

Irish Synodal Pathway – Working Group Submission

Working Group Priority Area: Healing

Date of Submission: 31st May 2026

1. Group Overview

Members:

Mr Ronan Barry
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Convener:

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National Synodal Team Representative:

Bishop Michael Router

2. Statement of Discernment and Vision

Maximum 800 words. This text will be read aloud at the National Synodal Assembly on 17th October 2026.

Prompts:

- 1. How we worked together:
Describe your synodal approach, including listening, prayer, discernment, dialogue, and consultation.*
- 2. What we did:
Outline the key elements of your work (meetings, consultations, research, engagement with Baptised and Sent, etc.).*
- 3. What we heard:
Summarise the principal insights, experiences, tensions, and themes that emerged.*
- 4. Why these proposals:
Explain the discernment that led you to bring forward these particular proposals.*
- 5. Vision for the Church in Ireland:
Articulate the pastoral and missionary vision that has shaped your work.*

How we worked together and what we did

The Working Group took as its starting point the National Synthesis (2022) which described physical, sexual and emotional abuse and its concealment by the Church in Ireland as an ‘open wound’. Given the multifaceted causes and the far-reaching consequences the Synthesis suggested that the abuse crisis was the ‘lens through which all else needs to be viewed’. It further noted that while abuse has contributed very significantly to the loss of trust in the Church in Ireland, there were some submissions which placed relatively low emphasis on the abuse crisis.

The Group developed its understanding of ‘healing’ and of its remit through Conversations in the Spirit. The example of Christ’s ministry of healing and its connection to outreach to those at the margins guided our work and underpins the conviction that the work of healing must be central to the synodal process in Ireland with its call to ‘enlarge the space of our tent’.

The development of this work owes a great debt to the courage of victims and survivors of abuse. As we respond to their testimony and seek to go deeper in our understanding of the forms, causes and consequences of abuse we recognise that there are many groups within the Church in need of healing who have not been adequately recognised. The need to bring in voices and experiences not directly represented on the Working Group was a priority. Members undertook to consult with people who bring different perspectives to the theme, asking their views on what the Church had done well and what needs to be improved.

The need to take account of existing reports and research was emphasised and the group considered synodal submissions from victims and survivors and LGBT+ people, academic research and the Strategic Review of Child Safeguarding in the Catholic Church in Ireland (2024).

What we heard

The truth-telling that has brought hope for healing of relationships and structures within the Church and renewal of its mission at the service of a wounded world through the synodal process owes a great deal to the courage of those who have shared their experiences of trauma, suffering and exclusion in the Church.

Some have re-told their stories in the hope that this will lead to institutional learning and transformation. For some, healing has not yet begun, while others feel their stories have been told repeatedly without meaningful change. Many of those who have shared through the synodal process their stories of being excluded, marginalised and hurt because of their gender, sexuality or family circumstances have done so for the first time. Others who have taken on positions of leadership and participation in the Church – clergy and lay, employees and volunteers – have experienced hurt and felt let down by institutional failings

Through these stories we hear a prophetic call to truth and justice, to repentance and reconciliation, pointing to the need to heal relationships and take the actions necessary to ensure that our structures and processes contribute to a culture of safety and belonging for all. Victims and survivors must be partners and included across Church structures and decision-making with input into areas such as structural change, leadership roles, liturgical recognition, and formation processes (including seminarian training).

The lack of clear and consistent priority around the theme of healing throughout the synodal process (from local to national to universal levels) may indicate a degree of compassion fatigue that needs to be addressed. The healing process must be seen as part of the mission of the Church and this has to occur individually and collectively.

Why these proposals

Abuse within the Catholic Church cannot be attributed solely to individual offenders; rather, it reflects deeper systemic issues embedded within the institution. Structural enablement of abuse arises when institutional frameworks, theological interpretations, and cultural norms interact in ways that prioritize the protection of the organisation and its leadership over the safeguarding of vulnerable and marginalised individuals. This dynamic produces what may be understood as a form of structural sin, wherein conditions are created that facilitate abuse, silence victims, marginalise minority groups, and disempower non-offending clergy, religious, and lay members. Such conditions also impede the capacity of Church leadership to implement effective reform, foster long-term healing, and embed a credible and sustainable culture of safeguarding.

A premature focus on healing and legacy risks obscuring the need for critical analysis; in the interest of justice, a thorough understanding of the underlying causes and mechanisms of abuse must take precedence, leading to responses that address both the spiritual and structural dimensions.

It was noted that different church groups operate in “silos,” which can leave people disillusioned. A whole-Church approach is required.

Vision for the Church in Ireland

“The practice of Synodality is a challenge to the growing isolation of people and to cultural individualism, which the Church has also often absorbed, and it calls us to mutual care, interdependence and co-responsibility for the common good” (*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops - Final Document*). It is hoped that the synodal process will contribute to the healing of our organisational culture, integrating the lessons from the past and addressing future risks.

Word Count: __867__ / 800

3. Proposals for Consideration

(Minimum 3 – Maximum 7 proposals)

Proposals should be sufficiently developed to enable informed consideration by the Assembly and subsequent discernment by the Bishops’ Conference.

Each proposal should be:

- *clear, practical, and actionable*
- *grounded in your Working Group’s discernment*
- *attentive to the capacity, resources, and structures of the Church in Ireland at parish, diocesan, and national level*
- *appropriately aspirational, while rooted in realistic pathways for implementation*

- *within the competence of the Church in Ireland, recognising that some matters belong to the discernment of the Universal Church*

Proposal 1

Title: *Explicit commitment to healing as a priority in the future work of the synodal process.*

Description:

It is proposed that the Synodal Assembly would recommend the inclusion of a priority focus on healing in the future development of the synodal process in Ireland and that healing in this context would be defined as follows:

Guided by the example of Christ whose ministry of healing was often conducted at the margins of society, bringing listening, connection and hope, the synodal process in the Irish Church affirms the need to keep a consistent priority on healing at the heart of its work. This includes and builds on the work that has been done to respond to the needs of victims and survivors of abuse and extends that learning into engagement with other groups of people who have been wounded by their experience of marginalisation and exclusion in the Church, offering meaningful opportunities for truth-telling, accompanied by a commitment to transformative action.

Rationale:

The need for healing has been raised at different points in the synodal process, both national and international, and from different perspectives. The prophetic witness of victims and survivors has greatly enriched and strengthened the synodal process. The theme of healing has not, however, received consistent, in-depth attention. Nor has it been sufficiently extended to include others who have been wounded by the Church. An explicit priority commitment in this area would help ensure this work would receive the attention and investment required.

Intended Impact:

Ensuring consistent continued attention to healing as part of the synodal process, grounded in a definition that is both wide-ranging and specific, in the hope that this will contribute to a continued building of trust with those who have suffered and that their truth-telling might lead to transformation.

Implementation Pathway:

1. That the Irish Episcopal Conference and The Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI) would approve this proposal and accompanying definition.
2. That this priority would be included in the Terms of Reference for the future office(s)/bodies tasked with taking forward the work of synodality at national level (and diocesan levels if applicable).

Proposal 2

Title: *Commission for Healing*

Description:

- That the Irish Episcopal Conference and AMRI would jointly establish a Commission for Healing to build on previous and existing work in this area and develop new initiatives with a diverse range of participants including women and men, young people, victim/ survivors and their advocates, family representatives, safeguarding experts, clergy, lay leaders, women religious, and members of the LGBT+ community, ensuring balanced and credible oversight.
- The Terms of Reference should cover an initial two-year period to reflect the urgency of the action needed and allow the group sufficient time to make an impact, with evaluation at the end of the two years providing an opportunity to make further changes and/or address any concerns
- The Terms of Reference should be sufficiently open to allow the experience of members to shape and inform the scope of the work and the methodologies to be employed, while also providing mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability - including, for example, commitments to engagement from those in relevant leadership positions, publication of reports etc.

Rationale:

The lack of a one-Church approach to the abuse crisis has been frequently cited as disheartening for victims and survivors and as a barrier to institutional learning and to ensuring best practice in safeguarding into the future. It leads to gaps in transparency and a failure to engage victims and survivors in ways that communicate authenticity and a commitment to rebuilding trust. A practical path toward healing in a wounded church must begin with mechanisms centred on truth, accountability, and sustained care. It is anticipated that the work of this Commission will contribute to the development of a renewed structural approach to safeguarding and inclusion within the Irish Church, thereby supporting comprehensive and enduring processes of institutional and communal healing.

Intended Impact:

The Commission on Healing would work in partnership with relevant church bodies, with the autonomy, resources and supports necessary to initiate actions in areas such as the following:

- **Research:** commissioning independent research into the underlying factors that caused, and may continue to contribute towards abuse in the Church. Key areas of inquiry might include the challenges faced by Church leaders, the internal dynamics surrounding the mishandling and concealment of allegations, clericalism and the identification of best practices in accountability, transparency, reparation, and healing. The purpose of this research is not only to understand past failures, but to ensure lasting institutional reform and transparency.

- **Facilitating a one-Church approach:** coordinating with relevant agencies to maximise opportunities for collaboration, make best use of available resources and increasing the visibility of the work that is happening.
- **Consultation and listening:** building on what has already been done and establishing appropriate methodologies to continue the work of listening and consultation leading to action.
- **Acknowledgement and accountability:** covering both current safeguarding commitments and lessons from the past.
- **Memorialisation and institutional learning:** recommendations on memorialisation of the suffering that has occurred, combined with the development of educational materials to inform training for ministry and wider institutional learning.
- **Access to information:** coordinating access to records held by religious bodies/passed over to state agencies.
- **Recommendations for reform:**
 - examination and recommendations for action on participation and decision-making processes in the Church;
 - examination and recommendations for action on issues of language and culture in the Church;
 - integrating learning from previous inquiries and consultations into areas such as into seminary formation, leadership training, safeguarding practice and governance structures.
- **Restorative justice.**
- **Sustainability of safeguarding work and addressing risks for the future.**

Implementation Pathway:

1. That the Irish Episcopal Conference would approve the establishment of a Commission for Healing in partnership with AMRI.
2. That a diverse range of participants would be recruited composed of women and men, young people, victim/ survivors, family representatives, safeguarding experts, clergy, lay leaders, women religious, and members of the LGBT+ community, ensuring balanced and credible oversight.
3. That Terms of Reference would be mutually agreed with the Irish Episcopal Conference and AMRI through a process of co-design, with a suggested initial timeframe of two years.

Proposal 3

Title: Places of Encounter.

Description: To develop local “Places of Encounter” across the country (within the different local diocesan and religious congregational settings) which are accessible, structured, welcoming spaces for listening, storytelling, and accompaniment. These would provide opportunities for victims/survivors, and others who have experienced hurt or exclusion, to share their stories in dignity and safety. These spaces would be living environments of engagement, dialogue, and pastoral care. They would embody a shift from “doing for” to “doing with,” fostering authentic relationships and shared responsibility within the Church community.

Rationale: At the heart of this submission is a vision of the Church community as a Listening, Truthful, Healing, and Servant community. Healing must be real and visible, especially for those wounded by the Church, and leadership must be grounded in humility, service, and accountability. There is a need for meaningful memorials and preservation of survivor stories to ensure dignity, acknowledgement, and collective memory. We must recognise the enormity and impact of what has occurred. There are some examples of this kind of work already that are not widely known and could be shared.

In order to deepen our institutional learning and find appropriate ways to share this learning with future generations it is necessary to go beyond memorialisation to create opportunities for prayerful reflection and dialogue, inviting people to engage with the reality of this suffering and the hope that emerges from the work of healing.

Intended Impact: This initiative recognises the need to move beyond siloed structures towards a more integrated “One Church” approach, where healing is visible, local, and ongoing.

Implementation Pathway:

1. That a group with relevant experience, which includes victims and survivors [this could be the Commission referenced in proposal 2] develops a set of guidelines to shape and inform the work of creating places of encounter in different local contexts (dioceses, religious congregations etc.).
2. These guidelines should seek to strike a careful balance between unifying principles (conveying a one-Church approach) and the flexibility necessary to allow local leaders to contextualise the work appropriately and make best use of the resources available to them. It would be important to offer guidance on the training that would be required for local leaders.
3. That local leaders begin this work by examining the resources that are already available in their context (e.g. memorials, testimony, art) and how people are engaging with these resources.

4. That places of encounter be established to allow a diverse range of people to engage prayerfully with the testimony of victims and survivors, in a spirit of lament for the harm that has been caused, appreciation for the courageous truth-telling that has initiated processes of change and an openness to learning the lessons of the past to prevent future harm.

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.

Signed (on behalf of the Working Group):