

Irish Synodal Pathway – Submission of the Working Group on Belonging

Working Group Priority Area: **Belonging**

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1. Group Overview

Members:

Mr Joe Conroy

Dr Kevin Hargarden

Sr Anne Harte Barry

Bishop Paul Dempsey

Fr Tony O’Riordan SJ

Convener:

Deacon Gary Carville

National Synodal Team Representative:

Sr Angéle Nkamsi

2. Statement of Discernment and Vision

How we worked together:

Trusting in God, we gathered together on seven occasions: once in person and the remaining times online. Our meetings took place in the evenings, usually from 7:30 to 9:00 pm, though they often stretched a little beyond this as our conversations deepened.

We came together with goodwill, with a shared commitment, and with a sincere desire to be attentive to the Spirit and faithful to the Synodal journey. As we progressed, prayer became more present in our meetings. From this place of prayer, we entered into Spiritual Conversation. Each person was invited to share how their encounter with the Lord had shaped their thoughts and their contribution.

What we did:

We engaged with materials from a range of sources concerning belonging in an Irish setting. We spent considerable time in dialogue on the range of questions that arose, with a view to putting forward some practical recommendations to

the Synodal Assembly that would give meaningful expression to the *Baptised and Sent* document and, moreover, set in motion some initiatives that could enliven the sense of belonging in each local community of faith setting. We did feel rushed and would have welcomed more time and resources for research, reflection and deeper exploration. What we share is offered in humility: provisional, unfolding, and still on the way.

What we heard:

We experienced something of the *sensus fidelium*—a quiet confirmation within the group, encouraging us to name and to offer what we have discerned.

We have heard, across Ireland, of the great passion people have for the living faith in Christ, encountered through the sacraments and through the life of the Church. But we have also heard how communities are struggling with a widespread sense of decline. And we have also heard of those who feel they do not belong within the Church or who struggle to find their place. The Church must follow the example of Jesus and come up and walk alongside (Luke 24:15) those who are struggling, facing challenges, or feel excluded from the community of the baptised.

Some of those who have been at the forefront of our thinking include people who are newly arrived and struggling to find their feet in Irish society; those who are sick, or ageing, or living with disabilities; those in the LGBT+ communities who can often encounter a cold welcome in the Church; those wrestling with grief, relationship breakdown, and economic difficulty; those who grapple with mental and emotional health problems; and indeed those in the Irish diaspora who have left the land of their first belonging. We were especially alert to how contemporary social realities make a sense of belonging difficult to secure and here we specifically note the younger generations coming of age in a period of rapid technological change and those who face housing precarity. There are so many difficulties but what we heard is that the Church is often a strong anchor point in people's sense of belonging, even if we do not always feel like we can describe that fluently.

The call to radiate the love of God to all people must mean that we proclaim the great beauty of the Gospel and Church Teaching. This compels us to share what we have received so as to bring more people into communion with the Church. Language and approach to questions of belonging in this respect are crucial.

Why these proposals:

Our Working Group discerns that journeying together means listening deeply to one another in order to build greater communion with Christ and one

another and inculcate a shared sense of mission. Our group noted the words of Pope Francis when he said: ‘A Church which “goes forth” is a Church whose doors are open’.¹

It is clear to us that belonging and inclusion are not simply themes among others; they are foundational. Indeed, they are so central that they might well be seen as expressions of mission itself. At the same time, we are aware of the limits of our understanding. These realities are wide and complex, touching many aspects of Church life. For this reason, many of our proposals are offered tentatively, with an openness to further reflection and development. One of our recommendations is the need for deeper study and research, so that the Church’s path of renewal may be grounded, thoughtful, and life-giving. We also considered the question of language and style of teaching used by the universal Church. While not trying to undermine Church teaching in areas such as sexual morality, we have concluded that quite often the language used, although technically understood at institutional level, is far from welcoming for some people, particularly the LGBT+ community and their families.

At a wider level, the Working Group suggests that the recent comments by Pope Leo concerning Church unity being prioritised around justice and equality rather than just sexual ethics to be worthy of reflection in terms of recommendations being put forward.²

With regard to migrants and refugees, their presence is very significant in Ireland. But we must not see them as ‘them’ but as part of ‘us’. That said, they could have much to teach us in terms of a future model of Church that is more rooted in belonging to one another in Christ.

Finally, we also consider ecumenism to be linked to the theme of Belonging. This must involve a renewed sense of local churches working together in a visible sense. While relationships at national level are good, there is still a lot to be done in terms of building a greater degree of belonging and reconciliation locally. This may also be important in the future political and constitutional direction of the island of Ireland in the years and decades ahead.

¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 47.

² Pope Leo remarks on return flight to Rome from Apostolic Visit to Africa, 23 April 2026. [Pope: As a pastor, I cannot be in favor of war; too many innocents have died - Vatican News](#) The Holy Father said: ‘I think it’s very important to understand that the unity or division of the Church should not revolve around sexual matters. We tend to think that when the Church is talking about morality, that the only issue of morality is sexual. And in reality, I believe, there are much greater, more important issues such as justice, equality, freedom of men and women, freedom of religion, that would take priority before that particular issue.’

Vision for the Church in Ireland:

‘Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (Romans 15:7).

The foundational truth of our faith is that we belong, first and foremost, to God. Because we belong to God, we are inherently bound to the rest of his creation - we belong to the Earth we call home and we belong to each other as members of one human family. Loneliness, alienation, and exclusion are thus not mere social ills to be lamented but are part of the work God calls baptised people to address.

At the heart of this Synodal journey and process is a call to the Church in Ireland: to reflect the Lord’s own desire to gather, to draw people together, and to nurture a deeper sense of belonging. We sense an invitation to foster attitudes and practices that make this belonging more visible, more tangible, and more deeply lived in our communities.

Like the story of the Road to Emmaus, we find in our listening something of our own journey mirrored back to us. Like the disciples, we become aware of a quiet fire in our hearts as we listen, share and discern together. We too now must always return to the wider community with what we have received and what we are able to offer.

As the People of God in Ireland, we recognise that in the past we have been part of a culture that made people feel excluded rather than as part of God’s family. We still have much to learn and much to do in proclaiming Christ’s mission of love and mercy to all and that we are all called to live as the one Body of Christ.

Going forward, our Baptism mandates us to welcome one another with language and styles that speak to each human person in Ireland today, each of whom is created in the image and likeness of God. No one is a stranger in the family of God.

Our vision also encompasses the care of creation all around us. We have a duty and a responsibility to lead people to a greater awareness of their unique part in God's creation and what this means for each of us in a global sense.

We know that the journey is not complete. There is more to be said, more to be understood, and more to be done. Yet we take this next step with trust. We believe the Lord has been walking with us, and we are confident that, together, we can continue along the road.

Like the yellow arrows on the Camino de Santiago - the Lord has given us this clear marker to continue the journey. We have some distance to travel, but we are clear on the direction of travel.

If there is to be one enduring legacy from this Synodal Pathway, let it be this: that we have said, clearly and without ambiguity, that the call of the Lord is to all. All are called, all are welcome, and all are to belong.

3. Proposals for Consideration

Proposal 1

Title:

Description: That we invite each diocese to begin discerning the process of establishing in every parish a “Ministry of Listening and Belonging.” This process might begin with an assessment of existing practices in each parish and an examination of best practices across the country. A simple, visible ministry made up of trained parishioners and clergy, whose role is to be present, to listen deeply, and to accompany people; especially those who feel unsure of their place in the Church.

Even for many Irish people today, regardless of their sense of faith in God, they can often feel a distance from the local parish. We need to invite them into a space that belongs to them locally in terms of identity and also something radical – the vibrancy of the radical message of Jesus Christ. “I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Rationale: At the heart of **belonging**, there is a very human longing to be seen, to be heard, and to know that one’s life matters. God answers that longing. Therefore, everyone must be made feel welcome to the hospitality of God in each parish.

Many people today are not necessarily asking: “Is there a place for me here?” People often leave the church not because they no longer believe, but because they no longer feel recognised, welcomed, or understood. This is particularly so in the case of migrant people, who are already on the margins of society and for whom the local parish can be a true place of welcome and belonging. Parishes are more than administrative units. There is a danger that as parishes amalgamate that they lose a sense of identity and connection with people and

therefore are less capable of engendering a sense of participation, mission and community.

Intended Impact: A purposeful approach to listening and belonging at the local level would gently change the culture of our parishes:

- ❖ From programmes to relationships
- ❖ From assumption to attentiveness
- ❖ From silence to honest encounter

It would also ensure that parish communities across Ireland remain connected with each other as vibrant centres of belonging, most especially places where people encounter Christ through Word and Sacraments and through each other as neighbours.

Implementation Pathway:

Phase 1 Each diocese asked to undertake an assessment of community connection and to begin a conversation locally on what belonging means in each parish and to identify needs. Such a process must be resourced and supported by appropriate templates and guidelines.

Phase 2 Training of people and teams who can reach out to people on the margins of parishes. It must be noted that many parishes already have much to teach us in this respect. Parishes should be encouraged to “own” their own action plans in this respect.

Phase 3 Development of programmes (catechesis, adult faith development, liturgical ministries, family ministry, social care, care of creation, community outreach etc) that will provide people with a real sense of belonging at the most basic and important level of the Church, i.e. the local parish community.

Proposal 2

Title: **Building communion with those who struggle to see the relevance of the Church**

Description: Belonging means reaching out to members of the community who have drifted away from the Church and/or those who have not been a member of the church. To meet with them in a ‘neutral’ setting and interact with them in a way that shows the gospel values through dialogue and encounter.

Rationale: Many people have fallen away from the Church over recent decades, some for understandable reasons, others for reasons that may be addressed more easily. The purpose of this proposal is to encounter these people in a dialogue that listens to them, hears their story and relates to them as individuals, establishing what nourishes them and enabling them to reconnect with the God of love, who welcomes everyone.

By showing forgiveness, love and mercy, as well as openness to new understandings, before doctrine and dogma, people may see a more pastoral church that they could identify with and maybe belong to.

Intended Impact: To bear witness to Christ in a way that brings the love and mercy of God to others in the community through encounter with Christ in ways that relate to them. This is especially needed for those who are deprived or challenged in various ways. Eventually, it is hoped this will enrich and build up the faith community with a renewed sense of family, hospitality and acceptance. Perhaps there are new places where the ministry of the Church needs to reach, e.g. people with special or additional needs.

Implementation Pathway:

1. Ask dioceses and parishes to identify needs specific to them in order to put in place a programme of outreach. Each diocese and parish needs to be resourced in terms of trained people and best practices for the creation of spaces where people can speak honestly about faith, doubt and disillusionment.
2. Then outreach can begin, initially through community activities not necessarily related to the Church. To encounter other people and by building relationships with them it would hopefully enhance a sense of community and recognise the experiences of people who are marginalised.
3. Parishes should be encouraged on an ongoing basis to use creative appropriate ways of connecting with those who have fallen away for whatever reason, assuring them they still belong, to build trust and to shift the model from maintenance to mission.

Proposal 3

Title: Promotion of pastoral accompaniment and support of people who experience brokenness in relationships, in the spirit of *Amoris Laetitia*.

Description: *Amoris Laetitia* reaffirms the Church's understanding of marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, open to life and rooted in the sacramental life of the Church. However, it calls on the Church to accompany individuals and families with mercy and compassion, especially those who experience brokenness in relationships. This marks a shift from a purely rule-based model towards a model of accompaniment. The synodal approach invites us as Church to listen more carefully to people's lived experience rather than simply applying universal norms.

Rationale: *Amoris Laetitia* outlines how a person's objective situation and their personal culpability are not always the same. Various circumstances can lessen moral responsibility. Subsequently, one of the most discussed aspects of *Amoris Laetitia* is in Chapter 8 and the related footnote 351. It suggests that, after a process of discernment, some people in irregular situations may receive the help of the sacraments. There have been different interpretations of this. Pope Francis reminds us that '*the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.*' (*Amoris Laetitia*, 305). In *Evangelii Gaudium* he outlined how "*Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a customs post; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.*" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 47). This is a powerful statement with a strong sense of belonging. It encourages people not to abandon hope even when their situation is complex and they feel excluded from full participation in the life of the Church and especially the Eucharist.

Intended Impact: We recognise that this approach can create tensions between those who emphasise the doctrinal teaching of the Church and others who seek greater pastoral flexibility.

The challenge for the Church in Ireland is to find a balance between fidelity to Church teaching and the Gospel call of mercy and inclusion. The synodal approach attempts to avoid polarisation by encouraging communal discernment.

The synodal approach invites us as Church to listen more carefully to people's lived experience rather than simply applying universal norms.

Implementation Pathway:

4. Considering these painful situations, we propose that the Church in Ireland engage further with the Universal Church in the Synodal process on this question and its implications for those who feel they do not belong because of their relationship situation.
5. While there are no clear or easy answers on this journey, by naming this issue again and engaging with it further we wish to emphasise its importance in the Church's pastoral life and mission in Ireland.
6. We need to foster parish communities that are inclusive and welcoming where no one feels excluded from the love and care of the Church, but that they know *'there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.'*

Proposal 4

Title: **Rooting belonging in practice: challenging the language and style at universal level**

Description: That the Church in Ireland would take a lead in challenging the universal church around language used in relation to LGBT+ people. Also, finding ways that show visible support to people in the LGBT+ communities and that we as a church do welcome them.

Rationale: As Catholics, we recognise that the Catholic Church has a long-established teaching on human sexuality, including its teaching regarding same sex attraction. Many faithful people continue to engage seriously and prayerfully with that tradition, even where they experience tension or disagreement.

At the same time, we believe that the language historically used in some Church documents has damaged people's sense of belonging and personal worth in the Church. Terms such as "disordered" or "intrinsically disordered," cause deep pain and alienation for many LGBT+ people and their families. Whatever the original theological intent of these phrases, in contemporary language they are widely understood as describing a person themselves as defective, damaged, or less fully human.

Intended Impact: We affirm the dignity, worth, and belovedness of every person, made in the image and likeness of God. We believe the Church's mission is to speak truth with compassion, humility, and pastoral sensitivity, and that

language matters profoundly in how people encounter the Gospel and experience a sense of belonging in the community of faith.

Questioning or re-examining certain expressions does not require abandoning Catholic faith or tradition. The recent report from Study Group 9 from the Synod reflects upon this question and recognises the polarised positions between *‘those who reaffirm non-negotiable principles in the name of truth and those who, albeit in different ways, emphasise the demands of understanding and merciful love’* (2.3). The report reflects upon the Church’s ongoing responsibility to listen and discern around this *‘emerging issue.’*

Implementation Pathway: Therefore, the Catholic Church in Ireland calls upon the Universal Church to devise a more respectful and life-giving vocabulary when speaking about LGBT+ people. A language that upholds conscience, recognises lived experience, and better reflects a sense of belonging in the Christian Community.

The pathway for this will involve continued spiritual discernment and application through the various opportunities and pathways that are presented to us at national, European and Universal levels. As well as rigorous academic engagement, this pathway would also include future Synods and Assemblies.

Proposal 5

Title: **Ministry with the Travelling People**

Description: To welcome the fuller participation of the Travelling People in the wider life of the Church based on genuine, respectful, and reciprocal relationships.

Rationale: While it is acknowledged that many dioceses and parishes have structures and some personnel in place to work with the Travelling People, and furthermore, that a great number of the Travelling People participate in the life of the Catholic Church in Ireland, we seek to actively confront and dismantle the systemic prejudice, misunderstanding, and social exclusion endured by them within the church and wider society. It is important to recognise that our church is incomplete without their unique culture, rich devotional traditions, and history.

Intended Impact: To build on the deep, historic faith roots within the Travelling People, so as to further enrich our local parishes with the true diversity of the People of God. We do this by:

- Forging clear pathways for members of the Travelling People to become active leaders, decision-makers, and workers for the Gospel in local parishes.
- Regularly weaving the traditions, music, and expressions of faith of the Travelling People into the worship life of the parish.
- Rejecting causal prejudice – whether expressed in individual actions and words or collective structures – and replacing it with a deep, lived culture of mutual respect and shared communion.

Implementation Pathway:

1. Identify and support parish team leaders to undergo anti-racism and cultural competency training.
2. Cultivate safe, shared spaces – such as study groups, prayer circles, or community forums – where settled and Traveller Catholics can share their faith stories, break down stereotypes, and build genuine friendship.
3. Expand parish projects – youth ministries, pilgrimages, community support hubs – which are entirely co-designed and co-led by members of the both the settled community and Travelling People.
4. Create prioritised pathways into leadership and parish, diocesan, and national level for members of the Travelling People.

Proposal 6

Title: A renewed emphasis on inter-Church encounter and dialogue in everything that we do in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Description: Being in dialogue, walking together, is a visible expression of belonging to Christ and his Church. Local inter-Church encounters are generally left to older people in local settings and often are associated with Northern Ireland alone. All communities in the Church in Ireland must be challenged to renew the sense of ecumenical dialogue and accompaniment locally. There is a challenge for us to invite younger people to encounter Christ through shared moments of prayer, study and witness in the community.

Rationale: The Second Vatican Council set the Church forth on a renewed path towards unity. This resulted in a range of encounters, moments of prayer and the development of structures for the purposes of joint-action and to stand together in the public square. Today, in a more secular Ireland, this is increasingly important. The fullness of the Church of Christ must be seen and heard as a voice in the public square.

It is recognised that the Irish Church Leaders Group, the Irish Inter-Church Meeting and the Irish Council of Churches, continue to give outstanding visible witness to unity, a renewed sense of working with other Christian Churches at local level is needed within the Catholic Church all across the island. While relations are good at national level, those relationships are based on political realities of the day and can often be just responsive. In today's polarised world, we need visible expressions of Christ's Church in action, doing things together in the local setting – the food bank, caring for and protecting our common home amidst God's creation, outreach to vulnerable people and working for justice, peace and reconciliation together.

The arrival in Ireland of members of new Church communities, including Orthodox Churches, is a welcome development and enriches the conversations at Inter-Church level. Translating this into practical encounter locally will require a focus at diocesan levels, in communion with the local bishop and all of the People of God.

Intended Impact: Just as Ireland has become more secular and multicultural, there is a need for us all to bring our Christian witness to the fore in a range of areas that will help us be peacemakers, build reconciliation and social cohesion across the whole island and to show practical care for our communities and our planet, that is rooted in the Gospel.

There is also a growing need for forms of inter-church work and prayer to engage younger people, particularly those in youth ministry. A listening process is required in this respect.

Implementation Pathway:

1. The IEC should engage with each diocese in terms of how best the call to be one in Christ can be given visible expression locally today, in the light of current circumstances. From that, a national plan with objectives can be discerned and devised.
2. Establishment of and support for visible structures and pathways for encounter and dialogue that are open to people more locally.

Proposal 7

Title: A national commission for faith-based social infrastructure and abiding

Description:

That the Synodal Assembly recommends a practical, research-driven Commission to map out and strengthen the local support networks for different kinds of belonging that faith communities already provide across Ireland.

We want to discover how local parishes already act as the first line of support for people who are isolated or struggling. The goal is to move past just talking about welcoming people and instead focus on how real encounters of belonging are being fostered and how that can be strengthened. This Commission will find what is already working well, share those lessons across the country, and show how the church can help wider society as it fulfils its apostolic mission.

Rationale:

Recent research suggests that the Church and other faith-based groups are often very effective in reaching those on the margins, helping them in all kinds of concrete ways around navigating health services, finding housing or work, managing paperwork – as well as providing spiritual comfort and an essential sense of community and belonging. By deepening the evidence for this, we can clearly demonstrate to the public and the State that the church is a vital partner in our society.

Intended Impact:

Real partnership with migrant communities: we can move from just treating “new Irish” and migrant congregations as guests to fully recognising them as essential, equal neighbours.

Turning empty spaces into community assets: we can identify underused church properties and land and turn them into practical resources – like community hubs, social housing, or spaces for local start-ups.

An end to the “secular blind spot”: we can provide the State and local authorities with hard data which demonstrate the on-going relevance and contribution of faith to our shared life.

Implementation Pathway:

Phase 1 - A new map: We can map out every diocese to identify the local churches and groups that currently act as primary safety nets for people in need.

Phase 2 – new resources: We can seek support for research funding to build a complete record of the under-used facilities available to find support new initiatives.

Phase 3 – A new discussion: We can call for dedicated “Integration Officers” in every local authority and city council to ensure that the work of religious communities is officially integrated into the decision making of our villages, towns and cities.

4. Final Declaration

We affirm that this submission is the fruit of a synodal process of listening, prayer, discernment, and consultation, undertaken in accordance with the mandate entrusted to this Working Group.