



+ April 30, 2026

Dear Heal Our Church Steering Committee,

I received your April 8th letter, and while I did not receive an invitation to the event at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, I am grateful for the summary notes you shared.

The feedback gathered at the Town Hall echoed many of the same themes that emerged during our local synod, which included nearly 1,000 listening sessions attended by more than 11,000 local people. These listening sessions were held in parishes as well as other settings to gather input from youth and young adults, people from different cultures, people on the margins, victim survivors of abuse, non-practicing Catholics, non-Catholics, the imprisoned, and many others. As you can imagine, I am well aware of the various issues that arose during your Town Hall as well as other issues important to Catholics in our archdiocese.

Pope Francis called us all to be a synodal Church, and the beautiful practice of listening to the workings of the Holy Spirit and each other is one we are embracing at all levels in the Archdiocese of Seattle. Your Town Hall provided another opportunity to listen and learn, and while I was not present, I hope it was conducted with genuine openness to hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit as we are called to do. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that helps us listen to the voice of God, who leads us, rather than temporal personal agendas.

Your letter and notes raise several issues that I am happy to address:

Lay leadership and women

I couldn't agree more on the importance of lay leadership in our Church. This is a topic I am passionate about – even before my arrival in Seattle. I have preached and written about it many times. As you may know, my leadership team is comprised primarily of lay leaders – including several women in key roles: chief operations officer, chief financial officer, chief communications officer, CEO of Catholic Community Services, executive director of Fulcrum, among others. In addition, women are strongly represented on the Archdiocesan Pastoral and Finance councils, their subcommittees, the Archdiocesan Review Board and many other councils and ministries. (Please see [a reflection](#) from COO Caitlin Moulding about her experience as a female leader in the Church.)

These lay leaders are vital to the leadership and governance of our Church and just one of the many ways the Church relies on lay ministers (including women) – just as parishes rely on their councils, commissions and lay leaders to sustain parish life. No parish could exist without lay ministers.

I wish to echo what I've shared in homilies and wrote in an [earlier statement](#), "The essential role of laity in the Church," and in [my column](#) called "A call to lay ministers," among other communications:

We need more of the laity to recognize Christ's call to service and to share the gifts of the Spirit for the benefit of the people of God. Lay ecclesial ministers – lay people who have been properly formed and authorized to serve publicly in the local Church through leadership in a particular ministry, in collaboration with the bishops, priests and deacons – are critical for a renewed spirit of evangelization in the Archdiocese of Seattle. ... The truth is, we don't know it all, and we truly value partners in the Gospel who can challenge us to explore new possibilities and encourage us in our work. This is the time for us to recognize the gifts we see in others and invite them to consider serving the Church as lay ecclesial ministers.

To support this effort of strengthening lay ministers, we enhanced our [ongoing formation](#) for lay ministers with multiple certificate programs and reopened our [Christifideles Lay Ecclesial Ministry](#) graduate program, which will celebrate the graduation of our first cohort in a few weeks.

All of this advanced education is designed to help people recognize their gifts and use their talents to support the Church – whether that's in parish life, Catholic schools, Catholic Community Services or dozens of other Catholic organizations. The Church is the living Body of Christ that comes to life through each one of us.

Role of hierarchy

While we all agree on the important and vital role that lay leaders have in the Church today, we cannot overlook the role of the Church's hierarchy.

During his [general audience](#) on March 25, 2026, Pope Leo XIV explicitly taught that the Church's hierarchical structure is founded on the Apostles by Christ himself, and therefore belongs to the Church's very constitution, not simply to its practical organization. He rejected the idea that hierarchy is a later or optional layer imposed on the People of God, stating clearly that it is a divine institution meant to perpetuate Christ's mission until the end of time. (See his full address here: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/audiences/2026/documents/20260325-udienza-generale.html>)

Drawing directly on *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Leo XIV taught that sacred orders function in service of the Church's unity, not over or against it. The hierarchy exists to hold the Church together in truth, sacramental life, and apostolic mission. He emphasized that bishops, priests, and deacons are entrusted with handing on what they themselves have received, preserving the apostolic faith through teaching, sanctifying, and governing.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the Apostles were the first community redeemed by Christ (People of God), while at the same time the "beginning of the sacred hierarchy" (Ad gentes 5; cited in Pope Leo's catechesis). Thus, Vatican II rejects any opposition between "people" and "hierarchy." The hierarchy doesn't descend from above but instead arises from within the People of God for their service. As baptized persons, we are all called to service, though some are called to serve as bishops, priests, deacons, or lay ministers.

The Church is a divine institution with a structure that requires both the hierarchy and the leadership of lay ministers to share Christ's radical love with others. I encourage you to continue to advocate for lay engagement at parishes because we need everyone to recognize their baptismal call to serve the Church.

Partners in the Gospel

I wish to clarify a few points of misinformation that seem to be circulating. First, the shortage of priests is not why we are undertaking Partners in the Gospel. We are stepping into this work with our eyes and hearts fixed on Jesus and the mission he gave us. The engagement trends from past decades reveal that how the Catholic Church has been organized and operated in Western Washington does not reflect the realities and needs of today. For decades we have seen demographic shifts and declines in participation in the sacraments, Mass attendance, volunteering, stewardship, and more. We need change. That's why we are creating this new opportunity through Partners in the Gospel to rethink how we are structured and organized so that we can better carry out our evangelizing mission. This is at the heart of Partners in the Gospel.

How can we creatively think of new ways to engage youth and young adults? How can we show up on the margins in our communities? How can we invite lapsed Catholics back to parish life?

These are the types of questions that parish families have been asked to explore. Parish families will work together at a local level to think about "Who are we?" and "Who do we want to become?" and "How do we get there?" This effort requires the participation of the People of God through dialogue, input, feedback and action to create a local plan for the future of their new parish.

Your notes insinuate that Partners in the Gospel "was accomplished," and this is far from reality. Partners in the Gospel launched in January 2023, and parish families were implemented after archdiocesan-wide consultation in July 2024. Most parish families have formed their consultative bodies through a Parish Family Advisory Council and a Parish Family Leadership Team. These councils will follow the One Parish Planning Process to engage parishioners along every phase for feedback and input. I strongly encourage all of you to participate in these sessions and share your voices.

I also invite you to read through the materials on our website and watch this [short overview video](#). You have made many assumptions about the Partners in the Gospel goals and process that simply are not accurate. Decisions about each parish family will be made at the local parish level with consultative input from parishioners. There is no pre-determined outcome at the archdiocesan level for this effort. Real discernment is required; discernment in prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit as we ask, "How should we re-envision to be the Church Jesus wants us to be?"

Our dialogue and healing

The letter indicated that I have ignored your "outreach for dialog." Our first interactions began with your PR attack on me in local media without ever having reached out to me. Nevertheless, I invited you to the Chancery and explained how this first impression of Heal Our Church did not demonstrate an authentic desire for dialogue. We had a respectful discussion about how we share the same goals but have different ways of achieving them. You should recall at the end of that meeting I respectfully requested that you work with me

in the future, rather than continuing to use other means to publicly influence me. I regret that you did not respond affirmatively to my invitation for dialogue and collaboration.

I understand that you are frustrated that I did not accept your demand for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2020. As I have already shared, the reason for this is to preserve the confidentiality of victim survivors who have repeatedly asked us not to share their stories (after reading about your demands in local media outlets). I have received similar guidance from the Review Board, comprised of Catholic and non-Catholic lay experts in sexual abuse and trauma. As I mentioned, we share the same goal of healing but have different ways of achieving it.

As the Archbishop, my goal is to ensure that all victim survivors and their families find healing – and that Catholics and the wider public understand we are deeply sorry for the sins of abuse. We have spent nearly four decades addressing the needs of victim survivors, while creating and updating policies, procedures and education that make Catholic churches and schools some of the safest places for children and vulnerable adults. Most people do not know that 99% of reported incidents of clergy sexual abuse occurred prior to 1995 in the Archdiocese of Seattle. You can read more about these efforts in the “[Creating a Safe Environment for All](#)” paper, which provides insight into local efforts and how they fit into the larger societal context of the time. A few highlights of our local efforts include:

- 1988: First Special Task Force convened to develop policies, procedures and protocols for sexual ethics.
- 1989: Special Task Force report released, which established the Blue Ribbon Committee to implement new policies.
- 1990: Background checks required for all employees and all volunteers working with minors and vulnerable adults.
- 1990: Safe Environment Program begins with mandatory attendance for all priests.
- 2001: Blue Ribbon Committee replaced by Special Cases Committee to review individual cases and make recommendations for suitability of ministry.
- 2003: Special Cases Committee becomes the Archdiocesan Review Committee in accordance with the Norms established by the USCCB. Purpose is to review all cases and advise on credibility.
- 2007: Policy for the Prevention and Response to Sexual Abuse, Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment and Code of Professional Conduct promulgated. Replaces Policy for Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Response to Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors (2004) and Ministerial Responsibility Requirements (2000).
- 2014/2015: Former FBI special agent hired to conduct independent review of archdiocesan files, identifying list of clergy and religious brothers and sisters for

whom allegations of sexual abuse of a minor have been admitted, established, or determined to be credible.

- 2016: After review by the Archdiocesan Review Board and Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the Archdiocese of Seattle voluntarily publishes a list of clergy and religious brothers and sisters for whom allegations of sexual abuse of a minor have been admitted, established or determined to be credible. Updates made as new information comes to light.
- 2024: Dedicated healing ministry launched.
- 2025: Added new name to the official public list.

You have repeatedly chosen to ignore the good work, efforts, listening and more that have taken place in our archdiocese and have been shared with you. Since Heal Our Church was seen interacting on stage with Attorney General Bob Ferguson prior to his May 2024 public announcement of the records subpoena (one in which the court ruled is overly broad and unconstitutional), I have not received further requests for meetings from Heal Our Church – but continue to experience targeted media attacks. It is clear that you do not have a genuine desire to dialogue with me.

While I appreciate your desire for healing – especially since I share that same desire and long for healing for all victim survivors and our Church, I do not see how your efforts are fostering healing for victim survivors and Catholics in general.

I wish to close by encouraging you to remain active in your faith and participate in your own parish family renewal. Engage in the Partners in the Gospel process, sharing your voice and vision for the future. I hope you will join me, and many others who are working so hard in this crucial effort, so that we can become more effective instruments of God's saving and life-giving love that comes to us in Jesus Christ. As always, I remain,

In The Heart of Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul D. Etienne". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and "E".

Most Rev. Paul D. Etienne, DD, STL
Archbishop of Seattle

P.S. Please only send correspondence to my office at the Chancery.