



SYNOD REPORT – ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF VICTORIA

JUNE 16, 2022

How to read this report

This comprehensive report on Synod 2021-2023 is comprised of a narrative summary along with verbatim quotes from people of the Diocese who participated in Listening Circles from February to May 2022. Additionally, people who sent in feedback via the online response form, email, or mail were included. The data tells the Synod story, and the narrative describes what was said. Thank you to all of the dedicated volunteers who helped with the Diocesan Synod; it was indeed a Synodal experience.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of the synodal process conducted by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Victoria (RCDV) in British Columbia. Encompassing Vancouver Island and surrounding islands. RCDV serves approximately 87,000 Catholics in 28 parishes, 12 missions, and five schools.

RCDV Synodal Process

The volunteer Synod committee included representatives from religious communities, education and healthcare professions, and Indigenous communities. True to a synodal process and grounded in Scripture, this committee met every two weeks from November 2021 to March 2022 to discern the process of reaching out to the People of God within the Diocese. A steering committee met on alternate weeks.

Listening Circles served as the primary consultation tool. The volunteer committee designed the Listening Circle process based on a model from the Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan. Committee members, interested clergy, and other volunteers were provided with an orientation session to facilitate the sessions (in-person and online). The facilitators were diligent in creating a safe, respectful, and confidential environment for the participants, and explaining and ensuring that Circles were not meant to identify and solve problems, issues, or concerns, nor to draw conclusions from the experiences that were reflected on and learned about. Circles were gatherings for listening to people's stories.

The questions that we asked were based on the fundamental questions from the Synod of Bishops – [Preparatory Document](#):

1. A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together". How is this "journeying together" happening today in your particular church or community?
2. What steps does the Spirit invite us to take to grow in our "journeying together"?
3. As you were listening to the stories from the fundamental questions, what thoughts and emotions stirred in you?

The above questions were adapted as needed to better suit the needs of the group (e.g.: youth)

1. What does Church mean to you?
2. How are you learning and growing in your faith?
3. What should Church be like in the future?

In addition to Listening Circles, a survey was available to be completed either online or obtained in hardcopy and mailed in. This was offered to help prevent barriers to participation. Overall, this Synod experience was positive. People were grateful for sharing and listening.

FEEDBACK HIGHLIGHTS

RCDV Synod participants included mostly cradle Catholics, adult converts to Catholicism, and a small number of people from other denominations. Nearly five hundred people participated in the process through 88 listening circles and 22 written submissions.

Journeying Together

Participants openly shared their stories – a heart-filled blend of joy and sorrow. While many are striding along, others are questioning and searching as the Spirit moves them along in their faith journey. Participants bore witness to the connection between a joyous journey and enriching adult faith formation experiences, involvement in ministry, and ecumenical engagement.

Challenges, losses, and opportunities were shared due to the isolation experienced during the pandemic lockdowns. People were grateful to have the opportunity to participate in live-streamed Masses and several people said that they would like online Masses to continue post-pandemic. Recent converts were noticeable and inspiring to others in their enthusiasm for the faith and their desire to learn more.

A Synodal Church

The Synod participants expressed much hope. The act of simply sharing feelings and thoughts openly was an invigorating boost. People were stirred and surprised. It is as if the process modeled what people aspire to - a Church that is open, welcoming, engaging, and full of life.

A yearning for change and transformation was evident in calls for more women in leadership (especially in our churches), ordained women, married priests, a Synodal approach similar to the momentum experienced in the early post-Vatican II era, more adult faith formation, greater involvement in social justice and interfaith dialogue, more youth involvement, and Indigenous truth and reconciliation.

Above all, the overarching desire is for a welcoming Church that exudes openness, inclusion, acceptance, love, and belonging. Hope springs eternal, no matter where they are on their faith journey. Expressions of hope and gratitude abounded. The listening circles offered a breath of fresh air, allowing participants to be where they are at, listening and sharing, as beloved People of God.

DATA ANALYSIS

After reading all comments received, 10 topic threads emerged. Each comment was sorted into one of these ten threads.

For the responses to the first Synod question (*How are we journeying today?*), the comments in each thread were further sorted by mood: whether they expressed joy, or sorrow, or were neutral. For the responses to the second and third Synod questions (*What steps does the Spirit call us to take? What emotions have stirred in you?*), the comments in each thread were further sorted into Synodal themes: whether they related to communion, participation, or mission, as defined by the official Synod documents.

The 10 topic threads, the three moods, and the three themes are described in the table on page 6.

“I think hearing everyone has given me hope. If we all had the same thought and vision in the church, and I am sure we do; that would be good. We just need help moving forward.”

“I feel a sense of hope and community. I am thankful and grateful for today’s session.”

“Hearing others was a shot in the arm and life-giving; happy to learn other peoples’ thoughts”

“Grateful to be here and grateful that Pope Francis has invited us on this journey.”

“I don’t know why God guided me to this meeting, but he did. I’ve learned and I’ve grown. We may never meet or see each other again. I’m just so amazed that we want to move forward because there is a big movement wanting us to go backwards.”

	TOPIC THREADS
ECU	Ecumenical engagement, interfaith dialogue, and participation
FRM	Faith formation and sharing, education, retreats, vocations, enthusiasm for learning about the faith
FTH	Eucharist, experiencing the faith daily, practices, participation, feeling loved and guided, belonging
LIS	Listening, pondering, sharing, resonates, inspires
LCM	<i>Leadership</i> : Call for women and married priests; <i>Change management</i> : Dismantle clericalism; Love over fear; Liturgy language; refer to People of God
QUE	Questioning, deep sorrow for Indigenous Peoples, lasting hurt from experience and scandals, the impact of COVID, fear of change, attachment to the past
REC	Indigenous reconciliation
REL	Relationships, community, diversity, welcoming, openness, divorce, concern for LGBTQIA2S+
SER	Involvement in service ministry, outreach, social justice, grassroots initiatives
YTH	Youth outreach, concerns – drifting away, not feeling welcome, perceived disconnect between Church and the outside world, looking for inclusivity, openness, relevance, acceptance

	Q1 Additional Sort Categories: Moods
Joy	Grateful, faith-filled, engaged, positive, inspired, committed to service, interested in learning
Neutral	A mixture of joy and sorrow, less about emotion and more about facts
Sorrow	Pain, wounded, worried, lament about scandals, deep sorrow for Indigenous people, questioning, hurting, hanging in/on to faith despite the pain – committed, hoping for change

	Q2&3 Additional Sort Categories: Synodal Themes*
Communion	Reaching out to all God’s people, diverse people of one faith, communion rooted in the love and unity of the Trinity.
Participation	Involvement of the People of God: laity, consecrated, ordained to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern, and offer advice.
Mission	Evangelize. Witness to the Gospel, especially for those who live on the peripheries of our world. A common home for all.

* as defined on p. 13 of : <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/document/commmon/vademecum/Vademecum-EN-A4.pdf>

Figure 1 on page 7 shows all the responses received to the first Synod question, sorted by topic thread and by mood. Figure 2 shows all the responses received to the second and third Synod questions grouped together, sorted by topic thread and by Synodal theme.

Plots help us see patterns; in the end, every comment expressed matters, no matter how many times it came up. The plots are intended to paint an inclusive big picture.

Figure 1: The journey today

Responses to the first Synod question (*How are we journeying today?*), sorted by topic thread and by mood

“The Church of the future needs to act and be like a “field hospital” to all people. The Church must be the place to be at home, in all circumstances, for everyone. We are still too elitist and rule-oriented to be approachable.”

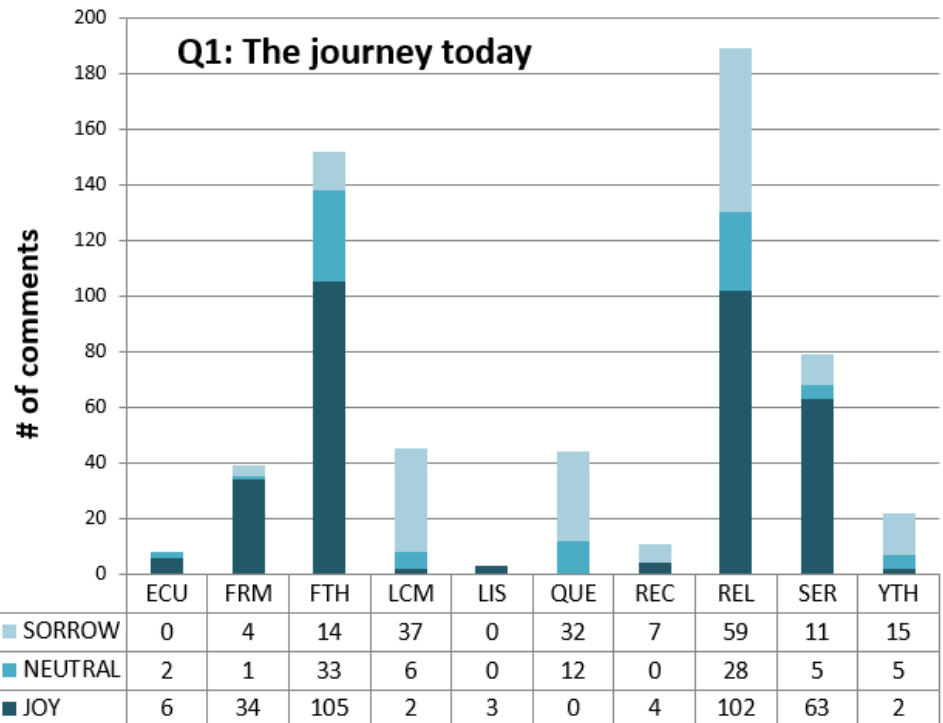
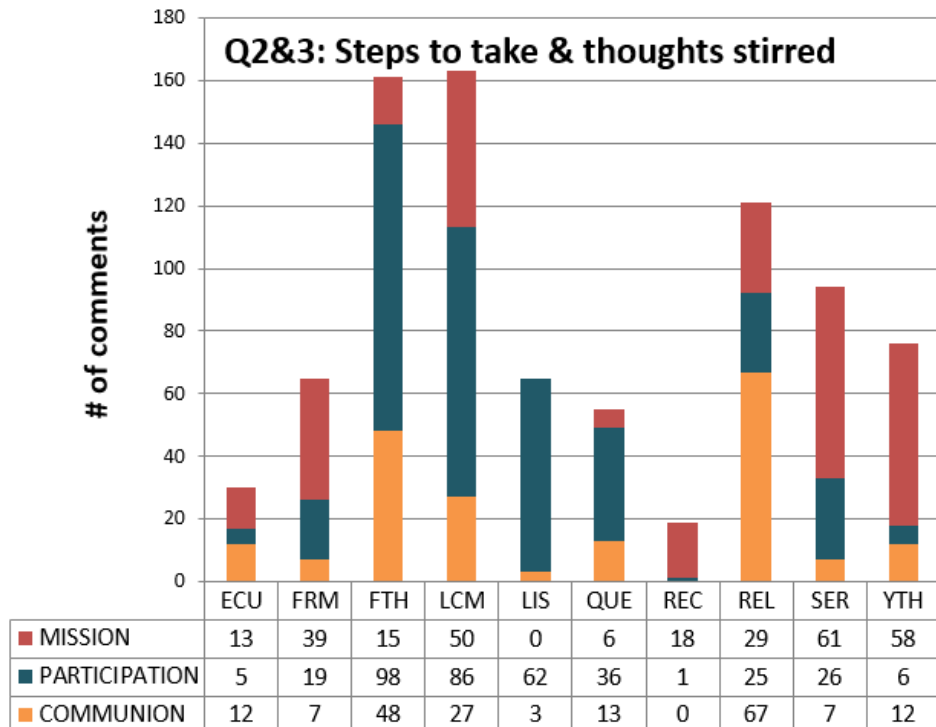


Figure 2: Steps to take & thoughts stirred

Responses to the second and third Synod questions (*What steps does the Spirit call us to take? What emotions have stirred in you?*), sorted by topic thread and by Synodal theme

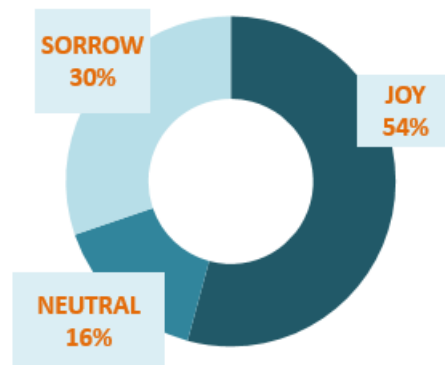


Looking at responses to the first Synod question (*Figure 1: How are we journeying today?*), the three most common topic threads are Relationships, Faith, and Service (REL, FTH, and SER). Faith Formation and Education (FRM) is another thread where participants expressed many joyful comments. The threads with the most sorrowful comments are Relationships, Reconciliation, Youth, Leadership, and Questions and Concerns (REL, REC, YTH, LCM, and QUE).

If we pool all responses to the first Synod question together across all topic threads, we find that the majority of comments expressed joy (54%), with 30% of comments expressing sorrow and 16% of comments being neutral (*Figure 3*).

Looking at responses to the second and third Synod questions (*Figure 2: What steps does the Spirit call us to take? What emotions have stirred in you?*), the five threads receiving the most comments are Leadership, Faith, Service, Relationships, and Youth, (LCM, FTH, SER, REL, and YTH).

Figure 3: Overall mood of the journey today



COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, and MISSION

This next section presents the key messages expressed in relation to the three dimensions of the Synod theme. Each of the following sections is formatted to cover the joyful story of how people are journeying together, then the sorrowful story of journeying together, followed by how the Spirit invites us to grow in our journeying together. All feedback was coded using the definitions on page 6.

Communion

How are we journeying together in communion – the joys?

The celebration of the Eucharist is central, and gathering as a People of God to share in this Sacrament is life-giving, but there is concern about the lack of vocations. The Sacraments of the Church are seen as essential in the lives of God’s people. People expressed that the Eucharist is about communion and community that provides a sense of belonging.

Relationships with the Church and with others are valued by people and deemed essential as we worship in communion. Some new to a community found comfort and a sense of belonging because others made them feel welcomed. Live-streamed Masses have brought us together as a diocesan community. During the pandemic, receiving drive-by communion after participating in live-streamed Mass was greatly appreciated. Shut-ins greatly appreciated people from their parish coming by for a visit and/or bringing them Communion.

The Church is beginning to journey in truth and reconciliation, which felt like a hopeful sign for people. People recognized and appreciated that Bishop Gary is calling us to gather, be in the community, and reach out in service to the marginalized. People expressed eagerness to live, learn and grow in their faith. For

“The Spirit is calling to us grow as a people. It is not about a hierarchy; it is about a circle. How do we grapple and make Eucharist so that it touches the soul of our beings and how do we reach out to others?”

“There is a need to work with lay people toward a more meaningful liturgy. In the mystery of faith, we proclaim Jesus’s death and resurrection, but we don’t recognize his life. We are stuck in the past; we need life giving words and messages.”

“I look forward to continuing with Synod and contributing to how we can be meaningful today.”

some, interfaith sharing and dialogue are essential ways to be open and inviting. For others, accessing opportunities to learn about the faith and share it with others energizes them. Young people recognize the Church as a collection of individuals based on shared values and beliefs. They see Christ acting here. Some describe the Church as a second family, where they go anytime, they feel lost or want to experience a sense of peacefulness.

How are we journeying together in communion – the sorrows?

A recurring topic was pandemic restrictions, not being able to gather in person, and the feeling of being isolated. As well, people commented about not feeling welcomed and not able to receive Communion because of who they and their family members are (i.e., gay/lesbian, divorced, marriages not annulled), not being a part of the community as a newcomer to Canada, alienation because of being a woman, friends or family members feeling that they have been pushed out of the Church, and strict Catholic upbringing about following rules.

Additionally, people commented about the use of non-inclusive language, the Church's hierarchy, some parishes being more welcoming and connected to their parishioners than others, and a feeling of being a closed community (not open to others from other faith denominations). There are concerns about the lack of priests, the loss of the young people participating in the Church, and the lack of momentum gained by the Vatican II changes.

People are ashamed of the abuse in the Church, clericalism, and the history of the Church with Indigenous peoples.

Where is the Spirit calling us to grow in communion?

People are looking for a more welcoming and inclusive Church. They want the Church to examine how we build up the faith outside of Sunday Mass with comments about being more than Sunday people. There is a desire to be more open to ecumenical services where all receive the Body of Christ and allow for interfaith communion, and to be more welcoming of non-Catholics by opening up the Communion table. There is interest in having more faith formation opportunities (diocesan and local parish), keeping the live-streamed Masses, and offering new parent groups.

People spoke about the need to dismantle clericalism, a concern for people who are left out or feel unwelcome (e.g., divorced people, LGBTQIA2S+), and discomfort with needlessly burdensome rules, such as the annulment process. There is a yearning to examine and find ways to be more inclusive of people that feel marginalized. There is a desire to continue with synodal conversations, listen to one another, develop a prayer life, ensure our parishes are hospitable, welcoming, and inviting, and engage with youth to find out how we can make the Church relevant to them.

“Love and respect. Church needs to respect all people. In homilies we need to hear more of “you are beloved.” Need to encourage all our young people to be involved by showing them respect and give them a sense of belonging. Jesus always respected all he met – God loves you for who you are.”

“The importance of openness to each other, to other faiths and the universality of God.”

“No matter what road we start on, we are all on the same path. I hope for more openness.”

“We lose good people because we are so strict with the laws especially when it comes to marriage and annulments. People who are divorced and remarry have a huge challenge to be a part of the church.”

“I am very worried about the young people. My daughter is married to a woman, and they are good people. I hope that the church will change in this area, so that gay people feel accepted and welcomed in the church. It is so hard for them in our church.”

“Church means a community and strength bonded from our shared goal of bringing everyone together to a truer sense of self.”

Participation

How are we journeying together in participation - the joys?

People greatly appreciated the Listening Circle process. Listening to others allowed people to share their joys and sorrows and see that others felt that they were not alone. Encountering and accompanying others in RCIA, small groups and outreach programs were mentioned as essential. People said that participation in faith formation opportunities occurred in various ways and times in people's lives, and people shared the value of pilgrimages, attendance at Catholic schools, Sacramental Prep or RCIA classes, ALPHA, Bible studies, retreats, Cursillo, and funeral ministry, among others. Engaging in ministry is commonly expressed as a way that participants achieve a sense of togetherness.

Being in community with others was instrumental for many people. This included being an active member of Knights of Columbus, CWL, Parish Council, eco-justice groups, prayer groups, choirs, etc. It is not just about coming together for Mass; it needs to be more than that. Parishioners noted that being invited made all the difference for them; some indicated that they were too shy on their own to volunteer and participate in parish ministries and activities. People shared that they grew in an understanding of their faith by conversing and learning from people of other faith denominations. For most, the Church is all about community; and for many people, involvement nourishes belonging. Prayer, mediation, and reading remain essential to people.

A common theme among the young people in our community is exploring our faith with one another. Many stated that they consider peers as role models and learn about faith from one another. They described parents as their sources to help them grow in their faith and expressed eagerness to learn more about their faith.

How are we journeying together in participation - the sorrows?

Participants were sad that they have children and family members who no longer practice their faith and have friends or loved ones who do not feel welcomed in the Church. People said that the language is not always inclusive. They also mentioned that the annulment process is restrictive, and people are not welcome to receive the Eucharist. People also noted being brought up in strict Catholic homes and parishes which created an unhealthy outlook on the Church. Indigenous participants shared the deep sorrows and scars of residential schools.

Where is the Spirit calling us to grow in participation?

Under this dimension, people want clergy who are good at building relationships and are good homilists to help them live the gospel as Jesus has always called us to do as disciples. People also suggested enriching the formation of seminarians by building relationships and working with women and people of diverse backgrounds.

"Need more women in leadership – A call to action that needs to be heard."

"The Synod is providing the opportunity to listen to people; the same as what we are doing with Indigenous People right now. We need to create space for something new. I realize it takes a long time. We need to listen to each other, to those we encounter, and to our children. Our church is life giving to me; this is where I am called to be. The Spirit is calling me to be open."

"I know we all need to help in outreach."

"Spirit makes it clear to keep believing in God and his love. Pray, and always be an example. We have to do it ourselves and trust in the Lord. He will make it work – Faith."

"The Spirit invites more collegiality, less patriarchy, and more involvement of the laity. We are beloved People of God who sin - as opposed to being sinners."

People noted that the Spirit is calling us to grow in some parishes through greater involvement of women, lay ministers, and youth in leadership. How the lay faithful are involved and invited to participate is important. The call for women priests comes up repeatedly alongside support for married clergy.

There is a desire to feel included and people are looking for a return of such things as coffee after Mass and group gatherings. At the same time, they are looking for more ways to involve additional people in ministries and service projects, and have more parish and interfaith retreats, workshops, bible studies, in-person and online. Also, people expressed that they want liturgies to be more joyful with more uplifting and lively music.

Some Indigenous people indicated their love of Jesus and even the Church despite its history. Prayers and praying in their native tongue is comforting and should be encouraged.

Mission

How are we journeying together in mission - the joys?

Participants' quest for renewal is resolute. They expressed a need for adult faith formation and faith-sharing groups to recharge their spirits and deepen their faith.

Comments were shared about people who are living witnesses of the faith who made a positive impact on people in their faith journeys. This included times when people grew in their faith, and times when they were not practicing but those witnesses brought them back. A wide variety of living witnesses were mentioned: parents, grandparents, elders, spouses, friends, priests, religious Sisters, Benedictines, Franciscans, etc. People noted that when they taught others about the faith, they grew in their own faith (i.e., catechism teachers). Some noted that spiritual writings provide great value.

Good uplifting sermons/homilies are greatly appreciated and make a difference for people. Additionally, people appreciated the advances in technology that have allowed for online Masses, online faith workshops, etc. People shared stories of leaving the Church and coming back home; the reasons for returning varied (i.e., priest, Sister, challenges of life, dealing with hurt, children, etc.).

How are we journeying together in mission – the sorrows?

The sorrowful story of mission for some people has included feeling judged and not welcomed because they are divorced. There is concern about the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and Church membership, with more pressure on fewer people to step up and contribute to the expenses. As well, there is a worry that the lack of clergy will impact liturgies, even with lay people being encouraged to lead. People were concerned that Indigenous people were converted to Catholicism and in many ways were then

“Sponsor workshops, talks and discussion groups on how to help a person grow spiritually - how to meditate, how to pray, how to practice Centering Prayer, how to contemplate. Have ongoing Adult Religious Education.”

“There is a great need for adult catechesis – not more theology (learning about God), but having a personal relationship with our Father, Jesus, and the Spirit.”

“Equal to our emphasis on Liturgy, has to be an emphasis on outreach and being more open and welcoming. Social justice has to be part of our Church. Now we are too subtle about it.”

“We have an opportunity at this time in history with the church. Pope Francis is courageous. My mom was a Vatican II person before Vatican II. She challenged me to think for myself and challenged me to listen to the Holy Spirit within. My grandmother shared a story that life with God isn't always inside a church and that struck me. The Holy Spirit calls us to listen to make us alive.”

“I long for more openness and inclusion. I love Pope Francis and feel he is trying to dismantle the clericalism and include the ‘People of God’ more visibly.”

abandoned; this was a sorrow shared by Indigenous people still engaged in the Church. Despite all of the burdens that were shared, the people of God remain faithful.

Where is the Spirit calling us to grow in mission?

Truth, reconciliation, and healing with Indigenous people are especially important.

People spoke about parishes focusing on what acts of service they are providing and expressed that there could be more done for social and ecological justice. Suggestions included ecumenical outreach to those who have left the Church and those who are marginalized (i.e., shut-ins, people with mental health and substance use), becoming closer to the mainstream population, and being open and welcoming. There is a desire for truth, justice, healing, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, although people were uncertain as to how best to do this.

Young people expressed a desire for greater welcome and inclusion in the Church. They long for the Church to be a vibrant place for learning, growth, and safety for all. Youth conveyed a need for role models in the Church who are supportive and open to change. They relayed a thirst for being wanted. The youth described a yearning to have current concerns (climate change, connection between faith and science, evolution, community service and outreach) addressed by Church leadership. They also want to be an active part of social justice initiatives and participate in outreach programs.

From youth in our Diocese

Below are some of the comments from youth in our Diocese.

What does Church mean to you?

"It means I have people to base my life around. Church means stability. Somewhere to go when you need help. A foundation upon which to build the rest of who you are. The Church means support, even in the darkest of times."

How are you learning/ growing in your faith? How are you getting to know God? Who helps you?

"I learned about faith by praying. My family and peers are good role models for me, because whenever something bad happens, they always have faith and I feel that I can learn from their example. Two ways of learning; being taught lessons/ways of thinking by Church leaders, parents, grandparents and asking yourself questions and searching out answers through Google, friends, priests, etc."

What should our Church be like in the future?

"The Church should be a place of nurturing. Family. The Church should look like an open, inclusive place where people feel safe, loved, and valued by God. It should stay dedicated to the ways that God has laid out for us in the early years of the Church but still maintain its ability to grow and adapt. It should look like a refuge and a place of belonging. It should look like the reflection of the people."

"My dream for our church and other churches is to be a place of healing and reconciliation, where people come and feel safe, a safe environment and they are welcomed and recognized."

"Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples is very important work."

"Regarding the Indian Residential School reconciliation – we need to show we are supportive."

"The Church of the future needs to act and be like a "field hospital" to all people. The Church must be the place to be at home, in all circumstances, for everyone. We are still too elitist and rule-oriented to be approachable."

"Church means a community and strength bonded from our shared goal of bringing everyone together to a truer sense of self."

CONCLUSION

We are on the path toward living synodality in communion, participation, and mission. These dimensions are intertwined and each needs focused attention and reflection. The Holy Spirit inspired people to share their personal stories in response to the questions posed.

The majority of those who participated expressed a deep love for their Church, their community, and a personal desire to grow in faith and charity. The joy of a faith well-lived was expressed in many different ways and a profound love for Jesus and the Eucharist was shared in the listening circles. Gratitude for positive relationships and inspiring leaders was a common theme, as were the blessings that came from engaging in parish life and community. Many shared the sincere desire to increase the ways in which the Church (themselves) accompanies others; including the marginalized, Indigenous people, and the disenfranchised.

Many spoke of positive and negative influences on their personal faith journeys. For those who shared stories of pain and sorrow, the worry about youth and people who are feeling abandoned or unwelcomed (e.g.: divorced, LGBTQIA2S+) looms large, as does anguish for the suffering of Indigenous people and the tragedy of abuse scandals over the Church's history. We recognize engaging in restorative action and rebuilding relationships is critical. Our diocese has done a lot in this area but there is much more to do. It is inspiring and humbling to observe their resilience in overcoming pain and sorrow to persevere on the journey in dedication to the faith.

Living synodality will require further discernment with more conversation to explore what we heard:

- Continue with synodal conversations and listen to others. Create safe spaces for people to share and dialogue with one another.
- Reach out to those who have left the Church or feel unwelcome and find ways to be more inclusive of people that feel marginalized. Add programs in parishes for social justice, ecumenical outreach, and truth, reconciliation and healing with Indigenous people. Welcome and help newcomers to Canada. Support new parent groups.
- Provide opportunities for people to gather socially. Involve additional people in ministries and service projects. Offer more parish and interfaith retreats, workshops, bible study, etc. (in-person and online). Make services uplifting and lively (i.e., music). Engage youth and make the Church relevant to them. Explore how we can build up the faith outside of church on Sunday. Maintain live-streamed Masses.
- Examine rules and processes such as those for marriage annulment.
- Offer ecumenical services where all receive the Body of Christ and allow for interfaith communion.
- Increase women in leadership roles within the parishes and involve laity and youth in the parishes. Allow women and married men to become priests, and, allow clergy to marry.
- Dismantle clericalism. Promote clergy who are good at building relationships and are also good homilists. Update the formation program for seminarians.

Overall, people said that participating in the Synod Listening Circles was a pleasant surprise, as they did not know what to expect before attending, but they were encouraged by being heard and listened to. The environment was safe, non-judgmental, and respectful because it was delivered by skillful facilitators who took the time to really listen to people. The facilitators and notetakers were humbled and honoured to listen to people's stories; it truly was a blessing for all involved.