

Field Notes from Ferns



DIOCESE OF FERNS

Journeying Together In the Spirit

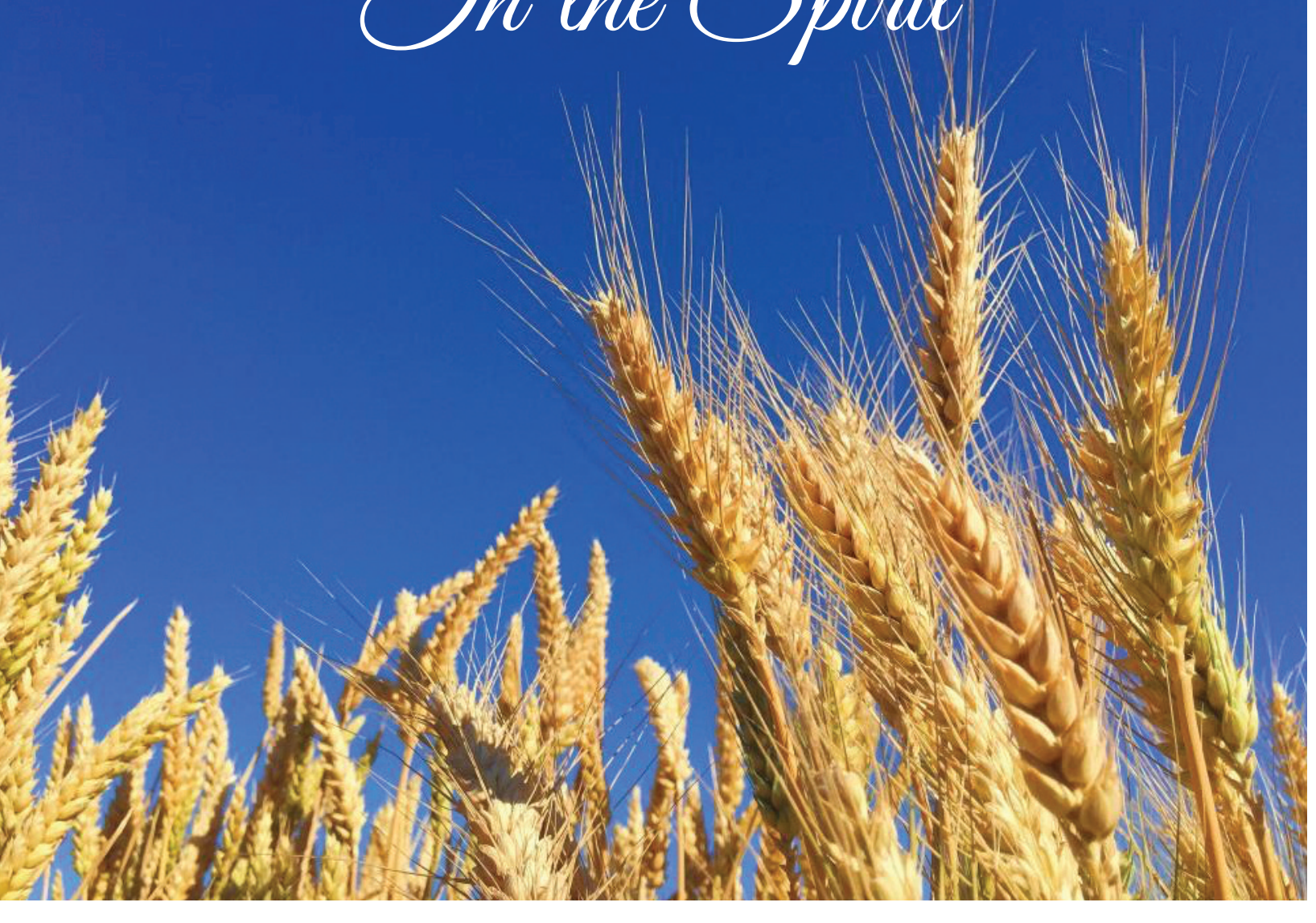


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Welcome to Field Notes from Ferns

The Diocese of Ferns, nestled in the south-east of Ireland across Counties Wexford and parts of Wicklow, has walked in the footsteps of St. Aidan for over 1,400 years. Our 12 pastoral areas, 49 parishes and 96 faith communities form a living tapestry of rural heartlands, coastal villages and towns. Rooted in a rich heritage of monastic foundations, missionary outreach and enduring faith, we are today a People of God (Pobal Dé) responding to the call of the Holy Spirit in a rapidly changing world.

These Field Notes emerge from the Irish Synodal Pathway, launched by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2021 as a response to Pope Francis's invitation for a Synod on Synodality. The Pathway invites every baptised person to listen deeply - to one another, to the margins, and above all to the prompting of the Holy Spirit - so that the Church in Ireland might renew itself as a community of communion, participation and mission.

In Ferns, this journey has unfolded through prayerful listening sessions, diocesan syntheses (including our 2022 communal discernment report), formation programmes and countless small acts of togetherness across parishes. Themes of belonging, co-responsibility, lay ministry, youth engagement and healing have surfaced again and again, echoing the priorities identified in national gatherings.

These Field Notes are not an official report or a comprehensive history. They are modest, grassroot snapshots - stories, surprises, pitfalls and learnings gathered from real people in real places. Compiled by voices from urban and rural parishes, pastoral care teams, youth groups, liturgy ministers, reflection facilitators, Jubilee teams and diocesan supporters, these notes capture what synodality feels like on the ground. They show that synodality is not a distant programme but a way of being Church: slowing down to listen, opening doors when unprepared, sharing leadership without losing unity, and trusting the Spirit to open new paths amid friction and fragility.

As Bishop Gerard Nash and our diocesan community continue this pilgrimage, these stories serve as both testimony and invitation. They remind us that the Holy Spirit is already at work - often in the quiet, the messy and the meaningful - transforming our vulnerabilities into bridges of hope.

May reading these Field Notes stir our hearts. Perhaps they will prompt us to reflect on our own experiences, add our own story, or simply sit in prayer with the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*. Whatever the case, know that we journey together - with Christ walking with us, freeing, healing and making all things new.

Sean O'Leary

Director of Pastoral Development

WHY SYNODALITY?

As we continue our journey of synodality - a way of “walking together” that calls us to listen deeply to one another and to the Holy Spirit - we recognize that this process is not merely about changing structures, but about a profound conversion of heart. At the centre of this journey is the Paschal Mystery: Jesus’ Cross and Resurrection. His love serves as the “compass” for our walking, showing us that we are one family - a community of communion, participation and mission.

To walk this path, we ground ourselves in spiritual discernment, learning to distinguish the movements of the Holy Spirit from our own personal opinions. This journey remains anchored in the rich history of Scripture and Tradition, providing us with a shared language as we navigate the Church’s existing governance. By integrating this “*walking together*” into our established structures and parish life, we learn to approach disagreements with grace, ensuring that even in moments of conflict, we remain focused on our collective mission.

In the field notes that follow, the three pillars - communion, participation and mission - come alive in concrete ways. Here, communion is the foundation of synodal life, rooted in the Eucharist and the bonds of charity. We also explore participation, examining how every baptised person can share responsibility through listening, discernment and co-responsible decision-making in parishes, pastoral areas, dioceses and beyond. As we look outward to mission, we consider how a more synodal Church can better carry the light of Christ to the margins, accompanying the wounded and proclaiming the Gospel anew in our changing world.

The following poem, *Deeper Mercy*, reflects on this synodal path by looking past the “*headlines sharp as thorns*” to see how God works through our togetherness. It reminds us that synodality or “*arms stretch wide*” is the Church, choosing the path of mercy over isolation. In a world where many feel unheard, these words invite us to carry each other’s loads gently. Whether through shared prayer or simple acts of service, these *synodal fruits* push back the darkness and reveal Christ’s presence among us. As we read, we remember that Jesus, the King and the Lamb, is walking with us, freeing us from what holds us back and making all things new through His Church.

DEEPER MERCY

Isolation laughs, certain it has won.
Evil hisses through headlines sharp as thorns,
the brittle “us or them” of divided hearts.
Yet even before death can speak its final word,
Jesus enters our fractured “together.”

He steps into the pain, the thorns, the buried wound;
He does not walk alone - He walks as us.
Arms stretch wide upon the rough-hewn wood,
He breathes a mercy that draws us close
even as spear and lash tear home.
His blood falls, covenant of communion -
each drop a quiet vow: *You are not alone.*

This love reaches past mere fairness;
it listens, it lingers, it remakes the dawn.
The stone rolls away, morning breaks in flame,
and Jesus rises - the living Head of one Body.
Now, on city pavements and hushed country lanes,
the serving King is the path we tread.

This deeper mercy never slumbers.
It dwells in a people who pour themselves out,
offering the small, stubborn “yes” of community:
a whispered yes like Mary’s,
a cross shouldered side by side,
listening without verdict,
forgiving with an unclosed hand.

The Cross stands as bridge to resurrection,
and darkness recoils before the light.
From the depths of His pierced Heart
Jesus speaks to our assembled lives:
“I have overcome.”

So rise, child of water, child of Spirit.
Bring your voice, your scars, your longing.
He is not finished.
Through His Church, through our faltering together,
He shatters the chains of those sharp headlines
and binds up the thorns of the world
until the wound is remade whole.



“EMERGING”

The Parable of the Four Pews

Here is a story of a bishop who arrived not with a silver staff, but with rolled-up sleeves.

He came to the cathedral on a grey morning. The air inside was thick with the smell of wax. The pews were polished, the congregation was settled, and the doors were shut tight against the overgrown garden that pressed against the stained glass.

Before the first hymn could be sung, the bishop stood at the altar and looked at the window. Then, without a word, he marched down the aisle. He grabbed the “Seekers’ Pew” - the one right at the back - and with a sudden, heave-ho strength, he dragged it right out the front doors and settled it deep in the weeds and the wildflowers.

A murmur rippled through the pews. But the bishop just pointed to the garden and said, *“The seekers aren’t in here looking for us. They’re out there, waiting to be found.”*

He walked back in, but he didn’t go to the pulpit. He went to the “Believers’ Pew.” He took one end, and with a grunt of effort, began dragging it toward the light. The murmurs turned into protests. *“Bishop, that’s our seat!”*

He didn’t stop until that pew was sitting under an oak tree. He wiped his brow and said, *“There are plenty who believe out here in the sun; they just need a place to sit and talk.”*

By now, the cathedral was a hive of confusion. But the bishop wasn’t done. He laid hands on the “Workers’ Pew” - the one for the readers and the servers. A gasp went up that shook the rafters. *“Where will the workers sit?”* they cried.

The bishop just leaned against the heavy oak wood and whispered, *“The harvest is out here, and the workers are already in the field. Let’s go join them.”*

The air in the cathedral was electric now - half-confusion, half-wonder. The bishop turned his eyes toward the very front: the “Leaders’ Pew.” He put his shoulder to it, but this time, he didn’t have to pull alone.

Two deacons stepped out of the shadows. A mother left her seat and a young man jumped up. Together, they heaved that heavy timber down the aisle, through the doors, and into the tall grass.

The mother looked around at the wild, green world, at the strangers already sitting on the first three pews, and she smiled. *“I see it now, Bishop,”* she said. *“The leaders are out here, too.”*

The bishop looked at the cathedral behind them and the living church before them. He nodded, took a deep breath of the fresh air, and said:

“Good. Now, let us begin.”

Synodality in Action

In the “Parable of the Four Pews,” we find a vivid dramatization of what Pope Leo XIV and his predecessor Pope Francis have termed the “*pastoral conversion*” of the Church. The bishop’s arrival is marked not by a sermon, but by a disruptive physical relocation of the Church’s most foundational furniture: the pews. This act serves as a profound metaphor for the synodal journey, offering three critical insights into modern pastoral theology.

Illuminating the Narrative

Theologically, pews have often been critiqued for stratifying the laity into “*passive participants*”. By dragging these heavy oak structures into the “*wild garden*,” the bishop breaks the “*theatre*” model of worship where the clergy perform and the laity observe.

Pastoral theology now emphasizes that the Church is not a warehouse of grace to be guarded, but a “*field hospital*”. The bishop’s actions suggest that the sacredness of the pew is not inherent to its location within a cathedral’s walls, but in its ability to facilitate encounter - whether for seekers, believers, workers or leaders - wherever they may be found.

The Garden as the New Periphery

The “*garden*” represents what synodal documents call the “*missionary periphery*”. In this space, the Church encounters a world that is not a desert, but a place of “*growth*” and “*interconnected root systems*”.

The bishop’s refusal to wait for seekers to enter the cathedral reflects a shift from an *attractional* model (“*come to us*”) to an *incarnational* one (“*we go to you*”). Pastoral care, in this light, is the act of providing a “*place to sit and talk*” amidst the complexity of modern life, recognizing that “*good leaders*” and “*good workers*” already exist outside institutional structures.

From Hierarchy to “Co-Responsibility”

The most striking moment of the parable is the moving of the fourth pew - the one reserved for leaders. Initially, the bishop acts alone, representing the “*heroic*” but exhausting model of clerical leadership. However, the movement becomes truly synodal when the congregation rushes forward to work with him.

This reflects the implementation phase of the Universal Synod, which mandates a shift toward “*co-responsibility*”. Leadership is no longer a seat to be occupied in a protected sanctuary; it is a weight to be carried together into the public square. When the mother realizes that “*leaders are out here, too*,” she voices the core of synodality: the recognition that the Holy Spirit is already at work in the world, and at times ahead of the institutional Church.

“Let Us Begin”

The parable concludes at the point where most liturgies end. The bishop’s “*Let us begin*” signals that the synodal work of the Church involves dismantling barriers and changing mindsets. As we continue to “*walk together*” on the Irish Synodal Pathway and beyond, we are reminded that the Church’s mission is not to preserve its resources, but to use them as bridges to the world.

Field Notes

These Field Notes from Ferns bring this vision vividly to life. They gather heartfelt, reflective stories from groups across the Diocese of Ferns - urban and rural parishes, pastoral care teams, choirs, liturgy leaders, youth groups, family carers, pastoral councils, facilitators, diocesan teams, and more - capturing honest experiences of living out synodality, the Church’s call to “*journey together*,” as highlighted in the Synod on Synodality and the Irish Synodal Pathway.

Organised around simple questions - *"What Worked," "Pitfalls," "What Surprised Us,"* and *"What We Learned Together"* - these notes illuminate grassroots efforts: reaching out in pastoral care to the lonely and bereaved; uniting choirs and communities across boundaries; embracing lay-led liturgies and shared leadership; engaging young people in retreats, pilgrimages and synodal teams; offering hospitality in unexpected moments; navigating conflict with patience and dialogue; coordinating Jubilee celebrations; forming lay ministers through reflective practice; and supporting governance through collaboration between clergy and laity. Everything is grounded in humility, prayer, community and the shared baptismal identity of the *"People of God"* (Pobal Dé).

Above all, these stories show us that when we allow our hearts to be touched and enriched by others, we journey together. This unfolds through simple presence, real relationships and everyday hospitality, built on mutual trust, patience and shared responsibility.

In our common vulnerability, we discover unexpected hope, renewed energy and a profound sense of belonging. These Field Notes remind us that synodality is the prayerful art of letting the spaces between us be transformed into vibrant communion, joyful participation and bold mission. May they inspire each of us to step onto this path with open, listening hearts, ready to journey together, from wherever we are to wherever the Spirit leads.

The Wonders of the Way

O Lord who dwells in the heart of all that grows,
Teach us to abandon our guarded interiors,
To carry our longing into spaces of belonging,
Where every soul, seeker, believer, worker, guide
Is already held in the contemplation of mercy.
In the co-responsible ground of roots entwined,
May we discover that the wonders of the Way
Has always been this quiet walking together
Into the mystery that waits beyond our doors.



Walking Together

In these stories, synodality reveals itself in quiet kitchens,
at bedsides and through open doors.

The Church becomes truly present when people offer simple presence,
shared tea and unhurried listening to those carrying hidden grief or illness.

What begins as a visit often becomes mutual pilgrimage together
discovering Christ already dwelling in the fragile and forgotten.

*“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one
of the least of these brothers and sisters
of mine, you did for me.”*

(Matthew 25:40)

Wonder

What happens in your own heart when you slow down enough
to truly see someone?

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: The Unexpected Visitors



Theme: Hospitality

Story

One day, four of us arrived at the back door. The woman of the house is in her seventies and likes to be prepared for every occasion. We were unexpected, perhaps you could say uninvited. Yet, the woman welcomed us in. We had arrived a day early, so she had only planned for herself and her cat. We crowded the kitchen, apologising. She looked at the pot (enough stew, she thought, for one bowl and a spoon for the cat), then at us, and said nothing for a long second.

Then she laughed the small laugh we all know and said, *"Well, the Lord sent ye, and the Lord will have to provide."* She added water to the pot, threw in the last two onions, a fist of flour, and half a cabbage that she'd been thinking of throwing out. We were sent to the pantry for potatoes; there were eight small ones left, the size of golf balls. She peeled them herself, humming an old hymn under her breath. The stew was thin, the potatoes few, but nobody said so. The cat even got a spoonful. We said the Grace Before Meals like we were in the cathedral for a big occasion, not a kitchen suddenly too full of people.

What Worked

Nobody announced the impossible, only what was possible; the meal simply happened around the refusal to let anyone leave hungry or feel unwanted. We still talk about this very happy meal, so generously prepared, that it tasted of belonging.

The Pitfalls

There is a quiet sorrow in not having enough or feeling unprepared. We know how easy it is to not open the door and pretend that we're out. The cook (always the one who gives) can be left with the thinnest soup and the smallest potato.

What Surprised Us

Abundance arrives disguised as shortage. The thinner the stew, the brighter the circle around the table became. We left warmer than we arrived. Hospitality is about much more than what is served. It's about community.

What We Learned Together

Hospitality is not having extra; it is having none to spare and opening the door anyway. The miracle is never in the pot. It is in the hand that lifts the lid when the sensible thing would be to keep it hidden. Sometimes the Body of Christ is four unexpected mouths and one determined woman who decides that love will just have to multiply what's in the pot. This is what synodality looks like when we come together.

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Urban Parish Pastoral Care Team



Theme: Being a Synodal Church for All

Story

Over two years ago, prompted by the synodal pathway and the quiet ache of loneliness among our elderly, sick and bereaved parishioners, a small group of us came together to form a Pastoral Care Team, linked with our Pastoral Council. We felt called to live the Synod's invitation to "*journey together*" by deliberately reaching out to those who most needed companionship, a listening ear and the comfort of faith in times of illness or grief.

What Worked

The simple gift of presence proved transformative. Volunteers visited housebound parishioners weekly, bringing companionship, a chat or just shared interest. Team members were trained to walk beside people with no agenda except "*being there*." A few who had not entered a church in years appreciated the non-judgemental acceptance of their story. They valued the warmth of company and began asking for prayers.

The Pitfalls

Some parishioners, who only expected to receive pastoral care from a priest, were surprised by lay visitors. A few volunteers felt challenged by the depth of loneliness or grief they encountered and needed ongoing support. Coordinating visits across the parish takes time. It also takes time to become a listening, prayerful community rather than a "*parish committee*".

What Surprised Us

Some families only associated the Church with inside the parish church doors and were pleasantly surprised that the church extended out into the community. Another surprise was how a visit may have started in their home, then hospital or care home followed later by a journey to the funeral home and graveside. Families were invited to a remembrance service as a reminder they were not forgotten. The memories and stories brought comfort to them in their grief.

What We Learned Together

Synodality is not a document; it is learning to walk at the speed of the people we journey with and discovering that Christ is already waiting there. We learned that pastoral care flows best when it is mutual - the "*visitors*" often receive more than they give. Clear boundaries, ongoing support and shared prayer are the branches on which pastoral care grows. Above all, we discovered that when we place the lonely, the sick and the bereaved at the centre, not as "*cases*" but as pilgrims upon the Gospel journey, everything else falls into place.

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Family Carers

Theme: Unprepared

Story

Three winters ago we knocked on her door not far from terraced streets of the town, expecting the usual cup of tea and a quick chat. Instead, we found a son in his fifties who had become mother to his own mother. For she wanders the house at night calling 'Hello', looking for company because she had forgotten her own home. At night, they sit by the Sacred Heart statue on the kitchen table, stroking the plaster wounds as if they were their own. The son has given up on a night's sleep. When his Mam calls out, he pads downstairs in socks, holds her hand, and brings her to the kitchen. There they sit together on the old chairs, eat toast with jam, drink tea and say some simple prayers. He places her hand on the Heart and covers it with his. Some nights she suddenly remembers his name and smiles widely. Other times, she weeps into his shoulder.

What Worked

Presence and simple prayer in the small places of the world. We thought we were visiting; instead, we experienced the Christ who visits us in the unprepared and the unravelled. The son never asked for help, only for prayers.

The Pitfalls

Burnout hides in plain sight. And the trials of life can be all encompassing, so much so, that people fall away from the larger community. Love and pain can sound the same when times are hard. At times, we simply sent a text to say that we're around.

What Surprised Us

That the Sacred Heart statue became a place of connection and presence for this struggling family. One time, they both agreed wholeheartedly that the Sacred Heart connected them. This was their home forever.

What We Learned Together

The synodal way is often two people holding a broken heart between them, reminding the rest of us where the tabernacle has moved to. Grace does not arrive when we are ready. It arrives when we are ruined enough to let love be unrecognisable. And sometimes the Body of Christ is an elderly woman calling for her own mother, who is also, somehow, still calling for her. This, we now understand, is what journeying together looks like when the road has narrowed to a kitchen table in the dark.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Traveller Women

Theme: Integration

Story

We are a group of traveller women who came together after two of our community had received Diplomas in Community Development from Waterford I.T. The two women had become aware of the need and desire for change and realised that they had to help themselves so they could help others. Our group wanted to share the learning that the two members had received and they wanted to do a project that would help them show their own personal strengths and would also be close to their own history, culture and experience of God. They were nervous about how this project would be seen both within their own community and by the wider community generally. The project they finally selected was to renovate a Holy Well which was neglected for some years but held great memories for their families.

What worked

The group planned their project well but underestimated what it would cost. They received funding and began work. The numbers who took part in the beginning were small but as the work progressed, more people became interested. Some of the participants described that summer as “the best summer they ever had”. While the actual work was going on, the working together gave us self-confidence and a courage to reach out to others. When some of the men began to get involved our group of women saw this as a success and as a sign that change was happening. People got involved because they trusted the leaders and they described their involvement as “developing a passion” for what they had undertaken.

The Pitfalls

At the beginning there were problems about access across the land and the very neglected state of the path leading to the Well. There were also challenges about managing a budget and sticking to the plan. Most of the pitfalls and challenges arise from the constant experience of discrimination that travellers have suffered over the years and which is difficult to overcome. The education which the leaders received showed them how this discrimination had undermined the self-confidence of travellers especially of traveller women. To make progress old well-established norms had to be demolished both within and outside the traveller community.

What Surprised Us

When the project began, local people began to take an interest and worked side by side with our group. Doing the physical work, there were no travellers or settled people, just people with a common task. People working together united them. Our group also discovered that holiness or faith has many aspects and that people who spoke about faith were on a journey also. We also recognised that people who described themselves as having no faith could participate in the project in a meaningful way. The group recognise the fruits of the Holy Spirit were present when the work was going on – Love, joy, peace, patience etc.

What We Learned Together

We learned that the first step to ending discrimination is to know your own worth and value. Then you will have the confidence to approach others, to ask for help, to learn from them and to undertake a big project like restoring the Holy Well. The Well had always been a holy place but that summer it became a place of peace and integration. It also became a safe space for people to be themselves. As a group we have also learned that we can continue to train and develop and so the Holy Well project was not an end but a beginning.



One Choir, Many Voices

These accounts show synodality as the patient work of weaving scattered communities into one Body. From amalgamated choirs to rotating liturgies and a youth pilgrimage where no one is left behind, unity emerges not by erasing differences but by choosing to walk, sing and wait together. Historical tensions and personal paces are honoured, yet the invitation remains: baptism calls us beyond our local patch to belong to the whole community.

*“There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one
hope of your calling.”*

(Ephesians 4:4)

Wonder

Imagine the energy released if every member chose to bridge division -
what song might then arise?

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Rural Parish Choir Member

Theme: Journeying Around the Parish

Story

Over a year ago, inspired by the jubilee of our local priest who ministers to a number of churches and the desire to unify our parish, we decided to amalgamate the choirs from different churches as an invitation to walk together in musical harmony.

What Worked

Our first public outing was the jubilee celebration for our local priest, which brought us together across local church boundaries with singers and musicians from the entire parish. We met weekly to practice and get to know one another. We went on to have an all-parish Carol Service in one local church, which will rotate on a yearly basis. We also sang at two liturgies, one in a local church and one outside at a parish shrine. We're also rehearsing for our first-ever all parish remembrance Mass.

The Pitfalls

As the choir has grown, there is a greater challenge to get everyone together on the same evening. Some members have not yet travelled outside their own local church, but we keep the invitation alive in our shared WhatsApp group and in person. There are some historical territorial issues that hinder unity. But, in their own church setting, there is always a welcome for all. While our baptism unites us, we struggle to be priests, prophets and kings together.

What Surprised Us

We were surprised by the camaraderie, the new members who continue to join, the encouragement of our local priest and the possibilities offered by striving for unity in a time of change. This has brought new energy, enthusiasm and commitment to our musicians and singers, which has enhanced the liturgy on celebratory occasions.

What We Learned Together

We have learned that we can work together as a whole parish, but we must be sensitive to the fears of everyone as we journey with people wherever they happen to be on this particular path. This helps us to be patient with each other and with the unsteady progress that we have made together. We have also grown in awareness that there is a tendency to revert back to our local church and have separate celebrations without always thinking of the whole parish community.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Rural Parish Pastoral Council

Theme: Priest & People Together

Story

Two years ago, we set up a pastoral council with a small bit of training from the Diocese. We didn't have any idea of how we would work together and what we might do as a group. We were a little fearful of bringing two church communities together as a parish pastoral council, but we were open to the experience. This was a big step forward for us.

What Worked

Meetings were practical and enjoyable. We were willing to sit around a table and listen to each other regardless of where we came from in the parish and to learn from each other. We learned to let go of preconceived ideas and plans so that together we would be free to try new things, no matter how small. Very quickly, these small ideas grew to draw more people into our faith community.

The Pitfalls

We began with no real expectations beyond coming together but we were willing to discern together a way forward. In hindsight, we may have played it too safe while we were becoming established as a council but maybe this gave us the space to really grow together as a parish-wide team.

What Surprised Us

We were surprised by the liturgies that we developed together, from a new annual outdoor Mass to the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross. People came to support the church and community who didn't normally participate in the life of the church. Having family members involved increased the participation of our parishioners. We were also surprised by the creativity and practicality of people stepping into new roles for the first time.

What We Learned Together

We learned that we could work together as a parish spanning two faith communities and make decisions as a group. This broke down boundaries so that we now rotate important liturgies between the two churches. People joined the council because they were pleased to be asked and were willing, with support from one another, to take on new roles. Making some time for group reflection was both affirming and motivation for our continued journey together.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Youth Pilgrimage



Theme: Staying Together is Tough

Story

Last summer a group of us gathered for a Youth Pilgrimage. We thought we were going for the craic, the holiday spots or maybe a bit of prayer if there was time. Nobody said out loud that half of us hadn't been to Mass since Confirmation and the other half only came because it felt like an adventure.

What Worked

We moved at different speeds. That was the first miracle. Everywhere we went, the fast ones raced ahead, then waited, sometimes impatiently. The slow ones (me included) lagged behind with the stragglers' who never hurried anywhere. Nobody preached. We just kept moving, one foot after the other. There were a few moments when we ended up kneeling along the way, somehow timid and brave all at once while someone started the Our Father in Irish and the rest of us stumbled in behind.

The Pitfalls

Some brought earphones and planned to listen to playlists the whole way. Some wanted silence and got annoyed when the loud lads started singing. A few of us felt stupid praying out loud; others felt stupid not praying. In the beginning, the gap between "*I believe this*" and "*I don't know why I'm here*" felt bigger than the plane journey. We nearly left the slowest pilgrim behind because the minibus driver was impatient. Maybe this synodality isn't a buzzword; it's noticing when someone risks getting left behind and choosing to fall back with them.

What Surprised Us

On the second day, the quietest boy in the group suddenly asked if we could go to Adoration. Not because anyone told him to, but because he said he wanted to try it. We all ended up joining him. Later, in the hostel, people started telling stories they'd never told anyone: parents splitting up, panic attacks, the night that was almost disaster. We weren't a youth group with guitars playing nice songs. We were just young people who discovered that the Church can still fit inside a group of young people figuring things out.

What We Learned Together

Some of us came for the experience, a few came secretly hoping God might still be interested. On the way home, we realised none of us had been on the same pilgrimage. Yes, we had shared memories, but we also had specific moments that were extra special for just one person. But we had journeyed together, and that seemed to be the point all along. The Church isn't behind us or ahead of us. For one extraordinary week on a youth pilgrimage, our church was simply the space we made between us when nobody was left behind. Because the path isn't clear until everyone is walking it.

Belonging to Everyone

Synodality here is forged in friction: a too-big bench, a contested project, a Jubilee calendar that demands shared discernment rather than top-down decisions. These stories reveal that true co-responsibility is born when priests and lay people listen deeply, hold tension without domination and allow decisions to emerge slowly from the whole community.

The result is not perfect agreement but a deeper trust that the Church's mission belongs to all.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

(Philippians 2:3-4)

Wonder

What might change if the goal shifted from winning an argument to letting the community itself become the gift?

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Parish Pastoral Council

Theme: Disagreement

Story

One Thursday morning, the man arrived at the pastoral centre with a new bench he'd found for the centre. It was practical and would help make the pastoral centre more hospitable. He carried it in himself, placed it where the council had wanted it, and stood back pleased. A little later, the man's neighbour arrived with a bunch of keys and her routine duty of making the place presentable. She stopped in the doorway, looked at the bench up and down, and said, *"Oh. That's far too big."* The man blinked, *"It's exactly the size we agreed."* But the neighbour was not for turning, *"it's the wrong size"*, she insisted, *"we'll have to send it back. Father has said that we don't want a bench that size."* To this, the man insisted, *"There's no sending it back"*.

And there it was: one bench, two opposing views, and me arranging to meet both of them with no memory of ever discussing the bench at all. I imagined us sitting around the too-big just-right bench like it was a battle zone.

What worked

Taking some time, proceeding gently and remembering that real people were involved. Having a quiet conversation with each person. Reminding them that we were all in this together and asking each of them to be the bigger person. Nobody had to be wrong. The bench stayed but it stopped belonging to one person when they both chose to let it belong to the community.

The Pitfalls

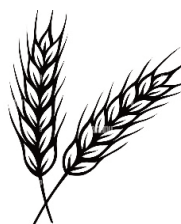
We nearly let the perfect bench in our minds murder the good bench in our hands. An idealistic vision can be just as fierce as a practical vision, and both can leave a person standing outside in the cold.

What Surprised Us

That when we begin to see beyond a thorny issue and see each other, the difficult issue begins to look less insurmountable.

What We Learned Together

Hospitality is not about getting the measurements perfect before anyone arrives. It is about letting the gift that is already in the room be the gift that is received. Sometimes things look like they won't fit or can't work, but two people who decide that community is measured not by the ruler but by the heart and are willing to sit together can make anything work. This, too, is what synodality feels like when we stop insisting on our own blueprint.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: A New Pastoral Council

Theme: Renewing Hope

Story

There was tension in our village. Many people disagreed with a new project being proposed. They felt that they hadn't been listened to. The local priest, who also has other churches to look after, invited a facilitator to mediate a consultation at a parish meeting. The hall was packed. Voices rose, old grievances surfaced, and for a while it felt as though the evening might end in deeper division. It was difficult but the consensus was clear. Redraft the project. We set up a pastoral council to work with the finance committee and received some training. We forged a new path, not an easy path but a path that invites the community to become more involved. The initial project is underway and we're now launching an even more ambitious project. It is early days, but we will continue to work together.

What worked

Bringing in an outside facilitator was decisive. Someone neutral could hold the space when emotions ran high and ensure every voice was heard. The training sessions that followed, simple, practical, focused on listening skills and shared decision-making, gave us a common language and tools we didn't have before. Meeting regularly in small groups rather than only as a full council kept momentum alive.

The Pitfalls

Early on, a few dominant voices still tried to steer everything, and we had to learn, sometimes painfully, to intervene and redraw boundaries. Scheduling was a constant struggle; with jobs, families, and the priest spread across parishes, frustrating everyone. We also discovered that "consensus" can slide into the tyranny of the cautious, watering down good ideas to avoid offending anyone.

What Surprised Us

How quickly trust can grow when people feel truly heard and valued. We were also surprised by the energy that emerged once the logjam broke, ideas and offers of help poured in from people who had stayed silent for years.

What We Learned

Renewing hope is less about grand visions than about stubborn, humble persistence in the small things: showing up, listening again, admitting when we're wrong, praying through the friction. Conflict isn't the opposite of community; if tended well, it can be the fire that refines it. We learned that leadership in the Church today often means creating opportunities for shared leadership rather than directing from the front.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Pilgrims of Hope Jubilee Coordinating Team



Theme: Hope Made Visible

Story

As the Holy Year of 2025 approached with its theme “Pilgrims of Hope”, a mixed group of priests and lay people from across the diocese came together to coordinate celebrations that would bring alive the Jubilee in our Diocese. From the beginning we committed ourselves to shared decision-making, inspired by the conviction that true collaboration in Christ allows diverse gifts to bear fruit for the whole Body.

What Worked

We communicated regularly and met frequently to discern a way forward together. Everyone could speak freely. Decisions emerged slowly but surely from this shared discernment rather than from one person or role alone. This approach shaped everything we planned: adoration, a Creation walk, Scripture sharing, a Marian celebration and liturgies dedicated to hope, the sick, priesthood or community volunteers. Lay people prepared and led parts of the celebrations alongside priests.

The Pitfalls

Shared decision-making takes time, and sometimes we felt the pressure of the Jubilee calendar pressing upon us. Some lay people hesitated to step forward, fearing they might overstep. Some priests were uncertain of their roles in this collaboration. Coordinating across different parishes meant juggling different expectations and ways of working. Keeping synodality alive required constant gentle reminders that no single voice, clerical or lay, should dominate.

What Surprised Us

We were surprised by how naturally the themes intertwined when we planned together. A prayer evening for hope began with Scripture and flowed into shared testimonies of lay ministry, and ended with prayers, all arising from one conversation where everyone contributed ideas. Priests found themselves enriched by lay insights into working together, while lay coordinators experienced anew the beauty of priestly presence. Hope became visible in small gestures: shared joy during decision-making, a new perspective welcomed or a project completed together.

What We Learned Together

When priests and lay people truly collaborate in Christ, with mutual respect and shared responsibility, the Church reveals herself as a community of pilgrims walking together toward hope. We learned that placing the Eucharist at the centre, surrounded by Scripture, Marian devotion, care for creation, and prayers of hope, draws people gently but powerfully. Lay leadership flourishes when supported rather than directed and priesthood shines when exercised in communion rather than isolation.

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: A Parish Community

Theme: Rising Together in New Times

Story

A year ago our resident priest moved on, and daily presence gave way to a new rhythm: priests visit to celebrate the Sacraments. The quiet presbytery could have left us waiting, but a small group gathered instead, open to what God might ask now. We formed a pastoral council and refreshed the finance committee, sensing our baptismal call to step forward. In a quiet surge of energy, we set up a sacristan group, recruited and trained altar servers in new albs, appointed safeguarding officers, formed cleaning and flower arranging teams, updated notice boards, renewed liturgy and Eucharistic Ministry groups, installed new lamps, restored the crib, and honoured past priests on the wall. New liturgies emerged - an Exam Mass drew families back - and people came, stayed, returned.

What Worked

Beginning where we stood, without waiting for perfection or priest-only direction. People said yes, trained each other, formed small groups around needs. Councils became spaces of real listening. New liturgies showed that community ownership opens the church wider.

The Pitfalls

Coordinating pastoral life demands extra effort; some felt the priest's absence keenly on quiet days. A few worried we stretched too thin or strayed from "the old way." Initial hesitation lingered about lay leadership's welcome and staying power.

What Surprised Us

Life stirred once we stopped viewing change only as loss. New groups brought fresh faces, friendships, belonging - not mere gap-fillers. Liturgies like the Exam Mass drew new faces; even the crib and priest names became signs of continuity in change. The parish felt enlarged, not diminished.

What We Learned Together

Synodality emerges when the People of God refuse to pause the mission. When one voice is absent, many rise - trained, prayerful, willing. The Body of Christ lives in sacristy work, flowers, safeguarding and shared tables. In practical loving action, the Spirit multiplies our little. The parish grew deeper roots. This is co-responsibility: walking hand in hand when the road is difficult.



The Altar Extended

These reflections show how lay-led Rosary, liturgy and celebrations of the Word offer living encounters with God. When lay people step forward - not as substitutes but as co-ministers - the liturgy breathes with fresh participation and draws even the housebound into the heart of the Church. Prayer becomes the daily rhythm that sustains synodal life and reminds everyone that the Spirit moves through all the baptised.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

(Matthew 18:20)

Wonder

What small act of leadership might you offer that could help the whole community to belong?

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Urban Parish Rosary Prayer Leaders.

Theme: Prayer in the Parish

Story

There has been a morning Rosary in our local church for a long time. The dedicated volunteers lead the Rosary and responses each morning. In 2020, an evening Rosary was contemplated. In the month of May when the COVID-19 Pandemic arrived, the Priests of the Parish agreed for the month of May to recite the rosary each evening before evening Mass. It proved to gain some engagement. Ever since then lay people have led the prayer of the Rosary every day. We initially recruited prayer leaders by approaching people at the end of Mass. Thankfully there has been a sufficient level of volunteerism to sustain this prayer initiative. Now there is a daily morning and evening prayer of the Rosary in our local church.

What Worked

The Parish regularly recognises the dedication of prayer leaders by the gifting of a Christmas Hamper or an Easter Egg and a Mass association card as a token of appreciation.

The Pitfalls

To pray the Rosary in the Church requires a little bit of organisation. The sacristy needs to be opened to turn on the microphone system and webcam. Thankfully, we have found ways to make this a successful initiative as the priests have facilitated the lay prayer leaders in accessing the sacristy. Batteries have failed during the praying of the Rosary, which requires stepping up onto the altar to ensure the broadcast is received outside the church. An unforeseen cancellation at the last minute and getting a replacement at short notice.

What Surprised Us

The commitment of prayer leaders and the regular number of people joining us for the prayer of the Rosary in person and online and the tremendous positive feedback received. A parishioner or church attendee stepping up to the microphone to ensure the Rosary responses are received by people who cannot attend the church for various reasons. When the Rosary was changed to before evening Mass instead of after Mass, Volunteers adjusted to the new start time and said the Angelus or the Regina Coeli, prior to the Rosary.

What We Learned Together

We have learned that there is very positive feedback given to the Rosary prayer from inside and outside of the Parish. It is a very positive way to start your day and end the evening.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Rural Parish Liturgy Leaders

Theme: New Beginnings

Story

We are in formation for pastoral ministry and engaged with lay-led liturgy training with the Diocese to be used in the unforeseen absence of the priest. Our local priest asked us on short notice to lead a Liturgy of the Word and a Communion Service in our parish church. This was our first time to independently lead liturgy, yet we have been journeying together as a community, so we felt supported to take on new roles.

What Worked

We walked the church and the altar to get a sense of the space and reached out to others to minister with us. This enriched the liturgy in the way the different ministries came together. We began by sitting quietly for a few moments and then said a prayer together in the sacristy. Overall, it was a positive experience. We see our own experiences and stories as central to our ability to reach out and empower others. To bring people closer to the church, we began with invitation and encouraging small acts of mission and ministry. Even small connections make a difference.

The Pitfalls

We didn't anticipate everything about the new roles, so it is important to make small adaptations to ensure an overall flow to the liturgy. This also requires us to be comfortable with the prayers that we individually lead so that we minister as lay people rather than as a stand in for priests.

What Surprised Us

It was a new experience to work in this way with each other and be truly co-responsible for the liturgy. The parishioners who attended were particularly attentive and supportive of lay leadership and place a strong value on the preparation that we'd received to lead liturgy. After the service, we were drawn together in a prayerful huddle, thankful for taking this small step together.

What We Learned Together

Listening to one another, hearing each other and walking together in a time of change opens our hearts to the movement of the Spirit so that we continue to celebrate the presence of God in our lives and in the life of our community. Formation has opened up new possibilities not only for us but for our local priest and community through sharing resources and building relationships.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Flames of Hope Prayer Leaders

Theme: Jubilee Celebration of the Word of God



Story

In response to an experienced need and requests from individuals the Flames of Hope diocesan gathering early in 2025 focussed on the Word of God. Using the synodal method of 'conversation in the Spirit' we asked the question 'How can we promote awareness of the Word of God and how it can nourish our lives.' The group of about 40 came up with many and varied suggestions. Leaders then invited volunteers to form a committee to choose and carry ideas forward. A group of ten met several times and worked on possibilities. Approval was given to a diocesan celebration of the Word of God as part of the Jubilee of Hope calendar. November 8th was chosen as the date and a local Church became the venue. All were anxious that this would not be just 'an event' and there would be lead up to it and follow on from it.

What Worked

The enthusiasm and collaboration of Committee members. There was good dialogue and variety of gifts. Letters to priests and to parish readers giving good time for planning. Flames of Hope groups helped to spread the word. Five programmes on Christian Media trust as part of lead up to the event. The celebration brought together a very diverse group of people. Sharing of personal experiences rather than long explanations. The willingness of lay people to take ownership and leadership both in preparation and on the day. The key speaker really involved people in dialogue and also gave rich input. People valued being welcomed on a one-to-one basis.

Challenges

Responses from schools about drama presentations and art competition as limits were imposed by safeguarding protocols. We appreciated the presence of the few clergy who were able to attend. Parents are so busy, dialogue is needed to find out what might suit them

What Surprised Us

The great energy in the Committee and in the celebration. The Holy Spirit did make hearts burn. The very positive feedback from those who attended.

Learnings

There is a great hunger for the Word of God - so many people are searching. The Committee came together after the event for reflection and celebration. We learned a lot: How willing lay people are to take ownership and leadership; How pressured schools and teachers are – the need to listen to that and balance expectations. The hope to involve parents this way did not work. It was great to have young people and adults together but perhaps we were too ambitious. Would separate events have been better and on a school day? Do not be put off by challenges.

Hearts Formed in the Circle

Formation emerges here as lifelong, communal conversion: monthly reflections, SPIRIT-guided conversations and retreats that awaken young people to the gifts already alive within them. Lay ministers, facilitators and children discover that vulnerability shared in trust becomes the soil for confidence, insight and vocational clarity. Synodality is revealed as accompaniment that helps each person recognise where God is already at work in their story.

*“I planted, Apollos watered,
but God gave the growth.”*

(1 Corinthians 3:6)

Wonder

How might creating more such spaces help us to grow into the disciples God dreams us to be?



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Pastoral Reflection Facilitators

Theme: Formation

Story

Nearly two years ago, our group was formed by the Diocese and St. Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth. We are a group of priests, religious sisters and lay people who facilitate monthly pastoral reflection meetings for lay women and men undertaking the Diploma in Pastoral Ministry. We underwent specific training and were each assigned a small group to accompany. We promote reflective practice as part of the students' placements in schools, nursing homes and parishes.

What Worked

Facilitating rather than advising, establishing working rules and trusting the journey. Inviting a willingness to take a risk, share and help one another and building on the delight in coming together to confront realities and notice growth. By sharing experiences, integrating course materials and learning from one another, each pastoral reflection group modelled a synodal church. Using the SPIRIT model to encourage diverse perspectives and develop insight into ongoing ministry development.

The Pitfalls

We questioned our own adherence to this new model of pastoral reflection but worked with the students to develop a shared way of being. Initially, there was a tendency to rush too quickly into solutions. It took time to develop a listening stance and sometimes they were shy about what they're bringing. We encouraged them to speak from the heart rather than reach for perfect answers and trust their developing insight. This takes time and repeated practice.

What Surprised Us

We felt surprised to be asked to accompany the students in this way. We have grown in awareness that the pastoral reflection model and the introduction of significant lay ministry is working. This is overwhelming. The relationship with local priests emerged a lot in student's reflections and it took time for them to perceive themselves as co-workers rather than helpers. Their placements became places of humanity, spiritual development and creativity.

What We Learned Together

The path to ministry is growing, which asks us all to review the model of church we are working from. Greater one-to-one evaluation would be helpful. The depth of spirituality in lay people is an untapped resource, and we need to empower others and give them opportunities to grow in confidence. It's easy to return to the norm but this way of working keeps synodality alive. Well-formed lay people out among lay people are beacons of light. This is the Pobal Dé, the People of God, a mustard seed for the future.

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Pastoral Reflection Group

Theme: Formation

Story

Our small group consists of pastoral ministry students who gather monthly for guided reflection on our emerging ministries, facilitated by an experienced facilitator. These sessions provide a dedicated space to pause amid demanding schedules and engage deeply with one another's experiences.

What Worked Well

The intentional practice of stopping to listen actively and openly proved profoundly enriching. Each participant, each with different life stories, brought valuable perspectives. Hearing one another without haste or judgement fostered genuine connection. Equally impactful was experiencing pastoral conversations in real time through the SPIRIT model (Story, Perspectives, Insight, Response, Integration, Theology). Observing and participating in this structured yet flexible approach helped us adopt a way of accompanying others that is attentive, respectful and spiritually grounded.

The Pitfalls

The primary challenge remains time. Our lives are already stretched thin with studies, placements, family responsibilities and work. Finding a single slot that accommodates everyone each month requires considerable coordination. While we have managed so far, the effort needed to sustain regular attendance highlights how easily spiritual formation can be crowded out by immediate demands.

What Surprised Us

Many of us initially viewed the group as a professional development obligation. Yet we quickly discovered a deeper personal need. In this confidential setting we could share vulnerabilities, doubts, joys and milestones that are rarely voiced elsewhere. Through thoughtful, prayerful dialogue we received unexpected wisdom and insight from peers guided by our facilitator. These encounters consistently nourished our souls, renewing energy and hope for the long vocational road ahead.

What We Learned Together

We recognized anew that each person carries unique gifts, talents, fears and concerns. No two journeys are identical, yet all are valid and important. As we trusted the reflective process, we grew in acceptance of wherever we are right now, knowing this is precisely where God intends us to be in this season. Above all, we are not alone: we have one another's companionship, the skilled guidance of our facilitator, and most importantly, the abiding presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit in, through and with us. These monthly gatherings have become a vital lifeline, reminding us that authentic ministry flows from hearts continually formed in community and grace.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Retreat Team

Theme: Engaging Mission

Story

As a small team of lay facilitators, we accompany children preparing for Confirmation across our Diocese, hosting retreats for 22–28 schools annually, reaching around 800 young people. These days fill quickly, a quiet sign of their resonance in parish and school communities. In the spirit of synodality, we journey together: facilitators, children, teachers and families, listening to one another and to the Spirit who speaks through the uniqueness of each group.

What Worked

What has borne fruit is our shared teamwork and open communication. We resist over-planning, choosing instead flexibility that allows each retreat to breathe with the personality of its participants. We walk with the group, adapting to their needs, energies and abilities. Remarkably, children from all faiths and none join fully in prayer-writing, shared meditation circles, and dramatic enactments of parables, participating with integrity, never compromising their own beliefs. This mutual respect mirrors the synodal call to encounter others as they are, creating space where the Spirit moves freely across differences.

The Pitfalls

We have learned to temper our expectations of accompanying teachers, recognizing that children's engagement often reflects adult modelling. Weather, too, teaches humility; when heavy rain arrives, we pivot indoors without losing heart.

What Surprised Us

The greatest surprise remains the children's wide-eyed wonder upon discovering the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit already alive in their lives, evident in moments of giving and receiving goodness. These encounters reveal how grace precedes our efforts, gently awakening faith where we least expect.

What We Learned

Together we have discovered that a day shaped by joy and play opens hearts more than instruction alone. Full participation emerges gradually as responsibility is released to the children themselves, nurtured by the team's own enthusiasm, prayerful unity and authentic relationships. In these small circles of listening, adaptation and shared delight, we glimpse synodality lived: a Church walking together, led not by rigid plans but by the Spirit who makes each gathering uniquely holy.



Listening Until the Way Opens

These field notes capture synodality at its most demanding and hopeful: stormy parish meetings, governance conversations across diverse expertise and facilitators holding space for raw honesty. Renewal does not arrive through quick fixes but through courageous listening, patient facilitation and by trusting that the Spirit can transform tension into the unity of shared mission. The Church is reborn whenever a community dares to name reality together and then walks forward in hope.

*“Whether you turn to the right or to the left,
your ears will hear a voice behind you,
saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”*

(Isaiah 30:21)

Wonder

If you trusted the Spirit to speak through every voice - including the most hesitant - what new path might become visible?

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Synodal Team

Theme: A Young Person's Experience

Story

As a young person in the diocese, attending the National Synod in Kilkenny in October marked a significant moment in my faith journey. I arrived unsure of what to expect, aware that the Church can sometimes feel distant from the lived experience of young people. Yet from the outset, the Synod felt different. There was a strong emphasis on listening, prayer and shared reflection. I found myself surrounded by people of all ages, backgrounds and experiences, all gathered with a common desire to discern where the Spirit is leading the Church in Ireland. During it, I became aware of a personal call - not just to witness synodality, but to actively participate in it through becoming a member of the synodal team. It felt like an invitation to step forward, to trust that my voice and perspective as a young person mattered.

What Worked

What worked powerfully for me was the experience of being genuinely listened to. Conversations in the Spirit were not rushed or dismissive; instead, there was space for honesty, questions and even uncertainty. Being part of this team has helped me see faith as something lived in community rather than privately. Journeying alongside others has deepened my understanding of the Church as a people walking together and I gained confidence in sharing my thoughts and realised that young people bring energy, creativity and hope to synodal conversations.

The Pitfalls

There were challenges too. At times during group conversations, I felt intimidated, questioning whether I had enough experience or theological understanding to contribute meaningfully. As a young person, balancing faith commitments with college, work and social life can be demanding. There is also the challenge of patience, as synodality is a slow process that requires trust and perseverance rather than quick results.

What Surprised Me

I was surprised by how deeply the experience affected me. I did not expect to feel such a strong sense of belonging or responsibility. Most surprising was the realisation that just saying yes when I was called to join the team could play a part in shaping how the Church journeys forward, rooted in listening, faith and hope.





FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Diocesan Team

Theme: Governance

Story

We are a small team of lay people and priests in the Diocese who support parishes. Our group brings together diverse backgrounds, including clergy with pastoral experience and lay members with professional expertise in areas like social care and education. We meet monthly to look at procedures and training needs so that we can meet governance requirements as a Diocese. These gatherings allow us to review standards, ensure compliance with policies, and identify practical ways to enhance practices across our communities.

What Worked

The sharing of strengths and perspectives, blending knowledge and experience from different areas of expertise and engaging in open conversation. This collaborative approach fosters creativity and ensures that solutions are well-rounded, drawing on collective insights. Our decision-making is shared and adjusted along the way so that agreement is reached. By listening actively and valuing each voice, we build consensus that reflects the needs of parishes while aligning with diocesan and national expectations.

The Pitfalls

Finding ways to integrate wider national requirements into local areas in a way that helps people to get on board can be complicated and asks us to problem-solve together to achieve good outcomes for all. Challenges arise when translating broad policies into parish-specific actions, requiring careful communication to ensure that volunteers and clergy feel supported rather than overburdened. This demands patience, empathy and innovative strategies to bridge gaps between central guidance and grassroots realities.

What Surprised Us

It is good that we all get on so well and enjoy coming together to work through the challenges. Despite differing roles and viewpoints, a genuine sense of camaraderie has emerged, making meetings productive and uplifting. The respect we have for each other is important. We are constantly surprised by our willingness to help one another even for routine tasks. This mutual support extends beyond formal discussions, creating a team spirit that strengthens our commitment to our shared mission.

What We Learned Together

It's not just about our team making decisions but it's also about journeying with parishes, parish volunteers and clergy along the way. Our way of working thrives on partnership, involving ongoing dialogue and accompaniment. This is a mutual journey and involves us all in adapting to different contexts as we go. We recognize that each parish has unique needs, and true progress comes from co-creating solutions that honour local diversity while upholding universal standards.

FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Parish Facilitators

Theme: Synodal Renewal

Story

A parish faced stagnation: a small, overburdened committee, endless work and a growing distance between leadership and the lived faith of the people. Renewal began not with plans but with courage - public gatherings that quickly turned stormy. Heated exchanges erupted over two long-delayed realities. Voices clashed on heritage versus adaptation, exhaustion from busyness and confusion were named aloud. Through faith, hope and charity, these tensions slowly unfolded into co-responsible discernment, a revitalized pastoral council, training in communal discernment and eventual shared ownership of next steps. The parish began journeying together.

The Pitfalls

Early gatherings risked polarization in the tight-knit setting - voices could wound deeply, and some withdrew when debates felt too raw. Without careful facilitation, dominant perspectives might have drowned others or exhaustion led to disengagement. Initial intellectualizing or defensiveness of habits sometimes blocked vulnerability. Time constraints occasionally rushed closure, leaving many questions unanswered.

What Surprised Us

How quickly consensus emerged once space and attentive facilitation were prioritized - differences that felt irreconcilable became pathways to hard won unity. The practical projects transformed from flashpoints into shared symbols of missionary hope. Facilitators' subtle reading of the group's energy - naming unspoken consensus aloud - proved more important than any agenda. Humour and tender stories of local memory surfaced naturally, softening the edges of conflict.

What We Learned

Good facilitation is not optional; it is essential to synodality. By safeguarding inner openness, preventing interruptions and promoting connected decision-making through consensus and discernment, facilitators help the group stay attuned to the Spirit rather than power dynamics. In contexts rich in bonds yet prone to isolation, this attentive accompaniment is sensitive to wounds, fosters a gradual trust and can turn heated exchanges into communal vitality. Faith confronts reality, hope animates structures, charity sustains relationships - but skilled facilitation aids this journey.



FIELD NOTES FROM FERNS

Group: Our Story

Theme:

Story

The Pitfalls

What Surprised Us

What We Learned

The Mystery of Community

(Inspired by the collective work of parish communities in the Diocese of Ferns)

Once, we huddled beneath the distant gaze of gilded palaces,
where hierarchies loomed, untouchable and remote;
now, we wander the pilgrim's gentle way, footfall by footfall,
through shaded valleys where the soul learns of heavenly grace.

For authority does not come from lofty towers or marble halls,
but stirs within the common clay, carried in the life of the flock,
a gentle shepherding from within, bending low in the hush
of bread broken, hands held, hearts unveiled in silent knowing.

In the tumultuous flow of daily living, the Eternal stoops to serve,
lifting us not by command, but by the mercy of presence;
true power kneels in the dust before us, washing feet with love,
and offering hope as an everlasting lamp to guide our way.

In gatherings that rise and fall like oceans in prayerful tide,
we listen and talk together, discerning through storm and calm;
a path that charts the course with a steadfast, curious conviction,
binding fractured voices into fresh harmonious psalms.

Our lives are a living crown, a belonging older than creation,
rooted in God where community whispers its ancient ways,
to journey in Spirit's breath, a cry through flesh and bone,
Corpus Christi, the Body living, fragile yet breathing as one.

We, here today, are but a fragment of the wounded body,
yet baptism's waters flow as silver streams beyond every horizon,
into the world's hidden thirst.

This is the mystery of our community, humble as clay,
prayerful as communion, courageous as the cross, and
vibrant as the resurrection in the People of God.



OVERVIEW

This is a collection of reflections and insights from the Diocese of Ferns on the journey of synodality, emphasizing communal listening, participation and mission within the Church. The main themes of the document “Field Notes from Ferns” are:

- 1. Synodality:** The document emphasizes the concept of “walking together” as a way of being Church, focusing on listening to one another and the Holy Spirit. Synodality is experienced as a journey of communion, participation and mission.
- 2. Communion:** The importance of fostering deep belonging and unity within the Church community, recognizing Christ’s presence in every person and relationship. This theme is rooted in the Eucharist and the bonds of charity.
- 3. Participation:** Encouraging every baptised person to have a voice and take responsibility in the Church. This includes lay leadership, shared decision-making, and co-responsibility between clergy and laity.
- 4. Mission:** Turning outward to accompany and serve others, especially those on the margins, the lonely, the bereaved and the seekers. The Church is called to proclaim hope and healing through presence and accompaniment.
- 5. Hospitality and Community:** Stories highlight the transformative power of welcoming others, even in moments of scarcity or unpreparedness, and the importance of creating spaces of belonging.
- 6. Formation and Reflection:** Lifelong learning and spiritual growth are explored, with a focus on reflective practice, training and retreats to nurture the gifts and spirituality of lay ministers, lay leaders and clergy.
- 7. Co-responsibility and Collaboration:** The document stresses the need for shared leadership and decision-making between priests and laypeople, fostering trust, mutual respect and unity.
- 8. Renewal through Listening and Discernment:** Renewal is portrayed as a process of courageous listening, patient facilitation and trusting the Spirit to transform tensions into shared mission and hope.
- 9. Hope and Missionary Outreach:** The Church is called to be a “*field hospital*,” reaching out to others and carrying the light of Christ to those in need.
- 10. Conversion of Heart:** Synodality is described as a spiritual transformation that prioritizes patience, presence and shared discernment.

These themes are illustrated through grassroots stories and reflections from various groups within the Diocese of Ferns, showcasing the practical application of synodality in everyday parish life.

Our Future Church

The Field Notes from Ferns provide concrete, grassroots evidence of the implementation of the Diocese of Ferns' pastoral plan '*Our Future Church*' (2024–2030), which envisions a sustainable, collaborative future for the diocese through clustering parishes into 12 pastoral areas, promoting team ministry among priests, and emphasizing co-responsibility between clergy and laity to inspire faith, build hope and live out the mission of Christ. The plan's eight core themes are vividly reflected in the stories and reflections.

- **Listen & Follow** and **Form & Lead** appear in the emphasis on deep listening, communal discernment and formation processes: pastoral reflection groups and facilitators use models like Conversation in the Spirit and SPIRIT for ongoing ministry development, lay ministers grow in confidence and synodal teams prioritize patient, inclusive dialogue to discern the Spirit's guidance.

- **Pray & Journey** and **Worship & Witness** are evident in extended liturgical participation and prayer initiatives: lay-led Rosary groups, rural liturgy leaders conducting services, Flames of Hope events celebrating the Word of God through shared testimonies and dialogue, and youth pilgrimages extending the altar into everyday spaces and fostering communal worship.

- **Welcome & Include** and **Empower & Flourish** shine through hospitality, belonging and lay empowerment stories: pastoral care teams accompanying the lonely, bereaved and elderly with presence, amalgamated choirs and merged pastoral councils overcoming territorial divisions to rotate liturgies and build unity, and new pastoral councils renewing hope through shared leadership, training and involving families/youth in creative roles.

- **Hope & Communicate** and **Love & Serve** manifest in outward mission and handling tension: Jubilee coordinating teams plan collaboratively across diocese-wide events (Adoration, Creation walks, Prayers for the Sick), family carers and urban care teams journey with those in fragility, parish meetings transformed through facilitation into consensus and shared projects, and outreach to margins via remembrance services, bedside vigils and recognizing Christ's presence in the vulnerable.

Overall, the notes demonstrate the early fruits of the plan's vision: priests and people working as co-responsible partners, building on listening sessions to form pastoral councils, embrace lay ministries, reach the vulnerable and adapt structures for sustainability. Challenges like resistance to change, burnout or slow processes mirror the plan's call for patient teamwork and support through transition, while surprises of abundance and renewed energy affirm its hope for a living, missionary Church in Ferns. These field-level snapshots show the plan not as abstract but as already breathing in real communities, aligning with its foundation in the collaboration of the Council of Priests and Diocesan Pastoral Council along with the gifts of all the baptized.

CONCLUSION

The stories in these Field Notes invite us to see synodality not as a distant programme or a new structure to impose, but as the way the Church has always been meant to breathe as the People of God (Pobal Dé) simply journeying together. At its heart, synodality is about three intertwined gifts that the Holy Spirit keeps awakening among us: communion, participation and mission.

- Communion is the deep belonging we discover when we stop seeing one another as strangers or competitors and begin to recognise Christ already present in every face - at the kitchen table, in the quiet companionship offered to all, in the shared silence of a prayer circle. It is the Eucharist made flesh in our relationships: we are one Body because we share one Bread and one cup of suffering and joy.
- Participation means every baptised person has a real voice and a real responsibility. No one is merely a spectator. We see it when lay people lead the Rosary, facilitate reflections, drag chairs into the parish hall, or step forward on a youth pilgrimage. It is the quiet revolution of co-responsibility: priests and people discerning side by side, trusting that the Spirit speaks through the shy as well as the confident, through the young as well as the experienced.
- Mission turns us outward. Synodality is never about turning in on us; it is about carrying the light of Christ outward - the housebound, the bereaved, the seeker or the carer. When we listen until the way opens, when we walk at the speed of another, we become a Church that accompanies rather than commands, that heals rather than judges, that proclaims hope by the way we stay with one another.

These are not abstract ideas. They live in the small, often messy, always graced moments that have been shared in these stories: the unexpected visitors welcomed, the stormy meeting that became consensus, the child discovering the gifts of the Spirit already within them. Synodality is conversion of heart before it is change of structure. It asks us to listen deeply - to one another and above all to the Holy Spirit - so that our disagreements become doorways, our vulnerabilities become bridges, and our ordinary lives become the place where the Gospel is proclaimed anew.

In the Diocese of Ferns, as across Ireland and the universal Church, we are still learning this way of walking. There will be mistakes, impatience and moments when old habits pull us back. Yet every time we choose patience over power, presence over programmes, shared discernment over solo decisions, the Spirit breathes fresh life into us.

May these Field Notes not sit on a shelf but stir us to continue the conversation in our own parish, family or quiet prayer. We can add our own story. Listen again. Discern together. Walk on. For Jesus, the Way Himself, is walking with us - freeing, healing and making all things new through this fragile, beautiful People of God.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SYNODALITY

This appendix aims to complement the grassroots stories and reflections in *Field Notes from Ferns* by providing a more systematic theological framework. While the main text captures synodality as a lived experience - rooted in everyday encounters, surprises and communal discernment - this section draws on Scripture, Tradition, Vatican II, papal teachings and the outcomes of the Synod on Synodality to ground those narratives in the Church's doctrinal heritage. It is not intended as an exhaustive treatise but as a resource for deeper reflection, formation, and implementation, aligning with the Diocese of Ferns' pastoral plan *Our Future Church* (2024–2030) and the ongoing implementation phase of the universal Synod (2025–2028).

As of 2026, the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality (approved by Pope Francis in October 2024 and integrated into the ordinary Magisterium) emphasizes synodality as an enduring dimension of ecclesial life, calling for structural and spiritual renewal through communion, participation and mission. This appendix organizes key themes from the Field Notes around these pillars, offering theological insights to enhance their systematic rigour.

Synodality: A Biblical and Ecclesial Way of Being Church

Synodality, or “walking together” (syn-hodos), is not a modern innovation but a recovery of the Church's apostolic roots. The Acts of the Apostles depicts the early Church as a synodal community: in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), apostles, elders and the faithful discern together under the Holy Spirit's guidance, resolving disputes through dialogue and consensus. As the International Theological Commission (ITC) notes in *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), this process reflects the Trinitarian communion - Father, Son and Spirit in perfect unity - extended to the ecclesial body (cf. Jn 17:21–23).

In the Field Notes, synodality emerges in stories like the youth pilgrimage (“Staying Together is Tough”) or parish facilitators navigating conflict (“Synodal Renewal”). Theologically, this aligns with Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (LG 12), which affirms the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) of all baptized as a charism for discernment. Pope Francis's apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (2018) formalizes synods as instruments of collegiality and co-responsibility, emphasizing listening as a form of kenosis (self-emptying, Phil 2:5–8). The Synod's Final Document (2024) builds on this, mandating ongoing synodal practices in dioceses, such as those in Ferns, to foster a “*missionary synodal Church*.”

Systematic Reflection

Synodality integrates hierarchy and charisms without opposition. Diocesan structures -like Ferns' pastoral areas - balance episcopal authority with lay participation, supporting decisions that emerge from communal prayer and dialogue rather than top-down imposition.

Communion: Rooted in the Trinity and the Eucharist

The theme of communion (koinonia) permeates the Field Notes, from shared meals in “The Unexpected Visitors” to unity in amalgamated choirs (“Journeying Around the Parish”). Theologically, communion originates in the Triune God: the eternal exchange of love between Persons (1 Jn 4:7–12) mirrored in the Church as the “*sacrament of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind*” (LG 1). St. Paul’s image of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–27) underscores interdependence: no member is superfluous, and diversity strengthens unity.

Eucharistic ecclesiology, advanced by Henri de Lubac and Vatican II (Sacrosanctum Concilium 47), positions the Eucharist as the source and summit of communion. In Ferns’ stories of lay-led liturgies (“New Beginnings”) or bedside prayers (“Unprepared”), the “altar extended” reflects how the Eucharist spills into daily life, healing divisions and incorporating the marginalized (cf. Mt 25:31–46). The Synod’s Final Document (2024) echoes this, calling for a “Eucharistic conversion” that renews bonds of charity, especially amid secularization and fragmentation in Ireland.

Systematic Reflection

*Communion counters individualism by prioritizing relational ontology - the Church as *communio personarum* (communion of persons). Drawing from patristic sources, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8), where the bishop presides in unity with the presbyterate and laity, this theme invites Ferns to deepen ecumenical and interfaith dimensions, as seen in the Traveller women’s holy well project (“Integration”).*

Participation: The Baptismal Call to Co-Responsibility

Stories of pastoral councils (“Disagreement,” “Renewing Hope”) and lay ministers (“Formation”) highlight participation as shared responsibility. Theologically, this stems from baptism, which incorporates all into Christ’s priestly, prophetic and kingly office (LG 10–13). The priesthood of the faithful enables laypeople to exercise ministries without clericalization, as clarified in *Christifideles Laici* (1988) and the Synod’s emphasis on lay ministries.

The ITC document (2018) describes participation as the exercise of *sensus fidelium*, where the laity’s insights contribute to doctrinal development (cf. DV 8). In Ferns, this is evident in Jubilee teams (“Hope Made Visible”) discerning collaboratively, aligning with the Final Document’s (2024) call for mandatory synodal bodies and formation programmes to empower women, youth and the peripheries.

Systematic Reflection

Participation requires formation to avoid clericalism or lay passivity. As Evangelii Gaudium (EG 102–104) warns, true co-responsibility demands conversion: clergy sharing leadership, laity embracing vocation. Ferns’ reflection groups (“Pastoral Reflection Facilitators”) model this through the SPIRIT method, fostering discernment akin to Ignatian spirituality (Spiritual Exercises 313–336)

Mission: Outward-Oriented Renewal

The Field Notes portray mission as accompaniment to the margins - elderly, carers, Travellers - echoing Gaudium et Spes (GS 1) on the Church’s solidarity with human joys and sorrows. Scripturally, this flows from the Great Commission (Mt 28:19–20) and Jesus’ preferential option for the poor (Lk 4:18–19). Pope Francis’s Evangelii Gaudium (EG 20–24) frames the Church as a “*field hospital*,” a motif vivid in Ferns’ pastoral care teams (“Being a Synodal Church for All”).

The Synod’s Final Document (2024) integrates mission with synodality, urging a “*missionary conversion*” that extends to digital and ecological spheres (cf. Laudato Si’ 49). In Ferns, this appears in youth retreats (“Engaging Mission”) awakening gifts of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), preparing disciples for evangelization.

Systematic Reflection

Mission synthesizes communion and participation, transforming the Church from self-referential to outgoing. As Ad Gentes (6) teaches, the laity’s apostolate sanctifies the world, a principle Ferns embodies in extending the altar to homes and communities.

Conclusion: Toward Ongoing Conversion

This theological framework affirms that the experiences in Field Notes from Ferns are not isolated but participate in the Church’s universal renewal. As the Synod’s implementation phase unfolds toward future assemblies, dioceses are called to integrate these insights through prayer, formation and action. May this appendix serve as a bridge, inviting readers to delve deeper into the mystery of the Church as Pobal Dé, ever journeying under the Holy Spirit.

Suggested Bibliography for Further Reading

- Vatican II: Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, Sacrosanctum Concilium.
- Pope Francis: Evangelii Gaudium (2013), Episcopalis Communio (2018), Praedicate Evangelium (2022).
- International Theological Commission: Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church (2018).
- Synod on Synodality: Final Document (2024); Pathways for the Implementation Phase (2025), Irish Bishops' Conference, Synodal Pathway Documents (2021–2024), also www.synod.ie
- Other: Henri de Lubac, Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man (1938).

Adsumus Sancte Spiritus

Every session of the Second Vatican Council began with the prayer *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*, the first line of the original Latin, meaning, 'We stand before You, Holy Spirit.' This has been historically used at Councils, Synods and other Church gatherings for hundreds of years, and is attributed to Saint Isidore of Seville (c. 560 - 4 April 636).

As we embrace the Synodal pathway, this abridged version of the prayer invites the Holy Spirit to be at work in us so that we may be a community and a people of grace.

*We stand before you, Holy Spirit,
as we gather together in Your name.*

*With you alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.*

*We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.*

*Let us find in you our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth
and what is right.*

*All this we ask of you,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever.*



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