

1.1 Contextualisation

In a climate of synodal reflection we find inspiration from the words of our Archbishop *'The Church will listen to its flock at this momentous synod'*.¹ This listening is rooted in encounter and prayer, proving an opportunity for reflection and revelation. These considerations will draw on their thoughts, responses and inspirations from the parish synod responses, the Southwark Agency for Evangelisation and Catechesis survey, together with other naturally interesting and relevant sources. As you might expect, there is a cross-over with other areas of the agency's work of evangelisation, catechesis, and intentional accompaniment.

Throughout the Synod there have been questions raised and exploring how the body of Christ lives, moves, and has its being in contemporary society. This work, this mission is inspired by the Holy Spirit who is present in our lives, guiding, inspiring and bestowing gifts to all the baptised. In his final reflections considering the Synod, Archbishop John is apposite in his observation that *'the desire to be formed, spiritually and catechetically, in both mind and heart'*,² is a central theme in our diocesan synthesis. God did not create us and form us to live in a void, he breathed life into us, so that we may have life to the full.³ Put another way, we are formed or created to *"do some definite service."*⁴

The Church is not a static institution and therefore it must be responsive to the needs and concerns of its members. In Southwark we are close to this vision. By active prophetic listening to the voices of the faithful, through the responses to the Synod and the Agency's parish plans survey, we can better understand the challenges, needs and opportunities that we are faced with. Here we will specifically focus on the area of formation.

¹ Archbishop John Wilson, in The Times, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-church-will-listen-to-its-flock-at-momentous-synod-b2x-39r0v8>, 30 Sep 2023.

² Archbishop John Wilson, Some Reflections in Light of the Synod on Synodality, 4 Nov 2023.

³ Gen 2:7, Jn 10:10.

⁴ St John Henry Newman

1.2 Formation

"What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved?" (EG, 264)

Catholic faith formation is a lifelong journey of growing in love and commitment to Christ. It encompasses knowledge and celebration of faith, moral formation, prayer, community, and mission. Formation essentially supports and encourages an ongoing proclamation of 'the beloved'. Both the survey and the individual parish synod responses indicate that the Body of Christ in Southwark have a desire to be informed, formed, and transformed. You have said that you want outward facing and sustained adult formation, the faith to be taught better so that you are equipped to explore and pass your faith on to others. The key areas arising from your responses are either things that are already happening in some parishes that you would like to see more of, or areas that you would like to see developed.

1.3 Approaches

How we live and move and have our being remained central to submissions, not least the question of anonymity often found to be present in our parishes. The desire for connectedness and community was consistently echoed in the responses. A potential solution to this is the development and nurture of small Christian communities.⁵ Other parishes said that they *'would love to see our parishes thriving with smaller groups that really help to develop people's faith and spirituality.'*⁶ The main premise behind this idea would be that the Sunday communities would be sustained by smaller groups which would meet outside of Sunday mass according to particular activities or needs.

The importance of community and small groups can also be encouraged through Some Definite Service our diocesan approach for parish growth in Evangelisation, Catechesis and Formation supported through local people, plans and prayer.⁷ Parishes already committed

⁵ P12, P32, P113, P130

⁶ P113, P130

⁷ <https://aec.rcaos.org.uk/sds>

to SDS have appreciated its value as a way of sharing responsibility in the raising and support of new leaders,⁸ or of how to enable parishioners to use their gifts and talents to participate in the mission of the church.⁹

Key Areas of Formation

2.1 Logos

Exploration of 'The Word' either through focused Bible study or Advent/Lent talks were the most cited areas that you would like to be formed in.¹⁰ This makes sense, as it is through Scriptures that we listen to God and enter more deeply into a relationship with him. It is where God nourishes our minds, strengthens our hearts, and enflames our hearts with love for him.¹¹ It was recognised too, that a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Bible could work the other way, resulting in a lack of spiritual growth.¹² In addition to having biblical Advent/Lent talks, other resources mentioned with frequency were Word on Fire, Bible Timeline and The Bible in a Year series.

2.2 Youth Formation

It is clear from the synod responses both nationally and locally in Southwark that the formation of young people and their absence was frequently cited as an area of pastoral priority.¹³ The passing on or transmission of faith through family and parish seems to have been diminished or have broken down with many young people struggling to see the relevance of the Church.

Suggestions as to how to encourage young people in their faith were centred on prioritising the encounter with Christ rather than just relying on sacramental preparation.¹⁴ A significant number of parishes called for the presence of young people to be better valued, with their voices heard and for space to be created for their involvement in the liturgy and life of the parish.¹⁵ There was an overriding sense that there is a need to provide opportunities for engagement post-confirmation¹⁶ particularly for 'good mentorship'.¹⁷ Other ideas included the importance of giving concrete witness, service to the poor and care for creation.¹⁸

⁸ P67, P111, P129, P143, P152

⁹ P111

¹⁰ P8, P15, P33, P51, P60, P92, P107, P132

¹¹ Pope Paul VI, *Dei Verbum* (1965) 23-25

¹² P24, P41, P 79

¹³ P12, P14, P17, P30, P32, P41, P51, P52, P56, P61, P64, P74, P90, P112, P116, P120, P127 provide strong examples.

¹⁴ P91, P106, P133

¹⁵ P106, P112, P127

¹⁶ P18, P51, P52, P56, P90, P116, P120

¹⁷ P101

¹⁸ P94

2.3 Domestic Church

Strongly aligned to the previous section, the role of families, particularly parents as the '*first teachers of the faith*'¹⁹ in the formation of young people was mentioned with frequency.²⁰ It was observed that families are the place where young people and children are formed, therefore emphasising the importance of more intentional and structured support in this area.²¹ There is a strong need for parents to be supported and enabled to know and own their faith for themselves to be able to effectively pass it on to their children. They need to be equipped to do this. One parish observed that '*young people need their parents to be committed to their faith if they are to become engaged themselves*'.²² Another parish cited the importance of mentoring for families, young people and children.²³

2.4 Adult Catechesis

In recognition that just because people may come to church it does not necessarily mean that they are evangelised or catechised. A clear example of this is that due to a lack of catechesis, people do not feel equipped to evangelise or communicate their faith.²⁴ One of our parishes put this beautifully, '*we need on-going catechesis*'.²⁵

Naturally, adult catechesis will have a certain amount of overlap with formation and mission. The provision of Advent or Lent talks are an example of this. One parish discerned that there were seasons in the Church year that 'provided and great and immediate opportunity to do something now, for people to deepen their faith'.²⁶

There is a strong sense from the parishes that short, easy-to-access courses providing '*back to basics*' materials are needed.²⁷ In addition to Sycamore, Alpha, Word on Fire a plethora of programmes and resources are available. In Southwark we use the Catholic Christian Outreach Discovery programme which is particularly useful supporting parishes in their 'parish plans'.²⁸ See also, our 'Inspire' web page for further ideas and inspiration.²⁹

¹⁹ CCC 2223

²⁰ P112

²¹ P1, P119

²² P37, P112

²³ P117

²⁴ P113, P120, P127

²⁵ P94

²⁶ P29, P52

²⁷ P69, P100

²⁸ <https://aec.rcaos.org.uk/our-parish-plan> & <https://cco.ca/faith-studies-series/>

²⁹ <https://inspire.rcaos.org.uk/>

2.5 Apologetically Speaking

This section in many ways is aligned to the previous one on catechesis and the following one on communion and inclusivity. Reflected in the parish responses was the tension of how-to bring church teaching into dialogue with lived pastoral realities. A good number of these broader issues are centred on inclusivity, for example, the role of women, same sex unions, divorced and re-married Catholics and racial equality.³⁰ Other key areas were scandals in the church (sexual, physical, emotional) and clericalism being perceived as a barrier to lay participation and leadership.³¹ It is evident that people are not always clear about what the church teaches and feel ill equipped to communicate this to others. Aligned to this, parishioners in a West London parish said that they would like more formation and encouragement on how to bring the faith into their everyday lives.³²

2.6 Community and Collaboration

This section encompasses a range of areas that were focused on, including welcome, hospitality and inclusivity.³³ One of our parishes summed this up superbly 'A successful parish isn't just the numbers attending Sunday Mass; it's a vibrant, Christ-centred, love-filled, supportive community of fellow-travellers reaching out to others, whatever their story and affirming and celebrating their calling as God's daughters and sons.'³⁴ Another parish speaks about this practically saying that whilst it is important to be welcoming and inclusive, this needs to be enhanced with an increase in lay involvement together with the provision of more opportunities to be 'social, spiritual and educational'.³⁵

Parish pastoral councils were also commented on at length, providing both challenge and opportunity.³⁶ When they work well, there is scope for collaboration and accountability. One parish talked about the fact that their PPC had worked well in the past which is now missed as it no longer functions.³⁷

2.7 Source & Summit - Eucharistic

An important point was reflected Southwark's Synodal Synthesis which said that there was little depth in understanding of how we relate to Christ and the church beyond participation in the Eucharistic

community.³⁸ Put another way, a South London parish reflected '*Most people come to Mass on a regular basis but don't do much else with the church.*'³⁹ Whilst the Eucharist was deemed to be of 'central importance', the question was asked if people really knew the value and importance of it.⁴⁰

A number of parishes discussed the celebration of the Eucharist, talking about the formative opportunities of a good homily and how this for many is the only opening to communicate and inform faith.⁴¹ There was also the desire for homilies '*to use plain English and be kept focused*'⁴² and for priests and deacons to be mindful of their congregations, for example, children, young people and those not able to physically get to church.⁴³

2.8 'To the Ends of the Earth' – Missional

When thinking about 'mission' this was understood differently from parish to parish. Several offered particular clarity of thought, for example, a large town parish in Kent stated '*First, we must develop our own personal relationship with Jesus, we must know and understand the core contents of our faith... we need to develop a forum for evangelisation.*'⁴⁴ Essentially, as another parish reflected, '*the mission of the church is to (a) preach the Gospel, (b) to provide help, support, a sense of belonging, and a safe home for ALL, no matter who they are or what their needs, and (c) to bring people closer to Christ.*'⁴⁵

Although there was a lot of good feedback on programmes such as Alpha, it was felt that a lot more was needed. In short, '*Catholics may be sacramentalised but not evangelised.*' Formation for mission is needed to provide the tools to go out to reach people. The desire to explore faith and mission is sometimes held back by a lack of knowledge, understand and formation.⁴⁶ A number of parishes suggested having mission/outreach training days, community planting, family events and '*nights of light mission events.*'⁴⁷

³⁰ P52, P56, P97

³¹ P17, P33, P107

³² P100

³³ P15, P105, P131

³⁴ P115

³⁵ P17, P119

³⁶ P12, P105

³⁷ P92

³⁸ §14

³⁹ P114

⁴⁰ P73, P51, P14, P140

⁴¹ P135

⁴² P15

⁴³ P32, P45

⁴⁴ P43

⁴⁵ P94

⁴⁶ P20, P36, P41, P129, P134, P142

⁴⁷ <https://www.stpatricksoho.org/advent>