

# Baptist praises process followed in Catholic Synod

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Some [observers criticized](#) the recent Roman Catholic Church's Synod on Synodality for failing to take bold positions on controversial issues. But a Baptist participant at the Synod believes other Christians could learn from the process Catholics followed.

"Synodality is an unfamiliar word, not only amongst Protestants, but also—I quickly discovered—amongst many Catholics, as well. It means 'walking together' or also 'accompaniment.' There was a strong focus on listening to one another and seeking to discern together—in contrast to only debating," Baptist theologian Elizabeth Newman said.



Elizabeth Newman

(Photo / <https://scholars.duke.edu/>)

Newman from the United States and Valérie Duval-Poujol from France served as Baptist World Alliance fraternal delegates to the [Synod on](#)

## [Synodality.](#)

The summit of 464 Catholic bishops, priest and laity—including women—gathered to discuss a range of issues, based on two years of conversations in Catholic parishes around the world.

As chair of the BWA Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Christian Unity, Newman is a veteran of Baptist-Catholic dialogues. She participated in conversations between the BWA and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, a long-term initiative.

“I believe this kind of ecumenical initiative is important because, as the Baptist World Alliance acknowledges, while for Baptists the local church is wholly church, it is not the whole church,” she said.

“God gathers us in local congregations of discipleship, gatherings that are at the same time part of a larger reality—the church universal. Ecumenism is the active reminder of this truth.

“There is, of course, division and even discord. God calls Baptists and all Christians, however, to seek unity,” she continued, citing John 17:20. “Unity is a way of sharing in God’s mission.”

[Religion News Service reported](#) 364 voting participants in the monthlong summit produced a 42-page document, Synthesis Document for a Synodal Church in Mission. RNS noted most of the 20 points in the document passed with overwhelming majorities, but no single paragraph received full consensus.

At the Synod, participants were divided into groups of 12 and “invited to address specific questions that arose out of earlier synodal discussions from the seven continents,” Newman explained.

“Each group considered shared convergences, divergences amongst

themselves and ongoing questions that the group had,” she said. “The groups had facilitators, and all members were allowed equal time to speak.”

## **Prayer and contemplation practiced**

Newman praised the Synod’s emphasis on prayer and sensitivity to the Spirit’s leadership.

“In addition to prayer at the opening and closing of each session, there were periods of silence, two to four minutes, usually following about 30 minutes of listening,” she said.

“As I experienced it, the Synod is seeking to form its participants to see synodality as a contemplative way of being. I think Baptists and all Christians could learn from this way of being with one another in contrast to the temptation to be reactive.

“At the same time, synodality is not only listening. The focus is discerning together in light of Scripture and tradition.”

She expressed hope the “contemplative process of synodality” and emphasis on prayer not only will shape congregational discussions, but also future ecumenical dialogue.

Synodality also includes “a strong emphasis on the poor, the migrants, those on the periphery or those who feel excluded from the church,” she added.

“How might fuller attention to those on the margins shape and build up our understanding of being church together?” she asked.

## Role of women explored

As expected, the role of women in the church figured prominently in Synod discussions. The [Women's Ordination Conference](#) officially said it was “dismayed by the failure of the Synod to take seriously the overwhelming calls to open all ordained ministries to women.” Even so, it applauded the Vatican for allowing 54 women to vote alongside male bishops for the first time at the summit.

The Synod gave serious attention to asking how to acknowledge fully women's gifts and roles in the church, Newman said.

“It was quite moving to hear women from different parts of the world speak to the need for their presence and gifts to be more fully received in the life of the Catholic church,” she said. “For me, this discussion related to discussion about authority, which some emphasized, was not simply power as in the secular sphere. Authority is service to assist growth, promoting others and not oneself, and is rooted in the grace of God.”

Newman noted the Synod opened the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate, if not the priesthood. She pointed out Lottie Moon—the revered 18th century Baptist missionary to China—supported a revival of the order of deaconesses, whom she called “holy handmaids of the Lord.”

“While Baptists and Catholics have differences in understanding the role of ‘deacon,’ it would be fruitful ground to explore as a shared possibility for women,” she said.

## Challenge of secularization examined

The Synod devoted particular attention to Christian witness in the midst of secularization, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, Newman noted.

“This secularization included the loss or weakening of faith across the generations,” she said. “This would be a shared concern for Baptists and other Protestants, as well.”

Discussion focused on how to include young people in various church roles, listen to their concerns and strengthen their spiritual formation, with special attention to communicating in a digital context, she observed.

“I talked with one sister who has a huge following on TikTok, where she responds to questions that young folks send in,” she said.

## **Signs of common ground?**

Despite distinct theological differences between Catholics and Baptists, Newman saw evidence of common ground in the discussions at the Synod.

“I think many Baptists would have been surprised to hear Catholics emphasizing a personal relationship or encounter with Jesus. This emphasis was in response to reflecting on co-responsibility and a shared understanding of all participating in the mission of the church,” she said.

“Baptists have long emphasized lay involvement in mission. At the same time, Baptists and Catholics can continue to learn from one another how our mission to the faith is to be lived out.”

In small-group discussions at the Synod, Newman noted “a strong emphasis on the witness of holiness or the idea that you’re sharing your own person as well as the good news. Holiness and transformation are part of the gospel.”

Baptists and other Protestants—who accept the priesthood of believers as a central doctrine—could learn from continued ecumenical dialogue with Catholics, she noted.

“The priesthood of all believers is no solo flight, but a communion that radiates,” she said.