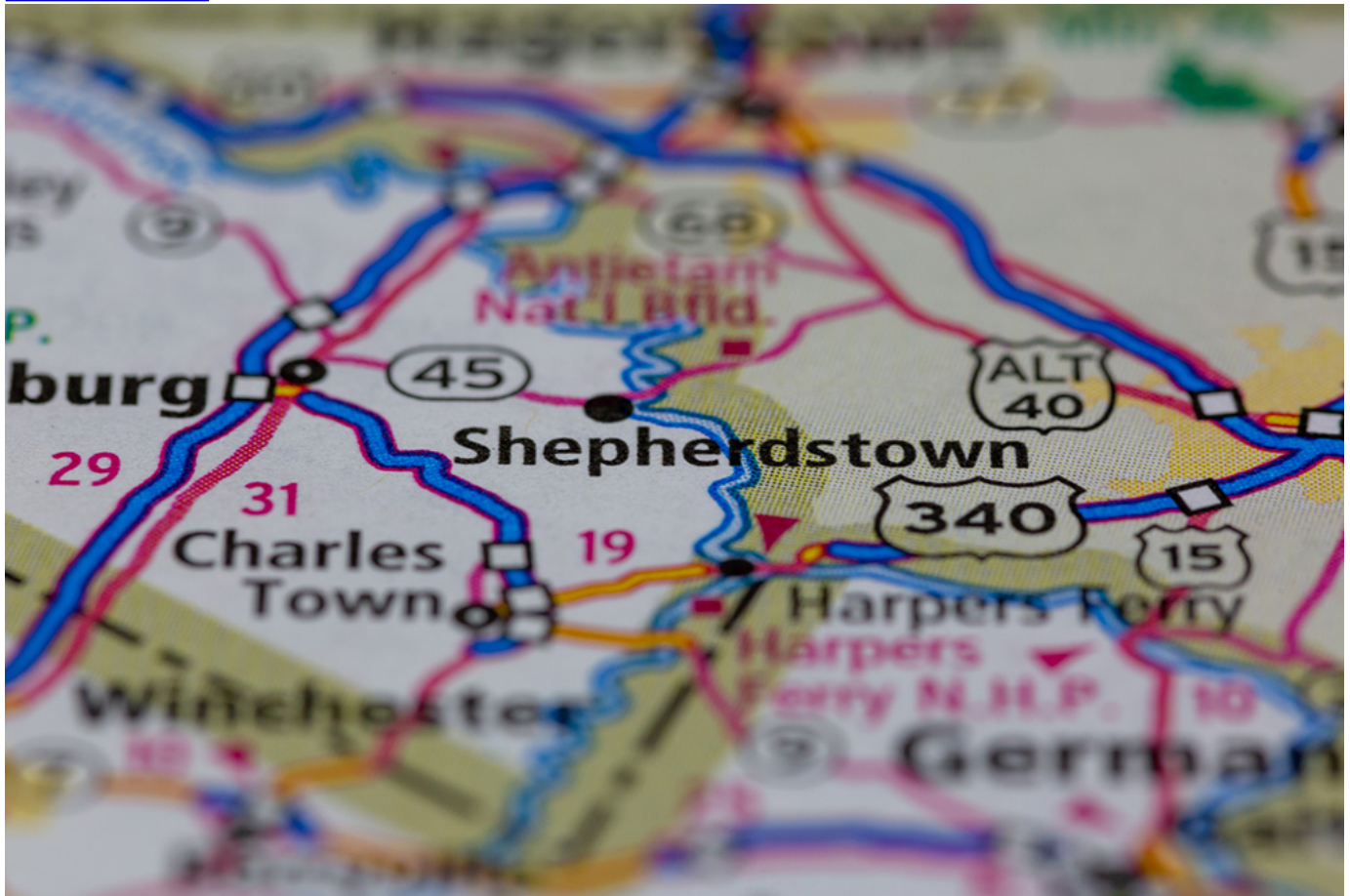


[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



(Dreamstime/Gary Hider)



by Peter Daly

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

October 10, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The global synod of the Catholic Church taking place at the Vatican Oct. 4-29 began with small, local listening sessions held all over the world. The synod is set to discuss continental reports summarizing dialogues that took place in parishes, dioceses and religious orders.

Many U.S. dioceses and parishes [did little or nothing](#) to prepare for or contribute to the synod. But some parishes took the whole process seriously. One such parish is [St. Agnes Church](#) in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese.

St. Agnes appointed three synodal coordinators and trained 27 "facilitators" to lead discussion groups over a period of nearly two years. Whatever happens in Rome, the synodal process has already had a deep and positive effect on St. Agnes.

In the week before the synod began in Rome, I interviewed the pastor, Fr. Andy Switzer, and the three lay coordinators — Helen Harris, Eileen Elliott and Eileen Dooley — to find out what they did and what they have learned from the process. The 17-page final report of the parish listening sessions is [available at the St. Agnes website](#).



Stained glass windows at St. Agnes Church in Shepherdstown, West Virginia
(Rosanne Hutton)

Daly: Tell me what St. Agnes Parish did in preparation for the synod.

Dooley: We went right to the Vatican documents and followed the procedures the Vatican recommended. They called for two coordinators and that is how Helen and Eileen Elliott were appointed. We formed a committee that trained 30 facilitators for the discussion. It was a very prayerful process.

Elliott: We did all of what the Vatican recommended, but that is not what most American parishes did. We asked for the parishioners to attend two two-hour sessions and we looked at the questions that the Vatican posed to the church. We also asked a priest, Fr. Bob Keffer, to supply quotes related to each [discussion] question.

We used the [Vatican questions](#) because we noted that the questions suggested by the diocese had a different tone. They were more concerned about the role of the bishop and how we could serve his ministry.



Helen Harris speaks about the synod at a St. Agnes Parish event in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in March 2022. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/St. Agnes Catholic Church)

Switzer: It was literally all lay-driven. I used to sit in the rectory and look at the parking lot full of cars for people attending the sessions.

Harris: We did the session both on Zoom and [in person] at the church. Most people came to the church. There were times when we had three sessions going at one time.

Dooley: We reached out in other ways. We wrote special questions for the homebound. We interviewed them in their homes. Eileen Elliott interviewed the staff of Catholic Charities. We met with veterans [at the veterans' hospital] and with the

youth confirmation class. We also did individual interviews with people who did not go to church anymore and got their input.

Harris: We also did a local radio show because we wanted people in our area, Catholic or not, to understand what was going on in the church.

Elliott: For all the effort we made, we basically reached people 50 and over. It was difficult to reach people in their 40s and below.

Switzer: The synodal process literally changed the demographics of the parish. We have more and more young families coming in. The spirit of the parish changed.



Fr. Andy Switzer, pastor of St. Agnes Parish in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, gives a homily May 16, 2021. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/St. Agnes Catholic Church)

In the spirit of synodality, things are evolving organically. A racial justice group was initiated. We formed a *Laudato Si'* group [on the environment]. We have had laypeople give reflections after homilies.

Synodality has become a buzzword in the parish. The whole spirit of Vatican II has been renewed.

Dooley: We even have had Zoom discussions within families.

Harris: COVID affected this. People were so happy to come back together after COVID and they were happy to discuss this with each other.

Dooley: We formed small groups, some of which have continued to meet.

Out of all these discussions, what hopes have emerged for the worldwide church and for St. Agnes?

Harris: We hope that women will be involved. We hope there will be a step up and we might see women ordained to the diaconate. A lot of our groups called for ordination of women. ...

They also spoke about the LGBT community. St. Agnes is a welcoming parish. We looked at how to welcome them.

We also looked at the Black community and how to get more people of color involved in the parish.

Dooley: People always want more people involved, but it is always hard to get people involved.

We talked about how to get together with the other Catholic churches in the area. We already have really good relations with non-Catholic churches, good ecumenical relations.



View of a street in Shepherdstown, West Virginia (Wikimedia Commons/Famartin)

Elliott: Some of this was just a reinforcement of being better at who we are trying to be. We have had good relationships with the LGBT community. It is our version of thinking globally and acting locally. ...

We are not waiting for what is happening at the Vatican. We are trying to figure out what we can do locally and do it better.

Switzer: There is a lot that we can do here locally. It surprised me how much ecumenical relations grew here locally. All the churches in Shepherdstown wanted to work together. We did Lenten services together. A woman Lutheran pastor and a woman Methodist pastor and I did Lenten services together. We had an ecumenical service for Ukraine. So, this is also part of the spirit of the synodal process.

Dooley: Even though this was a lay-led process from the start, there probably has not been a Sunday that has gone by in the last two years that we have not heard our pastor talk about the "synod on synodality."

Elliott: I'm glad you brought that up. He [Switzer] prepared the soil. Also, no matter what the Vatican is doing, we are trying to make a difference here.



Eileen Elliott speaks about the synod at a St. Agnes Parish event in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in March 2022. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/St. Agnes Catholic Church)

I like this quote from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful and committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has." I sort of feel like that is our church. No matter what happens at the Vatican, we can change things here.

Harris: Also, I like the phrase "[enlarging our tent](#)." We are trying to make sure that we make people feel welcome and invite them to be part of the community one by one. We are also trying to enlarge our tent.

How many parishes in the diocese did what St. Agnes did?

Harris: I don't think any parish did as much as what we did. We had many meetings over a long period of time. There are 92 parishes in the diocese. I was on the diocesan council. When I told them what St. Agnes did, they were amazed. I don't think anyone else did as much. People from other parishes came to St. Agnes to participate.

Dooley: The most important thing is that we did not short-circuit the process. We really emphasized prayer and listening. ...

Has participating in the synod made a lasting impact on the parish?

Harris: You got to meet people that you didn't know before. We got to know each other. We also realized that this is not a time to be judgmental. We related better to each other.

Switzer: I have seen the parish council move in a much more synodal way. Even now, we are looking at the synodal questions. It sets the tone for a vision for the future. I think we realize there is no going back to the forms and structures we have used in the past. ...

Advertisement

I think the parish realizes that we have to be less institutional and more flexible. People do not like to be told what to do. They want agency, not docility. Things will move less institutionally and more organically.

Dooley: The [synod document](#) has a subheading which I think is important: Community, Mission, and Participation. Who are we as a Catholic Church? What are we about?

Elliott: I think the question for us is "How will I change?"

Dooley: It has a lot to do with how we will relate to each other. We have to make hard decisions and we are called to be grownups. How do we begin to treat Catholic laypeople as adults and take such things as pastoral councils seriously?

Elliott: How do we take this seriously ourselves? I really do think there is a hunger for spiritual food. We can satisfy this by putting emphasis on prayer.

Harris: I really do think it is important that we make some progress on the LGBT community. If we are all God's children, if God can love us all, why can't we all love each other?

Dooley: In a sense, we are going through an identity crisis as a church.

Harris: My thought was let's not focus on the universal church. Let's just focus on St. Agnes. Let's make a difference here.

Postscript: After the conclusion of the first phase of the synod, I will revisit the St. Agnes coordinators to get their reaction to what was said. There will be no actions taken in 2023. There will be a year of discernment and then the synod participants will reassemble in 2024 to make recommendations.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. [View the full series.](#)