News



Pope Francis greets Cynthia Bailey Manns, a synod member and director of adult learning at St. Joan of Arc Parish in Minneapolis, before a session of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops Oct. 17, 2023, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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When Jane Leyden Cavanaugh learned the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis was holding synodal listening sessions in February, she not only marked her calendar, but also volunteered to be a scribe or facilitator.

Cavanaugh was able to share her thoughts about expanding women's leadership in the church during the two virtual sessions, which attracted more than 200 attendees. Among those listening were Archbishop Bernard Hebda and synod delegate Cynthia Bailey Manns, who works at a Minneapolis parish.

Although the diocesan listening session was a "big tent experience," with a broad variety of concerns voiced by participants, many were concerned about women's issues, said Cavanaugh, who is also involved in advocacy for women deacons.

Calls for fuller participation of women in church leadership have been heard throughout the multiyear synod process, beginning with the global consultation process in 2022-23, followed by continental assemblies, then a monthlong summit last October at the Vatican.

In the synthesis document produced at the end of the Rome meeting, the need to "ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry" was among only a few issues described as "urgent."



Pope Francis shares a laugh with some of the female members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops, including Spanish theologian Cristina Inogés Sanz, left, at the assembly's session Oct. 6, 2023, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. Women and laity were voting members of the synod assembly for the first time in 2023. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Now, as the process has moved into its next phase — another round of local and national consultations, followed by a final meeting this October — the call for expanded roles for women continues. Even as the Vatican seems to have spun off the topic of women deacons into one of its study groups, advocates say they remain committed to the synodal process and hopeful despite some concerns about the pace of the process.

"We just need to keep making our voices heard," said Russ Petrus, executive director of FutureChurch, a church reform organization. "As long as we keep lifting up and raising these issues, they can't be ignored."

Related: Diocesan listening session reports address church's 'successes and distresses' ahead of October synod session

Mary Magdalene goes to the synod

There was a bit of a lull in public synod activity after the October 2023 summit in Rome, but this spring dioceses and archdioceses were once again invited to hold listening sessions to consider two key questions: "Where have I seen or experienced successes — and distresses — within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?" and "How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?"

In addition to listening sessions held at parishes, dioceses and archdioceses, a number of reform groups also sponsored events to contribute to what will become a national report compiled by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The bishops' conference also held 17 national listening sessions on particular synod focus areas, including one on women.



Mary Magdalene is pictured in a stained-glass window in the Church of St. Waudru in Mons, Belgium. (CNS photo)

FutureChurch sponsored three listening sessions during Lent, attended by about 100 people, many of whom said the synod was being ignored or even actively resisted in their own parish or diocese, according to Petrus.* Manns, the synod delegate from Minnesota, attended as part of her own preparation for the upcoming meeting.

The listening sessions were "energizing," Petrus said. "They have given people a deeper sense of community and solidarity with other Catholics who have the same concerns that they do."

But the listening sessions are not the only way that FutureChurch is engaging with the synod. A new project, called "Mary Magadalene Goes to the Synod," addresses the synod's mention of the need to widen liturgical texts to include "a range of words, images and narratives that draw more widely on women’s experience," as the October synthesis document said.

Several analyses have identified a woman gap in the Sunday readings, with a disproportionate number of passages about women omitted or relegated to weekday Masses.

FutureChurch is reaching out to synod participants and bishops, as well as the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine and the Vatican Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, with an open letter calling for, at the very least, the Lectionary reading from the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John to include the verses that describe Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene and his commissioning of her to proclaim the Resurrection to the other disciples.

"We can't honestly have a conversation about the role of women in the church without talking about the role that women have played throughout salvation history," he said.

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So far, more than 4,300 people have signed the open letter, Petrus said. In addition, nearly 50 people have trained to be "Mary Magdalene advocates" to promote the issue.

Petrus said FutureChurch members, many of whom have been calling for church reform for decades, see the synod as a "significant step forward from the Vatican." But he worries that if real progress is not made on reform issues, it may be the "final straw" for these "vestibule Catholics" with one foot in the door of the church and one foot out.

"I think what comes out of the synod will have an impact on where their feet land, on one side of that line or the other," he said.

More listening

National reports from this year's rounds of consultation are due to the Holy See by May 15. Julia McStravog, the bishops' senior adviser for the synod, told Our Sunday Visitor News that the national report will be made public. (The U.S. bishops' conference did not respond to NCR's repeated attempts for comment.)

The national report will synthesize input from listening sessions in 15 regions around the country as well as from "Region 16," a designation for non-geographical groups. It also will be informed by the contributions from the 17 additional national, topical listening sessions organized by the U.S. bishops' conference.

Synod on synodality stories

Read NCR's coverage of the October 2023 assembly of the Synod of Bishops on synodality and plans for the second assembly Oct. 2-27.

Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, which advocates for the ordination of women to priesthood and the diaconate, was an attendee at the national listening session on women.

Although the bishops' conference required attendees at these sessions to abide by a confidentiality agreement, McElwee said she could share that she found the experience "fulfilling" and was pleasantly surprised to be included.

"Overall, people seemed really grateful for a space to talk freely, especially because in some places some topics are off the table," she told NCR.

Leadership from Discerning Deacons, a group that advocates for the restoration of women deacons, was not invited to the national listening session on women, said co-director Casey Stanton. A representative from the group did participate in a session for "Region 16."

Rather than hold its own listening sessions, Discerning Deacons chose to encourage members to attend local ones and instead focused the group's energy on continuing to "prepare the ground" for women deacons.



A woman holds a sign in support of women deacons as Pope Francis leads his general audience in St. Peter's Square Nov. 6, 2019, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

That includes telling the stories of women who already do diaconal work and of the communities that are ready to accept women deacons — especially to those who will be going to Rome for the next October summit, she said.

Discerning Deacons also held a virtual event on "Renewing a Prophetic Diaconate for a Co-responsible Church," on April 29, which was attended by more than 1,000 people, including several synod delegates. In addition to small-group "conversations in the Spirit," the event featured testimony from four people.

Aimee Shelide Mayer of Nashville, Tennessee, shared that in her work as a retreat leader, Catholics often assume that retreats will be led by a priest, deacon or sister. "It is still hard for Catholics to receive women's ministry as being real in the church," she said.

The Women's Ordination Conference held its own listening sessions for about 150 people in March. Although participants expressed a "renewed sense of hope in the synod process," McElwee also said there was some hunger for the process to move more quickly. "Some people have been waiting generations for this to happen," she said.

The issue of women's leadership in the church also was a significant topic of conversation at listening sessions organized by the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics, said Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of DignityUSA, which works for respect and justice for LGBTQ Catholics.

She said women's ministry is important to LGBTQ Catholics, many of whom turn to female chaplains, pastoral associates or women priests when they are refused ministry in Catholic parishes. "We wanted to be sure there were testimonies not only that official recognition of women's ministry was needed but that it's already going on and how impactful it is."



The people who presented the working document for the Synod of Bishops pose June 20, 2023, at the Vatican press office. From the left are Helena Jeppesen-Spuhler, a synod participant from Switzerland; Sr. Nadia Coppa, president of the women's International Union of Superiors General; Cardinal Mario Grech, synod secretary-general; Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, synod relator general; and Jesuit Fr. Giacomo Costa, a consultant to the synod. (CNS/Cindy Wooden)

"For some folks, even more than queer issues being addressed, there was deeper conversation around women's issues in our sessions," she said.

In Switzerland, the role of women is the "No. 1 topic," synod delegate Helena Jeppesen-Spuhler told NCR. Last year's national report from that country called for access to all ministries, including the diaconate and priesthood.

In listening sessions this year, including one with Catholic Church Reform International, Jeppesen-Spuhler said many participants expressed hope that the Vatican would open the diaconate to women worldwide, or at least leave the

decision to individual bishops' conferences.

While some are tiring of the lengthy process, Jeppesen-Spuhler remains hopeful and is excited for the next Rome meeting. Last October's discussion about the role of women was "one of the most inspiring and strongest moments of the synod," she said. "I think things have really started to move."

*Editor's note: This sentence has been updated to correct the date of the FutureChurch listening sessions.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **May 6-June 6, 2024** print issue under the headline: Amid synod process, Catholics continue to call for expanded church roles for women.