

ARGYLL AND THE ISLES DIOCESAN DISCERNMENT OF MISSION
WEEK 1 ORIENTATION SESSION 5th OCTOBER 2026

Welcome

I want to thank you for your generosity and commitment in accepting my invitation to participate in our diocesan discernment of mission. I want to welcome our clergy and lay faithful from every corner of Argyll and the Isles as well as our facilitators, some of whom live beyond our diocesan boundaries, and our IT Host John Hampsey, from the Ignatian Spirituality Centre in Glasgow.

Tonight is primarily an orientation session and so will differ from our next 8 sessions. I will introduce our purpose and explain the format before taking questions. We will then pray over a piece of scripture before having a taste of Conversation in the Spirit in your Small Groups.

Our Call to Mission

The Church exists for mission. As a local Church our most important task is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. We already know this, therefore what I want us to discern is how we can best witness to Christ and His love within Argyll and the Isles today.

We will begin the discernment process proper next Monday. The topic will be local mission. It is important that we have relevant information, including Church teaching, on each of the session's topics. By Wednesday evening material concerning the following Monday's topic will be posted on the diocesan website.

A Synodal Process

The entire process will be synodal. This means that we will discern together. This approach is not my own idea, but what the recent Popes believe the Holy Spirit is asking of the Church at this time. Synodal discernment is not a fad but natural to the church and forms part of the Church's Magisterium (official teaching).

I experienced this synodal approach during the Synod of Bishops 2021-24 and since then both within and beyond Scotland. I have found it to be very helpful. As your bishop, entrusted with the care of your diocese, please trust me on this issue and if you participate with genuine openness you will personally discover, and delight in, the activity of the Holy Spirit among us.

Synodality is an act of faith and trust in God. The Church is of divine origin for the purpose of spreading the Good News. The Holy Spirit guides the Church. The Acts of Apostles records that the first Christians discerned what the Holy Spirit was asking of them. The New Testament reveals that the paths to be taken were often unexpected and even uncomfortable for the first believers. It is our duty as contemporary disciples to discern what the Holy Spirit is asking of our local Church today.

Discernment

It could be asked if we really need to discern mission. Can we not just get on with the work? Prayerful reflection deepens activity's effectiveness. Discernment increases the likelihood of us complying with God rather than satisfying our preferences. It could also be said that our diocese is too small for such an enterprise as this. Discernment is natural for a Christian community regardless of size. It could be suggested that this process implies that good things are not already happening in our diocese. Of course, many good things are already occurring, thanks be to God! Through this process we will affirm the good which is already happening then seek to build on it and, if deemed necessary, to develop new missionary activities. This is what the Church should be doing if she is serious about spreading the Good News.

I realise that some of you will be enthusiastic about this process, while others may be more sceptical. Most, if not all of you, will be feeling nervous and even doubting if you have anything meaningful to offer. There is no need to worry about any of this. The first Sacrament we all received was baptism and through baptism we share in the common priesthood, we became children of God and temples of the Spirit. You all have a wisdom within arising from your faith and your life experiences. All I ask is that you be open because, if you are, God will use you and good will happen. A diocese that trusts in God and intentionally seeks His will, will be pleasantly surprised. Our immediate intention is discerning mission but other blessings will emerge.

The Process

Our reflections will touch every area of diocesan life - clergy, laity, religious, parish structures (including deployment of clergy as well as the number and organisation of parishes); local initiatives, diocesan structures and diocesan, national and universal initiatives.

Preparation in Advance of each Session

It is important that you are relevantly informed before each session. Therefore, materials for the forthcoming Monday's topic will be available in advance on the diocesan website (hopefully by the Wednesday evening). Please prepare by reading the information and reflect on it prayerfully before each Monday session. Questions will also help stimulate your preparation.

A Commitment

I know that this process is a big commitment for you and I thank you for it. I appreciate that some may miss the odd evening. However, that the same people meet in the Small Groups weekly will build an atmosphere of trust, dialogue, listening and sharing. This will allow discernment to flourish. Therefore, it is not appropriate to seek a replacement if you cannot be present for a particular week as the Group's atmosphere will be disrupted.

Inner Attitude

Discernment is a sacred activity. This is not a Diocesan Parliament where people debate or are trying to win an argument. I ask that you be honest during the sessions. Have the courage to say what you believe but equally have the courage to quietly listen

to others and to reflect on what you have heard before speaking again. No one has full knowledge. Discernment will only work if people prayerfully reflect and then share the fruits.

I invited two participants from every parish. It is important to understand that you are not representing your parish as a politician or defender. I wanted participants from every parish so that all areas of the diocese would be represented. We are not here to protect or promote personal concerns but to discern God's will which demands prayer and openness. While discerning we must not focus solely on our own preferences but have genuine openness to God and to others. Please don't be influenced by those outside for the discernment takes place here, in this forum.

Confidentiality

Before people speak will honestly, they must first trust the process. Therefore, there must be complete confidentiality when people speak. You must never, even in the future, link someone's name with what he or she has said. Trust demands total confidentiality.

The Weekly Sessions

Please be present for the sessions beginning at 6.30pm sharp. Each session will start with *lectio divina* (prayerful reading of the Scriptures) which will focus our minds and hearts. I will then give a short presentation on that session's purpose. The Small Groups, via the method of Conversation in the Spirit, discuss the topic. Facilitators ensure that participants remain within the round's allotted time for speaking, refrain from interrupting others while they speak and keep to the topic. This allows everyone to be heard and respected equally.

During the first round participants will express their thoughts regarding the assigned topic, during the second round participants will share what touched them when they listened to the others while the third round is an open discussion. The Group then begins work on their report by identifying key points raised and separate them under three headings: (i) convergences (ii) divergences (iii) areas needing more study. During the Plenary you will listen to views from across the diocese which may confirm what your Small Group has tentatively agreed or open it to new possibilities. By the end of each session every Small Group will complete and submit their report to me. If necessary, due to time constraints, the report's main points can be agreed verbally before the session ends but the facilitator will then email the Group members a draft report which is to be approved as an accurate record and sent to me by 6pm on the following day (Tuesday). Participants approve the report as being accurate and not based on whether they agree with the views expressed. Efforts should be made so that all members can accept the report. However, if this proves to be impossible the numbers who accepted or rejected the report should appear at the end of the report.

Transparency

I think it is important that a list is published containing the names of participants and their parishes. Please note that what individuals say or the reports submitted by the Small Groups will not be made public. This gives you the freedom to express yourselves

without your words being taken out of context. Any communication beyond this forum will be anonymised. A Final Document will be published as soon as possible after the final session.

All the relevant information made available to you in advance of the meetings, as well as my introductory presentation each week, will be posted on the diocesan website so that it will be available to anyone in the diocese who wishes to read them.

Conclusion of the Process

Once the eight sessions are completed I, as bishop and therefore the competent authority, will prayerfully reflect on your proposals and then take decisions. I will be greatly influenced if a clear majority emerges in any subject. However, if I disagree with the majority opinion it is possible that I could decide contrary to what is opposed. If this happens, I will explain the reasons why I took the decision and be open to revaluation in the future. I ask that in return you accept my decisions. This decision making (prayerful consultation) and decision taking by the competent authority are inseparable yet distinct elements of synodal discernment.

What we doing is ambitious – involving almost seventy people from across Argyll and the Isles. Discernment is hard work so brace yourself for two months of hard graft! However, what we are doing is what the Church asks of us. It is exciting for who knows what unexpected but precious fruits God will bring forth. May God bless our efforts to more deeply learn and comply more closely with his holy will for our diocese.