

DIOCESE OF  SALFORD

The Big Listen

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Introduction

'And as Jesus was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Mk 10:17). Pope Francis set before the Church this story of the encounter between Jesus and a rich young man when he opened the Synodal Process in October 2021. The Holy Father said,

The Gospels frequently show us Jesus 'on a journey'; he walks alongside people and listens to the questions and concerns lurking in their hearts. He shows us that God is not found in neat and orderly places, distant from reality, but walks ever at our side. He meets us where we are, on the often-rocky roads of life.

Pope Francis then used the Gospel story to draw-out the way Jesus journeyed with this young man: 'First, he *encounters* the rich man on the road; he then *listens* to his questions, and finally he helps him *discern* what he must do to inherit eternal life.' Pope Francis tells us that these three actions of Jesus - *encountering*, *listening*, and *discerning* are key to the synodal process - whose very name implies a shared journey. As the Pope reminds us, encountering and listening are very closely linked - a true encounter, he insists, only arises from listening. To illustrate this, he highlighted the qualities of Jesus' listening that are essential to the synodal way:

Jesus listened to that man's question and to the religious and existential concerns that lay behind it. He did not give a non-committal reply or offer a prepackaged solution; he did not pretend to respond politely, simply as a way of dismissing him and continuing on his way. Jesus simply listens, for whatever amount of time it takes; he is not rushed. Most importantly, he is not afraid *to listen to him with his heart* and not just with his ears. Indeed, he does more than simply answer the rich man's question; he lets him tell his story, to speak freely about himself. Christ reminds him of the commandments, and the man starts to talk about his youth, to share his religious journey and his efforts to seek God. This happens whenever we listen with the heart: people feel that they are being heard, not judged; they feel free to recount their own experiences and their spiritual journey.

The Diocese of Salford has sought to put into practice this Jesus-like listening through the *Big Listen*. It has devoted generous space and time to hear 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age.' (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1) The Diocese has done this so that it may play its part in the task of the whole Church, taking up the Holy Father's invitation to 'ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time. And the direction in which he wants to lead us.' Salford Diocese listens carefully so that it may recognise what the Spirit is saying about the Church's mission here, in this part of England.

The *Big Listen* has certainly inspired many people across the diocese. People say that they feel encouraged, that they expect to be heard, and that they hope to see or experience some form of change. There is an excitement and an honesty in the responses that have been submitted. Catholics in Salford are generally looking forward with hope, even though they may be struggling with life at the present or worried about the future.

This Report is a tool for this listening process. It seeks faithfully to bring together what people have been saying along the way and to offer a theological reflection on what has been said. It does not set a template for the future direction of the Diocese. Instead, it aims to help the Diocese to move onto the next phase of the journey that Pope Francis has mapped out - namely discernment. That phase will unfold as the Diocese carefully considers what has been heard in the *Big Listen* - not only in debate or discussion, but as Pope Francis insists, 'in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the Word of God.'

Importantly, the Diocese of Salford cannot do that discernment in isolation. The Catholic Church is currently conducting a synodal process that transcends diocesan and national boundaries. Ultimately, this listening initiated by the Holy Father has a universal – an authentically Catholic – dimension. The Catholic Church is a communion of local Churches, united by the union that their Bishops enjoy with the Bishop of Rome. Consequently, some matters may be raised at diocesan synods that touch so directly on the life of the universal Church that decisions on them cannot be taken by individual dioceses. The Salford *Big Listen* has indeed raised some such issues - particularly requests for the ordination of women or married men. Introducing any change in these areas lies beyond the competence of a Diocesan Synod. However, to be true to the synodal process it is also important that the voices that ask for such things are reflected in this Report, so that they can form part of a world-wide listening by the Church.

That having been said, most of what emerged during the *Big Listen* certainly falls within the remit of the local Church. There is much here for the Diocese to ponder and take forward. Of course, there were expressions of concern that if the listening is not followed by action or change then parishioners could become despondent, frustrated that their honesty and effort has led them nowhere. So, how the Diocese moves forward is important - Pope Francis has laid down the challenge. He said that the synodal process cannot be a 'Church convention, a study group or a political gathering, a parliament.' Instead, through careful discernment, especially in dialogue with the Word of God, it can be 'a grace-filled event, a process of healing guided by the Spirit.' Our hope in producing this Report is to help you to take the next steps along your synodal journey, stepping forward confidently as Pope Francis asks:

The Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of every Church, people and nation. And to listen to the world, to the challenges and changes that it sets before us. Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties. So often our certainties can make us closed. Let us listen to one another.

Dr Emma Swai and Revd Professor Peter McGrail

Breakdown of Responses

The process of gathering responses was carried out within the Diocese. Listening groups were held in parishes, schools, institutions, and diocesan organisations. The leader of each group then fed responses back to the Diocese which in turn passed them to the researchers for analysis. Individual responses were made via an on-line questionnaire managed by the Diocese, which, once again, passed them to the researchers.

The table below provides an overview summary of the responses submitted to the *Big Listen*. Responses from adults are shown separately from those of children/young people (C/YP). Whilst we can state with certainty the number of responses that were received, we cannot accurately calculate the numbers of people who have taken part in the process. This is because the group responses reflect the concerns and thoughts of several – sometimes very many – people. In some instances, the thoughts of up to 100 participants might have been digested into a single group feedback. The numbers given for individual responses are accurate.

Total number of responses	589 (with each response relating to the four questions)
Group responses (Adult) - Facilitated via the diocese	271 Inc. x4 university specific groups, x 1 targeted young adult group, x6 explicitly school staff and management, x1 retired priests, x1 deacons.
Group responses (C/YP) - Facilitated via the diocese	59 From both schools and parishes.
Individual responses (Adult) - Submitted independently via the website	207
Individual responses (C/YP) - Submitted independently via the website	43 Inc. x1 year 6 class response.
Organisations within the diocese - emailed responses.	9 Inc. x2 HMP Buckley Hall, x2 HMP Manchester, x3 Caritas and Di/San, x2 St Joseph's Mission to Deaf People

It is important to note an important difference between the group and individual responses. The group responses emerged from a facilitated process of shared listening and represent a summary of what emerged through that process. They tend, therefore, to be quite brief, and generally do not contain extensive quotations, and so the developed opinions of individuals rarely are presented in a direct manner. By contrast, the individual responses were uploaded online, and sometimes present longer and more developed responses to the questions. Often these individual responses present ideas in an emphatic way, speaking particularly loudly about contested issues from divergent perspectives. We have sought to represent these louder voices in the report and to give them their due weight. However, it was also important carefully to consider the often-quieter expressions that emerged from the listening groups; we have sought to identify those opinions and concerns that arise repeatedly through the group reflection processes, and to ensure that they, too, were properly represented in the Report.

How We Approached the Responses

Although a higher proportion of the responses are from adults within the diocese, many adults emphasise the need to pay attention and listen to the children and young people within the diocese. Their rationale is that children and young people are the future of the church. Furthermore, children and young people within the diocese discuss how they want to be listened to as part of the church itself, rather than being treated as an afterthought. For this reason, we began by first analysing the responses from children and young people.

We did not approach the responses with a list of themes or ideas to look for. Instead, we began to build a list of themes, patterns and links which emerged as we read and analysed what people were telling us. This always meant that we maintained a position of listening to what Catholics in the diocese wanted to say. We constructed a framework of themes from the children and young people's responses, expanding upon it with further details or issues that arose from adult perspectives.

The Diocese asked us to identify a small number of overarching themes that emerged from the *Big Listen*. As we constructed our thematic framework we found that four umbrella themes emerged:

Nurturing Faith for Tomorrow's World
Building Connections
Enabling Access
Fostering Christ-like Care

Obviously, some of the things that people have said fall into more than one of these broad themes.

Theological Reflection 1: *The People of God*

One of the major theological developments of the Second Vatican Council was the sustained focus it placed on the life and mission of the Church. Its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) looks at the Church through a series of different lenses, each of which helps to build up a rich understanding: the Church as a communion of local Churches, as the Body of Christ, as the People of God.

This last image – the People of God – is closely linked to the notion of journeying, and therefore to the synodal process. The Biblical story that lies behind it is the Exodus, when the Hebrew people left slavery in Egypt and across forty years of wandering were formed into a community that was bound to God by Covenant. In the same way, the Church journeys through human history, sent into the whole world, with the full establishment of the Kingdom of God as its destiny.

This, therefore, is a dynamic image. As Pope Benedict XVI said, writing at the time of the Council, 'If the Church means the journey of mankind together with God, if it is essentially incomplete and always short of its goal, then it is still the sinful Church continually in need of renovation. It must always throw off its earthly bonds and whatever leads to feelings of self-satisfaction.' (*Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, p. 77) Repentance for past failings, and sense of continually moving forward belong, are part and parcel of the life of the Church. The image also gives the Diocese the space - in the words of one respondent - 'To admit that what we're doing isn't working.'

The four overarching themes have been expressed as verbs in order to reflect the dynamism of the image of the Church as People of God. They carry the implicit recognition that the Diocese is not moving off from a standing stop but is already engaged on these things. At the same time, they also suggest movement into the future.

1. Nurturing Faith for Tomorrow's World

1.1 THE ROLE OF PRIESTS:

It must be acknowledged from the onset that people value their clergy. Respondents speak of the 'lovely priests...[who] make attending church easier,' and say that 'faith would be harder if we didn't have them.' The role of the ordained priests of the diocese is respected and viewed as important – not least because of their sacramental and preaching roles. Of course, there are exceptions, and it is clear from some responses that in a minority of parishes priest and sections of the congregation have not 'gelled.' These can seem like loud voices, but they are by no means as numerous as the volume they generate initially might suggest. Nonetheless, whilst negative comments are relatively few, this does not mean there are no problems to be addressed. Those problems are often due to miscommunication, misunderstanding and disagreeing opinions. In certain circumstances, the tension has escalated, leading to parishioners requesting oversight of priests and for the parish council to be able to challenge a priest's decisions.

A concern for the pastoral care of priests comes through loud and clear in the responses. Priests are 'first and foremost' people who should be cared for, and members of the diocese want 'to support our clergy.' A small number of responses suggested reducing the number of presbyteries and inviting priests to share accommodation. This, it is suggested, would rationalise the Diocese's property portfolio. However, there are also responses that clearly state that any adaptation of buildings must take account of the need to preserve each priest's privacy or safety - essentially recognising that due to the interpersonal nature of what they do on a daily basis, priests need respite and solitude.

Priests continue to be respected members of the wider Church community long after retirement. We know that priests' voices are quietly present in the listening group reports, but we also heard directly from a number of retired priests. Their *Big Listen* responses demonstrate not only wisdom and experience, but also a willingness to be involved in the future of the church. They discuss the hope they feel and faith they experience in the people and situations they encounter. One says, 'There is challenge and also difficulties but even there, love, joy and hope come through.'

1.2 THE SHORTAGE OF PRIESTS

Difficulties arise when there are not enough priests for the work to be done. Parishioners value the relationship between congregation and priest; they are yearning for it to be closer, with more frequent contact. Those old enough to remember a time where priests were not stretched so thinly, miss the close bonds that they had been able to develop and, in some cases, appear to feel lost without it. They do not, however, blame the priest himself.

There is a recognition that there is a shortage of priests and that, consequently, the demands of the role can become increasingly overwhelming. *Big Listen* responses have afforded some parishioners an opportunity to suggest how to ensure that priests are not overloaded and are cared for emotionally. One proposition, that appears frequently, is for priests to be allowed to marry and have a family. It seems that many people do not understand why priests have been

denied this support, given how important family is as a factor in hope and faith more generally. For some respondents, the fact that priests are not allowed to marry and have children even becomes a barrier to faith as they view the insistence on celibacy as 'archaic' and evidence that the Church has 'not moved on with the times.' Furthermore, those who need guidance on family concerns ask how a priest, through no fault of his own, could be expected to understand a position they have never been in or to which he has not had a similar personal experience.

1.3. INVOLVING THE LAITY

'We, the people, are the church.'

Another proposal made for supporting the clergy is the laity 'stepping up.' People want to 'work hand in hand with parish priests' and take on more roles within their church communities. They want to support their priest and parish by utilising their talents and resources. Each parish has skills and gifts that can be 'leveraged;' people ask the Church to 'appreciate the giftedness' of the laity and engage with what they can offer the Diocese. In doing so, many believe that other roles can be developed alongside the ordained priesthood. This leads to what some responses see as the need for clarification of roles within the Diocese – though not in a way that narrows the opportunities for people (and especially young people) to become more actively involved in the life of the parish: 'Everyone should be involved.'

One way in which the involvement of the laity is already taking place is through prayer. The importance of prayer is repeatedly emphasised by respondents, and *The Big Listen* makes clear that many Catholics in Salford regularly devote time to it. They regard regular prayer as essential to the practice of their faith. Adults, especially, see prayer as a practical response to fears, worries or social instability – and a desire to learn how to pray 'better.' Parishioners describe different styles of prayer groups, some of which appear to be creating unofficial cross-parish prayer communities. People ask for more prayer groups, for prayer to take place for a wide range of reasons and even though they value the prayers for people said by a priest, they also want to see the parish community praying for each other.

The interrelated roles of faith and prayer, or rather the perception of how faith works in response to prayer, is a little more ambiguously understood. Confusion arises for all ages in the area of unanswered prayer regarding suffering. For many children and young people faith is almost a means to manifest hopes and dreams, even wealth, with prayer as something of a request system that then facilitates God making those hopes and dreams happen. Comments by children and young people that begin with 'Why hasn't God...' are somewhat jarring, but are questions asked against a backdrop where the person wanting answers does not seem to understand (or perhaps cannot yet understand) the complex reality of faith.

Theological Reflection 2: *The Baptismal Priesthood*

Immediately after an infant has been baptized, the Deacon or Priest anoints the crown of their head with the oil of chrism, saying:

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into this holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.

This action and words draw out the meaning of the baptism just received: in the waters of the font every Christian is not only cleansed from sin, but also becomes a member of the People of God, sharing in Christ's own offices of priest, prophet and king. As the Second Vatican Council stressed, 'The baptised ... are consecrated to be a spiritual House and a holy priesthood.' (*Lumen Gentium*, 10)

We share in Christ's priestly office by our participation in the Eucharist and other sacraments, by a life of prayer and witness, and by active charity. We share in his prophetic office above all by our living witness to the truth of the Gospel – which at times may mean identifying that which is not truth or speaking up against injustice. We share in Christ's royal office when we reflect in our own lives the way in which he made himself the servant of all, coming 'not to be served, but to serve.'

We live our baptismal priesthood amid human society, where in our everyday encounters with others we put into action our participation in the three offices of Christ. Our service of others, our proclaiming the Good News by word and action, our life of prayer – all these flow from our Baptismal membership of the universal priesthood. All this goes on daily in our families, our schools, our workplaces, even our social engagements.

It is also the basis for our shared life in the Church. It is easy to regard the various things that people 'do' in the parish as 'helping Father' or simply meeting some kind of need. However, whenever people are giving their time and energy in whatever way to the mission and life of the parish, then what is happening is that they are exercising their Baptismal priesthood.

This raises two questions as we go forward. First, are we, in fact, helping people on the ground to appreciate the dignity – and challenges - that flow from their sharing in Christ's triple office of Priest, Prophet and King? Second, do we have a vision for our parish communities that enables us to discern, to receive and optimise the gifts that the Spirit has generously given to the Holy People for the service of Christ and his Church?

1.4 WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT FROM DIOCESAN AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP?

Just as *Big Listen* respondents speak warmly about their priests, they are also positive about diocesan leadership; the Bishop is seen as the person who will lead the way forward on the synodal path. Where complaints are made, they generally express a desire for more dialogue, greater visibility. Whilst some appreciate a pastoral letter, a greater number would value visits and possibly even guest preaching by the Bishop in local parishes.

However, a key driver of concerns expressed in the *Big Listen* is that people can find it difficult to understand certain decisions that are taken at a diocesan level and which impact on their lives - for example relating to Church closures and clergy moves. What is primarily at stake here does not appear to be a request that such decisions should be changed, since the authority of the Diocese is generally well-respected. Instead, people are expressing a desire to understand decisions and the reasoning behind them: in other words, they are calling for transparency. In some cases, people are trying to rebuild trust in the Church and desire such transparency because all they can currently see is the 'dishonesty of the Church in the past and present,' even though they still engage with the Church.

People effectively want a sense of clarity from leadership; currently, in some areas, many feel that what they receive is confusion. When people do not understand decisions that are made, then the direction of travel may be questioned - even, in one case, to querying whether the leadership was 'not listening to the Holy Spirit' in taking those decisions. An oft-cited quality for leadership within *Big Listen* responses is for leadership to be 'strong.' Though a range of different synonyms are used, what makes a leadership 'strong' is never actually clearly defined, apart from in cases of speaking truth to power and responding to clear instances of injustice.

1.5 THE TEACHING OFFICE OF THE CHURCH

The desire for clarity extends to the teaching Office of the Church. A key concern expressed by several respondents related to what has been recently presented in the press as the Vatican opening the possibility of LGTBQ+ people marrying. Pope Francis' position on this is extremely nuanced (offering blessing to the individuals but not to their union), and the Vatican has arguably been slow to provide the necessary clarification in ways that people can easily understand. As a result, some who responded to the *Big Listen* invitation clearly felt that the Church was changing its values and moving away from long-standing tradition. In this way, a barrier has evidently been created between the Church's leadership at the highest level and those parishioners.

For others, a barrier is caused by what is perceived to be a failure on the part of the Church to speak out on contemporary issues. This is particularly true of many young people whose responses to the *Big Listen* reflect the extent to which traditional stances on contemporary issues had become a barrier for younger Catholics entering the Church and engaging with the faith. When we listen to teachers, the Church's perceived silence on contemporary issues within Church environments is part of what drives children and young people away. This barrier is an issue for adults as well as children and young people, but responses from children and young people view the problem much more starkly: 'Certain doctrines and members of

the church that hold bigoted and violent views make me feel isolated and separate from the rest of my community.’ Contemporary issues, or rather what is felt to be the Church’s attitude to them, is a major cause of isolating people from the Church or sometimes isolating them within the Church.

So, is there a disconnect between contemporary issues and faith? *Big Listen* responses also contain the assumption that faith can help address contemporary and future issues, but there is confusion as to how. Some people perceive that the Church and its teaching lack modern relevance. Others experience a real tension between their beliefs and the official position of the Church – which is just as true for some who might advocate a more ‘progressive’ stance and those who emphasise the importance of the Church’s tradition and its need to uphold unchanging truths. Regardless of whether the barrier is perceived or real, contemporary relevance is a significant question for the Church to consider as it moves forward in the discernment process.

1.6 DIVERGENT POSITIONS

Individual responses especially convey a desire to have an open and honest conversation about contemporary issues, including but not limited to homelessness, gender, gay rights, priestly celibacy, historical abuse. The images of the Church being a ‘light in the darkness’ or ‘leading by example’ were common. However, perceptions of what exactly the Church should be saying differs. Some parishioners feel that the Church should speak out on issues from a very particular stance and be ‘strong’ by expecting Catholics to fall in line with that stance. For Catholics who yearn for a more authoritative approach on the part of the Church, any movement on the part of Church leadership in the direction of the values of contemporary society goes against the principle that it is the Church’s task ‘To teach the truth of the gospel and not to try and fit in with the world’s interpretation of the gospel.’ For others, however, who are looking to nurture a faith for the future, the pace of change in the Catholic Church is far too slow. The perspective of those waiting patiently for change is expressed in the following quotation: ‘*Laudato Si* spells out the problem, but we are eight years on from the publication of this and it seems that little has changed.’ Not surprisingly, therefore, there is a sense of frustration in some responses, - almost an impatience - at issues being ignored for too long and not being talked or taught about. Silence can be interpreted as exclusionary.

1.7 SOCIAL INSTABILITY:

‘The problems our world experiences seem to push faith and hope to the periphery of our lives. War, climate change etc make it hard to focus on hope for mankind.’

The *Big Listen* has taken place against the backdrop of military crises in Ukraine and the Holy Land and the ensuing human tragedy. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, war is an issue which is cited in responses as causing a barrier to future faith: how is it that a just God permits such suffering? People look to the Church for guidance and find themselves unable to work out the Church’s position. A high number of *Big Listen* responses demonstrate a desire for the Church to take a stand on peace. Peace for Ukraine after Russia’s invasion. Peace in the Holy Land. Gaza, especially, is a complex situation causing confusion: people see a global crisis and, despite the situation’s complexities, can conflate the Israeli government with the Jewish people favoured in Old Testament writings: “Why does God allow his favoured Jewish people

to suffer so much? And to inflict suffering on others?’ Negative media messaging heightens worry and prompts people to look towards the church for clarity of position and guidance. Politics is rarely mentioned overtly, unless there are comments about the church not being involved in politics. Yet people want the Church to speak into political situations. The Church is being looked towards as a catalyst for all communities to work together on the big, world-level problems, rather than seeming to maintain an insular position.

1.8 WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP:

‘The church is breathing with one lung’

The issue of women in leadership arises in many *Big Listen* responses. The exclusion of women from ministry and decision making is seen by some as a demonstration of inequality and a barrier to faith, causing ‘anger and despair.’ The ordination of women to the priesthood or to the Diaconate is proposed both as a solution to the shortage of priests and as a catalyst for growth, with the removal of the barrier to faith outlined above: ‘the ordination of women would transform the Church,’ open up both lungs so to speak, and emulate the biblical example of female followers of Christ, such as the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene - the 52 disciples.’ For some respondents, Pope Francis’ invitation to dream leads them to hope for the ordination of women.

However, other respondents feel very differently about this issue. Concerned about the influence of contemporary values within the Church, they argue for the retention of the current discipline, not least on the grounds of its venerable antiquity. For these, such a dramatic change as the ordination of women risks leading the Church into heresy. For them, maintenance of the *status quo* is not simply a matter of Church discipline but touches on the integrity of the faith.

Big Listen responses to this issue are polarised. A strong statement on the ordination – or not - of women based on Scripture and Tradition is requested by both its proponents and opposers. The direct way in which both sides of the debate present their case suggest that neither would be happy with a middle position of compromise. However, it is important that we recognise (a) the deeply held convictions of all members of the diocese, and (b) that what we see in the *Big Listen* is a local manifestation of a debate that is going on within the Universal Church. The ultimate responsibility for any future change of direction lies with the Church as a whole, beyond the remit of a Diocesan Synod.

Theological Reflection 3: Questions around Ordination

Although the questions of the ordination of women and relaxing the regulations on clerical celibacy are frequently proposed together as solutions to the current shortage in the numbers of priests, the two questions touch on very different core issues.

At heart, the requirement of clerical celibacy is a matter of Church discipline. From St. Paul onwards, the Church has always admired the wholehearted devotion to the service of the Gospel that a life of celibacy can foster. This is exemplified, above all, in the relationship of a bishop with his diocese. However, the requirement in the Western Church that priests should remain celibate is a matter of Church - rather than Divine - law. Consequently, the Orthodox and Eastern Rite Catholic Churches allow married men to be ordained to the priesthood, and we have seen other exceptions among convert Anglican clergy in our own country. This is a discipline, therefore, that the Roman Catholic Church could - at least in theory - change at some future date.

The ordination of women, by contrast, is a fundamentally theological question, taking us back to the core question of what Jesus intended for his Church. In other words, this goes to the very heart of how we understand the Church and its ministry. As the Church grapples with this question it faces a dual challenge: to know the mind of Christ, and to ensure that the rights and dignity of women are upheld throughout the world. Responding to the first is necessarily a long and very complex task – not least because it calls for intense debate not just within the Catholic Church as a whole but ultimately also with the Orthodox Churches. On the other hand, responding to the second challenge is an urgent priority – and it should be noted that some *Big Listen* responses express concern about a perceived silence on the part of the Church in the face of threats to women across the world. Ensuring that the Diocese plays its part in recognising the gifts that women bring to the Church and opposing those forces in the world that lead to their oppression should certainly be taken up as it discerns its way forward.

1.9 CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

'Not many churches are connecting with younger people and don't seem to do much to connect with them.'

A common observation made in responses to the *Big Listen* is that Mass attendance is decreasing. Adults find the decline in children's and young people's church attendance particularly concerning. They regard children and young people as the future of the Church and are deeply concerned that children and young people do not want to get involved and are not interested in religion or spirituality. Children's and young people's responses tend to present a different perspective: they do want to take on roles in the Church but perceive that they are excluded from doing so, either because the roles do not exist, or they do not know what roles are available. Some children and young people are asking where they look for how to take on roles within the Church. They want to participate, and they want to learn more about their faith, but they feel their viewpoint is often overlooked.

The stark differences in perception can be exemplified by this question: does the Diocese of Salford have a younger generation 'who don't see the need for religion' or are they 'fascinated and thirsty'? The answer to the question depends on which group of *Big Listen* responses, adults or children and young people, are being listened to. Children and young people 'want to connect to God and people but maybe in a different way.' They want to learn about Christ, be encouraged to develop their faith and be provided with opportunities to engage with God, they just need a variety of ways to access that spiritual communion. The *Big Listen* data from children and young people suggests that the idea that the younger generation do not see the need for religion is categorically not true. Apart from a few responses dotted around, children and young people, both Catholic and not, are most certainly aware of the need for religion. So why do a large proportion of Catholic adults believe the stereotype of disinterested children and young people?

Children undoubtedly are lapsing and drifting away from church attendance at different points, such as after their First Holy Communion. The phenomenon is noticed but met with bewilderment in some parishes. Adults, or at least those beginning to try and work out why this might be the case, worry about the lack of effective provision for children and young people, as well as children and young people not taking on roles within the church. The effort put into working with children and young people by a core group of individuals in parishes is recognised, as also the need to change how things are done. Younger adults, those over eighteen, feel a certain amount of pressure because they respect the adults who have taught children and young people for a long time and at the same time regard the older adults not changing to be a barrier to participation in the life of the Church. Ironically, even though adults do see working with children and young people as a source of hope, they are also the ones advocating for more provision and for things to be done differently. It appears that both groups are arriving at the same conclusion from different vantage points: they want the Diocese to support a new, re-thought provision for children and young people.

Ideally, the Diocese would provide support for increasing provision in children's and young people's ministry. There are examples of good practice in children's and young people's work and priests who are specifically named in *Big Listen* responses as 'cool' and who children and young people feel they can engage and talk with. Could other priests learn from this good practice? Could priests more generally be trained in children's and young people's work, such as in communicating the Gospel in ways more appropriate for a younger audience? Could church services be oriented to children and young people?

1.10 CONSIDERING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:

'Masses for young people so I can be considered'

Children and young people, as well as families do not always feel that Mass and other expressions of faith facilitate their involvement. *Big Listen* responses do not necessarily go into specifics, but there is an evident need to understand the generation gap in terms of perspectives on the Church. There are some quieter voices who want to do this by building relationships and community between generations, instead of maintaining defined us/them groups between age groups, especially between younger and elderly Catholics.

Catholic children and young people in Salford want to be known as individuals, not as a homogenous group. They make it clear that are not Catholic adults and do not want to simply

be associated with other people via family connections. They aspire to be Catholics in their own right. They want 'more' from the Church and 'more' from faith. In fact, the word 'more' appears very frequently in their responses. They are not necessarily asking for a change in doctrine or values, though what they view as sexism and homophobia does create a barrier to faith, but they do want the Church to think differently about how to express and facilitate core spiritual beliefs and develop faith.

1.11 FAITH WITHIN SCHOOLS:

'When children show love and joy, I feel love, joy and hope.'

The above quotation from a Catholic schoolteacher was echoed in virtually all the responses made by their peers. For example, another said, 'I feel very lucky to work in an amazing school. Each day the staff, parents and children give love and joy.' Schools are on the frontline with children and young people, as well as their families; they are privileged locations for the encounter between the Church and its members, as well as with the broader world. Therefore, the work and commitment of the Diocese's school communities necessarily must form an integral part of its vision for its future.

However, the *Big Listen* has identified at least two dissonances with regard to Catholic schools to which the Diocese is invited to respond. The first relates to the experience of pupils, as evidenced in their listening groups. The second touches on how members of the broader Catholic community understand their schools and their mission.

1.11.1 PEER PRESSURE:

Peer pressure experienced by children and young people

Whilst teachers and senior managers outline the depths of hope they draw from their school experience, their perspective may not correlate with the experience of all pupils. A key factor at play is peer pressure, which spills over beyond school boundaries, and which may well be invisible to many adults. Peer pressure against attending church and general anti-Catholic pressure, features in many *Big Listen* responses. There are over two hundred references to criticism received within a social context for attending church or for wanting to be Catholic, suggesting that peer pressure is a very real and present problem faced by children and young people every day. Is it possible that when children and young people are asking for more activities, groups, and attention, they are asking for pastoral care and support in the face of that peer pressure? More specifically, pupils ask questions about why their Catholic school does not prevent anti-Catholic bullying and do not refer to the classroom as a source of hope in the same way that related adults do. One pupil gave the startling response that 'this school sucks the faith out of you.' This is deeply disappointing, as schools certainly invest a great deal in safeguarding and in promoting inclusivity. Furthermore, given the reach of social media and the 'pressures and expectations' that children and young people identified with it, any anti-Catholic peer pressure almost certainly extends beyond the school gates and out of the sight of school staff.

However, it is clear from the responses that not a few children and young people are looking to the Church for guidance and for its institutions to be a safe place. The situation, they feel, is not being taken seriously. There is no explicit comment about a lack of action to deal with peer pressure, but there is almost a kind of despondency in responses. By this we mean that

children and young people provide details about peer pressure and how much of a barrier to faith they find it to be, but then do not suggest any kind of direct solution. For other problems relating to the Church, children and young people tend to be very proactive in suggesting specific courses of action. Therefore, when children and young people stay silent - as here - we should listen more closely to any potential reasons why suggestions are not forthcoming. Has that potential despondency arisen because children and young people have given up in terms of feeling that it is not seen as an important issue? Is there a lack of accessible pastoral care? Could the sheer amount of peer pressure be one of the major reasons that the church attendance of children and young people is declining? It is also worth re-mentioning that several young adults have reported anti-Catholic prejudice and peer pressure within their workplaces, so whilst it is proportionally more of a problem for children and young people, peer pressure is also a matter of concern in the wider community.

1.11.2 SCHOOL-PARISH LINKS

The second dissonance identified in the *Big Listen* process relates to the expectations around the links between school and parish. One student asks a very telling question: 'Why come to [a] Catholic school if [you are] not a Catholic?' It is true that many pupils might not be Catholic but what this means is that the Church has a connection with children and young people who do not attend their local parish and is, therefore, able to 'reach out to people through the well-established school system' within the Diocese. Catholic schools in the Diocese of Salford are making connections with non-Catholic children and young people; they need to be allowed to cultivate those connections gently and generously, within the boundaries of the school system.

The strength of the link between school and church appears to depend on local situations. The *Big Listen* heard adult voices describing a 'poor link between schools and church' as well as pupils who enjoy a priest's visits to their school. The Diocese would need to look at each local situation to consider how relationships can be cultivated and 'enable stronger relationships between schools and churches.'

Many school staff recognise the need for, and indeed desire, a stronger relationship with their local parish. Catholic teachers want diocesan involvement in and support for their Catholic practice. Many adults who may not themselves be directly involved in diocesan schools themselves feel very strongly about the historic link between schools and faith, and the role of the school. Such voices value the potential role schools have in the future of the Church and are prepared to make suggestions to 'encourage the development of faith in Catholic schools.' These suggestions include the mandatory teaching of the Catechism in schools.

2. Building Connections

Respondents overwhelmingly expressed a desire that the Church should be a source of hope for the future. Amid a society that sets up barriers between people, the Church has the potential to help people to negotiate the complex and unstable landscape in which people today find themselves. Key to this is the importance that the Church should take seriously its ministry to evangelise, which is common across the *Big Listen* responses. Where a divergence of opinion becomes evident is about how that potential is to be achieved. Most responses look to moving out from the church building into the world. This movement entails acting in accordance with the vision of the relationship between the Church and the world that is a key feature of the Second Vatican Council, and especially of its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, even if they do not refer directly to the Council. The consequences of a closure to the world potentially impacted on the Church's very viability - one respondent asked whether Catholic insularity has led to decreasing influence and church attendance. At the same time, a minority of responses focus not on the outward movement from the Church into the world but on the need to draw people 'out there' into the Church. This was illustrated by the image of the Church as a 'beacon.' This minority tends to reflect the perspective of those identified in the previous section who advocate a position of the defence of the Church and faith.

Clarification is required as to who the subjects of this desired outreach might be. A very clear concern emerged to reach out to lapsed Catholics. These include people who 'lapsed during COVID,' and a broader desire 'for the family of God to return.' One group response presented the matters in a strongly pastoral manner, saying, 'We need to be reaching out to lapsed Catholics. Those who are weak in their faith need to be supported.' Other responses broadened the discussion to embrace different audiences, including marginal groups, and the non-Catholic population in general. Thus, 'We must reach out to the poor and vulnerable'; 'We must reach out to those who are hard to reach.' At play here is a strong Catholic intuitive connection between proclamation of the Good News and its translation into effective service of others, and especially of the poor and marginalised. This finds its fullest expression in a submission by DiSAN (Diocese of Salford Social Action network): 'Spread the Good News of Jesus, and in doing so proclaim how we need to care for the poor and marginalised, to promote a care of creation, and reach out to those in our communities.'

2.1 SPREADING THE WORD THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

'To spread the word but what word?'

There is much discussion across *Big Listen* responses expressing a desire to return to the Church's core values. Yet no one actually says what those core values are and different responses appear to understand the phrase 'core values' in diverse ways.

One thing that is consistent, as has been mentioned previously, is the importance of relationships and the necessity of building connections. This links directly to ambitions for outreach since those connections need to extend beyond the physical boundary of church buildings. 'Church is not the building' because 'it's all about relationship' for members of the Diocese of Salford. The loudness in volume of responses which state that hope is found in family, friends, people met, and the church community comes from the build-up of almost a

thousand quiet voices. Hope and faith are found in the Church and in church services, but relationships are intensely important in people's lives. Some *Big Listen* responses discuss how they do not attend services because they are 'too churchy' but find their hope in the pub. Hope is not coming from alcohol, but from the community and relationships found in that place. There are *Big Listen* responses which look to the Church as a 'holy family' but not everyone transfers the social connection and belonging associated with family to the Church.

Church and family do not always 'mix.' Some members of the Diocese of Salford are offended by the presence at Mass of children who do not stay silent because they feel this disrupts their own worship. This directly contrasts with those who feel 'Children unruly or not should always be welcome.' One form of outreach deemed necessary within the Diocese is outreach to families, particularly in building supportive relationships with local families who might be isolated from their own relatives and need the Church to be additional support. To support families befriended through outreach, as well as families within the Church, conflicting attitudes or approaches to church environments will need to be considered. The expectation of maintaining liturgical silence in the Sunday assembly will exclude families.

2.2 'COMMUNITY' HAS MULTIPLE MEANINGS

The word 'community' is used to refer to different things within *Big Listen* responses, both church community and the wider community outside the parish, community related to the church and not. 'Community' often appears on its own and it is the context which leads to something of an estimate as to the supposed precise reference, where qualifying adjectives are not present. This linguistically reflects the fact that the boundary between parish community and local community is expected to be blurred for many Catholics in Salford. Those looking out from the Church might see, or want to see, an open boundary, but the view for those looking in is not necessarily as open.

For some respondents, the notion of community extends to ecumenism and interfaith relationships. If it is the case that, 'we are lucky we can practise our faith freely now in a multicultural society,' then the Diocese needs to look towards practical ecumenism and the 'tolerance of all faiths [through] love of our neighbours.' There is a sense that somehow, possibly due to COVID, there was a sort of withdrawal, communication of relationships shutting down and not re-starting. Additionally, there are some very fearful views that appear to come from a lack of familiarity with neighbours from other religions or communities. Perhaps a minority in terms of overtly expressing fear, some members of the Diocese in Salford are genuinely fearful of other religions taking over the world and extinguishing Christianity. This fear then affects how they are or are not able to look out into their local community. On a more positive note, despite that fear, people are looking to the Church for guidance instead of immediately retreating to an extremist position. There is potential for change with communication and reassurance.

2.3 BUILDING COMMUNITY AS A CONTINUAL AND COOPERATIVE PROCESS

The responses carried a sense of the complexity of the Catholic community. It is at the same time universal (or world-wide) but also local - primarily understood in the sense of diocese, but also extending down to parish level. The responses manifest an awareness that the body of the Church requires all its parts to work together. A strong sense emerged that people are looking to the Diocese to provide some direction and support to facilitate mutual support and

cooperation within and between parishes. People want to see some form of diocesan presence within parishes, more to make it feel like there is a community beyond a singular parish.

Therefore, *Big Listen* responses ask for diocesan support in facilitating clergy and laity in serving their communities. They also ask the Diocese to recognise that each individual community, whilst wanting to link with the wider Diocese, does have specific requirements. One thing which comes through responses very clearly is the recognition that each church is positioned to serve the community in which it is geographically situated; a church's location will necessitate 'different needs and circumstances.' One example might be a lack of 30–50-year-olds to take over the running of parish activities from older members. Is there any way that the Diocese could provide support for those parishioners who desperately want to grow their parish but struggle with the work on account of their age? If parents support local Catholic schools, would a closer relationship between church and school help? Members of the Diocese of Salford are asking for the Church 'to be open to listening to what parishioners feel they need' and 'To be more flexible in approach to best suit the needs of individual parishes.'

Theological Reflection 4: *The Mystical Body of Christ*

The emphasis on relationships that flows through the *Big Listen* responses echoes one of the powerful images used by the New Testament to describe the Church. St Paul wrote to the divided Christian community in Corinth as follows:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1Cor. 12:12-13)

This passage underlines what makes the Church different to any other human organisation. The Church is not brought into existence by a human initiative or through a collective decision, but by the action of the Holy Spirit. The relationship between the members of the Church, therefore, is also unlike the bonds within any other society: we are not simply co-believers or collaborators. Instead, the Holy Spirit draws us into intimate union with the Risen Christ. As the Second Vatican Council taught, 'By communicating his Spirit, Jesus mystically constitutes as his body those brothers and sisters of his who are called together from every nation,' (*Lumen Gentium*, 7) And, as it is the same Spirit that has been poured out to every Christian, then our union with Christ necessarily means union with each other in the body of which He is the Head. To be united with Christ necessarily means being united at a fundamental level with every other Christian woman and man; religious individualism is far from the Gospel.

Building community and healing divisions, therefore, are fundamental dimensions of the mission of the Church not just because they are good things in themselves, but because they flow from the very nature of the Church. In a world that is marked by division, selfish ambition, fear of others and a 'me-first' culture, the Church points to the destiny of humanity - to be drawn by the Holy Spirit into unity through its union with Christ. Consequently, the work of the Church in serving the Kingdom is to bring about that unity in the lives of men and women today. So, a commitment to ecumenism, to service of the poor and excluded, and opposition to all that in our society seeks to divide and exclude are not optional add-ons but are part of the essential mission of the local Church. In this light and especially at this time, inter-religious dialogue takes on a particular urgency.

The image of the Body of Christ here usefully points the way forward because it speaks of both unity and diversity. Just as in the human body, the members of the Church have different gifts and skills. All of these can be put at the service of the Church's mission in the world.

2.4 EVANGELISATION AND LOCAL OUTREACH

Evangelisation is linked to community. More specifically, evangelisation is envisaged as taking place through the visibility of Catholic life in community activity. People are looking for community spaces in which to build community relationships through activity, rather than retreating into insularity. More proactive members of various Diocese communities want to 'modernise our churches and community centres,' developing Church halls 'into community hubs/cafes' where the wider community would feel comfortable entering the church buildings.

Church should be a source of guidance and family relationship within the local community, but with an emphasis on the necessity of listening and understanding before attempting to provide any kind of guidance.

The question of local community outreach generates a host of ideas. One proposal raised was organising a beer festival. Linking back to those responses where people preferred the pub to church, with church being 'too churchy,' an event that created environments in which neighbours and the local community could be comfortable shows understanding and a willingness to meet people where they are. Other examples of hope coming from local community activities include watching and participation in sports: is there a way for the Church to build relationships through sport?

Innovative suggestions might seem too ambitious for an individual parish, but community is about mutual support and cooperation. People desire the Diocese to provide or facilitate the initial link between parishes so that relationships can be cultivated between different parishes, thereby allowing them to approach alternative outreach projects together and pooling their resources, which include the skills of their parishioners. Parishes have a great deal to learn from each other. The Diocese already has a professional and active Communications Office, although some respondents still appear to be unaware of the service it can and does already offer. But they clearly have a sense of what is possible: Diocese-wide communication between parishes could share different activities taking place, coordinating information as to 'what's on,' and so on.

On a very practical level, closer communication between parishes has the potential to enhance the deployment of the skills of the laity more effectively. Enhancing the relationship between parishes across the Diocese would enable Catholics to feel that they are part of something bigger. *Big Listen* responses notice, even negatively focus on, the decreasing of individual congregations and feeling small. To encourage hope, Catholics in Salford need to feel like they are part of a bigger family in Christ.

Theological Reflection 5: *The Parish and the Mission of the Church*

It can seem that that questions relating to parish reorganisation are very different to questions concerning the relationship of the Church of the world. The first may be seen as operational, the second as missional. It can therefore be tempting to imagine that we should prioritise 'getting our own house in order' before we look outwards to the world. However, Pope Francis regards the two as intrinsically linked, and has thrown down a challenge that is especially pertinent to the synodal journey. He writes:

'I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As John Paul II once said to the Bishops of Oceania: 'All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion'.' (Evangelium Gaudium, 27)

If the only practical result of the Synodal process in Salford was some kind of structural reorganisation that managed to 'keep the ship afloat,' then the opportunity of the Synod would have been largely wasted. Pope Francis points to the potential for the parish for self-renewal and to adapt, so that it can remain a fundamental point of mission, in the midst of humanity. However, he warns of the risk that the parish can become 'a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few,' and he says that 'the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.' (Evangelii Gaudium, 28)

There are - of course - many factors that need to be taken into consideration when reorganising parishes - not least the availability of priests, but also questions of patrimony and of buildings more generally. However, Pope Francis ask us that in our planning we start with the realities of life on the ground and the ways in which the Gospel needs to be proclaimed and its message of service brought to life in a given setting.

2.5 THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAR COMMUNICATION

In an age of ever-evolving media, effective communication becomes imperative. However, this is not necessarily a straight-forward matter. Diocesan members show concern about today's media, and especially about social media. Some adults expressed a strong concern about the media's influence on children and young people. Ironically, some of these adult responses show the subconscious influence of social media on themselves, adopting the media-spread language of 'wokism' and the 'metacrisis' emergency. Children and young people tend to be more relaxed when discussing social media. They live within a context where social media and technology is a standard part of everyday life. There is, indeed, the potential for social media and faith to be set in opposition to each other, but this is an issue which the Church can tackle if they listen to children, young people and adults who regularly interact with social media. Instead of being viewed through a lens of fear, social media could be a useful tool.

Undoubtedly, there are powerful secular agendas at play across sections of social media, but perhaps the reason for that is that the secular message is largely uncontested. Children and young people have noticed the gap and are asking why the Church does not have a greater online presence through which it can communicate with them. They have looked for the Church in the online space but found an absence; in short, children and young people want to see the Church on social media and inhabiting that space.

Children and young people do speak about 'outdated' methods of communication more than adults, but they still yearn for clear communication. It just happens that the format of their clear communication might need to be different and take place, for example, on social media. It is an area where a lot of children and young people had something to say. They want a central place to go for information, somewhere where they can easily find out their different options for Mass; they do not find the Diocese's website the easiest to negotiate. There were requests for a community website where children and young people could look to find vacancies or roles through which they could help the Church. Could there be an app to help them find the information they need? It is important to highlight that the purpose of all these requests for online interaction are for the purpose of getting more involved with the Church and finding ways to help the Church. Social media is a presence in contemporary society and is embedded within human interaction. People are looking to the Church to see how the Church builds online community and for guidance in how to do the same.

3. Enabling Access

Participation in the life of the parish provides hope and supports the development of personal faith. Therefore, it is important to ensure that people can access not only church buildings but also opportunities for liturgy, prayer and pastoral support. *Big Listen* respondents appreciate that the diocesan leadership is trying to facilitate their access to the life of the parish. Responses include comments such as 'Salford Diocese is going in the right direction, more of it.' The theme of access also links to previous discussions on relationships as members of the Diocese believe that 'God would like to bring children to Mass, encourage young families and make it a bit easier for them to attend.' Facilitating access means rather more than encouraging people to attend. There are barriers to access, and how the Church addresses them is important. These barriers - most obviously - can be physical. However, we also need to consider the needs of those whose conflicting responsibilities, work demands, disabilities, language barriers, amongst other obstacles, make Mass attendance more difficult. Alarming, *Big Listen* responses suggest the current system might only be working productively for a relatively narrow group of people.

3.1 LOOKING BEHIND PERCEPTION:

'It looks like I can't be bothered but I can really.'

People want to know that the Diocese actively seeks to understand the real situations that they are facing. For example, some respondents feel the Diocese fails to consider disparities of wealth within the Diocese. They see such disparities as problematic and are concerned that the Diocese fails to take into account the very different capacities of both individuals and parishes to respond to financial appeals. For some, therefore, daily financial worries are compounded by the Church's requests for charitable giving. Listening carefully, we hear requests that diocesan leaders should better understand the lives of the people under their care, rather than acting on what they assume situations to be. Improved two-way communication within the Diocese could allow leadership to get to know others more effectively. Priests entering the diocese could be given training on understanding the specific pastoral challenges and opportunities presented by the different socio-economic contexts present within the diocesan boundaries.

3.2 AWARENESS OF EXCLUSION:

'Be aware of people who do not feel that they are part of the Church.'

How people become aware of and respond to questions of exclusion depends largely on their own experience. This is true of every dimension of life - and the life of the Church community is no exception. Some respondents barely raise issues of inclusion/exclusion, whilst others express a growing concern about how some Catholics feel excluded from the Church. In broad terms, therefore, there are three bands of respondents: those who do not express awareness of the issues at play, those who have no personal experience of exclusion but are aware that others do, and finally, those who comment on their own experience of not feeling welcomed or part of the Church.

A complex picture of exclusion emerges from the responses. The most obvious factors contributing to exclusion are ethnicity, gender, and disability. However, there are other -

perhaps unexpected - barriers to participation in the life of the church. For example, the complexity of liturgical language presents a challenge not only to those whose first language is not English but also to those for whom gaps in their education (theological and otherwise) works against their participation. More broadly, fear and worry about daily life and social instability can create obstacles to faith for those who are affected - 'it's hard to concentrate on God when you're starving and can't pay the rent after working a full week.' If the Church does not appear to understand the impact of these pressing needs, then it is experienced as distant. Therefore, a common request heard in *Big Listen* responses is wanting the Church 'to understand the difficulties in life.'

Related to this plea that the realities of life on the ground need to be understood is the perception by some respondents that authority is over-invested in the clergy. As one person says, 'Steer away from clericalism and...the parish priest as an authority figure or someone to put on a pedestal.' Instead, there is a plea that the laity should, 'work hand in hand with parish priests and not wait to be led or directed by them.'

Some certainly attribute a lack of movement in the Church to its hierarchical nature and to leaders who 'feel threatened [about] letting go or being more flexible' and, therefore, 'unable to adapt or let the Holy Spirit work' through them. However, the broad range of responses is interestingly nuanced. Some responses that express concern for the abuse of power within the Church, lay that abuse at the door of social hierarchies within parishes of which the priest may not be aware - 'Too many lay people are taking power and control off the priest and using it to their own advantage to bully others out of their roles most often without the priest's knowledge.' It is essential for the future of the Diocese that parish communities are sustained by authentic relationships and by the practical living out of Christ-like. *Big Listen* responses lean towards a focus on that love, rather than on rigid rules and external religiosity. People want to avoid negative experiences of the parish, and specially the effects of judgemental comments from other parish members.

Another barrier to future participation in the faith of the Church for children and young people is, to put it simply, boredom. Already feeling sidelined by a Church that they think does not engage with issues important to them, children and young people said that church services are generally not expressed in a way which is effective for them and make the choice to not attend on account of that lack of provision.

Central to future faith is the Church's role in giving people hope for the future - many currently feel stuck amid social chaos. They want the Church to give them something to aim for, something to guide them through their turmoil. Catholics want and need liturgies that connect with them and facilitate their relationship with God. When people are asking for change in these areas, they are not asking for the abolition of current practices but for the genuine review of those practices. They ask the Diocese to use its understanding of members and of their broader social context to consider in depth what is and is not appropriate to take forward into the future. A concrete case is the provision made for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Several respondents felt that 'Confession times are too limited.' One suggested that parish online portals could include an 'online booking' process for the Sacrament. A dislike of the confessional 'box' arises in certain responses and, although there were no explicit requests for the celebration of the Sacrament with General Absolution, a communal dimension was

appealed to - 'Confessions should be an open service open to all participants as a congregation and not as it is being held in a darkened enclosed space.'

3.3 MASS TIMINGS AND THE DEMANDS OF MODERN LIFE:

'There are bigger problems facing ordinary man and women working to keep their heads above water'

The timing of Sunday Mass is repeatedly stated to be a barrier to participation in parish life. It is not that people do not want to attend, but that current timings make it practically difficult, if not impossible to do so. Many different reasons are given, and socio-economic factors largely lie below the surface of many responses. Certain jobs require weekend-working, which prevents some Catholics from attending Mass; yet they need to support their family in what can be a very hostile market place for jobs. Hence the appeals that 'Mass times need to be more flexible' - not least to 'make mass more available to shift workers and retail workers.' One respondent broadened the theme by requesting that the Church should 'allow people who work such long weeks to make ends meet to go to mass any day and it count as Sunday.'

The needs of young people were also raised in this regard; the widespread loss of Sunday evening Masses can impact particularly on them. One fact is that if they have a weekend job, it is likely in retail to involve Sunday working. However, the factors that mitigate against their attendance on Saturday evening or Sunday morning are broader. One respondent pointed to the impact of their social life, suggesting that 'Young people who have been out on Saturday night cannot make a Sunday morning Mass.' We must guard against considering all young people as a homogenised group and avoid applying a singular stereotype, recognising the complex human developmental, educational, and social factors at play. Sunday sport, of course, fits into this mix. One young person said, 'Sometimes I just don't have enough time to go to church because the days that Mass is on I have to go to my football games.'

The declining provision of daily Mass, too, was raised as an issue for some - 'It's becoming a proper privilege to get to daily Mass or to pray in church. One needs either a supportive spouse or flexible job- 'as early morning Masses for workers with a Eucharistic faith and longing are really non-existent in parishes outside of cities unless you live near a convent.' Another writes, 'it's a genuine and growing worry - as on the one hand you read inspiring Blesseds / Saints like Carlos Acutis or many Saints who built [their] lives around the Eucharist but who in England now couldn't do this unless they lived in the right place /city. Gone are the 7/7:30 Masses for workers / daily Evening Benediction of the past (but the gyms are thriving.)'

Where income is lower, Catholics struggle to pay for retreats and pilgrimages. As one young person says, 'If [it's] too much, then mum could not pay.'

3.4 UNDERSTANDING AND WELCOME:

'To be more understanding and accepting of individuals and families who don't appear to conform to all of the Catholic teachings and to welcome anyone into church as equals.'

Being understood is a necessary part of feeling welcomed. 'Welcome' is something all churches and parishes want to extend.

So, what does 'welcome' mean for the people of the Diocese of Salford? The *Big Listen* responses suggest two similar, but subtly different approaches. The first is 'compassionate, but firm - not wishy-washy but not excluding.' Respondents who take this line certainly do embrace the need for welcome and inclusivity, but they also place a particular value on the standards set by the Church: 'to be open but not too open so that [the Church's teaching] does not lose its relevance.' In the background lies a concern that significant agendas for moral behaviour are being set outside the Church - 'the Church is always having to bend to society. To be challenged and open and inclusive is good but sometimes it's more than that.'

The other response equates 'welcome' with acceptance. This position can be expressed in theological terms, starting from the perspective that 'God does not make mistakes' and humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. This recognition invites the response of 'embrac[ing] all who want to welcome God into their hearts/lives and walk the faithful path.'

Welcome is also associated in the *Big Listen* responses with 'inclusivity' but there is a vagueness as to what the concept of inclusivity means in practice. What people are sure of is that being like Christ means opening 'greater congregational and sacramental inclusivity,' even though some might want to put boundaries and restrictions on that inclusivity. The discussions on inclusivity revolve around whether God loves us all or whether maintaining clear religious boundaries and rules are more important. Can the Church embody the flexibility it needs to respond to individuals when no one size fits all?

3.5 DIVERSITY AND THE RECEPTION OF DIFFERENT CULTURES

Voices about and from different cultures are very quiet within *Big Listen* responses, despite some parish listening groups consisting of participants from different backgrounds. There are some comments, albeit not many, explicitly about diversity. As the retired priests group point out, many of the Diocese's parishes are multicultural and so discussion of inclusion seems appropriate. These priests ask whether there is, in fact, 'a culture of them and us?'. Comments made in other responses about priests from different nationalities vary but tend to relate to whether they truly understand the local context or whether their accent can easily be understood. In certain scenarios, such as for those trying to lip read or who have difficulties with hearing, there is a genuine issue to be considered. Included within this would be how a non-British priest might need training in how to communicate in such a way as to facilitate British Sign Language translation. However, there may be a broader frame of reference: some responses that raise a priest's accent as an issue also highlight the shortage of 'home-grown' priests. It will be important to ask whether this suggests a certain insularity among those who may not mix with different cultures in their local communities.

Learning from different cultures could bring valuable change. The priests' observations contain comments on British-born parishioners from different cultures: their strong spiritual identity and deep faith knowledge can seem alien at first, but the priests suggest the Diocese needs to listen to these groups to see what they can teach the Church more generally. In practical terms this might involve a receptivity to their worship traditions - 'I feel concerned in our church that African voices aren't heard in the choir. It would be good to have them contribute some hymns, once a month but each Sunday if possible.'

Other cultures take a more social perspective on Mass, for example, with the possibility of post-Mass food and fellowship. That social gathering and the provision of a meal is something that children and young people have, separately, been asking for. Adults, also, think that it 'is vital that the Churches allow people to gather before and after Mass for informal chats and exchange of news' to build relationships within the church community.

Catholics arriving to the UK from other countries speak about the way in which they negotiate the differences between the spiritual and social dimensions of their country of origin and those they encounter here. For example, a young Polish person explains how they incorporate differences between their Polish Catholicism and British Catholicism into their own practice - effectively, they follow both traditions at the same time. A fuller engagement with these issues is raised by the Cantonese community which meets at the cathedral. They explain their experiences and the necessity of culturally-specific support. In practice, this means that when they first come to the UK, they find a place where they can still practise their faith in their own language while they are adjusting to their new social context. Having access to a community of people who understand where they have come from and appreciate the issues they face in adjusting to the UK is essential. The pastoral care provided to this community has evidently been given careful consideration by the Diocese - 'Heartfelt thanks. Our Bishop John has done lots of good for Hongkongers. He has invited priests from Hong Kong to pick up pastoral support for us.' Another says, 'I think that God is asking Salford Diocese to be a pioneer, to set an example, to show other dioceses' how to serve different ethnic communities.

3.6 THE INCLUSION OF DIVORCED CATHOLICS:

'If I can be in communion with the church after confession and a murder conviction, why can't my father take communion when he has been divorced? Punishing people for an earthly mistake by removing a spiritual saving grace does not strike me as fair or in line with Jesus' teaching.'

Attitudes to divorced Catholics did not arise in responses as frequently as we may have expected. Those responses that do mention divorce fall between two extremes: on the one hand, a small number believe that divorced Catholics somehow 'infect' others in the Church and on the other we find those, such as the prisoner convicted of murder quoted above, who cannot understand the Church's discipline around divorce and reception of the sacraments. Most comments on divorce view the non-admission to Holy Communion of divorced and remarried Catholics who have remarried without the Church's blessing as a barrier to the Church's progress; they give it as one of the reasons why the Church has, 'lost its role in the eyes of the outside world.' Sadly, the Church's attitudes to divorce are given as one of the reasons why people say they do not attend.

3.7 LGBTQ+ CATHOLICS:

'I would like to see the church to be more accepting and welcoming towards people of the gay community we lose so much by excluding them'

How Christians of all denominations engage with the LGBTQ+ community has proved to be one of the most contentious issues of our time. Pope Francis' recent remarks - and media responses to them - have demonstrated how sensitive a point this can be within the Catholic community. The Salford *Big Listen* brings to the surface a breadth of opinions, concerns and

hopes on this subject. That breadth will be reflected in this section of the report, but as there was a discussion group for LGBTQ+ Catholics it is only right to begin with their voice.

Here we encounter an alarming response. In many regards, the comments made by this group about, for example, the need for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ Catholics in the life of the Church were identical to those made in many other *Big Listen* gatherings. The main difference, however, is that members of the LGBTQ+ group say that they do not feel safe in the Church. One said, 'I often cannot feel safe due to the opinions of many within the Catholic Church.' More broadly, LGBTQ+ Catholics talk about how, after time away from the Church, they felt led by God to return, but find it incredibly difficult to come forward and offer the gifts they have. Those who have tried to serve have been advised to 'act straight' by other LGBTQ+ Catholics, to avoid prejudice and judgement. LGBTQ+ members of the Diocese stay quiet but want to have their voices listened to.

Turning to the *Big Listen* responses as a whole, we encounter a spectrum of attitudes. In the main, discussions about LGBTQ+ members of the Church are folded into broader discussion about inclusion and acceptance. We can hear here the voices of LGBTQ+ young people and of their families. For example, a young person expresses that they are 'part of [the] LGBTQ+ [community]' and are 'not sure if [they] feel welcome.' The facilitator of a different Listening Group reflected that, 'One student came back to me and said that they didn't know where they stood religiously or with the Catholic church as a young person because of how they identify.' Parents of LGBTQ+ teenagers want the Church 'to include everyone...in our communion with Christ' and 'treat all God's children with love.' They do not understand why the Church cannot love LGBTQ+ people in the way that God loves us.

Children and young people generally find what they experience as homophobia to be a very real barrier to engaging fully with the Church and with faith more generally. It is clear from *Big Listen* responses that the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community can not only exclude LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families from engaging with the Church, but it also effectively pushes out those who believe that Christ-like love begins with acceptance of all humans made in the image of God.

Some *Big Listen* respondents criticise 'extreme behaviours' within the LGBTQ+ community, and what they see as sin or heresy in the response of some within the Church. Confused by the Church's stance, they ask that the Bishop of Salford should 'explain to the faithful why he is supporting LGBTQ+ factions within the church.' However, there is also a surprising degree of tolerance from older Catholics who, despite not really understanding LGBTQ+ issues, appreciate the importance of acceptance and inclusion.

Even those who do not adopt a definite position on LGBTQ+ Catholics within the Church feel extremely uncomfortable with the Church's silence on countries where homosexuality is now punishable with the death penalty. They want the Church to challenge that criminalisation as an act of evil. One more philosophical response simply states that 'If [LGBTQ+ people] are sinners, that makes them the same as everyone else.'

3.8 PHYSICAL ACCESS TO BUILDINGS:

'Being shut out of church'

Being able to even get to church is proving a challenge to some people as churches are closed. Closing parishes means a loss of a local presence, a centre from which the Church is embedded in the local community. It can also leave people behind when they cannot travel beyond a local church to the next closest one.

There is a long-standing tradition of Catholic churches being kept open for private prayer during the day. Rising crime and vandalism have all but brought an end to that tradition except in a few very fortunate locations. However, a longing for the ease of access to the Blessed Sacrament still resounds in the *Big Listen* responses. Some people express concern that when they are experiencing a time of crisis they find the church building closed. So, we hear a desire that the Diocese should 'encourage people to visit churches by keeping them open during the day' and feel the need to maintain 'the peaceful and reflective atmosphere of a church' because it is 'good for physical, mental and spiritual health.'

Another facet of the access discussion is the expressed need 'to consider how to be accessible to those who cannot attend for either physical or emotional constraint.' Whether people who would otherwise be excluded are visited by a priest or who are not reached out by the Church community more generally seems to depend on which parish they attend. Taking care of 'the sick' or 'the needy' does not have to be about a separate group of people: the Church needs to know and act on 'the importance of every person not being forgotten, especially the housebound.' People want Holy Communion to be taken to elderly parishioners and for them to still be part of a parish family.

3.9 DISABILITY AND PARTICIPATION:

'My disabilities make it hard for me to participate in the community life of my parish.'

There are *Big Listen* responses, quieter voices, which raise the question of whether everyone who cannot access church community needs to be excluded. What is it about church environments that prevents access? Interestingly, those not involved in community with other disabled Catholics seem to place the responsibility for access with their disability, rather than looking at how Church society prevents them from engaging with it. The lack of provision for disabled Catholics does not just affect the individual, it also affects their families. For example, in one response a child describes how their parents cannot attend church or take them to church 'due to [their] brother's learning difficulties.' This scenario raises the question why an entire family is prevented from accessing the Church. Could the Church not accommodate someone with intellectual disabilities (ID)? The majority of people with ID can go to a church service if the environment is made welcoming for them. Also, the parents are excluded from the church community and are not helped by that community. The family simply does not attend, and the parish has apparently not reached out to try and find a solution to the problem of lack of access.

The Catholic tradition of taking Holy Communion to the sick and housebound is much appreciated, and makes a vital link between the Sunday Eucharistic community and those members of the parish who are unable to attend Mass. The generous ministry of Extraordinary

Ministers of the Eucharist plays a vital role. For many of these people attending Church would never be a possibility, and the provision of online Mass, which was initially forced upon us by COVID but which has continued in some place, is cited by housebound members of the Diocese as a source of hope for them when they cannot physically attend. Nonetheless, we may still ask whether we have yet done everything in our power to make church buildings themselves fully accessible?

Voices highlighting disability are very quiet, but they should be listened to. There are fewer responses than we would have expected, given the prevalence of disability and chronic illness within the general population. Caritas has provided responses from service users which relate to a wider group of marginalised people. These highlight the need to be accepted and seen, instead of judged or persecuted. Concerningly, responses also implied that they felt judgement is exactly what would happen in an 'ordinary' church environment.

St Joseph's Mission provided responses from Deaf Catholics in Salford. Deaf Catholics effectively worship in a separated community, but what comes through the responses is a desire for integration. The reason why integration has not happened so far is the lack of facilitation. Church services do not generally cater for both Deaf and hearing parishioners.

If the Church wants to talk about meeting people at their point of need, they need to do so with genuine empathy that leads to acceptance. People need to be aware of their own biases when engaging with marginalised Catholics. Does the church pay attention to mental health and neurodiversity? Each is raised in a few responses, but not overtly. Particularly in children's and young people's responses, we found subtle references to ADHD, through comments on attention spans and other characteristics, but often nothing was referred to by a clinical term of name. This was particularly noticeable in mediated responses from children and young people; they were speaking in a school environment where they would be used to the various terminologies yet did not feel comfortable using that vocabulary in conversation with the Church. There are also references to neurodiversity below the surface of individual responses, if you know what you are looking for. There are potential references to sensory overload when discussing church environments and suggestions made regarding calming music enabling the person responding to settle into the service and, therefore, sit closer to God. Bringing accessibility ideas such as this into church practice may well benefit everyone and increase accessibility.

Mental health, or rather the Church's apparent lack of understand about and provision for mental health, is a barrier to faith for some speaking with private, quiet voices. It is not a topic covered in more open discussion, but 'being anxious and depressed...makes it harder for me to rejoice with my faith.' Mental health is presented as a reason for non-participation, without the reasoning for that being made clear. Perhaps the illness itself makes connecting in worship or prayer difficult, or perhaps it is the lack of understanding of mental health displayed by the Church and wider society that creates problems regarding comfortable access. Social anxiety, amplified by the lack of cultivated relationships, is one aspect of mental health that a lot of responses focused on the value of church community might be shocked by, as it is not a perspective that they are used to considering.

3.10 PRISONERS STILL WANT TO BE PART OF THE CHURCH

Prison chaplains have facilitated group responses from Catholic prisoners. On a practical level, prisoners are obviously excluded from church environments, but they still want to be included within the Church as whole. Prisoners want to be prayed for and somehow still be part of a church community, possibly via satellite groups in some form. Prison chaplains are experts in the specific requirements and boundaries of prison communities and what is possible in terms of linking prisoners with the wider Church; it is they who should be consulted as to what will and will not work, with the Diocese drawing on their professional expertise.

Church community is important to Catholic prisoners. They have very specific worries about their family being supported whilst they are serving out their sentence and concerns about life outside of prison once they are released. How will they return to the community, having been absent for so long? Will the parish accept them? The transition from prison to re-joining the parish outside of a prison environment is a question for the Diocese to consider.

3.11 LINGUISTIC EXCLUSION:

'Traditions are wonderful and should be honoured and protected.....but we also need to speak a language that people understand'

Access to church and faith is not just physical. Linguistic access is brought up repeatedly. One of the main issues is where complicated language within the liturgy, reading or homily excludes those who cannot understand.

Those who ask for 'tolerance within the Church to Catholics who love traditional liturgies' are not necessarily opposed to the use of the vernacular in liturgy; but they enjoy and find great meaning in the use of Latin and in the pre-Vatican II form of celebration. That being said, there is an understanding that language needs to be appropriate for the audience. Plenty of parishioners find the language - even the English texts - to be antiquated and complicated to follow. For them, the use of such formal language in the liturgy also leads to confusion over Scripture, either because the readings themselves are difficult to understand or because the language used by the homilist to explain them is equally complex. Where people feel they receive clearly communicated biblically-based homilies, they are content.

Our previous discussions on diocesan involvement in communities and the desire of parishioners for the Diocese to understand communities, also applies to different cultural communities. Different cultural communities need linguistic support to enable people from that cultural community to access faith. Where the Diocese does provide Mass in an alternative language, such celebrations do not occur with the same frequency as English-speaking opportunities. To help them to participate in Mass more often and within their local parishes, non-English speakers would like simple levels of support. One request was for Mass texts to be printed to enable ESL Catholics (English as a Second Language) to try and follow more effectively. When ESL Catholics attend English-speaking churches, they can find the readings inaccessible and need translations in their own language, either through the texts for that Mass or a copy of the Bible. Although the voices are quiet, or even silent, Salford is a very diverse Diocese. Catering for diversity by providing ESL support is essential, but it is not on every parish radar.

Some older Catholics have looked back to a time when the Diocese was involved in Adult Education. Whilst not directly related to Church *per se*, English language classes could be a potential solution; they would not only provide access to church participation, but also open the door to greater involvement in the Church community and wider society. In the meantime, if Church congregations looked at how they welcomed those from other cultures, learning a few words in a new language would show overt respect.

3.12 EDUCATIONAL ACCESS

One comment that is repeated throughout a range of responses is that people feel that they need to learn about their Catholic faith. People describe what they feel is a gap in their education and there are certain key aspects of theology and/or religious processes that they do not understand. That lack of education and understanding forms a barrier to faith which people are looking to the Church for help in breaking down. Importantly, the responses wanting the Church to provide more education in developing faith come from both adults and children and young people.

People's experience of full, active participation at Mass can be impaired when they do not properly understand what is happening. This can be acutely felt by those who have not been brought up as Catholics and who have chosen to join the Church later in life; now they are perplexed as to where to get the help they need. By bringing to light this experience of a gap in understanding on the part of some Catholics, the *Big Listen* invites the Diocese to facilitate the necessary learning, helping people not feel that it was a problem they alone were facing.

Educational access is a wider issue than just education in the Catholic faith. It could also go beyond the issue of linguistic access to the Church. Some members of the Diocese feel that a way of serving adults in Salford could be through the provision of Adult Education; with additional skills, people could be enabled to improve their outlooks in life at the same time as achieving that improvement instead of being dependent on others. Adult Education is positioned as a means to provide practical help that could lay the foundation for more direct evangelization. Hence the desire on the part of some that the Diocese should reinstate 'a Diocesan adult education programme.'

3.13 ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Quite a few respondents expressed a fear of modern technology; they appear to not understand and/or use it themselves. However, it is important that we do fall into a stereotypical division between older Catholics being against modern technology and children and young people being open to its use. There are ageing church populations who are looking to use 'modern communication methods' and it is the retired clergy who suggest bringing in external experts to help the Church to negotiate the social media and online space effectively. Many parishioners look to the Church for guidance in using social media. Therefore, they need the Church to be at least well-versed in that space, if not cultivating an online presence itself. The provision of guiding principles is becoming urgent: without those principles, people are simply using search engines uncritically and without the skills to evaluate the information that is returned to them. There is the potential that some more extreme views have been influenced by uncritical use of online information.

Church guidance on and use of social media needs to keep pace of a fast-developing sector. Lots of adults still use Facebook, but to children and young people Facebook is 'old-fashioned.' There is a generation gap of sorts as to which social media platforms adults use, which platforms they think children and young people might be using and which the children and young people actually use. Children and young people are open about which social media platforms they use, such as Tik Tok or Instagram, if adults were to ask them. They could point the Church towards where its social media presence ought to be.

Online Mass already provides hope for many of those unable to physically access a church building. The potential for the positive use of technology in creating online community could extend to online outreach. As we already mentioned, websites and apps promote the sharing of information and can make it easily accessible, enabling people to find alternative Mass times or information as to which roles in the Church they can volunteer for. Online platforms make information accessible in contemporary society and, as retired clergy have pointed out, modern technology is needed for communication and getting information to children and young people. It is through using technology to communicate information that the Church can begin to increase awareness of its relevance.

Technology and social media can be used to promote the church's position and reputation. Public relations is an area which *Big Listen* responses cite as necessary 'to lead people to God without the obsessions and disputes of the centuries.' People want the church to cultivate its position and reputation both inside and outside the Diocese. They want transparency and honesty, but they also want the Diocese to share positive news stories. They feel that the Catholic Church needs to do more to 'promote itself...as a positive influence, improve its image [and] spread the word' via media representation. People want the Church to be more prominent in the world, more vocal in supporting human rights.'

Theological Reflection 6: *Human Dignity*

Behind many of the questions asked above lies a concern for the dignity of all people. The importance of this concern in the teaching of the Church is echoed in a recent (March 2024) Declaration by the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled *Dignitas Infinita*. This Declaration opens with the clear sense that human dignity is not earned, or conferred by law. Nor can it be taken away or limited by circumstances. In other words, human dignity is never conditional, but is part and parcel of what it means to be human, to be made in the image and likeness of God:

Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable by reason alone underlies the primacy and the protection of human rights. In the light of revelation, the Church resolutely reiterates and confirms the ontological dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed in Jesus Christ. From this truth, the Church draws the reasons for her commitment to the weak and those less endowed with power, always insisting on the primacy of the human person and the defence of his or her dignity beyond any circumstance.

This inalienable dignity of the human person lies beneath the Church's passionate defence of the rights of the unborn, of people with disabilities and the elderly. Similarly, the stark inequalities of rich and poor, warfare, human trafficking and the sufferings of migrants are all viewed by the Church as grave violations of human dignity – as, too, are violence against women and sexual violence. *Dignitas Infinita* is careful to stress that human dignity is not to be confused with 'isolated and individualistic freedoms.' Nor can it be reduced to the 'ability to determine one's identity and future independently of others.' We can never understand our own dignity without thinking of our obligations to others, of our membership of the human community.

This fundamentally relational understanding of human dignity carries implications for the some of the moral dilemmas of our age. *Dignitas Infinita* reaffirms the Church's insistence that 'every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and consideration while every sign of unjust discrimination is to be avoided, particularly any form of oppression and violence.' But it also asks us to approach the debates surrounding gender theory, sex change and surrogacy through the lens of the objective dignity of the human person in his or her totality - understanding gender, body, and life itself not as things to be forged or chosen but as gifts from God.

As the Diocese of Salford steps out into its future, it is invited carefully to consider how its interactions with others always upholds the dignity which is theirs by God's gift.

4. Fostering Christ-like Care

The notion of fostering Christ-like care brings in different elements of the other *Big Listen* themes. Wanting the Church to be Christ-like and lead by example means 'Recognising and protecting the dignity of all' because they are made in the image of God. This translates into the question of how the Church treats people, how it cares for them.

4.1 LANGUAGE ISSUES - UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

Many responses refer to charity and the importance of helping 'the needy' or 'those in need.' However, there is a danger of seeming to create a separate group who are not part of the parish community, by definition, being 'other'. The language of separateness seems to link to socioeconomic exclusion, or even some kind of (hopefully unconscious) hierarchy, within which the church is positioned as benefactor and superior, instead of being a servant in the image of Christ and profoundly empathetic. The Diocese needs to be wary of creating a conceptual division between the Church and 'the needy.'

Paradoxically, even as some *Big Listen* respondents raise concerns about the lack of inclusion of some people in the life of the Church they use language that appears to contain unconscious biases. One such example describes the process of moving the homeless into accommodation as 'cleaning' the streets. The values embedded in the language used here echo the notion of removing the unsightly from view.

4.2 PRACTICAL FLEXIBILITY:

'Be more flexible to the needs of the people. Let God meet people where they are.'

Being Christ-like means meeting people where they are, following Christ's example of physically going to where people are and serving them. Service thus becomes a way 'To evangelise through living the faith.' There is a sense that, whilst service has always had a place within the Diocese of Salford, 'God is asking for the Church to shift from religiosity to practical' service and in this way for the Diocese to have a bigger presence in the everyday life of the communities it supports. Each parish is located within a specific local context and should take time to listen to and understand the needs of that local community.

When we hear respondents talking about not wanting the Church to simply be a service provider, what is intended is not that service as such should be halted. The issue at play is that of serving more purposefully. The parish should be an anchor of community, involved and open to local needs, in relationship with the people surrounding it and part of it. The Church does not 'give' (or, 'provide') services, neither is a response necessarily expected. As we have previously outlined, Catholics in Salford desire to get to know, empathise and walk alongside people to support them; they do not want to keep people who are turning to the Church at arm's length. Empathy requires knowledge and understanding of a person's situation, not judgement from a distance.

Theological Reflection 7: *Accompaniment on the Journey*

Pope Francis has returned several times to the image of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, walking away from Jerusalem in the late afternoon of the first Easter Sunday. He regards these two disciples, scandalized and disillusioned by the cross, as metaphors for so many men and women of our own days who cannot believe that the Church can offer them anything. Perhaps, the Holy Father muses, the Church appears too weak to many people today, 'perhaps too distant from their needs, perhaps too poor to respond to their concerns, perhaps too cold, perhaps too caught up with itself, perhaps a prisoner of its own rigid formulas.' (Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, 2013)

Pope Francis sees in the figure of Jesus, who walked alongside the disciples and listened carefully to them, an example for the Church to follow today. He says

'We need a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church capable of entering into their conversation. We need a Church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning.'

There is a model in this idea of 'accompaniment' for the mission of the Church at parish level. Ordinary Christians - the members of the baptismal priesthood - constantly find themselves listening to others across the course of their daily lives. Giving people time, listening carefully to them as they share their stories is the way that frequently we imitate Jesus on his journey of accompaniment on the road to Emmaus. Such listening can be a long, slow process, carried out across many encounters. But, as we come to really hear and understand what they are, then we can help them to make sense of their lives in the light of the Gospel. Pope Francis says:

'We need a Church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church which accompanies them on their journey; a Church able to make sense of the 'night' contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. But we need to know how to interpret, with courage, the larger picture. Jesus warmed the hearts of the disciples of Emmaus.'

People sometimes find the Church's invitation that we are all called to mission to be challenging - frightening, even. Pope Francis reminds us that it starts in a simple way - in human conversations, with a listening ear and an open heart.

4.3 CARING FOR PEOPLE

The challenges of daily life, health and financial worries, the demands of work, and the general uncertainty of life all mean that individuals and families need support. Pastoral care does include helping people to have faith in difficult times, but the *Big Listen* suggests that the Church needs to do more than that. The Church needs to 'become a safe space.' People need the Church to be a safe space and a refuge for them. They need the Church to be free from the pressure and judgement that feels prevalent within the society outside of the Church. However, *The Big Listen* reminds us that barriers to faith in contemporary society are considerable, and all too often our contemporaries can view the Church as anything but safe. - so we need to ask how the Church might change that perception and remove some of those obstacles to people's thriving.

For example, some respondents say that it can be difficult to reconcile the Church's stances on issues such as abortion and LGBTQ+ people, with its purported mission to show compassion for people. It is that mission which people want the Church to focus on, the mission of accepting people as they are and letting Christ do any transformation. Being Christ-like in the way of acceptance and love, the Church should be 'more welcoming to refugees, homeless, poor, marginalised and ostracised.'

4.4 PAST TRAUMA

It is important to acknowledge that certain trauma can make engagement with the Church difficult and that the Church should act sensitively in all scenarios, but especially when it comes to dealing with trauma appropriately. Participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for example, can be extremely difficult for victims of abuse, and they ask the Church to think of different ways that they can fulfil the requirements of faith at the same time as taking care of themselves.

Past clerical abuse is still an issue for some people, as they feel it has not been dealt with appropriately - its impact and extent not fully acknowledged and failure to set in place adequate safeguarding measures to prevent it.

Some respondents recognise the 'Church abuse scandal' but also lament the 'lack of forgiveness.' They criticize a 'negative feeling permeating the church [with] too much anguish over abuse issues.' Not understanding the effects of abuse and trauma, they expect the Church to have moved on. However, others within the Diocese are troubled by a lack of transparency; they see silence, cover up and victim blaming.

Perhaps the most powerful responses on the topic of clerical abuse are from survivors who are currently active members of the Diocese. For safeguarding reasons we cannot include direct quotations from their responses here, but their stories need to be heard. Clerical abuse suffered personally creates difficulties in participation in the life and worship of the Church. Where the Church is seen as not dealing with past issues of abuse, hurt deepens and trauma worsens. Survivors are unsure whether to continue in the Church or to walk away, based on how the Church has/has not dealt with the issue of clerical abuse.

We cannot and should not add to the words of survivors, but what we will say is that the issue of historical abuse by priests and the way it has been dealt with by the Church has clearly impacted negatively on way some people view all priests and the Church more widely. The history of abuse has caused Catholics to face ridicule for being associated with an institution in which scandals are not recognised and dealt with appropriately. Clear signposting of appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures is a specific point of action moving forwards.

4.5 DEALING WITH HUMAN NEEDS

The role of the church has changed from a place of rules to a place which has to deal with human needs

Members of the Diocese of Salford want the Church to challenge injustice and be involved in social action, not just to identify issues within society. People particularly cite *Laudato Si'* as 'encouraging everyone to care for others and our world.'

It is, however, also important to acknowledge the divergent view. Some respondents regarded a focus on the environment and issues of social justice as potentially dangerous. The Church, these respondents believe, should be focussed on saving souls instead of trees, and they suggest that working for social justice can be a distraction from the most urgent task in hand. This position, however, contrasts with more numerous, quieter voices which join together in increasing the volume of their message, that the Church should 'be seen and heard as a voice for social justice, welcoming everyone and serving all in a spirit of compassion and encouragement as equals.' Those who believe that the Gospel can be lived out without social justice cannot also attempt to be Christ-like, since Christ went out and did social justice practically.

4.6 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE BEING PRACTICALLY INVOLVED:

'I feel strongly that the younger generations have a kindness and a tolerance that isn't necessarily evident in older generations...the Diocese needs to harness that in a way that appeals to and engages the youth.'

One interesting observation about 'helping those in need' is that children and young people tend to be more specific than adult in suggesting how the Church offer practical social help. Adults tend to identify general issues and the solution of prayer, whilst children and young people make suggestions about going litter picking to supporting climate activism, or opening empty buildings to support homeless people within the Diocese.

Members of the Diocese want to support local social action projects, for example, through Caritas or St Vincent de Paul groups. They are also prepared to support CAFOD and other internationally active Catholic charities. This is about showing Christ-like care through those with expertise in the relevant spaces, supporting marginalised people and showing them respect.

One concern when reading responses on supporting marginalised people is the idea of being 'A voice for the voiceless.' We found this uncomfortable within the context of listening to both loud and quiet voices. Why are the voiceless unheard? Should the Church not listen to them or amplify those voices so they are no longer considered as 'voiceless'? Why does the Church not give the marginalised a microphone of their own?

4.7 SPEAKING OUT AND CHALLENGING INJUSTICE

We have alluded to this already, but within *Big Listen* responses to questions about the role of the Church, people want the Church to be vocal and loud in challenging injustice. The Pope is viewed as someone who speaks out against injustice and they want the Church to have a position on war, for it to advocate for peace. People want the Church to call out human rights violations and challenge members of the Diocese to become involved in challenging injustice too. Members of the Diocese of Salford want the Church in Salford to speak out on those issues and educate its members to be political voices for change. Social action is often not deemed to be involvement in politics, though; *Big Listen* responses do tend to take a deliberate step away from the concept of politics and political leaders, even though they want the Church to exert political influence.

Global crises have led to ‘continuous suffering of the same people in the same parts of the world.’ People want the Church to speak truth to power about persecuted Christians, human rights abuses more generally. It needs to challenge injustice, even in ‘prominently Catholic countries.’

4.8 CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Climate activism can be a particular point of tension. A minority of respondents deny climate change and believe the Church has been deceived by inaccurate scientific information. However, apart from those who express financial reservations, the majority fully support climate activism and think the Church should do more and be more vocal. This is mirrored by the numbers of people who find hope in nature and in spending time within God’s creation.

Environmentalism is important to many respondents precisely because of the hope they find in nature and their strong of support for the Bishop’s stance on climate activism. Some *Big Listen* respondents would like to see more diocesan projects related to eco living.

When compared to the daily grind, important issues such as the environment lack an immediate urgency for many people: they care about the environment but financially do not feel they have the capacity for certain aspects of climate activism. Some respondents to the *Big Listen* raise the question of whether environmentalism is only a concern for those who can financially afford to think about it; climate activism is perceived as the domain of the wealthy by some sections of the Diocese. It might be possible to communicate more affordable means to participate in environmental action, but at the moment it can seem out of reach to some.

Theological Reflection 8: *Care for the Environment & Human Dignity*

The 2024 Declaration *Dignitas Infinita* (discussed in Theological Reflection 6) stresses that the inherent dignity of the human person carries responsibility from the created world that: 'it belongs to human beings' dignity to care for the environment, taking particular account of the human ecology that preserves their very existence.' The natural world does not simply serve human utility, but also possess a value of its own; they are like gifts entrusted to humanity to be cherished and cultivated.'

Pope Francis draws this relationship of humanity with the created world into sharp relief in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, where he writes:

'The created things of this world are not free of ownership: 'For they are yours, O Lord, who love the living' (Wis 11:26). This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect. Here I would reiterate that 'God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement'.'

Add to this the realities of injustice and poverty generated by humanity's exploitation of the natural resources given to us by God, and the link between human dignity and a care for the environment becomes even clearer. Our sins against the planet all too easily are sins against our fellow men, women and children, sins against the dignity that is rooted in our being made in the image and likeness of God.

4.9 THE CENTRALITY OF FAITH

The exploration of Christ-like care returns us to the centrality of faith. Whilst there are many different aspects to faith, faith is seen by respondents as action. It is a guide through social instability. It provides comfort and strength. It overcomes barriers.

Responses to the *Big Listen* acknowledge that faith can be difficult, but from that understanding comes the desire to support those who they are enduring times that challenge their faith. The Church should be there to support faith during those times. People want the Church to 'Be brave and radical' in preparing for the future, building the necessary communities to enable as many people to access faith as possible, and the care for people and the planet as Christ would do.

4.10 PUTTING UNDERSTANDING INTO PRACTICE

The Diocese is being asked to listen hard to the realities of people's lives and circumstances. Hope is expressed that an understanding of the situation 'on the ground' might clarify what are

the real reasons, problems and implications for members of the Diocese that lie behind what is taking place.

Here we present three different examples from *Big Listen* responses, which could be dismissed off-hand at first glance, but which actually highlight issues the Church might want to address.

Example 1 - a teenager does not attend Mass because it is early on a Sunday morning

This scenario is repeated by children and young people in *Big Listen* responses and there are a range of reasons for non-attendance:

- Exhaustion on a Sunday morning
- There not being food before or after Mass
- Playing sport

Each of these reasons might seem flippant, with adults potentially responding to an apparent lack of commitment at non-attendance, but perhaps there is more going on? Scientific research has shown that teenagers' circadian rhythms make waking up early difficult and that their natural sleep cycles do not coincide with expectations of rising early. Some find the weekends to be their only time to rest properly, given how hard their weekly school routine can be, but they are prepared to attend Mass if it was not on a Saturday or Sunday morning. Finding alternative Mass opportunities is not the easiest task, due to the inaccessibility of information and lack of coordination between parishes.

Teenagers are generally always hungry and are always concerned about embarrassment. What if they were worried about access to food and their potential involuntary physical reactions to hunger causing them embarrassment?

We might expect children and young people to choose Church over participation in sport, but that is an impossible social choice. Peer pressure is a huge problem for children and young people within the Diocese and demanding that they withdraw further from interacting with contemporary society would cause further issues in terms of social interaction. We could not ask Catholic children and young people to reach out to their peers if they have been prevented from building friendships with them.

However we interpret the potential reasons behind Mass timings causing a barrier to faith for children and young people, Mass timings are effectively excluding a generation who interact in a socially different way than the generation before.

Example 2 - A woman lamenting the fact that she has not found a husband that meets her expectations of a Catholic husband.

There is a singular example where this is discussed openly: it was submitted anonymously via the Diocese website. The woman in question has not met 'any Roman Catholic men in my age group that [she] can date/marry' because they do not meet her ideal standard for a husband. Whether the woman's standards are deemed reasonable or not, the scenario does highlight some key issues within the Diocese that mean she should be taken seriously.

Big Listen responses from single Catholics do raise the concern that so much focus on marriage has implications for them and their faith. Younger, single Catholic adults do not find that they are able to make connections easily with their peers inside the Diocese. That lack of connection is concerning and not just from the perspective of finding a marriage partner. However, the importance placed on the Sacrament of Marriage means that the woman could be forced to make a choice between looking outside of the Diocese or outside of the faith if

she wants to marry. In either case, should she choose to start a family with any potential new husband, the Diocese would find it difficult to engage with that family.

Example 3 - Repeated requests for a new boiler.

Perhaps a familiar situation in many churches, some responses request that their church’s boiler needs replacing, but the work has not been carried out. Repeated requests for a new boiler might be seen as continued complaints, what if we were to think about the wider implications?

Repeated requests have been ignored and the congregation feels unimportant. A comfortable environment affects whether people feel valued, especially those who have health needs affected by temperature. ‘Freezing’ temperatures affect older people who have trouble kneeling, for example. The environment is a contributing factor as to whether people attend or do not, whether they stay or go given that ‘a more comfortable environment..would encourage you to stay.’ An uncomfortable environment does not attract people in or encourage them to stay, especially if it means they do not feel practically valued.

Warm environments facilitate social spaces and communal activities, which in turn allow the Church to serve the community and provide hospitality to those otherwise marginalised by society; helping the marginalised is something members of the Diocese of Salford have identified as something they want to prioritise. A social space not only allows for community outreach, but it also allows people who cannot otherwise access warmth to access a heated space. A boiler potentially allows a Church to share its ‘heat wealth’ with those facing fuel poverty.

4.11 DEFINING WHAT THE CHURCH IS/SHOULD BE:

‘There is a disconnect between Church and the world. What do we want the Church to be?’

From the responses submitted as part of the *Big Listen*, it is possible to compile a list of values or qualities that people want the Church to embody. Most words or values, though, are used by different people in different ways; desired characteristics are frequently named but rarely defined. The following is a list of what members of the Diocese deem essential:

transparent	honest	humble	faithful	servant-hearted
Christ-like	obedient	teaching	kind	community-minded
empathetic	open	safe	listening	outward-looking
tolerant	loving	welcome	modern	compassionate
approachable	accessible		non-judgemental	

Continuing Questions

How the Diocese works in practice is a challenging question. Many activities are undoubtedly taking place, but the Diocese needs to ask how effectively these activities serve the needs of the community and the mission of the Church. The themes of welcome and inclusivity recur as core values in *Big Listen* responses, but what do they actually look like on a practical level? Who does the Church welcome? How does the Church welcome? How does Christ-like acceptance and love work in practice? Similarly, 'helping those in need' is an often repeated ideal, but does the Diocese know what local needs are on a practical level? Beyond the poor, the sick and, occasionally, the elderly, there are not always clear suggestions as to how to help - although, as mentioned, children and young people often present clearer thoughts on what might be done.

We have listened very hard to what Catholics in the Diocese of Salford are trying to say. We have repeatedly sifted through their responses carefully. Some voices are very loud, others are not; this does not mean that quiet voices are less important. In fact, some of those quieter voices represent groups which we know are significant in number within the Diocese, but for whatever reason are not as overtly present in Synod responses as we might have expected. These voices include disabled Catholics and Catholics from non-English Catholic traditions. We get glimpses of their experience, but in-depth discussions are rare, except for small sets of direct responses in each case. If we listen very carefully, there are hints that issues such as disability and diversity are present and need further consideration.

Some synodal responses have expressed a concern that this listening process was 'opening the door to vested interests.' However, we have found this not to be the case. Those supposedly vested interests have actually been among the quietest voices.

Is there a fear of change? Probably and in many ways we might expect it. There are, however, many positive responses too: caring for the priests, wanting to get involved and the ambition of helping the church prepare to move forward to the future.

Positively, we can say with confidence that the picture of Salford that emerges from the listening responses does not present a Diocese divided into distinct camps. There are, obviously, differing opinions on certain topics or issues, but those divisions do not align with each other in a way that definitively splits the Diocese. Fascinatingly, there is a great deal of nuance. Some disagreements seem to be the result of confusion and there is potential that, once a clearly communicated explanation has taken place, any division might be minimised. At heart, everyone is essentially aiming towards moving in a similar direction: towards being Christ-like, leading by example and becoming a welcoming Church.

AFTER THE DISCUSSION:

'Are we going to make the same mistakes and just talk?'

Catholics took part in the *Big Listen* with a sense of expectancy. Perhaps the most direct response was the request for the Church to 'Please do something.' Those disillusioned by a previous lack of change want to see a visible follow-through to this synodal process. When we

listen from a more overarching perspective, taking voices all together, members of the Diocese are advocating for listening to take place, for there to be consequent discussion and for there to then be change. There is a desire that the *status quo* be disrupted and for there to be spiritual and practical growth. Empathy starts with listening. Now that the people of Salford Diocese have been listened to, they look to the Diocese to guide them with the same empathy into the future. As one respondent wrote:

'I hope for a new Church when the Universal Synod completes its work and guides our faith in the 21st century.'