



Synod Summary Report: Parish Level Takeaways The Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi

The parish Synod Team of The Catholic Community of St Francis of Assisi in Raleigh, North Carolina appreciates the invitation to grow deeper into being a listening parish through the Synodal process. As an addition to the [Synod Summary Report we submitted to the Diocese](#), we also would like to take the opportunity to share certain parish specific key themes that arose independently across most or all listening groups.

For this Synodal process, we held 16 different in person and virtual listening sessions. We also received feedback from many of our ministry areas including from our students in both our schools, even our [three- and four-year-old preschool children](#), through all stages of life to our seniors living in assisted living. In addition, we reached out to our social justice ministries like our prison ministries and LGBTQ+ ministries.

Our sessions each [followed a similar outline](#) which included these questions:

Topic 1: How do we journey together in our parish and how is God calling us to grow in journeying together?

- What are the joys?
- What difficulties, obstacles, wounds?

Topic 2: Listening Aspect of the Church

- How is God speaking to us through voices we may ignore?
- What facilitates/helps or inhibits/limits our listening?

Topic 3: Authority and Participation

- How does our community identify the goals to be pursued, the way to reach them, and steps to be taken?
- How are teamwork and co-responsibility put into practice in our parish?
- How can we foster a more synodal approach in our participation and leadership?

We received input from over 580 participants and received over [44 pages of feedback](#) that were captured from all the sessions. Please see [Appendices](#) for session outlines and detailed feedback.

A sub-committee of the [Pastoral Council](#) composed entirely of non-staff, lay parishioners gathered the feedback from these listening sessions, assembled the feedback, and has prepared the following summary to highlight our collective insight to share with the staff, school faculty, parents, and parishioners of The Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi.

The Synod Team observed that certain key themes arose independently across most or all listening groups. We believe that the resonance of these themes across groups that differed in facilitator, scribe, participants, age group, ministry, etc. is a very strong indication of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We do not represent these points as *unanimous* views of *every* participant or even of every Synod Team



member. Our process involved circling back afterward to ensure each participant had an opportunity to validate or correct the direct quotes, paraphrasing, and synthesized key messages that each scribe captured. The following has been carefully written with a mission to be true and faithful to the voices spoken; not allowing partiality to influence our actions. Furthermore, we embrace this as the beginning of our journey as a synodal community. We commit to these conversations of listening to continue among the saints of God in The Catholic Community of St Francis of Assisi.

Engagement for ALL.

St. Francis of Assisi (SFA) is a unique parish. There is so much about SFA that brings joy. Our parish is inviting and much more inclusive than the average Catholic church. Our parish is a welcoming community. The music is beautiful and encourages joyful participatory prayer. Our Kindergarten through 5th grade participants in the Synod shared their love for our music and desire to have more of it (along with softer pews). The laity is empowered to act in the greater community for the common good. The Franciscan Friars modeled joy, humble discipleship and grounded the Franciscan charism in the parish from 1988-2020. The Franciscan charism is felt in the acceptance of ALL. Strong examples of this welcoming and acceptance are the long-standing LGBTQ+¹ and the Divorce Care ministries at SFA. The parish's commitment to justice and peace is the bedrock of more than 100 ministries, 10% annual offertory tithe and is unrivaled.

The size of our parish presents great opportunities as well as great challenges in offering community and connection to every individual. Particularly during the pandemic, community and connection were a big challenge to many. As life stages change for individuals, a grounded sense of community can be elusive and greater effort to form meaningful relationships would ensure everyone is invited, inspired and served by the love of Christ.

Experiencing community in small groups within our parish is effective and valuable, for example, RCIA, Know, Believe, Live (or KBL), African Ancestry Ministry Evangelization Network (or AAMEN), Just Faith, The Franciscan School and St. Francis Preschool parent prayer groups to name a few. Having a small group experience, either in a long-term small Christian community (SCC) or in a randomly assigned group like KBL, helps maintain a sense of connection and community. An example of one of these opportunities for engagement during the pandemic that was particularly meaningful was the outdoor Stagville Plantation day trip to gain an understanding of local racial history.

As we continue to be a welcoming parish, we need to truly reach out to invite all and not assume new seekers will find their own way without our community-building and evangelization efforts. All should be encouraged to proactively approach parishioners they don't know and ask how the community can support them. Are we, the Church, the humble, loving and inclusive face of Christ for all?

Our teens and young adults, in particular, represent the greatest and most urgent need for increased engagement. Prior to the pandemic, research led by the Pastoral Council discovered that teen and

¹ LGBTQ+ is used in this document since it is the currently defined norm and is meant to include all orientations and gender identities.



young adult mental health was rapidly rising to crisis levels. In North Carolina, 16% of high school students reported seriously considering suicide - 43% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. This was *before* the pandemic.

On an average Sunday night for our Middle and High School Faith Formation programs, we surveyed all attendees. A total of 131 students in attendance participated in our local parish Synod survey. They reported a need for an engaged community. Here are some of the salient learnings from this survey.

- 1 out of 3 (34%) say they don't have at least one friend they can trust to share anything with
- Nearly 1 out of 3 (29%) say they "usually feel anxious or unhappy" and every other 10th grader (50%) says they usually feel anxious or unhappy
- Only 50% say they believe in a personal God
- More than 1 in 4 (26%) do not believe in Jesus
- Those who regularly attend Mass and those who believe in a personal God are twice as likely to report that they have at least one trustworthy friend and that they usually feel happy
- Nearly 1/3 of these teens who attended Middle and High School Faith Formation said they/their family attends Mass Christmas & Easter Only (9%) or "A few times a year" (21%)
- Our 44 7th graders who took the survey attended 20 different schools

Keep in mind, this is what our students who are showing up and bothering to participate in our survey shared. How are the hundreds of disengaged students in our parish feeling?

Focus on Formation

St. Francis parish is a special place with many great strengths (for example, the parishioners, social justice roots, Bible groups, Science Group, Divorce Care, and many more) but there are major aspects that need attention and revision, especially youth and young adult engagement.

We need to remove divisions among our Catholic school youth (St. Francis Preschool, TFS, and Gibbons) versus youth attending other schools, and find more opportunities to bring all peers together in community. Many felt we are doing a huge disservice to the youth in the Faith Formation (FF) programs, as they are not getting the catechetical resources that TFS students have. Another aspect of this division, we have seen many TFS and Gibbons families not engaging in the church community. We heard the need for opportunities for engagement, ministry, and service together among all our youth of the parish, including families. It is recommended to create a Youth Faith Formation council similar to the JPAC council to continuously improve, oversee, and guide these programs.

For years JustFaith (JF) has been the main Adult Formation offering, with hundreds of participants, many engaged in all the various JF programs. Oddly, it is not recognized as Faith Formation and is currently "housed" in Justice & Peace alone. KBL was a tremendous experience and participants learned so much. This renewed focus on theological adult formation is appreciated and important. Can we imagine marrying both of these formation offerings in the formation of modern Catholic Disciples?



We should continuously review our programs for youth and adults to ensure goals are clear and they are being met.

Outreach Ministry - It's what we do.

Outreach at St. Francis of Assisi is very different than at other Catholic churches. It is open and embracing of the wider community. We need to continue to open our minds to think beyond the walls of the church. SFA is a founding member institution of ONE Wake along with 45 other local Interfaith communities. SFA could challenge parishioners to do more in the broader community, for the common good of all. Some expressed a desire to have our parish increase its interfaith outreach. We need to continually ask what does the community need? How are we addressing those needs with love and compassion? Outreach is part of who we are as SFA. It's what we DO.

There seems to be an opportunity to assist parishioners better with life transitions (for example, empty-nesters no longer involved with faith formation) to help them find a new community within the parish. The parish could do more to support busy families and young mothers.

There is opportunity to renew our priority and investment in Stewardship. A good example is the Called and Gifted program, connecting parishioners with groups and needs where they may be called to share their gifts. In 2010, SFA was awarded the International Catholic Stewardship Council's highest honor for our community's commitment to form a culture of Stewardship. A decade later are we still living that commitment?

Changing Leadership

Over the past two years, our community has faced several challenges and changes, which have caused many to feel unsettled and to wonder if the parish home they have known and loved will remain the same. Some of these include: the transition of pastoral leadership from the 33-year administration by Holy Name Province (HNP) friars to diocesan priests, substantial staff turnover, and the Covid pandemic with its related restrictions on gathering in community. As we continue to adjust to the changes and to heal from our losses, there is a desire for intentional opportunities to encounter and personally engage with our priests and lay leadership, so all may build relationships through communication, mutual understanding, and sacred trust. These opportunities were limited during the pandemic, but now need to be actively cultivated.

Our parish has a unique history of a very empowered laity. From the founding of our parish, lay leaders have been intimately involved in the development and growth of the parish. Our laity are eager to be entrusted to use their God given gifts to serve our community and to promote the reign of God. Some expressed concern that a spirit of clericalism has begun to replace the more servant-leader style of the Franciscans. Our staff needs to be empowered to use their gifts and be encouraged to collaborate across areas. Seeking out connection and collaboration can help move everyone from our individual silos. Several parishioners commented that being given leadership opportunities gave them a sense of belonging. However, they felt that our parish needs to better equip and support our leaders through



listening sessions, technology training, seasonal spiritual formation, and multi-faceted Church community support.

Clarity of Mission and Evolving Identity

Several highlighted the uniqueness of our community and called St. Francis “the last stop for many Catholics” or “a bright spot in an otherwise dark Church.” There is a great deal of worry that the things that have made our community unique – welcome to all, focus on peace and justice, care for Creation, a spirit of joy and hope, prioritizing spirituality and connection over traditional theology – will not continue without the friars. Although many reassurances have been made that the Franciscan spirit lives on, those reassurances will need to continue. Our parish leadership needs to continue to engage in these conversations, recognizing the fear that underpins them. As a community, we also need to engage in reflection regarding our identity and who we are becoming. Our community was not stagnant throughout the 33-year tenure of the Franciscans. Even under that consistent leadership, our parish grew and changed. This time of transition can be an opportunity to begin to look forward at who we want to be in our future.

Recognizing the uncertainty and fear being experienced as our identity evolves with new leadership, parish management must be overly cautious about making sudden changes without thoughtful, empathetic, and diligent over-communication. For example, there was a desire for more clarity in our parish goals and a better understanding of how goals and priorities are determined, what those goals and priorities are, and how the parish will pursue them. The goals/priorities and progress against them need to be communicated and accessible to the parishioners. Divisions and agenda conflicts between church and schools should be brought into the light, dealt with transparently, and resolved so that the schools function as ministries of the church, rather than as separate independent businesses. How does the annual budget reflect the mission we profess?

A spirit of synodality is essential in addressing the issues of gaining clarity on the identity our community is wrestling with right now. As parishioners, clergy, and staff develop our understanding of who we are and how we will live out our Gospel call as a community, we need to focus on listening to one another, asking who is missing from the table, and prayerfully considering how well we are journeying together.

Improve Our Communications

In the listening sessions, it became clear that there were gaps in communications, gaps between the parish management and parishioners, gaps between parish staff and management, gaps between the school and the church. This synodal process of listening and communications needs to occur between and across all: parishioners, staff, parish management, and the schools. St. Francis of Assisi is an involved, lay-led community that feels strongly about the direction of the parish and wants to be included.



Regarding communication tools and methods: the website, bulletin, and social media platforms must be looked at as areas that are continually evolving - keeping the needs and expectations of young people as well as those less tech-savvy in mind. The digital version of the bulletin has good content, but it is no longer reaching many parishioners. In addition, our volunteer management technologies (MSP and Realm) need better adoption and deployment to other departments and ministries to be effective communication tools. The parish also needs better marketing, especially improving the use of social media. We should learn from digital content creators like Bishop Barron and Fr. Mike Schmitz to meet young people where they are by investing time, talent, and treasure into more effective digital communications. Our parish is large and has a plethora of talent eager to share these gifts! This priority on communication methodologies must be reflected in our budgets and human resources.

We heard the desire for messaging from our parish leaders that addresses the situations and struggles our parishioners are currently facing. People generally want to hear how the Scriptures connect and are relevant to their current lives and how they can better live them. They are seeking hope and joy, confirmation that we are people of the Resurrection. For people to hear the Good News, they first want to experience the love it preaches. The parish community needs to grow in trust of our new leadership and where the Holy Spirit is leading us. We hear from Pope Francis that the synodal process is to begin an open dialog, a back and forth, a way to allow communication to flow into the church. This new way of communication encourages us to sit in the friction, talk it through, and still love, respect, and *trust* each other in the end.

Listening Needs to Continue

St. Francis of Assisi embraced the Synodal process and took it seriously. This parish made an effort toward intentional listening to groups on the margins. Great information was shared in all the sessions. This information gathered from the synod process is an opportunity to bring clarity and propose positive changes here at St. Francis. Specific actions should be defined by those in leadership to realign our parish, diocese and Church with the joy and love that so many seek as followers of Christ and the Catholic Church.

The synodal team has come to realize that this is just the beginning of an overall listening process. The process is yet to be fully scoped or defined. An idea has been proposed to establish a regular time and place for people to come together to speak, to listen, and to be nurtured by each other and the word of God.

The Pastoral Council should fairly represent all members of the parish and should make sure all voices are heard. The Pastoral Council is a good choice to lead the Synodal process by helping our community (parishioners, staff, students, parents, and clergy) come together on this listening journey. Our hope is that The Catholic Community of St Francis of Assisi will make the decision to trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance by fostering openness as we listen to one another and journey together.