



# Synodality and Partners in the Gospel

## Overview

Since the end of 2021, the Church has been on a journey to rediscover and embrace the tradition of synodality. The Greek word “synod” literally means “together on the way.” Traditionally, a synod is a gathering of bishops, called together to dialogue and discern questions of importance in the life of the Church.

The Synod of 2021-24 is uniquely engaging the people of God in the broadest consultation ever undertaken. Pope Francis’ dream is that synodality will be integrated into the way the Church functions at every level: in other words, that we listen deeply to one another and, above all, to the Holy Spirit in everything we do.

As Pope Francis emphasized, a synod is first and foremost a spiritual event, centered on the Holy Spirit. In his homily for the opening of the Synod Assembly of October 2023, Pope Francis reminded the delegates, “We are not here to carry out a parliamentary meeting or a plan of reformation. The Synod, dear brothers and sisters, is not a parliament. The Holy Spirit is the protagonist. We are not here to form a parliament but to walk together with the gaze of Jesus, who blesses the Father and welcomes those who are weary and oppressed.”

While the Synod of 2021-24 continues to unfold, we can begin to experience the fruits by incorporating synodal models of listening and discernment in our parish communities as we implement Partners in the Gospel. In particular, a synodal listening process will be an invaluable tool in approaching important decisions and challenging issues. Hosting a synodal session on transition and healing would not only foster this new way of listening to each other - it would also help parishioners process their grief and other feelings about this change. See “[Transition and Healing Guide](#)” in the Appendix.

A few reminders about synodality:

- **Synodal sharing draws on our experiences, not just our opinions.**  
In developing questions for discernment, it is important to avoid questions that can be responded to with a simple yes/no, disagree/agree.
- **Synodal listening is a prayerful process.**  
When it comes to synodal listening and discernment, time spent in prayer and silence is essential. Pope Francis has said that in the liturgy, silence is the essential symbol of the Holy Spirit. In synodal listening, silence helps us make room for the Holy Spirit and reminds participants that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist.

- **Synodality always leads to discernment.**

Synodality is not just breaking into small groups. Rather, in a synodal event, small-group processes are ordered toward discernment on matters of significance to the parish community. Thus, synodality is not envisioned as an everyday occurrence in the parish. It is a spiritual event which we will engage in regularly as we move, step by step, toward becoming a parish family. During the Partners in the Gospel journey, 2024-2027, parish families might consider using this process annually for the entire community and, more frequently, with leadership groups.

- **Synodal listening is a communal event, not a survey or a parliament.**

Synodal listening is not about taking a vote or a survey of the community. It is a process of communal discernment. Listening to one another and sharing with one another, the community begins to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit in the various challenges they are facing. This process is meant to shape and inform, not to hamper – much less replace – the decision-making authority of the pastor and other leadership bodies within the parish family, like pastoral councils, finance councils, and the Partners in the Gospel team.



# Discernment and Decision Making

## Discernment is a gift

The journey of life is filled with many choices, the consequences of which can be far reaching.

A basic assumption underlies the process of discernment; growth is more likely to happen when we reflect critically upon our experience and note reoccurring patterns than if we move from one spontaneous experience to another without explicitly dealing with any of them.

Discernment is a gift to be exercised and may be defined as the meeting point of prayer and action. Discernment is the art of recognizing what God is asking of us - what God would like us to do, and how God wishes us to respond to the concrete situations we encounter.

In other words, how are we called to respond to God's call with courage and generosity? The following are some helpful considerations that can be used when entering into prayerful discernment.

## Prayerful discernment

In order to practice discernment, it's important to understand exactly what it means, what it does not mean, and how it is best practiced. To understand, like any good thing we care about, that it takes time to become well versed.

Not all things in life require discernment but it proves especially helpful when facing significant decisions, major transitions, liturgical changes, capital campaigns and more.

- Discernment works best when it becomes a habitual practice of the heart and is part of a regular prayer practice, encompassing reflection.
  - How do I/we make this a habit in my/our lives?
- Discernment always involves a choice between various goods.
  - What is the better good to pursue based on the present circumstances?
- Discernment is a prayerful process through which experiences are interpreted in faith.
  - Where and/or how does faith fit into this prayerful process?
- Discernment must deal with many voices seeking to capture our minds, hearts, and energies.
  - What are the voices I am invited to listen to currently? It may not be the loudest or most apparent one, but when it is heard we know it's what we are being invited to hear.

- Discernment relies on deep listening and openness to the Holy Spirit.
  - Can I cultivate stillness and quietness, while trusting the Holy Spirit is with me/us throughout this process?
- Discernment assumes that God is continually working in the depth of every individual and community.
  - Do I trust that God is active and alive in our midst right now?
- Discernment respects the nature of time and is willing to wait freely for a decision, allowing for clarification, detachment, and magnanimity.
  - Am I able to find ways to be patient and trust? Am I able to give the process time needed to truly listen to God's call and the movement of the Holy Spirit?
- Discernment blends faith and pragmatism, seeking to discern God's will through radical trust and implementing it in action.
  - It is not soft, but rather leads us prayerfully towards the best decision for this present moment.
- Discernment's authenticity is reflected in its consequences: decisions that are of God if they ultimately lead to life and love.
  - This is known as the confirmation of discernment - life and love!

*Adapted from Spiritual Direction by Robert Morneau*

# Transition and Healing Guide

*Sharing and listening about Partners in the Gospel*

*(Please use this as a guide. You may edit and distribute as part of a session.)*

## Introduction and Prayer

- Share: Exodus 16:10: “And they looked to the wilderness to see the glory of God.” (Reminder to look for God amidst the changes and chaos.)
- Partners in the Gospel Prayer ([English](#) | [Spanish](#) | [Vietnamese](#))

## Overview of Transition

- We want thriving parishes that carry out the mission of evangelization. To achieve this goal, and recognize the changes in our communities, the lack of engagement in parish life, and the diminishing number of clergy, the Archdiocese of Seattle launched Partners in the Gospel. This strategic pastoral planning process is aimed at realigning our resources in order to better serve the People of God so that everyone can be an effective missionary disciple.
- As a first step, parishes were placed into parish families under the leadership of one pastor. Over the next three years each family will work together to creatively re-envision parish life.
- Parish families will be moving toward becoming one canonical parish by July 1, 2027. Becoming one parish means that the people, the gifts, and the resources of the communities will be combined into one parish. (Keep in mind a parish refers to the people - not buildings or schools.)
- ENTER PARISH NAME is now in a Parish Family with ENTER PARISH NAME(S). Our parish family will spend the next year getting to know each other and will learn about each other’s ministries. We are not necessarily combining our ministries or parish teams during this first year.

## Sharing and Listening

### **Focusing questions:**

- How would you describe your feelings about the changes our parish is experiencing?
- Do you have fears or concerns about these changes? If so, what are they?
- What is something you hope for?
- These changes might raise questions for you about ENTER PARISH NAME. If so, what are your questions?

### **Process:**

#### **Step 1: Reflection**

- After reading the questions above, pass out the following “Focusing Questions” sheet and allow time for individual reflection (5-8 minutes).

- Invite participants to choose anything they would like to share from their reflections.

### **Step 2: Small Group Sharing**

- Invite participants to form small groups, then invite them to share and listen to each other's reflections in their small group. (10-15 minutes depending on group size)
- Ask the groups:
  - "Think about what you heard in your group sharing. Think about what struck you as important and significant. We are now going to pause for a moment of quiet and prayer." (1 minute)
- Invite participants to share in their groups what they heard from others in their group. Ask someone in each group to record the key ideas. (10 minutes)

### **Step 3: Large Group Sharing** (15 minutes)

- Ask each table group to provide a brief report.
- Invite volunteers from the large group to share additional comments about what they heard or what they are feeling that is most significant.
  - "Did the sharing stir up additional questions for you? If so, what are your questions?" Invite participants to write their questions on the sheet provided. Invite volunteers to share their questions with the large group.

**Word from Pastor or leader** - We're still the Church - God is with us in the midst of change and transition.

### **Closing Prayer**

# Focusing Questions

How would you describe your feelings about the changes our parish is experiencing?

Do you have fears or concerns about these changes? If so, what are they?

What is something you hope for?

These changes might raise questions for you about ENTER PARISH NAME. If so, what are your questions?