

Detroit's *Synod/69*, Vatican II-style!

By Judy M. Holmes

In 2021, Pope Francis invited Catholics around the world to build together a “synodal church...that listens to one another and to the Holy Spirit,” sharing concerns, hopes and dreams as equal members of the Body of Christ.

Previously, in 1967, a similar path of engagement and discernment was initiated and fully embraced by Detroit Archbishop John F. Dearden (1958-1981) whose transformative experiences as a participant in all four sessions of Vatican II and first President of the National Catholic Conference of Bishops prepared him well for consultation, collaboration and dialogue.

The announcement of the “Parish Participation Plan” in June of 1967, was addressed “Dearly Beloved in Christ” and expressed the archbishop’s fervent wish “to hear the free voice of our people on all topics—even those beyond my authority. How else can I know what is in your hearts?” His plan to educate, engage, energize and empower the People of God to grow the Church of Detroit was a hope-filled journey. His plan needed a compass as this overview describes.

“How else can I know what is in your hearts?”



John Francis Dearden¹ was a bridge, spanning the decades between Pope John XXIII and Pope Francis:

- As an ambassador of **John’s** Ecumenical Council;
- As a predecessor of **Francis’** Synod

¹ October 15, 1907—August 1, 1988

Having witnessed the dynamic process of the Second Ecumenical Council, Archbishop Dearden invited Detroit Catholics to participate in a synod similar to Vatican II—to learn, listen and “**Speak Up.**” The end result was called ***Synod/69*** which, to this day offers a viable, inspiring model for others planning their own synodal experience in order to share concerns about governance, policies and practices. Thirty years later, Detroit’s St. John Fisher Chapel and University Parish used this process to involve staff and parishioners in writing a new mission statement and setting parish goals, which were implemented on Pentecost. This model of engagement and speaking up is *evergreen* for church organizations. In fact, the national bishops’ 1976 Call to Action Justice Conference was similarly planned and structured.

Speak Up Groups Engaged 200,000 Eager Participants

Components of the “Parish Participation Plan” of renewal (1967-69) were multi-faceted, including closed-circuit TV, discussion booklets, recommendation forms, training programs and planning materials for leaders. A summary follows.

The three-year “Parish Participation Plan” (1967 to 1969) involved 335 parishes across eight counties with a population of 1.5 million Catholics:

✘ **Three shows**, “You are the Church” featured Archbishop Dearden, and were scripted by Fr. Clifford Ruskowski, recorded on Kinescope (prior to video) and viewed on closed-circuit TV in parishes, convents and schools. The shows introduced key concepts of Vatican II and the rationale for the forthcoming process of renewal, revitalization and restructuring in the archdiocese.



Guests at the TV studios of the University of Detroit with director Tony Reda: Fr. Thomas McAnoy, Msgr. Thomas Gumbleton, Archbishop John Dearden

✘ **Printed educational materials engaged 80,000 adults and 120,000 high school students** for six weeks to study, discuss and make recommendations regarding their choice of nine topics: clergy, religious, laity, worship, education, administration, ecumenical affairs, community affairs and missionary activity. This massive educational effort required the creation of 54 booklets (*one booklet for each topic/each week*) and their distribution by the thousands.

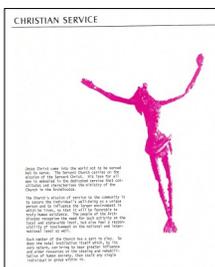
✘ **7,200 “Speak Up” groups met for six weeks**—their coordination was done without the benefit of computers or the internet. That alone was a remarkable endeavor and achievement—the archdiocesan program heralded a new post-Vatican II era.

✘ **65,000 recommendations** were recorded onto carbonless forms in triplicate and submitted to: 1) the “Speak Up” group chair, 2) the pastor, and 3) the deanery (regional) committee. The proposals from each group were to be published in the church bulletin and **voted upon** by the parish at large.

✘ These proposals were then tabulated and **synthesized into 3,629 proposals** on computer punch cards (through Burroughs Corp.) and distributed to the synod commissions in three stages: regional, deanery and archdiocesan.

✘ After seven months of further review, edits of proposals and consultation with experts, preliminary documents were presented to **1100 deanery delegates**. They, in turn, discussed them with Archbishop Dearden and commissioners over two days for final approval.

✘ Thus, on **March 30, 1969, a formal promulgation** was issued by Archbishop Dearden at a public Mass held at Detroit’s Cobo Hall convention center and was to take effect on Pentecost, May 25, 1969. The recommendations and statutes were described in the 80-page booklet simply entitled *Synod/69*. It was divided into seven parts: 1) Decree of Promulgation; 2) By This Covenant; 3) The Covenant and the People of God; 4) The Covenant and the Formation of Christians; 5) The Covenant and the Mission of the Church; 6) The Covenant and the Visible Structure of the Church; and 7) History of the Synod. Each part developed Council teachings, their applications to one’s faith life and their full implementation at the parish, vicariate and archdiocesan levels.



The Synod booklet (*sample page from Christian Service shown here*) was atypical of diocesan publications. Designed by Jane Wolford, it had artistic flair; its content was creatively embellished with photographs, art work and pertinent quotations from Scripture, authors and theologians. It was distributed in bulk across the archdiocese as a compass for living out the gifts and promises of Vatican II as baptized Catholics in Covenant with God and one another.

The results of the synod were all-encompassing and innovative: the archdiocese was restructured into vicariates led by *elected* vicars to encourage discussion and decision-making on the local level through mandated vicariate and parish councils. Archdiocesan departments and offices were established to broaden the educational foundations and to serve the pastoral needs in the areas of Worship, Christian Service and Christian Formation. Delegates for laity, religious and clergy were appointed as the archbishop's representative to handle matters directly. Shared decision-making was the new norm in the archdiocese involving laity and clergy.

“The Synod is a beginning, not an ending.”

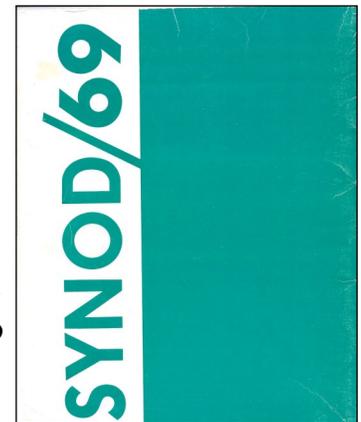
At the Mass of promulgation, Archbishop Dearden framed the three-year process with these words: “After months of preparation, of collaboration and of shared responsibility, we are to enact today what reflects our aspirations, hopes, desires and dreams of the Church of today and tomorrow. The document [*Synod/69*] reflects the course we are to follow. It traces the patterns of our movement forward. **The Synod breathes the spirit of the Vatican Council** [*emphasis added*]. It was needed to give life, warmth, strength and intensity to the Council directives. What we have done is so significant.... The Synod is a beginning, not an ending.”

In the foreword to the Synod booklet, the archbishop reflected: “The Church of the archdiocese will be stronger because we as a people were able to share the responsibility for its growth in Christ.

“...Since 1967, we have deliberated to find Christian answers to the fundamental questions of our times. With the Holy Spirit moving among us to guide us, the world which we are trying to shape reflects the world as we would have it: the fulfillment of God's design for the people of our community. The Synod guidelines are set forth to bring order to our efforts. Because none of us can anticipate the newness of tomorrow, the guidelines purposely have the flexibility that the times demand. Together we must accept an era of change as a time of opportunity...we must move into it with a confidence and trust born of the Holy Spirit.”

In Part One, Dearden acknowledged the limitations of any effort like the Synod: “The full and real results of our seeking progress together are **inscribed in our hearts and embodied in our lives**. The written word cannot capture all that is real in our hearts. The printed conclusions...are then, at best, our partial, inadequate and human response to the urgings of God's Holy Spirit. As imperfect as these documents may be, they are our response in faith to God and express our covenant with Him to live as the people He calls us to be.”

The daunting challenge of the “Parish Participation Plan” was to make the 103,014 words of the Council's documents “real, meaningful and concrete within the Archdiocese,” bringing to life the program's motto, “Seeking Progress Together.”



Significantly, as noted in the booklet’s conclusion: “Archbishop Dearden, himself one of the leading figures at the Council, decided to model as closely as possible a similar assembly here. Thus, Vatican II finds its replica in...*Synod/69*.”



On April 28, 1969, one month after the Synod’s promulgation, Archbishop John Francis Dearden was elevated to the College of Cardinals by Pope Paul VI.

Tools of Renewal: Adult Education and Faith Formation

Archbishop Dearden stressed the need for ongoing adult Christian formation and education for the People of God to grow in their faith and to live in covenant with God and one another. With his full support, Jane Wolford, the talented director of the Institute for Continuing Education (ICE) led a staff of nine lay women and one priest consultant to design adult educational programs and training of parish leaders. ICE sponsored 8-week classes across the archdiocese and hosted prominent authors, theologians and international experts to speak to large receptive audiences as part of its “Signs Series”—a direct response to “reading the signs of the times,” as urged by the Council Fathers.

These programs were developed concurrently by ICE which was already responsible for the planning, preparation, logistics, and distribution of printed materials for *Synod/69* and the “Parish Participation Plan” in consultation with the Synod Coordinating Commission. As a member of this team, I was involved in the remarkable, labor-intensive and exciting endeavor. Together, these components were effective tools which assisted Archbishop Dearden to usher in a new Spirit of renewal and reform. Ultimately, Detroit became known across the country as a progressive archdiocese dedicated to learning and living the wisdom of Vatican II. These were the golden years.



This summary² was prepared by Judy M. Holmes, based on primary sources published by the Archdiocese of Detroit and part of her personal archives:

- History of the Synod in Detroit prior to 1967;
- Announcement of the program, June 1967;
- Invitation to participate, September 1967; and
- The Leaders’ “Parish Participation Plan” Booklet—its goals, organizational structure, timelines, participants, process and expected outcomes.

²See also the description of *Synod/69* written for *The John Cardinal Dearden Legacy Project* by historian Samuel J. Thomas, Ph.D.

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*Let us have
a good
journey
together!*

Pope Francis



*We want
to be
a synodal
Church.*

Pope Leo XIV
May 8, 2025