

# Walking Together in Catholic Leamington St Peter's – St Joseph's – Our Lady's



Stage 2 Report – July 2023

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# 1 Preface

In March 2022 the report on the first stage of Walking Together in Catholic Leamington (the synodal journey of the three parishes St Peter Apostle, Leamington, Our Lady's, Lillington, and St Joseph's, Whitnash, working together) was published. This covered the period from November 2021 to March 2022. The report was sent to the Archdiocese of Birmingham as part of the consultation for the Synod of Bishops to be held in October 2023 and October 2024 and published to all parishioners of Catholic Leamington. After analysis, five major themes of that report were selected for further discernment. The aim of this was to see how they could be implemented practically in our three parishes.

The five major themes selected from the previous Walking Together report were:

1. **'Building community – getting to know one another better and to recognize our gifts'.**
2. **'Becoming more inclusive and welcoming'.**
3. **'Deepening and sharing our faith'.**
4. **'Prioritizing young people'.**
5. **'Parish infrastructure'** (covering such issues as communications, finance, and use of parish spaces and of technology).

Meetings to discern the actions that should be taken under the first four themes (or 'topics') were held during May 2023; it was decided to postpone discussion of parish infrastructure issues until later – hopefully before the end of 2023.

## **The structure of this report**

The first part of this report (Chapters 2 to 5) is a synthesis of the feedback from the various discussions at the ten meetings, as summarised by the four 'topic group leaders', arranged topic by topic. The four broad topics inevitably overlap, so that some comments made in a meeting discussing one topic may be of equal or greater relevance to another. For example, in a Topic Group 2 meeting discussing how to make welcome the different groups of people who often feel excluded from the parish, there may be comments on the difficulties of integrating teenagers. Rather than report this part of the discussion under 'inclusion', it may seem more appropriate to report it under topic 4 'Prioritizing Young People' where other points about teenagers give it context.

A particular aim of the discussions was to suggest actions for implementation in the shorter or longer term. This aim was abundantly fulfilled. Chapter 6 contains some general conclusions and a long list of the suggestions for action made in the discussions. These have been categorised in this chapter in terms of the feasibility of implementing each one quickly, with some discussion of the difficulties involved and an outline of the future work needed.

Since the Walking Together method is intended to become a permanent part of our decision-making at every level in the Church year after year, it is important to review the process followed and refine its application in future months and years. Chapter 7 contains an outline of the Stage 2 methods used and a first review of their effectiveness.

This report is restricted to the results of the discernment meetings held in May 2023. Therefore, as Fr Stephen has pointed out, some important areas for the three parishes requiring discernment and decisions in the near future were not addressed directly, such as: developing 'Catholic Leamington' from its current embryonic state; engaging with the Diocesan Vision and the rapidly reducing number of clergy; developing a culture of volunteering; and improving parish finances to maintain our existing churches, halls and presbytery.

## 2 Topic 1 ‘Building community spirit by getting to know one another better and recognizing our gifts’

The questions addressed by meetings of Topic Group 1 were:

- 1 What social activities would attract you and other parishioners, especially those whom you don’t know well or who are from different ethnic groups?**
- 2 How could you, and also parishioners who don’t seem to have a voice at present, contribute to decisions on how best to run your parish?**
- 3 There are a number of established groups in Catholic Leamington. Do you belong to any? What should they do that they aren’t doing at present, and if they did so, would you or other parishioners join them?**

The first aspect of ‘building community spirit’ to be examined concerned the **social life** of the three parishes of Catholic Leamington. Since the Covid pandemic and the restrictions imposed to combat it in 2020 to 2022 had caused much previous social activity to cease, many suggestions were to bring back activities from earlier days, as well as new ideas recognizing our greater ethnic diversity today and the growing cooperation of the three parishes in a single Catholic Leamington community.

A wide range of social activities were proposed for the future, some tailored to the needs of a single parish, others open to all Catholic Leamington parishioners. To implement them successfully, a single Catholic Leamington Social Committee was recommended, at a minimum to prevent diary clashes between different events, but possibly with the wider responsibility of arranging some events.

Many proposed social events centred on food and drink, starting with providing tea, coffee and biscuits in the parish hall after mass – well-established in Our Lady’s and St Peter’s after Sunday masses, but not yet reinstated in St Joseph’s since the Covid emergency. It was seen as very important, and there was a proposal to extend it to weekday masses as well. A more ambitious proposal was for themed evenings involving food, music and dancing, in which different minorities in our parishes could share their cultures. A very successful example occurred at Pentecost at St Peter’s when a bring-and-share meal with an Asian theme was followed by impromptu songs and dances in Indian and other Asian traditions. Two participants devised a similar event which they called a ‘World Pilgrimage in an Evening’: each person would choose a place on the world map with which they had a connection (or knew from holidays there) and share that country’s food, customs or faith practices.

Some social activities suggested were fairly active, such as barn dances, line dancing, picnics with outdoor games for families and treasure hunts. (In St Peter’s parish past social events included ten-pin and lawn bowling and skittles.) More sedentary activities were suggested for groups with particular interests – quizzes, study of Church history, book club, craft skills, card and board games. (Some of these are included in St Peter’s weekly Pastimes sessions, and Our Lady’s quiz evenings organized by Kindaid.) ‘Spectator events’ include film shows

and excursions (to theatres, other places of worship, pilgrimage sites). Of course, some of these activities require a financial contribution which might deter some, but it was recommended that where possible (especially for meals) voluntary donations rather than a fixed price should be requested. It was suggested also that church celebrations, such as weddings, first holy communions, receptions into the Church and baptisms, should if possible be open parish celebrations.

The second question addressed **decision-making** in the community – whether in the parish or in Catholic Leamington was left open and may differ between one recommendation and another. There was concern that people whose voices need to be heard include those new to the parish, those from different ethnic groups, and those with a difficult background story.

There was support for a **Parish (or Catholic Leamington) Council** or Leadership Team, to include the Parish Priest. People could direct their concerns to it and obtain information and advice from it (rather than from the Parish Office staff). There must also be a **Finance Committee** for each parish, which should be fully transparent and report regularly to the parishioners. There was a demand (repeated by other topic groups) for a **Parish (or Catholic Leamington) Directory** listing who does what, with names, photos and contact information.

There was also support, however, for continuing the **Walking Together meetings** to ensure communication between parishioners. The way in which the discernments of these Walking Together meetings can be integrated with the decision-making methods of the Parish Council has yet to be worked out. (It should be observed that reconciling existing governance structures with the discernments of a Synodal Church is one of the challenging issues for the Universal Synod on Synodality this October and next.)

It was pointed out that, for the laity to work successfully with the Parish Priest, the parishioners need to know his vision for the parish. There was, consequently, a suggestion that there should be an **open meeting** once or twice a year for all parishioners with the Parish Priest.

The third question concerned **existing parish groups**. About 20 were identified, but there was no clear indication of how many of the participants were members of them. It was felt they needed to be more clearly advertised, and their leaders should all figure in the Parish Directory. One or two new groups were suggested, such as a **Bereavement Group** supporting widows and widowers (mentioned by participants of Topic Group 2 also, under ‘making our churches more inclusive and welcoming’) and a ‘Husbands Group’. A recurring theme in these discussions was the need for better communications in the parishes and in Catholic Leamington as a whole. (This need will be picked up in our comments in chapter 6 below on issues to be addressed by Topic Group 5 dealing with parish and Catholic Leamington infrastructure.)

Although the value of what these groups do was not at issue, their relevance to building community was questioned in the form “Is community a matter of belonging to small groupings within a larger group, or is it what we do for others?”

### 3 Topic 2 ‘Becoming more inclusive and welcoming’

The questions addressed by Topic Group 2 were:

- 1 **Who might feel excluded from church or church activities and in what way? What could we – individually and as a congregation – do to make them feel valued as members of the faith community?**
- 2 **Is it important to ensure newcomers, returners and regular parishioners are given a reassuring and consistent welcome at every point of contact within the church? If so, can you identify ways of improving the welcome you experience or have experienced?**
- 3 **Can you name some benefits of collaborating with other denominations, Christian groups and other faith groups? How can we individually and as a congregation go about doing so?**

Many different groups of people were identified as lacking access to all the parish had to offer or feeling excluded from it:

- 1 **People with physical disabilities or restricted mobility**, including partially sighted, hard of hearing and wheelchair users. Suggestions included better sound systems, large visual displays, space at the front of the church for wheelchairs, ramps in place of steps, adaptation of toilets and other facilities, pre-recorded signing of scripture readings, recording of sermons for later viewing on the website. (Many of these ideas may be picked up by Topic Group 5 dealing with parish infrastructure.)
- 2 **People with intellectual disabilities, autism, mental health problems or other special needs including addictions.** It was felt that the community should show compassion for them and help them in their faith life as far as possible, and also recognize the gifts and different viewpoints they bring to the community. For example, some find the language, rituals and complex symbolism of the Roman Missal impossible to understand, and the size of the congregation may be daunting for some autistic people: an alternative and simpler liturgy in a smaller space could bring them to God more effectively.
- 3 **Those who are sick or housebound (or caring for someone who is)** and therefore unable to attend mass or other parish events in person. There was concern that we may not even know who they are. The Eucharistic Ministers who used (and to a more limited extent continue) to visit such people provided a necessary and fruitful outreach.
- 4 **Those whom the Church excludes from the sacraments**, including many who are divorced and remarried, in same-sex or other canonically irregular relationships.

- They may ask ‘Why can’t I be remarried in church if prominent public figures seem to be treated more leniently?’ or ‘Does God not love me anymore?’
- 5 **Those who** (perhaps wrongly) **perceive themselves to be excluded** by their life circumstances, for example believing the Church disapproves of them as LGBTQ+ or for raising a family with a non-Catholic partner, or else feeling unworthy to belong because of past events such as being an ex-offender, or a victim of abuse.
  - 6 **People of other Christian denominations or other faiths or of none**, who may feel excluded because of what they *think* Catholics believe, or who simply find Catholic liturgy and practices confusing when they attend funerals, weddings, baptisms or first holy communions. We should explain our religion and customs better on such occasions to make them feel welcome.
  - 7 **Visitors and newcomers** (including Catholics returning after many years away from the Church). They will be excluded immediately if they cannot find out where and when mass is; and we can appear very ‘cliquey’ – it takes courage for new people to come in, and they need the reassurance of a friendly face as a point of contact: “A smile or gesture goes a long way to put people at ease.”
  - 8 **Families with young children.**
  - 9 **Children and Teenagers.**
  - 10 **Further Education and University students.** (These three groups are discussed more fully under Topic 4 (Prioritizing Young People and Families) in Chapter 5.
  - 11 **Catholics from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds.** (Suggestions for integrating them into the community were mentioned in the last chapter.)
  - 12 **Members of the existing congregation** who feel called to be a Reader, Eucharistic Minister, Choir member or join some other group, and do not know how to do so. (The Parish Directory proposed by Topic Group 1 would help.)

The meetings of this group provided a list of 30 or more further suggestions for action to make our churches and activities more inclusive or accessible and welcoming. These are all categorized in terms of ease and speed of implementation in Chapter 6 Conclusions. A number of points were made in discussions of this question. It was pointed out that making the community more inclusive benefits not only the individuals included but the community as a whole. Some factors pulling people away from the Church are bad publicity in the media, bad experiences of Church for individuals or members of their families, excessive demands on parishioners for financial support, and some of the Church’s teachings about sin and guilt. It was recognized that some teachings of the Church are difficult to reconcile with the modern world, but we must concentrate on what we can do within current constraints to support and welcome those who cannot practice their faith fully. It is not for us to judge, consciously or unconsciously, but to love one another; as a banner seen in a Scottish Catholic Church reads, “All Welcome – None are Judged.” (There were other comments on our need to develop our understanding of our faith and the Church’s teachings, but those are discussed further in the next chapter, on deepening and sharing our faith.)



The first part of Question 2 elicited a definite and unanimous ‘Yes’ – that **it was important for newcomers, returners, and regular parishioners to receive a reassuring and consistent welcome at every point of contact with the church.**

There were many examples given of participants’ experience, in their current parish and in parishes they had known, of feeling welcome or unwelcome, showing that even regular parishioners like to feel wanted.

#### **Positive examples:**

- Priests who greet parishioners at the door as they go into mass.
- Words of welcome from the lectern at the beginning of mass (a pre-Covid practice recently reinstated at St Peter’s).
- Tea or coffee in the parish hall after mass (currently in Our Lady’s and St Peter’s).
- Sign outside a North-Eastern Catholic church: “Young or old, single, married or divorced, whatever your gender or sexuality, there is a place for you in our parish’.
- A large welcome sign at Coventry Cathedral, similarly listing all kinds of people, which was found to be matched by the welcoming behaviour of the community.
- Signs in a church narthex with a short introduction and photos of their Youth Team.
- A book for people to write their prayer intentions in their own languages (pre-Covid in St Peter’s).
- A newcomer at St Joseph’s told “Come, sit by me”.
- The post-Covid Sign of Peace, waving or holding up hands of prayer, acknowledges far more of the congregation.
- (Pre-Covid) visits to families of newly baptised.
- Neighbourhood groups of 8 parishioners formed to keep in contact with each other.

#### **A few negative ones:**

- No reply or follow-through when newcomers tried to contact church, via new parishioner forms, voicemail messages to Parish Office, forms completed on website.
- In Covid lockdown, a volunteer phoned an elderly parishioner who replied, “You are the first person from the parish to contact me since my husband died 11 years ago”.
- A newcomer found the parish ‘cliquey’ and took a long time to integrate.
- Parishioners are generally unaware of baptisms and other sacramental services that take place outside mass.

the Topic Group provided some suggestions for improving our welcome.

- 1 **At the door.** At some Christian churches ‘Meet-and-Greeters’ are a staple item, but Welcomers need consistent and on-going training like Readers and Eucharistic Ministers.
- 2 **During mass.** There should be a welcome from the lectern, pointing out activities like children’s liturgy, tea after mass, etc. (reintroduced at St Peter’s since this

suggestion was made). The priest must give sufficient time for the new form of the Sign of Peace, such as waving.

- 3 **'Lost' parishioners.** They may have historic networks of people they know who would miss them if they 'disappeared'. Similarly, older parishioners might be better at recognizing newcomers and returners. Catholic Leamington ('EXTRA') magazine articles might encourage people to be more vigilant.
- 4 **Regular parishioners.** 'Welcome' includes encouragement to get involved in parish groups and activities. The message can be given via social media, newsletter, noticeboards, friendly chats, and so on.
- 5 **Contact records.** Each parish should have up-to-date records of parishioners and their contact details, which can be used to contact 'lost' parishioners, send cards on significant anniversaries, invitations to special masses, etc. (GDPR requirements need to be considered in collecting this information.)
- 6 **General message of welcome.** There was strong support for a consistent welcome statement on noticeboards, newsletter, email, etc.
- 7 **Personal responsibility.** It was stressed that everyone has a personal responsibility to create a welcoming environment so that we can share our faith with others, and to be vigilant and pro-active in introducing ourselves to people we don't know or who look lost, and in offering help to any with mobility or other problems.
- 8 **Follow-through.** If people have tried to make contact with us, by completing a new parishioner form, emailing or leaving messages at the Parish Office, they **must** receive a response. We should try to maintain contact with people or families who have had special celebrations (weddings, baptisms, etc.) in the parish or who qualify for invitation to a special mass or event.

The third question related to **ecumenical and inter-faith** aspects of being inclusive and welcoming. The meetings listed the **benefits** of such collaboration.

**There is much we can learn** from neighbouring churches and communities. For example, St Paul's Anglican church in Leicester Street clearly has a large, vibrant and enthusiastic congregation. Study of how they achieve this could be very helpful to us. St Mary Magdalene (also Church of England) in Lillington has a small but active congregation. They encourage visitors by using their surrounding grounds for Lenten and other activities. Are our churches using their grounds to full effect?

We can learn **good practice** in a number of areas. Other Christian churches in Leamington post leaflets through letterboxes to promote their Easter and Christmas services; the Catholic community does none of this. There are great examples of external noticeboards welcoming all (including non-parishioners) to their services and social activities; by contrast, St Peter's noticeboard was widely criticised, Our Lady's had not had an external noticeboard for years, and St Joseph's was out of date, though praised for including information on St Peter's and Our Lady's. A good noticeboard shows that the church is functioning, is looked after, and has an active congregation. (Since these meetings were held, new noticeboards have been erected at St Peter's and Our Lady's.) Methodist churches have developed and

used a training package to make people more aware of their biases – nothing similar exists in the Catholic churches. The Lillington Free Church run a successful Mother and Toddler group, which could offer a guide in setting up our own. St Paul's and Thrive provide good examples of youth ministry.

We have goals in common on which we could **collaborate with other communities**, such as helping the poor of our town. The provision of free meals in the Sikh Gurdwara, and the 'Saturday Friendship Group' partnership between St Peter's and the Leamington Salvation Army citadel on a drop-in centre for homeless people are examples. Such collaboration provides a witness of our Christian values to the materialistic or anti-religious members of Leamington's population. Together we could present a united front on such public issues as the Common Good.

Suggestions on **how to initiate such collaboration** included support for existing ecumenical initiatives such as Christian Unity Week services, the World Day of Prayer (much less well supported by Catholics than in the past), Churches Together walks, Warwick District Faiths Forum, Street Pastors, and community services supported by many other Christians like the Food Bank. These should all be more actively promoted within Catholic Leamington (when better communication methods have been developed), and those who do support them (and also the Parish Priest) should personally invite possible volunteers. It was pointed out that, even when personal relations between members of different communities have been established, it requires perseverance to maintain and develop such relationships, and also to grow in understanding and respect for other traditions and viewpoints.

There was also some discussion of **why we fail to engage** with other Christian groups. Obviously, a person's availability to engage in new initiatives varies at different stages in his or her life. There may also be a fear of theological discussions with members of other churches because of our ignorance of the Church's teachings. Statements like "We are the one true Church" are a poor starting point for recognition of our Church's imperfections and the validity of other ways of following Christ.

## 4 Topic 3 ‘Deepening and sharing our faith’

The questions addressed by Topic Group 3 were:

**You may wish to share briefly your own formation as a Catholic, how you came to the faith. What experiences of adult education within the parish or externally have helped you to deepen or understand your faith better? What would help you to deepen your faith further?**

**What aspects of mass and liturgy speak to you most powerfully? Do you feel you have active involvement? How have you found liturgy to feed your personal prayer? How would you like to be actively involved in preparation of liturgies, setting up prayer groups, etc.?**

**What experience, if any, do you have of helping to pass on the faith to others within or outside of the parish? What aspects of the faith do you find difficult to share or explain?**

The participants were asked first **how they came to their faith**. They were overwhelmingly ‘cradle Catholics’ and had attended Catholic schools. The others were drawn to their faith by personal contact. Many mentioned their parents’ influence and encouragement (without compulsion) to pray and to see the good in others. One kept the faith after their parents had lapsed.

They then disclosed the **experiences that had helped them to deepen their faith**. Sources of theological formation they mentioned included reading Cardinal Ratzinger’s books, attending Catholic teacher training courses, CaFE and Maryvale courses including distance (inclusive) learning, and parish discussion groups with reading lists; also Bible study groups including study of the Bible timeline, some led by priests, others by lay people in the parish.

Experiences developing their Christian spirituality included belonging to Christian Life Community groups, working in the SVP, going on retreats organized by Youth 2000, the Kenelm Trust or St Peter’s Young Adults Group, other external retreats and parish days of recollection. Some had gained from Life in the Spirit seminars, Franciscan Friars of Renewal guidance on living faith in a practical way, inspiring workshops and speakers at Society of St Gregory and *Universa Laus* meetings, choir planning meetings, and Marriage Encounter weekends. Other experiences that deepened the faith of particular people were homilies at mass, the sacrament of reconciliation, altar serving, seeing others’ devotion and love of God, pilgrimage, and key moments in life when they realised how precious they were to God.

**Looking to the future**, this group suggested that what could help deepen their faith further would be:

- prayer meetings to share their faith. (They mentioned Christian Life Community groups, but these require a degree of commitment many might not be prepared for initially – the Walking Together style of meeting they were then attending might be a better starting point.)
- Bible study groups (including Bible history).
- Retreats.

- More interaction between the three parishes on all the above.
- Outside speakers whom they could question or even challenge – subjects mentioned for such meetings were Catholic Social Teaching and the dignity of the individual.
- A point of contact in Catholic Leamington to whom they could address questions.

**Resources** that were mentioned included ‘The Chosen’ series of videos, other DVDs, online material, social media and individuals within the parish; also the Google Forms free survey software to collect ideas.

The need for help with faith development and understanding of Church teachings arose in the discussions of other topic groups. It was felt that there was little support for such development after school age, and much confusion among participants about the Church’s teaching on divorce and annulment and on who could or could not receive the Eucharist and why. Some participants of Group 4 had high praise for **Youth 2000** as having profoundly affected them and greatly strengthened their faith. One provided a long list of Youth 2000 recommended resources (books, podcasts and websites) that could help. It was also pointed out that some people with intellectual disabilities or mental health needs might need additional support to sustain their faith.

Many participants clearly saw the **celebration of the mass** as central to the practice of their faith: as one said, “Mass is the most beautiful prayer and powerful fuel to keep you going.” Some stressed being physically present as a statement by the congregation: “Mass is a gathering of the flock; the physical presence of others is important”; and “Being present physically at Mass as part of a worshipping community [is making a] public declaration of faith and a public *Confiteor*, [and] allows us to relate [to the] other parishioners.”

There were many favourable comments on the liturgy itself. One valued the universality of the mass and the familiarity of its “awe-inspiring” rhythms wherever you go to church. For one, “the consecration and receiving Jesus in the Eucharist” were central; for another, not in full communion with the Church, receiving Jesus through the Word mattered most. Others too prized the scripture readings – one valued getting to church early to reflect on the readings; another noted that a good homily on the Word, to which one could relate, could be very stimulating and give rise to reflection on the readings. Some appreciated the liturgy above all when they were ministering – as an altar server able to observe the priest’s devotion at close hand, or privileged to serve through music. One, even when not ministering, was aware of being ministered to. The music was highly valued as part of the liturgy, whether in the more traditional style of St Peter’s choir or the varied music of Our Lady’s. One comment praised the whole liturgy at Our Lady’s, “readers, music and hymn choice all enhancing the experience.” However, even musicians accepted that music can be distracting, especially in the period of prayer after communion.

**Other sacraments and liturgies** were mentioned as speaking powerfully. One found their prayer strengthened by the joy of confession. Special masses for the sick were held annually at St Peter’s before Covid including anointing of the sick, and were very well attended – one participant spoke of such a mass just before lockdown. It was felt the **Sacrament of the Sick** should be used more often as central to the parish’s connection with its elderly members.

There were many mentions of the **Divine Office**, particularly morning and night prayers, said or sung during Advent, Lent and the Easter Triduum. Participants recalled the sung evening prayers prepared by Our Lady's choir and shared with parishioners of Catholic Leamington through Zoom during Covid lockdowns. One participant prayed the Divine Office alone in church in the morning; another prayed while cleaning the church. Apparently, many lay people now say the Office with the aid of on-line resources (the *Laudate* app or the Hallow app) or the *Magnificat* booklets.

**Holy Hours including exposition** of the Blessed Sacrament were valued, including recent examples held in parishioners' houses; one participant was moved by Fr Sean Gough's speaking to Jesus before the Blessed Sacrament. Another found the Stations of the Cross very engaging.

Asked whether the liturgy fed their personal prayer, however, few participants responded positively, apart from the comments recorded above about reflecting on the readings of the mass. **Liturgy was seen primarily as communal prayer.**

A number of **practical suggestions** for the future were given:

- An '**international mass**' designed particularly for parishioners of other cultural traditions.
- More opportunities for **Confession**.

(Both these suggestions would of course require a priest to implement them.)

- More **Services of the Word and Holy Communion**, in the absence of a priest.
- Revival of the previous practice of the **Rosary** or of the **Divine Mercy Chaplet** prayers.
- Developing the use of the **Divine Office**. (This development is being carried out.)
- A group studying the following Sunday's **mass readings**.
- Sessions based on 'Understanding the mass'.
- Better signage outside the church inviting people in.

Question 3 concerned previous experience of passing on the faith, and any aspects they found difficult to share with others. Many participants had had **experience of passing on the faith** in a variety of ways. Some **had taught it** in a more or less formal fashion:

- As a teacher, helping staff deliver Religious Education.
- Through faith-oriented employment.
- Preparing and leading parish seminars on theology and Church documents.
- Sacramental preparation of children not in Catholic schools.
- Leading children's Liturgy of the Word.
- Part of the parish Evangelization (or Outreach) Team.

Others had passed it on **in conversation or by example**:

- As a Street Pastor.
- As a stress pastor for transient people.

- Leading small groups at Youth 2000.
- As a parent.
- Praying with families.
- As an SVP worker dealing with many Muslims.
- Attending public rosary rallies.
- Witnessing in conversations with non-Catholics at weddings and funerals.
- “Being open about my faith at work.”
- “People crying out for God come to me.”
- “By the example of my life.”

They also discussed **aspects that they had found difficult to share**. This may have been on **complex or controversial issues**:

- Teaching sex before marriage is wrong.
- Contraception, IVF, marriage and divorce.
- Acceptance of suffering.
- Combatting ‘personal truth.’

Or it may be that **the place or context is not conducive** to such sharing:

- Within one’s family.
- On social media, where Catholic views can evoke an abusive response.
- in a forum where radical views may upset traditional Catholics.

Or a **lack of real understanding of what one believes** prevents one speaking convincingly: as one participant put it, “We need more of a lead from the top – we need ammunition to deliver the truth.” (This may lead us back to the need for better adult education in the faith.)

Various **practical suggestions** were offered:

- There was a desire to share our faith experience with others, and to study and discuss our faith further.
- We should share such resources as the ‘Pass it On’ DVD series and ‘The Chosen’ videos – having watched them, we should discuss them together.
- We need a ‘safe forum’ in which to share our views, which is felt not to exist at present in our parishes.
- We need to find or create opportunities for us to be challenged as to “Why am I a Catholic?”
- We should have groups for children under 18 to discuss their faith.

## 5 Topic 4 ‘Prioritizing young people’

The questions chosen for Topic Group 4 meetings were:

- 1 How do you feel you or your family have been served in your parish?
- 2 How can we reach out to or engage with families with school age children?
- 3 How can we help young people to continue their faith journey into adulthood?

In assessing the answers to question 1 it should be noted that the participants did not include any children, but mainly parents and grandparents reporting on the experience of younger family members, plus four young adults in their 20’s.

Many were glad that they (or their children) had been brought up as Catholics, most attending Catholic primary schools and parish masses until falling away from mass attendance as teenagers, though many had returned to the faith later in life.

Many participants felt well served by the churches of Catholic Leamington: a young mother with three small children said she had felt very welcome since her arrival in Leamington seven years ago; the sacramental preparation programme for children not at Catholic schools was recognized as good, and Our Lady’s Liturgy of the Word for children was much appreciated. Getting children involved in ministries or activities such as Our Lady’s choir provided support for young families.

However, one group felt the Church at both parish and diocesan level was poor at serving young people, and many agreed that it offered little to attract teenagers. One participant reported that a teenager who was disaffected with the Church was encouraged to stay by meeting the Catholic Leamington Youth Worker, but lapsed when the Youth Worker left her job. The loss of both a Mother and Toddler group and a Youth Club meant there were no longer any family focused events. The (18 plus) Young Adults Group was praised, but many teenagers left before reaching 18.

Other problems included the time of Sunday mass at Our Lady’s – 9.15 am was early for young children and very early for teenagers; if sports or other activities clashed with the mass time, parents often could not persuade their children to come to mass. It was observed that abuse scandals had affected teenagers – some had family members who had been abused, which had had a lifelong effect on them and their families. Cultural differences could colour people’s views of the parish – some people brought up in other countries saw the Parish Priest as the driving force in the parish, while UK residents relied more on lay volunteers to provide services to families.

Some conclusions and **suggestions for action** arising from this survey of participants’ experience were:

- We need to understand what works well now to develop a vision of where we should go in the future.



- We should try to involve pre-teenagers in altar serving, reading and welcoming ministries if we want to keep them coming to mass later.
- It is very important to appoint a Youth Leader and also provide a mentor to avoid losing them, as in the past.
- We should reinstate a Mother and Toddler group at St Peter's, and start a holiday club for part of the summer holiday season – all of this needs volunteers.
- Possibly there should be parish team focusing on family liaison and support.
- This is just one pastoral area in which lay parishioners should be providing support to their priest(s).

Question 2, on **reaching out to school age children**, elicited several comments on our local Catholic schools. It was noted that less than half of the children attending our primary schools are Catholics, and of them perhaps a quarter come to mass. In some cases the physical distance between church and parish school limits the frequency of children's visits to church. Schools do little to promote themselves within the parishes, so that parents of future pupils have little visibility of a local Catholic school and its activities. For example, one participant, whose daughter was recently looking for a sixth-form college to attend, was under the impression that Trinity College had closed its sixth-form entry, and discovered with some difficulty that it was in fact still open.

There was a need for closer liaison between the parish and its schools, and some felt that all aspects of school life in a Catholic school should be grounded in the faith. One group felt strongly that sacramental preparation should be brought back from the schools to the parish: 20 years of doing so at Our Lady's had brought many families back to mass, which was no longer the case since sacramental preparation had reverted to the school. An alternative suggestion was a programme of sacramental preparation involving school, parish and parents. It was pointed out, however, that children who do not go to Catholic schools often fail to learn about the sacraments and are not surrounded by Catholics at play. The role of parish catechists is very important.

It was also important that children who do come to mass feel welcomed, loved, cared for and wanted by the church family. There was a suggestion that families with young children felt obliged to sit at the back of St Peter's because parishioners could not hear the service over the noise young children made – more tolerance was called for (and better acoustics?). It was also suggested that more parish support may be needed when one parent is not a Catholic or in cases of family breakdown.

**Other suggestions** included:

- volunteer lay chaplains (with appropriate training) appointed to schools to liaise with the parish;
- encouraging 'mini-Vinnies' (school children working with the SVP) to come to mass, with tea and cakes afterward for the families;
- reinstating the offertory procession, where it has ceased, inviting families to take part on a rota basis.

Under Question 3 (helping young people continue their faith journey), there were a number of comments on what had **helped young people in the past**. Young people and their parents had had very positive experience of the former Catholic Leamington Youth Group (led by a paid Youth Worker, funded by specific donations pledged by parishioners). In 2020 the Youth Group took over 40 children to Alton Castle. They talked very positively also about Youth 2000, an on-going youth initiative in the UK, as having had a profound effect on them, greatly strengthening their faith. The interdenominational charity Thrive Youth Ministries inspires and equips youth and children's ministries in the area round Warwick; it was suggested we should examine how they help churches to connect with children and young people. There was praise for University chaplaincies and Christian faith groups as 'safe spaces' for young people to explore and share their religious beliefs.

These comments led to the following **conclusions and proposals**.

- It is important to sow seeds with young people which may bear fruit later.
- Parents and young people must have a voice to talk about their faith in a safe environment, and the rest of us must listen to what they say.
- We should provide some direct support to the faith of many Coventry University and Warwick University students living in Leamington, some of whom have probably left home for the first time. They should see their Catholic faith as a means of escaping or a support in bearing the immense pressures of university life.
- A way to make links with Warwick University might be an event to welcome Catholic students to Leamington in Freshers Week.
- We should try to establish a Catholic presence also in Warwickshire College.
- We need to have Catholic Leamington Twitter and Instagram accounts to engage young people. (Facebook is for older people.)
- We should be discussing issues young people see as important, such as climate change, social justice, and social action.
- We need more youth-focused liturgies – Holy Hours are well supported by the Young Adults Group.
- We could start a newsletter for Catholic young people.

## 6 Conclusions

The Stage 2 discussions and discernments were positive, rich in the range of issues covered, and fruitful in the many proposals and suggestions for action. Although the five topics chosen for discernment in Stage 2 reflected concerns voiced in Stage 1 (the 2021-2022 synodal consultation) about areas where our parishes fell short of our aspirations, the Stage 2 meetings seemed full of hope that those failings can be made good.

### Topic 1

The first topic was the need to build (or rebuild) the spirit of community, that older parishioners remember was once characteristic of our parishes in Leamington. The responses included many recommendations of an organizational nature, often including small groups or teams. One person asked “Is community a matter of belonging to small groupings within a larger group, or is it what we do for others?” A possible reply is as follows. A Christian community is a (fairly stable) group of people who know one another, respect and trust one another, and eventually love and care for one another, and together work to build the Kingdom of Heaven that Christ asked of us. We must start by knowing one another, and small groups and social activities give us an opportunity to do this, from which come respect, trust, love and care. In addition, some groups already work to build the Kingdom.

### Topic 2

One risk of a flourishing network of small groups is that they can leave many parishioners out, and the community is what some described as ‘cliquey’. This illustrates the need for the second topic of inclusivity and making ‘outsiders’ welcome. Many actions suggested on this topic involved teams of volunteers working together; but what was stressed again and again was the personal responsibility of every one of us to take a personal interest in, show kindness to, and (like the Good Samaritan) forget our own interests to care for those who seem lost, neglected, or needing help, so that they know they are part of our Christian family in Leamington.

### Topic 3

The third topic, deepening and sharing our faith, reflected our deep-felt desire to love God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind. Among other things, discussion focused on the difficulties many had, as intelligent educated people, in knowing and loving God with their whole minds. They recognized the value of sharing their individual insights, speaking frankly without fear of censure or ridicule, and listening respectfully and attentively to what the others are saying, as well as more traditional forms of study of scripture and Church teachings.

### Topic 4

There had been consensus in Stage 1 on the need to place a high priority on welcoming and valuing as members of our community children and young people and their families. This would include helping them to develop and practise their Christian faith through all the

difficulties and distractions of growing up. As mentioned above for adults, young people were felt to need a 'safe' environment for openly sharing their views on their Christian faith. A very important factor in achieving all this in the past had been the employment of a skilled Youth Leader. The two Catholic Leamington Youth Leaders of the recent past were greatly appreciated by the young people at the time and their families; they left for different reasons but are still exercising their skills, one in a senior position in the Kenelm Youth Trust, the other as Lay Chaplain at Trinity School. Several suggestions depended on acquiring and supporting such a valuable resource.

## **Topic 5**

Common factors that emerged in several or all the topic group discussions were: the need for better communications, applications of information technology, and modifications in some form to parish buildings. Underlying many proposals are competing implications for limited resources of finance and space. These factors, which we have labelled 'parish infrastructure', are the main components of Topic 5, yet to be addressed in the Walking Together programme. They need to be explored strategically, across all three parishes, rather than addressed piecemeal. It may be that parishioners with some expertise in these areas (communications, IT, finance, and buildings design) should first prepare proposals for a communications strategy, feasibility of IT applications suggested, finance scenarios, and possible adaptations of existing space, with indicative costs and timescales, before making choices between a limited set of options with the help of the Holy Spirit.

### **List of suggestions for action**

One of the principal aims of this stage of Walking Together in Catholic Leamington was to move from discerning broad directions for the Universal Church in Stage 1 towards practical actions to be implemented in our churches in Leamington. Over 100 suggestions for action resulted from the discernment meetings in Stage 2, some of which could be implemented immediately or very soon. Others will need more detailed analysis and planning, and possibly further work before implementation. The list contains some overlaps between suggestions made in different meetings, occasional incompatibilities between different suggestions, and in some cases one could think of possible extensions or variations of the actions which were suggested. Clearly there are not the human and financial resources for all of these actions to be implemented at the same time or in the near future. Nevertheless, some of the actions have already been implemented in the time since they were suggested, and people may be working on others as this report is being written.

An effort has been made below to categorize these suggestions in terms of ease or speed of possible implementation, to give the topic heading to which each of them relates, and to identify where more work may be required to implement them. Since it was necessary to delay the discernment meetings of Topic Group 5, relating to parish infrastructure issues, suggestions have been noted where those discernments would be relevant. The categorization and assessment of further work needed are necessarily subjective and not a direct result of the discernment meetings. It should be noted that it is *not* an assessment of

the importance or urgency of implementing any particular suggestion, which (in some cases at least) may require further discernment.

**Category A** The suggestions that appear easiest to implement, if it is thought worthwhile at this stage to do so, are:

- 1 Form a Husbands Group (building community).
- 2 Card & board games as a social activity (building community) - example of SP Pastimes.
- 3 Welcome to all present from the lectern at the beginning of mass (welcoming) - already reinstated at SP.
- 4 The priest to pause for people to give the sign of peace in its new form (welcoming).
- 5 Article in the Catholic Leamington magazine encouraging parishioners to be vigilant in recognizing new parishioners or those returning after some time away, and to greet them.
- 6 Form teams to plan and direct the implementation of 'inclusivity' and 'welcoming' suggestions (inclusive and welcoming).
- 7 When giving Blessed Sacrament at mass to Eucharistic Minister to take to housebound parishioner, Priest to pray and announce who is to receive it (inclusive).
- 8 Different families each week in Offertory Procession (inclusive).
- 9 Book of Prayer Intentions in different languages in churches (deepening faith) – as done previously at SP.
- 10 Where there is children's liturgy, if artwork done, children to show to congregation for approval when they return to church (young people).
- 11 Tea/coffee after Sunday mass at SJ, and at weekday masses everywhere (building community) – requires volunteers, especially on weekdays. (While writing this report we have learned that coffee and refreshments are now served every Friday after 9.30 am mass and on the first Sunday of each month after 10 am mass at St Joseph's.)
- 12 Open meetings once or twice a year with the Parish Priest (building community) – requires scheduling Priest's time.
- 13 Priest to greet parishioners at church door as they enter (welcoming) – might require adjustment of mass times.
- 14 Provide consistent on-going training for welcomers (welcoming) – volunteers needed.
- 15 Make optimum use of parish grounds (welcoming) – volunteers to review possible uses; *within Topic Group 5 remit*.
- 16 Collaboration with other churches and faith groups in Leamington (welcoming) – can start small but will take time and commitment to develop.
- 17 Establish small Welcome Team for each church to be point of contact (welcoming) – needs volunteers.
- 18 Car lift rota (inclusive) – needs capable organizer at each church.

- 19 Meals and entry to other events by donation, not fixed price (inclusive) – may need small financial subsidy if donations insufficient.
- 20 Bring-&-share lunch for those signing new parishioner form in last 6 months (welcoming) – needs record-keeping and organizer sending invitations.
- 21 People on door to speak to people as they leave mass (welcoming) – needs volunteers.
- 22 Create space at front of church for people in wheelchairs (inclusive) – involves moving pews at St Peter’s; *within Topic Group 5 remit*.
- 23 Create space at front for families with small children (inclusive) – involves moving pews at St Peter’s; *within Topic Group 5 remit*.
- 24 ‘International mass’ (welcoming) requires priest and organizer.
- 25 General pastoral support to Parish priest [possibly covered by other suggestions?] (welcoming) – volunteers [though not clear what experience required].
- 26 More Services of the Word and Holy Communion and more regular use of the Divine Office – morning and evening prayer – all led by lay parishioners (deepening faith) – volunteers will need formation. (Since starting to write this report, a team of Eucharistic Ministers with requisite training have begun to offer services of the Word and Holy Communion every Tuesday at St Joseph’s.)
- 27 Form one new CLC group in Leamington (deepening faith) – requires information session prepared by CLC members.
- 28 Bible (including Bible history) study group (deepening faith) – needs ‘expert’ leader and preparation time.
- 29 Retreats within the parish (deepening faith) – needs ‘expert’ leader and preparation, or organizer to find outside retreat-givers.
- 30 DVD / online showings (incl ‘Pass it On’ and ‘The Chosen’) and discussion after viewing (deepening faith) – needs organizer.
- 31 Regular Rosary or Divine Chaplet sessions in church (deepening faith) – requires organizers/leaders.
- 32 Group studying next Sunday’s mass readings (deepening faith) – organizer/leader.
- 33 More opportunities for Confession (deepening faith) – requires more time of priest.
- 34 Sessions on ‘Understanding the mass’ (deepening faith) – needs an ‘expert’ leader.

**Category B** Slightly more difficult, or demanding scarce resources, are the next group of suggestions:

- 35 Multi-cultural themed events such as ‘World Pilgrimage in an Evening’ (see page 5 above) (building community) – organizer, promoting the idea to minorities.
- 36 Social events based on picnics and outdoor games for families (building community) – needs rather more organizing than other events.
- 37 Social events – Book Club (building community) – organizer (example of SP Pastimes).
- 38 Social events based on craft skills (building community) – ‘expert’ organizer(s) (example of SP Pastimes).

- 39 Social events based on Film Shows (building community) – organizer + film hire.
- 40 Establish Mother & Toddler groups at SP and OL, and holiday camps for part of summer holiday period (building community) – organizer, volunteers and possibly small financial outlay.
- 41 Multilingual Rosary (inclusive) – needs promoting to minorities.
- 42 Providing explanations to non-Catholics of what is happening at funerals, weddings, first holy communions, etc. (welcoming) – writer + volunteers to deliver.
- 43 Providing a consistent welcome message on newsletter, website, emails, noticeboards, etc. (welcoming) – minor tech solution; repainting noticeboards (recently done at Our Lady’s).
- 44 Series of Welcome meetings for newcomers, with relevant foreign language speakers present (welcoming) – needs organizing and finding foreign language speakers in parish.
- 45 Maintain contact with those who had special celebrations in the parish (welcoming) – in the absence of full contacts database (see no. 95 below) needs record-keeping and a volunteer.
- 46 Special mass for people on faith courses or meetings in the past year; or married in the past year or with a milestone anniversary; or who have lost a loved one in the past year; or for families of those baptised in the past year (welcoming) – demands on priest’s schedule, volunteer keeping records, sending invitations.
- 47 Annual mass for people with special needs, and also one for sick and carers including those in care homes (inclusive) – priest’s schedule, organizer, invitations.
- 48 Better promotion in Catholic Leamington of ecumenical and inter-faith events (welcoming) – volunteer monitoring such events.
- 49 Choir exchange visits with other churches, or extension of choir audience to non-Catholic parishioners (welcoming) – organizing, choir practice time.
- 50 Support ecumenical initiatives and groups, e.g. Christian Unity Week, Churches Together walks, Street Pastors (welcoming) – volunteers, liaison with other churches.
- 51 Collecting ideas through Google Forms survey software [subjects and purpose not clear] (welcoming) – organizer with software skills.
- 52 Keep in touch with families on baptismal register (welcoming) – volunteer contacting families.
- 53 Further Walking Together meetings in order to share our faith (deepening faith) – organizer and volunteers.
- 54 Developing use of Divine Office (morning and evening prayers, said or sung) – ‘expert’ leader, believed to be under way at present.
- 55 Group sharing faith experience with study and discussion [possibly same as no.58 above] (deepening faith) – organizer, volunteers.
- 56 Encourage mini-Vinnies to come to mass (young people) – requires cooperation of SVP and school.

- 57 Youth-focused liturgies (e.g. Holy Hours, popular with Y.A.G.) (young people) – organizer and possibly priest.
- 58 Focus on issues important to young people, e.g. climate change, social justice, social action (young people) – priest in homilies, or a wider communications strategy? If the latter, *within Topic Group 5 remit*.

**Category C** The next group of suggestions seem to call for a greater degree of organization, or to depend on technology or communications issues yet to be explored by Topic Group 5.

- 59 Social activities involving barn dances, line dancing, treasure hunts or quizzes (building community) – all require organization.
- 60 Social activity of studying Church history (building community) – requires ‘expert’ and thorough preparation.
- 61 Excursions to theatres, places of worship or pilgrimage sites (building community) – organization, coach hire.
- 62 Opening to the parish private celebrations of weddings, first holy communions, receptions into the Church, etc. (building community) – negotiation, organization and possibly financial subsidy.
- 63 Transparency of deliberations of the Finance Committee, with regular reports to the parish (building community) – rules, possibly selection of Committee members.
- 64 Continuing Walking Together meetings for decision-making (building community) – organizers, interface with parish council.
- 65 Boards in churches with names, photos, contact details and brief introductions of people in key groups or positions (building community) – collecting details, photos, etc. + ongoing administration.
- 66 Recorded homilies (welcoming) – technology; *within Topic Group 5 remit*.
- 67 Posting leaflets through letterboxes for special services (welcoming) – many volunteers.
- 68 Using Methodist software package to recognize biases (welcoming) – negotiation with Methodists.
- 69 Establish Catholic Leamington (or parish) Twitter and Instagram accounts (*not* Facebook) (welcoming) communications strategy + ongoing management; *within Topic Group 5 remit*.
- 70 Promote Catholic faith as countering pressures of university life (welcoming) – requires communications strategy; *within Topic Group 5 remit*.
- 71 Outside speakers on Catholic Social Teaching and similar in open or challenging discussion meetings (deepening faith) – finding speakers, organizing, possibly small cost subsidy.
- 72 Links with Warwick University - Freshers Week event for Catholic students (welcoming) – needs careful preparation + volunteers.



**Category D** The next group require significant preparation or implementation times, or other difficulties:

- 73 Set up a Social Committee to coordinate the social activities of the three parishes (building community) – care in selecting the organizer(s), who will have a significant time commitment if they are also expected to devise and manage individual social events.
- 74 Publish a Parish Directory for each parish listing all group and activity leaders with contact details (building community) – a fairly long process of preparing the first edition + ongoing maintenance.
- 75 Set up a Bereavement group to maintain contact with and support for bereaved parishioners, including an anniversary card (building community) – needs a leader and volunteers with the right caring skills and potentially a significant time commitment + a small administrative task.
- 76 Better sound systems in churches (inclusive) – requires external expert advice, finance and installation; *within Topic Group 5 remit.*
- 77 Large visual displays in churches (inclusive) - requires external expert advice, finance and installation, and for some applications would require additional work for volunteers; *within Topic Group 5 remit.*
- 78 Alternative liturgy in smaller space for disabled or autistic parishioners (inclusive) – ‘expert’ advice, Church authorisation, volunteers and possibly technological solutions; *in the last case, within Topic Group 5 remit.*
- 79 Twinning with other churches in Churches Together in Leamington (welcoming) – this will require negotiation with other churches including agreement on the expected fruits of such twinning.
- 80 A team focusing on family liaison and support (inclusive) – needs organizing and much volunteer time.
- 81 A point of contact to ask questions on faith [presumably other than the Parish Priest] (deepening faith) – need to find an ‘expert’ on all aspects of the Catholic faith?
- 82 Involve pre-teenagers in altar serving, reading at mass, welcoming (young people) – difficult without a Youth Leader.

**Category E** These actions will take considerable time to be completed satisfactorily, though in some cases there may be some benefits from partial implementation:

- 83 A newsletter for young Catholic Leamington readers (young people) – this should be part of a full communications strategy; *within Topic Group 5 remit.*
- 84 Pre-recorded signing of mass readings (inclusive) – external expert advice, long time for signers within Catholic Leamington to record all Sunday readings of the three-year cycle, technology; *within Topic Group 5 remit?*
- 85 Visible and effective connection between parishes and parish schools (young people) – negotiation with each school.
- 86 Catholic presence to be more visible in Catholic secondary school (young people) – negotiation with school.

- 87 Parish Councils (or Catholic Leamington Council or Leadership Team), including Parish Priest(s) (building community) – needs planning, a written constitution and selection of members.
- 88 Up-to-date Contact Records for all parishioners, including roles, interests, talents (building community) – Database, GDPR requirements, time-consuming data collection and input; *within Topic Group 5 remit?*
- 89 Catholic Leamington Youth Club with paid Youth Leader and volunteer mentor to support YL (young people) – fundraising, headhunting, support.

**Category F** The last group of suggestions for action appear to have the longest implementation times, either because they depend on actions already listed above (appointment of a Youth Leader, establishing a connection with local schools) or because they involve building work requiring diocesan or other approval):

- 90 A ‘safe’ environment for young people to discuss their faith (young people) – probably requires a Youth Leader in place.
- 91 Groups for under-18 parishioners to discuss their faith (young people) – probably requires a Youth Leader in place.
- 92 All sacramental preparation to be parish-based or jointly by parish, school and parents (young people) – negotiation with schools and Diocesan Education Service, and additional volunteers with training.
- 93 Disabled toilets and other disabled facilities (inclusive) – external expert advice, finance, minor building works; *within Topic Group 5 remit..*
- 94 Ramps in place of steps (inclusive) – external expert advice, finance, building works; *within Topic Group 5 remit.*

### **Final remarks**

In the Stage 2 planning meetings there was some pressure for ‘quick wins’ – early visible results of the discussion meetings. It should be remembered, however, that if some of the most pressing needs require solutions with longer timescales, it is essential to start work on them as soon as possible.

In turning even the relatively ‘easy’ proposals into reality, a limiting factor will be the number of willing volunteers available and the response of those parishioners who cannot offer their time to make it all happen. This in turn depends on the spirit of community we can build. It is more about transforming ourselves and our values than planning and implementing particular actions.

A major resource we have is the synodal method, which locally we call ‘Walking Together’. In a recent talk, a London bishop, who had taken part for the first time in synodal meetings (at the Prague Assembly for the Continental Stage), strongly witnessed to “the transformative power of listening”, which is at the heart of the synodal method. The Holy Spirit is speaking to all of us – all we have to do is to listen attentively and urge others to do the same.

## 7 Assessment of the Process

### The Process

As mentioned in the Preface, this Stage 2 Walking Together programme had its roots in the report from Catholic Leamington submitted to the Archdiocese in March 2022 as part of the input to the Synod of Bishops. Five main themes were selected from that 'Stage 1' report, to see how they could be implemented in practice in Catholic Leamington. A meeting was held in June 2022 to begin planning the next stage of our Walking Together journey.

The absence of many parishioners on summer holiday, and the transfer in August to a parish outside Leamington of Fr John Cross, parish priest of St Peter's and Our Lady's meant that planning was delayed. His replacement Fr Stephen Day spent his first two months observing and getting to know the two parishes before involving himself in planning or long-term decisions.

A planning team was formed and met eight times in the nine months from September 2022 to May 2023, and Fr Stephen was present at three of those meetings. In late November 2022 the parish priest of St Joseph's had to step back from active duties in the parish, so that St Joseph's has effectively been without a parish priest for the whole period since then.

An aim of the new Walking Together process was to involve parishioners who had taken no part in, and were possibly unaware of the 2021-2022 Walking Together programme. The team started by giving a series of four 5-minute talks at the end of Sunday mass in the three churches from mid-January to 5<sup>th</sup> February this year to explain the Walking Together process and how it would be organized this Spring.

A 'topic group leader' was appointed for each of the five themes, and parishioners were invited to indicate their interest in one or other of these themes by signing up for their chosen theme or 'topic', on lists displayed prominently in each church over the next nine weeks from 6<sup>th</sup> February to 16<sup>th</sup> April. The aim of this was to promote dialogue between each topic group leader and the signed-up members of his or her topic group to find out what they saw as the priorities to explore within that broad topic heading; they need not be the suggestions we had made as outlined above. Then it was the responsibility of the topic group leader to frame three questions to be addressed in the discernment meetings on that topic. They would then book rooms in the three church halls for as many meetings as they expected to hold during May. Unfortunately, towards the end of March the leader of topic Group 5 was forced to withdraw from the project because of personal commitments. As a suitable replacement was not immediately available, it was decided to postpone the meetings of Group 5 until later in the year. This had the possible advantage that the group could then include infrastructure requirements arising from the discernments of the four other topic groups. The questions and details of all the meetings were published on the weekend of 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> of April, and ten meetings were held by topic Groups 1 to 4 between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> May.

At each meeting the procedures set out in the Birmingham Archdiocese Walking Together Handbook published in November 2021 were followed (with the minor exception that the

term 'facilitator' was used for what the Handbook calls 'enabler'), which is described in the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the October 2023 Synod as a 'Conversation in the Spirit'. At each meeting organized by a topic group leader, there were two or three tables at each of which there were between 2 and 6 participants plus a facilitator. At each table there were three such 'conversations in the Spirit' each addressing a different question set by the topic group leader. Every meeting for a particular topic group addressed the same three questions. The meetings took approximately 1½ hours.

### **Statistics**

The ten meetings that were held contained between them 20 tables, with three questions addressed at each table, resulting in 60 'conversations in the Spirit' in total. 77 people signed up for topic groups, though 29 of them did not in fact attend any of the group meetings. However, 11 parishioners who had not originally joined a group did come to meetings, so that 59 people in all took part. Since many of those 59 attended meetings of other groups as well as their own, there were 83 attendances in total. We speculate below on why fewer people attended meetings in this stage of the Walking Together journey than in the first stage in 2021-2022.

### **Assessment**

After completing Stage 1 in March 2022, most members of the team planning and coordinating that stage were exhausted. It was recognized at the first meeting of the Stage 2 planning team that not much could happen until after the summer holiday period, and the next meeting was scheduled for 9<sup>th</sup> September. At that time, the change of parish priest for St Peter's and Our Lady's limited the decisions that could be taken until Fr Stephen Day had fully settled in to his new parishes. By November the outline plan was clear, and the first timetable, agreed in January, showed the information talks taking place in the four weeks from mid-January, a long period of inviting people to join the topic groups, then the appointment of topic group leaders out of those who had signed up for the groups. The leaders were then expected to open a dialogue with the members of their groups to decide the priorities for discernment within the broad topic area they had chosen.. In that first timetable, the discernment meetings were planned to be held in the period after Easter Week until just before the Coronation bank holiday (17<sup>th</sup> April to 3<sup>rd</sup> May); the facilitators' reports would be collated during that period, so that the writing of the final report could begin just after the Coronation.

In retrospect, delaying the appointment of topic group leaders until after the lists of topic group members were almost complete wasted time that could have been used to start the dialogues between group leaders and their members. In the event these dialogues did not really happen, so that topic group leaders had to decide their groups' priorities and frame the questions accordingly, without any real consultation. There had also been an assumption that those who signed up for a particular group would attend the meetings of that group and not of other groups. This assumption was not borne out in reality: the choice of which meeting or meetings to attend often depended more on the convenience of the meeting times and the wording of the questions than on the topic under discussion. It could be

argued that asking people to choose in advance of the meetings the topic they were most interested in was of little value and may even have reduced their readiness to sign up again to indicate which meeting they would attend. It might have been simpler to admit them to whichever meeting they arrived at on a first-come first-served basis.

When planning Stage 2 it had been hoped that there would be more participants in the discernment meetings than in Stage 1. In the event, 59 people came to the meetings, compared with 88 people in Stage 1; many of them, of course, were the same people. Possibly, in the winter of 2021 to 2022, some people thought they were sending a message to Pope Francis that could result in far-reaching changes in the universal Church, whereas in Stage 2 the importance of changes at parish level and the powers of local leadership were seen as much more limited; possibly, they reserved judgement on the synodal process until they should see its results in the October Synod of Bishops.

As in Stage 1, the discussions were held in a respectful and prayerful manner, and the participants generally were very appreciative of the experience. The group leaders, facilitators, and other key members of the team worked hard and carried out their duties well, despite some delays in submitting their feedback. These caused the writing of the final report to start a little late, and it has taken slightly longer to complete. The total slippage against the January planning timetable is of the order of 6-7 weeks.