

# Discerning Deacons for a Synodal Church

Synthesis report of consultations conducted from January–June 2022  
for the first phase of the global Synodal on Synodality for U.S. Region XVI



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# Forming Ourselves in Synodality



**Discerning  
Deacons**

When the Preparatory Document was released, we at Discerning Deacons could hardly contain our energy. The more we studied and learned, the more enlivened we were to try to tell everyone we possibly could that they too were invited to participate in this moment, to contribute, to share in communion with the Church throughout the world, to be unleashed and renewed for missionary discipleship!

So, like town criers, we set about sharing the news of the reweaving of relationships through encountering, listening, discerning — the practice of active hope!

We are humbled by the response and by the overflow of graces surrounding this process, as we initiated an experiment to grow a community of Synod Animators drawn into this work of listening as we journey together.

The Synod is an invitation to live more immediately present to the Holy Spirit. In this posture, nourishment in the Word and the Eucharist is essential. For Synod Animators, having people to call on, to lean on, to troubleshoot with or to lend a listening ear — were also key elements so that our dreams for listening broadly and at the peripheries would get turned into concrete steps to engage people in complex contexts and communities.

As women and men who believe that the prophetic ministry of the deacon is a gift given back to the Church at the Second Vatican Council, we felt this invitation to be part of a synodal Church was a way to continue to renew the diaconate. Our work is to go between the back of the house and the front of the house — ministers on the threshold and bridge builders who connect those who might be left out of the distribution of bread, by bringing their needs before our bishops and presbyters — so that together we can walk as a people of God.

We lift up this attempt at synthesizing as yet another offering — we bring it to the table of the Eucharist and ask God to transform it, that we might each become more fully what we are: the hands and feet, the ears and hearts of Christ, alive in the world.

Respectfully submitted,

Casey Stanton

Ellie Hidalgo

Bridget Deegan-Krause

Maureen O'Connell

Carolina Manson

*Synthesis drafting team, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022*



Synodality entails receptivity to change, formation, and on-going learning. How does our church community form people to be more capable of “walking together,” listening to one another, participating in mission, and engaging in dialogue? What formation is offered to foster discernment and the exercise of authority in a synodal way?

—The Preparatory Document.  
For a Synodal Church:  
Communion, Participation,  
and Mission. One of the Ten  
Thematic Nuclei to be Explored.

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# Our Offering to the Church: The Synod Animators Cohort

Even before the formal opening of the global Synod on Synodality in October 2021, the leaders of the Discerning Deacons (DD) project recognized the scope and historic significance of the path being charted out by the Synod of Bishops. We discerned a call to our organization to serve the listening phase of the Synod by inspiring, training, and accompanying a wide variety of persons desiring to animate the Synod process in their respective dioceses, institutional and ministerial settings and networks. From our experience of successfully convening spiritual conversations in the summer of 2021, we knew that the People of God are eager to actively participate in communal discernment on urgent matters facing the Church. We also recognized the necessity of community, the value of a cohort to equip and support ministerial leaders in this vital work.

## Formation for those leading the Synod

Sending out a wide invitation, we convened a community of praxis: people seeking to form and be formed by participation and facilitation in this global listening consultation. Guided by the *Vademecum* and the Spiritual Conversations model, our team developed a purposeful and theologically grounded ministry formation process in “the spirituality of walking together” (see Thematic Nuclei #10).

Discerning Deacons gathered more than 150 participants in the initial Synod Animators Retreat and Training, with 100+ remaining actively involved in ongoing formation activities. Among them were more than 50 current or retired lay ecclesial ministers and eleven 11 vowed religious. Twenty-five were situated within higher education; thirteen 13 were affiliated with Catholic high schools. Our shared efforts created synodal discernment opportunities for over 8,500 persons in 50 dioceses across the country.

A team of experts in theological and spiritual formation anchored the cohort’s activities in the riches of the Catholic tradition. An opening retreat focused on discerning who we were called to listen to in this process. An educational webinar set Pope Francis’ invitation in context. An extended Advent retreat and Holy Week Service of Lament brought us to communal prayer, Scripture study and shared reflection. A closing retreat helped us gather the fruits of the discernment while integrating the experience with the revelatory question of Emmaus, “Were not our hearts burning?”

Synod Animators received coaching and spiritual direction to guide their efforts and opportunities for theological reflection and integration. Animators received practical support for addressing group leadership challenges of all kinds, e.g., discerning power dynamics in a group; exercising authority; navigating institutional and cultural realities; securing needed resources; managing a team. Animators had opportunities to convene regularly in peer circles where they could learn from others leading synod consultations in similar contexts.

## Animators as Protagonists

Taken as a whole, these Animators are a competent, diverse group of ministers, many theologically trained and pastorally prepared in the Catholic tradition, offering enormous gifts and talents to the synodal process. They are highly skilled in the art of listening both individually and organizationally as pastoral caregivers, chaplains, educators, spiritual directors, community organizers, and justice coordinators. Many have privileged access to the “peripheries” that Pope Francis has challenged us to engage in this process.

Most Animators took initiative in their own communities to organize synodal conversations. Some were frustrated in their attempts, especially in regions where bishops did not encourage or support the process. Yet many Animators reported great success, holding fruitful consultations despite apathy or even resistance at times from ecclesial leaders.

Animators themselves offer important perspectives, often speaking from their own experiences of marginalization in a Church that has often ignored or even repudiated their desire to exercise the fullness of their Baptismal call. Yet the Synod Process, with its directive to draw upon women’s gifts to exercise leadership in convening, facilitating, and evangelizing, has stirred a sense of agency and hope for some.

Many told us that the experience of participating in prayerful consultations has renewed their hope and deepened their sense of connection and community in ways they had not anticipated. For the ministerial leaders — both women and men — who participated in the Synod Animators Cohort, the Synod Process has been a meaningful way to live out a vocational call to serve the Church as they engaged in the work of inviting, gathering, encountering, listening, learning, discerning, synthesizing and reporting on what the People of God have said.

As Animators, many of us are ready to do even more as the Church continues on this synodal path. In the process of organizing synodal consultations, we have trusted that the Holy Spirit walks alongside us as we discern where God wants to lead the People of God. We heard — and felt — a desire not only to animate the synodal style of the Church moving forward, but to continue to be ambassadors for the renewed Church that can emerge from this global initiative. Our Animators Cohort models synodal ways of sharing the Good News and inspiring hope for the renewal and reform of the Church brought about through collective participation and thoughtful engagement with the hierarchy and all the faithful.



**I could step into my role as a protagonist and move with courage rather than asking for permission or direct invitation.**

What follows are the parish, institutional, organizational and diocesan affiliations of Synod Animators.

## Parishes

**American Martyrs Church**  
Manhattan Beach, CA

**Christ the King Parish**  
Pittsburgh, PA

**Dolores Mission  
Catholic Church**  
Los Angeles, CA

**Gesu Catholic Church**  
Detroit, MI

**Holy Spirit Catholic Parish**  
Great Falls, MT

**Immaculate Conception  
Church**  
Durham, NC

**Mary Queen of Peace**  
Pittsburgh, PA

**Our Lady of  
Divine Providence**  
Miami, FL

**Our Lady of Guadalupe**  
Doral, FL

**Our Lady Of Perpetual Help  
Catholic Church**  
Maple Shade, NJ

**Padre Serra**  
Camarillo, CA

**Sacred Heart in Strathmore**  
AB, Canada

**Saint Elizabeth Seton**  
Ridgefield, CT

**Saint Francis of Assisi Church**  
Concord CA

**Saint Francis of Assisi**  
Raleigh, NC

**Saint Francis Xavier**  
College Church  
St. Louis, MO

**Saint Francis Xavier**  
La Grange, IL

**Saint Francis Xavier**  
New York, NY

**Saint John – Saint Paul  
Catholic Collaborative**  
Wellesley, MA

**Saint John Berchmans**  
Chicago, IL

**Saint John Neumann**  
Pittsburgh, PA

**Saint John Vianney Church**  
San Jose, CA

**Saint Joseph Parish**  
Stevens Point, WI

**Saint Joseph**  
Somers, NY

**Saint Kevin Church**  
Miami, FL

**Saint Mary Magdalene  
Catholic Church**  
Pittsburgh, PA

**Saint Mary Parish**  
Chandler, AZ

**Saint Michael's Roman  
Catholic Cathedral**  
Coimbatore, India

**Saint Patrick Catholic Church**  
Carlsbad, CA

**Saint Patrick Parish**  
Charleston, SC

**Saint Perpetua**  
Lafayette, CA

**Saint Peter Claver**  
Lexington, KY

**Saint Theresa  
Catholic Church**  
Oakland, CA

**Saint Thomas More**  
Chapel Hill, NC

**Saint Thomas More**  
St Paul, MN

**Saint Vincent  
de Paul Parish**  
Baltimore, MD

**Saints Mary  
& John Parish**  
Evansville, IN

**Saints Peter & Paul**  
Detroit, MI

**The Church of  
the Ascension**  
New York, NY

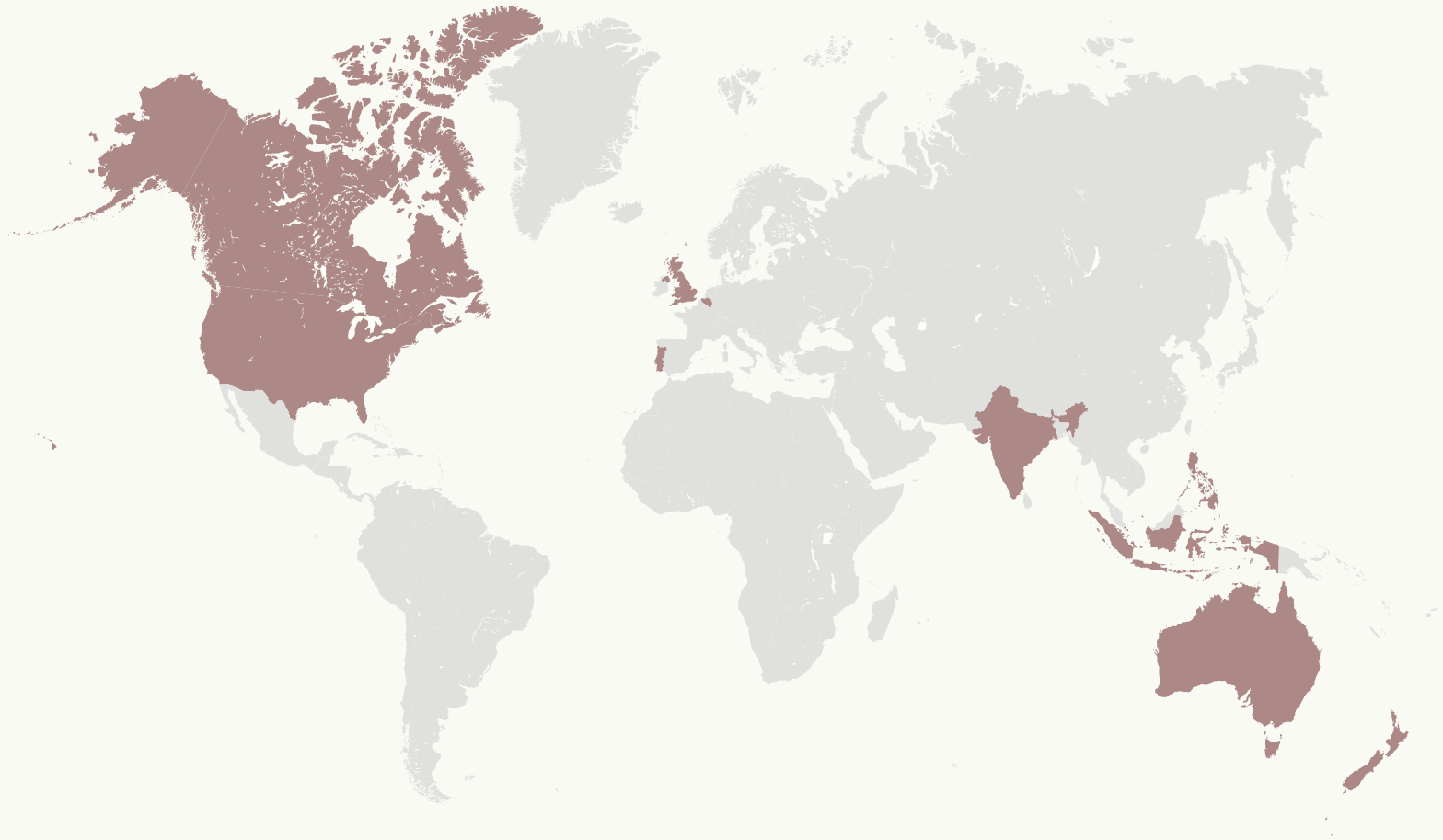
**UNC Newman Center**  
Chapel Hill, NC

## Synod Animators affiliated with the following Catholic Institutions, Ministries and Organizations

<b>Aquinas Institute of Theology</b> Saint Louis, MO	<b>DePaul University Mission &amp; Ministry</b> Chicago, IL	<b>Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center</b> Seattle, WA	<b>Retired Women Ministers</b> Oakland, CA
<b>Archdiocesan LGBTQ Outreach</b> Chicago, IL	<b>Diocesan Committee for Catholic Campaign for Human Development</b> San Jose, CA	<b>ISAIAH</b> Minneapolis, MN	<b>Sacred Heart Academy</b> Hempstead, NY
<b>Association of Pittsburgh Priests</b> Pittsburgh, PA	<b>Divine Mercy Region</b> Grand Rapids, MI	<b>ITEC (Itinerarios de Espiritualidad Calasancia)</b> Miami, FL	<b>Seattle University</b> Seattle, WA
<b>Bay Area Conference of Affiliates and Religious</b> San Jose, CA	<b>Dominican Center for Justice Resources</b> Racine, WI	<b>Jesuit Volunteer Corps</b> Baltimore, MD	<b>Secular Franciscan Family Fraternity of Greensboro</b> Greensboro, NC
<b>Belen Jesuit Preparatory School</b> Miami, FL	<b>Duke University, Leadership Education at Divinity School</b> Durham, NC	<b>Justa Center</b> Phoenix, AZ	<b>Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary</b> Campbell, CA
<b>Bishop Canevin High School</b> Pittsburgh, PA	<b>Faith in Action</b> Washington DC	<b>La Salle University</b> Philadelphia, PA	<b>St. Francis Springs Prayer Center</b> Stoneville, NC
<b>Boston College School of Theology and Ministry</b> Brighton, MA	<b>GoGatherAsOne</b> San Jose, CA	<b>Le Moyne College</b> Syracuse, NY	<b>St. Joseph's University Campus Ministry</b> Philadelphia, PA
<b>Carondelet High School</b> Concord, CA	<b>Graduate Program in Pastoral Ministries, Santa Clara University</b> Santa Clara, CA	<b>Loyola Marymount University</b> Los Angeles, CA	<b>St. Louis Ecumenical and Interfaith Committee</b> St. Louis, MO
<b>Catholic Student Center- Washington University</b> St. Louis, MO	<b>Graduate Student in Masters of Divinity Program, University of Notre Dame</b> South Bend, IN	<b>Loyola University Maryland</b> Baltimore, MD	<b>Suffolk University Center for Restorative Justice</b> Boston, MA
<b>Catholics for Change in Our Church (CCOC)</b> Pittsburgh, PA	<b>IAF Silicon Valley Committee</b> San Jose, CA	<b>Manhattan College</b> Bronx, NY	<b>Teresian Institute</b> Miami, FL
<b>Center for FaithJustice</b> Lawrence Township, NJ	<b>Ignatian Solidarity Network</b> University Heights, OH	<b>Maryknoll Affiliates Gulf South Chapter</b>	<b>US Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph</b> Jamaica Estates, NY
<b>Chestnut Hill College</b> Philadelphia, PA	<b>Ignatian Spirituality Center</b> Miami, FL	<b>Marymount School of New York</b> New York, NY	<b>Villanova University</b> Villanova, PA
<b>CLC-USA</b> Fort Washington, PA	<b>Ignatians West through the Jesuits West Province</b> Portland, OR	<b>National Association of Catholic Chaplains</b> Milwaukee, WI	<b>Voice of the Faithful</b> Needham, MA
<b>CLC-USA</b> South Florida Region	<b>Instituto Jesuita Pedro Arrupe</b> Miami, FL	<b>Notre Dame High School</b> San Jose, CA	<b>WINGS – Women In God's Spirit</b> Oakland, CA
<b>Contemplative Leaders in Action</b> Towson, MD		<b>Notre Dame of Maryland University</b> Baltimore, MD	
		<b>Oratory Women's Committee</b> Brooklyn, NY	



## Animators came from the following Dioceses



- |   |                                      |                                     |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Archdiocese of Atlanta, GA                  | Archdiocese of Singapore             | Diocese of Lexington, KY            |
| Archdiocese of Baltimore, MD                | Archdiocese of St. Louis, MO         | Diocese of Madison, WI              |
| Archdiocese of Boston, MA                   | Archdiocese San Francisco, CA        | Diocese of Monterey, Santa Cruz, CA |
| Archdiocese of Brisbane, Australia          | Coimbatore Diocese, India            | Diocese of Oakland, CA              |
| Archdiocese of Chicago, IL                  | Diocese Brooklyn, NY                 | Diocese of Orange, CA               |
| Archdiocese of Cincinnati, OH               | Diocese of Antwerp, Belgium          | Diocese of Peterborough, ON, Canada |
| Archdiocese of Detroit, MI                  | Diocese of Arlington, VA             | Diocese of Phoenix, AZ              |
| Archdiocese of Jakarta, Indonesia           | Diocese of Bridgeport, CT            | Diocese of Pittsburgh, PA           |
| Archdiocese of Los Angeles, CA              | Diocese of Charleston, SC            | Diocese of Porto, Portugal          |
| Archdiocese of Miami, FL                    | Diocese of Charlotte, NC             | Diocese of Raleigh, NC              |
| Archdiocese of Milwaukee, WI                | Diocese of Dallas, TX                | Diocese of Rochester, NY            |
| Archdiocese of New Orleans, LA              | Diocese of Evansville, IN            | Diocese of Rockville Centre, NY     |
| Archdiocese of New York, NY                 | Diocese of Fort Wayne–South Bend, IN | Diocese of Saint John, NB, Canada   |
| Archdiocese of Newark, NJ                   | Diocese of Grand Rapids, MI          | Diocese of Saint Paul, AB, Canada   |
| Archdiocese of Ottawa–Cornwall, ON, Canada  | Diocese of Great Falls Billings, MT  | Diocese of San Diego, CA            |
| Archdiocese of Philadelphia, PA             | Diocese of Hallam, Sheffield UK      | Diocese of San Jose, CA             |
| Archdiocese of Saint Louis, MO              | Diocese of Hamilton, New Zealand     | Diocese of Syracuse, NY             |
| Archdiocese of Saint Paul & Minneapolis, MN | Diocese of Harrisburg, PA            | Diocese of Trenton, NJ              |
| Archdiocese of Seattle, WA                  | Diocese of Kalookan, Philippines     |                                     |

# Whom did we encounter through our listening?

A snapshot of the Synod Animators' collective consultation:

- 358 consultations were conducted with approximately 8,819 people
- Where venues were reported, 188 encounters took place in person, 122 were virtual
- More than 23 consultations focused explicitly on young people
- Approximately 2,116 participants were under 18 and were engaged in a parish or school context.



**The majority of participants were active, baptized Catholics.** Animators also worked to engage a wider circle, including Catholics who have left the faith, Protestant Christians, those with no religious tradition or affiliation, and those who identified as Jewish, Muslim, Atheist, Agnostic and Orthodox Christian, respectively.

**Participants play a wide range of roles within the Church.** They included lay ecclesial minister, catechist, Eucharist minister, lector, parish coordinator, interfaith justice minister, music minister or choir member, theology teacher, spiritual director, retreat coordinator, youth leader, theologian, Catholic non-profit director, pastoral associate, Secular Carmelite, professed secular Franciscan, and chaplain. Among participants, 93 were clergy (26 priests, 5 deacons), 62 were women religious.

Most consultations were conducted in English, but Animators also reported sessions where participants primarily spoke Spanish, German, Chinese, French, Italian and sign language.

Several consultations engaged those who live more on the peripheries: the deaf community in Pittsburgh, a group of Catholic women in the military, a group of Protestant women, Catholic chaplains serving in prisons and in hospitals, LGBTQ+ outreach ministries. There was a focused effort to hear from young Latina women, many of whom are first generation college students in the US. A consultation took place among a group of diaconal women from across the US who have been meeting for over a year in prayer, study, service, and discernment.



In their roles as educators, campus ministers, directors of religious education, and community organizers, many of our DD Animators have privileged access to those on the margins whom the Synod is seeking to reach. In engaging more than 8,500 people who might have otherwise not been consulted in this Synod process, we heard several themes consistently echoed across the wide range of geographic, age, and demographic differences. They deepen our discernment of the Spirit at work in several of the Synod's thematic nuclei to which the Discerning Deacons community is eager and equipped to respond in relationship with Church leadership.

*Note: direct words of participants have been anonymized and are indicated throughout with quotation marks.*

## **Co-Responsibility in Mission** *Responding in and with Love*

### **Gospel Values Still Inspire**

The joys of journeying together as missionary disciples enliven many. Gospel values, the life and witness of Jesus, and the call to love is inspiring, especially for two groups: young people whom we are most at risk of losing and disaffiliated Catholics who are lingering on the edges of our faith communities. The People of God are nourished in and by sacramental communities, particularly those communities that are inclusive and those whose smaller size cultivates belonging. The Synodal Process of listening to each other attentively revived a sense of purposefulness in working together in a shared mission.



**None of us can do this alone. Do not put so much on a few. Let each small light become a blazing fire.**

## **Lack of Welcome Harms God's People**

Laments about journeying together as missionary disciples are real. Lack of welcome hurts both those who are excluded and those who love them. The perceived refusal to welcome women's leadership and their vocational calls leaves many questioning the integrity of the Church's commitment to upholding human dignity and our common Baptism. Suspicion or rejection of lay protagonists who live the narrative of Christ with their lives depletes the communities of faith to which they long to contribute.



**La mujer es la que ha llevado la fe viva en nuestras familias. El diaconado de las mujeres simplemente va a reafirmar lo que ya está sucediendo. Este es el momento.**



**We need to be a Church that challenges superficial love, and instead live a love in action. Love in action, not just words.**

## **A Call to Not Give Up**

In the creative tension between these joys and laments we heard the resilience of the Spirit at work in those who refuse to give up on or walk away from our shared call as missionary disciples to love. Many participants assure us — urge us even — that the time is now. In their faithfulness we heard ways to journey together toward co-responsibility in mission: acknowledge the contributions of women in sustaining the Church, especially the Church's latent synodal dynamics, and recognize that becoming a robustly synodal Church depends on recognizing their vocational calls.

# Authority & Participation

## *Crossing the Threshold to Pentecost*

So that we might cross the thresholds of locked upper rooms and embrace the Pentecost call to engage fully in Christ's life and mission, the Spirit gifts us with bold and imaginative ideas for re-thinking the paradigm of who exercises authority and how that authority is exercised in the Church.

### Service and Community Bring Joy

The People of God experience joy in communities:

- when the milestones of life are celebrated with and by a community of faith;
- wherever, as in the feast of Pentecost, lay peoples' gifts are welcomed, affirmed and integrated into the life of the community and the mission of the Church.

Many expressed a desire to renew their experience of faith as part of small Christian communities.



What fills me with joy about the Catholic Church is the feeling of being closer to God in a holy setting where everyone is coming together to share their love and passion for the church.

### Clericalism Harms

Obstacles stem from the exclusionary ways the Church exercises its authority. We heard clear naming of the wounds of clericalism: too much emphasis on policing with rules and regulations; reacting in ways that amplify polarizing politics; exercising power over congregations in ways that dim the sparks of the Spirit in parish communities; the potency of negative encounters with clergy, a learned helplessness among the laity.



How many ways can you spell 'clericalism'?



## Exclusion Wounds Everyone

In nearly every session, someone lamented the harm that comes from excluding far too many people from life in community, from ordained ministry and from the grace of the sacraments. Many Catholic parents lament that their children and grandchildren have disengaged from the generational Catholic faith of their great grandparents, grandparents and parents. The loss of family unity feels enormous. As a result, many participants questioned the Church's institutional integrity. Many named this as a direct contradiction of the Gospel and a reason for either their tenuous connections to the Church or their choice to leave entirely. We heard from a group of former seminarians, most of whom had left the priesthood and some of whom are now serving in ministerial roles in other faith communities. All continue to minister to the People of God, spreading the Gospel message they feel is constrained by the Catholic Church's legalism and lack of inclusivity.



A thinking, feeling, morally integrated Catholic makes the choice to continue to participate in the Church at this time at great cost. It is an experience of on-going moral/ethical, cognitive/intellectual, psychological, emotional and spiritual dissonance.

## Exclusion Drives Away Young People



**Youth are not rejecting God,  
but they are rejecting  
a non-inclusive Church.**

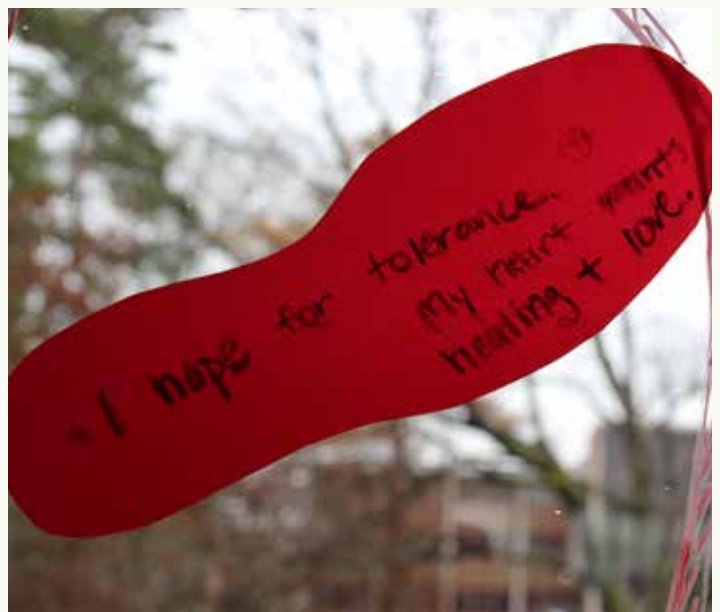
Youth make it clear that the Church they love is at risk of losing them. Latino/a youth from a parish offered important insights. One of their Animators reported, Latino/a Youth reported anxiety/fear of judgment to speak about LGBTQ issues, finding consensus in identifying the voices that are not being heard: LGBTQ, women (especially in the context of leadership & authority), youth, people of color, divorced Catholics.

Another animator of youth reported that young people are dismayed by hypocrisy within the Church, holding huge disagreement with the Church's handling of sexual abuse at the hands of priests/major Church leaders. They observe a lack of response to racial justice in the American Church and consistent frustration with the Church for not acting on its teaching.

We ignore the prophetic voices of our youth at the risk of losing them. This generation will just. Walk. Away.



**It was eye-opening to hear  
how easily they would remove  
themselves from the institutional  
church — however much they  
love it, however much they love  
Jesus — if the Church continues  
on the path it's on — denying  
communion to divorced persons  
and their families, denigrating  
queer folks, and refusing to  
allow women into positions  
of decision-making.**



*A Window in the Future of the Church* created by Becky McIntyre for the Philadelphia Catholic Higher Education Synod Process



# Discerning and Deciding *Evolving Us Forward*

## Listening to the Spirit Brings Hope



**The Holy Spirit is evolving us forward.**

In the overwhelming majority of listening consultations we conducted, we heard over and over that people deeply appreciate the opportunity to attune themselves to the presence of the Spirit in their own lives as well as in others' journeys with the Church. When invited with open arms and listening hearts into circles of communal discernment, participants found themselves imbued with a sense of joy, love, purpose, comfort, healing, solidarity, empowerment, and hope. Many named their synodal experience as standing in stark contrast to prevailing ways of relating with and as church.



**More facilitation of listening from those in positions of power with the folks in the pews might go a long way.**

## Listening to the Spirit Empowers

We learned that the Spirit is indeed alive and at work in this Synodal Process, pulling lay people, especially women, toward bold and shared visions of a vibrant and vital Church. In addition to desires to serve a synodal Church that we heard from our Animators, young people also told us that they seek to contribute to their parish communities but lack meaningful avenues for doing so. Many also mentioned feeling a lack of encouragement in living out their baptismal call aside from serving the parish in specific roles.



**This is the first time in my life that the church has displayed an opportunity for us to voice our concerns and listen to the people.**

## Listening Draws In Young People

DD consulted with and trained as Animators some 25 ministers to youth and young people. Several named synodality as a fresh way to engage youth precisely at a time when so many are walking away. DD listened to 2,644 young people in 28 institutions and heard clear evidence of the movement of the Spirit; their input revealed that the synodal path itself is evangelizing. One Animator reported the Latino/a Youth were very excited to have their voices lifted and opinions listened to during this process. This affirmed their hopes for more inclusivity and listening to their voices which have typically been ignored or excluded.



The Synod gave them hope because it shows that Catholic leaders are aware that their relationships with their members are damaged and that this is an opportunity to listen to those members.

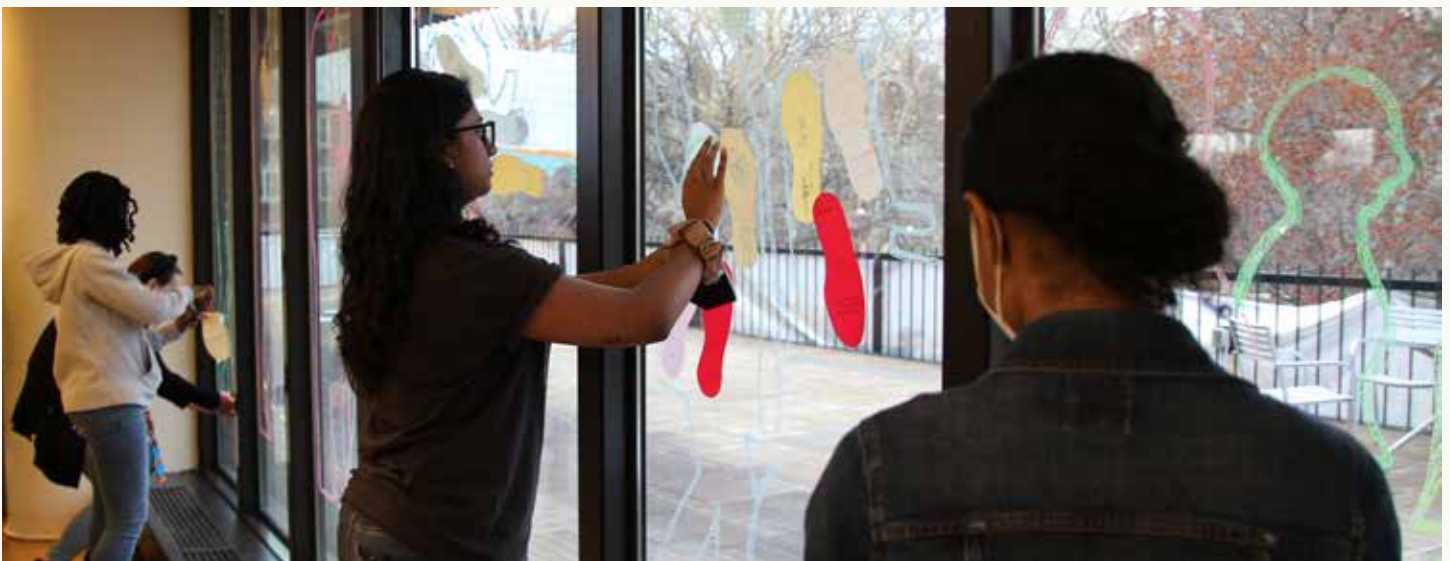


Photo Credit: Becky McIntyre



Synod offers an experience of church as a welcoming circle, where you are listened to, and where you listen to others who are not like you, where we hold honest, vulnerable space in order to listen for the Spirit moving and guiding us.



I have had a very positive experience with the Synod, I feel like I can not only live my school mission of inclusive love but that I, even at such a young age, can have a say in the church.

—A high school student,  
DD helped train as an Animator

## Listening to the Spirit Affirms Vocations of Women

The affirmation of women's vocational calls is widely seen as critical for the future of a vibrant and vital Church. This belief is held by a majority of the 8,500+ participants, by women of all ages who seek to have their vocational calls affirmed, and by all of those already ordained with whom we engaged.

Latino/a youth see a need for greater participation, formation, and inclusion of women in liturgical leadership. They have a sense of urgency about women deacons, a need to consider the ordination of women to the priesthood, and a desire for more visibility of women, LGBTQ and POC in public worship.



Young women are going to live out their callings. It is the Church that suffers if the Church doesn't create pathways for them to live out their callings.



Young adult Latina women need to witness well-prepared and committed women treated with dignity and being given a prominent role in the life of the community.

### LIVING LECTIO: Listening to the Word alive in one another

To practice the art of deep listening and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit in Synod sessions, we would pause for 30 seconds of silence after each person shared. Then we invited each person to write on a sticky note (or drop in a Zoom chat) a word or phrase that struck them from what the person had shared. We then went around the circle, saying it aloud. This was a way to let the speaker know they had been heard; as well as for everyone to ask the

Holy Spirit to "make Yourself at home in our hearts." as we are "temples of God." This practice of intentional listening cultivated a desire to seek communion as we give and receive each other's witness. Participants were drawn into sacred time, attentive to the deeper resonance and thoughtful in how to respond to one another that honors the dignity and contribution of each in the circle without falling into the temptation to fix or debate or prove.

# Forming Ourselves for Synodality

## *Listening as Sacramental*

### Synodality as Source of Grace

In this synodal process, many who participated named the Synod as an experience of encountering God's presence in their journey with the Church and God's presence in others. Listening to each other becomes sacramental. Some young people described the experience as one of compassion, and they called for more listening as a critical step toward healing those who have been wounded by the Church simply because of who they are.



**The Church needs to become more compassionate rather than judgmental.**

Other participants noted how the Synod experience amplified and expanded the graces of other sacraments such as Baptism, Eucharist, and Holy Orders.



**Gatherings like this listening session are church. The Spirit is inviting us to embrace these different and new ways of being church.**

### Synodality and the Risk of Inertia

Ironically, the Synod process revealed profound lament as we heard many who wondered if the Church has the capabilities to act on what we have learned from each other in this process, and if any kind of meaningful change will come of it. Can it help us name and redress histories and still unfolding legacies of colonialism, racism and sexism in our global Church and local faith communities? As we heard from one college student:



**When I first moved here I went from an all-Black Church to an all-white Church. I got the feeling that the Catholic Church isn't for Black people, and no one saw it as a problem.**

Middle age and older participants tended to have a guarded, cautious hopefulness, whereas young people conveyed urgency. As one high school student put it:



**What would the point of this Synod be if no change is made?**

The stakes feel high. Synodality sparks hope, and yet it is risky to engage in this process if the Church won't be able to follow through. A disingenuous process perpetuates real harm.



## Synodality as Catalyst for Eucharistic Renewal

A love of the Eucharist was consistently named as a source of joy and experienced as foundational for participants' journey with the Church. The experience of being deeply listened to also seemed to echo with an understanding of the Eucharist as the real presence, alive in fellow members of the Body of Christ. Synod consultations were often marked by the surprise of communion discovered in the sharing of dreams, sorrows, and hopes.



This is one aspect of Eucharist: adoration. Eucharist is also about gathering as a community, paschal mystery, and going out in mission. We all need to be involved in that.

After listening to nearly 9,000 voices and then reflecting on our sacramental experience of listening to them, the Spirit revealed critical insights into the current realities of our Church and exciting visions of what we might become through this synodal journey together. With the fire of the Spirit burning in our hearts and animating our commitment to serving the People of God, we make an offering of four recommendations for moving forward together along the synodal path.

# #1

## The synodal path forms the Church as an inclusive *circle* of kinship.

*Listening, learning, healing, and dialogue.*

### INSIGHT

Many participants of all ages expressed overwhelmingly positive experiences of synodality — healing, affirmation, compassion, empowerment, excitement, connection, community — and a desire for future and even ongoing listening sessions.

At a time when polarization in the U.S. inhibits even Catholic families from being in communion with one another, we understand the essence of the synodal process as a commitment to listening to and learning from others, keeping our hearts open to conversion, reconciling divisions, and discerning how to move forward into communion, participation, and mission as a People of God. To construct the reign of God is to create authentic dialogue that is generative and allows us to build communities where all belong, and all have gifts to contribute by nature of our baptism and our call to co-responsibility.



People are looking for places they feel they belong in the Church, where they can form authentic relationships with others and really live out the Gospel in their actions.



Even amidst that pain, most of the group had a sense that they didn't want to give up on what church could be. They came to a sense that this very process is church. What a gift it is to me as a young adult who's often very frustrated with the church.

# If we seek to become a synodal Church, then we can never stop listening for the Spirit at work in ourselves, each other, and our faith communities.

## **DISCERNING THE PATH FORWARD**

Continue to walk the synodal path by integrating the practices of synodality into ways of being Church at every level. Consider Thematic Forums as a concrete expression and innovative praxis to continue fostering participation, communion, and mission in the next phase of the synod.

## **A NEW ECCLESIOLOGY IN MOTION: THEMATIC FORUMS**

Discerning Deacons was inspired by the innovative praxis of thematic forums that were part of the preparatory phase leading up to the Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean in November 2021.

The fundamental question of the Synod gave room to identify key themes that then compel further engagement. Thematic forums structure a Synodal Process for necessary ongoing communal discernment, focused on particular topics or themes. They are aimed at deepening theological understanding, listening to the lived experiences of the People of God, and discerning the call of the Holy Spirit about a particular question.

We piloted a thematic forum in St. Paul/Minneapolis, an archdiocese that engaged in a local 3-year Synod process during which the issue of growing women's leadership in the Church came up consistently. Guided by the principle of subsidiarity, this three-hour session brought together 90+ participants including theologians, dozens

of lay ecclesial ministers, clergy and religious, artists, lay participants of all ages, and the local Archbishop. The elements of our forum included: prayer, scripture grounding and faith sharing, theological reflection and an educational overview on the history of women and the diaconate, witness testimonies by four women in parish or diocesan leadership, individual reflection time, synodal table conversations and participatory discernment. People also submitted their individual input forms and a report was compiled to be shared with the Archbishop.

During this next continental phase, we recommend the praxis of synodal thematic forums as a way for US bishops to keep journeying together with their people as they reflect on the urgent questions which are surfacing in the US Synodal Process.

Synodal thematic forums exercise the ecclesial muscle for communal discernment and Spirit-led participatory engagement in governance.

# #2

## The synodal path positions the Church to meet the People of God on the *threshold* of faith in the third millennium

### INSIGHT

Possibilities for a synodal church are latent in many pockets of the Church.

We discovered fertile ground for cultivating the practices of synodality. The synodal style resonates with the very young people we are at most risk of losing. Universities and high schools are prime incubators of synodality. They are latent communities where young people can continue to gather in circles and be heard by those who seek to accompany them as ministers, where they can be invited to respond together to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, where they can deepen their experience in the Eucharist and of breaking open the Word of God; and where we can further their capacity for synodal leadership.



Another grace was to have the Bishop there and his active listening to the people, it was a powerful witness to listening rather than trying to argue or debate. He was very empathetic.



Estamos en el umbral para avanzar o para retroceder. Se necesita una reforma profunda de las estructuras de la Iglesia para reconocer y afianzar el papel de la mujer, en toda la vida de la Iglesia, incluyendo en posiciones de liderazgo y de toma de decisiones.



We are on the threshold of either moving forward or moving backward. A profound reform of Church structures is needed to recognize and validate the role of women, in all the life of the Church, including in leadership and decision-making positions.



The possibility for synodality, however, must be urgently embraced through structural support in our Catholic institutions and dioceses given the stark reality of disaffiliation, particularly among young people who often see the Church as irrelevant, even antithetical to full human living.

#### **DISCERNING THE PATH FORWARD**

We need new institutional structures to facilitate synodality.

Synodality, while generative, is not spontaneous. To avoid being a one-off event, it requires commitments to creating and holding spaces for encounters, training people to listen to each other, creating channels for learning from and communicating what the Spirit reveals, and building trust through transparency and accountability. Through our listening consultations, we began to imagine nimble, flexible, and adaptable institutional structures — led by lay people and formally endorsed and encouraged by clergy — that can grow the movement toward a synodal Church.

For example, regional centers for synodality could offer integrated formation including spiritual discernment, communal practices for listening, discerning consensus, organizing around what is held in common and shared, and living the faith in the public arena with evangelizing integrity. Ad hoc teams that are institutionally anchored at the invitation of Catholic institutions — the Vatican,

Bishops' conferences, dioceses, university or high school leadership — could provide a nimble middle way between institutional credentialing and the flexibility to respond to the Spirit's stirrings among different faith communities. Through new synodal structures, hierarchy and authority can be leveraged to inspire participation and engagement.

In any imaginings of structural support for synodality, the question of women's roles is urgent. We at DD recognize that changes are already structurally underway with the reform of the Curia. And yet for people on the ground and in the pews, the significance of this change is unfelt and remains a distant reform. More immediate is a longing of the People of God to hear women's voices in their own sacred spaces, alongside men, in the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the liturgy, and the accompaniment of the People of God in their struggles for dignity.

## ONE HOPE-FILLED EXAMPLE: UNIVERSITIES AS FERTILE GROUND

In the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, DD animated a group of four diaconal women, each committed to the Gospel work of ministry in higher education and already connected through collaboration in broad-based community organizing with a local CCHD-supported organization called POWER. All it took was reading the preparatory document for these four to initiate conversations with their Vice Presidents of Mission and Ministry and then the Vicar of Faith Formation for Youth about creating a Synodal Process for college students across the archdiocese. Over six months and in partnership with DD, the team trained more than 30 animators from all 11 Catholic institutions of higher education in the archdiocese and three Catholic Newman Centers who in turn conducted >40 listening sessions that engaged ~400 students. Campus animators designed a cross-campus listening consultation with more than 50 students and Archbishop Perez in early April. They commissioned a young artist, a graduate of one of the

institutions, who captured what was shared in visual images integrated into their final report and which will become an art installation on each campus.

The process required a bracketing of suspicion on the part of those in higher education in order to intentionally reach out to the archdiocese and seek to partner. The archdiocese, in turn, received their initiative with encouragement and was eager to remain looped in, coordinating and connecting. This was itself an early fruit of the Holy Spirit making a way where previously there had been more reticence or silencing. At each turn the animating team, the ministers on each campus, the diocesan priests and partners all risked a new way of being in order to inspire young people to participate and feel like the Church was really listening and seeking to accompany them. The members of the synthesis and animating team were in consensus: this was the “most edifying vocational work the four of us in higher ed have ever done.”



Archbishop Nelson Perez of Philadelphia participating in a listening session with college students, Photo Credit: Dan Nguyen, La Salle University

# #3

## The synodal path invites Catholics to be *bridge builders* in a polarized world and Church

### INSIGHT

Experiences with the Synod created in many participants a sense of hope, renewed purpose, and re-commitment to discipleship at a time of cynicism, distrust and despair.



Too often, we find that the institutional Church reflects and reinforces the worst things in the world at large, rather than standing as an alternative or force against them.”



My cynicism is true but my faith in the Holy Spirit is true too.



My moments of greatest hope and joy have been seeing everyday Catholics come together to do the work of justice, under the Spirit.



# In listening we have empowered people and learned much. What do we do with this cacophony of consensus we have heard from so many who are ready to serve as protagonists for a synodal Church?

## DISCERNING THE PATH FORWARD

The USCCB can learn from and collaborate with networks of faith based community organizers to advance the practice of synodality as a living sign in the public arena of pursuing the common good.

### “The very best structure in the church that no one knows about”...

DD facilitated two listening consultations with organizers. Our goals were to build a synodal community among this distinct population of Catholics, themselves often marginalized from the institutional Church; to listen to the stories of their journeys with the Church as organizers; and to discern how the Spirit may be calling them to support the unfolding Synod Process.

In answers to the question about the relationship between Catholicism and their vocations as organizers, we heard joys of being welcomed into organizing by prophetic figures in the local Church, of the complementarity between the Gospel and the ongoing work for social

change, of the palpability of the Spirit among people who work together towards a shared vision of the common good, and a sense of being grounded in purpose and belonging to other people. Organizers expressed frustration at the walls they faced within the Church in trying to mobilize Catholics, dismay at the dismantling of much of the Catholic infrastructure for organizing, and profound concern for the future of the Church among marginalized populations. Still, when asked what organizers might have to offer to the unfolding Synodal Process, the turn to hope was swift and concrete. “Organizing is an expression of synodality,” said one. Another prompted their peers to consider the holiness of the chaos, even within the Synod Process itself, as an invitation to mobilize God’s people and to not be afraid to stir up new possibilities.

## ORGANIZING AS AN EXPRESSION OF SYNODALITY

Organizers are the bearers of a living Catholic Social tradition rooted in the arts of relationship building, listening and communal discernment. They create protagonists among the faithful to enact the principles of Catholic social teaching from the margins. Organizers build bridges across institutions and divides in order to pursue the common good and seek the human dignity of all. Although supported by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which one participant described as the “very best structure in the Church that no one knows about,” on the ground, many organizers struggle to deeply engage

Catholic parishes and institutions. Synodality could be a bridge to re-engage these leaders, to invite the gifts of the organizing tradition which the Church has supported and sustained for 50 years. Since the very praxis of organizing is synodal, organizers can be valuable partners in this process as it unfolds and attends to visions of justice we heard, particularly from young people. Even as young people are drawn to the work of social justice in the world, they are often unaware of the depth of theological, ecclesial, moral and political traditions that the Catholic Church can bring to bear for the common good.



# #4

## The synodal path is *planting seeds* for the renewal of the Church via the ministry of synodality

### INSIGHT

The People of God are ready to be protagonists in a synodal Church.

A central challenge of the Synod is (for each participant!) to embrace the fullness of baptismal responsibility: to receive the invitation to be protagonists in our Church and in our communities. This is a powerful concept that anchored animators' work to persevere and seek a way to engage others, even where there was less enthusiastic ecclesial participation in their own diocese. It inspired people to take initiative and responsibility, rather than complain. We saw many animators move from hesitation, weariness and skepticism towards leadership, energy and renewed hopefulness about the life moving within the Church.



Didn't realize how pushed down or cast aside I had been until I met this group, began to reignite the holy spirit in me.

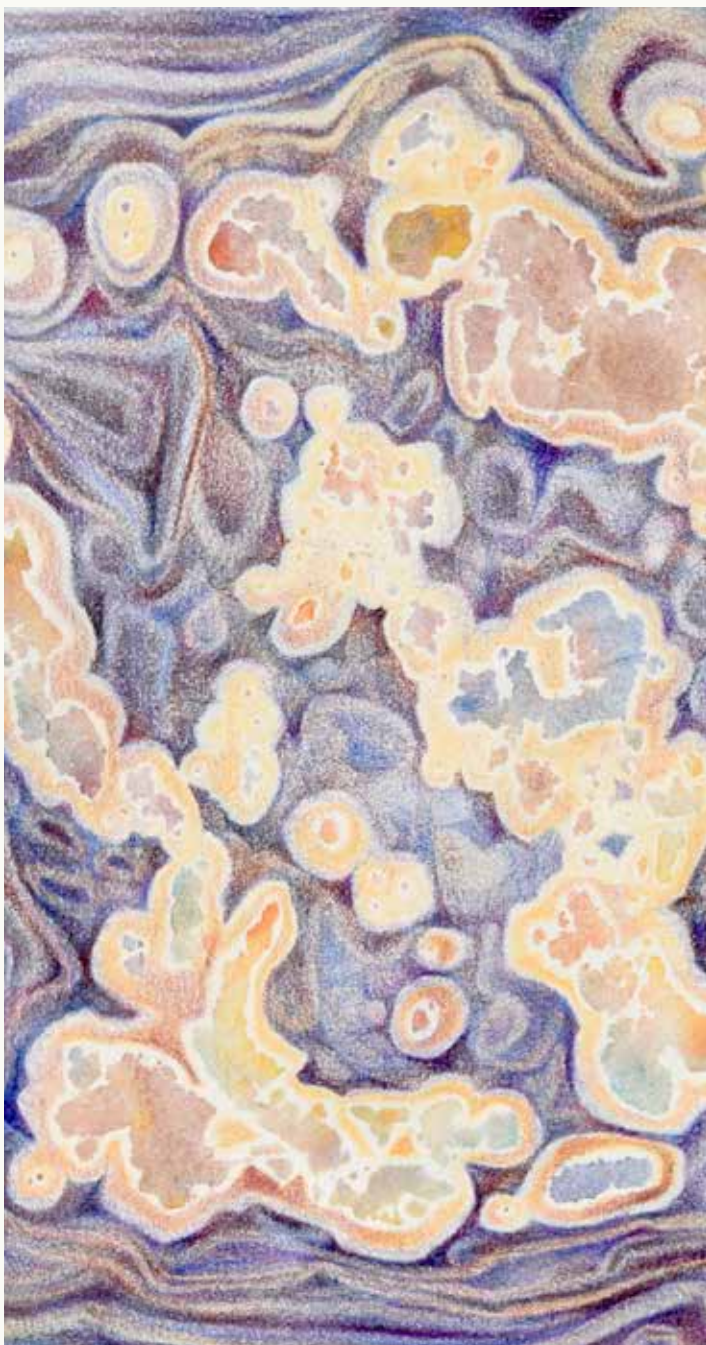
**Synodality requires a mature faith and renewed understanding of ministry. To become a synodal Church, lay people will need ongoing formation that empowers them to understand and claim the vocational callings and gifts received at Baptism. Likewise, clergy and bishops will need new understandings of ministry that embody a synodal relationship between all lay people and church leadership.**

We were surprised by the hundreds of participants, across ages and geographic contexts, who shared that they felt that the *Holy Spirit was saying to them* that now was the time for the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate. We offer just one example of a woman who answered that call in the context of the Synod: she was recognized by her local Bishop as having the marks of a diaconal vocation. She had worked for years as a chaplain, serving as a minister in the local health care system. She reached out to diocesan synod coordinators who were initially reluctant to receive her offer to help in the process, but she persisted and was able to dramatically expand the scope, reach, and organization so that, thanks to her initiative, over 2,500 people were drawn into the listening phase.

### **DISCERNING THE PATH FORWARD**

We need to discern what is being revealed in this Synodal Process about the ministerial needs of a synodal Church, particularly the diaconate.

Synodality requires vocational formation for *everyone* in the Church, from priests and ministers to teachers and young people, in order to discern and grow in our respective gifts of being ministers of synodality. Given that we have heard that God's people are eager to be seen and known, then synodality is a style of ministry that can itself be evangelizing and welcoming to those who might be hesitant or on the threshold. For many young people we consulted, we need a thoughtful Church unafraid of difference. For many women we consulted, this means affirming the vocational calls of those ready to serve a synodal Church in the marginalized spaces of the world where people long for connection and love. In other words, synodality requires an expansive understanding of ordination for ministry, both in terms of who can be ordained and what the ordained are commissioned to do.



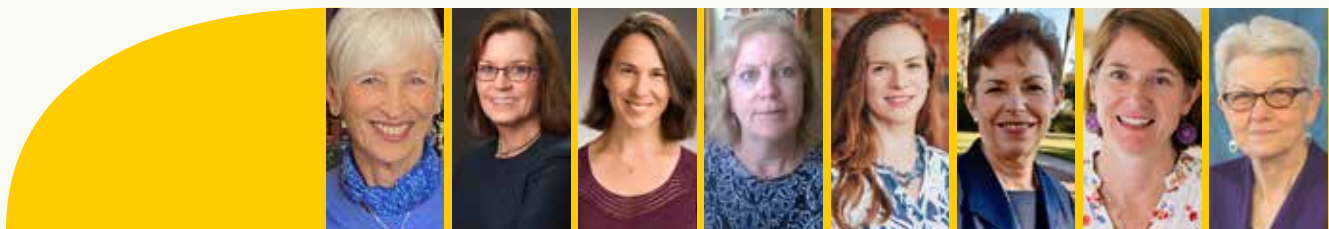
## Our Dream for a Ministry of Synodality *Towards a Synodal Diaconate*

In light of what we heard, we wonder whether the Synod might be revealing something foundational about the nature of the diaconate and the gift of this ordained ministry so recently restored for the Church. What if deacons are particularly commissioned (and formed) as *listeners* helping to flex the synodal muscle, serving the hierarchy to know what is in the hearts and minds of the People of God, especially drawing near to those who are at risk of being left out as key decisions or directions are made, while also calling forth and inviting the gifts of the community forward? In other words, a *synodal diaconate*.

We recommend convening thought leaders who can further develop this line of inquiry and theological-ecclesial exploration. We aim to serve a conversation that roots us and moves us towards engagement in the Synodal discernment process to receive what the Spirit wants to reveal about the *diakonia* which Jesus has gifted to the Church for this millennia. While we hear consensus about restoring women to the diaconate, we do not want to miss what might further deepen our understanding of this ordained ministry, as rightly ordered within and among the faithful for a particular service and charism.



**Discerning  
Deacons**





## ***We stand before you, Holy Spirit***

Synod Animators sought to  
hold space for humble, sacred listening.

Not seeking to fix, to solve, to defend, to argue or to judge.

To be midwives of stories. To help participants overcome fear and speak truthfully.  
Listening: to those who are regular Mass goers, active participants in their parishes,  
serving in ministry roles of a wide array.

As well as to those who are situated more on the edges of society's power structures  
and on the ecclesial peripheries.

We were surprised at the cacophony of consensus:  
Listening is sacramental. A privilege, a gift, a source of healing.

Along with the sense of urgency; a prayer, a plea.  
Will our leaders have ears to hear?

A sense that the Holy Spirit is speaking through us, and back to us: A living lectio divina.  
Asking us: What is ours to do? What is ours to pick up, to respond to, to be moved by?

This is the art of discernment in the wake of encounter.  
Then there is the call to share what it is we have heard, with those in positions of formal  
authority and decision making.

We recognize: the listening has only begun.  
We have not heard enough from those with whom we do not agree.  
In a fragmented culture, sharing our journey of walking near Jesus can be a bridge back  
into dialogue and communion. But many forces keep us from encountering each other.  
We have more steps to take on this journey to ensure all are heard and all  
can participate as protagonists.

We commit to ongoing formation and continual conversion  
in an evolving church,  
at the turn of an epoch.

***Teach us the way we must go, and how we are to pursue it.***



# Appendix

## Demographics and Participants in Discerning Deacons Consultations

Discerning Deacons hosted two virtual, bilingual national consultations that engaged ~196 participants affiliated with 121 parishes around the country.

**87%**

of participants reported attending Mass weekly or more.

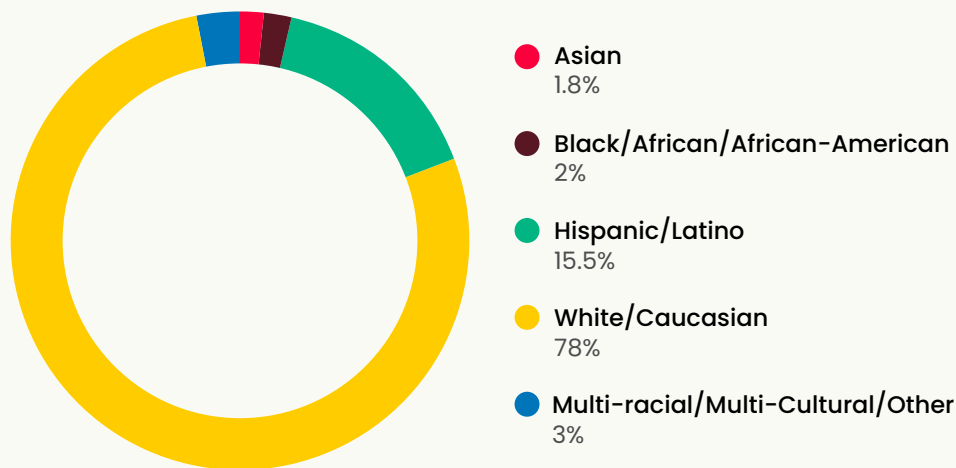
**8%**

of participants indicated they are no longer practicing and rarely or never go to Mass.

**21**

were vowed religious or ordained clergy.

Across Cohort consultations, a wide range of racial and cultural heritages were engaged. In Discerning Deacons' two national consultations, the ethnic mix was:



Discerning Deacons also organized two synodal thematic forums focused on the topic of women and the diaconate.

### ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

St. Paul, Minnesota | March 13, 2022

- Conducted In collaboration with the League of Catholic Women Foundation Fund, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province.
- This session engaged 91 attendees, including 1 Archbishop, 1 deacon, 4 priests, 9 women religious, 3 doctoral level theologians, 21 lay ecclesial ministers and 28 parents.

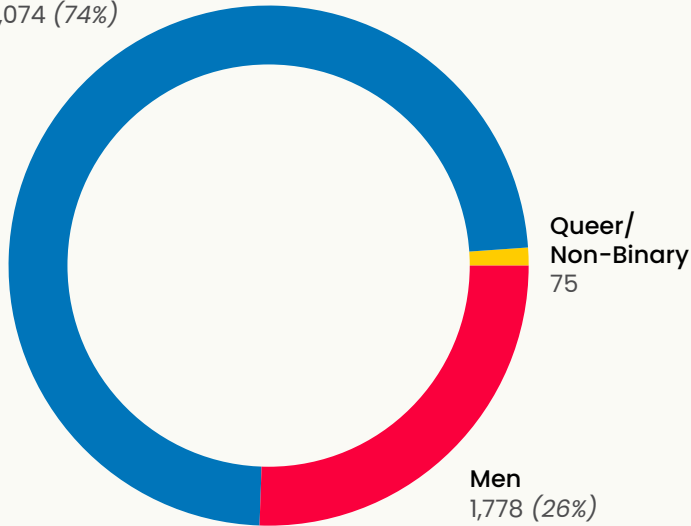
### ST. BARNABAS PARISH

Chicago, Illinois | March 26 and 27, 2022

- >750 attendees from across 7 parishes, 9 area high schools and several local peace and restorative justice ministries gathered for an opening session to educate about synodality.
- ~50 attended a focused session held in the parish including the pastor, deacon and lay ministry team

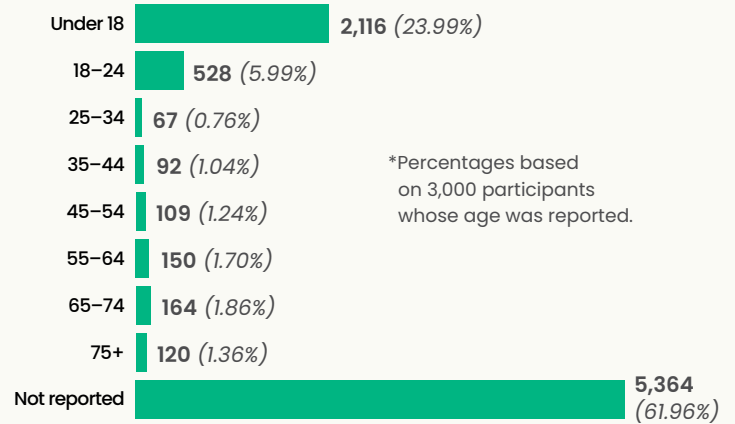
## Demographics

Women  
5,074 (74%)



## Participants by Age\*

Age demographics were not reported for 62% of participants; where ages were reported, the age distribution is depicted in the graph.



Discerning Deacons held two virtual consultations with Catholics engaged in broad-based community organizing and supported by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

These consultations included **12 Catholic theologians and sociologists** who teach and practice organizing in the context of higher education and **35 organizers**, either Catholic themselves or primarily engaging Catholics from four national and international organizing networks.

## **Discerning Deacons Synod Resources**

[DD Synod Animators Cohort Invitation](#)

[Map of Synod Listening Sessions](#)

[Map of DD National Consultations – Parishes Represented](#)

Educational Webinars to Spread the Good news:

[For a Synodal Church: What is Pope Francis inviting us all to do? \(11/4/2021\)](#)

With translation available in [Spanish](#) and [Portuguese](#);

>500 registered and >5,741 views on youtube

[How Can US and Latin American Catholics walk together on this synodal journey as one Church? \(2/9/2022\)](#)

With translation available in [Spanish](#);

>200 registered, and >200 views on youtube

## **Listening Reports from Synod Animators**

[Synodal Thematic Forum, St. Paul, MN Final Report.pdf](#)

[2022-St-Vincent-de-Paul-Synodal-Report-V-1.0.pdf](#)

[LMU Report Back to Discerning Deacons.pdf](#)

[Seattle University and IPJC.pdf](#)

[Synod Report write up WINGS. Final.pdf](#)

[Synodality in Philadelphia Higher Education – Summary Report Final Draft.pdf](#)

[A Prayer for Synodality – An Artist’s Reflection](#)

## **Supporting Documents**

[Gather the Fruits – 2021 Listening Report](#)

[Called to Contribute – Sociological Study](#)



## Credits

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Special thanks to Carmen Villafañe and Carolina Manson for their work to provide a faithful Spanish language translation.

Designed by Larry Issa.



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