

INITIAL DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Are you reporting for parish?	Yes
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How many Synod Listening Sessions did your Parish hold?	22 (on-site Catholic Listening Sessions) 8-10 (off-site Nones and Dones Listening Sessions)
Number of unique participants?	182
General demographics:	Age ranged from 12 to 80+. Pretty evenly divided men to women but more women. Predominately white, with participation from Filipinos, and some blacks. Catholics (162), Nones and Dones (20). The 22 Listening Session reflects on-site parish sessions. There were several (8-10) individual sessions to listen to Nones and Dones that occurred off-site.

THEME: COMMUNION

What feedback do you have to report from the conversations centered on the theme of Communion?

The most significant aspect of communion was the power of the universality and global perspective of the Catholic Church. Worshippers across the world share the same common Eucharistic experience. This provides a core belief that unifies all Catholics. At the parish level, the most shared characteristic was a feeling of being a member of a welcoming family with many opportunities to grow and minister to others.

Many groups were identified as being on the margin. These included

- Women
- Divorced
- LGBTQ
- Non-Catholics
- Members married to non-Catholics
- Elderly and homebound
- Non-English speakers
- Ethnic minorities

The Church is perceived as not being inclusive and often not welcoming to those on the margins. At the parish level, there are numerous programs to reach out to people, (i.e., Landings, Divorce Care, Grief Share); however, the outreach to people on the margins is not necessarily intentional or given significant attention. At the universal level, the messages that are sometimes sent have to do with following rules rather than embracing the teachings of Jesus and acting upon them. Jesus welcomed all to follow Him.

The Church is a hierarchical organization with a defined system of decision making, with the Vatican as the final decision maker. The Church has historically listened to the Cardinals and Bishops who informed the Pope. At the parish level, there are methods to collect input: parish council, staff, town hall meetings, ministry heads. Those who are not listened to are those who not connected to these methods. The Synod process has opened the possibility for any member of the Church who chooses to do so to be heard.

Members of Ascension reported that our liturgies promote active participation and encourage us to live lives of faith. Music was most often mentioned as the vehicle that allowed this to happen. However, members encouraged us to continue to grow in the area of liturgical celebrations and to strive to embrace multiple opportunities to encourage participation. This was particularly of concern to the youth of the parish, who expressed a desire for a greater variety of ways to participate and share the Gospel.

Homilies at Ascension were reported as drawing from the Word of God and inspiring the faithful. Parishioners stated that homilies were most effective when they:

- Connected to real life
- Included personal stories
- Were not read from a script

Theme: Discussion and Dialogue

Social Media was seen to have both positive and negative impacts. Although it is a great way to communicate, we struggle to harness it for good, discern the truth, and inform those who don't have access to it.

- Benefit from many options, especially Livestream Mass
- Church is not keeping up with social media
- Has enriched on-line learning opportunities
- Lack of internet creates marginalization
- Social media often distorts information

Collaboration at the parish and universal is lacking for many reasons. An overwhelming consensus is we simply do not deal with the issues. The issue is either a sin or not a sin and there is no further discussion on how to navigate. We need to learn to listen more and become equipped to neutralize dissension and replace it with true dialogue and listening. “Because I said so” can no longer be a mode of operandum.

- Not well-equipped to deal with dissension
- We are simply not dealing with issues
- We are limited by hierarchical structure
- Should be modeling Jesus
- Should be calling upon the Holy Spirit
- People want to know the “Why” we do what we do- we need to inform them
- We need to learn how to listen to each other
- We don’t have the information we need, so we avoid the tough conversations
- We are good with service efforts interdenominationally, but not the tough issues
- Church unites around social justice issues
- People are hurting (LGBTQ, divorced, women, inter-faith marriages, racism, etc.) and we don’t have the tools to help them
- Pope Francis is a model communicator and leading like Jesus

Area of Focus. The Catholic Church is perceived to only deal with the issue of abortion, despite the many other social and/or moral injustices in our world.

- The Catholic Church sees abortion as the only real issue to be dealt with at the exclusion of all others.

How can we improve?

- Helping people understand why we as Catholics do what we do.
- Guidance on how to follow the teachings of Jesus.
- Parents need Church guidance on how to speak to their children about LGBTQ, racism, and the other issues our youth are facing.
- We must continue and improve upon how we manage social justice issues.
- We need more interfaith dialogue to unite us as believers in Jesus Christ.

THEME: MISSION AND PARTICIPATION

MISSION:

Evangelization is still very new to most Catholics. Although we have taken some steps to empower people, there is a significant gap in the number of people who have participated in opportunities to learn more. Most people spoke about the gaps and obstacles to evangelization.

- Many opportunities at Ascension for Faith Formation opportunities

- Witness talks by parishioners are positive
- Need to engage youth
- More opportunities for prayer and scripture are needed
- There is a gap right after Confirmation – nothing to keep them engaged
- Personal relationships with Jesus needed

Obstacles:

- Fear of being rejected, being judged
- Not knowing enough about the church
- Education needed
- Lack of understanding - why we do what we do and why we believe certain things

To address these obstacles participants who have attended Living as Missionary Disciples sessions, shared they learned they have a faith story, and they don't need to have all the answers. Several others also commented on the recent Parish Mission by Casting Nets and the value of witness talks after communion.

PARTICIPATION:

Lay leaders and parishioners can make suggestions but the final decision is made by the Pastor. Father seeks the recommendation of Pastoral Council, and they share their perspective. There is a perception department heads have some level of authority to make decisions in their area.

Key comments:

- Too hierarchical
- Bishops don't even agree
- Parish's take on personality of pastor
- Lay leaders need training
- More people need to be involved in some decisions
- A common problem is follow-up – we don't always know the answer or how the decision was made

The dialog regarding the opportunities to raise people into leadership positions and how they are formed focused more on how identify potential leaders.

- Invite people personally to be involved
- Remove any judgements about the marginalized
- Share resources from the diocese

Traditional formats are used for gathering input for decision-making. Certain groups of people were identified as having an influence on what is decided. Dialog was valued.

- Town Halls/Forums - all invited, few come
- Council advises Father
- No feedback after decisions
- An assumption of discernment
- Small groups,
- Big donors
- Synod process a positive way to move forward
- Love people for who they are not for what they can do
- Stuck in ritual rules

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Central ideas about our journeying together at Ascension

One of the most frequent phrases to describe our journey together is “it’s feels like family”. In addition to liturgy, opportunities to be together are valued. Even though there is a strong sense of connectedness, there are some specific challenges.

Valued:

- Family Faith Formation – engaging the entire family in learning
- Numerous formation opportunities that also help build relationships
- Communion and prayer
- Building a relationship with Jesus
- Engaging the Holy Spirit and learning more about the Spirit
- Sharing experiences
- The many volunteers
- A welcoming community
- Active community outreach

Challenges:

- Need a common vision
- Small groups
- More people need to be involved
- Communication

The Holy Spirit invites us to take these steps.

The topics that were identified most often focus on inclusion. Church rules, rites and dogma often create barriers to loving people. The most frequent comments are primarily exclusion of certain groups of people.

- Female priests
- Married priests
- LGBTQ
- Divorced
- Call to be more inclusive with other denominations
- Listen to understand
- Learn more about prayer and scripture
- Witness talks and testimonies
- Be radical for Christ

FINAL THOUGHTS from Church of the Ascension to the Diocese

The following are thoughts that were expressed by all groups who participated.

Positives

- Universality of the Church
- People are hungry for lifelong faith formation.

Challenges

- The Church is not inclusive. Many groups are on the margin: women, divorced, LGBTQ, non-Catholics.
- There is a need to
 - better explain why the Church does what it does,
 - engage youth,
 - become better listeners and engage in dialogue with others and be equipped with the tools to do so,
 - Ordain women and married men.