



Roman Catholic Diocese of Victoria

Permanent Pastoral Synod

2025 Spring Plenary

June 13, 2025

Journeying as a Listening Church

In January 2025, Bishop Gary Gordon warmly invited everyone in the parishes and Catholic schools of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Victoria, and all people of God, to participate in Listening Circles. He stated that their voices and stories of life and faith are considered vital to our shared journey as a People of Hope, united in building a thriving community in the Diocese.

The Jubilee Year 2025, themed 'Pilgrims of Hope,' serves as a significant moment to highlight and celebrate the progress of the Diocesan Permanent Pastoral Synod. The overarching goal is to journey together as the Pilgrim People of God, continuing to develop the graces and skills of being a truly listening Church.

This report provides a summary of the insights gathered from twenty-six Listening Circle reports. These reports were submitted by twenty parishes and chaplaincies, three schools, and three other organizations.

*"I ask you, then," Pope Leo said, "to join in the work of the whole Church in seeking out those who no longer come to us, in learning how to **walk** with them and to help them embrace the faith, and become, in turn, 'fishers' of other families."*

He encouraged the faithful not to be discouraged but to be open to "new ways of seeing things and different ways of acting," which are necessary to respond to the challenges of each new generation.

Source: Vatican News June 2, 2025

Invitation to Participate

Participants were invited to Listening Circles through various methods, including:

- Parish bulletin announcements and announcements at Mass.
- Presentations at meetings (e.g., Parish council meetings, staff meetings).
- Personal invitations via email or in person.
- In some instances, Listening Circles were held during staff retreat days.
- Whole ministry groups, such as the Knights of Columbus or CWL, were often invited, which proved more effective than general announcements, especially in smaller communities.

Participant Reactions

The overall reaction from participants was overwhelmingly positive:

- Participants were very appreciative and grateful for the Listening Circle experience.
- Many participants were deeply inspired after their participation.
- Participants valued the bonding and the opportunity to get to know staff and/or parishioners better.
- There was significant gratitude for the opportunity to share experiences and be heard, and delight that the church wanted to hear from them.
- Some shared experiences they had never shared with anyone before, describing the experience as very peaceful.

- Many expressed an interest in participating in future Listening Circles, even repeatedly.
- Facilitators also found the experience fulfilling and special.

Challenges Encountered

Facilitators faced several challenges in organizing the Listening Circles:

- Gathering enough people was the biggest challenge, with common issues such as participants being too busy, cancelling due to illness or other commitments, or low turnout leading to postponements.
- Volunteer fatigue was mentioned in one parish.
- Some individuals were cautious, hesitant, or uncomfortable with open sharing and vulnerability, particularly regarding the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives.
- The questions themselves deterred some participants.
- Lack of sufficient people to lead circles was an issue in a few communities, especially smaller ones.
- Some facilitators expressed disappointment and frustration with the lack of turnout and support.

Concerns Raised

Despite the positive experiences, a few concerns were noted:

- Confidentiality was highlighted as crucial, with an emphasis that everything shared in the circle must be kept confidential.
- It was essential that participants do not attempt to solve others' problems or issues during or after the circles.
- Facilitators were advised that they are not equipped to provide counselling if participants are deeply affected by their sharing; instead, they should encourage seeking emotional support from family, friends, or professional counsellors.
- Several people shared that they had been away from the church for a while before returning.
- A few expressed that they struggled with church teaching, tradition and/or ritual.

2024-2025 Questions for Listening Circles

The foundational questions for the 2024-2025 Diocesan Permanent Pastoral Synod cycle are based the Gospel of Luke 4:16-21. At the Fall plenary, we discussed potential questions to ask. Bishop Gary and the DPPS team discerned the following ones:

- (Optional): What is a story from your own journey of faith and life that you would like to share?
- Question 1: What is your experience/connection with Christ, the Anointed One, in your faith journey?
- Question 2: How have you experienced blessings and hope in your life, in your parish, in your school, in your church, or in your family?

Adaptation of Listening Circles

Facilitators sometimes adapted the questions or format of the Listening Circles to suit their parish circumstances:

- In one parish, the Listening Circle was integrated into existing parish activities, such as catechism classes and ecumenical praise and worship, with modified protocols, resulting in success.
- Another parish used alternative questions such as "How has my Lent prepared me for Easter?" and "What is God asking of us and how do we move forward?", which were well received. The latter question also provided an avenue for parishioners to express feelings about losing their Pastor.
- Listening Circles were also conducted with children aged 5-16, using questions adapted to their developmental level and a slightly different format that required a group listening approach rather than smaller circles.

Future Plans

Many facilitators intend to continue offering and promoting Listening Circles due to their recognized value:

- Plans include inviting specific groups to participate in the fall.
- Solutions proposed for challenges include discerning the best time for circles, inviting ministry groups, asking facilitators from other parishes or schools for assistance, and continuing to adapt questions and protocol.
- Participants could also be encouraged to invite friends, family, and neighbours to future circles.
- Some see the potential for using the Circles for conflict resolution.
- Parishes with multiple facilitators are developing a team approach.
- There is a hope that parishes and schools that have not yet started will do so soon

Key Themes from Shared Stories

Regardless of whether a combination of questions or only one of the three questions was used in the Listening Circle, a reading of all the themes collected from the twenty-two parishes, schools and organizations pointed to an appreciation of faith, family, belonging and prayer.

Throughout the recorded themes, there was a deep sense of **gratitude**.

- Gratitude for **faith** and its gifts of trust, hope and comfort.
- Gratitude for being aware of God's presence and God's love, connections to Jesus and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Having an open heart was seen as a requirement for this awareness to develop.
- Gratitude for **faith** being introduced, nurtured and shared in the **family**.
- Gratitude for the benefit of **faith** in difficult times, as faith gave comfort and hope and was itself strengthened, bringing blessings, surrender and encounters with God.
- Gratitude for the inspiration of significant people of faith in families and church communities and among friends and strangers.
- Gratitude for the gift of **prayer** in families, with friends, individually and at church. (Many expressed that prayer was key to their relationship with God and their relationships with family members, friends and fellow parishioners. The Rosary and praying with scripture were mentioned several times.)
- Gratitude for experiencing Listening Circles and hearing the stories of faith, recognizing the diversity and similarity of faith journeys.
- Gratitude for being part of small and large church communities which contribute to a sense of **belonging**, of journeying together, of sharing joys and pains, being supported, accompanied and connected. Furthermore, gratitude for celebrations within church communities for the Sacraments, growth in faith, fellowship, and opportunities to serve the poor and marginalized.

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Victoria's Permanent Pastoral Synod (DPPS), framed within the Jubilee Year 2025, themed 'Pilgrims of Hope', has significantly advanced its goal of "journeying together as the Pilgrim People of God, continuing to develop the graces and skills of being a truly listening Church". The widespread participation in Listening Circles has revealed the vital importance of hearing the "voices, stories of life and faith" of everyone in parishes and Catholic schools.

The overwhelmingly positive reaction from participants stands as a testament to the success of this initiative. Individuals expressed deep appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity to share experiences and be heard, with many finding the experience peaceful, inspiring, and fostering a profound sense of

bonding. This process affirmed for participants that they “belong. My life and faith journey matter to God and to my Church,” underscoring the power of authentic encounter within the Church.

While challenges such as gathering sufficient participation, volunteer fatigue, and initial discomfort with open sharing were encountered, these were often met with adaptability from facilitators who successfully modified questions and integrated circles into existing parish activities. The commitment to continue offering and promoting Listening Circles, with plans for inviting specific groups and adapting protocols, highlights the recognized value and resilience of this synodal approach.

A deep and pervasive sense of gratitude emerged as a key theme from the shared stories. Participants expressed thankfulness for faith's gifts of trust, hope, and comfort; for awareness of God's presence; for faith nurtured within families; for the benefit of faith in difficult times; for the inspiration of significant people; and for the gift of prayer. The many different feelings of gratitude initiated a longing to share the joy of faith with others and to invite them to know God. This desire was especially strong when it concerned family members and close friends. This concern is found throughout our Church, not just on Vancouver Island.

The reports indicated that there was gratitude for the Listening Circle experience itself, for hearing diverse faith journeys, and for being part of church communities that foster belonging, support, and shared joy. This profound gratitude has naturally ignited a "longing to share the joy of faith with others and to invite them to know God," particularly with family members and close friends.

This missionary impulse aligns directly with Pope Leo’s encouragement to "join in the work of the whole Church in seeking out those who no longer come to us, in learning how to walk with them and to help them embrace the faith, and become, in turn, 'fishers' of other families". His call for openness to "new ways of seeing things and different ways of acting" resonates with the adaptable and inclusive nature of these Listening Circles.

Ultimately, these Listening Circles exemplify synodality not merely as a process of decision-making, but as an "encountering the Lord as we encounter each other," fostering genuine attention and listening to one another's truths, fears, and hopes.

As the Diocese journeys forward as 'Pilgrims of Hope' in the Jubilee Year, the commitment to being a truly listening Church, fostering a sense of belonging, and empowering all to share the joy of faith, remains at the heart of its mission.

“For all, regardless of their role in the Church, the most extraordinary thing to offer another person is "attention". This involves learning to listen for the truth in what others say, rather than just mistakes, and being authentic and honest about one's beliefs. This process demands stillness to truly hear another's truth, fear, and hope, leading to the "right word".”

Source: Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, June 2025, *Synodal Hope: The Vision of Pope Francis and the Future with Pope Leo*