

Four Steps to Practising Synodality

During the pandemic, Pope Francis presented us with a new image of church: that, no matter who we were, we were together in the same boat. The worldwide Synod process came out of that desire to engage with our changing world and with those on the margins to regain a renewed sense of purpose and mission. However, putting this into practice is not so simple. As a Church, we don't necessarily have good ways of listening to voices on the margins and connecting to people's lives. We struggle to have difficult or creative conversations, and to step away from our own agendas. In many ways we have lost the habit of seeking the Holy Spirit, and we are often paralysed by indecision. Pope Francis challenges us to become a listening, engaged church, through becoming more synodal.

Specifically this means:

- Actively responding to our changing world – reading the signs of the times
- Learning how to hold prayerful, truthful and safe conversations which value gracious listening and courageous speaking
- Consciously seeking the Holy Spirit's inspiration
- Being compelled to action by the stories we've heard

Although this sounds complicated, synodality is a way of being community which has been part of the Church since the very beginning (Council of Jerusalem, Acts 15). We have ancient tools of lectio divina and spiritual conversation which, when done well, can be transformative. In the past year, as we have grown in confidence



in this new way of being, synodality has been used to resolve contentious issues in parishes; to look for creative solutions to diocesan finances; and even to create safe listening spaces in response to clergy sex abuse. The result of becoming synodal, of truly encountering one another heart-to-heart, is a new sense of purpose. Grounded in the vocation of all the baptised, this purpose brings people together, helps prioritise finances and resources, allows people's gifts to flourish and enables us to take risks for the Kingdom. In Pope Francis' words, we move from being "zombie Christians" to "a caravan of solidarity" (Evangelii Gaudium, 83, 87) where all are welcome, all loved, all known.

Because this represents a significant shift in our culture, and is not a straight-forward undertaking, we offer a four step process modelled on the Council of Jerusalem, the first time the Church faced an intractable problem. We follow the disciples from disagreement to silence and story-telling, and then to discerning the Holy Spirit. Once the Spirit is discerned, the Church is compelled to action. There is much that we can learn from this example for the Church today. We must also become aware of new skills to learn, bad habits to break, and dispositions to cultivate. The School for Synodality exists to make this process a reality.

Lessons from the Council of Jerusalem: Acts 15

Step 1: Encounter

Paul and Barnabas were so successful in sharing the Gospel that many pagan people were coming to faith, and the question was raised: do you have to be Jewish to be Christian? Being Jewish meant keeping a kosher diet, being circumcised (for adult males) and other requirements of the Jewish law. Paul

and Barnabas felt passionately that this was not necessary, but there were passionate views opposing them too. Step 1 on our synodal journey is to be open to encountering our changing world and to be open to encountering difference. What is happening now that we need to respond to?

¹ Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.' ⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

Acts 15: 1-6

"Listening to those who have the same views as we do bears no fruit. Dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that we can easily exclude, cast aside, or discount.

Document for the
Diocesan Phase
(Vademecum), 2.2

What are some of the 'signs of the times' that we are called to respond to?

Skills

Step 1 involves a skill of encountering others which involves being open to people's stories, gifts and brokenness. Pope Francis points to Jesus as the perfect model of this: "The Lord does not stand aloof; he does not appear annoyed or disturbed... He is open to encounter. Nothing leaves Jesus indifferent; everything is of concern to him. Encountering faces, meeting eyes, sharing each individual's history. That is the closeness that Jesus embodies. He knows that someone's life can be changed by a single encounter." Pope Francis, Homily for the Opening of the Synodal Path

Bad habits

Closing our hearts to encounter or being scared of where that openness might take us.

Disposition:

Humility – we do not have all the answers, we empty ourselves to serve others.

Lessons from the Council of Jerusalem: Acts 15

Step 2: Listening

Before Paul and Barnabas could make a decision, they had to bring the situation to the wider church, and to listen to all the voices. The early church was not afraid of debate – when so much is at stake, it's necessary to take time to listen properly and to hold difference. In fact, if everyone is agreeing, we need to ask ourselves if we have the right people in the room. Are we hearing all the voices? Who is missing?

⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.' ¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Acts 15: 7-12

"Let us ask ourselves frankly during this synodal process: Are we good at listening? How good is the "hearing" of our heart? Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered, rejected or judged?"

Pope Francis, Homily on the Opening of the Synodal Path

Which do you find hardest – listening graciously or speaking courageously?

Who is missing from our conversations?

Skills

The kind of listening required here is different from what we use in everyday life. It's the kind of drop-everything-and-pay-attention listening that we might give to a friend or family member who is in trouble. We don't need to be thinking of a good answer, and we don't need to fix the other person. We just make safe space for them to speak. If we are listening in groups (eg in meetings) two great tools that the Church gives us are lectio divina and conversation in the Spirit. Both involve practising silence, allowing all voices to be heard, and actively discerning the Holy Spirit. (see our resources page for more, schoolforsynodality.org.uk/resources)

Bad habits

Needing to win an argument or to defend our agenda – listening to judge, not to learn.

Disposition:

Courage – to speak honestly, to be silent, to stick with the process.

Lessons from the Council of Jerusalem: Acts 15

Step 3: Discernment

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¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name... ¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God... ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.'

Acts 15: 13-4, 19, 28-29

"Encounter and listening are not ends in themselves, leaving everything just as it was before. On the contrary, whenever we enter into dialogue, we allow ourselves to be challenged, to advance on a journey. And in the end, we are no longer the same; we are changed."

Pope Francis, Homily on the Opening of the Synodal Path

How do we discern the Holy Spirit in our contexts?

Skills

Are you able to be free of your biases in thinking through an important decision? Does it give you a sense of peace, or are you still troubled? Can you test the decision in some way? The Jesuits have been learning and teaching discernment for centuries, and there are some excellent resources available online.

This is a good place to start: jesuit.org.uk/spirituality/making-good-decisions

Bad habits

Not seeking the Holy Spirit! Weirdly, as Catholic communities we often don't do this. It's an excellent time to get into new habits of seeing the presence of the Spirit in our lives.

Disposition:

Openness – to be open to the Holy Spirit, to be surprised, to be wrong.

Lessons from the Council of Jerusalem: Acts 15

Step 4: Move to action

Once the decision is taken, the disciples don't hang about. A letter is written to all the churches which Paul and Barnabas, and two other witnesses from the Council, Judas and Silas, take with them to share this official new teaching. A new understanding of church and being a Christian emerges.

It is worth making a thought experiment at this point. What would have happened if Paul and Barnabas had worried that Jerusalem was a long way away, that the Pharisees in Jerusalem would never listen, and that the best thing was

to change the law in the church where they were and not worry about the rest? It is likely that they would have split the Church – there would have been the majority requiring everyone to be Jewish and a small number of believers who disagreed. In those circumstances the Church may not have grown and flourished as it did. Instead of taking the easier route, Paul and Barnabas had the humility to know they did not have all the answers, the courage to speak boldly and to listen graciously, and the openness to be able to discern the Holy Spirit. The fruit of all this? Joy.

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. ³² Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Acts 15: 30-35

"If it is not embodied in structures and processes, the style of synodality easily degrades from the level of intentions and desires to that of rhetoric, while processes and events, if they are not animated by an adequate style, turn out to be empty formalities."

Preparatory Document, #27

In what areas of your life is the Holy Spirit moving you to action?

Skills

Moving to action often involves a lot of good life skills such as planning, gathering volunteers and communication. Above all, make sure you have heard the wisdom of everyone involved before you get started, in case there is a lesson it what someone will say that will save you a mistake. At the same time – do make sure you move to action. Starting small can be the way to a quick win.

Bad habits

Jumping straight to action without listening or discerning – or thinking that the decision is the action and not following through – or not quite getting to action. We have a lot of bad habits here!

Disposition:

Joy – to look for an encounter with the Living Lord and know joy and true peace

Characteristics of a Synodal Church

Taken from the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the guiding document for the Synod in Rome

Synodality is grounded in the vocation of all the baptised – we are all sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Christ in the one Spirit and sent for the common mission.

Central to becoming a Synodal Church is the **renewal of structures, institutions and procedures** to allow for co-responsibility to be exercised and practised.

In becoming a listening Church we discover the **joys of truly listening and being listened to, just as Jesus listened to those he met**. Our listening is not just within our communities, but to the world, and especially to the marginalised.

Through this listening, we desire to grow in humility and recognise that as a Church we must ask forgiveness and **have much to learn**.

A synodal Church is one of **encounter and dialogue**, especially with other Churches, recongising our common baptism.

Carrying the weight of these questions should not be the personal burden of those who occupy certain roles, with the risk of being crushed by them, **but a task for the entire community, nurtured by the Eucharist**.

Authentic listening and the ability to find ways to **continue walking together beyond fragmentation and polarisation are indispensable for the Church** to remain alive and vital and to be a powerful sign for the cultures of our time.

The radical call is, therefore, to build together, synodally, an attractive and concrete Church: an outgoing Church, in which all feel welcome, **managing tensions without being crushed by them**.

This Church is **not afraid of variety but values it without forcing it into uniformity**.

Trying to walk together also brings us into contact with the healthy restlessness of incompleteness, with the awareness that there are still many things whose weight we are not able to carry or bear (cf. Jn 16:12). This is not a problem to be solved, but rather a gift to be cultivated.

A synodal Church is also a Church of discernment. As we listen attentively to each other's lived experiences, we grow in mutual respect and begin to discern the movements of God's Spirit in the lives of others and in our own, in the hope of becoming a Church increasingly capable of making prophetic decisions that are the fruit of the Spirit's guidance.

It is clear that the purpose of this Synod is not to produce more documents. Rather, it is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission (PD, 32)

Using the material

You can use this framework for personal reflection, but also with any group in the Church, especially decision-making groups (parish councils, finance committees, school governors etc) to become more synodal. This will involve using two great tools of lectio divina and conversation in the Spirit.

Take an hour at the beginning of a longer meeting, or hold special meetings, or even use this material as the basis of a retreat day or afternoon together. It will be transformative for you!

It might be helpful to send the introduction to the materials to people in advance, or to use it to introduce your sessions.

Then, for each step:



1. Begin with the Scripture passage, using a lectio divina method:

- *Make sure everyone can see the words – either print out a copy per person, or project the words.*
- *Begin with silence and ask the Holy Spirit to be with you. It can be as simple as saying “Come Holy Spirit”*
- *Read the passage through at least twice. Having different voices helps to highlight different words.*
- *Keep silence between the readings and afterwards. Be aware how people are dealing with the silence.*
- *Sharing – if a group of more than 6-8, ask people first to share with the person next to them. What word or phrase struck them? Then move to the wider group and ask if anyone would like to share anything with the full group?*
- *Finish by asking the Father to send the Holy Spirit on your meeting.*

2. Use the commentary to introduce each topic and link to the reading.

3. Introduce the question for conversation and use the conversation in the Spirit method:

Begin with a few moments of silence to allow ourselves to ponder the question.

First round of conversation:

Each person has a chance to speak. There is no discussion in this round, and there is a time of silence to allow for reflection.

Second round of conversation:

Share what struck you most or what resonated for you in the first round and what moved you during the time of silence. Once again this is followed by a pause for reflection.

Third round of conversation:

Finally in the third round participants reflect on what moved them most deeply.

What new insights arise? What are the common themes or fruits of the conversations?

4. Finish your meeting by committing everything to God by saying the Glory be.