



Three Rivers Project Report

Synodality, Community Organising & Catholic Social Teaching

Introduction

This report is the fruit of ecumenical conversations with Catholic, Anglican and Pentecostal churches in east London who are engaged in Community Organising, and who seek to root this work deeply in prayer and Christian teaching. All of these east London churches are part of the wider Citizens UK alliance, with which the Centre for Theology and Community (CTC) works closely. CTC accompanies churches to root their Community Organising in prayer and theological reflection, and to harness its potential for internal renewal as well as external action.

Lay people and clergy from these churches gathered to reflect on the practices that have helped them to be open to the agency of the Holy Spirit and the voice and leadership of those on the peripheries of power (within both Church and wider society). This is at the heart of what Pope Francis has called “Synodality”. Our research is trying to find out what is making it a living reality in local parishes and congregations.

This process of reflection was led by a team from CTC, with support from the School for Synodality and Campion Hall, Oxford. The team has produced this report with the people who gathered from 10 congregations in East London.¹ Together, we have identified some key learnings to feed back into the wider Synodal processes of the Church.

Definitions

Synodality is “the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God”.² Pope Francis has summoned Christians from all denominations to go on a “Synodal journey” of increased openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, particularly through people who are marginalised socially and economically by the

¹ Anglican Parishes: Holy Trinity and Saint Augustine of Hippo, Leytonstone; St Andrew’s, Stamford Hill; Trinity Saints, Haggerston & Dalston; St Martin of Tours, Plaistow, St Barnabas, Walthamstow. Catholic Parishes: St Anthony of Padua, Forest Gate, English Martyrs, Tower Hill. Pentecostal: On the Rock International Ministries, Marks Gate

² International Theological Commission of the Catholic Church report, 2018.



dominant culture. It is worth noting that the word ‘synodality’ was initially unfamiliar and alien to many of those involved in this reflection, particularly from non-Catholic churches. However, the image of ‘journeying together’, guided by the Spirit, resonated deeply.

Broad-based Community Organising (which we shorten in this report to “**Community Organising**”) works through alliances of parishes, congregations and other local institutions to discern and act together for the common good. Organising is distinct from ‘activism’, which tends to focus on fast and large-scale mobilisation of people in service of political ends, in its focus on relationships. The foundational practice in Community Organising is the one-to-one relational meeting - which ensures that action flows from the gifts and concerns of the people, and is focused on developing grassroots leadership and solidarity as well as taking action.

Key learnings

1. Community Organising provide tools for the Synodal journey

Synodality goes against the grain of our dominant culture. It is committed to a patient process of people’s development and insists that we hear the voice of the Holy Spirit when we resist polarisation and listen attentively to one another - and in particular to those on the peripheries of power.

Community Organising provides a set of tools to support this process of listening, building relationships, developing leadership skills, and crucially, acting for the common good.

“Community organising allowed me to be bold, to be confident in who I am.... it woke something up in me that was afraid to come out... Because of fear and trauma, for some of us our voice had vanished... I used to feel I couldn’t speak, but now I can speak without fear”.

“I once thought that the church is the priest, now I know the church is everyone I am a part of the church and I can act. And if I don’t do something, it won’t happen”

2. Synodality calls Community Organising to be patient and prayerful

An emphasis on Synodality can slow down the pace of organising. When Community Organising proceeds without such patience, and without being grounded in prayer, it tends to become the activity of a small and more privileged group of social activists within a parish. Identifying and developing diverse voices and leaders requires time.

A truly Synodal process grounds our patient listening to one another in our listening to the Holy Spirit. It is God who is the ultimate “protagonist” - and throughout Scripture and the life of the Church, God acts most powerfully through those the world underestimates and pushes to the margins.



3. Synodality must include action as well as listening

Whilst it is important to begin with patient and prayerful listening, without a link between this listening and action, there is a danger the process becomes a ‘talking shop’. This can lead to a greater sense of frustration and powerlessness among those who have already been marginalised.

Unless discussion leads to action, new voices will not see the point of speaking up. It is when dialogue leads to action, within the Church and in the wider society, that new leaders are developed. Action could be anything from starting a youth group to nurture the faith of teenagers in the parish to campaigning for safer streets. Community Organising is a powerful way of making this happen. When Community Organising and Synodality come together, this leads to an ongoing cycle of listening, discernment, action and evaluation - all rooted in prayer (see diagram in appendix).

“There are so many stories in the bible of leaders who were angry and passionate and fought for something, they never sat back and just moaned and prayed - they worked and put their faith into action. You can’t just pray for a change, we need to pray and act together.”

4. “Synodal Organising” strengthens both churches and communities

We have used the term “Synodal Organising” to describe the process which occurs when Synodality and Community Organising come together, and lead on to action within and beyond the local parish or congregation.

The experience of our parishes and congregations is that this approach strengthens the life of the parish and congregation. Such a process of relationship-building, leadership development and congregational renewal lays a foundation for churches to act with their neighbours to build a more just society - with those on whom the weight of injustice falls hardest standing at the heart of this process. As one church lay leader put it, synodal organising has at its heart the command to love God, and love our neighbour... “it is about practicing the way of Christ”.

Conclusion

The experience of Christians and congregations in east London is that something very powerful can happen when Synodality and Community Organising are brought together in grassroots practice. In the appendix to this report, we have named some of the specific features of this process which we see in CTC’s work with east London parishes and congregations.

Our method has been informed by the prayerful, patient action of sisters and brothers in Christ in other parts of the world. This happens partly through the diverse places in east London’s Christians were formed in the faith, and partly through international networks of Christians engaged in Community Organising. We believe the approach we have developed together can be a gift to the wider Church.

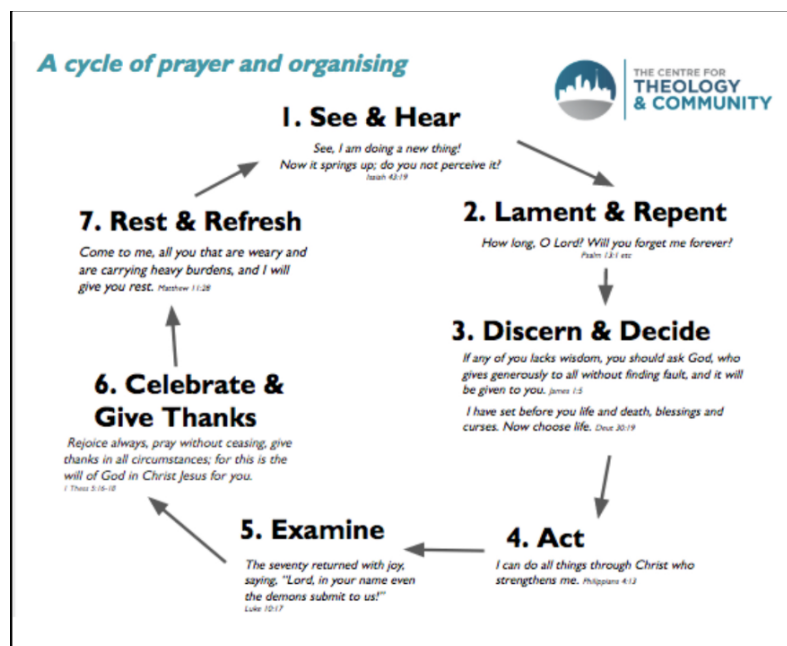


Appendix: Key features of “Synodal Organising”

1. **Patient relationship-building:** The foundation of all Community Organising is the one-to-one relational meeting. One participant in CTC’s lay training course explained that its approach “ is slower paced, it made me understand how to have deep, rooted relationships — it’s not a race, it’s a matter of trust”.
2. **Discernment of the Holy Spirit:** This work fosters a particular kind of ‘slow patience’, paying close attention to the realities of people and place, and by providing a set of tools with which to ‘discern’ both individually and collectively. The parishes and congregations engaged in this work recognise that people need to create space to discern and develop..
3. **Relationship between prayer and action:** CTC’s work involves a commitment to inward reflection in

the service of outward action – particularly embodied through its Cycle of Prayer and Organising (see image). This leads lay leaders to make a deep connection between worship and daily life.

4. **Evangelisation:** When action is the fruit of prayerful dialogue and is open to the work of Divine Providence, the power of the Gospel becomes visible beyond the Church’s walls to all. This is one reason many of the churches in this process are experiencing numerical growth across age groups.



5. **Action to develop leaders:** When Community Organising proceeds too quickly, it amplifies the voice and agency of those already used to acting. CTC’s work encourages an intentional focus on small-scale campaigns (for example getting lighting installed in a local park) which develop new leaders. This leads to both more diverse and participatory churches, and to a stronger and more deeply-rooted broad-based movement for justice in the wider Citizens UK alliance.
6. **An emphasis on vocation:** This process helps each member of the parish to discern a vocation which is fostered within and alongside the vocation of the Body of Christ and the local neighbourhood. “Synodal Organising” helps local churches to be places where people can develop new skills, build strong relationships, grow their faith and act for justice.

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