



Introduction

The LCSB is a community of Lay Benedictines founded in 1971 by the monks of Worth Abbey, and an independent lay association since 2003. We have our roots in the Catholic Church, while being an ecumenical community. We have 200 members who are spread across the UK, with some who live abroad. We have strong historic ties with the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton (where Worth Abbey is situated), and we, therefore thank Bishop Richard Moth for allowing our submission to go with the Diocesan response.

The LCSB undertook its own Synodal process in January/February 2022 approaching it in a constructive, spiritual and formal manner. Members were invited to participate over 2 dates with a 3rd being given to the teenagers and young people. There were 3 questions from the Vademecum which the groups considered and gave their feedback in a synodal way (i.e. listening to each other and it is this that was captured by the scribes). From the 12 Groups that were involved we are able to deduce that the participation was Catholics (40), Anglican (7), Methodist (2), Pentecostal (1), No Church (2), and left (1). This is an approximation as not all groups were specific in their make-up, and we received some late responses which we were unable to include although overall they did reflect similar themes. The responses to each of the 3 questions are detailed below.

Question 1: What experiences do you have of journeying together with others (church members, other denominations, people on the margins of the church/church life)?

Those of a Catholic tradition had had intense experience to informing their faith when growing up/ students and some had had an untroubled journey in their Catholic faith with the support of family/school/work/spouse. People brought up Catholic had residual goodwill towards the Church, based on a happy childhood. University Chaplaincies and Worth Abbey Lay Community (“WALC”) had given amazing experiences of faith and community with cradle Catholics having little or no experience of other denominations until at university. Nevertheless, many Catholics still believed in the prophetic role as the church and were committed to the common good and involvement in social outreach, not necessarily through church structures and in some cases better outside them. For all, the first experience of journeying together with others was in late teens and young adulthood. One Anglican convert described how her conversion began as a teenager in St Peter’s Square seeing and hearing Pope St John addressing thousands of Catholics from all over the world. A young person found it “hard to connect with God” and struggled to feel inspired by their Parish Priest’s homilies as they tended to refer to “general moral statements which felt out of touch.” Someone else stated there was “too much emphasis on individual sin.... And too little on our shared responsibility to care for the planet and for each other.”

There was a belief the Eucharist was important, and one person said they “fell in love with the Mass at an early age” which led to a “lifetime love of the Eucharist.” An Anglican described taking an interest in religion when he was of working age, when he explored charismatic evangelism before moving to an Anglo-Catholic church and discovering the Eucharist and the truth expressed in the discourse of John chapter 6. Another referred to the pain of the divisions over Holy Communion.

One person had suffered great bereavement and loss and had eventually been strengthened in faith through support from their parish. Another described finding a personal relationship with Jesus.



It was felt that the Catholic faith journey was enriched by exposure to other traditions and organisations; Buddhist/Hindu/Methodist links to common truths and inspiration came from a variety of sources e.g. daily service on the radio, prayer groups (especially an ecumenical one), contact with Poor Clares, ordained Anglicans, lovely days of reflection and contemplative prayer, Charismatic and Lectio groups and LCSB Quotes. These all deepened spiritual experience but were not received in a parish church. Some found themselves more ecumenical with profound sharing from different denominations. It was emphasised that other denominations were better at welcoming.

Many Catholics experienced being together through Ecumenical Music Groups, sharing events, Root & Branch, Mary Ward Groups, Catholic Parishes, Groups Serving People on the Margins (Social Justice Groups such as Kairos, CAFOD, Fair Trade, Homelessness), Diocesan Youth Work, World Youth gatherings with the Pope including youth from other denominations, Alpha programmes within a Catholic Parish but including people from other denominations and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

There was a view that people on the margins don't always trust Christians. One person's acquaintance of this had been mostly with those who left the parish because of disagreements with the parish priest, or abuse. Those from an Anglican background had experienced being together through journeying with Catholics within the LCSB, encounter with the Catholic Church through Worth Abbey and Church parishes through marriage partners. They had wider encounters through the official / hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church.

However, it was felt the Church was stuck in religion and faith was lost on the way and that "God isn't a tidy God." Mary Ward had read the signs of the times and one person gave this example as wanting to see the Church doing that. Others believed Christianity should be active e.g. in Parish groups, Cafod, Children's liturgy. It was noted the tradition of getting involved was now lacking in parishes and of sad lonely experiences due to a lack of community. The view was that whilst we did form friendships in our parish, they were not spiritual relationships but more a journey of community in life rather than in faith. Small groups were seen as the key to the community - lectio/Bible groups, getting to know people and share your faith.

There was a requirement to be more collaborative with a greater lay responsibility/voice as it was felt priests have too much power and too much depends on their character/ability e.g. examples were given of laity initiatives and vibrant programmes for activities being closed down by the priest but that we must continue to offer our services as the Church's role was to bring everyone into a full relationship with Christ. One person felt there was a problem in that a parish can be changed on the whim of a priest; another that they did not feel supported by their clergy. The view was the Church was overseen by a hierarchy whose emphasis was on searching for obedience rather than participation. The Parish was seen as unchallenging with no interest in a person's spirituality and some priests were lonely. It is a place where we "come to Mass" and then leave, it is difficult to build up community. Some viewed the Catholic church as being too focused on the Mass and question whether Jesus was telling us to go to Mass or to build community? One person felt turned off by doctrinal stuff from the clergy rather than the Gospel. In addition it was believed it would be helpful if married deacons could become priests and there was no place for women in an ordained role. The question was "why would young women want to remain part of "the church?"



The view was the LCSB could model the Church inclusivity to “become the best version of ourselves.” The Church was seen as a top/down organisation where authority excludes the laity, and the structure of the Church impedes it. One person described attending a local Synod meeting and “felt a knife through the heart for a gay friend sitting next to her” when a leading parishioner outlined how although we must welcome everyone, people who strayed from Catholic teaching (gay people, divorced, irregulars) must understand that they have strayed. The view was Canon Law has not ever brought joy to anyone and a need to sweep away the Church of rules/regulations and return to the teachings of Jesus and to healing. One person’s view was the Church needed healing, forgiveness & to make amends.

The LCSB was seen as a “great blessing” and an important personal community experience which had helped members and their children see beyond the parish. With a Benedictine balance of prayer, work, community, sharing our faith and our lives, it gave people the opportunity to experience the Holy Spirit, trust one another, ask questions and explore one’s faith without criticism with a freedom to ask, “what would Jesus do?” There was an openness in the LCSB and gifts. In addition, the LCSB was seen as “a model for what the Catholic Church should be showing”: welcome to all denominations/understanding/love and a reminder of St. Paul that love should be central to everything. Women and the laity were able to contribute on equal terms in the LCSB together with an ecumenical basis where differences were discerned but discussed. The LCSB built a layer of love and understanding which protected against oversensitivity. It was seen as “a blessing-uncluttered-variety of people just getting together to pray and support each other in Christian journey.” The LCSB Zoom/online prayer activities were seen as a great source of strength. Reference was made particularly to this in later life when there was the frustration of not being able to be so active in the church because of physical limitations.

One Catholic gave the example of walking away from the Lay Community and the Church 30 years ago, experiencing deep hurt at the attitudes and position of the Church, and feeling excluded as a gay woman. She had returned back to the LCSB and wanted to be part of its future but felt the Church was ignoring the needs at ground level. One person’s view was the dominance of middle-class people who like discussions (rather like the LCSB!) can make others feel out of place.

A Methodist viewpoint was they had found the Catholic Church historically a “hard to pierce exterior” and that Pope Francis was a hero for the global church, brave to speak out.



Question 2a: What joys did those experiences provoke? What insights have been learned?

People's best experiences were largely in non-parish-based activities; mainly in small groups some within the Catholic Church, many in the wider Christian community or beyond.

Lay Community of St Benedict

helped own children see beyond parish to a more vibrant community
ecumenical - women and men all people contributing on equal terms

– a model for what the Catholic Church should be;
WELCOMING/UNDERSTANDING/LOVE

a blessing – variety of people uncluttered just getting together to pray and support
each other on the Christian journey, loved the Offices and the focus on prayer
Scripture Weekends, mutual support in trouble, openness and gifts in the community

Rule of St Benedict as a source of wisdom including in working life

has provided very powerful & joyful experiences of journeying together including the
Northern group, sharing in the monastic liturgies at Worth, Easters etc
in contrast to my local parish where there is very little sense of community,
and I don't feel I am journeying at all

lots of love and gratitude for the LCSB and for what it has meant to participants



Ecumenical Experiences

expressed mainly by Catholic members:

Small ecumenical groups: LECTIO GROUPS (most life-giving focus is weekly lectio group – ecumenical and very deep sharing. Feel Holy Spirit is moving, and we share in each other's lives – caring and love for each other at a time of 'desert' Catholic parish still attended on Sunday but pretty lifeless). GROUP READING BIBLE together, ALPHA, CHRISTIAN PRAYER GROUP, IGNATIAN CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMUNITIES, SHARED PROJECTS TO HELP THE HOMELESS & REFUGEES, HOME GROUPS, much to learn from Christians of other denominations

SARUM COLLEGE – opportunity to learn and share with other Christians on a spiritual direction course - many ordained Anglicans or pastors in their own churches mainly women and given a sense as a Catholic of it being possible to be called to ministry as a woman; empowering. SALISBURY CATHEDRAL times of prayer and Liturgy very welcoming of Christians of all denominations, Radio 4 DAILY SERVICE sense of starting the day praying with other Christians led by people from different Christian traditions – LAY COMMUNITY OF ST BENEDICT (see above)



Groups that reach out to the marginalised: CAFOD, Kairos, Fair Trade, Homelessness, Refugees

One person had got far more from lay-led groups and sharing events- found great joy in LCSB, Root & Branch and Mary Ward groups

Another had been in a great number of groups – loved days of reflection and contemplative prayer

Deepening of Christian community through prayer & occasional retreats both LCSB and elsewhere.

Diversity provided by other Christian denominations particularly in view of the restricted role of women within the Catholic church hierarchy

Looking outwards at other faith experiences and valuing a diversity of gifts

Don't want to leave the Catholic Church but ecumenical dimension is vital to our faith and find life in parts of faith from other denominations which I don't find in Catholic Church

Catholic Church

- wonderful tradition of wisdom – some good priests including one who helped person find links between wisdom learned from other faith traditions and their Catholic spirituality
 - Pope Francis -hero for global Church – brave to speak out
 - the Eucharist and the other sacraments
 - House Masses
 - experience of working with young people at diocesan level & World Youth Gather
 - sharing worship, spreading the Gospel through music
 - encountering lively Christian community at a young age e.g. Catholic University Chaplaincies
 - experience of YCW – about living your faith daily -not about church
 - Poor Clares -sharing their liturgy and joyful, simple life
 - a few very good parishes with welcoming sense of community and lively Sunday liturgies and small groups for faith and for social outreach and a good sense of community – (also providing a home for people whose neighbouring parishes no longer feel like home through changes imposed by new very conservative parish priests). Anxiety of what might happen when their own parish priest is replaced possibly by someone much more conservative. Even these good parishes are constrained by what happens at diocesan level and above e.g. the new translation of the Mass, canon law (on divorce and re-marriage, LGBTQ, interdenominational communion and an ordained ministry which excludes women and also largely excludes married people to the priesthood meaning the good priests are exhausted and could do with sharing the load).



Q2b: What difficulties or wounds came to light? What insights have been learned?

For most of us, we found much more life in small groups and in ecumenical settings than in our own Catholic parishes.

The CHURCH NEEDS A MORE GENEROUS SPIRIT
MORE WELCOMING AND LOVING

AS CHRIST WOULD WELCOME AND LOVE

Church's role is to bring ALL into full relationship with Christ

The Church is too rigid and can't accommodate people
rules and attitudes can be forbidding and controlling

needs to be INCLUSIVE



DEEP PAIN from PROHIBITION ON INTERCOMMUNION among baptised Christians worshipping together

DEEP PAIN OF THOSE EXCLUDED FROM HOLY COMMUNION: a long list of people in relationships: - LGBT, divorced and re-married, people in long-term relationships but not married, people using contraception... in short, a high number of people who are sexually active and who find themselves the wrong side of the Church's rules and regulations which might partly explain why our churches are mainly attended by the over sixties and the very young and not many in between.



DEEP PAIN of LGBT people not feeling they even belong in the Catholic Church because of pronouncements made and people's attitudes shaped by years of hearing those pronouncements – these are an attack on the very identity of LGBT people whom God has made.

Anxiety of parents who may have a child who is LGBT – how will they be treated by the Church they go to? If their child finds a partner, will they feel welcome to bring them to church and feel loved?

the rules of the Church/canon law/the new catechism are millstones around our neck
we need to be followers of Jesus not priests
Church is standing in the way of God



Catholic Church gives the impression that
the voice of the Spirit is suppressed:
“Let Me Out!” the Spirit cries

We need a new way of working and greater
Lay responsibility and VOICE

Missing out on female wisdom.

Lack of inclusivity for women and married priests.

We need to learn from other denominations and use
all the gifts God is giving us.

Many women feel called to be priests. How many married people also feel
called to be priests? So why are church communities being closed
(sometimes even without lay consultation) because of a lack of priests?



need for intimacy not provided by the Church
disconnectedness
dryness of struggle within Catholic Church

People including the young walking away because more emphasis on the Church than a faith encounter with the PERSON of CHRIST

Very little sense of community in the parish;
don't feel I am journeying at all

Church is STUCK in RELIGION and FAITH IS LOST - church should support the journey from religion to faith but doesn't



**Catholic Church needs healing,
needs to ask for forgiveness and to make amends**

not just for the actual sexual abuse but also for the massive cover-up
and how people were treated

needs public acts of repentance:

sackcloth and ashes, a pilgrimage of contrition...

needs to publicly reach out to those who were abused and maltreated
and to apologise to its own members

HYPOCRISY of those in power in the Church.

There are still deep wounds from the clerical abuse crisis which has
undermined the mission of the Church and tainted it.

Children becoming anti-Church and leaving due to hypocrisy



Hierarchy have excluded themselves from the church community, but they have the power to make the rules, say how the community will function, who is to be excluded and what will happen why would young women want to remain in the Catholic Church or join it when Church can't even be bothered to use inclusive language? The Church falls below the standards now expected in society at large.

need to confront secrecy and abuse of power

imposition from higher up, for example, new translation of the Mass,

Priests have too much power: at least three examples from different parts of the country of laity putting in effort to create a community in the parish and various initiatives then these are swept aside when new priest comes everything filtered through the parish priest – can be wonderful or awful



Catholic Church too focussed on Mass rather than community
peripatetic priests just visit on Sunday to say Mass
so limited opportunity to develop team ministry approach with laity
too many priests are remote and clerical – don't seem to encourage
active participation of the laity
voices of the laity are not heard

Over-emphasis on sin; Mass should start with reminding us of God's
love rather than always we are sinners (emotional abuse)

frustration, disappointment, disillusion with Catholic Church
enthusiasm and hope of Vatican II seems to have been stamped out

rigidity of right wing in the church – growing rigidity among the younger
clergy and some young people who have lost the ability to question.



Question 3: Where, in these experiences, does the voice of the Spirit resound? What do we believe the Spirit is asking of us? What paths are opening up for our particular church?

Almost all participants felt that the Spirit was asking the Church for **INTIMACY, INCLUSION AND FELLOWSHIP**. Most discerned that in the majority of the Catholic parishes where our contributors were based, these things were lacking, and almost all felt a real hunger and thirst for these qualities to nurture our own spiritual journeys. Those who had found these things, had mainly done so outside the parish structure, in “intentional communities” like LCSB, or in shared work with people on the margins.

The obstacles to the development of these charisms are explored under the preceding sections and there is no need to repeat them here. One participant summarised the situation very eloquently when they said that:

“church’, in its institutional sense, has to mean something far more radical than it does at present. Radical as in meeting people where they are as Christ did. And I do feel hopeful this is present in many thousands of ‘silent’ lives who live lives of faith. But I do not feel hopeful for the institutional Church in its present form, it’s a time of struggle... and searching.”

Faith mattered to our participants more than religious observance. “What would Jesus do?” and “Not so much what to believe, as how to behave” (to each other, to our neighbour, to the marginalised) were recurring themes. Many (the “rabbits”) wanted to feel a greater sense of belonging within the Catholic church (a lot of female participants, in particular, felt that their voices didn’t appear to have a place). Others (the “squirrels”) felt that their calling was in living out their faith through engagement with the secular world, and needed the Church to be something they could draw on to be refreshed and empowered to live out their calling (a “field hospital” as one contributor put it). The collective feeling was that the way for both of these needs to be met was by a drawing together in a closer experience of community; “rabbits” and “squirrels” alike both longed to find a greater intimacy in their faith communities. The simple fact of meeting together in small groups to share and to listen is powerful, and goes a long way towards meeting that need for intimacy. Most wanted more of this. It is important that this should be a non-judgmental space, where people can feel safe and accepted: “We should listen more carefully to each other; listen to understand, rather than to agree.” One contributor stressed that “We don’t know what people carry” – many have been hurt and broken by judgment and exclusion, as well as by the more overt institutional sins of abuse and cover-up, and our participants longed for the Church to be transformed into a space where healing of those hurts could take place. Many doubted that the Church as currently structured was able to provide this intimate experience, leading some to suggest that if we can’t rely on the hierarchy to give us what we want, we should take the initiative and do it ourselves!

Our young adult participants spoke powerfully of their longing for “church” to be a place where they could bring their friends and know that they will be welcome. However this just isn’t the reality in the UK: welcome and inclusion are missing, the parish structure doesn’t nourish our young



people's spirituality at a crucially formative time in their lives, and they themselves are regarded as "a problem to be solved" rather than as people in their own right. One contributor spoke of the loneliness of coming to Mass on their own as a young person. Another spoke of how they longed for their close friend, who is gay, to be able to come to Mass with them and be welcomed as part of the community. One parent of young adults who are no longer active in the Church spoke of the damaging effect of hypocrisy – that where young people hunger for authenticity, and fail to find it in a Church structure obsessed with rules and transgressions yet which covers up abuse, is it any wonder that so many give up on the institution?

There was a strong sense that the Spirit was drawing us to a renewed understanding that the Church is **PEOPLE NOT BUILDINGS**. A contributor who had taught in Catholic schools spoke of an encounter with a wise 6th form student who told her "**You and me talking, that's church.**"

Many of the contributors witnessed to how deeply their faith journeys had been enriched by journeying alongside Christians from other, non-Roman Catholic traditions, as well as with people of goodwill outside traditional Christianity. They drew from these shared journeys a renewed enthusiasm for the faith, and a more compelling sense of mission. Several non-Roman Catholic LCSB members contributed to our synodal reflection and said that they found great richness in the mystical and contemplative traditions within our worship as well as in the Catholic church's teachings on justice and peace. The pain of separation (especially the doctrinal separation which prevents sharing the Eucharist together) was expressed as a visceral thing by several contributors. The majority spoke of the power of learning and working together, as an act of witness in a secular world where the institutional churches are tarnished by the abuses and scandals of clericalism. There was a strong sense of a need, and a desire, to work together and to learn from one another – to enter together into the discovery of "What would Jesus do?"

Several participants pointed to different ways in which faith communities had had to become more creative during the coronavirus lockdown, when churches were not open and Sunday Mass in the traditional sense could not happen. The experience within LCSB of praying the Office together online was felt to be powerful, and a way of drawing together a scattered community. Many such initiatives were led by the laity not the clergy, and women and men contributed equally; perhaps this represents a loosening of control "from the top" and a recognition that the gifts the church needs to sustain a community in testing times already exist within the lay faithful?

Whilst much of the reflection served the purpose of illuminating what is happening within our own faith communities, there was a powerful understanding that the transformations we longed for within the Church were not for ourselves alone. There was consensus that, in the years since Vatican II, the structures of the Church have become more introspective, leading to a closing of doors on the world. One contributor spoke with concern about the "gentrification" of the church, and that in the UK at least, there was a dominance of middle-class voices who like to debate,



leading to an exclusion of working-class worshippers who would once have been the bedrock of parish life. Another spoke of “socialisation” within the Church. It was strongly felt that this was not what the Church was for, and that Pope Francis’s challenge to “throw open the doors” was a calling in which all contributors wanted to participate.

Most felt that this will require a greater authenticity, a greater honesty from our institutions; a need to be seen to repent of the scandals of clericalism and abuse of power (in sackcloth and ashes if necessary) and to seek forgiveness from those we have excluded or who have been driven away. It will also require the church (and us, as its members) to take greater risks with our ministries of welcome and inclusion. Finding new ways to connect to those marginalised by the church – women, young people, those whose marriages had failed, and LGBT+ – was important to most if not all. “Putting the vulnerable at the centre of church life improves church for all as it makes it more inclusive and models God’s kingdom values,” as one contributor put it. We were reminded that Jesus himself didn’t seek out those who kept the law perfectly, he spent his life among those who had been put outside the law.

Many expressed the sense that if the Spirit is calling us to a greater witness to the world outside the church doors, this will require a fundamental change in the power structures of the Church – including a greater receptiveness to female wisdom, a widening of the pool from which those called to ordained ministry could be drawn, and an increasing involvement of the laity in leadership.

The Church’s teaching on *The Common Good*, deep rooted in our tradition though neglected for a generation, has startlingly contemporary things to say about our calling to minister to an increasingly uncertain world. Associated with this, several contributors felt that the Church needed to shift its emphasis on individual sin and salvation and to rediscover its sense of the collective: that we are a community sharing a mission, and that God’s vision, in which we are called to be participants, is for the healing and salvation of the entire world. We should be witnessing more overtly, through word and action, about the need for the right stewardship of our common home and our shared responsibility to those who are most marginalised. In so doing we present a more radical and more Christ-like face to the world, give more authentic witness to Jesus’s values, and attract others as Jesus did, instead of turning them away.