

What is a Synodal Meeting?

Pope Francis is encouraging us to hold synod-style meetings at all levels of the Church, including your parish!

When is this kind of meeting useful? How do you facilitate one?

When should we consider a synodal meeting?

Use a synodal meeting when you have something important to **discern**.

When a parish group meets to decide its plans for the year, we tend to follow a pattern: we brainstorm ideas, pick a few that seem good to the majority, make plans, and pass out tasks. It's not a bad way to proceed, but we usually end up doing the same thing we did last year, or pick up a new idea just because it "sounds good" to some of the people there. Although we may say a prayer asking for God's help at the beginning of the meeting, we're doing nothing further to open ourselves to the help that God wants to give us through the Holy Spirit. We're not consciously giving God a way into our decision-making!



The Synodal process is a **spiritual** one. It is oriented not toward discussion or debate, but toward **discernment**: "We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us." [Vatican Synod Handbook] In a synodal meeting, we **act** on our belief that the Holy Spirit lives in each baptized Christian, speaks to us through our experiences, and moves in the world. We speak with candor about our own experience, and realize in humility that the experience of others has an equal validity. We listen deeply to them. Then, in prayer, we open ourselves together to the Holy Spirit for guidance. *Use a synodal process when you have something important to decide and you want to be open to God and to the possibility of something new!*

Who is invited?

Anyone who wishes to contribute to the success of your project!

If you are a parish group, begin with your own members, but consider reaching outside to others who might have a stake in your plans.

Pope Francis encourages us to make a special effort to include people whose voices we do not usually hear, who are "on the periphery" of our group or our parish.

When at all possible, issue personal invitations.

How do we prepare?

Try to give your people whatever they need for skillful discernment. This might include:

- some **background** in the process of "conversation in the Spirit," such as *Becoming a Synodal Church #3*;
- **information** that will help them understand the issues to be discerned;
- **reflective questions** that will help them get in touch with their own experiences and wisdom related to the topic at hand.

While it is helpful to do as much of this as possible beforehand, you can take time at the beginning of the meeting as well.

How do we discern?

The Vatican has a recommended process for prayerful spiritual discernment. You can learn more about it in the third handout of the *Becoming a Synodal Church* series: “What is Conversation in the Spirit?”

Some important roles

Each small group would benefit from having a **facilitator** during its time of “conversation in the Spirit.” The facilitator aids the group in following the process.

A **notetaker** records the fruits of the conversation. This might include detailed notes of the conversation or just conclusions from the last round. In the latter case, the facilitator might also act as notetaker.

How does the meeting go?

There is more than one way to do it. Here is a simple outline. Adapt the process to your needs!

1. Welcome
2. Opening prayer, invoking the Holy Spirit
3. Brief introduction to the purpose of the meeting and the process that will be used
4. A prayerful “examen”—a review of the person’s experiences related to the topic through evocative questions
5. Brief presentation of information that would be helpful for discernment
5. Conversation in the Spirit, in small groups with notes taken on the fruits of the conversation
6. If you wish, some sharing of the results of the small group conversations
7. Closing Prayer

What does this look like in practice?

One local parish Creation Care Team used a synodal process for a workshop. The group’s proposal to grow fresh produce for the parish food pantry in a plot of land behind the rectory was approved by the parish advisory councils and pastor. The team decided they wanted to consult with others in the parish on what the garden might mean for the community. They invited people from parish groups and ministries, from the Family Faith Formation program and youth ministry and preschool. On the day of the workshop, participants:



- heard a brief introduction to Pope Francis’s encyclical letter on caring for the earth and for our sisters and brothers;
- did a reflective exercise that helped people recall experiences of growing things, of community, and of service to people in need;
- heard presentations from one person involved with an established community garden and another from the food pantry;
- were introduced to “conversation in the Spirit,” and met in small groups to speak about what had touched them in the workshop so far;

- listened to each other, reflected on what they heard, and asked the Holy Spirit to guide them in envisioning a parish garden;

- used a schematic drawing of the garden space to share their ideas and present them to the other groups.

Among the “fruits” of the group conversations were many practical suggestions about the layout of the garden and a shared dream that the garden would become a place of gathering and blessing for members of the parish community! That vision will continue to guide future work on the garden.

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Can we assist you in facilitating a synod-style meeting?
Would you like a presentation on becoming a synodal Church?
Contact us at: PghSynodalGroup@gmail.com.

