a learning disability. Having information available in hard copy remains important.
- Solutions to improve the inclusivity of the Church included mixed gender groups praying and speaking together as a way of helping men to understand how women's perceptions about their place in the Church and how this is viewed by some sections; greater involvement of young people in the Liturgy; and having a Sunday every year to acknowledge the suffering of and pray for forgiveness of those who have been abused by the clergy or the religious.
- Opportunities were noted to include young people more in Parish activities, in particular involvement during Mass, as well as reintroducing social events such as specifically within St Josephs' re-establishment of the Youth Club.
- Several respondents spoke of the need for Catholics to be trained in apologetics so we are better equipped to counter criticism, or proactively argue the appeal of our faith and its focus on justice, love, and concern about poverty.
- Social media was seen as a force that cancelled out any positive influence of the Church. Our young people were seen as a way to engage more effectively with social media.

Celebration

- There was a sense that the impact of C-19 had undermined participation in the Liturgy and that more time was needed for both the Liturgy and given for personal prayer after Mass. The importance of music was also noted, in particular for its ability to lift the spirit.
- A number of respondents highlighted the opportunity for the Church to be more proactive in seeking congregational participation during Mass. Practical suggestions to improve the sense of community during Liturgical celebrations included provision of eulogies at funeral Masses; more inspiring music (although this did not apply to all Masses), broadening the range and age of participants of readers and in the Offertory. Other opportunities to involve the congregation more broadly in Mass included decoration of the Church.

- The importance of lay ministers including musicians and readers understanding their role was raised, with Liturgical formation classes a potential solution after the prolonged break because of Covid.
- The need to be more welcoming and create a sense of community at the start of and during Mass was a frequent response with many respondents noting practical solutions such as having a welcoming group at the Church doors, parishioners introducing themselves to their neighbour in Church, and acknowledging them at the sign of peace.
- A number of suggestions were made in relation to improving engagement with children and young people, including participation in the Liturgy and personal invitations to Mass. Restarting the children's Liturgy was seen as a priority.
- Communal prayer was noted by some as inspiring and could promote greater participation and celebration if more opportunities were offered.
- There was also recognition that some people choose particular places for worship because the style within that Church meets their particular need. This includes the opportunity for a traditional Latin Mass. The importance of including the Creed in Latin on special Liturgical occasions within all Churches was mentioned. Some respondents emphasised it was important to ensure this need was met.
- Some suggestions to promote greater engagement in Mass related specifically to St Joseph's Parish. These included having the hymns projected on the wall for every Mass which was seen as more inclusive, and improving the sound system. Concerns about the quality of sound was a recurrent theme under a number of different questions.

Sharing responsibility and welcoming

- Overall was a sense that the Church needs to be more proactive in making people feel welcome. Some noted this can only be achieved by talking to those who are not already involved to understand the barriers they experience and what we need to do to overcome these.
- Many participants identified practical barriers to greater participation. These included pressure of time and competing priorities, other commitments and "laziness".
- The size of the Parish was noted by several as making it difficult to come together, to get to know other parishioners or to know when a new parishioner joins.
- Poor communication was identified as a barrier. This included lack of information about opportunities for involvement, particularly beyond Liturgical activity; the time commitment required; the purpose of groups; the skills or talents required; uncertainty about how to become more involved; or who to approach to volunteer, to put forward suggestions or to raise areas of concern.
- Some barriers related to people's individual perception of their ability to contribute, such as that they had no skills or talents to offer, that they lacked confidence or that others were better placed to help.
- Finally, there were barriers based on previous experience or perceptions. Several respondents stated that the Church was bad at building communities; that volunteering needed to be made more inviting; that all roles were already filled or that the Church was not receptive to new ideas. The theme of being unwelcoming recurred in relation to greater involvement in existing activities. Some respondents noted that some groups felt "cliquey", and if long-established, made it difficult for someone new to fully integrate.
- Many respondents spoke about the Church Hall as a key way to improve the sense of welcoming and of community, including opening the Hall after Mass.

- Suggestions included more frequent social events, such as ceilidhs and morning tea and coffee, and use by community groups such as the play group. The Hall offers a place to run groups about faith, including the opportunity to strengthen adult formation and discernment. For those who are marginalised, such groups could provide a forum to discuss specific areas of concern or challenge, establish social connections and reintegrate into the Church community. Access to the piano in the Hall was highlighted as a way to help people feel welcome. The standard of kitchen facilities was noted as a barrier.
- A “Fresher’s” week for participants was suggested. Previous events in the Hall bringing the different groups together to raise awareness and encourage volunteering were cited altho’ it was noted these were not always well attended and those who did volunteer did not always follow up on this commitment.
- The need for better communication was highlighted. Request for help should be explicitly made to all parishioners. Volunteering opportunities for participation need to be better promoted, should emphasise that these opportunities are open to all and include relevant contact details. Improvements to the website were suggested, it should be “written as if for strangers”. The “Welcome Pack” was noted as “very detailed and all contacts evident”. However this will require updating following C-19.
- Clearer verbal communication, in particular in relation to announcements at the end of Mass, was also raised. The poor quality of the sound system was highlighted by many respondents, including the need for additional speakers at the back of the Church.
- Some parishioners raised concerns about the need to raise additional money to sustain the Church. The example of tithing set by some evangelical Churches was cited. Another respondent noted this could discourage those on low incomes from attending.

Dialogue between the Church and society

- There was a sense that St Joseph’s Parish is (or appears to be) ‘well-heeled’ and many participants shared a worry that the church was no longer attractive to more traditional working-class people with Catholicism being seen as a middle class religion.
- The disengagement of children and young people from the Church was identified as a priority. The balance between home, school and the parish was seen as critical, with suggestions around greater involvement of the community and parents to ensure what children learn in school is seen as relevant in the home and Church setting. One example was in preparation for the sacraments rather than it being “professionalised”.
- Several parishioners supported a reactivation of Justice and Peace groups in all parishes as a way of beginning conversations.
- Lack of outreach was noted by several, with a need to be more proactive both within St Joseph’s and the wider community.
- Bringing the experience of those who have left the Church to share their stories, whether or not they have subsequently returned, was suggested as a way to increase dialogue. This could be done through a Synod Reflection time in each parish at a weekly/ monthly Mass listening after communion on the experiences of those who feel least accepted by the Church. This could include divorcees, refugees, and young people in an attempt to broaden understanding and encourage dialogue.

Ecumenism

- Stronger joint local action in both our geographical communities, including outreach programmes, and supporting communities of interest were identified by many respondents.

Existing interfaith community work such as Justice and Peace and the eco-congregation programme were opportunities where action could be strengthened locally.

- Social clubs and activities were also seen as a way of engaging and meeting other Churches. Sharing resources was raised as a way to achieve economic savings as well as improving communication, with the potential to share an administrator with other local parishes offered as an example.

Participation

- There was acknowledgement that the role of the Priest is as spiritual leader and responsibility should focus on the sacraments rather than on the role of parish manager.
- The need for greater lay involvement was seen as critical to St Joseph's as the size of the Parish means it is not possible for one priest to manage on his own.
- The very broad range of skills of parishioners was seen as an advantage in providing a pool of capable people. It was felt the laity could do some jobs better and skills could be utilized more effectively, but that some additional support may be required.
- The impact of Covid was discussed, in particular that for some it had increased their sense of participation and volunteering within the Church. However others experienced social isolation and loneliness and this should be an impetus to support them to return to Church.
- A Census of parishioners was suggested to identify "working talent" and have a register of "helping hands" i.e. parishioners willing to volunteer with a note of skills and abilities.
- The phrase "lay ministry" itself was identified as unhelpful by some parishioners. Firstly, it is associated with a perception of passivity and secondly there was the potential for it to be associated specifically with Liturgical ministry rather than other lay contributions within the Church building, broader community or schools. These different roles should be distinguished to ensure lay ministry was understood to include pastoral and practical functions.
- A number of different approaches were suggested to promote lay ministry, with recognition that no one approach would be sufficient. This included Church being clearer about we need from parishioners, and more proactive in asking for support. Some parishioners felt personal invitations to help might be more meaningful, particularly for men, however concern was also expressed that a direct invitation to individuals may be perceived as a small groups controlling decisions rather than an open invitation to all.
- The Pastoral Council was cited as an example where the process by which a parishioners became members was unclear. Opening up Pastoral Council meetings to any parishioner to attend, ensuring the opportunity to join the Pastoral Council was open to all rather than by invitation, and holding an AGM with elections to posts were suggested. Information should be available on membership of the Pastoral Council, how to contact members, dates and times of meetings advised in advance, and minutes being available both on-line and in hard copy. One respondent noted their appreciation for the hard work of the Pastoral council.
- The Link magazine and its distribution was supported by a number of respondents as a way to reach out beyond those who regularly attend Church.
- The lack of a local forum for people to share news or offer opinions was noted.

Discerning and deciding

- Many participants offered suggestions for developing the spiritual life of parishioners, and providing better support for adult formation and discernment. These included greater opportunity for personal and communal prayer and scripture study through prayer groups, running of an Alpha course, Catechesis groups for adults as well as RCIA courses, parish missions,

and providing childcare to enable parents of young children to participate in faith-based activities.

- Several participants reflected on the Synod itself and expressed concerns in its effectiveness, particularly in light of the experience of the previous Synod. The risk of raising expectations of change that were not fulfilled, further undermining confidence in the Church and its ability to respond to 21st century issues, was raised.
- The importance of seeing both the Parish and Diocesan report was noted. A Synodal network of contacts at Parish, Diocesan, national and international levels should be established to share best ideas and resources. The Synodal promotion and activity should continue uninterrupted beyond the listening stage. Ideally this Synodal network should involve a partnership of both clerical and lay participation.