**Reflections on Questions and Points raised at the Newcastle and North Tyneside Vicariate meeting at St Mary’s School, Benton**

**19 October 2016**

**Will there be any guidance for the Structure of the final meeting which will take place to produce the ‘Proposal’ Document?**

There is some general guidance and a ‘possible meeting format’ in the ‘From Parish to Partnership’ booklet, but we can certainly think about this and make something available if it would be of service to everyone.

**Are all the documents still available?**

Apart from the original ‘Data pack’ given to each parish as well as the more recent ‘Observations’ document in response to the Parish Questionnaire and the one page **‘Profile of Your Parish in Numbers’** document**,** everything has been made available on line via [www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk](http://www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk)

**It can be a struggle to get people together – do we need every parish representative there for meetings or can we leave it to the priest to report?**

It is often very difficult for groups of people to honestly explore what they see the future to be. None of us really wants to change, but it is extremely important that the breadth and diversity of views is fully appreciated. When it comes to reflecting the views of a community it must be done honestly and respectfully. If it is impossible for a parish representative to be there then someone else will need to reflect the views of all. It is just so important that the views of everyone, priests and people, are accurately reflected.

**Everyone is afraid of change – how do we reassure everyone not to be afraid and to move forward?**

It is perfectly true that we all find change very difficult. To not change, however, is to stagnate. What we’re facing is a renewed call to think seriously about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in a church and world which are both changing. Reorganising is one thing, but the purpose of the shift of emphasis from parish to partnership is to enable resources to be shared so that communities can be viable and flourish in the future. We also have a great opportunity to invest time and energy and other resources in enabling lay people to assume their rightful roles as leaders within our communities. It is change, but the changes will hopefully enable us to become more dedicated witnesses to Jesus in our world.

Change is facing all of us, including priests. We will have to learn to let go of some things we’ve perhaps done for years and trust others to become involved and take initiatives. We are really only at the very early stages of the move to Partnerships, it may take some years for them to come to fruition.

One suggestion we will be looking at is the ways in which new partnerships can have some of their meetings facilitated by someone from outside the area. There are no details worked out about this at all, but it will be something we will look at nearer the time when these skills will be needed.

**Some areas are more developed than others, and some people seem to presume that the new area will simply be the deanery. Some people also think that everything has already been sorted and it is a fait accompli …**

One of the reasons why the front of the ***Imagine New Ways*** leaflet has an outline on it is to make it clear that the only fixed boundary in the diocese is the diocesan boundary – we can’t mess with the North Sea, the Pennines, the River Tweed and the River Tees. We’re invited to use our imagination and not be limited by what we already know. In exploring proposals, communities can cross deanery boundaries if they so wish. We need to remember that these are ‘Proposals’ and final decisions will be made by Bishop Seamus after consulting the Board at the meeting in January.

There is a feeling in some areas that ‘decisions have already been made’ and that its all done bar the shouting. Putting it fairly bluntly, if some people think that Partnerships have been ‘stitched up’ by the clergy, or a group of priests and people together, then there can always be some un stitching in January. We need to take a long view, looking much further ahead than we usually do, to ensure that there isn’t a fundamental ‘rearrangement’ taking place every two or three years.

As Tony mentioned earlier, in December we will have to look at all proposals and look to the collective age profile, number of worshippers, financial viability and other things to ensure that any particular Partnership will be feasible for some time to come.

**Have we given enough thought to what sort of local Church we will have - do we have large Mass Centres with people coming from far and wide, or rotate the celebration of Mass around an area?**

Decisions like this are arrived at after a great deal of discussion and consultation. For some years now the people and clergy in Northumberland have been wondering and exploring how they will manage in the future with fewer clergy – and no final decisions have been made as yet.

In France there is one diocese with 14 parishes, and one of those parishes has 72 churches in it. There are two priests serving this parish! In one area in the West of France there are three churches which alternate the celebration of Mass. At present we have just about enough priests to maintain what we’re used to. This will not be the case in the very near future so we need a good bit of courage, imagination and willingness to change in order to explore what is best for the local church in each area.

**What size of ‘Partnership’ will be too large? Should we consider this at parish level?**

We have no preconceived idea as to the size of a Partnership. We do use numbers like, 5 or 6 or 7, and throw around ‘there may be around 30 partnerships in the diocese (at present there are 150 parishes) – but we really have no idea. We’re using these numbers to encourage everyone to look further than they think, to go beyond what is comfortable. We need to think bigger and look further in order to put in place a network of partnerships that could be effective for 15-20 years, and not have to repeat such a thorough consultation exercise for a long time.

Partnerships need to be big enough so that all kinds of resources can be shared, so that there are enough people from among whom new leaders can emerge, sufficient funding can be potentially available to help support all sorts of things like training programmes, the salaries of certain posts and so on.

We also need to keep an eye on the discussion that will be going on over Multi Academy Trusts, exploring how new arrangements might be supported by any new schools arrangements – and vice versa. Some people are worried about the catchment areas for junior and secondary schools. At the moment there is a simple solution to his one, the phrase ‘the area covered by the former parishes of Sts X and Y’ does the job. It may be that a similar wording would suffice in the future.

The important thing is for Partnerships to be large enough so that local communities can be supported and served.

**There is a plea from a number of areas for the training of lay people. Training which is accessible and imaginative (crèche provision for eg).**

In most people’s minds at present is the question about future ‘geographical partnerships’. But as we’ve said so often, ‘reoganisation’ need not change anything for the better. What is essential in it all is indeed the formation of lay leaders and training for more people in a wide range of skills and competences. We are also hearing that a good bit of this training needs to be accessible and local. The development of good relationships within a Partnership will very much depend on the development of a team of people working with the priest to serve the local community. In many ways these are new questions and it is for this very reason that we have made the appointment of our Lay Coordinator Development Officer.

**In the Document ‘What Our Clergy Are Saying’ there appears to be a deep anxiety about loneliness among some clergy.** The document **What our Clergy are saying** is a very honest and heart-felt reflection from almost 25% of our priests and deacons

As well as being a powerful expression of faith and commitment to the Church, our clergy voiced anxiety about a number of things, such as: ‘people who can’t/don’t want to understand that priests are human’; not wanting to become ‘mass machines and parish managers; needing a robust lay formation programme; knowing there needs to be change but not knowing what this change will be like – and so on. It is certainly worth reading to more fully appreciate the anxieties and concerns of the clergy of our diocese as we move together into the future.

**And to whom do our parish buildings belong?**

Technically all the buildings in the diocese belong to the Diocesan Board of Directors, but in practice they belong to the parish. What that means is that if a building is sold, then the money accruing from the sale belongs to the community. If that community, at some point in the future, becomes part of a new community, then the money goes with the community. We anticipate that in the years to come we may well have more unused and underused property in the diocese. To this end, in April next year, we plan to appoint someone on a 3 year contract to be a Parish Property Outreach Officer. This person will help local communities to explore how any property they have can be used for the benefit of the Church and the local community. This person will help the community to take on the responsibility to explore how best to use the asset that is available to them.

**Is Forward Together in Hope not just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic?**

I watched the film! I seem to remember that the Titanic sank because nobody was keeping a good eye open on what was going on in the Atlantic, they rather missed the huge iceberg that wreaked so much havoc in such a short time…. When Bishop Séamus launched *Forward Together in Hope* in 2014 he was inviting every Catholic in the diocese to look up and look around. He was encouraging us all to take a very good look at our own communities and the diocese as a whole and explore how best we can use our resources to fulfil the call to each of us to be disciples and to be a missionary Church in this part of the world. We may have to downsize in the years to come, but the purpose will always be the same and the Lord will be with us as we witness to him as best we can.

Some people long for the day when married men can be ordained, women can be ordained and men who no longer exercise their ordained priestly ministry can return to it. Our task now, however, is to live the Church we have now and not simply wait for what might or might not happen in the near or distant future. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is urging us to look very seriously at shared responsibility, collaborative ministry and lay leadership, while at the same time, praying for Vocations to the Ordained Priesthood and Religious Life. There seems to be an increasing number of people who believe that this will only happen as we come to realise that every single one of us is called by God on a unique pathway of discipleship, of a personal way of witnessing to Jesus in our world today. They feel that once our worshipping communities are deeply caring and courageous in their witness to the Lord then there will emerge from within them, those who feel called to very specific pathways among them.

**Written questions/comments handed in that evening.**

**All these discussions seem to be between existing members of church/parishes – can we please make provision for the young church to be represented at every meeting. This would give an important message to young people in parishes. We need to go into schools to ‘bring the youth in’ telling them they are vitally needed.**

The reflections contained in the document **The Way We See It**  - the views of over 5,400 young people who responded to our survey – does say a great deal about what young people think and feel and why they no longer feel they want to be part of the worshipping community. This is a huge question for the Church in our diocese and way beyond our diocese. The questions about young people in the Parish Questionnaire were to be there to be answered by young people themselves. In very many parishes young people, for whatever reason, were not particularly part of the discussion and reflection. How we engage with young people must be a fundamental question to be explored by all of us, and very soon.

**Is it essential that all parishes are represented at the meeting and preparation of the Partnership Agreement?**

It is most desirable that every parish in the diocese is involved in discussion about the future Partnership proposals.

It may be that there is a parish or some members of a parish who are not at all keen on the idea of being in partnership with any other community. If there is such a parish, then a decision will be made as to which partnership it is most likely to benefit from in the future. The Plan which is to be prepared for Bishop S$é$amus and his advisors after midday on 27th November, will include every parish in the diocese. It will be flexible in that some areas may be able to move quite quickly into closer working relationships and others may take longer because of different circumstances – but everyone will be included. This being the case, it makes real sense to be part of the discussion at every stage.

**Is it always essential that the parish priest is available at the meetings?**

It makes extremely good sense for the parish priest to be at the meetings as a key member of the community. It may be that for some reason he is not able to attend on an occasion, but that is no reason for the meeting to not take place. He can always be appraised of what is happening later. What matters is that as full and open a discussion takes place for the benefit of everyone.

If a parish priest simply does not want to be part of the discussion, then he can hardly be forced! Just as no other individual can be forced. It may then be extremely difficult for parishioners to feel supported in exploring the future and it might help to have a word with the local dean to find ways for their views to be taken on board in future discussion and decision making.

**Is there a point in looking at the possibility of having a ‘Communion Service’ on a Sunday if it is not possible to celebrate mass together?**

This question has been asked many times at different meetings. There is no doubt that the very heart of our Catholic faith resides in the coming together to celebrate Mass together. This will always be the case. As Bishop Séamus has said on many occasions, there will be churches in the future where mass will not be celebrated, and mass will be celebrated less often. There is nothing particularly new in this. At the present time we have 177 churches in the diocese where mass is celebrated, that is 25 fewer than we had in 1965. The number of churches in which mass is not celebrated is likely to accelerate in the years to come if the local community is not able to maintain them for other liturgical gatherings.

This means that we will need to travel further to be part of a celebration of mass, so communities will need to look at making transport available. Where communities do come together for worship, there are often initial difficulties, this is almost inevitable, but eventually there emerges for many people a realisation that this is much more ‘alive’.

Who knows what will happen in the future? It may be that some communities gather for a Service of Word and Communion on a Sunday and have an opportunity to come together to celebrate mass during the week. It is the case that in emergency, shocking weather, the inability of the priest to the church because of illness etc, then communities do celebrate with a Service of Word and Communion. No one is in a position to give an easy answer to the question, though it may well be that it will be asked increasingly in the months and years ahead.

Jim O’Keefe