

Synodal Synthesis

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Introduction

Come Holy Spirit. The synodal experience in the Diocese of Des Moines began in 2020 when Bishop William M. Joensen, Ph.D., assembled a small group of senior diocesan staff to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit. He was considering a visioning process that would capture the mission landscape in the Diocese as we look at pastoral planning to navigate the pathway for years to come. It is in the midst of these conversations, Pope Francis announced that the next Synod of Bishops would be on the topic of Synodality.

This group met frequently to discuss evangelization, conversion, diocesan values, the current ministerial landscape, organizational culture, and leadership. This group also visited with other bishops and their staff in dioceses that had recently participated in their own visioning process to help us answer key questions in our discernment. Our team reviewed past diocesan initiatives relating to visioning and pastoral planning. The most recent process was titled *Building the Kingdom* which began in 1999 and was implemented in 2001. The goals and action items for this process was responding to God’s call for the next millennium.

By early 2021, Bishop Joensen decided to move ahead with a visioning process that was rooted in the Holy Spirit and would model active listening as integral to our discernment. By May 2021, we contracted with a consultant who outlined a process that supported our requirements of being Spirit led and consultative. The phase included a discernment process with a synodal steering committee from around the Diocese who would help guide our synodal initiative. Once seated the steering committee would then begin formation for the eight-month commitment. During this process, the Vatican announced that the Synod on Synodality would open with a diocesan phase beginning in October 2021.

Our first challenge was aligning the Diocese’s visioning with those outlined in the instructions that were received around the vision and goals of the synodal project. Throughout every part of the process from early June 2021 through April 2022, we were listening to God’s people and discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit through humble inquiry conversations, one-on-one deep listening conversations, focus groups, and a survey. Our goal was to include a variety of voices from around the Diocese: every age group, clergy, religious, and laity, those actively engaged, and those on the margins.

Throughout the process, those engaged in the listening sessions shared, “If someone had listened to me as you have, I would still be engaged, or more engaged, in the Catholic Church today.”

Our desire was especially to hear from those on the margins and disengaged. Frequently this desire was not actualized. We found it extremely difficult to engage those who no longer practice their Catholic faith. We found the best way to reach those on the margins is to go to them, instead of expecting them to come to us, for one-on-one conversations.

For those who are engaged in their faith community or a specific ministry, a “this has nothing to do with me” attitude made it difficult to populate our groups to the desired number of participants.

With that said, modeling a process of authentic listening has provided a foundation to chart a diocesan pastoral plan. It has been a catalyst for broadening our consultative voices from around the Diocese with people whose insights and wisdom will move us into a more missional posture.

The Top Ten Themes that Arose in the Diocesan Synthesis Process

The Diocese of Des Moines, created in 1911, serves people over a 12,446 square mile area in the southwestern quadrant of Iowa, including 23 counties. Our 80 parishes serve 104,925 registered Catholics with a total population of 904,037, according to the 2021 Official Catholic Directory report. We estimate we serve 140,000 when including unregistered Hispanic and other multinational families.

The Catholic parishes that are located close to the Des Moines and Council Bluffs metro area serve the largest number of Catholics. However, the largest number of parishes are located in rural areas outside of the Des Moines and Council Bluffs metro areas. To make sure we had a representative sample of our community, we intentionally pursued rural voices within every synodal process, as well as leadership on the steering committee.

In an effort to not lose the heart and context of the many meaningful conversations, the synodal steering committee reviewed the reports and held vibrant discussions on the major themes. Universally we learned that at the heart of every dialogue, we had people with a deep love for Jesus and the Church and a desire to see the Church grow. Below one will find pastoral challenges and common descriptors about the challenge.

One-on-one question format:

Church attendance and engagement; inviting and welcoming

- We are set in our ways.
- People feeling disconnected with church and judged by Church members.
- Inability to attract young families – they are not coming back.
- Lack of education by the church – we do not understand our own teachings or we are not teaching our teachings.

Discipleship and Evangelization; The Eucharist

- Institutional listening – creating a posture and atmosphere of letting people share

- Judgmental – both “inside the Church and outside.”
- Timidity about sharing faith with others. Laity rely too heavily on our priests to do evangelization.
- Lack of access and openness to the sacraments.

Spanish Speaking Communities and Catechetical Formation

- We are segregated and divided. This was voiced regarding preparation for sacraments: especially baptism. Participants pointed to two different processes for baptism depending upon ethnicity.
- Need bilingual and bicultural priests.
- Education problem – we are sacramentalized but not evangelized.

The Sacraments and Catholic Schools

- People in Catholic schools are disconnected from the sacraments and their meaning.
- Great disparity among parishes regarding expectations and approaches to sacramental preparation.
- Catholic schools serve only a small portion of the diocesan community.
- Funding is controversial among stakeholders.

Young Adults and Polarization in the Church

- Education of the church’s teachings and what it means – we are raising kids who are inner focused but want to participate in social ministries.
- Meet students where they are (social media).

Church leadership, Rural Parishes, and Parish Planning

- Lay people are not leading/stepping up and need to be empowered. How can we enable the laity to serve and help lead the church in addition to the priest? This allows the priests to focus on other relevant matters that need leadership only they can provide.
- There's a lack of women involved in leadership positions within rural areas.
- Rural parishes feel isolated from the larger diocesan church.
- International priests are sent to rural areas with lack of onboarding/time to adjust/enculturate.
- Demographic decline, farming and agriculture creates challenges for the appropriate parish distribution.
- Younger priests want to be close to each other and grow in communities where they share a common life.

Priests of the Diocese and the Chancery

- Overall positive regard in bishop and chancery.
- Priests feel isolated and overwhelmed.
- Inconsistent approaches to faith formation processes provided by the chancery staff. The lack of clarity is especially hard on faith formation leaders who have not had formal training in religious education or youth ministry.
- Deficiency in technology.

- Chancery staff need focus.

Refugee Community feedback

- Refugee communities are targeted for membership into Protestants churches when they arrive; they tend to go to congregations offering rides to religious services.
- Messaging needed for their communities.
- Need reminders of their home country to visually attract their members (rosaries to wear, choir vestments).
- Want Catholic education for their children. Families feel alienated at many Catholic schools based on race and class.

Focus Group question format:

Overall impression of the Diocese; specific strengths of the Diocese

- Appreciation within the church for values and tradition; but when the faithful engage the broader world these values and traditions are countercultural.
- Strength of bishop: dynamic leadership.
- Recognition of need to adapt as a church.
- Challenges with urban/rural dynamics; many comments about youth concerns.

Specific weaknesses of the Diocese; what should the Diocese stop doing or consider not continuing

- Us vs. Them: priest/laity, east/west, urban/rural, chancery/parish, etc.
- Too many requests for money.
- Formation needed at all levels. Mentoring is need at both schools and parishes.
- Lack of consistency in sacramental preparation.
- Need for more clarity on the role of the diocese. Who supports whom?
- We say “all are welcome” but do not live it.
- Transitions are hard – especially priest transitions, programming starting and stopping; lack or no communication.
- Need to support international priests; need to inspire priestly vocations and enhance a culture of vocations.

What can the Diocese do to improve in our areas of weakness?

- Enable/empower lay leadership.
- Build community, relationships. and cordiality. This includes priests, within and between parishes, between generations, within chancery
- Formation: consistency and more meaningful approaches.

Opportunities for the Diocese to experience growth

- We do not spend our time and resources well.
- Educational impact is skewed; more resources for fewer Catholic school students; inequity.
- Opportunity to spread teaching of Eucharist as Body and Blood of Christ.
- Technology – opportunity to use as a tool.

What challenges prevent the Diocese in its growth?

- Political and cultural polarization impacted Church leaders addressing tough topics
- COVID kept people away.
- Outside competition for time (example is youth sports).
- Outside parties often define the Church's narrative. We need to more assertively tell our own story.
- People do not know how to discern vocation (priesthood, deacon, family life).
- Young adults are not coming back.

What are the major strategy suggestions moving forward given the challenges and the opportunities?

- Build communities and relationships.
- Empower and equip laity for mission.
- Define our own narrative. Penetrate the community with our message.

Based upon this intentionality in our synodal listening methodology (humble inquiry, one-on-one listening, focus group listening) we are confident that the ten themes below represent the voices of the faithful in our rural and metro areas of the diocese. A survey sequenced the themes/topics that were most discussed.

Top ten themes:

- Inspire our Youth and Young Adults
- Invite and Welcome People to Community
- Celebrate the Eucharist
- Offer Meaningful Adult Faith Formation
- Accompany and Support Families
- Address the Polarization in Today's World
- Communicate and Apply Catholic Social Teaching
- Assist the Poor and Refugees
- Evangelization Outreach
- Support Rural Parishes

There were other themes that were surfaced which included: offer more robust sacramental preparation, develop leadership skills for ministry (clergy and laity), foster parish/school collaboration, delegate more responsibility to the laity, encourage regional collaboration to support parish ministries.

Through a discernment process between the steering committee leadership and our consultant, these top themes were framed into these four strategic questions and the corresponding synthesis of conversation around it.

- **How does the Diocese of Des Moines work to inspire youth and young adults?**
 - “To inspire means to move the spirit, to breathe new life or to intrinsically motivate. Our young people need to experience the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Simply telling them what to do will not bear the same fruit as asking, listening and

engaging them in conversations that build trust, demonstrate respect and develop their capacity to live as disciples of Christ.”

- **How does the Diocese of Des Moines embody an inviting and welcoming posture?**
 - “To invite means to summon, to challenge or to pursue with vigor. To welcome means to greet someone with kindness, to accept newcomers with gladness. It is with the joy of the gospel and hope in Christ that we: go out to meet others where they are, listen to their joys and sorrows, witness the gospel in word and action, model the way of Jesus, and invite others as guests to join us in community with Christ.”
- **How does the Diocese of Des Moines communicate boldly and clearly our teachings?**
 - “To communicate means to share a common message, to open up to each other, or to listen and to respond in a conversation. The teachings of our Church are bold and they are clear. How we communicate that teaching can fall short on both counts. At times, we fall short of the boldness of the gospel and at other times, we send mixed messages.”
- **How does the Diocese of Des Moines offer meaningful adult formation to equip the faithful for mission?**
 - “To form something is to make, or to create a shape. To form someone in the faith means to make disciples, to make them fit for Christian living and to create openings that deepen their faith. Evangelization, catechesis and ongoing conversion are the foundation for faith formation, which is the lifelong journey of learning, growing and practicing the faith.”

The synodal listening sessions continued up through early spring 2022 and helped us confirm the four strategic questions which rose to the surface were Spirit inspired and authentic. Furthermore, additional insight and wisdom on each of the four strategic questions has helped the steering committee begin to formulate refined strategies and action steps as they approach the implementation process.

Collaboration with Non-Diocesan Organizations

Early on in the one-on-one process we collaborated with the Iowa Catholic Conference director, directors of Catholic health care and Catholic Charities, leaders of a regional Catholic Conference (Christ Our Life) that is held in Des Moines, local leaders of other faith traditions, civic leaders, and a neighboring bishop. In the focus group process, we also had listening sessions with leaders of the local Iowa Catholic Radio network and those who were disengaged or no longer active in their Catholic faith. We are now embarking on summer listening follow-up with some of these same individuals.

Synodal Statistics

Steering Committee members held forty in-person one-on-one listening sessions and between forty to fifty in-person humble inquiry sessions. Humble inquiry is the process of fostering a climate of openness and asking questions for which one does not already know the answer. This dynamic helps build a relationship based on genuine curiosity and a sincere interest in the other person.

One-hundred-twenty individuals participated in-person. These one-on-one conversations included:

- five priests
- several parish staff (rural and urban)
- several members of parish pastoral or finance councils (rural and urban)
- several parents of Catholic school children
- several young adults
- several Spanish Mass attendees
- a rural parish couple
- two deacons and a deacon couple
- three chancery staff
- a board member of the Catholic Foundation of Southwest Iowa
- the director of the Iowa Catholic Conference
- one Catholic religious sister
- one neighboring bishop
- the director of Catholic Charities
- a Catholic health executive
- a Catholic school principal
- the organizer of the Christ our Life Regional Conference
- a few Latin Mass attendees
- two Protestant clergy
- two couples who are home schooling
- two people who are no longer practicing the Catholic faith.

We held thirty-nine listening sessions, thirty of which were held on Zoom. These focus groups included:

- Presbyteral and Diaconate Council members (in separate sessions)
- Pastoral Center staff
- parish staff (rural and urban)
- religious education, adult faith formation leaders, and youth ministry leaders (in separate sessions)
- active and retired priests
- members of Bishop's Council
- Catholic School administrators
- religious sisters
- deacons and their spouses
- members of the faithful who attend the Extraordinary Form Mass
- home school parents
- parishioners (rural and urban)
- Spanish speaking faithful
- members of the refugee community
- Iowa Catholic Radio leadership
- Catholic School parents
- Catholic Charities staff

- disengaged and inactive Catholics
- young adults and teens (in separate sessions).

Four-hundred individuals participated in the listening process: about three-hundred participated on Zoom.

A steering committee of leaders from around the Diocese participated in an on-going synodal discernment beginning in late August 2021. Committee members included Latino and Black parishioners, Catholic School administrators, a deacon and his spouse from rural Iowa, priests from urban and rural communities, a rural farmer, an evangelization expert, youth ministry leaders, rural parishioners, young adults, staff support from the Diocesan chancery and Catholic Charities, and Bishop William Joensen.

Each of these individuals held two or three humble inquiry conversations, focusing on those who are disengaged and inactive in their faith. This leadership group met once or twice a month from August through April.

Our methodology utilized targeted focus groups and one-on-one sessions over parish listening sessions to gather data. By doing this, we were assured that every segment of the Diocese was heard. Our synodal reports numbered seventy-nine, which is near the number of reports we might have received if every parish would have participated. As is evident later in this report, it is our hope that the true pivot of synodality and the transformation of our identity and life as Church will occur during the implementation of the synodal vision. As strategies and action steps are discerned by a larger community, local synodal conversations will be necessary for each parish community to discern and employ their next pastoral initiatives.

An on-line survey was conducted to sequence the top fifteen themes. We received 2,598 responses (2,430 were in English and 168 in Spanish).

Based upon the data from the initial period of listening session in the fall of 2021 as well as the results of the early 2022 survey, we held an additional eight listening session in February 2022 to make sure we had surfaced the top four strategic questions and to conduct additional focused listening. These eight listening sessions had participation from 70 people from the following groups:

- young adults
- priests
- lay leaders
- deacon couples
- teens

The Synodal Process

We took to heart some of the foundational wisdom in the *Vademecum* as we incorporated synodality into our own diocesan visioning process. Reliance upon a consultant who constantly situated each phase of the process in a spiritual context was essential. The steering committee's initial formation was an extended reflection on the Beatitudes. Listening session executive reports were discerned in early 2022. Each steering committee member added prophetic wisdom

to the process and respected the meaningful conversations that had occurred during each listening session.

The question process was slightly different depending upon the phase.

- One-On-One Phase
 - What are the main challenges facing the Catholic Church in southwest Iowa today?
- Focus Group Phase
 - Give your overall impression of the Diocese of Des Moines.
 - Sometimes we would alternate the question with different groups.
 - What's it like to work for the Diocese? (Pastoral Center staff)
 - What's it like to work for the Catholic Church? (parish staff and formation leaders)
 - What's it like to be a Catholic priest these days? (active and retired priests)
 - What's it like to be Catholic in these times? (parishioners, Bishop's Council members, Hispanic laity, Iowa Catholic Radio leadership, teens)
 - What's it like to be a Catholic in today's world? (Catholic School administrators, Catholic Charities staff, young adults)
 - What's it like to be a deacon (or deacon's spouse) in the Catholic Church in today's world? (deacons and spouses)
 - What's it like to be a youth minister in the Catholic Church today? (youth ministry leaders)
 - What's it like to be a Catholic religious sister in today's world? (religious sisters)
 - What's it like to be a parent of a child in a Catholic School in today's world? (Catholic School parents)
 - What are the specific strengths of the Diocese?
 - What are the specific weaknesses of the Diocese?
 - What can the Diocese do to improve these areas of weakness?
 - Is there anything that the Diocese should stop doing or consider not continuing?
 - What do you see as opportunities for growth for the Diocese?
 - What are the challenges that are preventing the Diocese from growing?
 - Given the opportunities and challenges that are facing the Diocese, what are your suggested major strategies moving forward?
 - Please evaluate how well we are doing as the Catholic Church in Southwest Iowa in each of the following areas (weak – below average – average – above average – strong – don't know):
 - Address the polarization in today's world
 - Inspire youth and young adults
 - Reach out and evangelize
 - Communicate and apply Catholic social teaching
 - Support rural parishes
 - Offer meaningful adult faith formation

- Invite and welcome people to community
 - Develop leadership skills for ministry
 - Accompany and support families
 - Offer robust sacramental preparation
 - Foster regional collaboration to support parish ministries
 - Foster parish/ school collaboration
 - Delegate more responsibility to the laity
 - Assist the poor and refugees
 - Celebrate the Eucharist
- Select up to five categories that you think are most important for the Diocese of Des Moines to address in its new Strategic Vision
- Optional Demographic data
- Second-Round Focus Groups (to refine and define the top categories needing attention)
 - Are these pastoral questions the right questions?
 - How can we inspire our youth and young adults?
 - How can we invite and welcome all people to community?
 - How can we communicate more boldly and clearly our own teachings?
 - How can we offer robust and meaningful adult faith formation?
 - Anything else?

The core of our process was based upon the two questions posed in the *Vademecum*: 1) How is this “journeying together happening today in your local Church? 2) What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together?” That being said, to assist us in building a multiple year diocesan strategic vision, we framed this within a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).

Conclusion – Next Synodal Steps for the Diocese of Des Moines

The visioning process report will be made available to diocesan and parish leadership (clergy and lay leaders). A robust summary of this report will be communicated to the public in our diocesan newspaper, on our social network platforms, and on our website.

Synodality will be essential in the implementation phase of our strategic visioning process. This summer we will extend the synodal phase by creating four implementation teams, expanding committee memberships to include individuals who participated in the listening sessions. Their task is to hold additional listening sessions with local, regional, and national leaders to help us frame strategies and action steps around these four pastoral questions (found on page 6). Once completed, these strategies and action steps will be married with the diocesan vision articulated by Bishop William Joensen and his own discernment coming out of the synodal conversations.

The Diocese will hold implementation workshops near the end of 2022. A version of a synodal process will be used to help local parish communities discern their pastoral landscape based upon the vision, strategies, and action steps articulated by the Diocese. Once launched, a synodal dimension will continually evolve as we work with parish communities and our own diocesan staff to animate and realize our maturing mission.