

**Listening Sessions
February 26, 27, 28, 2022**

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your local Church? What steps does the spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?

St. Nicholas journeys together as a prayerful, welcoming community, but there are challenges and obstacles.

Praying together

- There is broad involvement in liturgy, with a special focus on diversifying ministers.
- Bilingual liturgies enable the community to worship together.
- Groups come together for evening prayer and in Lenten discussion groups.
- Ministries are active year round.

Welcoming

- People come together despite having different views, gifts, and abilities. Lay participation and lay leadership are valued. “The people are the Church.”
- The sense of community is immediately palpable, particularly with the presence of children and families in church.

Challenges and obstacles

- There is not full consensus on the value of bilingual prayer. Some find it difficult, distracting, or awkward.
- One challenge is how to maintain distinct cultures while also coming together. Cultures include ethnicities, parish identities, liturgical tastes, and theologies.
- While respect for laity is a value at St. Nicholas, many believe that the clergy as a whole doesn’t have the same trust in the laity. They desire a more mutually respectful relationship.
- Parishioners care about young people and are deeply concerned about their absence from the Church.

COMMUNION

The definition of those “on the margins” is broadly inclusive.

- Those who feel marginalized or who are marginalized include the following: Catholics whose views are at the “extremes” (liberal and conservative); people of color; different languages and cultures (primarily English and Spanish at St. Nicholas but others as well); St. Nicholas and St. Mary parishioners; young people (those under 30 or even 40); young people struggling financially (e.g. tuition costs); former Catholics; Catholics who are not attending services; homebound Catholics no longer visited by priests; LGBTQ individuals; divorced Catholics; women who have had abortions; persons with physical disabilities,

- including hearing impaired (St. Nick's no longer provides a sign language interpreter); persons in care facilities such as Albany House; the homeless; the poor; refugees and immigrants; victims of abuse.
- Some of the groups named as marginalized are specific to our local community. Others are more broadly marginalized in society.
 - Young people feel marginalized and question whether they belong in the Church. Connecting with them where they are is the only way to bridge the gap.
 - Inclusion is uneven across the Catholic community. Some who are welcomed at St. Nicholas are excluded in other parishes or by the institutional Church. For example, LGBTQ people in our parish feel accepted, but the Church at large is not as accepting. LGBTQ diocesan employees have been fired for being who they are, and committed partners of twenty-five years or more have been told that to receive absolution, they must leave their partners.
 - Pope Francis has been affirming and sustaining, but sometimes clergy speak out of their own marginalization and further alienate others in the Church.

Parishioners at St. Nicholas encounter those on the margins in a variety of ways.

- Marginalized individuals worship with us on Sundays.
- Members of the community show up at the parish office seeking help.
- The homeless are visible in our local community and are served by organizations that many parishioners support.
- Lay reflections during Mass broaden our understanding of what it means to be human and challenge us to move beyond sympathy.
- "We are the Church. We must be welcoming."
- "All are welcome" is the vision; how can we live this vision?

Listening is key to being inclusive.

- We must listen to articulated needs: for example, we should ask young people what they want and need. Initiatives can't be top down.
- Young people are often ignored so we shouldn't wonder why they aren't in church.
- Pope Francis is modeling active listening. However, the perception is that the hierarchy isn't listening and isn't interested in a two-way dialogue.
- We can learn from those who are leaving or have left the parish or Church. Ask them to help us understand their reasons.

Creative solutions are needed in order to be inclusive. Some of these solutions include more effective use of technology.

- The live streaming of services as an option can allow the homebound to be safely connected, but for most virtual attendance can't replace in-person worship.
- Liturgy cannot become entertainment.
- An ongoing social media presence, far more extensive than currently offered, would promote inclusivity.
- A Mass for teens and young adults and a Sunday evening Mass might be ways to promote involvement of these groups.

- One size does not fit all. Flexibility is key.

PARTICIPATION

Parishioners expressed urgency for fundamental, transformational change and for true diversity, equality, and inclusion. For many of us, the time for incremental change has passed.

- Even committed, involved parishioners have left the parish and the Church, often because change has been too slow.
- The impact of the clergy abuse scandal and injustice toward women has been profound.
- The Church is pushing people away and is perceived as not being receptive to change. “People are turning away from the Church because the Church is turning away from them.”
- Even Catholics who have had every opportunity to be part of our vibrant parish (Catholic schools K – university and supportive Catholic families) have found the Church irrelevant.
- Our parish has lost anchors of our community. These losses have been deeply felt.
- The adult children of committed Catholics are un-churched.
- Vitality is missing in many parishes; we value the vitality at St. Nick’s.
- As society has changed, the institutional Church has become less central to people’s lives. The Church is seen as unreceptive to change. As a result, the Church as we knew it is disappearing.
- Church leaders have not always appreciated the perceived chasm between Catholicism and Christianity.
- The pandemic has exacerbated trends that were already evident.
- Many who have stayed in the Church have done so in order to work for change from within.

Having women in all roles, including priesthood and the diaconate, was strongly supported throughout the discussions.

- Women are not viewed or treated as equals.
- “Full participation” must mean women in all roles. This is a “given.” “No more second class citizens.” By extension, “full participation” would also mean married clergy.
- We say “we are together,” but gender divisions persist.
- Young people don’t accept or understand the exclusion of women.
- “We don’t get to stop working just because the men feel they can do a better job.”
- “We are making a sacrifice by being women in the Church.”
- St. Nicholas has an Equality for Women in the Church committee that advocates for women in the diaconate and priesthood.

Parishioners emphasized the fundamental importance of liturgy.

- Meaningful rituals, challenging homilies that relate the message to what is relevant in the world, beautiful music, prayerful presiding, and well-prepared lectors all contribute to the experience. Lay preaching is a necessary component.
- Liturgy is the principal way (often the only way) that most Catholics are nourished in their faith.
- Gathering in person as a community of faith is essential to a sense of belonging. It is the “together” part of journeying together.
- The Eucharist has always been central. How can that be maintained when participation is virtual?
- The sacraments remain important on a personal level, even among those who are no longer committed Catholics and who don’t attend services regularly.
- Education is needed about the Mass, liturgy, sacraments, and our faith traditions (adult catechesis). Faith formation and learning must be ongoing.
- The spirit must be nurtured by meditation and quiet. How can we bring this into being Church?

MISSION

Parishioners emphasized the importance of honoring the past while being open to new ways of being Church.

- Knowledge of each other’s traditions will help to build new bonds of community as St. Nicholas and St. Mary parishes merge.
- Our parish and our Church offer many models, past and present. They include inspired leaders, parish “elders,” and those dedicated to ongoing ministries: for example, ushers, Boy Scouts, soup kitchen, Ministry of Care, post-detention team, Stephen Ministry, and St. Vincent de Paul Society.

The Church’s leadership structure is dysfunctional and in urgent need of fundamental systemic change. The structure is undermining the Church’s ability to effectively serve the mission of Christ.

Widespread clericalism is a key manifestation of the dysfunctional structure.

Clericalism—identified by Pope Francis as a major barrier to mission—is reinforced by:

- Rigid and exclusionary hierarchical structure
- Exclusion of women from being priests or deacons
- Exclusion of laity from decision making power
- Mandatory celibacy for priests

The effects of the dysfunctional structure can be seen in:

- Leadership that is out of touch with the rest of the world
- Sexual abuse by clergy and its cover-up
- An attitude of passivity and subservience by much of the laity
- Alienation of young people
- Laity leaving the Church to avoid complicity in an unjust system

Active outreach on a grassroots level, in addition to fundamental internal reform, builds strong community, and strong community is critical to attracting and retaining membership.

- The pandemic has weakened the ties of community.
- Small groups are effective in building community: for example, ReLent groups at St. Nicholas and St. Mary.
- “Life goes on at the ground level.” Empower, include, be intentional.
- Participation in parish ministries and activities leads to a sense of belonging and a feeling of contributing to the greater good.
- Journeying with grieving families and with immigrants are examples of positive outreach.
- Parishioners have been encouraged to “participate in whatever way you can.” This general message is important, but so are personal invitations to become involved.
- The non-ordained should have authority as well as responsibility.
- Inclusion and community building takes sustained, focused effort.
- Hospitality and reaching out to new parishioners, possibly through a revival of our Welcoming Committee, would promote a feeling of being part of the community.
- How well are we meeting the needs of our thriving Hispanic population? For example, publications are sometimes English only and staff aren’t all fully bilingual.

Commitment to social justice is a strength of our parish.

- Build on this strength by addressing social justice issues in homilies, by using stories of inspiring individuals and leaders such as Dorothy Day.
- Participation in Interfaith Action and collections for charities are ways to demonstrate support for social justice.
- The Holy Spirit is alive in commitment to justice, inclusion, and the marginalized in our parish.
- Sunday worship should not be the most visible action of the Church. Our mission begins when we leave the church.
- Doing the work of God in an active way unifies us. Participants expressed a desire for more service opportunities, perhaps even monthly.
- Young people (under 40) are out in the world dedicating their lives to making a difference, but they remain outside the Church and often feel disrespected. They want action and a Church that demonstrates faith in a tangible way. How do we invite them to come to Church? Begin with conversations and show involvement in social justice work.

Individuals are more likely to become part of the Church if they see it working for justice, peace, and respect for all human life, but Church leadership is falling short.

- Lay people seem to be more interested and more active in social justice than the clergy at the top. Many lay Catholics don’t feel support from above and find it hard to evangelize when Church leadership doesn’t address their doubts and concerns.

- Bishops often set poor priorities: for example, focusing on whether President Biden should receive communion.
- There is great concern for the unborn but not as much concern for mothers and children after birth.
- The emphasis needs to be on humanitarian issues rather than on partisan politics.
- Bishops need to hear the same message about justice, peace, and respect for human life that is being preached to the laity.
- The Catholic Church is a global Church and can make a big impact,