

# Hopeful listening to God's Spirit

Diocesan synthesis of the synodal process in the diocese  
of 's-Hertogenbosch



Voor een synodale Kerk

communio | participatio | missio

## Diocesan synthesis of the synodal process in the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch

This diocesan synthesis contains the main fruits of the synodal process in the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch. It contains a description of the synodal process in the diocese, a first account of positive and negative experiences that have been shared, and a first look at the further synodal path.

### Synodal Process

In October 2021, the Diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch started the synodal consultation, for the diocesan phase of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality in 2023. Organising discussion groups and inviting all people of good will in the diocese was a big challenge, especially because of the corona pandemic and the lockdown from December 2021 to February 2022. A synod team of three was formed. The team later received help from Professor of Market Research Prof M.G. de Jong and his PhD student M. Gregori, both working at Erasmus University, for the online data collection and analysis.

The data collection procedure for the synod document of the Diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch went through several phases. During the first months (October 2021 - March 2022) input could be submitted via a opened e-mail address ([synode@bisdomdenbosch.nl](mailto:synode@bisdomdenbosch.nl)). From the end of March 2022 until 1 May 2022, a weblink developed in cooperation with the researchers mentioned above from Erasmus University Rotterdam could also be used. The weblink was suitable for discussion leaders to report on a group discussion, people who wanted to tell their thoughts after a group discussion, people who were not able to participate in a group discussion but still wanted to tell their thoughts and people who wanted to provide input on behalf of someone else. The web link was also available in English. The intention was to give as many people as possible the opportunity to participate in the synodal process.

The weblink consisted of the suggested themes, where the main theme and the three themes selected by the Dutch bishops were supported by open questions. The themes and their descriptions as they appeared in the weblink were added as Addendum A. To ensure that people could find the weblink, it was given a prominent place on the website of the diocese. Furthermore, there has been media attention, and the weblink and its possibilities have also been communicated to the pastoral workers in the diocese. There have also been digital advertising campaigns in order to reach as many people as possible. A description of the participating groups can be found as Addendum B. What is generally striking is that few young people participated. Most participants are churchgoers. Groups that have not been sufficiently reached include children, people under 50, non-churchgoers and expats.

The quality of the input is generally high. Summarising a large amount of open, unstructured text (more than 1700 contributions) is methodologically a significant challenge. Several methods have been developed in the scientific literature to summarise text, both qualitative and quantitative methods with varying degrees of human

involvement. The time for the analyses and the writing of the report was very limited. Therefore, in order to achieve synthesis, a method was initially chosen in which the synod team read through the input and summarised the main points as well as possible. The synthesis was further supplemented with points that emerged from quantitative models based on "Natural Language Processing" (see Addendum C). Such data analysis techniques can use a computer to check what is said and how it is said.

### Synodal experiences

For parishes, but also for the diocese, the synod was something that had to be fitted in between the many activities. After the winter lockdown, it seemed that normal parish life could finally be restarted. Logically, the focus was mainly on that, which made it difficult for many parishes to organise a synodal process as well. This did not always happen. What may have played a role in some parishes was a sceptical attitude towards the synod.

By now, the first step in the synodal process has been taken, and through the conversations that have been held and through the weblink provided by the diocese, all kinds of voices have been collected in which the People of God are speaking. Where conversations have started, many positive experiences have been heard. In general, people have experienced it as pleasant that they were allowed to reflect on the future of the Church in conversation with their fellow believers. People have expressed their desire to continue to talk to each other and to explore these themes in greater depth.

Of course, this also means that those parishes who, due to lack of time, have not been able to take the first synodal steps will still have opportunities to do so. Experiences were shared that it is inspiring to think and share with each other about what the Holy Spirit asks of us as a Catholic community in the present time. Although the results of these discussions will no longer have any influence on the global synodal process, they can offer an opening for the local community to further shape the common path.

In addition to holding conversations, the diocese has deliberately chosen to set up a weblink. This was to give people who did not have the opportunity to be present at a discussion, people who are not involved in the Church or people who wanted to share insights after a discussion the opportunity to make a contribution. After all, the synodal process is a process for all people of good will, not just for those who are active in a community.

This opportunity was used, but of the thousands of Catholics in our diocese, a small proportion used the weblink. It is impossible to say exactly how many people contributed, because it is not always clear how many people in the parishes participated in the synodal process. But the group that is on the border of the church has not been sufficiently reached. Possibly the threshold to fill in a web link with open questions is too high. Perhaps it would be more fruitful to actively invite those who are not visible and to start a conversation with them. Here are opportunities for parishes, but also for the diocese. This does not alter the fact that by using the weblink, more people have been

able to make their voices heard than would have been the case if we had only focussed on conversations.

### Diocesan synthesis

The main fruits of the synodal process for the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch are:

#### Theme: Journeying together

1. For many, journeying together means being in community. An open and welcoming community, a community where faith, joy, hope and support are shared. And a community where everyone may contribute on the basis of equality. Building together on God's Kingdom. Not everyone experiences this community in the present church. Numerous ideas have been put forward to increase the sense of "journeying together".
2. There are experiences that a lot is missed in the (local) Church at the moment. In particular, the feeling of community or contact with fellow believers is missed, as well as hospitality, the younger generations and the conversation about the future.
3. For many people, the Church is less visible in society than before. This is missed: the Church could be more visible, more outward with open doors, and less concerned with preserving what is.
4. More attention should be paid to investing in faith development. Training is an important part of this; there is a great demand. This applies to both lay believers and pastors. People may continue to develop themselves, for example in the area of knowledge about the Bible. Theological formation also includes learning to take a critical look at one's own Church institution.
5. More attention should be paid to volunteers. For example, in training, but also in screening. Vulnerable elderly people in particular are a target group that people can take abuse of.

#### Theme: Travelling companions

6. The first travelling companion is Christ. It is said that an open attitude is important and that all people of good will are companions on the journey, even those who are searching or who do not live exactly according to the rules of the Church. However, this does not mean that the Catholic identity has to be abandoned, or that all kinds of concessions in faith are necessary. Although there are also voices saying that there may be an emphasis on the Church. It was also mentioned that fellow travellers do more than just travel together; charity plays a major role in this. Are we all travelling on the same road?

#### Theme: Listening

7. Listening is seen as a duty, which requires training. First, it is important to listen to God. Then it is important to listen to everyone, not just those who shout

the loudest. It is also important to listen more out of interest.

8. There are experiences that parishes and pastoral forces do not always listen to the community. While listening to each other has positive effects on the parish. Dedicated people should be as important as ordained people.
9. There are many voices saying that the Church must move with the current time, in order to better connect with today's society. At the same time, there is a fear among some that matters of faith are being abandoned for the sake of modernisation. Some note generational differences: according to them, young people often seek clarity and are more conservative than the older generation.

#### **Theme: Opportunities to express ourselves**

10. There is gratitude in the diocese that it is now possible to speak out in this synodal process, and also that not just three, but all ten themes suggested by the Vatican can be discussed. After all, being able to express oneself is the hallmark of an open community. It does mean, however, that in recent years many people have felt unable to speak out safely and without fear. This applies to both lay believers and pastors. The idea was also shared that the Church in the Netherlands would not be so marginalised if people could speak out freely. Opportunities to express oneself were missed.
11. Speaking up is important, but the response to this is just as important. This can be difficult, but if the reaction is not forthcoming or is misunderstood, misunderstanding and pain ensue. It is possible that a culture of fear has arisen within our Church as a result of incorrect responses in the past. There is also distrust as to whether people will listen now.
12. Many people feel that they do not have sufficient command of the language to be able to speak about their faith. There is a longing for this. Also, the language of the Church is no longer heard by society.
13. There seems to be a language barrier between the Church and people's daily lives. How do we as a Church translate the message of Christ? How do we as a Church carry it out in our behaviour, and how do we tell new generations about it?

#### **Theme: Celebrating**

14. Celebrating together provides nourishment and inspiration, and is seen as the foundation. Celebrating transcends the individual and the community. Liturgy and community are therefore seen as equivalent, but not always experienced as such. The attention of the Church seems to be mainly focused on celebrating the Eucharist, and much less on celebrating and stimulating the sense of community.
15. There are many more ways to celebrate than just the Eucharist. The mystery can inspire us in many ways, and more could be celebrated than just the climax.

There are also calls for more freedom to fill in the liturgy, depending on local spirituality. There are various preferences in liturgy in our diocese. For example, there are people who like to celebrate the Tridentine Mass, but also people who like a contemporary interpretation of the liturgy.

16. The role of the pastor is very important. He can either inspire people or lose them. There are those who say that the sermon should proclaim the doctrine, but there are also those who say that a topical sermon inspires. Music is also important. Good music and songs contribute to the inspiration that people experience during a celebration, and are an essential part of the celebration.
17. It is also mentioned that the celebration is not always easy for everyone to follow. People do not always understand what is happening, and are therefore more likely to drop out. Training can play a role in this, as well as simplifying the texts.
18. Young people do not always opt for the parish they live in, but instead they look for a community or place where they feel at home and meet like-minded people. The university campus is mentioned as a place where young people can come together.

#### Theme: Co-responsibility for the Mission

19. It has also been mentioned that there seem to be many people seeking meaning in society. This could be an opening for the Church to offer a low-threshold and limited binding offer for this group of people.
20. The connection between the Church and society is missed by many people. It is therefore a challenge for many people to take their faith with them in their daily lives. They seem to be two different worlds.
21. Making God's Love available to all is seen as the mission of the Church. Welcoming everyone is important in this, as is being a modern and inclusive Church. A Church that is a celebrating and serving community.
22. Charity is where the Church gives hands and feet to many people, concretely in the diaconia and Caritas. These good works of the Church should be more visible. They are also visible in our values.
23. Many people try to spread the Gospel by being an example to others in their everyday lives. They also engage in conversations about their faith. It should be noted that because of busy lives, time for this is limited.
24. As a Church community we may show our vulnerability, and not judge each other for it. We must seek the connection with each other, so that we continue to inspire each other, discover the Spirit together and maintain our courage.

25. Many people still are suffering from the past. It is good to heal this pain, as a community, by not avoiding it.
26. There has been talk of a more equal position for women in the Church. This is not only about small matters, such as being allowed to read aloud in liturgy, but also about the ordination of women. In about a quarter of the discussion groups - when it comes to Church authority (theme 8) - this point about the ordination of women is raised. The feeling is that there is too much male leadership in the Church. In individual contributions this comes up less often, namely in 16% of the cases.
27. The community can play an important role in seeing what happens. The pastoral team cannot see everything. Equality in this is missed. The hierarchical structure of the Church ensures that the pastor is often decisive, this has an adverse effect on the formation of community.

#### **Theme: Dialogue in church and society**

28. There are many needs and requirements seen in society. There is a need for community, for genuine interest. The Church may contribute to this more actively. The Church could also be more accessible.
29. Attention to creation is seen as important, and the Church should call for respectful treatment of nature.
30. There seems to be a distrustful attitude of society towards the Church. Therefore, it is said that a strong Church is needed, not a instructing Church.
31. The conversation with society is therefore made more difficult. The Church seems to be invisible, society does not want to talk to it. The Church's hierarchy does not help either, nor its judgmental image. Nevertheless, there are opportunities. After all, the Church can mean a lot to society: to do justice to people is a Christian mission.

#### **Topic: Conversation with other Christians**

32. It is mentioned that ecumenism can be more than what it is today, and that some initiatives have been blocked in the past. Because of the mutual differences, ecumenism finds itself in an area of tension, but an exchange can also generate much richness. It is good to look for what unites and from there to share together in the joy of Christ, without losing one's own identity. Joint training can be an opportunity.

#### **Theme: Authority and participation**

33. Many participants have the perception that the Church as an institution does not tolerate dissent, is too clerical and rigidly hierarchical, and is too focused on rules. The experience is that this does not promote participation, and weakens the sense of responsibility of the faithful. There seems to be a fear of participation, while there are also opportunities within the Church for creativity and



participation of the faithful. The people of God want to go on the road together with the Church leadership, but is this mutual?

34. In local communities there are experiences that pastoral teams are not always capable of being shepherds. This causes hurt in the community. It might be an idea that pastors could be trained in leadership and conversation techniques, and receive coaching in shepherding. Good leaders in society, such as managers, mayors, world leaders, etc. can be learned from. In line with this, there is the question of whether parishes can have more influence in the appointment of pastoral workers.
35. On the theme of "authority and participation", about half of the discussion groups found that celibacy is valuable, but that it could be optional. Priests who are lonely, or in need of physical or emotional intimacy could function better and be more balanced this way.
36. There seems to be a need for synodality, in which equality and an open attitude are particularly missed. The diversity of people in our Church may be seen as a fortune. Everyone should be allowed to participate. The hope is expressed that there will be permanent synodal processes.
37. There is also the sound that the limits of Church teaching must be respected when it comes to matters of faith, and that change is not necessary.

#### **Theme: Discernment and decision making**

38. Discernment requires education. Distinction also requires an understandable language for everyone, the ability to listen, and an openness to unlikely solutions.

#### **Theme: Forming ourselves in synodality**

39. The image of the learning Church appeals. This does not just happen, but is a gift of God's grace. At the same time, there is the sound that change is deception. There is also an image that the Church does not form itself, and does not want to change.

#### **Other**

40. Experiences from the synodal process are that participants have spoken with openness and vulnerability, and that they responded with respect. The essence of community was experienced in this way. By entering into dialogue openly with each other, a path of mutual understanding can be taken. There is therefore a need for a follow-up, and it is noted that the Church can develop methods and techniques that are suitable for collecting the input of believers.
41. What is striking is that in many conversations a lack of understanding emerged of the Church's attitude towards the groups it excludes. Many active Catholics experience the Church as a place of God's Love for all, and they do not understand why groups are excluded from active participation. This particularly concerns divorced people, people who are part of the LGBTQ-community, and the



role of women. They know that the Church will not change this overnight, but the desire for change is often expressed.

42. Parish mergers were also discussed. Two causes mentioned were the shortage of priests and the decline in income. Letting go of the familiar and getting used to new habits are the consequences for parishioners. Another consequence is that the parish is seen as different communities, each on a different island. In one's own community one is on the road together, but in the parish this is not always the case. More attention could be paid to this. Also, pastoral support is often distant. One voice is that the merging of parishes should be stopped. The possibility of restoring the house church was also mentioned.

### **In conclusion**

There are many desires that speak through the answers. There are many who want to contribute to and support a living Church community, but also many who do not know how. There is much distrust, fed by past experiences, but there is also a willingness to go and journey together. To grow together as a Church. A Church that listens to these desires, is visible and supports God's people in rebuilding our Church together: that is the dream of many. The question is therefore: How can synodality take shape in our diocese and its parishes?

### **Fruits of the Spirit**

The data above are the first fruits of the conversations that have been held and the results of which have been delivered (until 1 May). We hear that more conversations have been held. This report is the result of these conversations for the purpose of the Church-provincial report that is to be drawn up. Some (first) fruits of the Spirit can already be mentioned.

Listening to each other with an open attitude is a beneficial result of this process. Hearing and being heard, without judgment or condemnation: a listening community. Whereas in the beginning there was a fear of extreme discussions, the result of listening, hearing and being heard is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. To allow this Spirit to speak in our communities and churches is to look to the future.

The results show a variety of opinions. Sometimes personally, sometimes as a group, sometimes with a view to personal welfare, sometimes with a view to the future of the Church. Being together on the road requires a change of attitude: from the individual to the common, from the small (parish) community to the world church. A challenge for the follow-up process is to keep opening this view to the larger whole of the church community: from faith community to parish community to world church. To speak of the future of the Church in this way requires a changing attitude from the 'I' to the 'We'.

Central to the attitude of faith is the Christ. From and with Him we speak and think about the church. He invites us to the Father and inspires us as apprentices to go out

and proclaim the Good News, to give it hands and feet. He is central in our journeying together. In our speaking and listening we may depart from Him and return to Him.

What is striking about the results is the absence of various groups from our communities and society. Here lies a task to go out and hear them as well and to go on the journey with them. One in community with the Father.

Where people form a community, where people form a (world) church together, frameworks and rules are needed. These are regularly questioned in the discussions. The continuation of the synodal path requires deepening and exchange.

Attention for helping proximity is pronounced. Can we, as a church community, really be close through deeds? A focus on concrete diaconia leads to community.

The greatest challenge that the synodal road presents us with is the connection with society. Can we pick people up where they are in society, pull them along and bring them to God? This requires low-threshold forms of community, a listening ear and a helping hand, based on the core of our faith: from the Father, through the Son in the Spirit.

A first step on the synodal road has been taken. Many may follow. Further analysis of the many contributions may set us on this path in the power of the Spirit.

### Key recommendations

The participants in the consultation have put forward many ideas for a synodal church. The main recommendations are as follows:

#### 1. Promote a sense of community

A large number of participants think it is important that there should be more opportunities to meet each other, that there should be genuine attention for each other. This goes beyond knowing each other's name. Therefore it is important to invest in a hospitable, friendly and open culture in the parishes, in which the community feeling is actively stimulated and facilitated. One can think of coffee/tea after a celebration, time after a celebration to discuss a sermon, visiting the lonely/sick, theme meetings, pilgrimages together, small prayer or bible study groups, etc. However, a sense of community also requires a different attitude from those who are used to focusing primarily on the Eucharist and living out their faith more individually. There is also a clear call for more openness and less exclusion. There are many who seek, but do not live by, the "rules" of the Church. Too often these people feel excluded and not part of the community.

#### 2. Extra focus on youth & innovations

Invest actively in new activities and celebrations for young people. This requires an understanding of the world they live in and the questions they have. It also takes courage to embrace newer forms of celebrating and gathering that may not be as in line with the traditional way activities and celebrations take place in the Church. These include online

activities (social media), personal witnessing, but also other texts, songs, or forms of the liturgy. A glance across the border shows that worldwide there are quite a few variations possible in the liturgy, without this being at the expense of the essence of the Catholic faith. Holding on too frenetically to a large degree of standardisation and the patterns of the past 20-30 years can be counterproductive. In any case, it is important to see young people as serious partners in dialogue, where they are allowed to show co-responsibility and leadership in fulfilling their religious needs with passion and enthusiasm. High schools, university campuses and student associations deserve special attention because it is here that young people are formed and make choices that determine the direction of their lives.

### 3. Reform the leadership culture

The input has clearly shown that leadership in the Church should be less hierarchical, and that there is a need for more ownership and participation by various lay faithful. Structures and processes should be put in place to facilitate this. Furthermore, it is important to train and coach pastoral teams more in leading and listening, and to review the training of priests with a view to quality and additional skills needed in the present and future. What is also important, is that Catholics should not have a one-off say, as they have during this synodal process. The synod team recommends investing in methods and techniques that will allow for the regular retrieval of the input of the faithful. This is needed by many Catholics and it allows for a healthy and mutually fruitful exchange between the diocese, pastoral leadership and the lay faithful.

### 4. Invest more in formation and catechesis

More must be invested in faith development and catechesis. This applies to both lay believers and pastors, and to all generations. Formation is essential for a fruitful Christian life and for a strong relationship with Christ and the Church. Examples include courses and activities aimed at increasing knowledge of the Bible, apologetics, forms of prayer, etc.

### 5. Stepping out

As one of the participants wrote: "People no longer automatically come to church themselves. Therefore, we will have to go to the people." The aforementioned formation/catechesis and a warm community can help to enter into conversation with people from outside the Church more easily and in a more accessible way, and to show in word and deed what the Church has to offer. Of course, the Church can also learn things from them, and the conversation can be a first step towards inviting people from outside the Church to attend activities and/or celebrations. Although this may be uncomfortable for many Catholics, the Church can in this way become more visible in society and introduce Christ to those who seek him. The needs in the world are great (e.g. poverty, loneliness, contact with nature, decay of morals, lack of tolerance, addictions, mental problems), and there is still a great need for meaning.

## ADDENDUM A

Below is the measuring tool "synodality" used in the weblink

### Main theme: Travelling together

In proclaiming the Gospel, a synodal church is "journeying together".

*What does 'journeying together' mean to you?*

*How does "journeying together" take place in your local church?*

*What steps can be taken to increase "journeying together"?*

### Topic 1: Travelling companions

In the Church and in society we stand side by side on the same road. In order to speak of "being Church together", we must also ask who is part of this "together" in and outside the Church, so that we do not forget anyone.

### Theme 2: Listening

Listening requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice. Nowadays, it seems as if people talk more than they listen. And when there is a lot of talking, other sounds are no longer heard. Listening is much more difficult than talking. To be able to listen well, you have to be open to the opinion of the other person, and not judge them. Listening is very important in order to give shape to "being Church together".

### Topic 3: The opportunities to speak out

We are all invited to speak with courage and boldness, connected in freedom, truth and service. Everyone may tell his or her story. This of course in all freedom. If everyone is allowed to tell what is important, this story must also be able to be received unambiguously in love. We must also be able to say what is important to us.

### Topic 4: Celebrating

"Travelling together" is only possible if it is based on shared listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. We celebrate our faith.

*What does it mean to you to celebrate our (Catholic) faith together?*

*Does celebrating make you want to "go out together", to be Church?*

*How does prayer/meditation/Eucharist inspire you?*

*Have you ever been touched during a celebration by the Word of God, by Jesus giving Himself to you? How do you take this into your daily life?*

### Theme 5: Co-responsibility for mission

Synodality is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all its members are called to participate. We are all missionary disciples.

*What do you see as the mission of the Church?*

*Do you see where our faith takes shape in our daily lives?*

*How do you help in the task of spreading the Gospel?*

*How can we help each other to do this?*

### **Topic 6: Dialogue in church and society**

Dialogue requires perseverance and patience, but it also enables mutual understanding.

*Who do we (as the Church) meet in our neighbourhood, village or city?*

*Are we aware of what is happening around us (as the Church)?*

*What needs do you see in today's Netherlands and the world?*

*How can the Church contribute to alleviating the needs in our neighbourhood? Where in your parish does the conversation between your Church and society take place?*

*Do you think there are opportunities for the Church to engage with society?*

*What can the Church learn from society?*

### **Topic 7: The dialogue with other Christians**

The dialogue between Christians of different origins, united by one baptism, has a special place on the synodal road. In spite of the great differences, there are also many similarities between the various Christian churches. It is therefore important, when we speak of "being Church together", also to speak of communion with other Christians.

### **Theme 8: Authority and participation**

A synodical Church is a participating and co-responsible Church. To be Church together, it is also important that enough people participate and want to take responsibility. The way in which leadership is exercised within the Church affects this.

### **Theme 9: Discernment and decision making**

In a synodal manner, decisions are made by discernment, based on a consensus that comes from common obedience to the Spirit. Making decisions within the Church is more than just making a choice or a majority vote. There are often many interests, desires and emotions at play. Examining these influences on the decision is called discernment. In this way we try to find out what the Holy Spirit wants to say to us, through the whole Church community.

### **Theme 10: Forming ourselves in synodality**

The spirituality of walking together is called to become a learning principle for the formation of the human person and of the Christian, of families and of communities. If we want to be Church together, to walk together, we must accept that things do not always go as we expect. Being "Church together" also creates the expectation that we will change, form ourselves, and learn as we go. That is what being together on the road requires from us.

## ADDENDUM B

**TABLE B1**  
Demographic description of participants (individuals)

Variable	Value	Percentage
Gender	Man	58%
	Woman	42%
Age	Age under 30	3.2%
	Age between 30 and 50 years	16.7%
	Age above 50 years	30.9%
	Age over 65	49.2%
Relationship status	Married and living together with husband/wife	60,8%
	Married but living apart from husband/wife	1.6%
	Permanent relationship, cohabiting	4.0%
	Permanent relationship, not living together	3.2%
	Divorced and no relationship	3.2%
	Widow and no relation	8.0%
	No steady relationship and never been married	19.2%
Education level	Primary and secondary vocational education	16%
	Higher vocational education (HBO/ HEAO)	26%
	University	38%
	Otherwise	20%
Number of inhabitants city	Less than 5,000 people	4.8%
	5,000-10,000 people	12.8%
	10,000-50,000 people	42.2%
	50,000-100,000 people	14.4%
	100,000-200,000 people	11.2%
	More than 200,000 people	14.4%

Church previous to corona	(at least) 1 time per week	59.2%
	2 times a month	17.6%
	1 time per month	7.2%
	A few times a year	10.4%
	Only at Christmas/Easter	0.8%
	I did not go to church	4.8%
Church after corona	(at least) 1 time per week	52.0%
	2 times a month	15.2%
	1 time per month	8.8%
	A few times a year	13.6%
	Only at Christmas/Easter	0.8%
	I do not go to church	9.6%

TABLE B2  
Background questions related to the Catholic faith  
(Yes/No questions)

	% yes
Did you contribute to the Actie Kerkbalans last year?	74
Do you ever talk to other people about your faith?	94
Would you be willing to travel longer to attend a Eucharistic celebration?	68
Do you currently have good contact with other believers (e.g. fellow parishioners)?	77
Before the corona pandemic started, did you have good contact with other believers (e.g. fellow parishioners)?	87
Were you raised Catholic?	92

TABLE B3  
Sample distribution groups

	Number (in case of individual contribution after group session)	Number (group input)
Web link		
Diocesan groups	8	3
Parish Council	6	1
Pastoral team	16	1
Parish group liturgy	5	3
Parish Group Diac-nate	4	0
Parish group catechesis	4	1



Youth group	6	2
Family group	20	0
Friends group	23	0
Prayer group/Bible study group	10	4
Other groups	16 (choir, religious, interested parishioners, ecumenical discussion group Woman and Faith, sexual abuse mediation group, rkdocumenten.nl and other websites, KBO discussion group, pastor's wreath, theology professors)	25 (Church at Work, delegation + parish contact council, women parishioners and groups, family chaplaincy, whole parish, Agriculture and Society, discussion groups network meeting, national group on sexual abuse, site administration/ council, working group on the elderly and sick, congregations and faith community
Groups via e-mail		26 (parishes, abbey, church council, ecumenism, discussion groups)
Total	118	40+26=66

## ADDENDUM C

### Methods of scientific data analysis used

To achieve synthesis, various scientific methods based on "Natural Language Processing" have been used. Such data analysis techniques can, with the help of a computer, check **what** is being said and **how** it is being said<sup>1</sup>. A brief description of the methods used is given below.

1. *Analysis of word frequencies.* Based on all open text submitted, it is possible to calculate which words, which combinations of two words, and which combinations of three words occur most often in the contributions (unigrams, bigrams, trigrams). For this, the text corpus was first cleaned (removal of stop words, punctuation, numbers, unnecessary spaces, etc.). A follow-up analysis concerns the calculation of word correlations, i.e., which two words often occur together in specific contributions (without these two words having to appear next to each other).

2. *Lexicon-based classification.* The text corpus can be easily searched for all contributions containing specific words or combinations of words, via a self-assembled lexicon (word list). A specific lexicon can be compiled per topic. Some examples of lexicons used are: ("female", "female", "women"), ("celibacy", "celibate", "married", "unmarried", "unmarried", "married", "married", "marrying"), ("young", "youth", "young", "children", "youth choir", "elderly", "old", "old", "generation", "generations")

3. *Sentiment analysis.* Sentiment analysis can provide insight into positive, neutral or negative sentiment with regard to specific topics. For this purpose, it is necessary to first break down all contributions into separate sentences, after which an analysis can be done at sentence level. There are various models for determining sentiment, from relatively simple (based on rules and/or word lists) to complex (based on neural networks). Here, a simple sentiment analysis based on VADER<sup>2</sup> was chosen. VADER ("Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner") is a well-known rule-based algorithm that can determine sentiment.

4. *Topic models.* These models attempt to reveal the hidden semantic structure in a collection of contributions. They assume that in each contribution one or more topics emerge, each topic being characterised by a specific set of words (formally, a "topic" in this model is defined as a probability distribution over the entire vocabulary of the text corpus). Models based on *word embeddings* were used as well as more traditional models based on *bags-of-words*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Berger, J. & Packard, G. (2021). "Using Natural Language Processing to Understand People and Culture," *American Psychologist*, Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000882>

<sup>2</sup> Hutto, C.J. & Gilbert, E.E. (2014). "VADER: A Parsimonious Rule-based Model for Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Text," *Eighth International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM-14)*. Ann Arbor, MI, June 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Dieng, A.B., Ruiz, F.J.R., & Blei, D.M. (2020). "Topic Modeling in Embedding Spaces," *Transactions of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 8, 439-453.

Roberts, M.E., Stewart, B.M. & Airolidi, E.M. (2016). "A Model of Text for Experimentation in the Social Sciences," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 111, 988-1003.

5. *Clustering of sentences.* The most advanced method used to identify topics in the text corpus is based on the clustering of similar sentences, after which these clusters can be named. To determine whether sentences are similar, each sentence is represented in a vector space based on the sentence-BERT model<sup>4</sup>. BERT models have been trained on (hundreds of) millions to billions of text pages in multiple languages and are among the most advanced language models. After all sentences are mapped into a vector space, a dimension reduction algorithm is applied (UMAP<sup>5</sup>), after which a clustering algorithm is used (HDBSCAN<sup>6</sup>). The clusters are then named according to the sentences that belong to a cluster.

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<sup>4</sup> Reimers, N. & Gurevych, I. (2019). "Sentence-BERT: Sentence Embeddings Using Siamese BERT-Networks," *Proceedings of the 2019 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, 11, Association for Computational Linguistics.

<sup>5</sup> McInnes, L., Healy, J. & Melville, J. (2020). "UMAP: Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection for Dimension Reduction," <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1802.03426.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Campello, R.J.G.B., Moulavi, D. & Sander, J. (2013). "Density-Based Clustering Based on Hierarchical Density Estimates." In *Pacific-Asia Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining*, 160-72. Springer. doi:10.1007/978-3-642-37456-2\_14.