

## Synod Report

### **Section A:**

Name: St. Michael Catholic Church  
Address: 1440 Pearce Circle  
Gainesville, GA 30501  
Pastor: Fr. Tim Hepburn  
Reporter: Suzie Hawkins; shawkins@saintmichael.cc

### **Section B:**

Consultation Processes: *Please describe the process(es) you chose to consult your community.*

There are three prominent language communities at St. Michael. By consulting members in each of the language communities, we were able to discern which formats might be best for each community. In English, a synod listening session was offered on three different occasions. Two of those formats were the three-week format – one in-person and one virtual. (The virtual session was canceled due to lack of interest.) The third session offered was the one-day session which was held in-person. There were two sessions in held in Spanish, both were the three-week format conducted in-person. Additionally, there was one session held in Vietnamese. The Vietnamese session was the one-day format held in-person.

Participant Description: *With whom did you consult?*

The entire parish was invited to participate. The participants in the listening sessions included lay parish members, staff, and members of the Parish Leadership Team. To our knowledge, we were not effective in gaining participation from outside the parish, including inactive Catholics, other Christians, or those who are unaffiliated.

Highlights: *What was the best part of the process? What were the high points?*

Among those facilitating the sessions, it was clear that we enjoyed being a part of something being done across the entire parish, across all three language groups. We appreciated that synodality and journeying together were not just the topics, but that they were the heart of the process. The process itself encouraged journeying together, and people appeared to appreciate the opportunity to speak and listen to one another regarding topics that were vital to their parish experience. Providing the community a forum to speak and be heard was the highlight of the process.

Challenges & Lessons: *What was the most challenging aspect of the consultation process? What are some lessons learned?*

Challenges for Leadership: We did not have a good pre-existing structure or organization to launch the synod process across all three language groups. There was not any existing multi-language lay leadership group that could be utilized to communicate to the entire St. Michael

community. It was not clear how to begin or who to work with. We had dates on the calendar before we had secured facilitators.

**Challenges to Participation:** Communicating the message of ‘what the synod is all about’ was challenging, and our inability to do this most likely lessened the participation in our parish. Additionally, the portion of the community that is regularly only active on Sunday for mass was most likely not a major contingent of the listening sessions. Our sessions tended to attract those that were already at the church for other activities outside of Sunday mass.

*Moving Forward: Are there any fruits or steps that your community will be implementing as a result of this process?*

Because it is so soon after the conclusion of our sessions, the specific direction that will emerge from this process is not entirely clear, though it is clear that the community that participated does want follow-up and would like to know what action will be taken to address concerns raised in the synod listening sessions. Each community’s leadership had a scheduled meeting with the pastor and vicars to present the notes from those meetings, where they were able to discuss important findings. The notes were gathered by the pastor for additional prayer and discernment regarding steps to be taken moving forward. Additionally, it is hoped that St. Michael parishioners will read and review this document as a way of initiating organic change.

### **Section C**

*Insights: Please share four or five of the most important insights from your local synodal experience.*

**Insight One:** It is clear that St. Michael’s parish community is a diverse community. From all sides, this is a celebrated diversity. Yet, this celebrated diversity feels flat to many because it is *only* diverse. The experience of solidarity that brings diversity to life is lacking, and therefore, our diversity has not translated into integration. The joys of being a large multi-cultural and multi-racial community seem in sight but just out of reach. Language and culture, the very things the community seems to appreciate about itself, are the things that appear to prevent it from blooming from a diverse community into an integrated community. This is a frustration to many and is experienced as a lack of fulfillment.

**Insight Two:** The St. Michael community that participated in the synod listening sessions describe themselves as passionate about their faith but feel a deficit of confidence and preparedness to be effective evangelizers. This was described in all three language sessions in different ways. It ranged from how to evangelize one’s own children to how to evangelize friends and strangers, and included how to evangelize without proselytizing. There seemed to be an ardent desire to both be able to evangelize effectively and to participate in formation to be more confident and effective evangelizers.

**Insight Three:** Those that attended listening sessions in Spanish expressed a concern regarding internal divisions based on ministries in the Hispanic community. These divisions, at their worst, foster arrogance and pride. Each of the ministry groups feel that they are unacknowledged and are experienced as strangers to the other ministry groups. This is a concern to the church and to

the community. There is a desire to bring deeper communion and cohesion within the Hispanic community, especially with events that are open to all ministries.

Insight Four: Those that attended the listening session in English expressed a concern about communication. There is frustration about how to be in touch with leadership, how to ‘make things happen’, and express concerns. Additionally, there are more tangible frustrations regarding communication, especially concerning the bulletin and website. Many feel that they do not know what is happening at the parish or how to participate at the parish level. Most have experienced good communication within particular ministries but not from the parish as a whole.

Insight Five: In the Vietnamese-speaking community, there seems to be a genuine concern for the youth. The Vietnamese community at St. Michael has a high degree of co-responsibility. In light of this disposition, they see that their faith and prayer are effective means of affecting this concern for their children. They persist in being vigilant and hopeful in the sharing of their Catholic faith with their children.

Final Question: *In what ways do you see the Holy Spirit inviting the local Church here in the Archdiocese of Atlanta to grow in Synodality?*

The Regional Synod Listening session hosted at St. Michael was a wonderful experience. It was a gift to get to meet some of the Archdiocesan staff and to be with other faith-filled leaders in our surrounding area. No parish wants to feel as an island to itself, nor is it necessary for the Archdiocese to be a singular hub connecting all parishes, but perhaps there is a way to weave the parishes together into a web of interconnectivity. In this case, the Archdiocese would act as the channel for these connections to be established... a facilitator, perhaps by offering other gatherings for training, formation, and community-building.