

## How a Synodal Church Learns to Listen

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**Abstract:** In seeking to assess the effectiveness of any particular listening, discerning, or consultative approach, it is useful to recall the purpose for which the process is being adopted. This paper briefly returns to the purpose of the Synod on Synodality and provides case studies from ecclesial, civil, and government entities that can be used to compare and elucidate the Conversation in the Spirit methodology used in the three synodal listening phases. A particular focus is the 2023 assembly, given the innovative use of small-group discernment involving both bishop and non-bishop voting members at an episcopal assembly. We identify principles for listening and discernment, as well as considerations, cautions, and lessons that may be drawn from this broader examination of the practice of listening, discernment, and consultation in other domains.

In examining the listening methodology for the Synod on Synodality, officially known as the “XVI General Synod of Bishops—For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission 2021–24,” we should remind ourselves of the Synod’s stated purpose:

Synodality is the way of being the church today, according to the will of God in a dynamic of discerning and listening together to the voice of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

As the phases of consultation have demonstrated, this way of being Church requires a particular culture, as well as processes and structures.<sup>2</sup> This is a core part of what the Synod has been examining, particularly at the continental and universal levels, following the identification of issues from discernment in Phase 1 undertaken in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” no. 19, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html), in “For a Synodal Church: Guide to Group Synodal Conversations,” 8, [hallam-diocese.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/11/group-synodal-conversation-guide-westminster.pdf](https://www.hallam-diocese.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/11/group-synodal-conversation-guide-westminster.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> The Synod Secretariat is to be applauded for supporting this assessment of listening methodologies, conducted at an evaluation conference in Rome, March 25–27, 2024.

local churches. Its purpose was to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit on how to become a synodal Church, as emphasized in the Synod secretariat guidelines, “Towards October 2024,” issued to local Churches on December 11, 2023.<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1 provides a timeline of the synodal process.)

**Figure 1: Synod on Synodality timeline<sup>4</sup>**

Date	Event
October 9–10, 2021	Worldwide Opening of the Synodal Process
October 17, 2021	Local Opening of the Synodal Process

#### Phase 1: The Consultation of the People of God

- Local-National Consultation
- Continental Stage
- Dialogue among the churches of a specific region

#### Phase 2: The Discernment of the People of God

October 4–29, 2023	First Session, XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops
October 2–27, 2024	Second Session, XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

#### Phase 3: The Implementation “For a Synodal Church”

March 2025	Announcement of the accompaniment and evaluation process
July 2025	Publication of the <i>Pathways for the Implementation Phase</i>

<sup>3</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Towards October 2024,” December 11, 2023, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/towards2024/thedocument/ENG\\_Document\\_TOWARDS-OCTOBER-2024\\_XVI\\_II-Session.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/towards2024/thedocument/ENG_Document_TOWARDS-OCTOBER-2024_XVI_II-Session.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, “Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod, 2025–2028,” June 29, 2025, [vatican.syond.va/en/resources/communication-tools/infographics.html](https://vatican.syond.va/en/resources/communication-tools/infographics.html).

October 24–26, 2025	Jubilee of Synodal Teams and participatory bodies
June 2025–December 2026	Implementation paths in local churches and their groupings
First Half 2027	Evaluation Assemblies in Dioceses and Eparchies
Second Half 2027	Evaluation Assemblies in National and International Episcopal Conferences, Eastern hierarchical structures, and other groupings of churches
First Quarter 2028	Continental Evaluation Assemblies
October 2028	Celebration of the Ecclesial Assembly in the Vatican

These extracts from *Episcopalis Communio* provide insights into the role of the bishop germane to the practice of synodality—a pastor who listens to, and walks with his people. Pius X’s 1906 description of the faithful as a “docile flock” is not in harmony with the synodal conception of being Church where all the baptized have a role and responsibility. Their participation was guided by the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which served as the basis for discussion at the 2023 and 2024 Assemblies in Rome. For the 2023 Assembly, the *Instrumentum Laboris* was derived from a multilayered process of discernment to responses from the local churches, beginning with the synthesis of responses to the global consultation,<sup>5</sup> followed by discernment at the continental level,<sup>6</sup> and, finally, discernment by the Synod Secretariat into the *Instrumentum Laboris*,<sup>7</sup> released in June 2023 ahead of the October Assembly. Discernment took place as a Conversation in the Spirit. (This process is detailed in Figure 2.)

<sup>5</sup> The consultation took place in local Churches from October 17, 2021 to August 15, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> This process involved local Churches (generally Episcopal Conferences) aggregating their responses into the Continental level submissions in the period October 2022–late March 2023.

<sup>7</sup> This process was undertaken by the Synod Secretariat staff with some experts in May 2023 and written into the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the first Assembly, October 4–29, 2023. XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session,” October 2023, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/PAGINATED\\_ENG\\_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/PAGINATED_ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf).

**Figure 2: A dynamic discernment in the synodal Church<sup>8</sup>**

<b>Personal preparation</b>	By entrusting oneself to the Father, conversing in prayer with the Lord Jesus and listening to the Holy Spirit, each one prepares his or her own contribution to the question about which he or she is called to discern.
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Silence, prayer, and listening to the Word of God

<b>“Taking the word and listening”</b>	Each person takes a turn speaking from his or her own experience and prayer, and listens carefully to the contributions of others.
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Silence and prayer

<b>“Making space for others and the Other”</b>	From what the others have said, each one shares what has resonated most with him or her or what has aroused the most resistance in him or her, allowing himself or herself to be guided by the Holy Spirit: “When, listening, did my heart burn in my chest?”
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Silence and prayer

<b>“Building together”</b>	Together we dialogue on the basis of what emerged earlier in order to discern and gather the fruit of the conversation in the Spirit: to recognize intuitions and convergences; to identify discordances, obstacles, and new questions; to allow prophetic voices to emerge. It is important that everyone can feel represented by the outcome of the work. “To what steps is the Holy Spirit calling us together?”
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<sup>8</sup> “The Conversation in the Spirit: A Dynamic Discernment in the Synodal Church,” [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/communication-toolkit/infographics/conversatio/CONV\\_SPIRIT\\_ENG.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/communication-toolkit/infographics/conversatio/CONV_SPIRIT_ENG.pdf).

## FINAL PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

One of the unique features of this Synod was the process of circularity seeking ever-refined views from the People of God, including at the Continental level. The Working Document for the Continental Stage, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” involved a thorough discernment of the submissions from the local churches by some thirty people gathered at the Giovanni XXIII Monastery in Frascati outside Rome in September 2022 to consider the submissions from the first stage.<sup>9</sup> I was involved in this gathering. We were invited to read the documents prior to arrival and to submit our reflections on electronic templates. A thorough discernment was conducted in a prayerful environment in Frascati, and many of us expressed a sense of privilege and responsibility to be involved in a process authentically drawing forth the voices of the lay faithful from the corners of the world.

For the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the October 2024 Assembly, a similar process of circularity was adopted. The report of the 2023 Assembly, “A Synodal Church in Mission,”<sup>10</sup> was provided to the local churches, seeking further reflection on issues raised and discerned at the local, continental and universal levels for reconsideration at the Continental level.<sup>11</sup> Their submissions were once again considered by the Synod Secretariat in a process of discernment leading to the development of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the October 2024 Assembly, “How to be a Missionary Synodal Church.”<sup>12</sup> This document was an invaluable tool for Assembly members.

There are many angles from which the XVI General Synod’s listening methodology, the Conversation in the Spirit, could be evaluated. This paper will examine it from the perspectives of responsibility, participation, and power, taking into account comparable approaches in civil, government, and ecclesial contexts. While each case study serves to illustrate one of these three dimensions, there is an interplay of factors at work, and none is exclusive to a particular case study. We also undertake a brief participant observer scan of the

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<sup>9</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage,” October 2022, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> XVI General Ordinary Assembly, First Session, “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report,” October 4–29, 2023, [synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report\\_IMP.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report_IMP.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> The author chaired the Discernment and Writing Group for Oceania.

<sup>12</sup> XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Session: How to Be a Missionary Synodal Church,” October 2024, [www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/il/ENG-INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS-A4.pdf).

reception of the approach at the three phases of the discernment process.

### **OCEANIA STAGE 1 IN THE LOCAL CHURCHES**

Oceania is a relatively small ecclesial region, with only four Episcopal Conferences situated around the vast Pacific Ocean: Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea/Solomon Islands, and the Pacific Island countries. There are wide differences in cultures, stages of economic development and experience of Church, leading to differences in their approaches to listening and discernment.

In Australia, the first listening and discernment stage overlapped with the Plenary Council<sup>13</sup> and coincided with the global pandemic. There was a degree of “consultation fatigue.” The post-Vatican II approach in Papua New Guinea involved all of the People of God: this “We are Church” mode provided a structural basis for the synodal discernment. In Pacific Ocean nations, particular challenges were posed by their vast distances at sea, unreliable digital connectivity, and remote locations. New Zealand had some success in reaching peripheries, including youth and prisoners, through their chaplains.

There were problems in hearing the voices from the peripheries (remoteness, social isolation, self-imposed exclusion), especially in those dioceses without a Diocesan Pastoral Council or comparable structural means of listening. Amongst the issues worthy of consideration from Stage 1 are that the participants were primarily practicing Catholics and, anecdotally, not all were proficient in English, raising questions of the degree of representativeness of their contributions, and the degree of unintended exclusion of non-English-speakers, or the semi-literate or illiterate, by a reliance on the written word. Another factor is the extent to which local discernment depended on the enthusiasm and capacity of the episcopal conference, the local ordinary, or the parish priest. In Oceania, some bishops were already stretched with existential matters such as the climate crisis and the impacts of poverty.

There was a pleasing degree to which participants were grateful for the opportunity, felt valued and included, and expressed joy in church life, alongside expressions of hurt, anger and frustration at individual experiences of the Church. Given the open nature of Stage 1 discernment and the focus on sharing the experience of “journeying together” in a synodal Church, it is unsurprising that the responses were more focused on people’s current experience of the Church, rather than how to be a synodal Church. This is underscored by the

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<sup>13</sup> “The Second General Assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia,” July 3–9, 2022, [plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au](http://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au).

fact that for each part of the world, and in each stage of the synodal journey, participants have been learning by doing. This is a valuable experience for individuals and the Church.<sup>14</sup>

## **OCEANIA STAGE 2 AT THE CONTINENTAL LEVEL**

Amongst the issues for Oceania at the continental level was the absence of administrative arrangements for the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO). Discernment on this scale at the continental level was new, and those with insufficient infrastructure faced a greater challenge. A further confusion was that the timeline for the continental level consultation coincided with a long-planned quadrennial FCBCO Bishops meeting. Despite these considerations, a solid and credible basis of continental discernment was formed by the document “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” (developed from the Frascati Synthesis of summaries from local churches).<sup>15</sup> It proved helpful to have clear guidance that this second stage was for deeper discernment, based on the fruits of Stage 1 discernment. However, although the intent was to foster deeper reflection on the findings of Stage 1, it proved difficult for many to move from sharing strengths and shortcomings to considering how to be a synodal Church.

The explicit intent was to have assemblies of all of the People of God to accept the continental submission prior to it being sent to the Synod Secretariat. This did not happen in Oceania, as financial implications and the logistics of planning a second event around the agreed four-yearly FCBCO meeting rendered it impossible. The creation of a Discernment and Writing Group with appointees from each episcopal conference and the Eastern Catholic Churches to create a Draft response for the region was the agreed workaround. The Draft was considered and modified at the FCBCO meeting.

Amongst the challenges was the overlapping of the Synod discernment period with the summer holidays for those in the southern hemisphere, which combined with “consultation fatigue” in some locations. The other challenges are the vast cultural, economic and geographic differences in the region, especially remoteness and poor digital connectivity. For Oceania, financial and logistical practicalities

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<sup>14</sup> For an account of the Oceania Continental Stage, see Susan Pascoe and Ormond Rush, “The Continental Stage of the Synod on Synodality: Reception of the Working Document for the Continental Stage in Oceania,” in *The People of God have Spoken: Continental Ecclesial Assemblies Within the Synod on Synodality*, ed. M. Wijlens and V. Tirimanna (Columbia Books, 2023), 314–327.

<sup>15</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage.”

meant that the synthesis prepared by the Discernment and Writing Group received solely episcopal consideration. In contrast, the Federation of Bishops' Conferences of Asia was able to hold an ecclesial assembly. While the Oceania bishops prayerfully and sincerely engaged with their draft submission, it was a very different atmosphere in Asia, where representatives of all of the People of God sat together around tables and considered the summaries from episcopal conferences. This may explain why the Oceania bishops felt a need to add their own Pastoral Statement to the submission drafted by their nominees.

Adding to this sense of learning by doing, on October 16, 2022, the Pope announced there would be a second Synod Assembly in October 2024: "This decision stems from the desire that the theme of a Synodal Church, because of its breadth and importance, might be the subject of prolonged discernment not only by the members of the Synodal Assembly, but by the whole Church."<sup>16</sup> Most welcomed the Pope's affirmation of a dialogical approach; it also reinforced a sense of participating in the making of history.

### SYNOD ASSEMBLY STAGE 3 AT THE UNIVERSAL LEVEL

Pope Francis announced on April 26, 2023, his decision that ten people from each continent could attend the Synod Assemblies as full voting members, including lay men and women, a historic development for an episcopal assembly, adding seventy members to those elected by their episcopal conferences alongside those personally invited by the Pope. This was generally positively received as further evidence of a synodal Church involving representatives of all the baptized. However, some saw this as a challenge to episcopal authority, resulting in a challenge to the legitimacy of the Assembly from the plenary floor. The General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Mario Grech, answered the challenge with a statement toward the end of the Assembly on October 25, 2023:

It can be concluded that the legitimacy and authority of this Assembly, as 'expression of episcopal collegiality within an entirely synodal Church,'<sup>17</sup> is not called into question or diminished by the presence of sisters and brothers who are not vested with the episcopal *munus*. It is and remains the authority of an Assembly of Bishops summoned to

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<sup>16</sup> Devin Watkins, "Pope: Synod Assembly of Bishops to be held in 2023 and 2024," *Vatican News*, October 16, 2022, [vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-10/pope-francis-synod-bishops-extension-2023-2024.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-10/pope-francis-synod-bishops-extension-2023-2024.html).

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, "Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops," October 17, 2015, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).

Rome by the Successor of Peter to offer their advice on the theme he has indicated. The presence of sisters and brothers who can testify, together with the Bishops, to what the Spirit has so far done, gives this Assembly greater authority, since it situates it within a synodal process that was intended to involve the entire Church and everyone in the Church.<sup>18</sup>

It was clearly stated that the first Assembly was a continuation of listening and discernment from earlier stages in particular churches and Continents, and that the *Instrumentum Laboris* was a synthesis of the fruits of this listening and discernment and the Assembly's foundation document. Some struggled to appreciate the continuity and the essential trust vested in each member to faithfully draw in the voices of those who had contributed to earlier stages but were not in the room. The conduct of the Assembly was shaped by 2018 Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, and 2023 "Regulations for the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops."<sup>19</sup> For the first time, *Circoli Minori* (small groups) were interspersed with *Congregazione Generale* (plenaries) in the program, and non-Bishop members (with voting rights) sat alongside their episcopal colleagues.

In terms of the organization, the expert theologians and facilitators were provided with helpful pre-Assembly formation. However, for first-time small group facilitators, there was still a degree of learning by doing. The month-long Synod program was densely scheduled, leaving some with extreme fatigue by the end. Partly offsetting this was the retreat, the ecumenical prayer vigil, and the solemn Mass which preceded each module of the Assembly, as well as the opportunities for prayer and silence.

There were many positive aspects to the conduct of the 2023 Assembly. Most saw benefit in the combination of bishop and non-bishop members, especially given the focus of involving all the baptized as a synodal Church. The round-table, small-group format generally created a sense of solidarity, respect, friendliness, and shared mission irrespective of ecclesial role or status. However, in many cases, it also created a tendency toward consensus and a concomitant discomfort in identifying points of difference amongst participants. However, anecdotally, many who had been to previous Assemblies

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<sup>18</sup> Bernadette M. Reis, "Cardinal Grech: 'Tracing the Catholic Path to Synodality,'" October 25, 2023, [fabc.org/cardinal-grech-tracing-the-catholic-path-to-synodality/](https://fabc.org/cardinal-grech-tracing-the-catholic-path-to-synodality/).

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*: "On the Synod of Bishops," September 15, 2018, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_costituzione-ap\\_20180915\\_episcopalis-communio.html](https://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html); General Secretariat of the Synod, "Regulations for the XVI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session: Communion, Participation And Mission," October 4–29, 2023, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/0410/XVI-AGO-2023---REGOLAMENTO-ENG.pdf](https://synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/0410/XVI-AGO-2023---REGOLAMENTO-ENG.pdf).

saw the mix of small group and plenary sessions as a vast improvement to the quality of interactions and outcomes.

The highly sophisticated technology enhanced voting, group writing and deliberations, and, when switched on halfway through, eventually moderated the few long-winded plenary speakers! The availability of papers on tablets aided members in reaching a depth of understanding through ongoing access to materials and supported the environmentally friendly approach. And the Synod Secretariat staff, with their “Do Disturb” in-tray, provided calm and efficient support.

However, there were areas that warranted improvement for the 2024 Assembly. Some administrative practices, such as early electronic sharing of information prior to and during the assembly, eased communication. The intensity and length of the 2023 program had an impact on many participants, with growing fatigue especially among the organizers and writers. The process for providing amendments was improved, including an awareness of the time needed for those not operating in their first language. More time to consider the draft text was helpful, alongside the development of a digital template for entering proposed changes and protocols for amendments. It was helpful to have greater use of theologians and canon lawyers to address questions in the Synod hall in real time.

Notwithstanding the freedom of expression provided by the exclusion of media in the October 2023 Assembly, the live access on YouTube to the opening statements of sessions in the Paul VI Hall was appreciated by some and was more widely publicized prior to the following Assembly.

## **RESPONSIBILITY, PARTICIPATION, POWER**

These incremental improvements could be summed up under three broad headings: responsibility, participation, and power. These three principles are reflected in good practice examples from civil, governmental, and ecclesial contexts. Each can be adumbrated with three specific case studies in which the author has been involved.

### *A Civil Case Study of “Responsibility”*

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is the nation’s peak body for overseas aid and development organizations, including Caritas.<sup>20</sup> The board comprises elected CEO members who are required to focus on the good of ACFID as a board of directors, not merely to voice the concerns of their own

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<sup>20</sup> Australian Council for International Development, [acfid.asn.au](http://acfid.asn.au).

organization. ACFID receives funding from members, the Australian Government, and other sources, but is free to openly critique policy (for instance, asylum seeker policy and practice, or humanitarian aid in Gaza). This mature relationship is based on mutual respect and transparency.

The ACFID secretariat and board act on behalf of members but consult directly on sensitive, complex, or controversial matters. At the time of writing, Australia had paused its aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency in Gaza (UNRWA).<sup>21</sup> The ACFID CEO consulted the chairperson and the board, drafted an open letter to the Prime Minister demanding the immediate reinstatement of funding to avert a humanitarian crisis, and undertook a range of media interviews highlighting the gravity of the crisis.<sup>22</sup> By having agreed media protocols, and a graduated approach to consultation, matters can be escalated immediately. This is possible as there are established structures for ongoing consultation, such as annual meetings in major cities, board meetings, Communities of Practice on particular issues, and ongoing relationship building with parliamentarians and other stakeholders to advocate on particular issues and to influence policy development and implementation.

In considering the relevance of this case study, it is noteworthy that ACFID has permanent structures for engagement and its own Code of Conduct overseen by an independent committee with consequences for non-compliance, including removal from membership. These explicit rules of conduct engender confidence and credibility both in the consultative process and the organization. These qualities and practices which give ACFID a credible voice indicate that its consultative practices are part of its DNA, not an exceptional technique on an ad hoc basis. ACFID is responsible to its members whose purposes involve a shared responsibility for aiding some of the world's most vulnerable people.

### *A Government Case Study of "Participation"*

The Victorian Government's Social Services Reform Taskforce was established in 2022 with a membership of CEOs from peak bodies affected by new legislation. The role of the Taskforce was to consult

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<sup>21</sup> Penny Wong, "Funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and Additional Support for Gaza," March 15, 2024, [foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/funding-united-nations-relief-and-works-agency-and-additional-support-gaza](https://foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/funding-united-nations-relief-and-works-agency-and-additional-support-gaza).

<sup>22</sup> Susan Pascoe, "Letter from Australian Council for International Development to Australian Prime Minister Regarding Humanitarian Aid to Gaza," February 2024, [acfid.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Open-Letter-to-PM-Minister-Wong-ICJ-UNRWA.pdf](https://acfid.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Open-Letter-to-PM-Minister-Wong-ICJ-UNRWA.pdf).

sub-sectors on the introduction of both new quality and safety standards and a new regulator with authority over services for Victoria's most vulnerable: children in the care of the State, homeless persons, victims of sexual abuse, people with disabilities, and victims of domestic violence. The Taskforce was short-term, with a targeted role to advise government and to co-design the new regulations which will impact their services.<sup>23</sup> It was a timely, direct, and authentic approach to involve people directly involved – a form of “subsidiarity” (to borrow the Church term). There was open engagement with people with “lived experience” via Taskforce members and online consultation on *Engage Victoria*, the government's ongoing mechanism for consultation across departments and agencies.<sup>24</sup> These modalities enable Taskforce members to reach the margins through existing consultative structures.

The Taskforce co-chair was a delegate of the Minister (a Parliamentary Secretary) enabling direct communication with the decisionmaker, lending confidence in the process and satisfaction from Taskforce members and their constituencies of their capacity to influence decisions. In the small number of instances where there were differences of opinion between the Taskforce members and the government department overseeing the move to an independent regulator, there was an iterative process of “discernment” where matters were examined and re-examined until consensus was reached, or at least an understanding of the basis of the disagreement. This case study demonstrates a judicious use of power where the Minister (with temporal powers analogous to those of a bishop) has created a consultative mechanism to advise her that maximizes the participation of those affected by government decisions as active co-responsible agents, not mere passive contributors.

Most government agencies in Australia have protocols for consultation and engagement.<sup>25</sup> This case study does not try to equate ecclesial methodologies with those in the government domain, but to illustrate that there are some practices with useful comparable

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<sup>23</sup> Information on the social services reform and the role of the Taskforce can be found on the government website at Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing Victoria, “Social Services Regulation Reform,” [dffh.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulation-reform](http://dffh.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulation-reform).

<sup>24</sup> Engage Victoria, “Social Services Regulations 2023,” [engage.vic.gov.au/regulatory-impact-statement-and-draft-regulations-for-social-services](http://engage.vic.gov.au/regulatory-impact-statement-and-draft-regulations-for-social-services).

<sup>25</sup> The advice from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet is similar to guidelines at other levels of government and can be found at Office of Best Practice Regulation, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet-Australian Government, “Best Practice Consultation,” March 2020, [oia.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-09/best-practice-consult.pdf](http://oia.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-09/best-practice-consult.pdf).

methodologies.<sup>26</sup> The temporal and divine nature of the Church is alive in synodal practices, which prayerfully aim to invoke the Holy Spirit. We do not see this in government!

*An Ecclesial Case Study of “Power”*

The canonical form known as the Ministerial Public Juridic Person (MPJP) is a relatively popular governance approach in Church ministries in Australia, where ministries have been passed from founding congregations to layperson governance.<sup>27</sup> Many of these ministries are very large, especially those in the health sector. Trustees invest considerable time in formation and have a special relationship with the Mission Director of the MPJP to ensure the Catholic identity of the ministry is maintained. Trustees of MPJPs have canonical decision-taking power and a responsibility to ensure the stable patrimony of their ministry. They typically begin meetings with scripture and prayer, and use discernment reflectively as part of shared, collegial decision-making.<sup>28</sup>

St. John of God Health Care owns twenty-four hospitals across Australia, as well as other services for people with disabilities, and community and youth services. St. John of God is both a civil and canonical entity, valued at AUD two billion, and employs over sixteen thousand caregivers. It has a bicameral governance structure.

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<sup>26</sup> This point was made in the review report, *The Light from the Southern Cross*, commissioned by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia in response to Recommendation 16.7 from the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; see [catholic.au/s/article/Church-Governance](http://catholic.au/s/article/Church-Governance) and [www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/](http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/). The report proposed that they initiate a review of the governance of parishes and dioceses due to evidence of weak checks and balances, lack of transparency and accountability, and insufficient inclusion of lay people.

<sup>27</sup> It is significant that Church entities other than parishes and dioceses were explicitly exempted from the ecclesial governance critique made by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. See Mary Wright, “The Development of the Ministerial Public Juridic Persons: Questions and Challenges,” Proceedings of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference of the Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand, September 3–5, 2018, [ampjp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CLSANZ-Proceedings-2018-Development-of-Ministerial-PJPs.pdf](http://ampjp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CLSANZ-Proceedings-2018-Development-of-Ministerial-PJPs.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> As described in the Association of ministerial PJP’s website, [ampjp.org.au/about-mpjps/](http://ampjp.org.au/about-mpjps/), the features of Ministerial PJPs include: being largely autonomous in canon law (like Religious Institutes); having an exclusive focus on Church ministries (unlike Bishops and Leaders of Religious Institutes who have a broader mandate); governance by a college of canonical stewards (whereas diocese and parishes are governed by a single person); canonical stewards can be, and almost always are, lay people (other PJPs require their canonical stewards be a vowed Religious or an ordained cleric); and steering by a clear and set demarcation of roles with the boards they appoint to govern their ministries.

Canonically St. John of God is a Provincial PJP whose trustees are appointed by the bishops of the nine provinces in which it operates—the bishops’ circumscribed role is to appoint trustees and to receive an annual report. The trustees then have the authority to appoint the board, ensure fidelity to mission and stable patrimony, and receive recommendations from the board on substantive matters. The delegations provided from the trustees to the board and from the board to management are codified in a Governance Authority Matrix, which sets out financial and governance boundaries—which are also governed by Vatican requirements, such as thresholds for acts of “extraordinary administration.”<sup>29</sup>

The reasons for the inclusion of this case study are that it provides an example of some of the governance differences between parishes and dioceses and an MPJP, describes the model of collegial decision-making, and illustrates the importance of relationship-building as a structural dimension of a synodal Church.<sup>30</sup> The MPJP offers a model of co-responsible Church governance characteristic of a synodal Church. The Trustees invest ongoing time and energy into maintaining trusting relationships: with the local Ordinary of the Provinces in which they operate (a form of ongoing dialogue); with the board as a means of harmonious governance (with clear decision-making boundaries and responsibilities); and with other groups, such as other Catholic healthcare providers, professional standards bodies, and so on. While the trustees of most MPJPs hold the power of veto on major recommendations of the board, this is exercised sparingly, due to ongoing communication, and both parties operating on a “no surprises” basis. Complex or controversial matters are the subject of discernment, sometimes with communication between the trustees and the board, so that power is exercised in the best interests of the ministry and the people served.<sup>31</sup>

## **SYNODAL LISTENING AND DISCERNMENT PRINCIPLES**

Clearly, the first two of these case studies have no interest in creating space for the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the third case study is of an entity that straddles the civil and ecclesial worlds. To that extent, the lessons for ecclesial practice that can be drawn from

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<sup>29</sup> See St. John of God Health Care, “Every Moment Matters: Annual Report 2024–25,” [sjog.org.au/about-us/annual-report](http://sjog.org.au/about-us/annual-report).

<sup>30</sup> The model of collective or collegial decision-taking is distinct from that of a bishop who has authority vested in him in his Petrine role.

<sup>31</sup> Discernment on complex, sensitive and controversial matters is more generally iterative than shared, as proper reporting and accountability boundaries need to be maintained.

them are limited. However, there is always the danger in the Church having a disposition of exceptionalism, and there are lessons the Church can learn from civil practice (as noted in *The Light from the Southern Cross* report),<sup>32</sup> just as the civil world can learn from Church practice.

It is axiomatic that listening and discernment in a synodal Church is at heart an invitation to the Holy Spirit to come amongst us. Prayer, opportunities to celebrate the Eucharist, and time for reflection and silence are fundamental, so that we can listen with the ear of the heart, as exhorted by St. Benedict.

On a practical level, the advantage of identifying principles for engagement is that we have a broad, flexible yardstick for assessing the utility and suitability of particular approaches. Whether in ecclesial or civil contexts, most people who give their time for listening, discernment and consultation are volunteers. Generally, they offer their gifts and services altruistically due to their love for the Church or other bodies. Effort should be made to ensure their goodness is not exploited and their time and talents are respected. Simple measures such as timely access to information and adequate time for preparation assist in this. The following principles are put forward as discussion-starters.

**Figure 3: The three dimensions of synodal listening**

<b>RESPONSIBILITY</b>	<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>POWER</b>
Dialogue	Inclusion	Authenticity
Listening and engagement structures	Accessibility	Legitimacy
Liturgy and prayer	Clarity	Transparency
Integrity	Respect	Co-responsibility
Consistency	Timeliness	Feedback, evaluation, review

<sup>32</sup> ACBC-CRA, *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia, 2020), [static1.squarespace.com/static/5acea6725417fc059ddcc33f/t/5f3f79e41aac2871be0fba5c/1597995610389/The+Light+from+the+Southern+Cross+FINAL+%2815+August+2020%29.pdf](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5acea6725417fc059ddcc33f/t/5f3f79e41aac2871be0fba5c/1597995610389/The+Light+from+the+Southern+Cross+FINAL+%2815+August+2020%29.pdf).

**SYNODAL RESPONSIBILITY PRINCIPLES**

- *Dialogue*: the circularity of listening and responding is inherently respectful when undertaken with authentic intent by those in positions of responsibility.
- *Appropriate listening and engagement structures*: providing mechanisms such as Diocesan Pastoral Councils with ongoing means of engagement.
- *Opportunities for liturgy and prayer*: structuring all meetings and engagements so that there is time for prayer and reflection.
- *Integrity*: genuine processes of listening and responding have an aura of integrity to them. When those with responsibility, such as bishops or parish priests, engage authentically with their people, their contributions are given due consideration, as envisaged in *Episcopalis Communio*.
- *Consistency*: methods for listening and engagement that are consistently applied evoke a sense of fairness and due process. This is especially the case when the protocols are agreed and clearly communicated, and when the outcomes of a listening process are transparently shared with participants.

**SYNODAL PARTICIPATION PRINCIPLES**

- *Inclusion*: inviting/involving all the baptized.
- *Accessibility*: ensuring listening and discernment opportunities are available at times and in venues (including online) and modes suitable to people of all abilities and socioeconomic levels.
- *Clarity*: ensuring materials are provided in formats accessible to people of differing language groups and literacy levels, and preferred modes of engagement (digital and print).
- *Respect*: providing protocols and environments where people are treated with dignity and respect irrespective of their circumstances.
- *Timeliness*: organizing opportunities for listening, discernment, engagement, and expert input with advance notice, and at times

and in modalities that maximize the capacity for participation and ease any burden on those contributing.

### **SYNODAL POWER PRINCIPLES**

- *Authenticity*: those in positions of power and authority walking with their people as good shepherds, listening with genuine intent, and conveying the fruits of that listening in appropriate fora, such as the Synod Assemblies.
- *Legitimacy*: methods of listening and discernment will be accepted as legitimate when properly formulated and communicated, especially when developed in a co-responsible process. This legitimacy is essential for the ultimate reception of the outcome of any deliberative process.
- *Transparency*: processes of listening and discernment should be formulated and conducted within guidelines openly developed and disseminated. Transparency is a mark of respect and acknowledgement of our common baptism in a synodal Church.
- *Co-responsibility*: those practices which can be developed in a co-responsible manner should be. This enables subsidiarity in which those impacted by decisions have a say in their development, and those with “lived experience” are able to enrich approaches and practices in a synodal Church.
- *Feedback, Evaluation, and Review*: good practices of engagement provide feedback to participants as a mark of respect and to enhance their practice. It is emblematic of any human service or practice that we seek optimum validation of efficacy and continuous improvement through rigorous review and evaluation so that those involved and those impacted are valued and treated with dignity.

### **CONSIDERATIONS, CAUTIONS, AND LESSONS**

The practice of seeking the views of the faithful and of experts is not new to synods. However, the global scale of listening and discernment for the Synod on Synodality is unprecedented in any entity—civil, Church or government. Hence, the wisdom in pausing between Assemblies to assess the strengths and limitations of practices adopted to date, and how we are to become a truly synodal Church. Participant observer reflections can be consolidated around a number of conclusions.

The foundation of each synod in scripture, liturgy, prayer, and teaching is the cornerstone on which listening and deliberations are based. This footing was well established during the Synod on Synodality, as epitomized in the Preparatory Document and the Working Document for the Continental Stage, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.” Planners of future synods would be wise to continue the depth of this practice, including the use of Biblical scholars in any team of experts. In addition, planning sufficient time for individual and group prayer and reflection is critical to creating space for the Holy Spirit. We are relearning the practice of synodality from the early Church, and there are many exemplars in Scripture.

In considering the efficacy of listening methodologies, they can be maximized and avoid disruption in local churches which have a structured means of the local Ordinary engaging with laypeople, such as a Diocesan Pastoral Council.<sup>33</sup> This could be seen as a prerequisite to being a synodal Church and be mandated in the same way as a Diocesan Finance Council. The ability to include engagement and discernment into an existing structure could also avoid “consultation fatigue.” A means of hearing from impacted individuals is a core feature of well-run human services entities in many countries, including whistleblower protocols and avenues to communicate compliments and complaints. An outcome from the current Synod could be to mandate that dioceses, parishes, and other Church agencies have a structured means for the pastor to engage with the lay faithful.

The use of expert facilitators, theologians, and canon lawyers for future synod assemblies warrants consideration. A cadre of trained facilitators could have roles in their local churches as well as at synod assemblies. Similarly, the input from theologians and canon lawyers could be planned throughout the synod stages, mindful of their availability and that most are volunteering their gifts and services and balancing them with existing commitments. It became clear during all stages of listening that judiciously timed theological and canonical advice might have settled contentious issues without quelling legitimate discussion on what some see as “immutable teachings.”

While individual principles for listening and discernment have been suggested for discussion, they are all interrelated. At the heart of them is a valuing of the dignity and gifts of each human person, a love of the Church, and a respect for teaching and pastoral authority. Legitimacy, authenticity, and power are interrelated and underpin the likely reception of the fruits of discernment. If the lay faithful see a listening and deliberation exercise as one of integrity and due process, they are likely to consider participation and to judge it as valid.

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<sup>33</sup> The need for Diocesan Pastoral Councils was a recommendation of *The Light from the Southern Cross* report.

In reflecting on synodal practice to date, certain cautions come to mind. One is the trap of exceptionalism. A missionary Church seeks to include all, especially those who are vulnerable or living on the peripheries. However, the listening and discernment in many local churches was primarily accessed by self-selected groups and individuals whose language proficiency, levels of literacy, or sense of acceptance in the Church influenced their choice to be involved. Greater efforts are needed for future listening activities, including taking the lessons from those civil and government agencies which already have inclusive practices.

Amongst the lessons from the current synod is the degree to which approaches to listening and reception of findings are influenced by cultural norms. The easy move to synodal listening in Papua New Guinea was due in part to their post-Vatican II “We are Church” approach. The rejection by SECAM of the Declaration on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, *Fiducia Supplicans* (issued by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on 18 December 2023), was strongly influenced by cultural factors, as was the request for a pastoral reconsideration of polygamy in the Synthesis Report from the 2023 Assembly.<sup>34</sup> These examples illustrate the challenges for a universal Church working to achieve unity in diversity. Alongside these cultural dimensions is the reality of living in an increasingly polarized world in which ideological and political tensions generated by those who disagree with synodality can undermine the process.

A further lesson throughout all stages of the synodal journey is the effectiveness of a dialogical approach. There is strength in inviting and potentially involving all the People of God into a reflective conversation—as contributors in a co-responsible Church which recognizes the gifts and responsibilities of all the baptized. As noted, possible limitations in the first iteration of the listening approach were that participants were learning by doing and that we did not achieve the degree of participation envisaged. However, we are on a reflective journey learning how to be a synodal Church, transparently creating practices and documents for all the faithful seeking to contribute to their Church at every level.

Under the ‘canopy’ of the wings of the Holy Spirit, as fashioned by the prayerfulness created in spiritual conversation, these documents present opportunities for the church to learn—from the Spirit-aroused

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<sup>34</sup> SECAM, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar rejected *Fiducia Supplicans*. However, South Africa and the Maghreb Countries did not support the SECAM position; see Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans*: “On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings,” December 18, 2023, [vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_dff\\_doc\\_20231218\\_fiducia-supplicans\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dff_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html).

‘sense of the faith’ of all the faithful—new perspectives that may require development of the church’s teaching regarding doctrine and morals as it stands at the moment. **M**

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