

Report from St Peter's, Hazel Grove and St Philip's Offerton, Stockport for Synod 2023

Community • Participation • Mission

This report is based on a questionnaire we distributed in the parish followed by a meeting. 116 responses were submitted both in paper format and online (approximately 30% of our current Mass attendances). Also, around 50 people attended a Synod evening in the parish centre in December where we had an opportunity to experience being synodal. We are pleased to have received responses from people who feel that they belong and participate regularly in the life of the Church. We are also very grateful to have received responses from 17 people who consider themselves to be on the fringe or who don't feel that they fully belong. One response suggests that we make the responses of those on the fringe the focus of our Synod deliberations.

Community

The benefits of belonging, being part of a community, part of a family, where we are accepted and known by name is the most mentioned positive comment – of feeling part of the parish community (79 people!). Even people who feel that they don't belong to the parish (9) see the community element of 'church' as being important. **Belonging is really important to people.** (This feedback justifies why from the outset we amended Communion to Community.)

Many have found a **good welcome** at St Peter's (25). Friendship and support (3) and the chance to meet with other families (2), which happens through community life, are also noted (3). **The large number of parish activities, the fun and laughter, the caring for each other that goes on, are also a vital part of this belonging** (10).

For the most part, people experience 'community' in their local parish. However, many identified benefits of

- being part of the wider community
- the sense of belonging that it gives to the global/universal Church (26)
- the blessing of receiving the Sacraments (25)
- founded on Christ (12)
- all they have ever known (10)
- based on unchanging traditions (9)
- beliefs that bring meaning and certainty to life (6)
- receiving strength, peace, life, freedom, comfort, fellowship, security to people's lives (9)
- giving time for reflection (10)
- helping with life's problems and giving a sense of calm to busy lives (4).

Being a Catholic has an impact on people's attitudes and choices in life (28).

When asked which aspects of Church are still important to them, those on the fringe cited

- community (9)
- spirituality and relationship with God (6)
- prayer (3)
- Christmas (14) and Easter (8) services.

No-one on the margins described themselves as hostile to the Church; 11 described themselves as friendly, 6 indifferent. Some said they would definitely consider re-engaging with Church (6), others said maybe (11) – this is significant.

Barriers to belonging

It is also clear however, that some people feel excluded or fear they may be excluded from the community and so do not benefit from this sense of community and belonging. One person feared they would not be made welcome.

Those on the margins felt the obstacles to their re-connecting with Church were being divorced and remarried (1), cohabitation (1), being in a gay relationship (1). One person feared “they might not feel welcome” in the Church as they were divorced and remarried.

Some of those who attend regularly struggle with the Church’s stance on ‘modern-day issues’ (21). Some struggle with the Church’s stance on homosexuality (26), feeling that there should be greater focus on inclusion and welcome. “Young people feel excluded from church if they are gay, or their parents are divorced.”

Some also struggle with the Church’s stance on divorce (18). Some feel that the Church is ‘uncaring to those who are divorced’ (4), citing a need for more welcome and for the teachings to be better explained. Others cited co-habitation (3), sex before marriage (3), contraception (4), reception of Communion (1).

One contributor said, “The Church should be less bound by an outdated view of society and relationships. It needs to look at what modern day families believe now”. Another, “The Church is supposed to be welcoming, but having gay friends, I would feel uncomfortable in supporting it.”

Some find the rules confusing (2) and there were calls for less doctrine/dogma (7); some of those on the margins said they no longer believed in its teachings and disagreed with its stance on various moral issues (7). “I think the Church rules are outdated and I would be more interested in coming back if these were updated eg LGBTQ. I used to enjoy the community aspect of Church, but the Church’s teaching on moral issues such as homosexuality really put me off.”

There is a need for **greater inclusion** in the Church, and **greater openness to difference** (26). One commented, “We can be together in our differences.” Another, “The parish should reflect the diverse nature of the community around us”.

- Some people feel that the Church needs to be more authoritative about its teachings (2) and some like the Church’s defence of unchanging traditions (9)
- Others struggle with the authoritarian, judgmental attitude of the Church (7)
- There should be less judgement and authoritarianism and more love (12)
- There should be more positive inclusion of those on the margins (26) and more compassion
- we should be “less known by our rules and perceived judgements and more by our love” (12).

“This doesn’t mean compromising our faith and beliefs” (1).

Those not involved in Church cite **lack of time**; family/work commitments as one of the biggest obstacles to engaging with Church (7). “In modern life, time is more precious” and lack of it is considered an issue in engaging with parish life.

We are asked “to think wider about family life and to be more flexible where families are involved” (2).

“Modern life is extremely busy, and families are juggling many things and under extreme pressure at times” (3).

Some feel it is now time to remove the obligation to attend Mass (3).

“Times have changed – flexibility to go any day of the week.”

COVID has been a barrier to being part of the community: “We’re out of our routine of coming” (1).

Hierarchy distant from the Church

It can feel that the Church is distant from the people. Some sense a disconnect between Church and society and feel the Church needs to be “more in tune with society and life in 2022 so that we can meet people where they are”.

Some speak of a “disconnect between the bishop and the people” (5); “it feels like the bishop is distant from parish life”. Some feel the Church needs to listen more (4). Some feel the Church is too top heavy (2), that it is rigid, inward looking and dictatorial (9), struggling with the divisions (3) and polarisation of views (1). “Conservatism goes against the fundamental teaching of the Church” (1). A voice from the margins feels that “the Church needs to be more liberal and move forwards with the times in order to attract younger people” (1).

Scandals

Negativity about the Church puts people off participating in the Church. People refer to the various scandals affecting the Church (15) and call for greater transparency (2) and honesty (1). Many feel that the scandals have still not been properly addressed (10). A comment from the margins: “Priests abusing children should never have been covered up, yet it was, and still seems to be a shady issue that has never really been fully addressed.”

Participation

The language of the Mass is considered to be a barrier to participation, and some find the recent changes unhelpful (5). The webcam has been really helpful over lockdown and has kept us together as a parish community (2). The large, wall mounted TV screens in church also help people to feel involved (1).

Some people believe that the Church should change its stance on **women** and their inclusion in the Church (24). Some believe that priests should be allowed to marry (17) and that the laity should be given an increased role (7). There are concerns over the decreasing number of priests (2). Clericalism is an issue (1).

“**The number of people in the pews** is an even bigger problem that needs to be addressed.”

Many have concerns over the **lack of young families and youth** in our parishes (7). Some refer to a Church “that is stuck in the past, that is out of step with the reality of family life in 2022”. If there are more young people and families, then the parish becomes more relevant to other young families.

- Some find Mass uninspiring, boring or irrelevant (4)
- Families struggle to get their teenagers to go and wonder how we can appeal to young people (2)
- Others suggest better music that would attract young people, with child-friendly fun songs for children’s Masses (5)
- The new TOAST (**T**ime **O**n **A** Sunday **T**ogether) children’s liturgy makes Church accessible for families (8)

- Families find church easier if the children are involved and feel they would participate more if there were more activities for the children (6)
- People said that participation would be helped by explanation of the sacraments (4).

Mission

Pope Francis should receive more support and have full control to implement the findings of Synod 2023 (1), and the Church should “carry on and progress the reforms of Pope John 23 that seem to have got lost.” (1)

Many are attracted to the Church’s social action (9) and feel more could be done with it (3).

Some think the **Church’s charitable action and humanitarian action** makes us relevant (8).

People still feel we should be more **outgoing** in our local areas, with more outreach to those in need, more work with the poorest in society (15). People asked for more community projects, charitable work and volunteering opportunities (6).

“The Church needs to be more involved in the community, not waiting for the community to turn up at church” (1).

Whilst the welcome in the parish was considered to be good (25), some feel that welcome should be taken more seriously (9) and call for a more dynamic, invitational welcome (14), more compassion, (12) more openness to those on the margins (17), the organisation of events to welcome people (1), groups to support those on the margins, ministry to those going through separation and divorce (2). “More openness to difference to embrace everyone’s gifts.” (1)

We need to find ways to engage with our young people (1). Youth groups help draw people in (4). More child-friendly services are requested and activities that make Church fun for children and young people (5).

Closer working between school and Church would help (1). “School and Church, working closely with parents as primary educators” (1).

We should have more of an online presence (6). More use of social media was suggested to dispel some of the “negative myths about the Church” (6), to publicise what the Church does well and let people outside the Church know what we are doing (9). More well-publicised ‘activities for all’ will help participation of a wider group of people (1).

There was a request for **more faith sharing groups** (10) **more Alpha courses** (8) and more guidance on how we can be brought back to Church (1).

Some cited the need to work closer with other Catholic parishes (2), the need to break down barriers between other denominations (1) and for more outreach to the Kerala community (1).

The Synodal journey is a journey for all the Church and it will go beyond 2023 and further afield than Rome because Pope Francis wants the whole Church to be a Synodal Church in response to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. We must embrace this journey and take part in it by revisiting the way we operate in our parish as a community of believers who share and proclaim the life and love that is Jesus Christ, our way, our truth and our life.

Fr Peter Sharrocks, parish priest of St Peter’s and St Philip’s. February 2022