

Synodal Questionnaire – Analysis of Parishioner Responses Holy Family and St Ninian’s Parish, Kirkintilloch.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the Synodal journey, a questionnaire was developed by the parish council of Holy Family and St Ninian’s Church Kirkintilloch, which is part of the North East Deanery of the Archdiocese of Glasgow. The questionnaire focussed on the experiences of the parish community throughout the pandemic in the spirit of “*Communion, Participation and Mission*” which were highlighted as the key themes of “*walking together as a Church with the Holy Spirit*”

The questionnaire was sent to all known Catholic households using a messenger system which offered the opportunity for Catholics who do not, or cannot attend church. The parish council received 81 responses to the questionnaire. As the questionnaire was anonymous, the parish council is unable to create a distinction between responses received from those who are active members of the Church community and the number who are not. However, there is evidence within some responses that some questionnaires had been returned by people who are inactive within the Church. Comments received within responses included examples such as: “*I don’t attend Mass but thank you for posting this through my door.*” and “*I used to attend church but...*”. It was also noted that where some responses were submitted by individuals, some responses were submitted as a joint response which had been completed by couples or families.

Initial analysis of the responses expressed a variety of considerations with people taking the opportunity to voice their gratitude to the Parish Priest, the volunteers and the wider Church community for their flexibility, commitment, understanding and support in ensuring access and availability of services, private prayer and pastoral support throughout the pandemic.

Where this report is aligned to the 10 questions set out by the Archdiocese of Glasgow, it is also worth noting that additional information was submitted by respondents which may be outwith the scope of the set questions.

OVERVIEW OF RESPONSES.

Respondents to the parish questionnaire highlighted a number of topics which they felt were important. The topics mostly raised were in relation to one of the following:

Community - most respondents felt there was a strong and supportive community in Holy Family and St Ninian’s Church with recognition and gratitude of several factors related to worship, pastoral support, friendship, charity, flexibility and commitment. Responses also outlined how social activities designed to help build relationships with others would be a welcome development for the future.

Charity – This was a very varied topic which highlighted the giving nature of parishioners in a number of ways. There were many examples of individual and collective charity efforts to make sure others were safe and connected during the pandemic as well as regular efforts to give financial aid and food bank donations. Although groups already exist for people suffering from addiction or bereavement, suggestions of creating more support groups of this nature to offer a safe space to those who are, or who feel marginalised within society (and perhaps more so as a result of the pandemic) would be welcomed by the Church community.

Relationships – Respondents offered reflections of how their lives had changed as a result of the pandemic. Their relationship with God, their families and the wider community improved and became a priority giving a warmth that was perhaps not evident prior to the pandemic when life was very busy with work and practical activities. Overall, responses expressed the importance of close relationships with family, friends, God and the parish community during the pandemic and their desire to maintain and nourish these relationships in the future.

Authority – There was a variety of comments about authority within the local, diocesan and global context of the Church. These comments could be broken down into four different sub themes:

- The first part is attributed to the relationship between the Parish Priest and parishioners. Responses highlighted the friendly, approachable, supportive and discreet nature of how this mission is applied.
- The second part can be aligned to the Parish Priest as the head of the local Church community and the expectations placed upon him to have a structured approach to all aspects of the Church community and its members.
- The third part is aligned to the parish structure and communication of that structure to those who are members of the Church. Having a clearly defined and communicated structure is necessary for members of the Church to understand who to approach and in what circumstances. Where this is very well developed in some areas of the parish structure, the pandemic and changing priorities has resulted in some parts of the structure being unclear. Development of distinct roles and points of contact would offer more clarity to those who are not involved in parish life.
- The final part of this section in relation to authority offered opinion on the hierarchy of the Church. This varied from questions related to the laws that we abide by (Canon Law), the role of the Archdiocese and how the Church as a whole could or should develop and modernise to address priest shortages and acceptance of those who felt detached from the Church. There were references to Church members who felt unwelcome within the Church due to personal circumstances or life events beyond their control.

Analysis of responses to the questionnaire was approached using data coding aligned to the importance of specific topics identified by respondents as they emerged through the data. In addition to the topics above, themes coming out of the data include, but are not limited to the following topics:

- Volunteers
- Youth
- Music /Audio
- Digital Access
- Increased attendance
- Religious Preparation
- Leadership
- Families
- Children
- New Parishioners

Comments in relation to all of the above topics will be aligned to the Diocesan questionnaire and more detailed analysis is provided within each part of the Synodal Themes.

RESPONSE TO SYNODAL THEMES

1. COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY- WHAT DO WE EXCEL AT AND WHO DO WE LEAVE BEHIND?

Responses to the questionnaire revealed that Holy Family and St Ninian's Parish is a supportive community who do a lot of work to help others in need. Comments related to faith and belief, inclusion of those in need, pastoral support and Sacramental preparation were complimentary. Links with schools are good and the parish has adapted well to exceed the requirements set out in order to adhere to Covid regulations throughout the past 2 years. Pastoral support is of a high quality with people feeling they could ask for help at any time and generally felt very supportive of the work of the Parish Priest whilst recognising that there are limitations to having only one priest and one deacon.

There was much comment about the introduction of online services and how this provided some comfort to parishioners when the church was closed and helped those who were unable to attend funerals due to restricted numbers to pay their respects privately.

There was an incredibly positive response to volunteers who gave up their time during the pandemic to welcome people to the church, help people to adhere to Covid protocols and wipe down seats after individual prayer or services. Responses to the questionnaire highlight that continuation of parishioners being greeted upon arrival at the church would be a welcome development:

"Parishioners welcomed on arrival at church due to track and trace has promoted a greater sense of community this could be extended following covid."

The Parish Council agreed that welcome hosts at the back of the church helped to build a stronger parish community. In addition to this, the responses revealed that integrating and welcoming new parishioners is also an area that could be developed further and this practice could help new attendees to build connections and relationships with fellow parishioners who are trying to integrate into a new parish community.

Responses to the questionnaire expressed gratitude to volunteers who gave their time to maintain, support, coordinate or prepare the church for the different events and services that take place and had a particular focus on the lengths that volunteers and the parish went to during the pandemic in ensuring people visiting the church felt safe and included. One area highlighted for development in this area was communication of the work that takes place in the parish.

"I feel there is much more work goes on in our parish than I know about..."

"Maybe the support that is there is not promoted enough."

Some responses also highlighted the positive work that takes place with young children through faith, liturgy and Sacrament clubs and highlighted the need to develop more activities for young people.

It was suggested that preparation and support could also be extended to meet the needs of other Sacraments such as Baptism and more opportunities for social engagement would be a good way to give people who felt excluded the opportunity to engage with parish life.

Social activities featured highly through responses with examples of activities where people could socialise and be with others. One such example was the café which open after Mass on a Sunday and Wednesday. Responses highlighted a need for more targeted social activities for women, young people, families and those who are vulnerable.

2. LISTENING- DO WE EXCLUDE THE VOICES WE DON'T WANT TO HEAR?

Responses to the questionnaire informs us that there is a lot of good work taking place within the parish of Holy Family and St Ninian's and provided ideas and recommendations to develop this work further. There were many responses that referred to the welcoming approach taken by the head of the Parish community.

"He knows his flock well always with welcome and empathy."

Responses told us that there is a range of work taking place to support people facing poverty through the SVDP, weekly food bank collections, providing support for the homeless and providing financial support to local, national and international good causes. Creating more local support for marginalised groups with opportunities for them to come together and share experiences could provide further enhancement to this work. Further comments put forward were favourable of traditional methods of worship overall, however it was also highlighted that introducing different types of spiritual enlightenment such as "Word on Fire" by Bishop Robert Barron could attract more young people.

Much credit was given to the adaptations put in place during the pandemic which created a sense of belonging among parishioners. This built on the vibrant community of Holy Family of St Ninians parish. Although at the time of the questionnaire, society was in the early stages of easing from Covid restrictions, comments indicated that the sense of community has been noticeably strengthened.

"I have noticed that parishioners are going out of their way to speak to everyone and help them to feel part of parish life."

One respondent described this as frightening for people who didn't know anyone, another described the challenges of reaching out in times of difficulty when you don't know many people. Where this is a valid point to consider, it should also be noted that there are also people who prefer not to engage and this balance should be considered when implementing new practices to protect the personal space of individuals. The Parish Council has taken this into consideration in the decision to maintain the role of welcome ministers at the back of the church to help people attending Mass to feel welcome in the parish community ensuring they can be approached by anyone who may wish to engage in conversation or ask questions.

Responses also suggested that the hierarchy of the Church should recognise that there are unavoidable life events that result in Catholics being unable to receive Sacraments. Some responses felt that people who are divorced or LGBT+ were marginalised by the Church through not being able to receive the Sacraments. This went further in some comments that questioned the Church's position on women priests and deacons. One comment mentioned that the Church was unsupportive of people who "*went against the Church's old ways*" indicating a preference for modernisation this was supported by other comments where there was a preference for general absolution at life events and festivals such as weddings, funerals, Christmas and Easter.

A couple of responses returned from visitors to the parish, referred to the oversight and governance of the Church at a Diocesan level. These responses communicated that Holy Family and St Ninian's parish went above and beyond expectations where their own parish provided little support. These responses offered a proposed way forward through regular monitoring and instruction of those permitted to preach to avoid turning people away and perhaps a method of support to clergy in sharing best practice would be beneficial.

3. SPEAKING OUT- DO WE SPEAK OUT COURAGEOUSLY, WHO DOES THE WORLD CONSIDER SPEAKS FOR CATHOLICISM?

A few responses to the questionnaire highlighted the need for the Church to be more vocal and openly challenge decisions at all levels of authority. Credit was given to the approach taken to legally challenge the decision from the Scottish Government to implement a blanket closure of churches during the second phase of the pandemic. This resulted in recognition of Catholics being able to exercise their human right to practise their faith.

It was also requested that the Church should have a stronger presence on social media against the impact of local, national and international decisions and practices that have a detrimental impact on the physical, mental and spiritual health of the most vulnerable people within society as their voices are seldom heard within the decision-making process.

4. CELEBRATING OUR FAITH- ARE OUR CELEBRATIONS ENGAGING, NOURISHING, SATISFYING?

Reflecting on this question led the Parish Council to ask themselves *“Are our services accessible?”* as a first priority. There were many complimentary responses related to worship, support and attendance at services. There was also much recognition of the parish adapting to provide online services including funerals, weddings and baptisms.

“Our church is always welcoming for everyone but sadly not everyone can attend services. It would be a great idea if people were always able to access these online if they have facilities to do so as they would feel more connected with everyone.”

The most common response to improving celebrations was around improved music and audio. One response highlighted that *“Music and song can be spiritually uplifting”*. Regulations implemented during the pandemic meant that singing was not permitted during services. Responses informed us that this meant the experience of attending services was less engaging for the congregation and resuming the organ playing and choir performing would be a welcome development. Further suggestions included having cantors singing at Mass. Some responses referenced being unable to hear readers at Mass, however, this could also be related to comments regarding the audio system or how the microphones are positioned when being used.

Responses highlighted that not many young people attend services and recognised the challenges involved in maintaining their engagement. Suggestions in this area included specific services targeted at young people, young people becoming volunteers as readers or Eucharistic Ministers and the provision of more social activities. There was also recognition of the activities that take place to maintain the engagement of younger children through the children’s liturgy and suggestions that teenagers could help to organise this as a way of continued engagement. In addition to this, responses also highlighted the importance of links with schools in the parish and recognised the good links that the parish has built in this area. There was also a suggestion to increase the number of catechists to help young people to understand the Catholic faith.

Responses voiced that engagement went beyond church celebrations and services and commended the leader of the parish community for his approach to engaging and supporting people of the parish.

5. RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR COMMON MISSION- WHAT HINDERS THE INVOLVEMENT OF ALL THE BAPTISED?

Responses to the questionnaire felt that relationships with others was the most important theme to being involved in the parish and this was supported by strong leadership and inspiration from the Parish Priest as the head of the parish community. There were also comments highlighting where the understanding of this could be better communicated to the parish community.

It was highlighted to be especially mindful of members of the community who could not attend services or be involved in the church for a variety of reasons. This included taking care of the sick and the elderly of the parish to ensure they felt included and supported.

Comments directly related to people not attending services appear to be based on the Church's views on LGBT+; women priests and a lack of social connection or belonging. There were further comments on how some people don't understand the Catholic faith or the symbols and language being used. It was also indicated that following a long period of restrictions being in place due to the pandemic, it will take time for people to remember rituals and prayers when returning to practice their faith.

The importance of social activities to help create the sense of belonging among parishioners and creating opportunities for people to come together were also featured as a welcome development which would help people to meet one another and would be especially helpful for new parishioners.

6. DIALOGUE- DO WE SPEAK TO OTHER CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES, CIVIL SOCIETY, OTHER FAITH COMMUNITIES?

The Parish Council confirms that engagements with other Christian communities is a regular occurrence and includes joint events and planning for religious celebrations such as Good Friday, an ecumenical choir, Concordia, ecumenical concerts on Palm Sunday and on the first Sunday in Advent. The Parish Priest and parishioners also support and engage in the local ACTS (Action of Churches Together Scotland) movement and attend services with other denominations.

Responses spoke of the church's involvement throughout the community, suggesting that there is much encouragement to be inclusive to everyone in the community irrespective of creed. There was also evidence of direct engagement with other Christian communities through joint events.

"Very supportive of the people in the Parish having a good community spirit and relationship with all creeds of the area."

A few responses suggested this should go further and replicate the approach taken by other Christian communities. There was little detail to explore the interpretation of responses to this question, however, respondents have indicated that joint events with other denominations in addition to what is already provided would be welcomed.

7. THROUGH OUR COMMON BAPTISM, OTHER CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE IN OUR LIVES- HOW DOES THIS MANIFEST ITSELF?

Engagement with other faith communities is strongly supported by Holy Family and St Ninian's parish through a variety of joint events and through recognition that we are all God's children. This manifests itself through the common sense of community which helps local organisations to support vulnerable people through food banks, SVDP and giving time and financial support to local and national charity efforts.

In creating a greater sense of community, parishioners are more confident in their faith and expressing their belief and belonging to the parish family of Holy Family and St Ninian's as well as a desire to support social justice aims of people less fortunate, irrespective of belief.

An adverse impact of being closely connected to other communities of faith is that non-Catholic families are taking places in Catholic schools which leaves Catholic children having to travel outwith their area and some Catholic parents being more comfortable with sending children to a non-denominational school.

8. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION IN OUR CHURCH- HOW DO WE OPEN THIS TO ALL CHURCH MEMBERS?

In addition to the comments in sections 1 and 2 the main points made through responses to the questionnaire was around the elements of communication and participation as well as structure and governance.

Communication

Most responses highlighted the good work that takes place in Holy Family and St Ninians parish with comments such as: *"The Parish Priest in my local parish is a caring and helpful person and the communication in my parish is first class."* However, a few responses felt that communication could be better. Given the previous comments regarding the audio system, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not this is due to the methods being used. Although most notices are printed in a weekly bulletin, it could be a beneficial addition to have a designated notice board advertising roles for volunteers and the contact person responsible.

Structure and Governance

Some responses were in relation to the structure of the Catholic Church at a parish and Diocesan level. *"Communication of how the Church operates at all levels could be better."*

There were suggestions of the Diocese providing support to have more catechists in the parish and training for RCIA, children's liturgy, bereavement support, addictions and eucharistic ministers. There was also a suggestion for specialist spiritual support to be available to parishes who are helping to support individuals and families who have been affected by alcohol and substance misuse.

Although it was felt that support is very good in Holy Family and St Ninian's, it was highlighted that oversight from the Diocese could help improve parishes that do not provide a similar level of support. The decision to reinstate the obligation to return to Mass was highlighted as being one area where more consideration should have been given to people who were afraid or continuing to shield. Perhaps a better approach would have been to have a phased return beginning with an obligation for people who were not shielding throughout the pandemic, then opening this up more to include all categories of parishioners. It would also have been helpful if neighbouring parishes permitted similar levels of access to services and private prayer as churches reopened their doors.

A few responses asked about the hierarchy of the Church and indicated that roles at a parish and Diocesan level were not easily understood. One possibility is the development of an organisational diagram which would explain how decisions are made or how each element of the structure interacts with other parts of the structure at the same or a higher level. This could also be used to help to identify gaps in knowledge, support or distribution of volunteers.

Participation

Responses mainly focussed on participation and the sense of community that is felt within the parish. There were many suggestions and recommendations on further developing opportunities for participation within the parish. Responses highlighted the need for more spiritual and social events, support groups and opportunities for people to volunteer.

Suggestions received included, but were not limited to:

Holding annual events such as a parish retreat; healing service; Divine Mercy Sunday; Information events to explore the dangers of new age practices and creating confraternities. Continuation and development of Faith groups during Lent and Advent and groups designed for new parishioners.

There were also suggestions for setting up more targeted support groups for alcoholism; substance misuse; bereavement and mental health support. Organising more social events and groups such as a women's guild; family nights and youth activities. Some responses also highlighted the need for more young people to volunteer.

Over the past few months, there have been attempts to increase the number of volunteers involved in a range of roles within the parish. We are pleased to say that this has been successful and we now have more readers, people welcoming parishioners as they come into the church, families offering to host refugees, passkeepers and cantors for singing. We would like to extend our thanks to everyone who has come forward and offered up their time to carry out these roles.

9. DISCERNING AND DECIDING- HOW DO WE ENSURE THIS IS INSPIRED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT AND TAKES INTO CONSIDERATION THE FRUITS OF THE DISCERNMENT OF ALL THE BAPTISED?

In response to this question, the Parish Council began by reflecting on their individual and collective reactions to some comments within the responses. Where the vast majority of responses were very positive and recognised the limitations of the volunteers and the Parish Priest as the head of the parish community, a few comments targeted specific areas where the respondents felt the need to express views which initially appeared less positive. This required careful handling and interpretation to ensure all views were included within the process and all views included within the report. At the same time, it was equally important to ensure interpretation of the comments put forward were conveyed in a sensitive manner. In ensuring these responses were included within the Synodal journey, the Parish Council asked themselves the fundamental question of:

“Where is the voice of God within the responses to the questionnaire?”

As well as ensuring the voices of all parishioners were considered and included within this report, the question above helped the Parish Council to fully consider the duty of care for parishioners, volunteers and clergy, helping everyone to undertake the Synodal journey. Taking this approach and acting with due diligence helps protect everyone involved and further develop relationships between each part of the parish family.

Building on the responses received through the questionnaire, the Parish Council also recognised that there are many developments and initiatives which could and should be led by members of the parish.

The Parish Council have also considered how this work and future developments could be led, structured and communicated within the parish.

This involves making sure that there is a structured method of communication to carry information to parishioners as well as receive communication from parishioners. The method should include honest and transparent reporting systems where each active part of the group has someone who will represent their views on a parish council. This requires commitment at all levels, and commitment from the Archdiocese to act as a supportive vehicle to communicate information or suggestions received.

There should be regular information events to help people of the parish to understand the purpose of the work that takes place alongside opportunities for parishioners to become involved. This will be developed using a “Carousel” method where parishioners are able to go between stalls from various groups that are active within the parish. There will also space for parishioners to propose new groups, events or initiatives to be developed within the parish. This will help to develop and build on relationships within the parish as new initiatives, social events and volunteering opportunities are often better developed naturally, as parishioners interact with one another.

Where all new initiatives would be required to go through a structured process for the purposes of good governance, developments could include the role of the parish council shifting slightly to helping parishioners to bring their ideas to life where possible through sign-posting and promotion.

10. HOW DO WE CONTINUE TO WALK TOGETHER, LISTENING AND DISCERNING THE WAY FORWARD?

Responses to the parish questionnaire put forward suggestions for new initiatives, better methods of engaging, improving communication and further developing the community of Holy Family and St Ninians Church.

Responses to the questionnaire has informed us that relationships are the most important part of a person’s life. Comments included people’s relationship with God, their relationship with other people within their family and community and reflections of the importance of a person’s relationship within themselves. Responses also told us that understanding the importance of these relationships is what helped many people through the various stages of lockdown and the pandemic and there has been much action taken to restart services and build or rebuild relationships within the parish.

Following initial consultation of new initiatives, communication on existing initiatives and consideration of proposals for implementing further volunteer opportunities, it would be advised to conduct a further gap analysis within the parish Community. This would measure suggestions from responses against participation, organisation and needs of the wider parish community alongside and inclusive of other communities of faith.

It is also worth highlighting at this stage that responses to the questionnaire provided much recognition and gratitude for the Church taking a flexible approach to ensure services were offered digitally. There were requests for this to continue post pandemic stressing the inclusive impact that this has on those who are isolated, sick or cannot attend mass. Prior to the pandemic, there were few parishes with digital access to services and yet this type of digital media was widely used and accessible within society. As a Church, consideration should also be given to why it took a world-wide pandemic to change the Church’s approach to providing inclusive services for those are disadvantaged and cannot attend in person.

Earlier in this report it was suggested that clergy should have regular monitoring from the Diocese in order to maintain high quality preaching, pastoral support and effective administration within parishes. It could also be said that this is equally valid for all roles across the parish and at all levels of the

Church hierarchy. Parishes could be matched to communities with similar profiles to allow for a review of emerging needs and suitable developments as well as support and guidance for what has worked well. This could help to build on efforts put in by similar communities or prevent similar errors being made by different parishes. If this matching process were to be exercised at Diocesan level, communications could help ensure that any serious consequences related to governance or due diligence were recognised and acted upon early in the development process. Developing this further could connect people within parishes to experiences further afield in different parts of the same country, continent or wider world. This could be facilitated digitally or physically whilst connecting this to other suggestions received from responses such as an annual parish retreat.

Implementation of this process and indeed all developments and gaps taking place within the parish community would require regular review of effectiveness and compliance to better improve the service being delivered. This should be a Diocesan wide effort which requires local communities to provide feedback on parish developments and participation. Although this would be different from the way that a parish would report or record the Sacramental journey of each parishioner, a similarity could be considered with regard to the relationship between “*Communion, Participation and Mission*”

LIMITATIONS OF RESPONSES

The questionnaire was put out to parishioners with a four-week timescale for returning responses. The timing of the questionnaire meant that physical attendance at Mass was reduced in number due to the pandemic. Although steps were taken to ensure that all parishioners received the questionnaire through the messenger system, returning the questionnaire could have presented more challenges to some parishioners than others. There was also an option to return the questionnaire by email however, this could present a barrier to parishioners who do not have the required digital skills or devices. In the absence of digital access, a journey to the Church in order to return the questionnaire, would have been required making responses from non-attenders less likely.

It was noted that respondents may not have a full understanding of the position of the Church in some responses. Consideration should be given to the perceptions of those are, or who feel, separated from the Church where there was an indication of some people not being permitted to receive the Sacraments due to being divorced or LGBT+.

Responses to the questionnaire were anonymous. As there is no profile of the respondents for comments given through the questionnaire, some suggestions, although well intended, may come from people who have limited knowledge of proposals being put forward. For example, there is no evidence within the data to suggest that proposals for the creation of groups to provide mental health support or addiction support comes from people who have lived experience of these issues. This then raises the question of how much support could or should be provided by parishioners in what is often considered specialist areas of work. Similarly, responses talking about the needs of vulnerable people or young people were not necessarily completed through the eyes of people whose life we aim to improve. There was also no consideration within the data highlighting the boundaries of practise for volunteers. This would include an understanding of the depths of vulnerability which is essential in order to provide safeguarding to those who need it.

A similar consultation with the targeted groups mentioned throughout this report may help to provide more extensive information and ideas in order to better understand the support required; seek out appropriate support coordinators to coordinate groups or sessions and triangulate the information that has been put forward.