

ImPlymenting Synodality with, ahem,

Plymodalitrees

Some innovative suggestions that might be of help

"The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive. It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle."
At the Synod in Rome Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe OP offers a spiritual reflection on 'The seed germinates.'



Walking together is the essence of synodality. "Step by step" is how its fruits will become visible, according to Plymouth's Bishop Nicholas Hudson. But for diocesan teams, implementing synodality across parishes may be more of a slow shuffle than strides, with pauses and sidesteps. Much as often happens with new plants. So some parishes might welcome ideas they can happily get on with by themselves without troubling the diocese. Plymodalitrees are meant to be a help in this – a variety of suggestions on synodality with its sleeves rolled up.

Plymodalitrees may tickle imaginations because they're practical, fun, and don't need budgets. The "trees" might be planted and initially tended by enthusiastic individuals, ad hoc groups or committees. But, they'd also be activities for – unusually – asking the parish as a whole to approve, perhaps with a simple show of hands en masse at Mass. (Altar servers make good tellers, btw.) They aim to:

- ✓ offer opportunities to be involved – parishioners, newcomers, clergy, schools, families
- ✓ provide a diversity of practical and enjoyable activities
- ✓ help people feel better about themselves, their parish, the Diocese and The Church
- ✓ be attractive to share with other faith communities, and local and social media

And they're a nod to the Synod not so much for its specific discernments and proposals but the spirit of consensus. If its 360+ delegates could arrange to vote on something, why not a whole parish en masse? After all, *"Transparency and a culture of accountability are of crucial importance for us to move forward in building a synodal Church."* And parishwide approvals of action and change might also help counter Cliques in parish decision-making (*"Unfortunately, clericalism is a disposition that can manifest itself not only among ministers but also among the laity..."*) Plymodalitrees aim to foster that sense of consensus.



Plymodalitrees have sprung from my OpenBooks Project exploring transparency – a 1-man synod, you might say. Feedback, suggestions or advice will be welcome. With all best wishes for planting and implementing!

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(Just1 is a Fairtrade Church of just one, btw)



Plymodalitrees Suggestions by Hugh Gibbons as part of www.just1.org.uk/openbooksproject



#1 Acclaim your Unofficial Saints

inspirer-spotting for all ages

"We need more creativity in establishing ministries according to the needs of local churches, with the particular involvement of the young."

Seen in A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report on the Synod October 2023

For parishes wanting to be creative in the involvement of the young of all ages, a likeable idea is to produce and refresh Alphabets of Unofficial Saints. Schools can lead the way.

It's very simple, and fun. Just compile A-Z lists of "Saints Next Door", as Pope Francis put it during the pandemic. They're individuals or groups or communities who inspire, encourage, uplift, or serve – who deserve thanks for the help and good they bring to other people's lives. It was the basis of the [Adelante Gallery](#).

For example? Schools might have in their A-Z Alphabet of Unofficial Saints: A for Ambulance Crews; B for Beekeepers; C for CAFOD Volunteers... They then have a list to share with a parish on website or a travelling display.

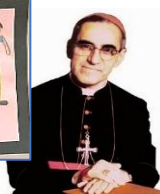
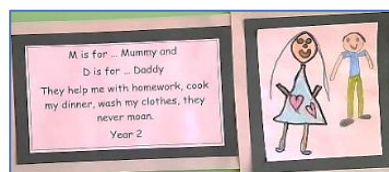
Here's a parish outreach idea. What might appeal is collective appreciation – a round of applause for Our Unofficial Saints of the Month, announced at the end of Mass. *"Today we're going to send a collective thank-you to all Lifeboat Crews, who've been selected as Unofficial Saints by Year6 pupils at the school. We're going to give them a round of applause, and write to the RNLI to let them know that hundreds of people in this parish appreciate them".* You might think to invite an unofficial saint in to hear the applause at first hand – a great synodal story to feed to press and social media.

- NB1 Unofficial Saints needn't be alive
- NB2 It's an idea to share with other local faith communities. Many will have their versions of everyday saints or uplifters or inspirers to air and share.



Oscar Romero becoming an official saint on 14 October 2018 was the origin of this idea. To mark the occasion, Hugh Gibbons made the unique 8' high Adelante Gallery of Unofficial Saints (left). It's been seen by thousands in Catholic churches, primary schools secondary school chaplaincies, and one cathedral.

Adelante's home is now Romero Multi-Academy Trust and parishes in Coventry.



The PDF Guide is still available and includes Hugh's own A-Z Alphabet of Unofficial Saints at www.just1.org.uk/adelantegallery





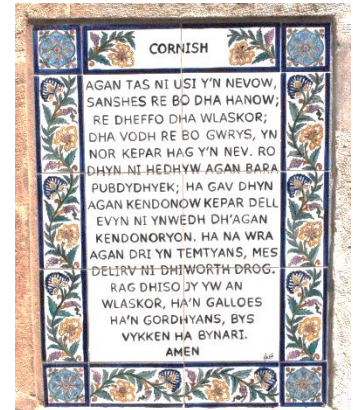
#2 C.A.S.T. nets for your languages

WhoArtful Galleries help engage together fruitfully

"In a Church that is living synodally, different cultures, languages, rites, ways of thinking, and realities can engage together and fruitfully in a sincere search for the Spirit's guidance."

Seen in A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report October 2023

"Agan tas ni usiy'n nevow." From Penzance Parish to the Church of the Paternoster on the Mount of Olives, The Lord's Prayer in Cornish is alive and well! (Devon perhaps had its "Hagon tat so in nefou", in a dialect 1500 years ago...) Today schools in CAST and parishes in the Diocese abound in dozens of languages – ready to gather and share as their WhoArtful Galleries. You can see the concept and example at www.just1.org.uk/whoartful.



So schools and churches can be their own home-grown version of The Church of the Paternoster. WhoArtful Galleries are fun to put together, update, show your parish diversity, and engage lots of massgoers, students and families. And they don't cost!



WHOARTFUL GALLERIES

How to sow and grow? Invite congregations and schools to send in the Lord's Prayer in any language. Collate them into a simple document to share. Find a bit of space on your website. Or make a printed display

in some space as a Paternoster Gallery – laminated sheets work well.

And maybe sometimes all the congregation could be encouraged to speak their own preferred language. NB There are other words worth translating: Peace Be With You; Hello; Many thanks; Well done! How can I help? The whole idea's one to share with local Christian churches.

A British Sign Language version is included in a thoughtful all-ages ecumenical YouTube video produced by CofE Devon [The Lord's Prayer in Different Languages | Pentecost 2020 \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=The Lord's Prayer in Different Languages | Pentecost 2020)



Where did the idea come from? Hugh Gibbons' Paternoster Gallery which had 20+ examples of translations made into wooden plaques for



schools and churches to enjoy and put to use. Some were provided by parishioners and clergy in UK and overseas. In All Souls CofE church in Ascot around Pentecost 2023, some of the Paternoster language plaques were displayed on the pillars in the nave – a good accompaniment to the funeral of a parishioner who'd spent many years as a doctor in Africa and on Mercy Ships. In May 2025, the Gallery was given to Moseley CofE Primary School in Birmingham – where Hugh had spent much of WWII.

See www.just1.org.uk/whoartful for information on the plaques, including their array of languages.



Plymotalitrees Suggestions by Hugh Gibbons as part of www.just1.org.uk/openbooksproject

#3 Cherish your Parish Stories

in a yearly synthesis record of happenings



"In this Synthesis Report we have collected the main elements that emerged in the dialogue, prayer and discussion that characterised these days. Our personal stories will enrich this synthesis with the tenor of lived experience..."
Seen in the Introduction to the Synod Synthesis Report October 2023

In the UK, Catholic parish websites are surprisingly light on history – recent or distant. Yet all parishes have a lot of lived experiences each year worth collecting and setting down in a synthesis. Yearly reports and reviews are valuable for the information and enjoyment of parishioners, returners, visitors, incoming clergy. And websites are ideal settings with space for them - not transient or squeezed as with newsletters and social media. The history may be small: we got a new tea urn. Or big: we got a visit by the new bishop.

Parish Year Reports celebrate highlights and happenings, a recap of some things that make people feel good about their parish, the Church and - importantly - themselves. They let others near and far see and share their good ideas, values and identity. They're an opportunity to appreciate and thank individuals and groups, and to publicise their values and activities. And they're helpful when mergers are being aired or put in place.

How? Just collect up happenings into a simple file. Put it on the website. If appropriate, include information from or link with other documents – eg the priest's annual financial report to the faithful. Done once, an annual report could just need updating.

An example of good content are in the report on the right.

Events for the parish, groups, individuals, clergy, and outreach are appreciated and applauded. NB Worth looking at are local churches, chapels, mosques, synagogues - where a handful of Trustees manage to provide a detailed annual report and accounts.



We published [St Joseph's Parish Annual Report 2024](#) in March 2025. In it you will find a review of the last year, a report on our parish finances by the Chairman of the Finance Committee, a Financial Statement for the year ended 31 March 2024 prepared by our Treasurer and reports from our parish representatives for Health & Safety and Safeguarding. Updates on parish ministries, groups, organisations and activities can be found throughout our website as these were updated during our Participation drive in Autumn 2024. Exemplary walking together at [Our Parish | St Joseph's Parish](#)

NB Parishes have interesting statistics to share in an annual report

- Numbers and names sent to the dioceses eg Baptisms, Marriages, Confirmation, First Holy Communion, Deaths, Mass counts. (And how about including short obituaries?)
- Maybe find some unusual statistics – such as hectares of floor cleaned; emails handled by the office; parishioners visited at home.
- And Moments of the Year! Heart-stopping, hilarious, surprising.



NB Priest's Eye View personal reports by clergy. How about one volunteered after a year into a new parish? Or every five. Or on leaving? One word written a week should do it... There's an example of one ten years after leaving at www.just1.org.uk/openbooksproject. It's a new take on Quinquennial Reports...





#4 Be like Greggs: inspired to action

The UK's instant sign of social justice commitment

"The Church's social doctrine is a too little-known resource.

This needs to be addressed. Local churches are invited not only to make its contents better known but to foster its reception through practices that put its inspiration into action...

There can be no synodality without an ecumenical dimension."

In A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report October 2023.

"Bishop, were I to visit you in your office or residence, would I be offered Fairtrade tea or coffee? Or would I have to take you out to the nearest Greggs?" That's a good question to ask in any UK Catholic or CofE diocese. In Plymouth, they're ready. "At the Curia Office at St Boniface House we order fair trade products," says the website. And, er, clergy residences?

Inspiration into action was what drove CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Traidcraft, the World Development Movement and the National Federation of Women's Institutes to found the UK Fairtrade movement in 1992. In 2004, the first of half dozen Catholic Dioceses achieved Fairtrade status, with over 50% of parishes signed up. Thousands of UK towns, schools, universities and businesses with an instant sign of social justice solidarity. Fairtrade products now include coffee, cocoa, sugar, tea, cold drinks and juice, honey, cotton, wine, clothing, chocolate, flowers, beauty and wellness, spices, gold - and bananas. And its appeal continues to grow strongly despite pressure on family budgets. You can buy over 6000 products in all sorts of retail outlets, some nationwide. FYI Greggs have been great ethical supporters of Fairtrade since 2006, buying £millions for their 2500+ outlets.

The Places of Worship Award is ecumenical: "Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other places of worship across the UK have been at the heart of the success of Fairtrade – putting faith into action by using and promoting Fairtrade products and leading public conversation about justice for the farmers and workers we rely on." Signing up for the Places of Worship Award might start and grow by approval en masse by the parish at Mass – with an annual renewal by a show of hands. Flag it on every newsletter. The Award is not a tough financial or administrative call. Parishes commit to:

1. Use Fairtrade products wherever possible (at least tea, coffee and sugar) and share information about FairTrade products with the wider congregation.
2. Integrate Fairtrade into the life of your place of worship, at Fairtrade Fortnight or other times

There's a useful website packed with examples at www.just1.org.uk/fairtrade_portsmouth

NB This includes two videos of a catholic range of clergy setting an example with Fairtrade:



#1 [Pope supports products with "Fairtrade" mark - Rome Reports](#)

And in Ilminster, as practical action or social justice in church and home

#2 www.facebook.com/IlminsterFairtrade/videos/524811729710928



Rev Jo Stobart on why and how the parish decided to support Fairtrade Fortnight and year round.



NB If you're looking for a present for a priest or deacon, how about a Fairtrade clerical shirt or other gift from the specialist www.fairtradeclergyshirts.co.uk.





#5 UnCage Your Ears!

a surprisingly distinctive take on listening

"The synodal Church can be described using the image of the orchestra: the variety of instruments is necessary to give life to the beauty and harmony of music, within which the voice of each one retains its own distinctive features at the service of the common mission".

In the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality



"These Synods were clear that helping individuals find their place in the Church is something for which clergy and laity alike bear a shared responsibility". That's from Bishop Hudson's homily on his installation in November 2025. *"The key to knowing how we do it, how we organise ourselves to welcome, the latest Synod was also clear, is to deepen our listening. Deepen our listening? Yes, that we need to deepen the quality of our listening to the Spirit, to one another, and to our context; our listening to every generation in the Church – but with a special attentiveness to the young, to the poor, to the marginalised, to those who stand on the outside looking in."* But to train ourselves in how to listen, how about using not voices but the music of everyday sounds – in waiting rooms, wards, churches, schools, offices, homes. UnCaging Ears is one way, sprung from a famous work: 4'33".

"...they didn't know how to listen. What they thought was silence was full of accidental sounds." That's what John Cage noted during the first performance of his 4'33". Cage saw silence as a way to attune audiences to the soundtrack of everyday life - to value all those unintentional sounds. So the score of 4'33" instructs the performers not to play. A variant for you? UnCaging Ears!



UnCaging Ears is easy, for anyone, anytime, anywhere. And free!

- When you have a few moments or minutes to yourself, sit-down – indoors/outside – or stand still.
- Just listen to the sounds around – near/far, clear/blurred, loud/faint, natural/man-made.
- This could be a parish- or diocesan-wide activity during a set time – The Great Listen Week?

Of course, there's also 4'33" to perform formally – for orchestras, groups, audiences, congregations – using any instruments. The experience can be immensely moving, as seen in one

orchestra's and its Conductor's must-watch video - <https://youtu.be/AWVUp12XPpU>.

There's a fine commentary at [When the Berlin Philharmonic Performed John Cage's Iconic Piece 4'33", Capturing the Solitude of the Pandemic \(2020\) | Open Culture](#).

In late October 2020 amid another surge of the COVID-19 virus, the German government asked the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra to close down for a month. They chose to finish with their version of 4'33" - offering a poignant commentary on the silence and isolation experienced during the pandemic. *"The conductor Kirill Petrenko "defined each of the three movements in 4'33" with a particular affect. In the first movement, he seemed to be conducting a conventional piece that wasn't there. In the second movement, his hands were positioned near his face, as if asking for quiet or like a priest pronouncing a benediction. In the third movement, his hands stretched toward the orchestra, fingers splayed in one hand, with a searching facial expression. He was near tears with sorrow and grief. 'What is this? What is happening?' he seemed to ask. 'I don't understand!' We all felt that way at some point."*

