

Catholic Diocese of Saginaw
Synod Summary Report



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Introduction

Synod 2023: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” was convoked by Pope Francis on Oct. 10, 2021, in Rome. With a desire to call upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, generate awareness and encourage participation within the Diocese of Saginaw, the opening Mass of the Synod on Synodality was celebrated by the Most Rev. Robert D. Gruss, Bishop of Saginaw, on Oct. 20, 2021, at the Cathedral of Mary of the Assumption. The synod is about listening to what the Holy Spirit is speaking into the hearts of the faithful and Church leaders and reaching out more pastorally to all. Although this synod does not foresee changes in Church teaching, some responses from the faithful indicate a desire for such and are included below.

Bishop Gruss appointed Don Buchalski, Vicariate Liaison and Coordinator of Evangelization and Joe Stong, Director of the Office of Stewardship and Development, to oversee the diocesan synodal process within the Diocese of Saginaw. Under their direction, a steering committee was formed and a diocesan synodal team established.

In a Nov. 30, 2021, meeting, the full 14-person Diocesan Synodal Team discerned that the Diocese of Saginaw should conduct its synod following the process recommended by the Vatican and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Each team member was assigned a specific area of responsibility, including a vicariate (parishes within a specific geographic region of the diocese), clergy and religious, Catholic schools, multicultural ministry, fallen-away Catholics and leaders from other faith traditions.

The call to reach out to those on the periphery, from whom Pope Francis particularly wanted to hear, was taken to heart. Team members contacted migrant outreach organizations, social justice organizations, cultural groups, and advocacy groups to extend invitations to minorities and the marginalized. Effort was also made to reach fallen-away Catholics, including victims of abuse and those who left the priesthood.

The Diocesan Synodal Team also made the following recommendations based on their discernment: parishes were encouraged to have at least two consultations for general parishioners on different days of the week; Catholic school students were invited to attend listening sessions at their schools; youth not in Catholic schools were to be invited by their parishes; priests, deacons, religious and directors of parish life additionally participated in separate listening sessions unique to them.

Beginning Dec. 17, 2021, the Diocesan Synodal Team planned details of the participatory process, beginning with each parish assigning a group coordinator. From Dec. 20, 2021, to Jan. 14, 2022, the Diocesan Synod Team developed training and outlines for group coordinators to conduct their listening sessions. Additional training was also offered online to better aid the diocesan and local coordinators and their sub-teams. A parish toolkit included resources for promoting the listening sessions, an overview of the synod and prayer resources.

From January through April 2022, parish coordinators across the diocese planned and conducted 295 listening sessions with nearly 3,600 Catholic faithful, clergy and those from communities

both within and outside of the Catholic Church. These included: Catholic schools; pastoral and finance councils; intellectual and developmental disabilities groups; youth, teens and young adults; nursing home residents; parish groups such as prayers groups, Altar Societies and parents of faith formation children; jail ministry, ecumenical and interfaith groups; members of the Latin Mass community and Black and Hispanic communities. Special efforts were made to coordinate meetings with those who may not be parishioners by contacting local heritage councils.

Listening sessions were divided by parishes and areas of responsibility and were done in person, virtually and through written individual surveys. One session was offered in Spanish, while the rest were in English.

While many participants expressed skepticism on the process and whether any changes will result, everyone felt heard. They shared that they enjoyed and appreciated the process and most voiced a desire to continue participating in regular local level listening sessions even after the synod is complete. Those who participated found it so valuable, they wished more people would have joined the listening sessions.

Coordinators emphasized the synod was about journeying together by listening, dialoguing, praying and discerning to make decisions together. Most coordinators expressed genuine surprise that the synod listening sessions brought forth such heartfelt feedback and were not the complaint sessions some anticipated. The sessions were constructive, and this brought consolation.

Key topics discussed during these listening sessions included individuals' experiences; what brought joy and growth in their relationship with Jesus; difficulties or obstacles and the wounds they revealed; what one's parish/school is doing well or could improve upon; whose voices are not being heard and what the Holy Spirit is guiding the group to further consider. In addition to asking for feedback regarding their local church, some parishes also asked listening session attendees for specific feedback about the diocese and global Church.

Each parish/group prepared a three- to five-page summary report to share with the Diocesan Synodal Team by May 8, 2022. Parishes were also encouraged to share their summaries with parishioners through a face-to-face meeting, their website or bulletin announcement. A diocesan team of 13 people in teams synthesized the data for a specific area of responsibility and gave it to the four-person drafting team. The drafting team synthesized the data once more to create this Diocesan Synod Report.

The draft summary of the Diocesan Synod Report findings was presented to Bishop Gruss, pastors, directors of parish life, members of the Diocesan Synodal Team, diocesan staff and parish and group coordinators during a Diocesan Pre-Synodal Meeting on June 9, 2022. The report was then finalized after additional input from the Pre-Synodal Meeting was incorporated.

A commitment to prayer was made at the beginning and throughout the synodal process, including meetings, training sessions, listening sessions and the drafting of documents, including this report. The Holy Spirit has continually been called upon for guidance and direction each step of the way.

Desiring to witness who we are: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church

The content of the reports submitted from across the diocese was very inspirational. The honest input captured highs and lows, joys and wounds, conflicts, and agreements, while highlighting what is being done well and opportunities for improvement. Although each area of responsibility was slightly different, common themes arose. Follow-up with parishes on issues specific to their individual parishes will happen via vicariate liaisons, while those issues in common across the diocese will be highlighted in this report.

The common themes have been categorized by a desire to witness who we are: *ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC and APOSTOLIC CHURCH.*

ONE

A deep need and desire for healing within the Diocese of Saginaw was voiced in all reports received. Across the diocese there was a plea for help in healing the wounds from the merging and closing of parishes, distrust of the diocesan and global Church, the priest sexual abuse scandal locally and globally, the COVID-19 pandemic and a loss of identity.

Merging and Closing of Parishes

Parish mergers across the Diocese of Saginaw, which were announced in 2013 and ultimately led to the closure of some churches and schools, were broadly discussed. Nearly a decade after the mergers began, the wounds are described as still very raw and in need of healing.

Listening session participants expressed anger over the Diocese's perceived lack of transparency regarding the mergers, which they believed caused division among those forced to come together. In addition, frustration regarding the way the mergers were handled, parish name changes, loss of parish identity, sacraments of initiation being administered in the parish church and not in additional church locations, as well as other related issues were described as barriers for parishes and parishioners to grow and share their faith.

Many of the parish leaders are seeking unity in their parish, but many parishioners are still to hurt to move on and are clinging to their previous church or identity.

Distrust of the Diocese and Global Church

Participants noted a general breakdown in relationship between the parish communities and the diocese. They expressed feelings of being disconnected, a lack of trust and said there is no relationship with chancery staff. They also voiced a desire to be seen, particularly with visits by the bishop to their parishes. These feelings were not isolated to the local Diocese; participants also described feelings of abandonment and a lack of trust regarding the global Catholic Church.

Clergy Sex Abuse Scandal

The wounds resulting from the clergy sex abuse scandals, both locally and globally, still resonate with parishioners across the diocese. As one vicariate reported:

The broadest issue mentioned was the priest sexual abuse scandal and the lack of transparency and feeling of abandonment of the hierarchy of the larger Church. Every parish had these issues mentioned in one form or another.

The sex abuse scandals, it was noted, have resulted in feelings of resentment, mistrust and even resistance when it comes to a relationship between parishes and the diocese.

Estranged Catholics reported feeling scandalized by both the clergy sex abuse crisis and the parish mergers, prompting some to leave for non-denominational Christian churches.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Complicating the healing process was the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to present many challenges for parish communities regarding participation and re-engaging parishioners. Some participants described feeling isolated or abandoned during the height of the pandemic, and many others continue to feel the emotional impacts. As of May 2022, Mass attendance has not resumed to pre-pandemic levels, which commenters noted. The desire for gatherings that were more commonly offered prior to COVID and have not returned in their parishes was also mentioned.

Loss of Identity

A final area identified in need of healing concerns identity. Some priests described a “lost sense of identity.” Both clerical and lay participants expressed a desire to “rediscover the spirituality of the Diocese,” in order to have a direction and focus on where to go. In some cases, differences in a preferred style of worship also has led to a divide that needs healing.

Many varied opinions were expressed about the Traditional Latin Mass. On one side, a respondent expressed, “the experience of casual Masses in the past had a negative impact on [our] Faith. Reverent liturgy has reignited our Faith and that of our families.” Some feel the Traditional Latin Mass community “is being harshly treated and marginalized” and report feeling ignored by the chancery. Others expressed anger that the Traditional Latin Mass is offered and reported a concern that the community would “mess up what they felt was a vibrant and booming Catholic community.”

Healing in the areas mentioned above, as well as in many areas that are captured below, was identified as a *necessary and essential first step* toward strengthening the foundation on which additional suggestions and changes may be implemented to build a stronger, more vibrant Catholic community in the Diocese of Saginaw.

HOLY

The reports expressed a clear call for formation, evangelization, deepening of faith and ongoing formation for clergy.

Formation

The synod uncovered a significant desire and need among Catholics to learn more about the Faith. A strong desire for adult faith formation was expressed, beyond what is already offered for

children and youth. Participants struggle with passing on the Faith to their children and explaining and defending the Faith, especially considering the social issues of the day.

Participants recognize the need to better understand the basic tenants of the Catholic Faith, including Mass, the sacraments and Church history. There is also a desire for clarity. Writes one vicariate:

There was an especially strong theme of wanting to understand the Mass and Eucharist better. Another theme was the basic understanding of the faith, especially considering current events and the current culture so parishioners can be clear on misconceptions or misrepresentations on what the Church believes. LGBTQ+, divorced/remarried [people], immigration and those who have had an abortion were specific topics mentioned.

Through efforts surrounding education and deepening spirituality, it was stated, the diocese could better serve those in all stages of their faith journeys.

Groups of Catholic school students also said they want practical applications of faith to life situations and to understand the reasons behind Catholic teaching. They want to grow in faith as well as knowledge.

Evangelization

Evangelization was explicitly or implicitly mentioned across the Diocese. Parishes expressed the desire to reach out and bring back youth, young adults, family members, fallen-away Catholics and victims of abuse. Participants also recognized their need for guidance in effective evangelization. Parishes asked for advice and direction on how to be successful. One synod report noted:

How to pass our faith and love of God unto others, especially our children? ... That was the desire and aspiration in the listening session.

A bright spot for evangelization was highlighted in the clergy report:

... newly ordained priests seem focused on evangelization and have energy and excitement about the possibilities of where the Church could go and how it can welcome into the fold those that have fallen away from the Church.

Deepening of Faith

Despite criticisms against specific policies, the Diocese and/or the institutional Church, many participants expressed a love of their parish and their faith. They are looking for more: more reverence, more encounters with Jesus, more evangelization. Catholic school students specifically requested more opportunities for Mass, Confession, and prayer in school chapels/churches.

Ongoing Clergy Formation

Ongoing clergy formation was also strongly desired, including time to pray together and days of reflection. The excellent initial formation of priests, deacons, religious and lay ministers was

noted in the listening sessions, but a need was identified for initial formation for directors of parish life.

On a practical note, clergy, religious and administrative listening sessions noted a need for clarification to the laity on the difference between their roles as clergy (priests, deacons, religious) and roles as administrators (pastors, directors of parish life, sacramental ministers, etc.) They also seek more roles in which lay ministers and laypeople may participate.

CATHOLIC

The word catholic means universal, and the desire to be universal was very strongly expressed and represented across the entire diocese. Visions for a Church that is welcoming, engaged in outreach, multigenerational and ecumenical were shared throughout.

Welcoming and Outreach

Every vicariate report noted the importance of inclusivity and welcoming of all people of every ethnicity, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, as well as divorced and remarried people, fallen-away Catholics, post-abortive parents, victims of abuse (particularly abuse by clergy) and youth and young adults. Participants believe a Church diverse in her people and their experiences would be stronger.

Overwhelmingly, the desire to be a more welcoming and inclusive Church was cited as a critical action to move the Church into the future.

While numerous individual parishes received positive feedback toward their efforts to reach out and welcome, there was a desire expressed in all vicariate reports for a more welcoming Church and a call for greater outreach.

While welcoming is the posture we have when people come to our parishes, outreach necessitates a personal invitation to those who are not yet coming to our Masses and events. Writes one vicariate:

Embodied in welcoming was the idea of being inclusive and reaching out to the margins no matter what a person's ethnicity, physical or mental handicap, marital status (especially the divorced and remarried), religious views or sexual orientation (LGBTQ+).

Many specifically spoke of the need to further explain the Church's teaching on marriage and annulments, in addition to welcoming and supporting divorced Catholics. One vicariate mentioned divorced participants feel the annulment process should be easier and become a place of healing.

Another area which identified a need for compassionate outreach is regarding the LGBTQ+ community. Several parishes shared that this is a topic both younger and older members of their parish communities are passionate about.

Listening sessions with fallen-away Catholics especially spoke to the need for greater outreach in the Catholic Church. For example, one woman who identifies as Catholic but no longer attends

Mass noted that when she stopped attending church, no one at her parish or the priest contacted her or checked on her. While she expressed a desire to return, she said she lacks the personal invitation and support she feels she needs.

Outreach extends to non-Catholics, as well. In a multicultural listening session, participants:

...expressed dismay that area Catholics would readily give charity but without forging any personal ties, without inviting them to 'come and see' or pray with/fellowship with them. They wondered why we were so insular and didn't invite non-Catholics to even attend Catholic events or celebrations.

Youth and Young Adults

Each report specifically mentioned youth and young adults as the largest missing demographic in their parish communities. Most also stated they didn't know how to reach out to young people.

Along with the very strong message of needing to reach youth and young adults, most vicariates expressed a desire for a multigenerational parish, with families, children of all ages, adults, the elderly and those in assisted living facilities.

For their part, young people surveyed in Catholic schools stated they want to be a part of the Church and have an active part in liturgies, including liturgies with people in their age groups and more opportunities for Mass and the sacraments.

Most of our schools have Mass once a week and confessions only occasionally. They would like more Masses and more times for confession. Also, more time for private prayer or visiting the church or chapel to pray.

Some parishes stated the importance of intentionally including teens in parish life as a strategy to keep young adults from leaving the faith. Young people in one parish surveyed shared they are looking to get involved in social justice, to care for the poor and go out to the margins to help those in need.

Synod participants realize that a multigenerational parish is the result of effective outreach and creating a welcoming community. Many want family events and social events that people of all ages and stages can attend. In addition to larger community gatherings, there is also a desire for small faith-sharing groups.

Across all age groups, parishioners desired increased involvement and participation of all parishioners, whether that be in Mass, outreach, or fellowship activities.

Ecumenical

In ecumenical listening sessions, those of other faiths expressed curiosity and interest in the Church's ancient history and doctrine. While some took issue with problematic aspects of the larger Catholic Church and her role in history, after clarifying that the discussion would center on the Diocese of Saginaw, esteem was expressed for the Church's outreach to the poor and hungry, pro-life ministries and the richness of Catholic traditions. Several Catholics who left the

faith for other Christian denominations shared a primary reason for leaving the Catholic Church was that no one invited them to a personal relationship with Jesus.

Eventually, people from what are sometimes called “Bible churches” personally invited them to experience the sense of community in their congregations – and soon they both felt like their lives were being transformed in Christ.

Most participants expressed interest in opportunities to learn more about the Catholic Church and forge personal connections.

APOSTOLIC

Across the diocese, the need was expressed to address the decline in vocations as well as a desire for liturgies that draw parishioners into a greater understanding of the faith.

Vocations

A critical issue facing the Diocese of Saginaw, and many (arch)dioceses, is the decline in vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Most vicariates noted the need for more priests and religious and appear to be ready to address the issue in earnest. Many support the idea of married priests and women priests and deacons to address the issue.

The availability of a priest and a priest’s relationship with parishioners is viewed as important in the life of a parish. The listening sessions revealed the administrative burdens on priests overseeing a parish and the need to alleviate administrative burdens, allowing them more time to minister to those entrusted to their spiritual care. As previously mentioned, there is also confusion among parishioners as to the roles and duties of deacons and directors of parish life who are working in place of or in partnership with a priest.

The role of the laity was mentioned in the vicariate reports, but more specifically discussed in the clergy report. Although the clergy believe the Diocese is doing a good job promoting involvement of laypeople, there was a sense from some that it has “gone backwards” in recent years regarding church leadership and liturgy.

A listening session with some of the Diocese’s permanent deacons demonstrated the joys the men have found in their unique role in the Church.

Liturgy

A very frequently reported comment from youth and young adults was the need for liturgies that speak to them through upbeat and inspiring music, relatable and energetic homilies and authentic messaging that leads to deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Participants of all ages mentioned that homilies should speak to the issues of the day and be applicable to their everyday lives.

Adult synod participants in one vicariate reported:

Everyone across the vicariate agrees that liturgy, music, sacraments, and other prayer experiences are critical for developing faith. While the style of liturgy and music varies

across the vicariate, most believe they are already doing it well, but all agreed improvements can still be made.

Several parish listening sessions also positively mentioned Eucharistic adoration and that worship, and the sacraments are an important part of building an unapologetically Catholic culture.

Conflicting issues

The synod listening sessions also uncovered conflicting issues between members of the Body of Christ and the future of the Church. Two not already mentioned are worthy of inclusion.

One had to do with the polarities of a so-called “magisterial Church” vis a vis “a Church that needs to evolve.” Several suggestions and critiques were made that would mean changes in Church doctrine. Others expressed a need for the Church to stand firm in her teachings, and some acknowledged a need to balance the two sides.

The Church has to learn how to share the unchanging truth and make it apply to the world today. The Church has to grow and change while still maintaining the truth.

Additionally, opinions were expressed that, on one hand, the Catholic Church is too focused on rules, while others expressed feeling “penalized” or “categorized” for following the rules.

Minority report

Participants in a few parishes also brought up the following issues, which are noted below:

- The patriarchal structure of the Church and the need to revisit the role of women in the Church particularly in leadership roles.
 - Women being ordained as priests and deacons (more than just to address the shortage in clerical vocations) and, in general, the need for women to have more leadership and ministerial roles.
- Issues of clericalism and a need for transparency.
- A few issues for consideration with the sacraments were raised.
 - A desire for permanent deacons to be permitted to anoint the sick.
 - Allowing non-Catholics to receive Holy Communion.
 - Allowing the sacrament of Confession with general absolution.
 - Confusion with the continued changing of the order of the sacraments and the age of receiving Confirmation.

Conclusion

Bishop Gruss and the leadership of the Diocese of Saginaw have listened to the people of God. The genuine desire for a thriving, strong and authentically Catholic diocese is evident, and the thoughtful feedback provided will help in discerning a path forward.

One parish report offered a vision for our diocese mentioned in other vicariate reports:

Churches full of families and people of all ages coming together to fully participate in unity as Catholics...Mass would be full of engaging music, a vibrant pastor, and welcoming to all who walk into our worship space...There would be overflowing vocations with parishes full of priests, nuns, commissioned lay ministers and laity... Our parish grounds and buildings would be up to date, handicap accessible and to have buildings outfitted to fit all the needs of parishioners and various ministries.

With the important information and insights gathered throughout the synod, the Diocese of Saginaw is better positioned to identify and serve the needs of the faithful. While much more needs to be done to address the feedback in this report, especially in the area of healing, several current initiatives are good starting points.

First, the National Eucharistic Revival will begin to address the desire for formation by addressing the need for education on the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of our Faith.

Next, the diocesan re-envisioning process is in progress and had identified some of the needs expressed in the synod. The coordinator of youth ministry is now also responsible for ministering to young adults. A coordinator for evangelization was hired, and vicariate liaisons were appointed to improve relationships between the Diocese and the parishes.

The Diocese has announced Catholic schools as a priority and a commitment to Catholic identity. The Diocese is considering changes based on the feedback given by Catholic school students in their listening sessions. Some individual schools have already begun acting on some excellent ideas that students mentioned during the synodal listening sessions.

Diocesan leadership has been presented with suggested courses of actions shared by parish leaders and volunteers during the Pre-Synodal Meeting on June 9, 2022. Bishop Gruss has expressed a strong desire to address the needs discussed in the synod listening sessions which are actionable and within his authority. The synod report will also play an important role in future planning at the chancery. The Diocese of Saginaw will continue to seek to understand God's plan with the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we continue down the path the synod has set us upon.

Appendix

Diocesan Timeline

Diocese of Saginaw Roadmap Synod Diocesan Phase



Diocesan Synodal Team

<u>Team Member</u>	<u>Area of Responsibility</u>
Joe Stong	Co-contact person
Don Buchalski	Co-contact person Parishes – Vicariate 5
Beth Bauer	Parishes – Vicariate 1
Peg McEvoy	Parishes – Vicariate 2
Kellie Deming	Parishes – Vicariate 3
Deb Popielarz	Parishes – Vicariate 4
Deacon Gary Patelski	Catholic Schools
Deacon Jim Damitio	Deacons
Fr. Steve Gavit	Priest
Sr. Mary Dolora Keating	Religious Sisters
Sr. Janet Pewoski	Directors of Parish Life
Deacon Larry Gayton	Multicultural
Dr. Dan Osborn	Ecumenism and Interfaith
Chris Pham	Communications