



# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

*from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study*

#163 - April 1, 2022

## A Best Practice: A Precursor to Pope Francis' Synod

As we are all aware (and hopefully immersed in), Pope Francis has invited Catholics to be a part of a synodal process (*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*) - coming together (in person or virtually) to discuss issues, needs, concerns and hopes for a more vibrant Vatican II Church.

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“A Synod means walking together and listening to one another  
but above all to the Holy Spirit.

To deepen this essential characteristic of the Church,  
the upcoming synod is unlike any previous one.

It starts with,  
and involves all the faithful at local Churches across the world,  
promising to listen to all, especially to laypeople.”

~ Pope Francis  
October 23, 2021

Synods are not new. Often a synod is typically a group of bishops who gather to assist the Holy Father in addressing challenges that face the Church. Originally, synods were held locally, within various regions of the world, to deal with local issues. Synods of this type date back to the 4th century.

Pope Paul VI revived the idea, establishing the Synod of Bishops in 1965, a gathering of representative bishops from the universal church.

In our recent history, there have also been various synods focusing on local regions of the world, such as America (1997), Europe (1999) and Africa (2009).

In the Vatican II church many dioceses and even parishes have invited the

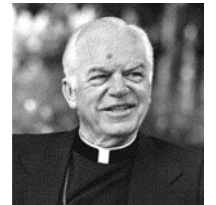
laity to a synod: a listening to all voices within the church. (For example: [https://www.janetschaeffler.com/Moving\\_into\\_the\\_Future\\_through\\_a\\_Parish\\_Synod.pdf](https://www.janetschaeffler.com/Moving_into_the_Future_through_a_Parish_Synod.pdf))

A significant diocesan synod occurred shortly after the Second Vatican Council in the archdiocese of Detroit in 1969. Judy Holmes, Director of The John Cardinal Dearden Legacy Project ([www.johncardinaldearden.com](http://www.johncardinaldearden.com)) reflects: “Detroit’s Synod/69 is an inspiring model of ‘a participatory, listening church,’ whether in small groups, in parishes or in dioceses. It demonstrates the remarkable difference that leadership makes.”

What follows is a summary from Judy of Synod/69 in the archdiocese of Detroit in order to:

- exhibit what the church’s current Synod could be
- provide ideas and suggestions for (arch)dioceses and parishes who, going forward, might plan synods for their local area

Over 50 years ago, a path of engagement and discernment was initiated and fully embraced by Detroit Archbishop John F. Dearden whose transformative experiences as Council Father and first President of NCCB prepared him well for consultation, collaboration and dialogue. “John Francis Dearden” was a bridge, spanning the decades between Pope John XXIII and Pope Francis - an ambassador of Pope John’s Council and a forerunner of Pope Francis’ Synod.



Archbishop John Dearden invited people to participate in a synod, Vatican II-style - not only to “listen” but to “Speak Up.” The end result was Synod/69 which, to this day, offers a viable model for others planning their own synodal experience in order to share concerns about Church governance, policies and practices. In 2000, one Detroit parish team used the model to involve parishioners in setting parish goals and writing a new mission statement, all of which were implemented on Pentecost.

The following highlights are taken from primary sources published by the archdiocese: History of the Synod in Detroit prior to 1967; Announcement of the program, June 1967; Invitation to participate, Sept 1967; and the leaders’

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

Parish Participation Plan Booklet - its goals, organizational structure, participants, process and outcomes.

## HIGHLIGHTS: Parish Participation Plan, Speak Up Groups and Synod/69

- The three-year plan (1967 to 1969) involved 335 parishes (population of 1.5 million Catholics)
- Three programs, “You are the Church,” with Archbishop Dearden were produced on Kinescope (precursor of video) and viewed on closed-circuit TV in parishes, convents and schools to introduce Vatican II and the Parish Participation Plan.
- Printed educational materials engaged 190,000 adults and high school students to study and discuss their choice of 9 topics: clergy, religious, laity, worship, education, administration, ecumenical affairs, community affairs, missionary activity.
- 7,200 Speak Up groups met for 6 weeks.
- Booklets with “reader-friendly” content and discussion questions were distributed to the participants: 6 booklets for each topic presented Council teachings in those specific areas of interest.
- 65,000 recommendations were written/typed onto carbonless forms and submitted: one for the Speak Up group chair, one for the pastor, and one for the deanery (regional) committee. The proposals from each group were to be published in the church bulletins and voted upon by the community at large.
- The proposals were tabulated and synthesized into 3,629 distinct proposals on computer cards (Burroughs Corp.) and distributed to the synod commissions in three stages: region, deanery and diocesan.
- After 7 months of further review, edits of proposals and consultation with experts, preliminary documents were presented to 1100 deanery delegates. They, in turn, discussed these documents over two days for

approval with Archbishop Dearden and commissioners.

- On March 30, 1969, a formal promulgation of the documents, known as Synod/69, was made by Archbishop Dearden at a public mass held at Cobo Hall convention center, taking effect on Pentecost, May 25, 1969. “By This Covenant,” a publication about the synodal process, the restructuring of the archdiocese and the statutes/recommendations, was distributed across the Archdiocese of Detroit.

The results were all-encompassing and innovative:

- The archdiocese was restructured into vicariates led by elected vicars to encourage discussion and decision-making on the local level through mandated vicariate and parish councils.
- Departments and offices were established to broaden the educational foundations and serve the pastoral needs in areas of worship, Christian service and Christian formation.
- Delegates for laity, religious and clergy were appointed as the Archbishop’s representative to handle matters directly.
- Additional statutes and recommendations were enumerated in the 80-page Synod/69 document.

The initial June 1967 announcement was addressed “Dearly Beloved in Christ” and expressed the archbishop’s fervent wish “to hear the free voice of our people on all topics—even those beyond my authority. How else can I know what is in your hearts?” His plan to educate, engage, energize and empower the People of God to grow the Church of Detroit was an exciting and intensive journey that people still talk about today with deep gratitude and nostalgia.

At the mass of promulgation, Archbishop Dearden framed the three-year process with these words: “After months of preparation, of collaboration and of shared responsibility, we are to enact today what reflects our aspirations, hopes, desires and dreams of the Church of today and tomorrow. The document [Synod/69] reflects the course we are to follow. It traces the patterns of our movement forward. **The Synod breathes the spirit of the Vatican Council.** (emphasis added) It was needed to give life, warmth,

# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

strength and intensity to the council directives. What we have done is so significant to the Church, what we have accomplished is clear. The Synod is a beginning, not an ending.”

In the forward to “By This Covenant,” Archbishop Dearden reflects: “Our 1969 Synod is now a reality. The Church of the archdiocese will be stronger because we as a people were able to share the responsibility for its growth in Christ. I am personally grateful for the unwavering dedication of so many in this singular event.

“...Since 1977, we have deliberated to find Christian answers to the fundamental questions of our times. With the Holy Spirit moving among us to guide us, the world which we are trying to shape reflects the world as we would have it: the fulfillment of God’s design for the people of our community.

“The Synod guidelines are set forth to bring order to our efforts. Because none of us can anticipate the newness of tomorrow, the guidelines purposely have the flexibility that the times demand. Together we must accept an era of change as a time of opportunity...we must move into it with a confidence and trust born of the Holy Spirit.”

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~ Archbishop John Dearden  
March 30, 1969

In chapter one, Archbishop Dearden acknowledges the limitations of any effort like the synod when he writes, “The full and real results of our seeking progress together are inscribed in our hearts and embodied in our lives. The written word cannot capture all that is real in our hearts. The printed conclusions...are then, at best, our partial, inadequate and human response to

the urgings of God’s Holy Spirit. As imperfect as these documents may be, they are our response in faith to God and express our covenant with Him to live as the people He calls us to be.”

The chapter laying out the history of Synod/69 draws a parallel with the Council and Detroit’s Synod/69: “To make the 103,014 words of ...the Council’s documents ...real...meaningful and concrete within the Archdiocese..., Archbishop Dearden, himself one of the leading figures at the Council, decided to model as closely as possible a similar assembly here. **Thus, Vatican II finds its replica in the Detroit Archdiocesan Synod/69.**” (emphasis added)

On April 28, 1969, one month after the Synod’s promulgation, John Dearden was elevated to the College of Cardinals by Pope Paul VI.

On a personal note: I was a team member of the Institute for Continuing Education responsible for preparing the printed materials for the Parish Participation Plan and Synod/69 in consultation with the Synod Coordinating Commission. Jane Wolford, mother of seven, was its talented executive director. She was instrumental in designing other **concurrent adult educational programs** with the full support of Archbishop John Dearden. He stressed the need for ongoing Christian formation and education for the People of God to grow in wisdom and grace and to live in covenant with God and one another.

Not only did the Institute for Continuing Education handle the planning and logistics of the massive Parish Participation Plan, the office also sponsored **ongoing adult education opportunities:**

- 8-week classes in the fall and spring in 8 counties
- it also brought prominent authors, theologians and international experts to speak to large, receptive audiences as part of its “Signs Series.”

The office consisted of nine women and one priest consultant. At this time of renewal and reform, Detroit was known across the country as a dynamic archdiocese, dedicated to living the wisdom of Vatican II.

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# GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

## Resources and Suggestions

- Judy Holmes reflects: “We have a voice; let’s use it. Perhaps the purpose of your synodal gathering would be to set goals for the faith formation team or parish pastoral council, or to write a new mission statement, or to let the parish leadership team know what’s on people’s minds for its long-term planning. The process should include voting on the recommendations.

In short, DREAM BIG:

- plan well
  - describe purpose and process
  - provide educational resources with discussion questions
  - offer hospitality and prayer
  - create excitement
  - communicate the results to participants, the local newspaper, leadership teams on the local, diocesan, national levels including USCCB.org/synod, Future Church.org, and the Vatican website, www.synod.va.”
- *The Story & Promise of Vatican II in Plain English*: <https://www.vatican2.center/>
  - A regional opportunity to help people revisit the Second Vatican Council: [https://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS\\_42.pdf](https://www.janetschaeffler.com/GEMS_42.pdf)
  - How one parish designed a parish listening Synod: [https://www.janetschaeffler.com/Moving\\_into\\_the\\_Future\\_through\\_a\\_Parish\\_Synod.pdf](https://www.janetschaeffler.com/Moving_into_the_Future_through_a_Parish_Synod.pdf)
  - *Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches during the Synod*: <https://www.usccb.org/resources/vademecum-synod-synodality>
  - What is the synod on synodality?: <https://slmedia.org/blog/what-is-the-synod-on-synodality>
  - *Walking Together – A Primer on the New Synodality*: <http://www.twentythirdpublications.com/watonepronne.html>

- Your Church Wants to Hear from You: What Is the Synod on Synodality?: <https://litpress.org/Products/6816/Your-Church-Wants-to-Hear-from-You>
- *A Church Renewed – 30 Days with Pope Francis on the New Synodality*: <http://www.twentythirdpublications.com/chrenedawipo.html>



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at [www.janetschaeffler.com](http://www.janetschaeffler.com)

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation planning and best practices can be found:

- *Deepening Faith: Adult Faith Formation in the Parish*: <https://www.litpress.org/Products/4652/Deepening-Faith>
- Lifelong Faith Training: <https://www.lifelongfaithtraining.com/>
- Lifelong Faith: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/>
- Lifelong Faith Studio: <https://www.lifelongfaithstudio.com/>
- Seasons of Adult Faith website: <https://www.seasonsofadultfaith.com>
- The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation:
  - [https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons\\_of\\_faith\\_journal\\_special\\_issue.pdf](https://www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/seasons_of_faith_journal_special_issue.pdf)
  - <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/books.html>