



THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM



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For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

WALKING TOGETHER

CONFIDENCE, CAPACITY, MOTIVATION

OUR RESPONSE TO THE DOCUMENT FOR THE CONTINENTAL STAGE

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Introduction

The Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS), “*Enlarge the space of your tent*” (Is 54.2) asks every diocese to respond to three questions as part of the ‘*Restitution Process*’ whereby there is a dialogue between the local Churches themselves, and the universal Church. This document is the response of the Archdiocese of Birmingham, and its dialogue between the local Churches (within the dioceses of England & Wales) and the universal Church.

The three questions which it is asked to address are:

- After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?
- After having read and prayed with the DCS, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent's perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?
- Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with the local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023? (DCS 106).



1. CO-RESPONSIBILITY AS THE PRISM OF OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER AND OUR DIOCESAN VISION

1. Our Diocesan Vision is to be a Catholic diocese which is faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, full of missionary disciples who work together co-responsibly in vibrant communities of faith, joyful in their service of God and neighbour.

2. Arising from our common baptismal dignity, our vision of vibrant and joyful communities of faith is rooted in the expression of co-responsibility of all the baptised for the one mission of the Church. (see DCS 11). The Archdiocese of Birmingham has seen the implementation of its Diocesan Vision and walking together along the Synodal Pathway, as one and the same. Co-responsibility has become the prism by which this is achieved. This is because (to answer the first question) 'the intuitions which resonates most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the church' in Birmingham, is co-responsibility. The significance of co-responsibility was pivotal within our Diocesan Synthesis (April 2022).

Birmingham pg 6, 'Truly inspirational parish life is more vibrant now because we the laity are now having the opportunity and taking responsibility and accepting a new movement, gaining strength in faith and moving forward together'. [Our Lady of the Wayside, Shirley, Birmingham].

3. Within the DCS, we note that there is a fresh emphasis upon co-responsibility as the 'engine' as it were, that drives mission forwards. It is significant that whereas previously the subtitle for the Synodal documents was 'Communion, Participation and Mission'; DCS 3.3 has become 'Communion, participation and Co-responsibility'. DCS paragraphs 57 – 70.78 are devoted to Co-responsibility as the methodology by which we move 'towards a missionary synodal church'.

4. The DCS resonates with our Diocesan vision:

DCS 57, 'The mission of the Church is realised through the lives of all the baptised. The reports express a deep desire to recognise and reaffirm this common dignity as the basis for the renewal of life and ministries in the Church'.

Birmingham pg 5, 'A more widespread movement of lay roles in the church, following the Pope's opening up of the roles of lector, acolyte, and catechists to lay people, including women. This will help take the Church out to the people of the community, with the priest's focus on the sacraments. Catholics often rely too heavily on clergy to organise things whereas we can do it for ourselves'. [Blessed Carlo Acutis, Wolverhampton]

DCS 66, 'Responsibility for the synodal life of the Church cannot be delegated but must be shared by all in response to the gifts the Spirit bestows on the faith'.

DCS 67, 'this desire for co-responsibility becomes grounded first of all in the key of service to the common mission, that is, with the language of ministeriality'.

5. *Birmingham Pg 2, 'Our ecclesial listening is similar to lectio divina. We try to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the different diocesan Churches that constitute the Church in England and Wales'.*

In our conversation with the Bishop's Conference of England & Wales, during the final stages for the publication of their synthesis, we noted the lack of emphasis upon co-responsibility within the submissions of different diocesan Churches and the Synodal Synthesis document of Bishop's Conference of England & Wales. This is still the case. We would expect this imbalance to be corrected in future submissions from the Bishop's conference.

2. ENGAGING WITH THE BIBLICAL VISION – ‘ENLARGE THE SPACE OF YOUR TENT’ (IS 52,4)

6. The biblical icon of the tent is rich with possibilities. It speaks from the experience of the Israelites, a pilgrim people on the move to the land of promise; as well as the experience of the Church today: the people of God journeying towards the Lord. DCS 11, 'This tent is a space of communion, a place of participation and a foundation for mission'. Within the DCS, the biblical icon of the tent is used to express a desire for radical inclusion – no one is excluded. DCS 28 'Enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity'.

7. DCS 42. Enlarging our tent is at the heart of the missionary activity- a “church deeply involved in the world's challenges. Synodality as a call from God to walk together with the whole human family (43). The call to synodality echoes the whole purpose of the Church as Sacrament of Salvation to the world, it is called to walk with people to bring Christ among them in their suffering, brokenness, and questioning. Mission is about inclusion so that more people can enter the space of the Church as 'tent' and hear the message of salvation.

8. This icon resonates with urgent call for inclusion, which was expressed within every submission across our Archdiocese.

Birmingham pg 7, 'There was a strong sense that the Church must be there for all. Without undermining the Lord's challenging call to repentance and holiness, it was felt strongly that the Church should embrace all its members and those at the point of entry, those on the peripheries and those bruised by our hurting world. This was seen to include especially those from minority groups, those who have been abused, people who are divorced and re-married. It also includes same sex attracted persons, those who struggle with gender identity, people in difficult situations and those who find it hard to follow all the moral teachings of the Church. However, the parish was found to be a 'safe place' to begin discussing such difficult and contested conversations, which is evident by the number of times this was mentioned in our submissions'.

The Bishop's Conference of England and Wales expresses this challenge with eloquence: DCS 30 'The call is to live better the tension of truth and mercy, as Jesus did [...] The dream is of a Church that more fully lives a Christological paradox: boldly proclaiming its authentic teaching while at the same time offering a witness of radical inclusion and acceptance through its pastoral and discerning accompaniment' (EC England and Wales).

2.1 Victim Survivors

9. DCS 20 'An obstacle of particular relevance on the path of walking together is the scandal of abuse by members of the clergy or people holding ecclesial office: first and foremost, abuse of minors or vulnerable persons, but also abuse of other kinds (spiritual, sexual, economic, of conscience). This is an open wound that continues to inflict pain on victims and survivors, on their families, and on their communities.

'Careful and painful reflection on the legacy of abuse has led many synod groups to call for a cultural change in the Church with a view to greater transparency, accountability and co-responsibility.'

10. We must, as a matter of great urgency, ensure that our tent is so enlarged, that all victim survivors feel truly at home. Further reflection and engagement with our Birmingham Synthesis has led to deeper conversations with individuals and diverse groups which includes victim survivors. These regular conversations are encouraged. Archbishop Bernard Longley has regularly expressed his door is 'always open' to victim survivors. The Archdiocese is committed to learn from their experience, and to greater transparency, accountability, and co-responsibility in the future. We have already begun this process with the commission and publication of the Barnardos report in October 2022.

2.2 LGBTQ+ Persons

11. DCS 39 'Among those who ask for a more meaningful dialogue and a more welcoming space we also find those who, for various reasons, feel a tension belonging to the Church and their own loving relationships, such as: remarried divorcees, single parents, people living in polygamous marriage, LGBTQ people'. (see also DCS 38 – 40) Within the Birmingham Synthesis (pg 7) the voice and experience of LGBTQ+ groups and individuals is expressed and heard. This has also resulted in further conversations with Archbishop Bernard Longley and LGBTQ+ individuals and groups.

2.3 Rethinking Women's Participation

12. There is a resonance between the Birmingham Diocesan Synthesis and the DCS: *Birmingham pg 6 'Improve procedures to involve laity. It's a good thing to involve more lay people in the decision-making process, and especially women who bring a different perspective i.e., have experience of family life. It was noted that the Pope has appointed women to some key roles in the Vatican, which was welcomed. Women's rights and involvement. Women must be seen to be much more prominent at youth level and senior levels. Women are on the Board of Trustees for the Diocese – how many people know that?'* [Blessed Carlo Acutis, Wolverhampton]

'The Church treats women as second-class citizens and does not meet today's standards of equality and diversity. The Church loses out on the potential of women and the benefits of collaborative ministry.' [Bewdley & Stourport].

'It is surely clear by now that in the main and for decades, the laity including women religious have had little or no voice in the structures of the institutional Church'. [Individual submission. Female Religious.]

DCS 60 'A critical and urgent area in this regard concerns the role of women and their vocation, rooted in our common baptismal dignity, to participate fully in the life of the Church. A growing awareness and sensitivity towards this issue is registered all over the world'.

DCS 61 'It is clear that the Church must find ways [...] to enable women to participate more fully at all levels of Church life'. (See also DCS 60-65)

13. The question of the Ordination of Women lies beyond the authority or office of an individual Bishop or Diocese. Nonetheless, the Archdiocese of Birmingham remains fully committed to the desire expressed above that the 'role of women and their vocation rooted in our common baptismal dignity [...] should enable women to participate more fully at all levels of the Church'. Within the Archdiocese of Birmingham, women exercise responsibility as Trustees of our Diocesan Trust. Women also play a key role in Safeguarding, Evangelisation, and the Synodal Pathway. The Diocesan Seminary relies on the expertise and wisdom of women in several different and senior roles to ensure that the formation of our Seminarians has a profound richness. Our diocesan commitment to co-responsibility will ensure that this understanding remains a continuous priority for our Archdiocese.

3. TENSIONS AND DIVERGENCES

14. The second question asks, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important?

3.1 Diversity

15. We are reminded (DCS 28) that 'Enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity' (DCS 87) 'a synodal Church is built around diversity' since a synodal church is a missionary church which involves a constant reaching out to those who may be on the margins and may not feel included as well as other Christians and those not in full communion. DCS 85 notes that 'as has already been stressed many times, a synodal Church first of all needs to deal with the many tensions that emerge from encountering diversity'.

16. Over the last 20 years, within every parish of the Archdiocese of Birmingham there has been a greater sense of diversity of language, culture, background, and ethnicity. The profound diversity of our parish communities and the enrichment of the local Church that flow from this is a gift and sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit within our Archdiocese. Our Diocesan Synthesis failed to fully appreciate this gift. In part, this speaks to the unique legacy that the history of Britain and its experience of world-wide influence offers us, as the Church in England & Wales as opposed to other Churches across our continent. It offers us genuine potential for Ecumenical and interreligious encounters' (see DCS 22. 45.47-49) and a discussion of 'Culture, religions and dialogue' (DCS 53-56). This insight has a particular resonance and intuition for the Archdiocese of Birmingham, given the life-long experience, wisdom, and engagement of Archbishop Bernard Longley in this field.

17. Whereas the (DCS, 49) calls for "revitalizing the commitment to dialogue and accompaniment as a witness in a fragmented world" and one that "requires targeted formation that increases confidence, capacity and motivation for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue," Birmingham diocese is fortunate to have ongoing formation and accompaniment in this area.

Birmingham pg 1. *The Catholic Church's commitment to dialogue with other Christians and people of other faiths – her openness to listen and learn – is now bearing fruit within the Catholic community. For over sixty years we have been ready to discuss our differences ecumenically and to seek a deeper understanding of a contrasting convictions. Now the Church within our Archdiocese is ready to promote an internal dialogue among those who hold different and sometimes opposing points of view in order to hear the Holy Spirit speaking within the dialogue itself.* [Archbishop Bernard Longley]

3.2 Young People/Disability/Environmental Issues

18. DCS 35 'There is a universal concern regarding the meagre presence of the voice of young people in the synod process, as well as increasingly in the life of the Church'. This is not our experience. We pay tribute to the contribution that the Kenelm Youth Trust and the Birmingham Diocesan Education Service played within our Synodal experience. Leading listening sessions with young people, families, and school communities. The voice of young people was treasured in our synthesis. However, we share the experience and challenge of increasing participation of young people in the life of the Church.

19. DCS 36 'Numerous reports point to the lack of appropriate structures and ways of accompanying persons with disabilities and call for new ways of welcoming their contribution and promoting their participation'. There was no reference at all to persons with disabilities within the Birmingham Synthesis document. We have failed to ensure that such listening conversations were a priority in themselves, although they were part of larger parish conversations.

20. DCS 45 In particular, invites us to recognise the interconnectedness of social and environmental challenge and to respond to them by collaborating and forming alliances with other Christian confessions, believers and other religions and all people of good will'. The Birmingham Synthesis Document devotes one paragraph (see pg 11) to Environmental issues. It does not quote 'Laudato Si' or have a sense of the urgency that is required. The Archdiocese is committed to implementing 'Laudato Si', it has divested from its investment in fossil fuels and is actively encouraging and supporting environment projects within every parish and school, with almost every school participating in Live Simply.

4. A SYNODAL METHODOLOGY

4.1 The priorities, recurring themes, and call to action

21. The third question asks each diocese to reflect upon what arises from their reflection upon the previous two questions. In short, their priorities, recurring themes, and calls to action.

22. Our ongoing experience of walking together has led to the development of a 'Synodal Methodology' which is beginning to take root in our parish communities and across the Archdiocese. Rooted in active listening and built upon synodal conversations and prayerful discernment we intend to extend these conversations further. Already this methodology is happening in each pastoral area where a visitation is already taking place. This year, these conversations will be extended to every deanery in the Archdiocese.

4.2 Confidence, Capacity and Motivation

23. Drawn from the language of dialogue (see DCS 49 & para 15 above) *confidence, capacity and motivation* is an apt summary of our call to action. Our confidence is based upon our experience of the Holy Spirit accompanying our Walking Together and the enthusiastic response of the People of God throughout our Archdiocese. With a response of 91%. more parishes engaged in our synodal conversations than any other diocese in England and Wales. Our capacity is based on the richness of our diocesan resources, (see below) the vibrancy and diversity of our parish communities and the call to 'enlarge the space of your tent'. Our motivation is to answer generously, Pope Francis' call to be a Synodal Church, to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and to fully implement our Diocesan Vision with its emphasis on Co-responsibility.

Confidence

24. DCS 43 'Synodality is a call from God to walk together with the whole human family'. DCS 100, The people of God have found joy in walking together and express the desire to continue doing so. DCS 103, Everyone is called to take part in this journey, no one is excluded.

Capacity

25. As well as the lay, Religious and ordained members of the diocesan family, we are blessed in the Archdiocese with resources for formation which we will need to fulfil the vision of the committed and equipped missionary disciples which all Catholics are called to be. A strong appetite for formation has emerged and our diocesan agencies and organisations, alongside others, such as the Jesuits in Birmingham and the Manresa link, will offer effective spiritual, theological and synodal formation.

We are particularly blessed by the presence and work of the seminary at St Mary's College, Oscott; by the rich history of catechetical and theological formation of the Maryvale Institute; by the unique contribution of Newman University; by the formation of our young people within our schools and supported by the Kenelm Youth Trust; and by the formation in the Church's Social Teaching which is part of the outreach of Father Hudson's Care. These are some of the prominent and distinctive features of our Diocesan landscape that will help us map our way along the Synodal Pathway in the years ahead.

Motivation

26. Synodality calls for a conversion of the Church's culture for the salvation of the world (DCS 60). Co-responsibility embodies conversion in new ways of communion, mission, and participation. Birmingham pg 11. *'Co-responsibility calls for new modes of participation in diocesan decision-forming and decision-making which support those with responsibility for decision-taking'*.

'The voices of young people and families, of women, of LGBT+ Catholics, of people from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures, of priests and deacons and Religious, of victim/survivors of abuse, of active parishioners and of those who have felt marginalised or overlooked have all been welcomed in this Synodal Pathway consultation and they have been reflected in this synthesis. They need an enduring forum in which to be heard and possibly influence the decisions shaping our diocesan mission in the years ahead, perhaps through the provision made in the Code of Canon Law (Canons 511-514) for a diocesan Pastoral Council'. [Archbishop Bernard Longley]

Archdiocese of Birmingham. Response to the DCS. January 2023.