

## **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.