

Christ the King Church
195 Brandon Road
Pleasant Hill, CA 94523
Registered Parishioners: 4,400

St. Stephen Church
1101 Keaveny Court
Walnut Creek, CA 94597
Registered Parishioners: 300

Summary Report on CTK/St. Stephen's Synod Listening Sessions

Introduction/Methodology

Beginning in early January and ending in mid-March, in response to the invitation from Pope Francis to provide input from the People of God to the planning for the 2023 Synod on Synodality, Christ the King and St. Stephen's parishes conducted over 40 small group Synod Listening Sessions. The sessions were attended by approximately 200 people. They were conducted primarily in small groups of 3-7 participants to allow ample time for each person to share their thoughts and reflections. Eight of the over 40 Listening Sessions were conducted at St. Stephen's parish and the others at Christ the King.

The conversations were guided by these two reflection questions:

- 1) What do you appreciate most about your experience of the Church and the hope and joy it brings to your life? In other words, what is the Church doing well these days to meet the spiritual needs of you, your family, and our community?**
- 2) What are your greatest concerns about the Church and its future and what are your recommendations for addressing these concerns and increasing the Church's relevancy for you personally, your family, and our community? In other words, how can the Church be a better Church at both the universal and parish level?**

Requests to participate were extended through pulpit announcements, the Sunday bulletin, the parish website and personal invitations. Specific outreach was also made to all parish ministries and groups. A number of listening sessions were also offered following the Saturday/Sunday Masses at both parishes.

Participants were grateful for the opportunity to share their joys, hopes, concerns, and recommendations in response to building a better church. The sessions were spirit-filled, and conversations were animated, reflective, energetic and oftentimes were characterized by strong emotions.

The demographics of the participants in the listening sessions reflected those of the two parishes, especially of those most engaged in the Church. These numbers included some 90 men and over 100 women, the majority of whom were Caucasian and between the ages of 50 and 65 plus. Detailed demographic information can be found toward the end of this report.

While there was some outreach to those who are disaffiliated from the Church, the short deadline for this report made that challenging. The Pastor has committed the parish to a major initiative after Easter to address those parishioners not currently active in church liturgies.

Facilitators and recorders were present for every listening session. The recorders were charged with capturing the key points of the conversations and the substance of the responses on the two reflection questions. The reports of the recorders from all of the listening sessions totaled 110 pages. To assist in our processing and summarization of these reports, the parish enlisted the services of an independent, third-party consulting firm to do a qualitative analysis of the reports and help us identify the major themes of participant responses.

The report which follows attempts to capture the spirit of the listening sessions and the major themes brought forward from all of the listening sessions and includes examples of how these themes were expressed by the participants, and the key recommendations made by participants in response to those themes.

Report on Responses to Question #1:

What do you appreciate most about your experience of the Church and the hope and joy it brings to your life? In other words, what is the Church doing well these days to meet the spiritual needs of you, your family, and our community?

Major Themes and Participant Comments

1. Celebrating the Sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist

- Parish liturgies are a positive experience: The sacred space is well thought-out and always well presented. Music is consistently well done, and
- focused and always relevant to the signs of our times. Homilies are thoughtfully prepared, relevant to day-to-day challenges, and delivered effectively.
- Homily charges me for the whole week.
- I feel the Holy Spirit “and have goose bumps in church”; I want to spread the news to my family when I leave Mass.
- The universality of the Church – common liturgy, sacraments, prayer; all connected in the Eucharist; the Body of Christ.

Recommendations Regarding Liturgies

- Heighten sensitivity within the Diocese of diverse worshipping communities, e.g., young adults, the gay and lesbian communities, the homeless, youth, and immigrant/refugee communities.
- Celebrate lively and joyful liturgies that reverently give glory to God and nurture the spiritual development of the people of the parish/diocese.
- Provide culturally-sensitive liturgies in parishes with large numbers of people born in other countries. Celebrate our diversity.

- Provide quality homilies that are more personalized and targeted in all our liturgies; develop ongoing diocesan homily evaluation and assistance programs for the clergy.
- Continue to invite guest preachers who deliver messages and reflections on the Gospel in a different voice, a different perspective, views from a different lens.
- Offer our international priests' accent-reduction training classes to avoid parishioners having to struggle to understand what the priest is saying during the liturgy.
- Schedule a Family Mass on the first Sunday of every month at 9:00 AM. Set up a committee for planning the liturgy and engage the CTK school choir to help with the music.
- Identify other affinity groups for whom specially planned Masses and homilies might be more meaningful and relevant, more focused on their needs and experiences; use relevant language in homilies.
- Restore the Fr. Joyce practice of the pastor welcoming everyone before the beginning of Mass, providing a short question the answer to which can be shared with a few people around you to get to know them and make a connection.
- Homilies need more focus on current events and the life challenges, joys, and pains of parishioners. Continue to invite reflections from lay women and men.
- Incorporate great church music with more updated and upbeat music in liturgies.

2. Having a Welcoming, Supportive Parish Community

- Value the strong sense of community/social and spiritual bonds with fellow parishioners: sense of support; openness to new ideas; a welcoming, hopeful, fulfilling, nourishing, joyous place. Church is the center of my life.
- Through our nearly 15 years here, we have been on the giving and receiving end of enormous outpouring of direct love and support during our most troubling times and our friends' most troubling times. This was built with our relationship with others that we met through the church and school.
- Entire parish staff provide attention and support through happy and sad life events (births, baptisms, sickness, death, funerals, etc.)
- Joy comes through the community we have at CTK in friends and the positive impact that the school is having on my kids in both academic and faith formation. The church also does some things well to promote our mission to the Pleasant Hill Community.
- Extra effort exerted during COVID restrictions – outdoor Masses, live streaming of Mass, improved parish communications, e.g. *Staying Connected*; need to build on these successes.
- We have a generous parish that is managed in a fiscally prudent, transparent manner allowing us to maintain the parish and support many worthwhile causes.
- Appreciation for efforts of CTK to keep St. Stephen's alive.

Recommendations to Strengthen Our Parish

- Return to key social events of the parish, e.g. Festival, coffee and donuts after Mass.
- Plan more social and spiritual connection opportunities, especially after COVID, for all and by age group/life stage/ issues and challenges held in common (families with young children, those grieving a loss, those experiencing divorce. etc.)
- Do better at welcoming guests; be more open and upbeat; revitalize our welcoming ministry. Are we explicitly hospitable? Can we be more welcoming? Are we truly reaching out to those who have not been with us recently? Encourage small groups; more involvement of clergy with parishioners.
- Continue to encourage parish volunteerism. Don't become too reliant on those who step forward to volunteer repeatedly, especially those who may be aging out of their volunteer/ministerial positions. Leverage impromptu volunteers by looking for ways to make volunteering easier. Continue to be compassionate and responsive to those in need.
- Build a strong relationship between the community of CTK school families and the broader parish community for both social and spiritual support. Do outreach to school parents to assume leadership roles in parish ministries whose current leaders are aging out.
- Continue financial transparency re: parish budget and spending priorities.

3. Seeing Church as Conducive to Spiritual Formation and Religious Education of Laity

- Parish provides the opportunity to nurture and grow in my faith, especially through the Eucharist and other sacraments (liturgies/adult ed./homilies/ministries) CTK is family, my spiritual home.
- I value the moral and spiritual principles, values, and foundations provided by the Church.
- The CTK school is a valuable asset and does a fantastic job at preparing our children to be kind and effective citizens of the world with a strong moral compass.
- CTK promotes open and active communication with Church members through town halls; *Staying Connected*; church bulletins; website, on-line presence.

Recommendations for Continuing Education of the Laity

- Develop a series of training/education classes on what the Catholic Church teaches on a variety of relevant topics with a broader focus on Jesus; Mass and liturgical celebrations; basics of the Catholic faith from a Vatican II perspective; bible study; marriage and family, not fear based; develop a unified American Catholic message.
- Continue to increase the parish's on-line presence. Take this opportunity to make written resources or links available. Some suggestions:
 - Make written copies of homilies available so parishioners can go back to reflect on what they heard or revisit their favorite homilies
 - Create on-line resources and on-line links to e-learning opportunities including scripture study, prayers for particular needs, Catholic Social Teaching, etc., especially directing

- Parish would be stronger if there was a coordinator/resource person on staff to provide information about internal ministries as well as the diocese and the county community at large.
- Revitalize adult education programs including more emphasis on Scripture study. Make these available to the broader local community through improved marketing and publicity.
- I would like to see our parish aggressively move forward in providing continuous adult formation. Discussions and presentations on topics including Care of God's Creation, Racism and Peace might be on our list, and our goal would be to stimulate parishioner involvement. This activity might also include recommendations on how parishioners might enhance *their advocacy skills*.
- Support a Church media. Poll parishioners to stay relevant regarding shifts in attendance, contributions.
Focus on: evolving with Christ; Christ loves us individually; Christ within us.

4. Being Involved in Social Justice Causes and Other Parish Ministries

- Parish provides opportunities to participate in the many varied ministries of the parish, especially those related to social justice and helping those in need and the less fortunate.
- The parish has active ministries with outreach, including St Vincent De Paul and Dress a Kid Around the World.

5. Having a Parish with Positive and Involved Priests

- We have a strong parish with a history and legacy of kind, compassionate, prayerful, inclusive, quality priests that extends to this day; we benefit from an active community of retired priests who continue their ministry through our parish.
- I truly value our pastor and our priests. They are inspiring and selfless, and I know they work hard to make Christ the King a welcoming church and a model of Christ's love – Thank you!

6. Showing Respect for the Overall Mission of the Church and the Leadership of Pope Francis

- Strong leadership from Pope Francis on key moral and social issues and from pastor at the parish level; respect for Pope Francis and what he is trying to do. He is a pope with a heart, simple, humble, inclusive, prophetic.
- The Synod Listening Sessions were great; we should do this again in the future.

Report on Responses to Question #2

What are your greatest concerns about the Church and its future and what are your recommendations for addressing these concerns and increasing the Church's relevancy for

you personally, your family, and our community? In other words, how can the Church be a better Church at both the universal and parish level?

Major Themes (Related to Greatest Concerns About the Church and its Future) and Participant Comments

1. Church's failure to better engage young people and young families

- We are losing/not reaching our young people who are not actively participating in the Church. The Church has lost its relevance to young people who leave and rarely return.
- How do we bring young people and young families back in and help them feel they belong? Have a synod session for young families.
- The Church through its actions should show that it has meaning and relevance in the lives of today's young people.
- Pope Francis and the entire Church should work harder to connect youth to Christ.

Recommendations

- Need quality religious education for all elementary and high school students whether or not they are enrolled in Catholic schools. Find new ways to make these programs both substantive and attractive to young people.
- Recognize and meet the needs of contemporary youth.
- Need to rethink the Confirmation program. A two-year program is too challenging with two parents working and the extra-curricular activities that students and families are involved in; the Church has not kept up with the social and time demands of families.
- Sponsor a weekly/monthly Mass for/with young people relevant to their needs. Engage them in planning and execution of the Mass.
- Recognize, empower and engage youth as full members of our Church; encourage participation as musicians, singers, lectors and eucharistic ministers.
- Engage young people in outreach and service to/with the poor, e.g. role for young people in the St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- Designate selected parishes in the Oakland Diocese as centers for youth ministry where the local parish is not able to provide this ministry.
- Young people need to see ideals lived out by institutions such as the Church and not the hypocrisy that currently is at the forefront. We need a Church that speaks through its actions on behalf of the poor, LGBTQ people, the divorced and many others. The Church is not living the mission Jesus set out to establish.

2. Issues related to discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity and the lack of diversity in the leadership of the Church

- We are not recognizing the gifts of women in the Church and their ability to lead and minister; need to increase and elevate the role of women in the Church.
- Concern about the reported 1/3 of Catholics who have left the church, many of whom are women who are fed up with the inequality of their role.
- Need to provide wider choices available for the members of the Church, ordained and lay, reflecting the early Church, with members given opportunities for leadership according to their gifts, not their gender or social/financial status.
- The Church looks frozen in time and the current glacial pace of change is not good enough.
- I want women involved in every aspect of the Church, including ordination.
- Church leadership not welcoming to LGBTQ community. Gays are tolerated but not accepted.
- There is a lack of a sense of brotherhood among races and gender groups creating institutional divisions.

Recommendations

- Highlight and appreciate the contributions women have made to the Church and recognize and incorporate women into key leadership roles at all levels of Church governance and administration. As long as the Church continues to pursue a singular, male dominated structure, people will continue to abandon the Church.
 - Church should open ordination to the diaconate and priesthood to women, single and married.
 - LGBTQ community needs to be welcomed and encouraged to enjoy a complete life as Catholics.
- 3. *Lack of open and honest communication and interaction by church leadership with Church members, especially in addressing serious issues and scandals.***
- On-going concern about sexual abuse scandal and the way it has been addressed by Church leadership. The loss of trust has sent many of our parishioners away from the Church.
 - Concern about divisions between conservatives and progressives in society and in the Church. How do we lead across these divides through respectful dialog and deeper appreciation for differing points of view, especially when it comes to politics? How does the Church stay out of politics while at the same time strongly advocating for Gospel values and Catholic Social Teaching.
 - At the Diocese level, the priority has been for decades to spend money on facilities and pay off the albatross that is the cathedral. I can't help but wonder how much good could have been done in our Diocese if that money went to endow or support mission work within our communities.

- Church leadership in general is not transparent and available to the people. Leaders have lost their way and seem more concerned about protecting their power than promoting community, social justice, and inclusion.

Recommendations

- Maintain a Zero Tolerance policy against sexual abuse and harassment of minors and vulnerable adults.
- Hold Bishops accountable for their acts of omission and commission with regard to applicable laws and church policies concerning sexual abuse.
Strict compliance with diocesan sexual abuse prevention policies and programs including mandatory training and background checks for all clergy, lay and religious staff and volunteers who are in direct contact with children and minors.
- Continue with efforts to support and heal abuse survivors.
- Concern that the USCCB continues to push advocacy against abortion over any and all Catholic social teaching. News items where this is mentioned and politicians on this subject work with a singular focus. Should the USCCB continue to push their culture war? This will eventually push many out of the church to other faith homes that are more welcoming of all.
- Emphasize Catholic social teaching as a starting point for promoting greater unity in the Church.

4. Concern about the many disaffiliated who are no longer attending Mass and/or leaving the Church.

- The Church is in crisis: loss/erosion of credibility and moral leadership; people leaving the Church (not counting deaths) at a higher rate than those coming into the Church; rigid all male hierarchy.
- Concern that the USCCB continues to push advocacy against abortion over any and all Catholic social teaching. News items where this is mentioned and politicians on this subject work with a singular focus. Should the USCCB continue to push their culture war? This will eventually push many out of the church to other faith homes that are more welcoming of all.

Recommendations

- Designate 2023 as a Year of Outreach to Catholics who are no longer engaged with the Church – continue to try to ascertain why so many have left the Church; address these concerns; provide support and accompaniment for their return.

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5. Concern about the shortage of priests in the US.

- How do we foster vocations? Why aren't more American men going into the priesthood? Are there structural issues that need to be changed? Concern about availability of the Sacraments when there are not enough priests; need for more and better training of seminarians and younger priests.

Recommendations

- The Church needs to reverse the man-made rule that eliminated married clergy. The rule should have been returned to that of the previous 1200 years of Church history that had optional celibacy for diocesan priests. The Church has lost many, highly qualified men who left the priesthood to marry and dissuades many others from considering the priesthood due to the outdated and misguided rule insisting all priests be celibate.
- Promote and recognize the leadership and ministerial gifts of women at all levels of the Church - parish, diocese, and the Vatican – including ordination to the diaconate and priesthood.

Demographic Details

Demographic background information was collected for most but not all those who participated in the parish listening sessions. Here is a summary of the demographic details collected:

Gender: Male: 92 Female: 106

Age: Under 18: 12; 18-34: 1; 35-50: 21; 51-64: 29; 65 and over: 100

Ethnicity: Caucasian: 134; Asian/Pacific Islander: 11; Latino: 5. Black: 3

Concluding Comments

The Synod called for by Pope Francis, and the main topic of the October 2023 Synod on Synodality was enthusiastically welcomed by the participants in our parish listening sessions. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity to provide their input and reflection on the Church and its future. This invitation for engagement on the part of all God's people inspires us and makes us hopeful that this invitation for engagement on the part of all of God's people will enable us to create a better Church.

We acknowledge that there is also a skepticism among a number of those who participated in the listening sessions and those who chose not to attend. Some are skeptical that significant change will come because of this process. Further, there is skepticism that the concerns and recommendations offered will be recognizable after layers of summarization have been completed at the diocesan and national levels.

It is for this last reason, that the summary report from the parishes of Christ the King/St. Stephen to the Bishop of Oakland will also be sent directly to the Secretariat for the Synod in the Vatican, an option clearly made available in the Vatican Handbook on the Synod. It will also be sent to the Synod Office of the USCCB.

As we complete this phase of the Synod, we look forward to a continuation of synodality as a way of being Church at all levels. We have high hopes especially for what this will mean for our parishes as the conversations begun in this phase continue to bring vitality, relevance, and growth to our local faith communities.

As we have been praying through these last several months of listening sessions:

We stand before you, Holy Spirit, as we gather together in your name. With you alone to guide us, make yourself at home in our hearts. Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it . . .

We conclude with the words of one of our parishioners: *May the Holy Spirit lead and guide us along the correct path and bring God's anointing and blessings upon the final outcome!!!*

Let all God's people say AMEN.

APPENDIX

Members of the CTK/St. Stephen Synod Planning Team

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