

A Call to Action – Leeds (ACTA Leeds):

Response to the Diocesan Listening Process as part of the Synodal journey in the Diocese of Leeds.

27 January 2022

Aims of ACTA Leeds:

We are a group of Catholics in the diocese of Leeds (priests, lay, religious) drawn together by love of Christ's Church and wishing to promote her future. We feel it is imperative to build a new Church for the new future as indicated by Pope Francis. We consider that a key component for this development is to engage in dialogue - at all levels. Jesus calls us to action. Dialogue will help us to take up his call to bring the love of God to our world.

We dream of a church which gathers us for Dialogue:

“Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for the person’s point of view, opinion, and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defences, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth.” On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the 21st Century.

Introduction:

ACTA Leeds wishes to respond to the Leeds Diocesan Listening Process. Supporters of ACTA Leeds were initially attendees at annual day conferences on dialogue within the church held more than ten years ago. This has developed into a network of quarterly open meetings with presentations on issues mainly related to the role of lay people in the church following Vatican II. They are typically attended by over a dozen (mainly lay people – not always the same people) from various parishes across the diocese. Since the Covid pandemic, meetings have been conducted on Zoom. A newsletter summarising discussion and action is emailed quarterly to about 150 supporters in the diocese. It has a website www.actaleeds.org.uk which gives its aims, presentation papers and newsletters with meeting summaries.

Our key points for consideration by the diocesan listening team:

We have summarised below what we consider to be key points relating to our experiences of synodality within our local church, at diocesan and parish levels. They have been drawn from discussions and reflections at our network meetings in recent years (summaries available in past newsletters on the website). Most of these points

relate to the ten questions asked in the diocesan survey but from a group, rather than personal, perspective.

1) Speaking out

The people who attend our network meetings are invariably involved in other church groups, for example SVP, CAFOD, Justice and Peace, work with refugees, foodbanks, or Leeds Citizens. Some who were originally keen to participate have decided that their efforts are better focussed elsewhere because they believe that there has been no effective dialogue with lay people in the diocese. We believe that lay people and clergy can be encouraged to communicate what is important to them if they know they will be listened to without judgement.

2) Participating

Many of our deliberations have focussed on lay people not able to participate fully in their parishes because of the views of the Parish Priest or changes by a new Parish Priest. Our view is that 'participation' involves not merely the practical support for the Mass (e.g. as a reader or Eucharistic Minister) but a sense of everyone being welcomed by the priest to a collective celebration in which we all have a part to play. We think that people would 'participate more' if the priest and lay people were welcoming (of visitors and parishioners) from the start of Mass and there were more roles for lay people to express their faith (writing the bidding prayers?) and the language used (in homilies?) is inclusive. Differences in approaches to inclusivity have become more apparent through use of the internet to 'go to Mass'.

3) Marginalised

The role of women in our church has been a constant topic of discussion, not only in terms of what roles they may or may not have, but also the issue of women priests. There is a strong feeling of injustice which needs to be addressed if women are not to feel even more marginalised than they feel at present. There are similar views regarding LGBT+, and divorced and remarried people.

4) Co-responsibility and participation

Our diocesan parishes do not all have parish pastoral councils (PPCs). Furthermore new Parish Priests may refuse to continue with already established parish councils. There cannot be a sense of teamwork and co-responsibility without established and transparent mechanisms for doing this in every parish. The inconsistency in provision of PPCs within the diocese has been discussed and experiences shared on numerous occasions (a paper on PPCs was presented in Nov: 2019). There can be no 'discerning or decision-making' in our local churches without a forum to facilitate the listening process. We believe that one of the biggest obstacles to developing 'teamwork' and

‘participation’ in our parishes is the lack of a diocesan requirement to have a properly established PPC in every parish in the diocese. This would be one way of improving the listening process so that the Holy Spirit can get a look in without it being a post-code lottery.

5) Clericalism

In line with Pope Francis’ views, we feel strongly that clericalism is the root of many of the structural inhibitors to lay-participation and the decline of ‘authority’ in our church. This has been compounded by the abuse scandals which have been uncovered in recent years. ‘Father knows best’ has undermined the notion of traditional authority within the church. We feel that more involvement of lay people (especially women) is now an essential step towards becoming a truly synodal church devoid of clericalism and more in line with the teachings of Vatican II.

6) Formation

The diocese should consider utilising its resources at Hinsley Hall to provide Zoom courses on Vatican II to help in the formation of lay-people in parishes across the diocese so that the knowledge of Vatican II and the confidence generated can be passed on to future generations. This might incorporate some of the excellent training for facilitators in the parish listening exercises recently undertaken.

We are also aware of university training courses (e.g. Diploma in Pastoral Ministry and Leadership) which are available for lay-people prior to undertaking new ministries in their parishes (Dec 2019, Feb 2021). Diocesan or parish support (including financial) for such courses would help lay people to undertake more liturgical ministries in our parishes and reduce the demands on an aging/retiring diocesan clergy. Homilies are generally the only form of instruction in Faith received by lay-people so they need to be helpful and inclusive (perhaps presented by lay-people?) Many parishes put summaries of homilies in their bulletins.

7) Co-responsible in the mission

The pandemic has taught us that we need to be able to communicate more effectively within our church and with other churches, denominations and the wider local community. We can be more effective as missionary disciples if we can network better with others. At the beginning of the pandemic many parishes did not have up-to-date contact lists for parishioners; Zoom Masses were developed (some turning people off our Faith, others turning them on). Parishioners could ‘go to Mass’ anywhere and could see things being done differently. Websites of different parishes vary greatly in their quality and content. One way of becoming a missionary disciple is to improve communication on and off-line. Helping to improve parish bulletins, and social media and websites is missionary work (even within our own church) and may be unsupported in some parishes. Some parishes may need technical help with this.

Forming ourselves in synodality

ACTA Leeds has discussed a lot of issues relating to synodality and has its membership to share its deliberations with. We have looked closely at the recent Synod 2020 in the Archdiocese of Liverpool <https://synod2020.co.uk/> and evidenced the processes of synodality there. There is excellent material on their website. We have agreed, as part of our mission statement, to identify what we believe to be good practice in parishes in our own diocese and to share this with our supporters through our newsletters and on our website. We believe that in doing this prayerfully through our own listening exercises we are forming ourselves through the synodal processes which Pope Francis is asking us to engage with from this time onwards.

We believe ACTA Leeds to be currently on the margins of the church within the diocese. For various reasons we have not felt that our quest for dialogue has been heard, even though we feel we have much to offer as lay people committed to our faith. ACTA Leeds is not represented on the recently established Diocesan Pastoral Council. Our existential view is that ACTA Leeds would not need to exist in a truly synodal church which implicitly encompasses prayerful and meaningful dialogue as part of our faith journey.

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<https://actaleeds.org.uk/>