

National Board of Catholic Women England and Wales

The National Board of Catholic Women brings together Catholic women and women's organisations in England and Wales. It is a Consultative Body to the Bishops' Conference.

This response is based on synodal conversations involving members of the Board and written comments from Board members on the Synthesis document.

Response to the Synthesis Report

1 The Face of the Synodal Church

The Church will need to create structures to support processes of shared decision-making and co-responsibility at every level; and equip clergy and laity with skills necessary to participate in these processes. The concept of 'servant leadership' is the antidote to clericalism.

We must find the balance between the necessity for authority, the need for constructive collaboration through co-responsibility, and opening the processes to a greater diversity of voices.

The Church is multi-ethnic, and multicultural. WE need to equip clergy and laity with the skills to develop internal intercultural dialogues, to improve understanding and share wisdom and insights.

Communication is an important aspect of being the Church in the interconnected modern world. Do our communications consistently reflect our commitment to the gospel? Protocols for good communication, including use of inclusive language, are needed.

The abuse crisis continues to cast a long shadow. Women are concerned about the weaknesses in safeguarding that still exist and expect more robust procedures to be developed through good synodal practice.

We recognize the importance of our parish clergy in moving towards the synodal church, sharing decision-making and responsibility, and shaping lay engagement. Understanding and collaboration between clergy and laity will be important. Lay women expect to be fully involved in these changes.

We would welcome a review of how the Church at every level includes women in decision-making.

Concrete proposals for change include: parish and diocesan pastoral councils with real responsibility; employing lay managers and administrators to release the bishop for more pastoral engagement with ordinary parishioners; investment in lay formation.

Models of synodality in practice, and examples of good practice would be helpful. We have understood the concept, but struggle with implementing synodality at the grassroots.

The 'vision' of the synodal Church is still a work in progress.

2 Disciples and missionaries

Co-responsibility for the mission of the Church will require long-term commitment from the laity and this will need to be supported by, for example, structured programmes of formation, retreats and study days, and skills training. This will require investment.

Catholic social teaching prioritises respect for the dignity of every person, solidarity between people, and the option for the poor. Social outreach is an important aspect of mission, and we must find ways to offer better institutional support and encouragement for this, where women often take the lead.

Admitting lay people, women, and men, to the ministries of acolyte and lector would enable them to better support their parish. These ministries would also require appropriate formation. The tasks and responsibilities of the lay diaconate, including the possibility of admitting women to the diaconate, should be further explored. Empowering women to preach would be transformative for the Church.

Women already fulfil vocations as chaplains, spiritual directors, formators etc., It is time for the Church to recognise these ministries, and empower women preach, give absolution, and offer the sacrament of the sick, as appropriate to the demands of their ministry.

Women's gifts, skills and experience are often undervalued by the ecclesial establishment. Many women feel that their genuine desire to contribute to the parish or diocese is brushed aside, and they feel marginalised by the male, and clerical, hierarchy. We note that the recent Vatican document on human dignity did not engage with any academic work by women or cite any work by a woman. This may indicate an underlying misogyny.

Lay discipleship and mission take many forms. Lay people may expect their parish and diocese to offer spiritual nurture to enable them to be 'missionaries in everyday life'. Engagement with secular organisations working for justice and the common good is a missionary endeavour.

Family life is an important lay responsibility and should be respected. Formation for family life might be constructive in a time of frequent family breakdown. Women more than men may be impoverished by family breakdown, and disadvantaged as single parents.

Parrhesia – speaking the truth in love – in direct, emotionally honest language - remains important. This requires trust and respect.

3 Bonding and community building

Trust between clergy and laity will be at the heart of the synodal Church. Listening and working towards consensus requires skill and patience. The synodal way shows us how to proceed. Parish priests may cause concern by making arbitrary decisions without consultation or preparing the ground. Dioceses also may need to consider new mechanisms for consultation. We must be able to hold one another to account.

Changes may be best achieved by small steps.

Parishes with ethnically and culturally diverse congregations need to bring people together and work towards mutual respect and understanding through spiritual conversations. Priests and people would benefit from participation in this. Training and formation in spiritual conversation, for both clergy and laity, would be helpful.

Social outreach by parishes contributes to mission as well as to community building. Listening to people, and especially women, at the grassroots is important for both mission and community building. Catholic social teaching and working for the common good may connect us to other ecclesial communities and to the wider, secular world.

Celebrations that include the whole parish, pilgrimages and special events that can be shared across cultural boundaries, are important in building community.

The Church welcomes everyone. Our mission is to open the tent out to all those who are marginalised and excluded and invite them to share the living water of the gospel. People living with disabilities, the old, and families with children with special needs are especially welcome. LGBTQ+ people, who have been excluded and stigmatised in the past, should also be welcomed into the tent of meeting.

Our parishes should be places where people, whether ministers, employees, volunteers, or casual visitors, are valued and treated with respect. Women are the story-keepers and the heart of the parish community and of the Church as communion. We hope for a future of inclusion and new possibilities.

Patricia Stoa

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