



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission



Catholic Diocese of
SAGINAW

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

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Introduction: Journeying Together

The entire Catholic Church is called to participate in the upcoming Synod of Bishops. This Synod is entitled: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission."

Pope Francis has called the entire People of God to journey together. This Synod is not just another meeting with oral presentations and written reports. It is a process of journeying together by listening, dialoguing, praying, discerning, and making decisions together for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis is asking each local diocese to gather - clergy, religious and laity together- to listen to each other's joys and hopes, and griefs and anxieties (c.f. *Gaudium et Spes* no. 1). The "goal" of this journeying together is not to create a new vision or pastoral plan with objectives. Rather, the goal of our journeying together is to be present with one another, to listen and learn with each other, and to grow closer to the Lord and His Church.

Additional information:

- Vatican Synod website <https://www.synod.va/en.html>
- USCCB Synod website <https://www.usccb.org/synod>
- Saginaw Diocese Synod website <https://www.saginaw.org/synod2023>

How to Use This Guide

The most important aspect of the 2021-2023 Synod of Bishops is listening. While each diocese is required to submit a report to the USCCB based on listening sessions held in the diocese, this report is secondary to the listening sessions where members of the local Church community can gather in order to pray, listen and dialogue together.

Purpose of Diocesan Synod Sessions

It is hoped that this Synod process will provide parishes an opportunity to be together as we slowly emerge from the COVID- 19 pandemic. Many parish communities have been affected by COVID - 19 through illness, deaths, and missed celebrations like First Communion, funerals, weddings, and graduations. COVID- 19 has also affected parishes through the incredible generosity of community members giving their time and talent.

This Synod is a unique gift for our local Church. It is a gift of time - a chance to take a step back and reconnect with our parish communities. It is an opportunity to invite people not only back to Sunday Mass but also to parish life. This invitation to parish life starts with listening – listening to each other's joys, hopes, sorrows and anxieties. Listening to each other is the basis of dialogue, friendship and community life. This Synod is not about changing doctrine or church structures, but rather encountering each other as brothers and sisters in Christ in a post-pandemic world.

Since this process is meant to help re-engage parish communities after COVID-19, Pastors and DPLs are encouraged to discern with parish clergy and staff, and the parish Pastoral and Finance Councils as to how best to implement the listening session process. For example, some parishes may hold a listening session with their Councils in addition to hosting listening session(s) for the general parish community only. Pastors and DPLs may also adapt the process to include Mass or a meal depending on local circumstances.

Diocesan Synod Overview

The Catholic Diocese of Saginaw has developed a pastoral approach to implementing this Synod. The Diocesan Synod opened on October 24, 2021, with an Opening Mass celebrated by Bishop Gruss at The Cathedral of Mary of the Assumption. From October 17 until early January 2022, diocesan staff has been planning and customizing information for the people of the Diocese of Saginaw. From February through April 2022, parishes will host listening sessions where the clergy, parishioners, religious communities who live near the parish and any other community members will be invited to participate. Parishes will be asked to submit a summary report of their parish's listening. Pastors and DPLs are asked to name a parish group coordinator to lead the effort of the synod at the parish. A Diocesan Pre-Synodal Meeting will take place on June 7, 2022, where the Pastor or DPL and the Parish Group Coordinator are invited to

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attend. At that meeting we will pray together and share with each other the joys and challenges of their parish life so we may accompany and journey together.

After the Diocesan Pre-Synodal Meeting is complete, a 10-page report will be created by Bishop Gruss with the Diocesan Synod team. Every diocesan report submitted to the USCCB will be summarized to create a national report. This national report will be used during the continental phase of the Synod where episcopal conferences will gather to pray, listen, and dialogue together. Continental reports will be submitted to the Synod of Bishops in Rome, which will use the continental reports to create the working report for the 2023 Universal Synod of Bishops.

Resources in this Guide

In this guide you will find the outline and questions for a parish listening session, plus facilitator notes and resources to help guide the discussion.

This Guide contains the following resources:

- Overview of Listening Session
- Participant Ground Rules
- Small Group Discussion
- Large Group Feedback
- Evaluation
- Appendix

Overview of Listening Session

Start Time (minutes)	Duration (minutes)	Description	Comments
	5	Gathering Prayer	
	10	Welcome, Introduction, and Overview of the Synod	Pastor or DPL to welcome participants. The Parish Group Coordinator is host for the event.
	5	Participant Ground Rules	Host
	45-60	Small Group Discussion: The Fundamental Question <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Round #1 (15-20 minutes) - Round #2 (15-20 minutes) - Group Discernment (15-20 minutes) 	Facilitators at each table
	15-30	Large Group Feedback	Each table shares the Group Discernment
	5	Sending Forth Prayer	Ask participants to complete an evaluation form before leaving. Can include closing comments from Pastor or DPL or Host before the final prayer.

NOTE: Each parish is encouraged to insert their custom agenda into this page before printing for the listening session.

Participant Ground Rules*

- We are here today to have a **DIALOGUE** or a conversation to build relationships and exchange perspectives between participants. We want to expand our possibilities by helping to reflect on our collective experiences. Please avoid arguing or comments that seek to advance a personal agenda.
- We will treat what anyone says with reverence and respect.
- During individual sharing, one person speaks at a time, uninterrupted.
- We will listen with an open mind.
- We only speak once until everyone has had an opportunity to share.
- Respect the times of silence when we stop the sharing to reflect and pray.
- When we report themes and experiences it will be done without attributing specific comments to individual participants.

Facilitator Notes:

- Establish clear boundaries of time and topic for the speakers.
 - We want to give space for participants to be comfortable telling their story, while guiding the dialogue to completion in a reasonable period of time.
- The Appendix includes a guide for *Facilitating Potentially Difficult Synodal Conversations* from the Leadership Roundtable for your reference.
 - Gently interrupt a person who talks disproportionately more than others.
 - Gently interrupt and redirect a speaker who gets off topic.
 - Gently re-focus a speaker who is preoccupied with an issue that is not pertinent to the topic or inhibits the participation of others in the group.
 - If you must interrupt a speaker, it helps to acknowledge their contribution by providing a brief synthesis of what you heard them say and thank them for their contribution.
- Dialogue is the foundation of all synodal consultations. It is helpful to distinguish between the different types of exchanges:
 - **Dialogue** is two-way, cooperative, and its purpose is to build relationships and exchange perspectives between participants.
 - **Discussion** is a process of talking about something to reach a decision or exchange ideas.
 - **Debate** is two way and competitive, where the purpose is to convince another.
 - **Diatribes** is one way, and its purpose is to browbeat, inspire, shame, or emote.
- Dialogue comes before discussion in synodal exchanges. These two activities can lead to true discernment of what the Holy Spirit is saying and leading.
 - Dialogue expands possibilities and insights into possibilities.
 - Discussion holds those possibilities against one another helping to reflect upon them, and narrowing toward realistic, doable solutions, and steps forward.

*Adapted from content from the Leadership Roundtable, [Process for Facilitating Synodal Consultations](#)

Small Group Discussion

- Round #1 – Individual Sharing
 - What are your experiences of journeying together in communion, participation, and mission in our local Church?
 - What experiences bring you joy and help you grow in your relationship with Jesus?
 - What difficulties or obstacles have you encountered?
 - What wounds did these experiences reveal?

Facilitator Notes:

- The focus of Round #1 is on experiences. In other words, we want participants to share their faith story.
 - What experiences brought them to encounter Jesus?
 - What experiences keep them coming to Mass or are keeping them away?
- Use the *Thematic Questions and Reflection* and *Fundamental Question and Reflection* in the Appendix to add direction or as conversation starters, if needed.
- Many participants will want to share opinions and solutions. Gently steer the conversation to the experiences behind these opinions and solutions.
 - Explain to participants we will discuss insights and suggestions in Round #2.
 - In focusing on experiences, the conversation will point to the root cause of their joys, difficulties, and hurts.

Note: Sharing in this session may surface trauma for a victim-survivor of Church abuse or for someone who has felt hurt or abandoned by the Church. If this occurs, please ask the Pastor, DPL, host, or staff member to join the table discussion. If desired, they and the participant can step away for compassionate listening and possible additional help. A survivor of Church abuse deserves the very best of professional expertise and pastoral care.

- Silent reflection for 1-2 minutes
- Round #2 – Individual Sharing
 - What insights have the experiences shared sparked?
 - What do you think our parish does well that we need to continue doing?
 - What do you think would make our parish better?
 - Who else do we need to reach out to, listen to, or include whose voice is not being heard?

Facilitator Notes:

- Round #2 should continue with the ground rules of one person speaks at a time uninterrupted and participants only speak once until everyone has had an opportunity to share.
- This may be the hardest time for participants to listen to each other and wait their turn to talk.
- The focus of Round #2 is on dreaming.

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- It is important to gather what we do well and need to continue doing from each participant, before jumping into the things we can do better. We want to be sure to build on the good foundation.
- Please note Round #2 should build on Round #1 and reflect the stories shared and not turn into a diatribe by any individual participants on an unrelated topic. If a new genuinely unrelated topic is voiced, gently guide the participant to share their experience behind the insight.
- Silent reflection for 1-2 minutes
- Group Discernment – Facilitator led discussion
 - What key message from our discussion is the Holy Spirit guiding us toward?
 - To what minority opinion(s) is the Holy Spirit calling us to further consider?
 - Briefly describe the “listening” process experience of the group.

Facilitator Notes:

- Discernment is about the Holy Spirit inspiring the group based on the discussion in Round #1 and Round #2, so don't cut short the silent reflection time which is meant to give space to the Holy Spirit to speak to the participants.
- Have individuals answer the first question in writing and then share what they wrote with the group. This technique will make sure everyone has an opportunity to have their insights captured.
- The group discernment may be a time when a participant may try to take over the conversation. It will be important to capture their idea and then move onto a new topic from a different participant.
- The facilitator should guide the group to one or two key messages from the listening session. If someone has a strong opinion that is not represented in the key messages, please include it as a minority opinion for consideration.
- The discernment is not about a consensus opinion or a democratic vote, but to see where the Holy Spirit is guiding participants in a common way.
- All feedback should be captured on the *Synodal Conversation Notes* pages and shared with the meeting host.
- For the last 5-10 minutes of the discernment, ask the participants to share their experiences of the listening process. Capture these as pros and cons on the last note page.

Large Group Feedback

- Each table facilitator will share a summary of the group discernment.

Facilitator Notes:

- The facilitator shares the keys message(s) and minority opinion from the group discernment.
- If the host allows individual feedback, the facilitator may ask a specific individual with a specific story or passion to share or can open it up to the entire group.

Evaluation

- How well has the listening session allowed you the opportunity to share your own experience of Church?
- What are your hopes for the Church as we “journey together” in terms of communion, participation, and mission?
- What practical suggestions do you have for your faith community to continue to be a more listening, discerning, and participatory Church?
- What groups, minorities, or marginalized segments of our community do we still need to reach to hear their voice?

Facilitator Notes:

- The facilitator collects the written comments from the participants at the table and gives to the host.

APPENDIX

Below you'll find Thematic Questions for Reflection

- Fundamental Question Reflection
- Thematic Questions Reflection
- Facilitating Potentially Difficult Synodal Consultations

Fundamental Question Reflection

The Fundamental Question

“A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?”

Reflection Questions

Addressing the fundamental question requires listening to the Holy Spirit, who like the wind “blows where it will; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8), remaining open to the surprises that the Spirit will certainly prepare us for the listening sessions.

In a prayerful way, ask yourself what experiences in your particular Church the fundamental question calls to mind?

What joys do these experiences provoke? What difficulties and obstacles have they encountered? What wounds have they brought to light? What insights have they elicited?

Where in these experiences does the voice of the Spirit resound? What is he asking of us? What are the points to be confirmed, the prospects for change, the steps to be taken?

Two Perspectives

“Journeying together” can be understood from two different perspectives, which are strongly interconnected. The first perspective looks at the internal life of the particular Churches, at the relationships between their constituent parts. The second perspective considers how the People of God journeys together with the entire human family.

Thematic Questions for Reflection

Questions to reflect upon in preparation for listening sessions:

Companions on the Journey

In the Church and in society we are side by side on the same road. In our local Church, who are those who “walk together”? Who are those who seem further apart? How are we called to grow as companions? What groups or individuals are left on the margins?

Listening

Listening is the first step, but it requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice. How is God speaking to us through voices we sometimes ignore? How are the laity listened to, especially women and young people? What facilitates or inhibits our listening? How well do we listen to those on the peripheries? How is the contribution of consecrated men and women integrated? What are some limitations in our ability to listen, especially to those who have different views than our own? What space is there for the voice of minorities, especially people who experience poverty, marginalization, or social exclusion?

Speaking Out

All are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, in freedom, truth, and charity. What enables or hinders speaking up courageously, candidly, and responsibly in our local Church and in society? When and how do we manage to say what is important to us? How does the relationship with the local media work (not only Catholic media)? Who speaks on behalf of the Christian community, and how are they chosen?

Celebration

“Walking together” is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. How do prayer and liturgical celebrations inspire and guide our common life and mission in our community? How do they inspire the most important decisions? How do we promote the active participation of all the faithful in the liturgy? What space is given to participating in the ministries of lector and acolyte?

Co-Responsible in the Mission

Synodality is at the service of the Church's mission, in which all her members are called to participate. Since we are all missionary disciples, how is each Baptized person called to be a protagonist in the mission? How does the community support its members committed to service in society (social and political commitment, in scientific research and teaching, in the promotion of social justice, in the protection of human rights, and in caring for the Common home, etc.)? How do you help them to live out these commitments in a logic of mission? How is discernment about mission-related choices made, and who participates in it? How are the different traditions that constitute the patrimony of many Churches, especially the Oriental ones, integrated and adapted, with respect to the synodal style, in view of an effective Christian witness? How does collaboration work in territories where different sui iuris Churches are present?

Forming Ourselves in Synodality

Synodality entails receptivity to change, formation, and on-going learning. How does our church community form people to be more capable of “walking together,” listening to one another, participating

in mission, and engaging in dialogue? What formation is offered to foster discernment and the exercise of authority in a synodal way?

Dialogue in Church and Society and with Other Christian Denominations

Dialogue is a path of perseverance that also includes silence and suffering, but which is capable of gathering the experience of persons and peoples. How are divergences of vision, the conflicts, the difficulties addressed? How do we promote collaboration with neighboring Dioceses, with and among religious communities in the area, with and among lay associations and movements, etc.? What experiences of dialogue and shared commitment do we have with believers of other religions and with non-believers? How does the Church dialogue with and learn from other sectors of society: the world of politics, economics, culture, civil society, the poor...? The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey. What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations?

Authority and Participation

A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church. How do we identify the goals to be pursued, the way to achieve them, and the steps to be taken? How is authority exercised within our particular Church? What are the practices of teamwork and co-responsibility? How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the Faithful promoted?

Discerning and Deciding

In a synodal style, decisions are made through discernment, based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit. By what procedures and methods do we discern together and make decisions? How can they be improved? How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities? How do we articulate the consultative phase with the deliberative one, the process of decision-making with the moment of decision-taking? How and with what tools do we promote transparency and accountability?

Facilitating Potentially Difficult Synodal Consultations

Content adapted from the Leadership Roundtable, [*Process for Facilitating Synodal Consultations*](#)

As a facilitator you may find some consultations are difficult because of people who have traumatic experience of Church through abuse, people who (often unknowingly) attempt to hijack a consultation for their own agenda, or who have few effective filters for what they might say. There are some ways to mitigate or respond to those situations.

1. Preparation and clarity of purpose
 - Set clear expectations, process and purpose early and keep on topic.
 - Set the tone as prayerful and reflective.
 - What may be reported out of the synodal consultation is not what we all agree upon, but what we discern as having potential to be the will of God for the Church in the future. Even conflicting perspectives can be reported.
 - Be clear that the synodal consultations are not equipped to provide the support that those who suffered abuse need, and at the same time we need to hear those who choose to raise the abuses by the Church as pertinent to our considerations of a future Church.
 - Be clear that our purpose is to help form a more synodal and listening Church and that means keeping an open mind so the Spirit can work in all of us. Don't let our personal agendas limit our conversations.
2. Responding to a speaker who talks of the trauma of abuse by a minister, staff member, teacher or volunteer at a parish or Catholic school.

Tragically, some consultation participants may have had traumatic experiences of Church.

Facilitators must take into account that those traumas deserve our compassion above all. It is also true that the synodal consultation is not the place for long discourses about those tragedies. It is the place to recall and acknowledge that they happened, that they had a severe negative impact on individuals, families, faith communities, and the Church as a whole, and need to be prevented.

It is appropriate to recall that those tragedies happened and to talk about, for example, how a synodal Church might help prevent them happening again.

What can a facilitator do when an abuse survivor speaks?

- a. Acknowledge the trauma is deep and painful.
- b. Thank the speaker for their courage and acknowledge the depth of hurt you hear as they speak.
- c. Set a boundary such as "I'm glad you had the courage to bring this tragedy up. While we cannot go deeply into the personal stories in this consultation, we do need to acknowledge the pain caused."

- d. Set a direction such as “Those tragedies must be part of our considerations in these synodal consultations, which are forward leaning, looking at a renewed Church where such things cannot happen. As we consider the direction the Church needs to go, please keep the survivors and their families in mind and pray for them. We need to do everything possible so that this kind of abuse does not happen in the future.”

3. Responding to people with agendas

It may happen that either individuals or groups attend synodal consultations and come with particular agendas. When a facilitator can recognize this, there are approaches that may help keep the conversation on track.

When an individual or group blames others, a facilitator can respond by inviting other perspectives and developing consensus: “How could any of us make a difference here?” “Are there some steps we would agree together that would be helpful here?” “How could all of us be part of the solution?”

Sometimes it is also necessary to restate the purpose and nature of the synodal consultation. “The synodal consultation is forward looking, envisioning the Church of the future, and we are approaching this in a reflective, prayerful manner, keeping an open mind so the Spirit can surface the direction forward for our Church. Let us all please take a moment to place ourselves in an internal space where we can constructively participate by how we listen and how we speak.”

4. Responding to people with no filters

Some people of goodwill speak without awareness of the impact they have on others by how they speak or the words that they say. It is more than just abrupt; it is doing harm to others even if they see it as “just being honest” or something similar.

The facilitator may need a graduated response to such people:

- Gently interrupt the speaker and remind them that we need to be respectful of others.
- Gently tell the speaker the impact they are having on some people in the room.
- Call upon the group to share how this speaker is impacting them (If you think they will speak up and if they are willing to share that through you as the facilitator).
- Ask the speaker to change how they are speaking (e.g., softer, more aware of how people are hearing them, focus on the question not the person).
- Suggest a break or a time for reflection and quietly approach the speaker and ask for a change in delivery or tell the speaker the group will be moving on after the break.