

Christ the King Parish Synod Report



INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2021, Pope Francis kicked off a global process called a *synod*, an ancient Greek word meaning “journey together.” Francis is calling the global Catholic community to be a church that listens and learns from all of God’s children—and that means everyone.

In March and April, Christ the King responded to Pope Francis’s call by offering numerous listening sessions where we welcomed everyone in our community to share their experiences of what the Catholic Church has been for them and what they hope it might become.

This report represents a synthesis of the notes taken during these listening sessions. Five key themes emerged from conversations about where our parish is right now and where we might like it to go. Here is a summary of what people had to say.

WELCOMING

Welcoming describes how newcomers feel initially when they participate in parish activities. This might include new parishioners, out-of-town visitors, or even non-Catholic significant others.

Where is our parish right now?

Participants generally affirmed Christ the King's hospitality, specifically citing and praising the Mass for seniors on the parking lot and Mass on the ball field during COVID. Credo is viewed as valuable opportunity for young adults to connect to the parish.

Renovations to the exterior of the Church to make it more accessible were appreciated. However, access to the altar for the disabled and lack of resources for hearing impaired continue to inhibit involvement for some.

Respondents shared the belief that new members are unaware of opportunities for parish involvement and often perceive this community's leadership as "siloed." Some expressed a desire for a deeper experience of community and enhanced participation, wishing for the "house church" of early Christians. Difficulties related to the size of the parish seem to contribute to this desire for smaller and more intimate gatherings.

Some expressed a concern that their experience of the CTK community is one of exclusion and marginalization, specifically, but not limited to: non-Catholics, divorced members, those without families, members of the LBGTQ community, all of whom struggle to feel welcomed here.

Participants reported that non-Catholics struggle to feel welcome. Factors contributing to this include lack of familiarity with Catholic liturgy, uncertainty about how non-Catholics are supposed to participate, and the perceived unwillingness of others to greet and welcome them.

Where do we want to go from here?

As mentioned above, most participants regarded Christ the King as being a welcoming parish in general, but they offered many suggestions about how to enhance our hospitality. Some of the more popular ideas included the following:

- Develop a programmatic approach to welcoming new

parishioners which might include a hospitality team, information packets, periodic ministry fairs, and newcomer events. Expand role of greeters to enhance hospitality.

- Identify strategies to foster inclusion of non-traditional families, non-Catholics, single, divorced and LGBTQ+ members.
- Address barriers for those with special needs and disabilities and implement resources such as listening devices, ramps, signing to allow full participation.
- Assess current opportunities for member participation in order to address the desire for a deeper sense of community. What is missing? Are their gaps in services/experiences?
- Develop outreach to other faith communities, participate in one another's worship services and initiate discussion sessions with these communities. Additionally, outreach to other faith communities (Christian, Jewish, Muslim) was recommended.

BELONGING

Belonging describes the ease with which parishioners feel connected to the wider community. While welcoming refers to those encountering the parish from an outside perspective, belonging refers to how parishioners will feel like Christ the King is their spiritual home.

Where is our parish right now?

Participants reported wide variation in their feelings of belonging to the parish. Those who reported a strong feeling of belonging tended to be lifelong parishioners, growing up in the parish and often attending the parish school. Participants who feel a strong sense of belonging also reported that they had to be willing to “do the work” and “show up” to events for a long time before attaining an insider status. In general, existing relationships (i.e. children in school, family members who attend CTK, Catholic spouses) make it much easier for people to find a sense of belonging.

Participants reported a weak feeling of belonging for a variety of reasons. Young parents found it difficult to attend parish events due to challenges involving time management, child care, and when events tend to be scheduled. Less extroverted participants described showing up to events as being intimidating, especially without prior relationships that might ease entry in the community. Some

participants suggested that the perceived high socio-economic status of Christ the King parishioners makes it hard for others to fit in. Christ the King tends to attract affluent members of the community, and while the status markers of such a community can be largely invisible to those who are in it, they can be perceived as exclusive barriers to those of lower socio-economic status. Many participants reported uncertainty about how to find opportunities for ministry and social connection. Finally, barriers to feeling welcome because of marginalization mentioned earlier are also barriers to a feeling of belonging: non-Catholics, divorced members, those without families, and members of the LBGTQ+ community all struggle to belong.

Where do we want to go from here?

Participants report a wide range of activities in the parish, so challenges to belonging are not coming from a lack of options but from barriers to access. Participants reported concern about a “silo” or “clique” effect, in which members of groups and ministries in the parish only interact with other members. Increasing the opportunities for all parishioners to gather and meet one another might soften the perceived boundaries around parishioners.

A great number of participants expressed a desire for small faith communities in which they might meet others and find a stronger sense of belonging. Some participants who asked to join ministries or groups reported that they never heard back, leading them to believe that they were not wanted. To prevent this, ministry leaders might do a better job of responding to inquiries. Additionally, ministry leaders should examine the barriers to belonging, asking themselves who tends to show up and who might be overlooked. How might ministries make it easier for parishioners to attend and participate in their events?

Finally, those who attended the outdoor Masses during COVID reported an enhanced sense of belonging stemming from the natural surroundings, the alternative seating arrangements, and the ease with which families with young children could participate (in contrast to the indoor space.) Adding periodic opportunities to gather on the field for Mass might help people feel a renewed sense of connection to the community.

LITURGY

Liturgy describes how participants experience the parish’s liturgical life, including but not limited to Sunday Mass, baptisms, and weddings.

Where is our parish right now?

The overwhelming majority of responses in terms of liturgy were very positive. Participants had praise for the liturgical environment, music, homilies, lay ministers and atmosphere of the church itself. There were many who expressed a feeling of being part of a spiritual community. Many commented that the inclusion of baptisms and sacrament of the sick were good ways of fostering community. The outdoor Mass during COVID was very popular, especially among young families. People enjoyed the more relaxed atmosphere, exposure to creation, children playing, presence of pets, and an enhanced feeling of community. The music ministry received consistently high praise. People appreciate the quality, choice of both old and new hymns, excellence of cantors and musicians, and the way it fosters participation by the congregation.

There were some conflicting comments, such as “there needs to be a more quiet, prayerful atmosphere before Mass” and “there needs to be a more friendly, social atmosphere before Mass.” Some expressed a desire for a return of a choir, more opportunities for confession and adoration. Several commented on how helpful the videos that Fr. Dexter, Fr. Phan and Jon Stotts did during COVID were, expressing hope for a return of that effort. Other participants expressed concerns that the Mass is being experienced as a collection of individuals in prayer rather than a community at prayer.

In general, the overall impression of participant reports seems to verify one person’s comment that CTK is a “spiritual family” nourished and sustained by a vibrant liturgical life.

Where do we want to go from here?

The overriding impression from the responses seems to be a desire for more community and connection across the many groups in the parish, which would lead to more fulfilling liturgical experiences. A need for education on the liturgy itself and other Catholic practices was expressed as a way for non-Catholic family and friends to feel more included. One person commented that our liturgies provide “a wonderful experience of being nourished.” Participants expressed a desire to continue in that direction. Because of concerns that many who attend Mass are merely “going through the motions,” concerted efforts to help parishioners better understand the various meanings and actions that go into our liturgical celebrations would help foster greater participation.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Spiritual formation describes how well parish life stimulates and nourishes the faith lives of participants. Spiritual formation might include things like education, small group opportunities, or connection to the global church.

Where is our parish right now?

Overall there appears to be a yearning for more “spiritual formation.” Many participants reported a desire for faith sharing groups. Others expressed discomfort with their knowledge of the Bible. Some participants want better education around sensitive topics like abortion, LGBTQ+ issues, and contraception, either for apologetic purposes or because of struggles with the Church’s teachings. Many participants reported a desire to explore different religions and faith communities from a non-defensive posture.

Even though the adult spiritual formation classes are “not well attended,” there were many positive comments about various offerings including retreats, centering prayer, gospel reflections with Fr. Dexter, Fr. Phan, and Jon Stotts, lectio divina, Journey through Scripture. Many participants reported that Father Dexter’s homilies are thought provoking and sources of spiritual insights.

Some participants raised concerns about perceptions that Catholic church leaders are judgmental and rule-focused, especially when it comes to admitting people to the sacraments. In general, participants expressed appreciation and love for Catholic tradition while recognizing the need for additional growth and spiritual vision.

Where do we want to go from here?

In summary, there seems to be a strong interest in more opportunities for spiritual development, especially regarding how to translate one’s faith into everyday living. Several commented about their desire for small faith-sharing groups as well as other ways to have small group discussions (e.g. further discussion of Sunday homilies). Some new ideas include providing a whole order of the Mass for visitors, lay people sharing their faith at Mass bringing more laity participation, exploring how to live out our baptismal roles of prophet, priest and king, the theological intent of such prayers as the Our Father and Hail Mary, as well as discussions about why there are certain Catholic practices. One comment that seemed to be a vital question: does our shared faith translate into care and love for others?

SERVICE

Service describes opportunities for participants to share their time, their gifts, and their money in ways that contribute to the parish and to the wider community.

Where is our parish right now?

Participants affirmed that Christ the King offers many opportunities for members to be of service to the wider community: Room in the Inn, Habitat for Humanity, the Haitian Twin Parish and Haitian Coffee projects, the Elizabeth and Margaret ministries, to name some examples. Membership in parish groups also provides such opportunities, like the Knights of Columbus' support of Mur-Ci Home and American Cross blood drives, and the Women's Council's sponsorship of various service projects.

Still, some listening session participants expressed feelings of not knowing how to engage in these ministries, or of not being certain they would be welcomed into already established groups. One person said, "Maybe outreach to traditionally disadvantaged groups is ok, but inclusion is lacking." There were also questions if the services performed are truly transformative. As one person said, "Parishioners providing services to 'recipients' does not transform parishioners' perception of people on the margins, just reinforces stereotypes."

Participants affirmed the value of adult education around social justice issues like racial injustice, domestic violence, and care for the earth, and many want to see these educational opportunities translated into individual and community action. Participants were divided about whether social justice should be part of parish life or something that is up to individuals to pursue. Finally, there seemed to be an even split between those who appreciate our priests' reluctance to engage publicly with social justice issues and those who want greater attention to social and political issues from the pulpit.

Where do we want to go from here?

The key takeaway from the listening session participants is a general desire to be of service in a way that grows a culture of service. In terms of optics, Christ the King has plenty of service opportunities, and those who participate in them report satisfaction. But the parish has work to do to grow its culture of service, supporting those already engaged, engaging those who desire to serve, and transforming the

lives of all involved. This might involve paying greater attention to the many needs surrounding the parish, especially in less affluent areas, and asking how other communities might want Christ the King to use its considerable resources.

CONCLUSION

In general, listening session participants reported high degrees of gratitude and satisfaction with Christ the King while recognizing room for improvement across many areas. Many of the concerns raised by participants pertain not only to this parish but to the wider church, especially when it comes to matters of inclusion and social justice. According to participants, Christ the King's liturgical life appears to be its strongest asset. The reverence and beauty engendered in our liturgical celebrations seems to create in the hearts of parishioners a desire for greater belonging, spiritual formation, and opportunities to put their gifts in service to others.

We submitted a full report to the Diocese of Nashville on April 29, 2022. This report includes our methodology along with all the notes that were taken during the listening sessions. You can view this report, along with the Diocese of Nashville's own synthesis, at:

<http://www.ctl.org/listen>

At the parish level, the goal of Pope Francis's Synod on Synodality is to foster the sense that we are journeying together as the people of God, listening to one another's experiences and learning from what we hear. To those who shared your experiences earlier this year, thank you for helping this parish discern where we are and where God might be calling us to journey next.

A special thanks to all the parishioners who dedicated their time to promoting and organizing our synodal process, facilitating listening sessions, transcribing notes, reviewing our findings, and creating this report. Your efforts have helped our parish listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. May God bless you in a special way.

If you were not able to participate in a listening session, you can still share what the church has been for you and what you hope it might become. All are welcome to join in a special listening session in the West Wing of the Parish Hall from 9:45am - 10:45am on Sunday, August 21st.

If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts.