



Implementing Synodality in Aotearoa

Brendan Daly highlights some of the outcomes of the Synod on Synodality and anticipates that the local Church has much to do to implement its teachings.

THE MEMBERS OF THE XVI Synod approved the final document "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission". This document epitomises the approach of Pope Francis to reform in the Church. Pope Francis, as he noted in his apostolic exhortation after the synod on the Amazon region, seeks to challenge rigidity in the Church, clericalism and any approach that would narrow our vision or restrict our understanding of the Church to its functional structures. Synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ.

Pope Francis Demonstrates Synodality

Normally a year or two after a synod, the Pope issues an apostolic exhortation about the synod topic. This time, however, Pope Francis announced he would not be writing an apostolic exhortation but would simply publish the

final document that had been voted on by the bishops in attendance and the 70 non-bishop members. Pope Francis said: "What we have approved is sufficient." By using the word "we", he emphasised the contribution of the laity to the magisterium and thus the governance in the Church.

Pope Francis was sending a message that the synodal process involved all members of the Church, and that all had been listened to and were part of the approval process of the final document. In that sense, the synod was operating in a model way for the entire Church.

Transparency and Accountability

The final document, "For a Synodal Church", recognised the need for greater transparency and accountability in the Church. It is obvious that both are lacking at present: in the processes pertaining to abuse cases, financial decisions and around decision-making itself. Many issues are not dealt with promptly — instead of prompt action, a decision is

delayed in favour of forming a committee to look into the matter concerned. At other times, as canon law researcher and theologian Judith Hahn notes, power is sometimes used to delay clarifications on points or what can be done. Pope Francis in his final greeting to the synod members said true reform comes about by "listening, convening, discerning, deciding and evaluating ...[with] pauses, silences and prayer."

Lay employees of the Church often have performance reviews, but currently few clergy have them. This will change in the future as the final document requires ministers and ministries to be evaluated.

"A synodal church is a participatory and co-responsible Church. How does our Church community identify the goals to be pursued, the way to reach them and the steps to be taken? How is authority or governance exercised within our local Church? How are teamwork and co-responsibility put into practice? How are evaluations conducted and by whom?"

Study Groups Formed

After the 2023 synod meeting, 10 study groups of experts were to deal with complex or controversial topics such as women deacons and changes in canon law. Some changes may be forthcoming in canon law, but much of the application of synodality has been left to the local Churches to implement in ways that suit their local circumstances and realities.

In his final greeting to the synod, Pope Francis said of the final document: "It will largely fall to you, together with many others, to make what it contains accessible in the local Churches. The text, without the witness of lived experience, would lose much of its value."

To Allocate Personnel and Resources

Sometimes structures in the Church exist, but are not used, or nothing of importance is referred to them and they die. This can happen with parish councils and diocesan pastoral councils. Too often there is a lack of application of real consultative processes in the Church. Therefore, episcopal conferences are encouraged to allocate personnel and resources to facilitate the growth of a synodal Church in mission.

Participation of Baptised

The final document quotes from John 21 where Peter says to the other disciples: "I am going fishing." They reply: "We will go with you." This scriptural passage symbolises the synodal journey of going together. We are all called to "go together" because mission involves all the baptised: women, men, children, married, single, religious and clergy. Lay people should have increased participation in the discernment processes and in all phases of decision-making processes (drafting, confirming and making decisions), more opportunities to qualify as judges in all canonical processes (New Zealand has one married woman judge), and more involvement in seminaries and decision-making about ordinations and who is in active ministry.

Women's Leadership in Church

Article 60 in the Synod document on the role of women's leadership in the Church was the most contested issue. While 72 per cent of delegates voted for the article, changes to women's leadership still may not happen.

Nevertheless, article 60 is a strong official Church



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statement: "There are no reasons that prevent women from taking on leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. The question of women's access to the diaconal ministry also remains open. We need to continue discernment in this regard."

Problem of Clericalism

While women deacons remains an unresolved issue, it is clear that some canon law needs to change. In fact the biggest obstacle to the involvement of women in decision-making is the culture of the Church — its clericalism.

Pope Francis has spoken often about how the Church has been bedevilled by clericalism and patriarchy so that things like abuse have been ignored, covered up or minimised.

The synod specifically mentioned that "the Church must acknowledge its own shortcomings. It must humbly ask for forgiveness, must care for victims, provide for preventative measures, and strive in the Lord to build mutual trust."

In response to these systemic problems, Pope Francis promotes synodality not by creating new laws (which are not always followed anyway), but by developing a customary approach to the law that is built on living relationships in the Church with all its members of laity, religious and clergy moving together as a real community in mission.

Much will depend on what bishops and other local church leadership will allow or promote.

Hope for Synodality in Aotearoa

Synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium. A synodal Church will engage, listen and learn as it preaches and lives the Gospel in a way that re-establishes trust. The big challenge for the Church is to make synodality real, alive and active in the lives of individuals and the Church as an institution. To be a synodal Church there has to be change in our Church in New Zealand. For that to happen there must be more transparency, co-responsibility and accountability throughout Church life and that is the challenge for everyone. ✦

Image from www.synodresources.org 7 March 2022

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