



## Introduction

For decades at Holy Trinity, in striving to proclaim and live the Gospel of Jesus, the role of women in the Church has been on the hearts and minds of parishioners and the pastoral staff. Interest in the topic of women's absence from leadership heightened in the wake of reports of ecclesiastical failures to properly prevent and respond to clergy sexual abuse. Parishioners have been seeking ongoing conversation and formation in the parish on women in the Church. An opportune moment was created by the release of an interim report in the form of a letter to Pope Leo XIV on December 4, 2025 from the Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate. The study group of ten, who formed the commission, concluded that at this time they will not recommend that the diaconate be open to women, and instead the Church needs to engage in further understanding of and discernment about the diaconate. While there are signs of hope in the letter, the parish pastoral team and the pastoral council heard experiences of desolation from parishioners – anger, sadness, frustration – coupled with a desire to respond. Grounded in the parish's commitment to accompany one another in Christ, the pastoral staff in coordination with parishioners decided to host a listening session on Women in Ministry in the Church. This was scheduled on January 24, 2026, and despite the impending icy snowstorm predicted to begin that evening, 80 women and men gathered to pray, listen, and share with one another their experiences of women in ministry and reactions to the commission's letter to Pope Leo.

## Method

Experienced in using listening circles and committed to implementing the practice of synodality in the parish, three members of the parish staff (Catherine Heinhold, Anne Marie Kaufmann, Ian Mitchell), two members of the Restorative Justice Team (Bob Stump and Ellen Toups), and a parishioner (Liz McCloskey) met to discuss the best approach and process for the listening session. They decided that the process would use a combination of Conversations in the Spirit and the restorative justice Circle Keeping Process for small group interaction. Elements from Conversations in the Spirit included inviting participants to read and pray with material ahead of time; beginning the session with prayerful reflection; holding three rounds with a three-minute silence in between each round to listen to the voice of God, that is, the Holy Spirit, in considering the comments of each person at the table; and concluding with finding common themes that emerged at the table. These were the questions for each round:

Round 1: As you reflect on the "Role of Women in Ministry in the Church," what moved you and how was the Spirit moving in you?

Round 2: Share what struck you most or what resonated for you in the first round and what moved you during the time of silence.

Round 3: Share what moved you most deeply. What new insights arise? What are the common themes or fruits of the conversations?



Elements from the Circle Keeping Process included having a trained facilitator at each table who would not participate in the sharing; having a notetaker who would participate in the sharing; and allowing each participant two minutes to share with no cross talking or commenting. Each table would have no more than 9 participants. Notetakers would have the role of taking notes during the third round. Following the third round, the notetaker at each table would give a summary report limited to three minutes and would submit the notes from the third round to either Catherine or Anne Marie. A meeting was held with facilitators and notetakers to orient them to the topic and process.

In advertising the session, participants were asked to pre-register and were emailed in advance of the session with clear guidance on the process (including the importance of arriving on time and how latecomers would participate<sup>1</sup>) and the request to read prayerfully in advance the letter from the commission to Pope Leo and, if there was time, a couple of additional articles that provided an explanation on the letter. Because each subsequent round depended on having listened to table members in the previous round, anyone arriving late would be asked to sit in an outer row of chairs where they could listen but would not be able to participate in the circle conversation.

At the end, all participants were invited to add any additional comments via sticky notes. The planning group decided that this would provide an alternative way for those who arrived late or who felt they needed more time to express and share their thoughts.

### **Common Themes/ Summary Notes**

In the Gospel of John, Mary of Magdala is the first to arrive at the tomb on the first Easter, “early in the morning, while it was still dark.” (Jn 20:1b) Upon seeing the empty tomb, Mary weeps. Jesus’ body is missing, and she wants to find out where he has been laid. She mistakes the risen Lord for the gardener, until he calls her by name, “Mary!” In hearing her name spoken with love, she knows it is Jesus – and responds, “Rabbouni,” or teacher. She has encountered the risen Lord! He then tells her to go and proclaim the Good News of his Resurrection to the disciples. He sends her as his messenger, as an apostle or as recognized by the Church, the apostle to the apostles. This story of Mary of Magdala in many ways parallels the experience of the women and men who participated in the listening session on women in ministry in the Church – sadness, confusion, deep encounters with Jesus and his love, a call to serve the Church, an urgency to respond, and in the midst of it all, hope.

Following is a summary of the reports from each of the ten tables, highlighting common themes and offering additional comments to broaden the viewpoints shared during the listening session. This summary does not express every viewpoint or idea that was shared. However, the notes

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<sup>1</sup> Chairs were arranged in an outer semi-circle near one of four tables for anyone who arrived late. All attendees who wished to participate in the conversation arrived on time. There were 5 attendees who either were unable to stay for the entire time or otherwise did not want to participate in the conversation and so sat in these outer circles. One of these five in the outer circled prayed for the participants during the listening session.



from each table are also available in order to give voice to all comments that were recorded during the listening session.

**Feelings of desolation:** Common reactions to the letter across all groups included: anger, sadness, confusion, pain, frustration, disappointment, and embarrassment.

**Strong women of faith:** Participants told stories of strong women of faith in their lives who were influential not only on their own journeys but also in their parishes or faith communities. These included mothers, grandmothers, and women religious who gave witness to their own faith through active ministry as “the heart and soul” of their parishes. The importance of these women in their lives made reading the letter painful and caused frustration at what seemed to be a devaluing of their contributions to the mission and ministry of the Church.

**Women called to ordained ministry:** Additionally, participants spoke of either experiencing the call to ordained ministry themselves or recognizing that experiencing a call is a reality for women, including women they know. Many felt the commission’s letter was dismissive about women who feel called to discern vocations to the diaconate or priesthood and continued to perpetuate a devaluing of women’s experiences with regard to ordained ministry. Instead, participants expressed that there should be a process for women’s voices to be heard and honored.

**Women ordained in other denominations:** Attending services at other Christian churches where women are ordained and preach provides a powerful witness to the gifts that women have to offer the Church.

**Signs of the times:** Participants spoke of priest shortages and young people they know, including daughters, who have left the Church because they feel women are not valued and there is no place or role for them. For some, there was a sense of urgency out of concern for the vitality and existence of the Church, and a recognition that, unlike older generations, today's young women feel much less obligated to stay in an institution that doesn't seem to welcome them fully.

**Dignity of women:** A strongly expressed idea across the groups was that Christ being male should not be the basis for excluding women from ordained ministry. While participants acknowledged differences between women and men, the unique gifts that women would bring to ordained ministry and leadership in the Church would only strengthen and enliven the Church, not cause it harm. Furthermore, sometimes women need to hear from other women, such as through preaching or giving pastoral guidance, in order to be heard and to understand their place in the Body of Christ. This, then, becomes a question of honoring the dignity of women as being made in the image and likeness of God.

**Diaconate, priesthood and other ministry roles:** Some discussion focused specifically on the diaconate, with a desire to understand its meaning more and to see it as a real position of ministry in the Church, not just an intermediary to the priesthood. Plus, a final decision has not



been made on whether the diaconate will be opened to women. At the same time, conversation naturally included discussion of the priesthood, with strong desires and convictions that when considering women and the diaconate, the priesthood needs to be included as well. There also was an understanding that ministry roles outside of ordination exist for women, and these should be recognized and valued by the entire Church.

**Women in leadership in the Church:** Increasing the number of women in leadership and decision-making roles in the Church was also acknowledged as vital to a healthy and thriving Church. It was noted that women's leadership is already present in some places, but it has not yet been formalized or recognized by the institutional Church. Some expressed that to effect real change in the Church requires change in the hierarchy – greater transparency, truly listening to women's voices, and including women in decision-making processes.

**Commitment to staying in the Catholic Church:** The desire to create change from within rather than leave the Catholic Church was a common sentiment. This is my “spiritual home,” and “my heart is here.” Or more practically, “I’m too stubborn to leave the Church.”

**The Universal Church:** It was acknowledged that the decision about women in the diaconate is influenced by the worldwide Church. Different cultural norms regarding women result in different views on ordaining women and might make the idea of women deacons less acceptable. At the same time, there have been situations where local churches have made their own decisions about ministerial roles because of a pressing need. The question was posed: Is there a place for different ministries of the diaconate in different countries or regions?

**Gratitude:** A general sense of gratitude was expressed across the groups. There was gratitude that the conversation about women in the Church took place where they could express their reactions to the letter and share their anger, sorrow, disappointment and hope. There also was gratitude for the ways that Holy Trinity does value women in the Church – lay preaching, trying to ensure the presence of women on the altar, and women in leadership roles. It has provided an oasis for some – a place of welcome and acceptance.

**Hope:** Despite the negative reactions to the letter, there also was an underlying sense of hope and trust in the Holy Spirit. Some even expressed hope in the letter itself, for it didn't close the door on the diaconate, and even if not well received by all, it was made public. Specific comments included: “The conference letter is discouraging but could offer a glimmer of hope.” “We understand our church is undergoing a process, and we choose to have hope.”

**Desire for Action:** This theme came up at a number of tables. Some parishioners expressed interest in understanding how they could influence decision makers. Others expressed desire for immediate public actions such as a women's strike, an open letter to Pope Leo, the pastor meeting with Cardinal McElroy on this issue, or a letter-writing campaign.



Holy Trinity Catholic Church  
Women in Ministry in the Church  
Listening Session January 24, 2026  
Final Report

**Conclusion**

This listening session offered parishioners the opportunity to share their reactions to the interim report from the commission tasked with studying women's ordination to the diaconate. While there was a clear experience of desolation, the expressions of gratitude and hope reveal the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is always at work among the People of God. Further discernment and conversation will follow to determine next steps. "As we end, I am filled with frustration but also hope. Lord, it is so good to be here." (Comment from a participant)